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LED BY WOMEN: PERSPECTIVES FROM GRASSROOTS WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS ON FUNDING AND PARTNERSHIPS IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

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şimdiki kadınlar
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COMMONLY USED TERMS

THIS POLICY BRIEF USES A NUMBER OF TERMS WHICH ARE EXPLAINED BELOW:

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANISATION (WRO)¹

1) An organisation that self-identifies as a woman's rights organisation with the primary focus of advancing gender equality, women's empowerment, and human rights; or

2) an organisation that has, as part of its mission statement, the advancement of women's and girls' interests and rights (or where 'women', 'girls', 'gender' or local language equivalents are prominent in their mission statement); or

3) an organisation that has, as part of its mission statement or objectives, to challenge and transform gender inequalities (unjust rules), unequal power relations and promote positive social norms.

WROs play a vital role in advancing and realising women's rights in in some or all of the following ways: advocacy on laws and policies that protect women's rights; providing awareness and education; offering GBV support services; strengthening capacities of women and girls to exercise their rights and participate fully in society; conducting research and documenting human rights violations; and some may engage in coalition building with other social justice movements and civil society groups.

WOMEN-LED ORGANISATION (WLO)²

An organisation with a humanitarian mandate and/or mission that is:

1) governed or directed by women; or

2) whose leadership is principally made up of women, demonstrated by 50 per cent or more occupying senior leadership positions. Women-led organisations bring a unique perspective and approach to advancing women's rights, often drawing from their firsthand experiences and insights as women. They may work on a variety of issues including: strengthening women's representation and empowerment, confidence and self-efficacy, addressing discrimination by offering context-specific solutions to address women's and other human rights issues, offering GBV services; promoting grassroots activism and community-led initiatives; investing in deepening the skills and capacities of women and girls, enabling them to access resources and opportunities; may advocate for policy changes at local, national, and international levels to address systemic barriers to women's rights; and may create networks of support and mutual aid.

WOMEN-LED INITIATIVE (WLI)

While not referred to in either the Grand Bargain or IASC Gender Reference Group, women-led initiatives are led by women volunteers, are less formal, not registered and their activities tend to be smaller in scale. Given these differences, although some might be considered WLOs, not all

are, so it was considered necessary to distinguish this group in this study for a more inclusive policy discussion.

INTERMEDIARIES

Intermediaries are UN, INGO, or larger Syrian NGO 'partners' that are the primary recipient of funding, who partner with or 'subgrant' funding to WLOs. Many WLOs in NW Syria use the term 'donors' in a broad sense to describe INGOs, UN Agencies, larger National NGOs acting as intermediaries for the grants they receive, as well as formal bilateral and multilateral donors. While trying to differentiate between donors, who are bilateral and multilateral donors, and intermediaries, this report tries to highlight this perception among WLOs by using donors/intermediaries where relevant.

FUNDERS AND DONORS

Interviews and focus group discussions with WLOs revealed that many of them perceive all agencies that channel funding to them as 'donors'; including both the actual back-donor institution that is the source of funding, and intermediary agencies that partner with them and channel this funding onto them. In this paper, unless otherwise stated, we use the term 'donor' to refer to institutional donors (or other categories of donor, such as philanthropic institutions), and the term 'funder' is sometimes used for when WLOs were describing an intermediary in those terms.

COORDINATION ACTORS

Interviews and focus group discussions for this research involved engagement with a wide range of agencies involved in coordination efforts inside NWS, and at the international level in support of funding, programmes and partnerships with WLOs in NWS. WLOs also shared insights about their experience across different kinds of coordination, and made comparisons across their different experiences of these. Therefore, the term 'coordination actors' is used in this paper to refer to actors involved in coordination of humanitarian, early recovery, human rights and peace/political track efforts, and we specify which category is being referred to when relevant.

HUMANITARIAN LIAISON GROUP (HLG)

The Humanitarian Liaison Group oversees the cross-border humanitarian response within Northwest Syria. It serves primarily as the executive coordination group, comprising the UN Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (DRHC), local and international NGOs and UN agencies.

NORTH-WEST SYRIA (NWS)

The focus of the policy brief is on the WLOs, WROs and WLIs providing assistance in NWS, as well as those engaged with these groups through funding or partnerships. These entities may be based in NWS, Gaziantep/Türkiye or elsewhere.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

Gender equality actors have made significant strides in focusing the attention of policy-makers onto questions about how to better fund and partner with women-led organisations (WLOs) in countries affected by crisis. What is unusual about north-west Syria (NWS) is the myriads of interventions undertaken by different actors seeking to make this shift happen in practice. WLOs, Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) and Women Led Initiatives (WLIs), [collectively referred to as WLOs] in NWS are trying to access funding and increase their influence in different ways to support their frontline work of supporting both women and girls and the wider community. Donors, international agencies and Syrian NGOs are also trialling new ways to improve partnerships with WLOs and ensure funding reaches them. On both sides, these efforts are often poorly understood or coordinated.

This paper seeks to address this issue by highlighting opportunities for greater collaboration across actors committed to improving partnerships with WLOs and increasing the funds available to them. The analysis and recommendations made by this paper centre the experiences and perspectives of WLOs in NWS themselves. Recommendations were developed through consultation with a Research Advisory Group (RAG) comprised of WLOs based in NWS, and through an iterative process of research and presenting draft analysis and recommendations to representatives from a wider range of WLOs, as well as representatives from donor institutions, INGOs, UN agencies, coordination groups and Syrian national NGOs. Following input from WLOs in the RAG, an administered questionnaire was sent to over 50 WLOs operating in NWS, and this was followed up by in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with WLOs, donors, NGOs and other stakeholders involved in platforms, processes and partnerships of relevance to working with them, such as the NWS WLOs Task Force and the Women Advisory Group (WAG). Recent research documenting best practices for funding and partnering with WLOs was also reviewed and incorporated into discussions with stakeholders and this paper. Recommendations in this paper were presented,

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* On 8 December 2024, a coalition of armed opposition groups led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) overthrew the Government of Syria. A transitional political process is underway. The humanitarian and recovery needs in Syria are immense and the involvement of Syrian civil society in rebuilding Syria will be key. This paper was finalized before December 8, but its findings and recommendations remain timely and highly relevant in the changing context. Support to WLOs to be able to play an important role in the transition and early recovery is vital.

validated and refined during two strategic workshops with WLOs, representatives of coordination groups, international agencies and donors operating in NWS. From the paper's conception, the Research Advisory Group provided feedback at each stage towards ensuring that this entire process was given direction by Syrian WLOs themselves.

The research and validation of our findings revealed both challenges and opportunities, and our intention is that this report can catalyse further policy dialogue, research and piloting of refined or new approaches in funding and partnerships to address both. For example, a significant portion of WLOs engaged in this study highlighted that little progress has been made to reduce administrative and regulatory barriers preventing them from accessing funding. Almost half of the online survey respondents said organisations' size plays a factor with small organisations only receiving limited short-term funding (11) and larger organisations accessing more significant funding (9). Several other WLOs (10) pointed to lack of registration in Türkiye, the language of applications requiring submissions in English (9), and limited information on what funding opportunities are available as significant barriers. WLOs based in Syria face challenges establishing or accessing bank accounts and documenting their financial history (3), which also often prevents them from accessing funds. Further, the short-term nature of funding available means that significant time is wasted on continuously trying to secure funding, rather than implementing programs to respond to the needs of women and the wider community in NWS. Some interviewees described how this undermines organisational effectiveness with one sharing that "insufficient financial support creates weak governance."

In relation to the funding of WLOs, funders and coordination actors did identify several options to increase the quality and quantity of funding available to WLOs. For example, many pointed to how donors could and should require the involvement of WLOs in the development and submission of funding proposals, rather than having intermediary agencies "on-board" WLO partners after the project's inception when the parameters of the project have already been established. In exploring these ideas with WLOs and other stakeholders in the research, the question was

also raised as to whether this involvement could extend beyond WLOs being invited into proposal development led by others. Is there scope to design funding calls for proposals and application processes which put the WLOs into a lead or colead role, and intermediaries playing more of a support role (and WLOs able to select which agencies play such a role)? There was also a recognition the benefits of quality funding provided to INGO or Syrian NGO intermediaries should also be cascaded onto WLO partners. Discussion the quality of funding for WLOs – both with WLOs and with the donors and intermediaries engaged for this research – did always then connect into discussion of partnerships. Several donors and funding mechanisms discussed ways in which they have sought to engage WLOs in strategic advisory boards to their decision-making processes and their efforts to develop funding and partnership modalities that are more equitable and empowering for WLOs. It is however important to highlight that several funders shared that they are not able to lighten eligibility and reporting requirements at this point beyond what is feasible through intermediaries.

When it came to discussing partnership quality, many consulted WLOs expressed appreciation for how partners engage with them to identify what risks they face in their local context and provide support to address and mitigate those risks (18). A significant number of WLOs recognised and expressed appreciation for how some partners support them to participate in policy dialogues and influencing opportunities with relevant advocacy targets (20). Less than half of the WLOs engaged in the research (8) asserted donors and intermediaries reflect on promoting mutually accountable, empowering and equitable partnerships with them and use their influence with other relevant powerholders to address priorities set by WLOs. Yet these practices are not consistent. There are also instances of exploitative relationships with, for example, intermediaries, who use the expertise of WLOs whilst giving them little or no control over the design of projects or partnership agreements. Examples were also shared of intermediaries providing only small amounts and/or short-term funding to WLOs, which was perceived as a strategy to be seen by donors as having partnered with WLOs without that evolving into sustained funding or meaningful partnership. Principled engagement with WLOs seems dependent either on

the will of certain individuals within an organisation or of specific organisations rather than a systematic approach that cuts across all humanitarian, development, and peace actors in NWS. Given these dynamics, it is unsurprising that support for collective advocacy by WLOs to address structural barriers that inhibit their meaningful inclusion in funding opportunities, partnerships and other spaces came to the fore. WLOs called for greater accountability and a fairer assessment of the successes and failures within partnerships through the adoption of mutual accountability processes to monitor, evaluate and assess programmatic work.

Despite the slow progress towards equitable partnerships and access to funding, WLOs were remarkably optimistic about the potential for WLOs to take a greater role within the overall response to the crisis in NWS within the next few years. When it comes to funding, the most common aspirations were that better quality funding could be given to WLOs and that the barriers associated with WLOs' lack of legal registration could be mitigated. A few WLOs expressed a preference for receiving funds directly from donors without intermediaries; while others said they would like to see intermediaries expand their support to them. Informants emphasised that the expertise and capacities of WLOs must be acknowledged rather than treating them as a junior partner. As one informant put it in a workshop to discuss these findings, "WLOs may not use our tools or have the kinds of capacities that INGOs or UN agencies have, but they have their own tools and strengths, which we should recognise, complement and reinforce." Notwithstanding the many risks and challenges faced in the complex environment of NWS, WLOs have a proven track record of delivering successful programmes and are ready to collaborate. They want solidarity and support from other stakeholders working on human rights, humanitarian, development and those supporting the peace process. Given there are several donors and coordination groups looking for ways to support WLOs in NWS Syria, the time is ripe for actors to come together to broker more equitable partnerships, particularly through greater funding volume and quality, and further supporting the important contributions of grassroots women's groups and networks in NWS.



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■ KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were developed based on the perspectives and experiences of Women's Rights Organisations, Women-Led Organisations and Initiatives themselves; and refined through consultations with donors, UN, I/NGOs, and other stakeholders with relevant expertise in NWS. These recommendations have been developed to also reflect wider international commitments to localization and gender equality, including relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, the Charter4Change, the Grand Bargain and the Pledge for Change. As such, they have been developed predominantly to catalyse discussion with donors and intermediaries engaged in NWS framed in the context of their wider efforts on localization and gender equality.

1 Donors and intermediaries should adopt and promote the following 'Funding Local Actors Minimum Standards'. Current and future funding to support WLOs in NWS should be reviewed against these minimum standards:

- a. Increase direct funding volume and quality (multi-year, predictable, and flexible)³ to WLOs, not constrained by specific sectors or themes, centred on their implementation of participatory, women and girls-led programming methods to identify priorities for action.
- b. Amend due diligence processes and funding eligibility criteria to reflect mutual accountability and partnership principles. Examples of this include establishing mutual 'due diligence' assessments⁴ in which due diligence and eligibility requirements are established together with WLOs in NWS; and adjusting capacity assessment tests to not exclude small to medium local actors (including WLOs).
- c. Establish funding mechanisms that fund only WLOs, including smaller grassroots women-led initiatives, directly without intermediaries. For other funding mechanisms focused on different sectors or themes (not dedicated to WLOs), establish ambitious targets for percentages of the overall amount to reach WLOs directly and/or indirectly.

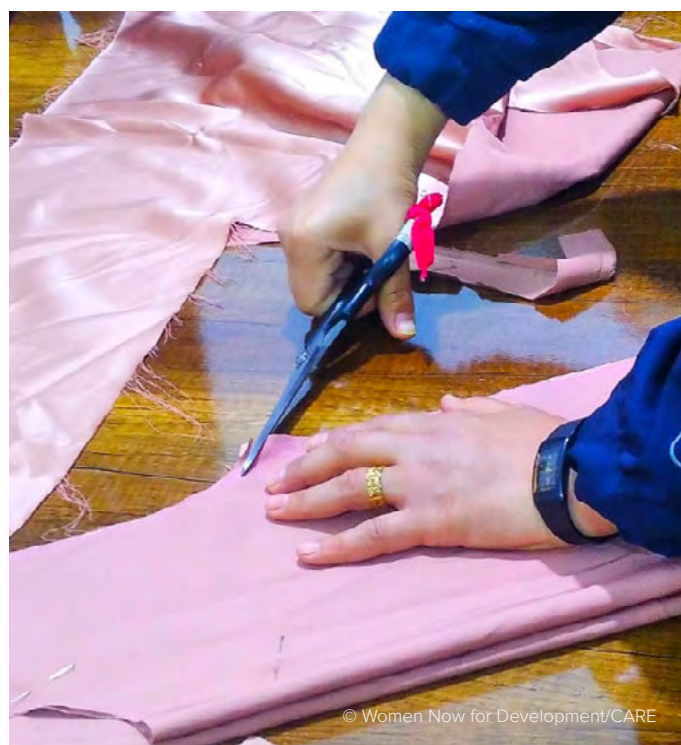
d. Support micro-grants packages to WLOs

that include tailored and jointly developed strategic partnership plans, that allow WLOs to grow and enable broader and strengthened collaboration.

- e. Ensure funding is fairly and consistently allocated to cover the overheads costs of WLOs; including when they are not the direct recipient of funding.
- f. As required in the revised annual self-reporting process of the Grand Bargain, report on the amount and proportion of funding allocated directly to WLOs, specifying as much as possible the role WLOs play in these partnerships (GBV/women's issues/community support etc.). If donors and intermediaries are not yet tracking funding to WLOs, report what measures are being taken to address this gap. In addition, use the Grand Bargain annual self reporting exercise to report on actions taken to support and incentivise the participation and leadership of WROs/WLOs in coordination mechanisms.
- g. Adopt a 'risk sharing' approach to risk management in funding WLOs; including through funding and technical support to help them anticipate and mitigate risks that they may face in implementing grants and programmes. Ensure a gender analysis informs risk management, given the specific risks WLOs face responding to sensitive issues such as protection and GBV in high risk, sometimes open active conflict settings. Recognise WLOs operate in a complex, high-risk environment, often affected by violent conflict, a war economy, by Sanctions and Counter-Terrorism Measures (SCTM), bureaucratic and administrative impediments, etc and adopt a trust based (rather than suspicion based) and supportive approach to manage risks if / when they occur. This may include support with investigations, sharing financial risks if they materialise.

2 Donors and intermediaries should adopt and promote a Partnership Charter. Current and future partnerships should be reviewed and aligned against the following elements:

- a. Centre principles of equitable partnership with WLOs at all levels of engagement with them, extending beyond the implementation of individual projects; including through support to equitable partnership and WLOs' leadership in advocacy, policy and coordination spaces.
 - b. Establish equitable partnership agreements between intermediary agencies and WLOs which extend beyond individual project agreements, defining the partnership roles, mutual accountabilities and organisational strengthening plans; and including a commitment to reflect regularly on partnership health with attention to promoting mutual accountability and local leadership.
 - c. Leverage WLOs' expertise and understanding of the context to jointly design, monitor and evaluate projects in ways that centre women-led and community-led approaches and a partnership-based approach between donors, intermediary agencies, WLOs and the community members that they work with.
 - d. Ensure transparency and equity in budget related aspects of partnership. As part of this, funds should be allocated in proportion to the needs and scope of agreed works between WLOs and other partners involved based on collaborative budgetary decision-making and transparency about budget-share.
 - e. Recognise that WLOs face backlash, threats and resistance, and support them to include such risks in risk management plans and to overcome these challenges in the implementation of programs and in their broader participation in decision-making forums and coordination groups in NWS.
 - f. Support WLOs to organise, network and partner with other stakeholders beyond the parameters of project funding such as within policy dialogues, inter-agency learning events, and linking them with coordination groups on thematic focus areas or those implementing area-based approaches.
- 3 Donors should increase support to women's rights-focused funding instruments and organisations, in particular the existing WLOs in NWS with a demonstrated track-record in maintaining quality partnerships with other smaller WLOs and WLIs.
 - 4 Donors, intermediaries and WLOs should commit to sharing learning across different models of WLO-led consortia, with attention to promoting equitable and collaborative decision-making amongst the WLO partners involved inside NWS.
 - 5 Donors and intermediaries should strengthen information-sharing about funding opportunities with WLOs, including through platforms created for these purposes, such as the NWS WLO Taskforce.
 - 6 Donors and intermediaries should regularly convene dialogue with WLOs on how they can enhance WLOs' role and influence within humanitarian, human rights, political, and early recovery programs and policy discussions relevant in NWS. Within these discussions, donors and intermediaries should share in concrete terms what they are actively doing to enable increased funding volume and quality and improved partnerships with WLOs.
 - 7 Donors and intermediary agencies should promote a wider enabling environment for WLOs; including through setting quotas for WLOs in strategic decision-making forums; and by holding all agencies accountable for demonstrating gender sensitivity and gender mainstreaming. Specifically, to strengthen WLOs' influence within the humanitarian and early recovery response architecture in NWS, the Humanitarian Leadership Group (HLG) and the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (DRHC) need to endorse, implement and uphold the funding minimum standards and partnership charter across the NWS response.



■ INTRODUCTION

International commitments have been made to localise and leave no-one behind. The Grand Bargain 2.0 requires that signatories take tangible steps to localise humanitarian and development response efforts, by ensuring their meaningful participation and by providing them with greater access to quality, flexible and multi-year funding.⁵ Because of such initiatives, there is now growing attention paid to renegotiating relationships with local actors and affected populations to be more equitable. It is understood that local actors and affected populations must have greater influence and power to make decisions about assistance offered to them.

The same is true for WLOs, women, and girls. CEDAW granted women the same right to work with international organisations as men⁶; the UN SCR 1325 called upon the international community to increase participation and representation of women at all levels of decision-making; and the IASC gender policy stated that WLOs and WROs must be rightfully engaged in strategic management and coordination processes.

In NWS, as elsewhere, WLOs have played important roles in helping women and girls to access services, to protect their rights, and to work towards positive changes in social norms, behaviours and attitudes regarding the roles of women and girls. And now there is increased recognition of the importance of WLOs and interest among actors across development, political and humanitarian spheres to work with them. The time is right to bring the WLOs, WROs and WLIs in from the margins.

‘Localization is about shifting power, not just money,’ said one WLO informant to this study. It is in that spirit this policy paper was written. It examines factors affecting the engagement of women-led organisations, women’s rights organisations and women-led initiatives working in north-west Syria (NWS), it explores funding available for WLOs, WLIs and WROs and the relationships between donors, intermediaries and WLOs within their partnerships. It finds that several efforts have been made by individual actors to improve partnerships with and funding to WLOs, WLIs and WROs that provide lessons for all actors working in NWS. It also outlines how these actors can step up their support to WLOs so that a more substantial shift

in power is achieved.

Another policy brief that reflects on coordination issues in NWS from the perspective of WLOs was produced at the same time as this brief.

METHODOLOGY

This policy brief captures the results of a participatory consultation process, working with WLOs, donors and intermediaries, who have the ability to bring about the changes WLOs are seeking, to share their perspectives and experiences, create opportunities for dialogue, and to develop recommendations. The research team solicited the views of WLOs through an online questionnaire, key informant interviews (KIs) and focus group discussions (FDGs) with WLOs, stakeholders involved in coordination processes of relevance to the mandates of WLOs, donors, UN and INGOs. The answers transcribed and extracted from the online questionnaire and interviews were sorted according to the type of questions asked (multiple choice or open). Responses were analysed to determine the trends in responses (including collating responses into themes) related to funding and partnerships (including differentiating between different types of partnerships - funding and strategic).

The qualitative data was supplemented with secondary data through a review of relevant and contemporary research on best practices of supporting WLOs in the context of wider literature on localization and gender equality. The RAG and Steering Committee, both of which were coordinating with wider groups of WLOs, and discussions with coordination groups and donors.

The findings were then triangulated through a series of strategic workshops with WLOs, donors, and the humanitarian community in NWS more broadly to validate the findings and develop and refine the recommendations to ensure they were practical and had buy-in among decision-makers. The result is that tangible recommendations have been produced to meet the different needs of women-led organisations, women-led initiatives and women’s rights organisations and that are informed by insights from donors and international agencies on their engagement, partnerships and support to WLOs.

The data collection and subsequent workshops took place from 1 April to 10 May 2024 and encompassed:

- **A Research Advisory Group** comprising 1 WLO and 2 WLIs working within NW Syria was established to guide the direction of the policy brief, its methods, analysed its findings, and reviewed and provided feedback to the draft policy brief and its recommendations.
- **An Online Questionnaire** written in Arabic, was sent to 36 WLOs, WLIs and WROs who operate in NWS. A total number of 23 responses were received— WLOs: 9; WLIs: 8; WROs: 6. The majority of respondents (19) are located in NWS and only 4 are located in Türkiye.
- **Key Informant Interviews** were conducted with 36 people from 9 women's organisations (5 WLOs, 2 WROs, 2 WLIs), 7 coordination groups (2 clusters, 2 NGO networks, 1 executive forum, 2 cross-cutting working groups) and 11 entities providing funds to WLOs⁸ (3 SNGOs, 4 INGOs, 3 Donors, 1 UN agency). Informants chose whether the interviews were conducted in Arabic or English. The semi-structured interviews were approximately one hour each and almost all interviews were conducted over a 3-week timespan.
- **Secondary Data Review** of recently published reports focusing on the experiences of WLOs in international, regional and NWS-local contexts and outlining policy commitments of donors and international actors on localization and advocating the rights of women and girls was conducted and the reports were utilised in discussions with research participants and in the report.
- **Two Strategic Workshops** were organised. The first included WLOs to validate and reflect on the findings and develop recommendations. The second brought together WLOs and other stakeholders, donors, UN, N/INGOs, and the humanitarian community more broadly to refine the recommendations and discuss preferred strategies moving forward. The first workshop was conducted in Arabic through Google Meet and the second was conducted in English and Arabic (with simultaneous translation) via Zoom.

Limitations in the Methodology

This policy brief is based on the views and opinions of women-led groups in northwest Syria. While the draft findings were shared with a number of donors and other relevant stakeholders (UN agencies, INGOs, Syrian national NGOs and research specialists), this brief is not intended as a comprehensive reflection of all stakeholders views on the topics expressed. The authors acknowledge that a complex set of dynamics exist in northwest Syria in regards to partnerships, funding, and coordination - and that the views expressed by the women's groups do not reflect fully these dynamics. Donors, international agencies and other Syrian civil society actors operate within a wider landscape that shapes their options and what they have done until now or could do in future to support women-led organisations. Instead, this brief acts as a contribution to the dialogue between those stakeholders with local women's groups, in the hope that follow-up work will be done to explore these dynamics in more depth with the women's groups.

Participants were selected based on referrals from the Steering Committee and the Research Advisory Group and from other participants. The informants represent only a small proportion of WLOs, coordination groups and donors, and intermediaries that operate within NWS. With the resources available, efforts were made to reach data saturation so that the breadth of perspectives among different groups were represented.

Some questions were discarded if not enough people answered them or if questions were not well understood. It should be noted that most of the informants from across the different international agency stakeholders interviewed were relatively well versed in coordination systems and agencies of relevance to WLOs, and so there was a clear bias towards promoting the inclusion of WLO amongst those informants. It is likely that actors involved in coordination who were less supportive of the inclusion of WLO were less likely to participate in this study.

To safeguard respondents' anonymity, personal information was not collected.

Context: WLOs in NWS

After more than 13 years of conflict, the situation in NWS continues to be dire with more than four million people in need of assistance⁹ and a political solution to the crisis still far out of reach. Donors, UN agencies and international non-government organisations (INGOs) have been responding to this crisis, many through cross-border operations in partnership with Syrian NGOs. From this pursuit, there is growing recognition that more needs to be done to shift power towards a more localised response.¹⁰

WROs and WLOs in Syria have been at the forefront of support to communities since the beginning of the protracted conflict¹¹ stemming from the women's movement's long history within Syria (see text box). WLOs and WROs have led efforts providing aid, documenting human rights abuses, and have engaged heavily in peace negotiations, all while advocating for women's rights and gender equality in their communities, nationally and internationally.¹² This is despite the safety and reputational risks for them to discuss women's rights and gender equality in NWS.

Across NWS, traditional societal roles are held that proscribe and limit women's participation in the public sphere, WLOs are often seen negatively by political and military authorities,¹³ and women working for WROs and WLOs face discrimination and violence within the political, societal and religious spaces.¹⁴ To mitigate these security risks, many WROs and WLOs work undercover and do not publicise their work, causing their efforts to be overlooked and not adequately recognised.¹⁵ This also affects their inclusion and participation within interagency coordination processes of relevance to their mandates and programmes delivered in their communities, and limits their ability to form partnerships, attract funding and influence decisions that affect them and their communities. The influence of WLOs is connected with the broader civic space available to Syrian civil society, therefore, their freedom and independence as a whole should be supported so WLOs can more easily engage in the long-term process towards peace and democracy that upholds the rights of women and girls.¹⁶

HISTORY OF THE SYRIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

"The Women's Movement in Syria can be traced back to the early 20th century when Syrian women began organizing themselves to advocate for their rights and participate in social and political movements. During the late Ottoman Empire and early French Mandate period, Syrian women started forming fora to address social and educational issues. After Syria gained independence in 1946, women's organisations such as the Syrian Women's Union became more active and vocal, advocating for women's rights and political participation. The Syrian Women's Association, founded in 1948, conducted studies on women's participation and has also made significant contributions to Syria's women's movement. After February 1966, the Baath Party took control of women's associations, restricted their work, and abolished freedom of expression under the pretext of establishing the Women's General Union. During the 1990s and early 2000s, WLOs in Syria, including Syrian Women's Observatory and the Syrian Women's Network, played a crucial role in advocating for women's rights and challenging discriminatory laws. They campaigned for legal reforms, raised awareness about domestic violence, and supported women's economic empowerment. The outbreak of the civil war in 2011 had a significant impact on women in Syria with many women-led organisations shifting focus to address the specific challenges faced by women in conflict."

Excerpt from the WLO TF (Oct 2023), Women's Organisations in NWS & Turkey, Gaziantep.

WLOs and WROs in Syria play a critical role in advancing women's rights by centring women's voices, experiences, and leadership in the fight for gender equality and social justice. WLOs have been essential in sustaining communities, raising awareness on women's rights, and advocating at all levels for women's equal participation in political and peace building processes within and relating to Syria, contributing to more inclusive and equitable

societies where all women, along with men, can thrive and realise their full potential.

In the context of the on-going crisis in Syria, women are well placed to engage affected people and lead change due to their skillsets and understanding of Syrian social dynamics and societal expectations. Some of the core contributions of women responders to crisis situations include:

1. They can access hard to reach areas and marginalised communities during emergencies and can identify the needs of different groups because of their understanding of the context and language which helps facilitate community acceptance.
2. Through their networks and positive relationships with other WLOs, they can more easily connect conflict affected women and girls with other support, provide them with opportunities to have their voices heard, support their leadership, and lead capacity strengthening of smaller WLOs and WLIs;
3. Because they are women they can empathise with other women and girls in their day-to-day challenges, which helps ensure aid and support is tailored to their specific needs;
4. Because they are from the same communities, they put greater effort to ensure interventions are sustainable and contribute to positive impacts over the long-term.
5. They know how to engage with key stakeholders at the local and national level and have the ability to think and act creatively to find solutions to the systematic and cultural barriers and deal with them in a more sensitive and appropriate way, because they are also affected by the safety and security risks affecting women.¹⁷

WLOs are invaluable actors in the NWS response¹⁸ and their meaningful participation and leadership within strategic decision-making bodies is vital to ensure the needs of women and girls are met.





FUNDING

After more than a decade of investment to the institutional capacity of national Syrian NGOs (SNGOs), some have established a proven track-record of high-quality programming and accountability, enabling them to secure funding directly from donors, rather than through intermediaries. However, most of these investments have gone towards organisations run by men, bypassing WLOs, which has meant that WLOs have not received the same support or opportunities to build the same level of recognition and trust with donors. This is particularly true for smaller WLOs and women-led initiatives (WLIs) based only inside NWS.

Throughout the many discussions with WLOs, most described feeling excluded from the localisation process. Some feel that their only entry point to access funding is through intermediaries, which involve processes of funding and partnership agreements that often involve top-down processes that inadvertently erode their engagement with their communities, governance capacities and self-determination. WLOs know better practices are possible. They want to be better informed of where to secure viable funding and to work with allies to support Syrians to be safer and more resilient in NWS.

Sources of Funding

There are multiple sources for funding (humanitarian, peacebuilding, development) channelling support to WLOs operating in NWS. They include:

- Direct funding to women peacebuilders through embassies. Embassies of several bilateral donors (e.g., Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, the UK and the US) provide direct, flexible funding for women peacebuilders through a dedicated instrument. Often, local organisations and embassies jointly refine proposals in a process of co-creation.¹⁹
- The Country Based Pooled Funds (administered by OCHA) has recently adopted a policy to give additional weighting to applications where at least one of the partners is a WLO. Whilst in 2023, a large amount (41%) was directly paid to national

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NGOs, there was no reporting on the proportion of funding allocated to WLOs.²⁰ This is against a backdrop of allocating 4.6% of available funding to WLOs or WROs in 2022.²¹ For comparison, the Ukraine pooled fund, the eligibility criteria and reporting requirements were lightened to broaden access to funding for local actors with WLOs alone receiving 6% of that allocation.

- Aid Fund for Northern Syria pooled fund provides flexible assistance with unearmarked funding from a diversity of donor countries. Project proposals are scored more highly if WLOs are included, targeted funded support is offered to WLOs to address compliance with 'due diligence' expectations and requires grantees to have human resource management policies that integrate gender equality and social inclusion practices.
- The Global Fund for Women, the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women, and the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund provide specific funding to work for women's rights and gender equality giving priority to WLOs and WROs.
- The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) through its Innovative Peace Fund (IPF) provides financial support and technical assistance to women-led peacebuilding organisations in countries affected by conflict, extremism, transition and closed political space. ICAN "invests in trust" and values the knowledge and access that women peacebuilders have developed in communities that drive how they respond to crises. The IPF gives partners the ability to determine their priorities and define their own programmes, while offering strategic and technical support based on individual need.²²
- Several actors provide funding for human rights work, including Human Rights Watch and the European Commission. Funds are usually provided through intermediaries; although there exist examples of consortia in which WRO and other SNGOs with registration outside of NWS have directly accessed EU funding, and then worked in consortium with WLOs (see case study page 15).
- Several government donors provide funding on women's rights based on their foreign policies.
- In 2022, 15 donors committed to supporting locally-led development positing the merits of civil societies defining the needs. In 2023, the Principals of the Grand Bargain Caucus on Funding for Localisation (USAID, DG-ECHO, Denmark, OCHA, UNHCR, Save the Children, IFRC, A4EP and the Northwest Syria NGO forum) endorsed recommendations that included developing road maps for increasing the proportion of funds donated to local/national actors, and will denote funds allocated to WLOs and WROs on the basis of common definitions for both under the IASC Gender Reference Group.²³
- There are philanthropic foundations and corporate social responsibility programs that advertise funding several initiatives in the Middle East online.



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DIRECT AND CONSIDERATE FUNDING EXPANDS THE WLO'S CAPACITIES AND COMMUNITY INTERVENTIONS

A WLO has been providing GBV response and prevention services through several Women and Girls' Safe Spaces (WGSSs) in NWS since 2013. Registered in Türkiye since 2015 and as a member of thematic clusters and the NGO Forum, the Association has been able to learn of, apply for and receive funding through the Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS), one of the pooled funds available in NWS.

In 2023, the WLO received an e-mail inviting them to register as a partner and apply for a project simultaneously. The process of submitting a proposal and complying with due diligence processes were extensive, not least because the application process is the same for all organisations, irrespective of barriers faced by local actors and in particular WLOs. In this instance, legal registration and long-term membership of coordination groups stood the WLO in good stead. Although they had key organisational policies and procedures in place, such as financial, procurement and HR policies, they still had more to develop in a very short time. Despite the challenges, funding was secured.

The AFNS has significantly assisted the WLO's programs and organisational capacity by providing:

Viable Operations: : The AFNS provides \$500,000 to the WLO, fully funding one of the WGSSs, including all activity and operational costs and salaries for all 30 staff that work for the project. This ensures the viability of the operation.

Improved Organisational Capacity: The AFNS team's availability and regular follow-ups helped the WLO to raise any issues and identify solutions immediately together with the AFNS. The fund also gave them the space to work on their organisational policy and procedures such as safeguarding and data protection and information sharing.

Comprehensive Service Provision: The WLO is able to offer a wider range of interconnected services, including but not limited to GBV case management, psychosocial support, vocational training, literacy education, and legal awareness sessions. Such comprehensive support helps address the diverse needs of the women in their communities and is in line with GBV guidelines.

Support for small-sized Women-Led Initiatives: With this fund, the WLO was able to identify, train, and support ten WLIs in NWS. These WLIs are now independently implementing their own projects, expanding connections with WLIs and the reach of women's support services.

The WLO says that AFNS provides an excellent example of how to support localisation, women's leadership and community connections. If other donors replicate this example and offer transparent and open communication with partner WLOs, allocate resources to strengthen their organisational capacity, and cover their operational and administrative costs, they will help the WLOs navigate challenges, comply with donor standards, maintain viability and foster stronger community connections.

Access to Funding

WLOs, coordination and donor informants described how the vast majority of funding to local civil society in NWS goes to national NGOs that are male-led. Some informants went as far as alleging that some male-led NGOs place women in roles that only appear to make decisions, yet have no influence in practice, in order for the NGO to qualify as a WLO or appeal to donors to access funding. Some WLOs shared a few examples where male-led NGOs engaged with a WLOs to meet donor expectations and then dissolved the partnership following receipt of funds.

Very few WLOs in NWS receive direct funding from donors. Instead, those surveyed shared that they access funds via intermediaries (primarily INGOs or Syrian NGOs) and are only responsible for

delivering one component of a broader program. Others receive funding through a pooled funding mechanism or from funding aimed at supporting women's rights work. Depending on the location, a few WLOs access funds to implement area-based responses, and a few receive private donations.

Of the WLOs who responded that they were able to access direct funding, the majority said the amount of the grant was small and was for short term projects less than one year. (see case study on p 16). One had 2 grants lasting over a year and one had a grant longer than a year. One consortium (see case study on page 16) had channelled support to WLOs for over two years, although it was through two short-term rounds of micro-grants with limited support to their core costs. Because of the

short-term nature of funding available to them, WLOs need to spend significant amounts of time researching and applying for funding.

WLOs shared that they most commonly receive funding that only covers activity costs but not salaries and/or indirect costs associated with operating organisations. This presents real challenges for the continuity of WLOs' work to support women and girls, and the wider

community, which can force them to either stop their work altogether or continue it without pay. This approach to funding does not contribute to quality programming and partnerships and, longer term, it will undermine the viability and sustainability of women-led interventions. It is also unreasonable and deeply hypocritical that WLOs are expected to be able to adapt and operate, when NGOs and UN agencies would not be able to function nor would they be expected to under the same conditions.

LIMITED FUNDING FROM AND UNEQUAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH DONORS AFFECT VIABILITY OF PROGRAMS LED BY WLOS

One WLO, like many WLOs inside North West Syria, is one of the grassroots organisations that provide critical and rapid services to women who have been affected by the protracted crisis. They respond to and prevent gender-based violence through various interventions such as case management and women's economic empowerment in IDP camps and related host communities in NWS. Despite their critical interventions and filling a gap in a sector that is contextually complex and globally underfunded, the continuity of their services is often interrupted and effectiveness undermined due to current funding processes and partnership approaches that are available to them.

Currently, the WLO receives funding through intermediary Syrian and international NGOs, like many other WLOs registered in Syria. In their current partnerships, their funds are limited to small amounts, usually \$3,000 USD though it can be up to \$10,000, allocated for specific services or activities and not covering their administrative costs or staff salaries. Moreover, the services and activities they provide, and their geographical coverage and target groups are decided by their donors according to their agendas with limited room for their engagement. Such funding and partnership approaches causes the WLO to lose their qualified staff. Without staff, the WLO is unable sustain their programmatic and operational presence. The amount of funding and specified targets limits the WLO's capacities to reach women with different backgrounds with tailored assistance.

Barriers

WLOs report significant struggles in accessing funding, despite the pivotal role they play in supporting communities affected by the crisis in Syria. WLOs respondents shared the key challenges they face in accessing funding:

- Lack of information on available funding and unclear application processes
- Eligibility Criteria
 - Issues with licensing, registration and work permits.
 - History of financial management and/or owning a bank account.
 - Lack of interest in supporting service models that WLOs are interested in;
 - Applications and reports are expected to be in English.
- Organisational capacity
 - Lack of dedicated staff for resource mobilization, monitoring and reporting

● Networking

- Funding may rely on who you know;
- Competition used against WLOs; and
- Not accessing coordination groups.

Lack of Information

WROs and WLOs are generally not aware about the funding mechanisms and resources available to them. They lack information on when calls for funding are announced, the application processes, eligibility criteria and the amount of funding available.²⁴ One WLO respondent said *"Knowing when the calls for funding happens, is half the battle. Then I need to write the application."*

Eligibility Criteria & Reporting Requirements

Several WLOs pointed out that the one-size-fits-all approach to eligibility criteria is a significant barrier. Donors have the same requirements regardless of the size or type of the organisation (CSO, NGO, INGO, UN), or the scale of the proposed interventions. There appears to be an unrealistic expectation by donors that local actors, particularly smaller WLOs, should have the same

administrative capacity and staffing offered by large international and national NGOs who have received dedicated funding for decades to build their capacities on project proposal writing, monitoring and reporting.

As such, many WLOs struggle to meet donor eligibility requirements. Applicants are often expected to have organisational policies and procedures in place, including but not limited to human resource management, awards management, Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH) and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP). According to some WLOs, there is limited funding or support provided to develop such policy and procedures. In addition, donors consider the amount of funds applicants have managed in the past when making their allocation decisions, and WLOs highlight that their history of grant management often does not meet donor expectations.

WLOs described to us how ‘due diligence’ processes have been designed for much larger scale organisations focused on delivering traditional humanitarian programmes rather than a broader array of work led by WLOs. Existing

funding processes require significant absorption capacity and fulfilment of technical criteria that smaller organisations, and in particular, non-humanitarian organisations, do not have, halting innovation and limiting ownership. This puts them at a disadvantage for not having logistical, human resource and administrative capacities, which some perceive as irrelevant to their mandates, ways of working and scale interventions.²⁵ To meet such requirements, WLOs are pressured to develop bureaucratic capacities and processes, which can detract from their core mandate, programme goals,²⁶ and lead to delays in accessing funds and responding to community needs.²⁷

Donors usually require applicants to be registered in Syria, which is difficult, particularly for organisations working on women’s rights. It is not always simple for women to open a bank account while in North West Syria due to cultural, societal, or legal barriers that restrict women’s autonomy in financial matters as well as the fact that the only bank operating in NWS is governed by the Turkish government and operates from Aleppo. One INGO working with multiple WROs and WLOs in NWS tried adapt its ways of working to remedy this issue (see case study below).

ACCESS TO QUALITY FUNDING AND EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS IS POSSIBLE: A CASE STUDY OF ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIPS WITH UNREGISTERED WRO AND WLO

A global women-led and women’s rights organisation that works for achieving gender equality started working with a diverse group of Syrian WROs and WLOs including in Türkiye and NWS to amplify women’s voices, bring and sustain WROs and WLOs’ perspectives and work into the humanitarian response in Syria. The INGO has been implementing this project since 2018 and have been working with 23 downstream WROs and WLOs and groups, some of which have no registration in Türkiye or Syria focusing on three outcomes: increased access to core flexible funding, tailored technical support, facilitating spaces for networking and advocacy. In a context where WROs and WLOs experience multiple barriers in accessing to quality funding and challenges with unequal partnership approaches, such project brings a fresh and promising example that shows some of the main barriers and challenges can be tackled if the will is there.

The INGO simplified their due diligence process for their partners to ensure this process does not become a barrier in front of a partnership and funding, and they ensure to provide close monitoring to support partners’ organisational capacities throughout the project.

Due to the challenges in transferring funds through bank transfers inside Syria and lack of registration of some of the downstream partners, the INGO is trying to explore other options to transfer funds, assessing each situation on a case-by-case basis as each partner has unique circumstances. As one of the options, the INGO subgrants to their well-established Syrian partners who operate in areas the traditional banking system does not. Such sub-granting promotes capacity-strengthening and knowledge exchange amongst the different partners, allowing them to foster collaborative partnerships and build working relationships with each other. This largely enhances the sustainability of the INGO’s project, as some partners are often based in areas that are out of reach of both the traditional banking system and Western Union offices.

In areas like NWS, where there have been disruptions due to conflict and displacement, accessing banking services might be particularly challenging for women, as they might face additional hurdles such as lack of identification documents, limited mobility, or social norms that discourage independent financial activities.

The language of funding applications also presents difficulties. WLOs prefer to be able to apply to funding and report on progress in Arabic rather than English. Greater consideration of local organisations' preferred languages for communication, application and reporting as well as applicant/partner's capacities would broaden eligibility access and provide WLOs operating in NWS more funding opportunities. In addition, it is noted that WLOs that are not engaged in the professional networks are unlikely to be using the same professional language as the members.

Given these conditions, only a few WLOs are able to meet the eligibility criteria of donors. These successful few have used this opportunity to channel support to other smaller women's organisations and initiatives that cannot meet donor requirements.

The majority of WLOs tend to rely on being invited to partner with Syrian national NGOs and INGOs that are able to meet the eligibility criteria set by bilateral donors and pooled funding mechanisms.²⁸ In turn, this limits their participation in strategic and operational decisions and often create a top-down relationship in which WLOs are not seen as equal partners, and instead are seen as sub-grantees or 'junior implementing partners'.²⁹ It also adds another layer of overhead and administrative costs with some donors giving the intermediaries the power to decide how much of the grant will be used to cover WLOs' and partners' overhead costs.³⁰

Positive practices regarding funding and forming partnerships do exist. These include donors being willing to adapt funding amounts and funding criteria, and develop partnerships based on mutual respect empowering local actors and integrating gender equality as a core indicator of aid effectiveness, leading to more effective interventions and long-lasting impact on the communities.

Organisational Capacity

Some of the WLOs respondents expressed frustration that they were routinely expected to participate in training or "capacity-building" sessions without this ever translating into viable funding opportunities. One SNGO described how their relationships with WLOs centres mainly on providing in-kind support and capacity-strengthening, not financial support. A WLO staff member spoke with irritation stating: *"The argument is made that we cannot fund grassroots groups and voluntary initiatives led by women due to their lack of capacity. In fact, they have capacity, it may just look different to what international agencies understand by those terms. They may not know your 'tools', but they have their tools, and we should support them."*

That being said, in some cases, funding and targeted capacity strengthening support is being offered by donors in tandem. In the consortium case study on page 25, a consortium model comprised of WLOs and local and international NGOs have bridged some of these gaps, by providing trainings to smaller WLOs and WLIs to acquire some skills and strengthen their systems to better manage funding. The process ended with the provision of micro grants that enabled the WLOs and WLIs to implement small scale projects with minimal reporting and eligibility requirements.



Role of WLOs

Limited understanding and recognition of the nuances of WLOs' contributions also diminishes their access to funding, and negatively impacts their overall influence and leadership in setting priorities and developing strategies to respond to the needs of people, including women and girls in NWS. Some of the donor and coordination groups see the focus of WLOs as working on GBV and/or 'women's issues' rather than more broadly supporting marginalised groups and community-based responses across a myriad of sectoral initiatives, which can limit the funding opportunities available to them.

Networking

Coordination groups play a key role in influencing funding approaches and where funding is directed in NWS. Donors determine their funding and strategic priorities based on a combination of domestic politics, whether their states have signed international treaties and commitments, and on the priorities flagged by in-country teams—particularly through the Humanitarian Response Plans (HRP). The HRP is guided by needs assessments that are coordinated by the cluster working-groups around sectoral themes. Therefore, as one donor informant stated: *“exclusion from coordination mechanisms denies influence on strategic and operational priorities and access to funding.”*

WLOs, and specifically those who only operate in NWS without offices in Gaziantep, face challenges in connecting with the humanitarian architecture and cluster working groups due to their presence in Türkiye and limited outreach by cluster coordination groups. As a result, WLOs lack information about the response and miss out on potential funding opportunities that are communicated through the cluster working groups.



Quality of Funding

The Grand Bargain 2.0 defines “quality” funding as funding that is timely, flexible, predictable and long-term. This definition was also affirmed by WLOs in NWS. However, the reality is that WLOs are often receiving only short-term funding inconsistently, and when it does come, it is often not flexible.³¹ Multi-year funding is an important aspect of quality funding as it allows for longer-term planning and better utilization of resources.³² It is essential for WLOs, not only for the viability of their operations, but also to ensure continuity of their services, which often focus on providing protection services that requires developing connections and trust within the community over long periods of time. Multi-year funding is also necessary for strengthening resilience of communities affected by a protracted and ongoing crisis.

In NWS, very few local organisations access multi-year funding. A survey of Syrian NGO Alliance members found that most of them (80%) do not have access to multi-year funding³³ with the percentage of WLOs lacking access to multi-year funding expected to be even higher. Of the 23 WLOs surveyed by the GiE group, none had multiyear funding, 15 had funds covering up to 12 months, 8 had funding for less than 6 months, including two operating without funds.

The limited or lack of financial support to cover overheads costs is also a serious concern of WLOs participating in this study. Previous research by Development Initiatives and UNICEF in 2022 found that not providing funds for indirect costs lead organisations to adopt negative coping strategies to meet uncovered costs, undermanaging their ability to manage and mitigate programming risks, to retain and invest in staff, to establish equitable partnership and reduces the sustainability of interventions and the capacity of local actors.³⁴

Trialling Solutions to Access Funding

WLOs are optimistic and believe it is possible to improve their access to quality funding over the next few years. WLOs are hopeful that current barriers around lack of registration could be overcome by providing evidence of their accountability and quality programming. A few hope to increase the funding they receive directly from donors without intermediaries. While others are focused on increasing funds through their partnerships

with intermediaries in specific sectors (protection, GBV, political and economic empowerment, and education) leveraging their collaboration to better improve outcomes for affected communities.

WLOs would also like to see the wider international community acknowledge the important role played by WLIs and expand financial support to them. Coordination actors, donors, and intermediaries shared some of the strategies they are utilising in NWS to address the barriers preventing WLOs from accessing funding,³⁵ such as:

- Dedicated funding to support gender equality;
- Weighted scoring for funding applicants partnering with WLOs;
- Funding supporting area-based approaches, including initiatives led by WLOs;
- Targeted support (including funding) to address eligibility shortfalls;
- Adapting internal NGO policies to be more applicable for WLOs;
- Providing flexible funds to support WLOs' broader programming and core costs; and

- Requiring all funding applicants to demonstrate resource management strategies that promote gender equality practices.

Intermediaries, in particular, also noted other actions they could take to facilitate more funding to WLOs including: taking more responsibility to facilitate WLOs' access to donors and coordination groups, and shouldering more of the administrative burden of compliance and 'due diligence' reporting. Despite these efforts, one donor informant noted there are limits to their ability to lighten the requirements for direct grantees in NWS, sharing that "the higher the risk, the more monitoring donors need to undertake, which they don't have resources for." Both the Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS) and the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) are exploring ways they can adjust their assessments to be more accessible to local actors, including WLOs, assisting marginalised groups. When making these adjustments, these funds and other donors, should utilise the lessons learned from such initiatives underway in Ukraine (see case study below) to better support and improve partnerships with WLOs in NWS.

LEARNING FROM ANOTHER CONTEXT: UKRAINIAN WOMEN'S FUND EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

In Ukraine, efforts are being made to localise the crisis responses, including through WLOs. This requires the use of several strategies. For example, the Ukrainian Women's Fund aims to support grassroots women's organisations. In 2019, they started implementing a project, funded by Global Affairs Canada, called 'Women's Voice and Leadership in Ukraine' which supports 190 women's rights organisations. These WROs represent diverse groups of women and girls, including but not limited to women affected and/or displaced by the current conflict, women with disabilities, and Roma women across Ukraine. The fund supports these small-sized grassroots organisations with their activities, their organisational capacities and building networks and alliances by providing training, mentorship, creating opportunities for them to share their experiences etc. through multi-year funding.

The Director of Strategic Development of the project said that the Fund actively seeks to give money away rather than focus on who should not receive it. She also shared the importance of encouraging applicants to reserve 10% of the funds for self-care, acknowledging the trauma likely experienced by WLOs staff directly impacted by the conflict and the vicarious trauma they experience when supporting others.

The IASC GenCap Project has also been working with the humanitarian country team and the humanitarian coordinator to localise responses tailored to different groups based on their gender diversity, including age, ethnicities and capabilities. This has included working with the HCT and WLOs and WROs to understand how each operates, how to navigate the humanitarian system, and how to achieve common goals. Consequently, WLOs and WROs are engaged as critical partners within the Ukrainian response, and are able to directly access funding through the Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPF). The CBPF lightened the eligibility criteria and due diligence requirements in order to implement the HC's localisation agenda. Its revised capacity assessment includes: contextual relevance; simplified capacity assessment tools and a due diligence checklist; minimum standards of compliance; a questionnaire to support and guide improved communications; and assessments of local partners can be made on a rolling basis, prioritising partners working in locations and sectors of greatest need; enhanced risk management through setting of minimum standards and increased operational modalities for new national partners; and targeted capacity improvement plans linked to assessment and adopting a partnership approach with Ukrainian partners.

Respondents from coordination groups added some suggestions for improving WLOs' access to funding, such as:

- Clusters supporting WLOs to meet funding pre-requisites;
- The HLG advocating with OCHA and the SCHF to allocate more funds to WLOs based on their technical expertise;
- Donors reporting the proportion of funds allocated to WLOs as required within the Grand Bargain 2.0, and
- Donors lightening the eligibility criteria and due-diligence procedures for WLOs.

These practices could improve WLOs' access to funding. Next steps should involve highlighting current best practices across all actors supporting WLOs in NWS to access funding and ensure that efforts are aligned with and reflect global and institutional commitments rather than ad hoc efforts

based on the will of individuals and organisations. Donors should also review the eligibility criteria and due-diligence procedures required of WLOs, whether as direct recipients of funding or sub-grantees. In other contexts, donors have been able to provide financial support with less stringent reporting requirements to smaller, informal and voluntary actors working in high-risk and hard to reach areas where the need for interventions are also high and donors accept that there may be a certain degree of losses. Furthermore, WLOs own strengths in community participatory programme approaches, and the relatively smaller sums of funding required to implement programs, could mean that there is scope for donors to explore tiered approaches to due diligence and eligibility criteria. Taking a comprehensive approach to addressing these challenges through the actions proposed above, will likely have a systemic impact on increasing the number of WLOs accessing funding. It will be important to ensure that this funding supports quality programmes as well as the safety and dignity of the WLOs within the network of service providers.





PARTNERSHIPS

It is clear that funding alone is insufficient to support the work of WLOs and that more equitable partnerships are needed. This section explores how WLOs, coordination actors, donors and intermediaries think about partnerships, and how partnerships shape the quality and quantity of funding and other forms of support available to WLOs. Of particular interest, it showcases what kinds of relationships WLOs define as true ‘partnerships.’

Differing understandings of what ‘partnership’ is and how it is defined shapes the varying expectations of different stakeholders. WLOs interviewed for this study frequently defined partnerships as more encompassing than simply one party working collaboratively with another towards the same shared goal. Partnerships and the roles within them may be defined in writing or are more informally understood. In true partnerships, resources are shared equitably and differing perspectives are respected and even valued and organisations address identified challenges together.

Partnerships with Donors and Intermediaries

Intermediaries described partnerships in terms of equality or shared values, and more often those interviewed referred to partners in terms of those working together to implement agreed elements within a grant agreement. While intermediaries use the term ‘partner’ to describe WLOs, these relationships are often more transactional, top-down and projectised. While WLOs described them in terms of donorship, rather than in terms of ‘partnership.’

Although the partnership funding approaches used by donors, UN agencies and INGOs in NWS strive to embody inclusive principles and correct power imbalances, these aspirations do not always translate into practice. In reality, power imbalances continue and, in some cases, perpetuate patriarchal structures within the partnerships. For example, UN agencies and INGOs dominate coordination groups, and within these, they have the tendency to try to apply their own agenda(s) or approach in communities even when community-led solutions already exist and are well documented, or when they might not be appropriate or achievable in the local context.

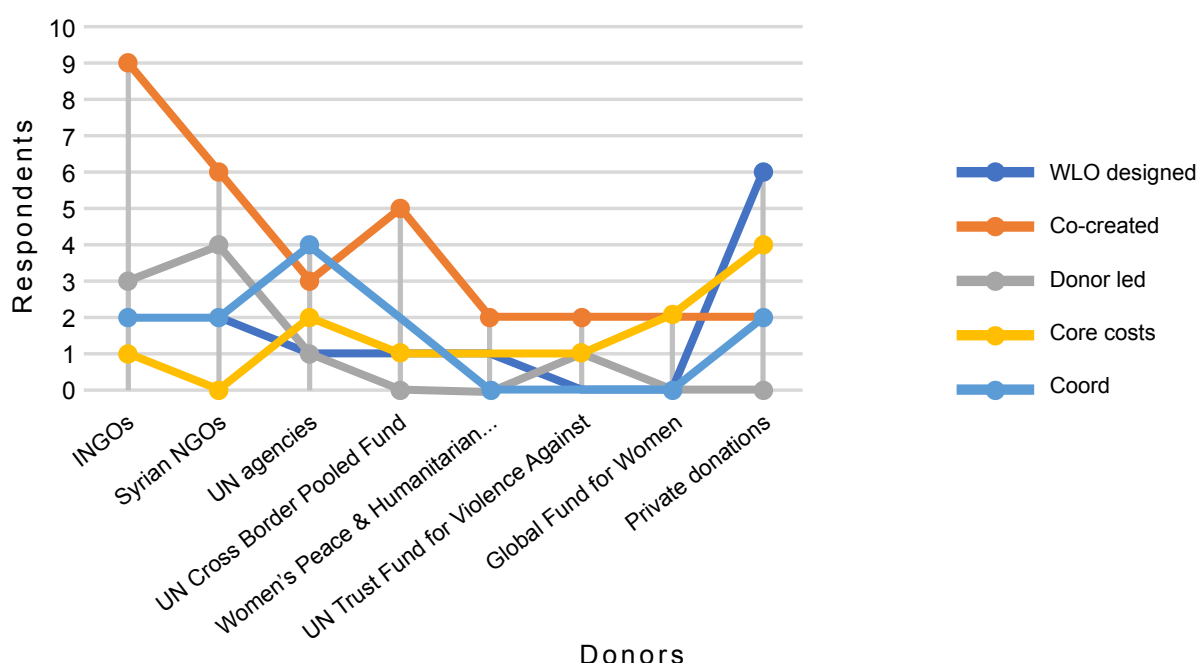
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This study found that WLOs described their partnerships with intermediaries and donors quite differently, and not all of these partnerships are alike.

As outlined in Figure 1, Some WLOs shared that some donors (primarily private donations and UN agencies) gave them the freedom to define programming based on community needs; some said they co-designed the projects (primarily with INGOs and Syrian NGOs); and others described designing projects based on the donors'/intermediaries' parameters (SNGOs and INGOs). Looking at the type of intermediary/donor, it is important to note that respondents did not rate

funders if they were not involved with them. WLOs were more likely to rate INGOs as co-creating (64%) than donor-led (21%) or WLO-led (14%). SNGOs were perceived to be co-creating by 50% of WLO respondents, donor-led by 33% and WLO-led by 17%. UN agencies were perceived to be co-creating by 60%, funder-led by 20% or WLO-led by 20%. With the Syria PBHF, respondents were most likely to say they were able to co-create (perhaps as sub-grantee) (83%) or WLO-led (17%). Very few rated Women Peace Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), UN Trust Fund for VAW or Global Fund for Women. With respect to private donations, 75% of respondents said the designs were led by WLOs and 25% were co-created.

FIGURE 1



WLOs described a tension between being expected to follow the stipulations of donors and intermediaries and focusing instead on assisting communities to meet their actual needs. This trade-off was particularly pronounced if the donor did not reside within NWS. However, significant differences also emerge from the different approaches and expectations of donors and intermediaries. For example, if donors and intermediaries attach importance and resources to supporting flexible and participatory planning and implementation, WLOs tended to have greater ability to influence the strategic direction of a project. Whereas, if instead, they direct and/or frame activities in a top-down

fashion within limited sectoral or thematic priorities, WLOs have less ability to influence and lead their interventions.

Some women's organisations expressed frustration with having to work under national NGOs or INGOs that do not share their principles or views on community engagement. For example, one of the WLO informants said they struggled to convince their intermediary of the need to work directly with women and include them in community discussions, rather than to assume they know what their priorities are or to only consult with men within the community.

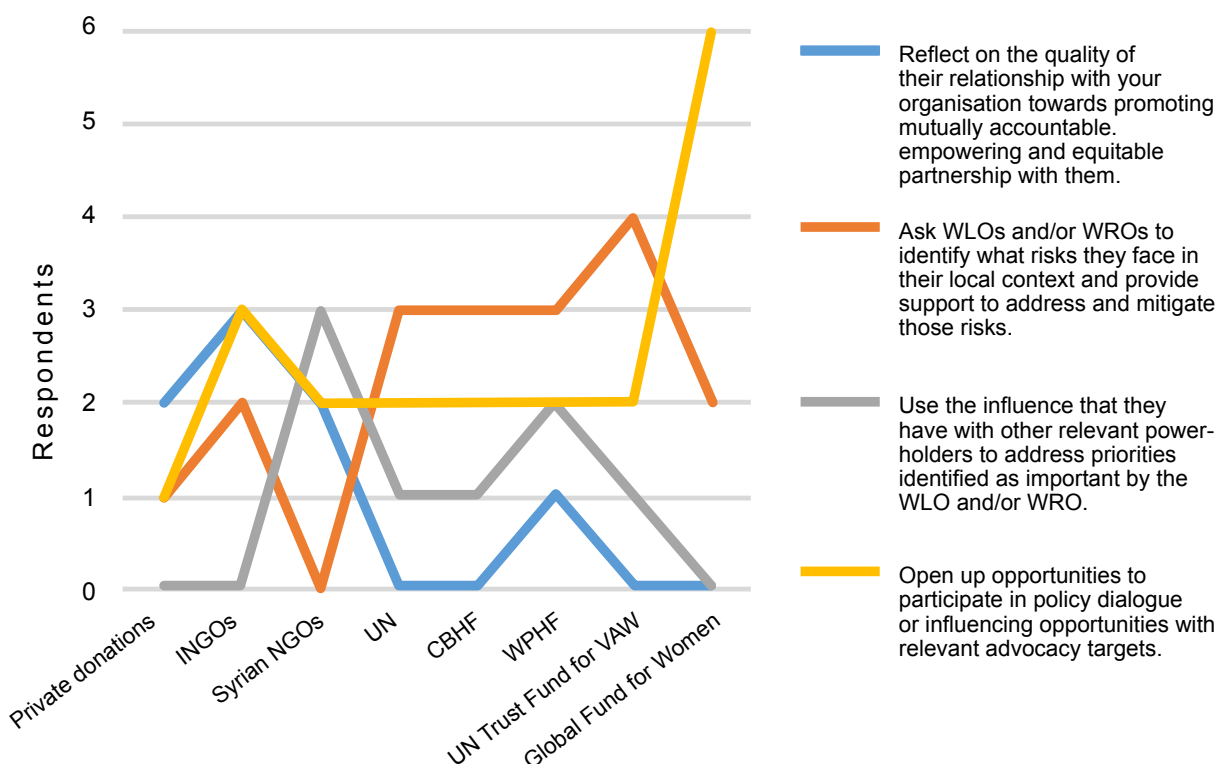
WLOs had mixed opinions on their partnerships with Syrian NGOs, which are most often male-led. While some WLOs and WLIs find such collaboration useful, others shared that these partnerships do not exemplify principled partnership and do not always translate to improved programming. For instance, some shared their expertise was not utilised to broaden women and other marginalised groups' access to services and that they received disproportionately low percentages of the grant allocation. Others shared that in some cases disagreements and harassment occurred and were not always dealt with appropriately. Given that WLOs typically have less power both at the local level and within the international aid system, WLOs shared it is often difficult to hold partners accountable for misconduct.

Conversely, some WLOs also described positive experiences with INGOs, which have used their networks and presence in donor capitals and other decision-making spaces to provide opportunities for WLOs to directly influence policy and decision-making. WLOs noted that some INGOs provided on-going informal coaching and accompaniment support, as well as formal technical assistance

and came together in solidarity with WLOs to lead collective action and provide mutual support. A positive example of a WLO, NGO and INGO coming together in such partnerships within a consortium is detailed in the case study on page 17.

WLO respondents to the questionnaire were asked to assess whether donors/intermediaries reflected on the quality of relationships, demonstrated allyship over risks, address priorities jointly and provide opportunities for WLOs to influence policy. As outlined in Figure 2, most (20) said that donors/intermediaries (across all types of actors listed) were likely to open up opportunities to participate in policy dialogue or influencing opportunities with relevant advocacy targets. For example, CARE invited WROs and WLOs to an Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) event in Türkiye where participants discussed how to improve engagement with WLOs and make programme delivery more accountable to communities and WLOs were able to share with donors about their preferred strategies (in both Arabic and English). The European External Action Service also supported WLOs alongside other civil society actors to engage in political and peace processes related to Syria.

FIGURE 2



While 18 of the 23 WLO surveyed said donors/intermediaries asked them to identify what risks they face in their local context and provided support to address and mitigate those risks, none of the respondents shared any examples of when donors or intermediaries had used their influence or power to support them when political, programmatic or financial risk challenges arose. Instead, some WLOs expressed a concern that when such challenges arise, they are effectively left to address them alone.

Only a few WLO respondents (8) said that donors/intermediaries reflected on whether their partnerships enabled mutual accountability or equitable partnership practices. From the interviews, a couple of INGOs shared that they are developing partnership agreements outside of project contracts with WLOs aimed to better frame partnerships in

terms of how they want to work together in mutually supportive and accountable ways.

There are signs that donors and intermediaries are starting to engage with WLOs more meaningfully. Yet, there are also instances of intermediaries using the expertise of WLOs while giving them little or no control within the partnership, and providing them with insufficient, short-term funds in order to claim that they have integrated women's rights work into their portfolio. The exercise of principled engagement with WLOs seems dependent on either individuals or select organisations rather than a systemic approach to integrate global localisation and gender equality commitments across the humanitarian and development system in NWS. WLOs are very clear that the quality of partnerships needs to improve in tandem with improving their access to funding.

CASE STUDY OF THE CONSORTIUM MODEL

At the end of 2021, three organisations came together to form a consortium under a donor-funded project aiming to strengthen the capacity of WLOs and WLI to lead, engage, and advocate for democracy and human rights in Syria. The consortium included one international organisation (INGO) and two local organisations, one of which was a WLO – based both in Türkiye and NWS.

At the consortium's inception, it was agreed that one of the two local organisations would take the lead. A steering group was formed, made up of two representatives from each organisation. Operating in this way fostered a democratic model, wherein all decisions were reached with the agreement of each consortium member. Further, the consortium model allowed for a great degree of space and flexibility for each organisation to work in their own style – while following the parameters of the consortium agreement – which enabled opportunities for each organisation to learn from each other.

As the lead organisation, the local NGO assumed responsibility for receiving the funds from the donor and transferring these funds to the other two organisations accordingly. All institutional administrative costs were split proportionally according to each organisation's share of the activities, ensuring funds are distributed in a fair way. While the lead organisation faced challenges in releasing funds, the inclusion of the INGO in the consortium offered valuable flexibility. For example, the INGO drew on its core funding to support the immediate post-project period for the consortium members.

This consortium model created ample learning opportunities for each organisation. The WLO contributed their gender expertise, and offered support to the lead organisation supporting them to address gender-related issues, such as helping women to access safe spaces. The INGO gained valuable insights into effective approaches for collaborating with WLIs and WLOs; lessons that are intended to be further developed and applied across future initiatives and projects. Observing the strong relationships that the local organisations built with the WLIs and WLOs motivated them to strengthen the way they work with grassroots organisations. Finally, the INGO was able to transfer their skills in navigating donor relationships and donor communications to the lead organisation.

Once the project began, six smaller WLOs and six WLIs in NWS were selected to receive a mixture of training and micro-grants. An Organisational Capacity Assessment Tool (OCAT) was used to determine the capacity of each organisation, which was followed by tailored capacity-strengthening and accompaniment on different issues, including their programmatic work with community members and advocacy to different targets at local and international levels. Organisations were invited to submit a proposal for a micro-grant, which enabled them to strengthen their capacities and the existing ways that they worked rather than transform WLIs and smaller WLOs into NGOs.

Although the WLOs and WLIs were not part of the consortium steering committee, they participated in networking workshops, and there were many opportunities for them to share their thoughts and ideas – particularly through the advocacy component of the project which had the smaller WLOs and WLIs at its heart and in the methods used to identify priorities for external engagement both in NWS and with relevant actors at the international level. To further improve such an approach, representatives from the smaller WLO and WLI should be part of the steering committee in order to identify and address the challenges they faced, and include their feedback in the implementation of the project in a timelier manner.

While the project demonstrated clear successes, it did not do so without challenges. The earthquake that struck Türkiye and Syria in February 2023 had a huge impact on the project and the functioning of the consortium. The project was suspended for several months, as each consortium member struggled to adapt to the new reality the devastating earthquake had created. Following the earthquake, the operating landscape for the smaller WLOs and WLIs had shifted, and the advocacy space looked very different than it did at project inception. Further, in October 2023, many locations were subject to military operations, an escalation of conflict and displacement, which led to many activities being suspended as WLOs and WLIs were similarly displaced.

When confronting these challenges, it was the high levels of trust, expertise, and knowledge within the consortium that enabled the project to still have significant positive impact.

Partnership Implications of Coordination Structures

When networking with external stakeholders, including UN agencies, INGOs and larger Syrian NGOs, the WLOs primarily rely on informal, personal connections rather than coordination actors, which impedes their consistent access to information and ability to influence response efforts. Smaller WLOs that are not part of the NWS humanitarian response and its coordination system, do not have access to service mapping and instead rely on their knowledge of who works where in the context where they live. While this organic and informal networking serves important functions for WLOs, it does not help them to connect with the right organisations and donors to influence localisation efforts and improve humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts in NWS, thereby undermining appropriate support for communities in NWS.

These challenges are even more apparent for WLOs based in NWS, who do not have offices in Türkiye. WROs and WLOs based in NWS without offices in Türkiye state that there is no platform that connects Türkiye-based organisations with NWS-based WLOs, WROs, volunteer groups, and affected communities. As a result, donors and intermediaries with offices in Gaziantep, Türkiye tend to engage with Gaziantep-based WLOs who provide at least some support in NWS, rather than those who are only based in NWS. NWS WLOs are then not aware of NWS donors' and intermediaries' efforts to engage with WLOs and their exclusion from coordination groups means their opportunities are even further limited to shape the strategies, partnerships and funding approaches of agencies that are in principle seeking to support WLOs. They are not able to feed into the agenda, let alone set it."³⁶

Most of the coordination group informants within this study believe that WLOs and WROs are actively included in the collective management

of their programming, while most WLOs feel their engagement is tokenistic and that they have little influence on decision-making. WLOs shared that while they are consulted and informed about actions coordination groups are taking, they are not involved in decision-making processes. Interviewees said their partnerships within coordination groups and their membership within most UN-led coordination processes, including clusters, the Gender Working Group, the AAP task force and other working groups were often transactional. Internally within coordination groups, there is often a hierarchy among partners based on the proportion of funds allocated, use of UN/humanitarian terminology, presence in sub-working groups and other forms of 'embeddedness' in the humanitarian architecture. These dynamics within the coordination structures then influence the relationships between WLOs with donors and intermediaries.

Despite on-going challenges described above, there are some positive examples of WLOs entering the coordination structures and partnering with coordination actors in NWS. One Syrian NGO involved in one of the coordination groups interviewed commented: 'there are WLOs leading or participating in area-based responses who are very effective in this work'. WLOs respondents said the Early Recovery & Livelihoods Cluster and the HLG formed WAG are two examples where women are engaged in making decisions within the humanitarian coordination architecture. The newly established WLO Taskforce, supported by the Gender Working Group and the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG), also aims to more meaningfully involve WLOs within coordination efforts.

Several ideas emerged among respondents of how to build upon these examples of good practice and address the challenges that prevent WLOs from

being more meaningfully engaged in coordination and related decision-making processes. A WLO informant suggested that dedicated seats be designated in coordination groups for WLOs. Both clusters and WLOs could benefit from learning about their respective ways of working, professional frameworks and how to improve collaboration. As such, one respondent suggested that coordinators should hold discussions with WLOs to hear from them about what meaningful participation should look like within each coordination group and to determine how this can be achieved linking this to wider efforts to promote localisation (see the case study on Ukraine). One WLO proposed that coordination groups be established within NWS, that are managed by local actors, including NWS-based WLOs, which could shadow and feed into those operating in Gaziantep. WLOs should be integral members and could also be coordinators of the NWS-based coordination groups.

From our interviews and survey responses, there were no references made to how WLOs who participate in the coordination forums sought prior input from other women's organisations or provided feedback to them after such meetings. In general, UN agencies and some INGOs are resourced to have staff lead on coordination are share information with other organisations, whereas WLOs do not have such staff. Instead, their representatives feed into these processes and engage with coordination groups on top of already very busy day-jobs. In some cases, this causes WLOs to be isolated from their peer WLOs, thereby missing out on opportunities to better influence and leverage their collective voice as WLOs. This should be explored further, and the WLO Taskforce is one entry-point to address some of these issues.

One challenge in brokering improved relationships with coordination groups across the humanitarian, development, peace and human rights spectrum is some stakeholders expressed scepticism over the expertise and potential contribution of WLOs. As one informant put it; 'they can only work on GBV and not the top priorities such as food security and health.' Some respondents involved in peacebuilding and human rights also expressed similar views. Such comments may reflect their perception bias and possibly vested interests in retaining levels of influence and funding flows, or they may reflect simply a lack of engagement and understanding. As such, localisation efforts would benefit from exploring how WLOs can contribute to coordinated efforts across the humanitarian, development, peacebuilding spectrum.

There was some confusion expressed about new initiatives to promote gender within coordination efforts in NWS. In the past, clusters invested in gender-mainstreaming and engagement through 'gender focal points' in different kinds of organisations, while in recent years the focus has been on working with WLOs. A few of the coordination group respondents advised that the HLG should make a decision that at least 50% of seats in decision-making forums must be held by women.

Interviews and group discussions did point to various ways that some WLOs are organising, collaborating and networking amongst themselves inside NWS. Within these partnerships, WLOs exchange human and logistical resources, help each other to strengthen their relationships with other organisations, expand their geographical scope of services, and build new relationships with donors. However, such horizontal partnerships tend to form if there is a joint project or when WLOs are implementing separate projects with a similar goal, but beyond that, wider efforts to coordinate and partner amongst each other remain sparse. A few WLOs involved in this research and subsequent workshops stated their interest in pursuing such efforts. Yet there is a gap between WLOs support for those efforts and how WLOs perceive or understand the role of coordination groups in helping them to be more meaningfully included and involved in decision-making.



A Shift toward Improved Partnerships

While international human rights, peacebuilding, and humanitarian actors in NWS still have a long way to go in shift power to local organisations, including WLOs, efforts are underway. In January 2024, an Accountability for Affected Populations (AAP) workshop comprising Syrian NGOs, including WROs & WLOs, discussed how to strengthen participation and engagement of Syrian civil society. Several interviewees within this study had also participated in that event, during which they emphasised the need for a cultural shift that re-centres the agency of the affected populations and local civil society actors who are rooted in those communities within the delivery of services, protection interventions and wider humanitarian, development, peace building efforts in NWS.³⁷ They shared that relying on the experiences and knowledge of local actors not only makes programming more effective from a technical design perspective, it also enhances community acceptance making interventions more accessible.

Likewise, some actions can be seen of SNGOs, INGOs, and donors to at least connect with WLOs. As indicated in a UNDP report documenting the outcomes of a workshop with WROs and WLOs in 2020, space has started to open for WROs and WLOs to come forward and share their perspectives with UN agencies on the delivery of programmes in NWS, which has started to shift the narrative on WROs' and WLOs' participation. However, this shift has not yet translated fully into their meaningful and equal participation in decision-making. As shared by the participants, in a January 2024 workshop co-hosted by CARE, UN Women and OCHA, currently WROs and WLOs are consulted for needs assessments and Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs), however it is not clear that the WROs & WLOs' inputs are being taken into consideration in strategic planning.

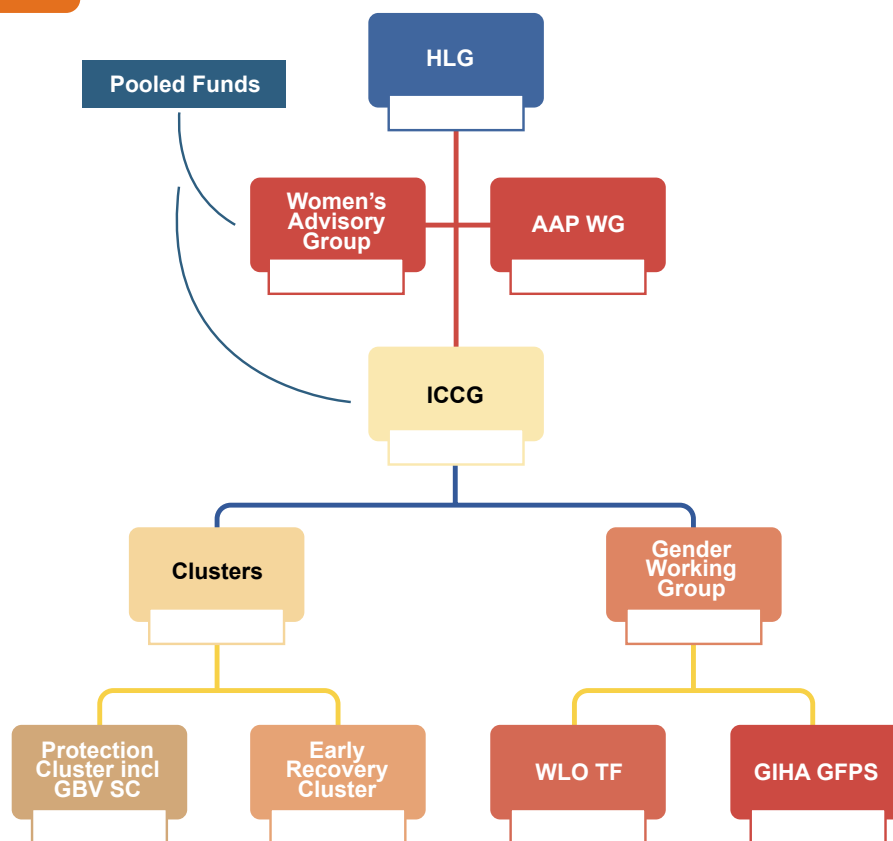
In line with IASC guidance on localisation³⁸, pooled funding mechanisms for NWS have made efforts to involve WLOs strategically to a certain degree. For example, the Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS) routinely seeks the advice of the HLG Women's Advisory Group³⁹ and has a WLO on their board. The Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund engaged the Gender Working Group to review funding proposals

in 2023 and has prioritised WLOs in their screening of organisations eligible for funding.

There are multiple stakeholders across the political, development and humanitarian efforts in NWS that engage WLOs, WLIs and WROs within coordination, advocacy, policy dialogues, and decision-making expanding beyond the direct or indirect funding relationships into more strategic and equitable partnerships. Such examples include:

- The Syrian Women's Advisory Board (WAB) was established by the Office of the Special Envoy in January 2016, in partnership with UN Women and with the support of the UN Department of Political Affairs. This came after several years of advocacy efforts by Syrian women's rights activists for a direct and meaningful role in peace talks.
- The European External Action Service continues to support a political solution in line with UNSC Resolution 2254 and to mobilise significant resources to assist the Syrian people – both in Syria and in the region – including through an annual Brussels Conference where civil society, including WLOs, are able to voice the experiences of affected communities and contribute to Syria's peace process.
- The regional humanitarian response coordination structure (Figure 1) has expanded the entry points for women and women-led organisations to influence strategic and funding decisions. The HLG established its Women's Advisory Group (WAG) in 2020, comprising women in middle-management roles. The HLG developed a Gender in Humanitarian Action Road Map in 2020, along with the Gender Working Group (GWG) and cluster gender focal points in 2022. In 2023, the GWG prioritised establishing a WLO Taskforce, drafting its ToR in January 2024. It is intended the taskforce will have a broad membership of WLOs and WROs and efforts will be made to strengthen their ties with humanitarian clusters/coordination system.
- Networks and consortia supporting area-based management and coordination.

FIGURE 3



As described above, there have been significant efforts to engage WLOs in NWS over recent years. Agencies involved in these efforts should seek to identify how these strategies complement each other and could be expanded to ensure WLOs are meaningfully involved in strategic and operational

decisions concerning their community. As one WLO informant said, *“By better supporting and strengthening women organisations and initiatives, and helping to ensure they have a strong voice in decision-making, the humanitarian response will have a greater positive impact on women.”*



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Gender in Emergencies Group:

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