international alert

Practical approaches to localisation in peacebuilding
Lebanon

Cover note

This report was written in July 2024, two months before the hostilities in south Lebanon expanded into a war affecting the whole country and displacing more than a million people.

The local civil society in Lebanon launched its immediate response to the emergency with local and international funds. Over the first few weeks of the war, peacebuilding interventions were revised to address the immediate needs of people affected by the violence and displacement.

The focus of local and international peacebuilding actors shifted to ensure conflict sensitivity of the emergency response in the short term and to advocate for an integrated humanitarian-development-peacebuilding approach in the post-emergency period.

Contents

Introduction

The complexity of the Lebanon context persists, marked by delicate communal relations and political divisions across regions. Competition over services and jobs is perceived as the main driver of tensions between Lebanese communities and Syrian refugees, while intra-Lebanese tensions are driven by political and sectarian divisions. Since October 2023, the escalation of hostilities along Lebanon's Blue Line – the de facto border with Israel – has caused significant displacement and loss of life. The violence has also intensified political divides and socio-economic pressures in a country already fractured by political and economic instability. The most divisive issues have been Hezbollah's engagement in the war in Gaza,[1] compensation to affected families in the south, the national defence strategy and the presidential vacuum in Lebanon.[2] At a systemic level, further weakening of municipalities, deterioration in the rule of law and erosion of rights, including the freedom of speech[3], have affected the space for peacebuilding. Resentment towards international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), UN agencies and donors has been mounting due to their positions on the Gaza war.

Localisation efforts in Lebanon have been ongoing since the end of the civil war in 1990 and have gained new momentum following the Grand Bargain of 2016.[4] Several localisation mechanisms have been established, the most prominent of which is the Localisation Taskforce created with support from Expertise France's Shabake project.[5]

This paper was produced as part of the Practical Approaches to Localisation research project, funded by the Swedish Postcode Lottery Foundation.[6] The project, based in Lebanon, Syria, Kenya and Rwanda, aims to ensure that local realities and voices on localisation are included in international debates on the topic. This paper seeks to provide guidance to donors, international, national and local NGOs, and civil society organisations (CSOs) on how to effectively support localisation in peacebuilding work in Lebanon. It incorporates analysis and recommendations from the research process and validation workshop.

Methodology

The practice paper presents the results of a participatory study that was conducted between January and July 2024 with four phases of data collection.

Literature review (January 2024)

A review was conducted of articles and reports on localisation, the decolonisation of aid, international funding trends and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus to inform planned primary data collection.

### Phase 1: Interviews and focus groups (February to March 2024)

The qualitative data collection phase assessed how organisations have reframed their work to respond to the implications of the Gaza war, how community perceptions of aid have shifted, and which partnership opportunities have emerged. Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with

four participants (all men) from organisations working on social stability and peacebuilding. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with 42 participants (17 men and 25 women) from 23 CSOs that mainstream social cohesion into their work, of which 10 were CSOs from Upper Chouf region and 13 were from the Bekaa region.[7] Overall, representatives of 27 organisations were consulted.

Phase 2: Online survey (May 2024)

The survey was disseminated via International Alert's communication networks, which include CSOs engaged in past or ongoing projects and initiatives. In total, 51 representatives of NGOs and CSOs active in peacebuilding, social stability and social cohesion responded to the survey. Questions were related to the respondents' understanding of local actors, their vision for the role of local actors, and factors contributing to or hindering localisation, gender and inclusion. Almost half of the respondents (22) came from organisations based in the Bekaa region, due to Alert's longer-term programming in that area.

Figure 1: Survey respondents by region

Bekaa **47%**

North **15%**

Chouf **17%**

Mount Lebanon **13%**

South **8%**
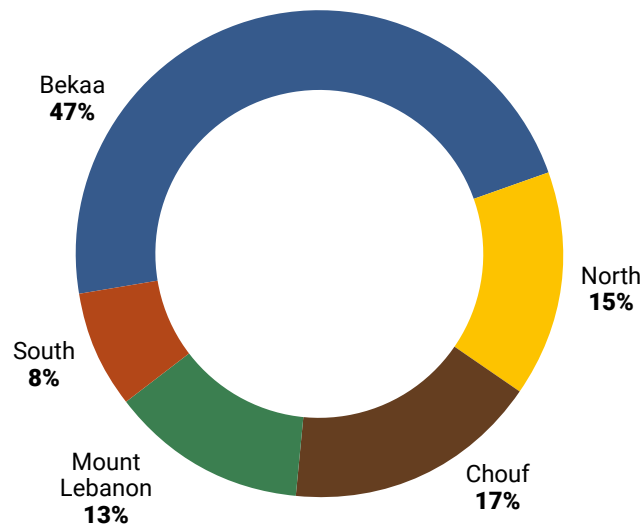
Phase 3: KIIs (June to July 2024)

Eight semi-structured interviews were held with nine individuals (eight women and one man) with specific experience in supporting localisation to develop an understanding of ongoing localisation efforts in Lebanon, the extent to which peacebuilding actors are part of the process, and lessons learnt from the progress to date. Participants included representatives of donor agencies, consultants and leaders of national peacebuilding organisations. A learning session with Alert staff and consultants (four women and three men) provided insights based on the capacity assessment of 16 CSOs working or aspiring to work on social cohesion in two regions of Lebanon.[8]

Phase 4: Validation workshop (July 2024)

A workshop with 15 participants (13 women and two men) was held in Beirut to validate the preliminary findings and co-create recommendations. The participants included respondents who had been interviewed during phases 1 and 3 and other practitioners involved in localisation efforts.

Limitations of the data

The research was done using convenience sampling (Survey Monkey survey with local CSOs) and snowball sampling (KIIs with experts).[9] The survey findings reflect the views of NGOs and CSOs (survey participants) who have been implementing or are planning to implement projects on social cohesion and are not representative of the broader civil society in Lebanon. The sample was dominated by NGOs and CSOs from the Bekaa region, which is where a large proportion of internationally funded projects have been implemented. The large proportion of Syrian refugees settled in the area, the high level of social tensions,[10] as well as factors such as confessional diversity and accessibility, have attracted more funding to this region compared with other parts of Lebanon. The survey results may therefore be positively skewed towards better-informed and better-connected local organisations that have more positive outlooks on the value of localisation.

Another limitation is the fact that research participants with experience in localisation are in general more likely to work in experienced in humanitarian and development programming rather than peacebuilding. This reflects a global trend of the localisation debate being dominated by humanitarian partners, but it may also explain the stronger emphasis in this report on the 'mainstreaming' and 'integration' of peacebuilding than on peacebuilding-focused programming.

The peacebuilding focus of the research was also found to be sensitive because the timeframe coincided with the first months of cross-border fighting between Israel and Hezbollah. This required the introduction of the qualitative data collection (phase 1) that identified CSOs' responses to the security and displacement crisis in south Lebanon before launching the survey.

Key findings

Understanding localisation in the Lebanese context

The broader discussion on the localisation of aid is more advanced in Lebanon than the rest of the region. According to research participants, "there is still a lot of confusion [around] what we mean by localisation, but there has been some progress in later years". This is attributed to civil society in Lebanon being more open and developed compared with other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and to recent initiatives directly supporting localisation. These have not, however, distinguished between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work.

> *"I think the conversations [on localisation] in Lebanon started before it came on the agenda of the international community, in the 1980s … there was this push to create change from within, [to see] how social and political issues can be addressed by people most affected by them."*
> – Research participant

Research participants largely agreed on the definition of a 'local actor' in the Lebanese context. According to Alert's survey with 51 Lebanese CSOs, local actors consist of local NGOs (92.2%), individuals and community members working on grassroots initiatives to improve social stability

(90.9%) and local government officials such as municipalities, *moukhtars* (village chiefs) and social development centres (SDCs) (78.4%). Previous studies on the localisation of aid in Lebanon recognise the lack of clarity in defining local actors. A Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP) report on localisation in Lebanon and Jordan uses the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) definition that refers to local authorities and local civil society as actors in localisation.[11] The National Localisation Framework for Lebanon, which was developed to strengthen CSO capacity to lead on localisation, refers only to national and local civil society actors.[12]

Figure 2: Answers to the question 'Who do you see as a "local actor" within the context of peacebuilding and community development in Lebanon?'
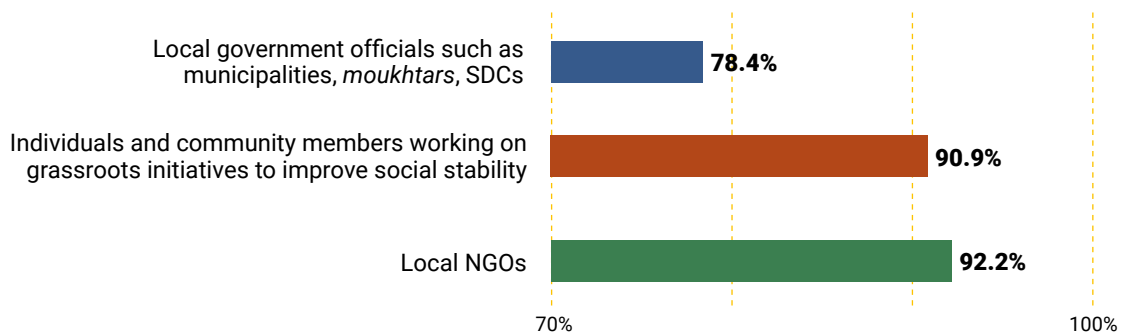
The engagement of local government actors in localisation is challenging in the fragile Lebanese context. Recent economic crises have depleted the financial and human resources of municipalities, and the SDCs run by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The repeated postponement of municipal elections has led to the dissolution of many municipal councils and the paralysis of others because of internal conflict between rival political actors.[13] A representative of a donor agency noted, "Many of the capacities that have been built up have disappeared." Thus, in areas where tensions between different political or confessional groups are high, the municipalities may be absent or not seen as legitimate to lead development and peacebuilding processes.

Local CSOs aspire to a localisation that gives increased decision-making power to local actors and peacebuilding initiatives (86.3% of survey respondents), greater access to resources and funding to local peacebuilding efforts (82.4%) and integration of local knowledge and perspectives into peacebuilding efforts (72.6%). Surveyed CSOs also emphasised that they wanted to see recognition of local expertise, increased transparency and accountability, empowerment of marginalised groups such as youth, women and minorities, and increased coordination and collaboration between NGOs and CSOs.

Positive moves towards localisation in the Lebanese context

Two-thirds of survey respondents (66.7%) observed positive changes towards localisation in peacebuilding efforts over the past two years. Organisations in Beirut, Mount Lebanon and the North were more likely to recognise positive changes towards localisation, likely due to their higher exposure to coordination meetings and events. Organisations in the South and the Chouf region,

where fewer projects are implemented, were least likely to report positive trends. Strong collaboration between international and local organisations was seen as the main contributing factor to localisation (reported by 82.4% of those who reported positive trends). Respondents also identified the active presence of youth and women's groups (70.6%) and training for local actors (70.6%) as contributing to positive changes. In contrast, only three respondents (8.8%) attributed positive changes in the move towards localisation to increased funding for local peacebuilding initiatives.

Lebanon has traditionally had a **strong civil society**, which has enabled faster progress with localisation compared with other countries in the region.[14] CSOs are present and active across the country, providing services to fill in gaps and weaknesses in the public sector.[15] Peacebuilding organisations have been active since the end of the civil war. Key informants noted that local non-partisan organisations were better at mitigating tensions and responding to local needs, as well as enjoying greater acceptance compared with local authorities[16] and INGOs. Notably, INGOs working with funding from western donors have lost the confidence of communities in Lebanon since the Gaza war due to the support of many western governments for Israel.[17]

Shifting funding modalities and the commitment of INGOs to supporting localisation have facilitated **strong collaboration** between international and national/local NGOs. Many INGOs are prioritising the co-design of projects, creating more horizontal decision-making mechanisms on partnership and consortia projects, and investing in developing skills among local partners' staff. Although it is still rare for large projects to be led by a national NGO and for INGOs to assume partner roles, such examples do exist. In one case, the national NGO partner reported that it had trained staff of its INGO partners on a consortium project on integrating social stability approaches into primary healthcare.

Localisation Taskforce and Framework

The **Localisation Taskforce** was established in 2022 to oversee the implementation of the Localisation Action Plan developed under Expertise France's Shabake project (2019-2022), which supported the localisation of aid. The taskforce includes 10 member organisations – national and international – and two observers. The taskforce developed the National Localisation Framework.

The **National Localisation Framework** was developed in 2022. The framework defines localisation as "shifting ownership and decision-making power from international actors to local actors, aiming to increase the effectiveness, sustainability, and ownership of aid by ensuring that it is responsive to the needs, priorities, and capacities of local communities". The development of the framework involved more than 500 stakeholders. The framework has four components: capacity strengthening, partnership principles, fundraising, and coordination. One Lebanese, one Syrian and one international organisation with clear peacebuilding missions were included in the process of developing the framework.

Networks and forums have facilitated collaborations between national and INGOs. The Lebanon Humanitarian and Development NGO Forum (LHDF), for example, is a network of 85 international and national NGOs, facilitating coordination, strengthening capacity and advocating for localisation. Although LHDF does not include peacebuilding partners, other initiatives have a strong focus on peace and social stability, such as the Conflict Sensitivity Forum led by House of Peace and the Forum for Memory and Future, which have both international and national members. Awareness

sessions on localisation and coordination among national and local NGOs have been supported through several mechanisms, most notably the Lebanon Localisation Taskforce.

Donor practices in recent years have encouraged **local NGOs to take the lead on projects** addressing social cohesion and social stability. Some donors have provided financial incentives, such as a recent EU call for proposals in several MENA countries, which encouraged locally led projects through a much smaller co-funding requirement than that needed for projects led by EU-based NGOs.[18] Other programmes have built trust through horizontal engagement with grantees from the project design stage all the way through implementation. A co-design process and accompaniment, however, is resource heavy and requires donor agencies/funding programmes with in-country presence and sufficient staff with sound understanding of the context and technical skills to support grantees.

An increase in **pool funding and donors' preference for consortia projects** were also noted as factors that enabled localisation. Pool funding allows donors who cannot contract locally to delegate the fund management to an in-country team who could support the grantees. Consortia, on the other hand, allows INGOs to bring on board multiple local partners with different expertise and/or geographic reach.

Novel approaches of NGO-led financing for crisis response have also emerged in the MENA region. A review of eight such mechanisms including NGO-led grant facilities found that funding is "more predictable and flexible than traditional, projectised humanitarian funding" and preliminary evidence suggests greater efficiency.[19] These mechanisms progress the localisation agenda by exclusively funding national and local organisations, covering overheads or gradually increasing funding to local grantees.[20]

Capacity-building of national and local NGOs has continued in recent years, with a shift to more **systemic capacity strengthening** through training, mentoring and support for the implementation of local projects. Alert's project on supporting local CSO capacity for social cohesion has, for example, focused on developing policies and systems, in addition to building individual and team capacity to design and implement social cohesion interventions. A stronger donor emphasis on 'Do No Harm' and conflict sensitivity in Lebanon due to the volatile context has also prompted NGOs to include a peacebuilding partner organisation or consultant on some projects. The extent to which national and local organisations have managed to internalise approaches and lessons from such projects remains underexplored, a main limitation being the unstable funding and high staff turnover in national and local NGOs.

Barriers to localisation in peacebuilding

The main barriers to localisation, according to survey respondents, were the insufficient resources available to local actors (43.1%) and the lack of trust between local communities and international organisations (35.3%). Only four respondents (7.8%) considered limited capacity of local actors to be a barrier to localisation.

Figure 3: Barriers hindering progress towards localisation in Lebanon's peacebuilding efforts

Insufficient resources available to local actors
46%

Limited capacity of local actors
8%

Inconsistent government policies on localisation
8%

Lack of trust between local communities and international organisations
38%
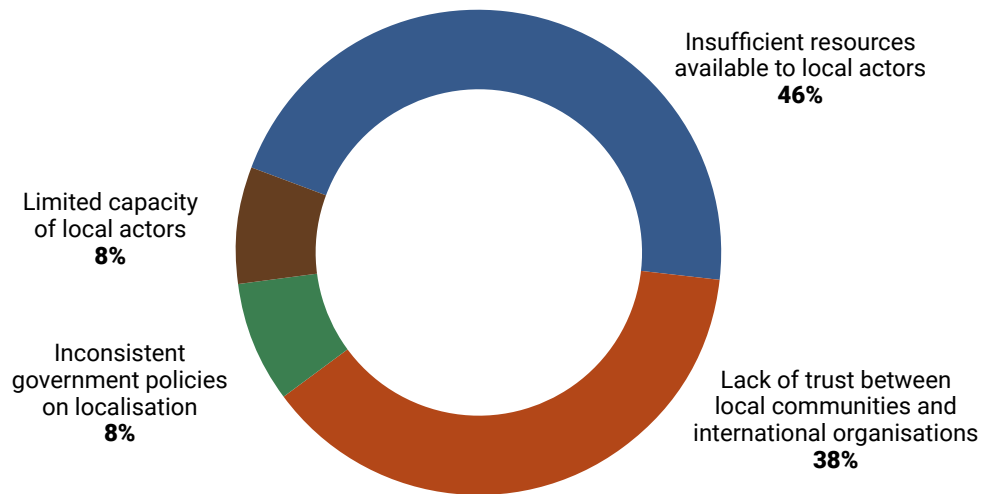
Insufficient resources for peacebuilding are the result of a decrease in overall overseas development assistance in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS), as well as the specific portion of funding for conflict prevention.[21] Although donors in Lebanon have taken steps towards allocating more funds to national NGOs through direct financing or as part of consortia with INGOs, limited funding is affecting the size of the grants. Furthermore, few donor agencies are structured and staffed in a way that allows them to increase support to national organisations. Although localisation is meant to increase efficiency in the long term, in the short term it needs investment to both adapt the ways of working of donors and strengthen the capacity of national and local NGOs to operate with larger budgets.

The imbalance of power between international and national NGOs is another barrier to localisation. Although INGOs have embraced the principles of localisation, the culture of work continues to be dominated by the international organisations because they hold much larger budgets and have better established channels of communication with donors.

"I think that until now there has been a lot of imposing of agendas on local organisations – they [donors] would decide on the needs and trends. There are no spaces for communities to identify needs, priorities, dreams." – Research participant

Context-specific barriers

Peacebuilding is a **lower priority in view of the humanitarian and security needs** in Lebanon. The conflict in south Lebanon, the economic crisis and the severe weakening of public services have all resulted in "increasingly humanitarian thinking".[22] Local NGOs and CSOs are compelled to respond to immediate needs and peacebuilding work has been affected by a notable decrease in funding. In the FGDs, CSOs from the Bekaa and Chouf regions confirmed a move from development projects to emergency response and a relocation of resources to the development of risk assessments and contingency plans. In addition to security and humanitarian priorities, CSOs reported an increase in demand for local services such as electricity and water due to the economic and governance crises. This shift after October 2023 has posed a challenge to peacebuilding efforts in general, and perhaps even more so to locally led peacebuilding. Any efforts to sustain peacebuilding work at the local level would require a response to people's immediate needs, but projects should not only be based

on needs and vulnerability assessments. They should also be based on context analysis and the identification of opportunities for conflict transformation.

> *"The economic and political crises are also blocking localisation. There is no security and peace of mind for people to have these conversations – to identify our trends and our needs. They are pressured by the crises; they are firefighters rather than creating something customised and tailored."* – Research participant

The **space for work on peacebuilding** and the related areas of social cohesion and gender equality have been shrinking, according to key informants. Ministries have opposed the term 'social cohesion' since the alternative concept of 'social stability' was introduced in 2014. Support from municipalities and ministries to community work connecting Lebanese and Syrian communities has been dwindling with the rise in deportations, evictions and public campaigns against Syrian refugees. In response, donors and NGOs have opted for mainstreaming social stability in projects that provide protection, livelihoods or education services, because it has become "increasingly difficult to work on social stability alone".[23]

As a consequence, social stability work applying traditional peacebuilding approaches such as dialogue, trust building between communities and participation of communities in decision-making have become more difficult to fund. In addition, social stability is often only mainstreamed on paper due to the limited experience and capacity of organisations specialised in service provision, protection or livelihoods to apply it effectively. Alert's work on mainstreaming conflict sensitivity and social cohesion into the health, protection and education sectors in Lebanon has confirmed that national and local NGOs are often not structured or trained to implement an integrated approach,[24] and efforts tend to be closely linked to specific projects instead of guiding the organisations' thinking at a strategic level.

Increased global humanitarian needs combined with crises and insecurity in Lebanon have pushed donors towards **shorter contracts and smaller grants**, in contrast to the multi-year funding that localisation advocates have demanded. In some cases, donors have moved to the reimbursement of costs instead of upfront payments. Such an approach excludes smaller organisations, who lack the financial resources to implement projects before receiving funds. Research participants from NGOs reported that their donors have become "more demanding", while simultaneously reducing funding for overheads or capping the percentage of grants for human resources. One key informant from a local organisation interpreted these requirements as a "reversal of the trend" towards localisation. There is also a concern that with decreased donor funding for Lebanon, traditional donors will prioritise commitments to UN agencies, which will sustain and reinforce the practice of sub-granting and sub-contracting to NGOs, instead of promoting direct funding in international aid financing.

Donors supporting civil society actors with reduced funding also face a risk of resorting to **'localisation by default'**: funding local actors directly, purely as a means of reducing costs. Some localisation programmes in Lebanon have already shown that donor agencies and funding programmes require management and technical expertise to support their local grantees. If donors are not able to build expertise within their teams, disbursement to national and local NGOs puts the achievement of positive outcomes at risk in the short term. The responsibility of strengthening local capacity for peacebuilding lies both with NGOs and donors: the former should demand funding for their own development and professionalisation, and the latter should recognise that localisation has a cost.
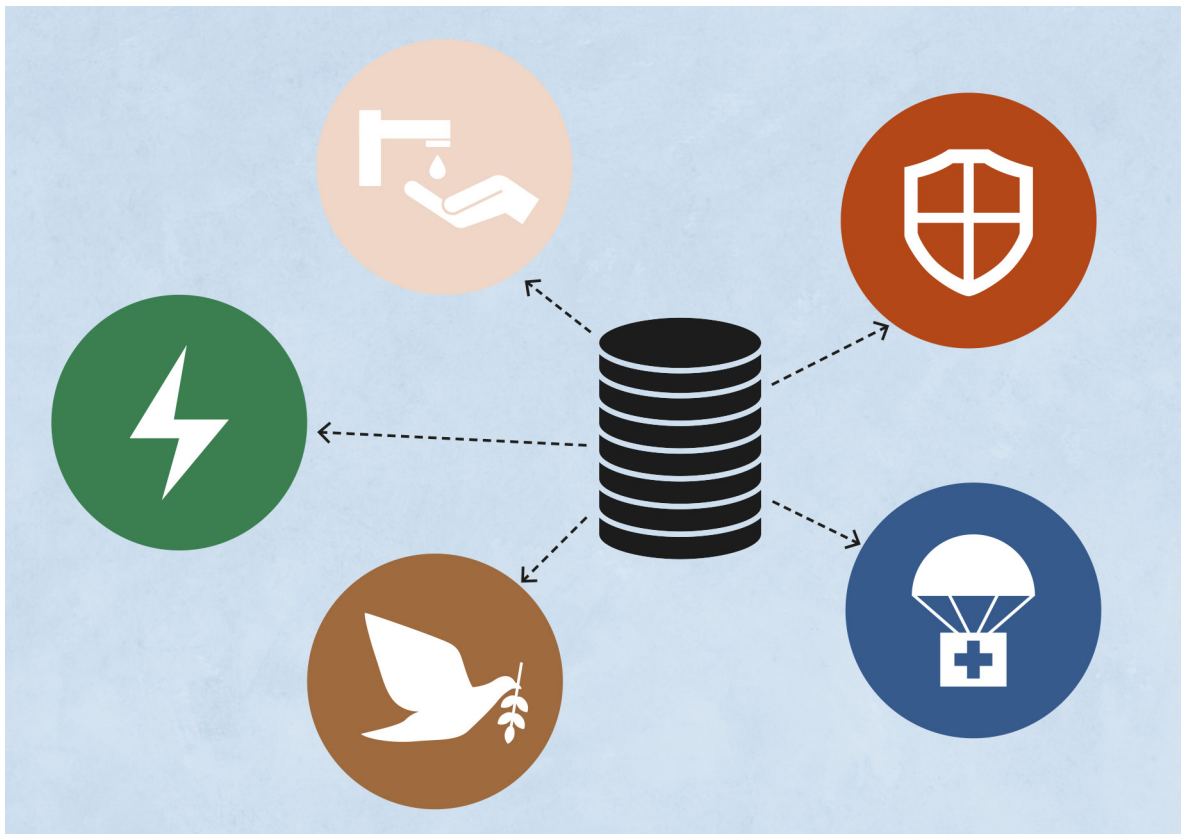
"When funding is slimmer, you do localisation by default, which is not necessarily the right way to do localisation. If localisation happens by default, there should be demand from donors for enhancing capacities [of the organisations]." – Research participant

Barriers specific to local actors in peacebuilding

At the local level, NGOs that work on peacebuilding and/or social stability do not have **peacebuilding missions**, often work on a range of services and in many areas, and have **limited institutional capacity**. Efforts to support localisation in peacebuilding therefore overlap with efforts to support the localisation of humanitarian and development aid overall. Capacity-development priorities identified in the localisation framework or in assessments conducted by donors,[25] such as linking capacity-development plans to an organisation's mission, creating capacity-strengthening plans that include knowledge, practice, policy and organisational structure, and documenting lessons learnt from the process, are valid for the peacebuilding sector too. Furthermore, peacebuilding capacity needs to be developed as technical expertise to complement professional capacity in specific services.

The limits set by donors on **human resources and overhead costs** for peacebuilding projects do not reflect operational needs. A greater proportion of the budget is required for human resources in peacebuilding projects than in humanitarian and development projects. Furthermore, some peacebuilding funding programmes have reportedly disallowed overhead costs in their recent funding cycle.

Local and national NGOs are more **reluctant to engage with state institutions**, political actors and policy-makers on issues related to peace and social stability compared with INGOs, according to key informants from donor agencies. Many local and national NGOs perceive the state as corrupt and are accustomed to 'blaming and shaming' institutions. Some also face stronger criticism from

the authorities when advocating for the rights of marginalised groups such as refugees and sexual minorities. This limits the ability of national and local organisations to engage with formal institutions. "We are pushing them to be political", remarked one informant from a donor agency when referring to their national partner NGOs working on peacebuilding. Donors have facilitated NGO engagement with the state through participation in strategy development and planning, providing technical expertise and forging contacts with selected officials, when needed.

Peacebuilding NGOs largely use **western approaches in peacebuilding**, such as training in human rights and citizenship, creating consultation mechanisms and running advocacy campaigns, which are not always adapted to the realities on the ground. Local acceptance, support for peacebuilding practice, impact and sustainability of peacebuilding results can be compromised when the work of peacebuilders is seen as 'imported'. A localisation process needs to ensure that local actors use locally developed approaches and have the space to learn from and adapt other peacebuilding practices. To this end, networks of Lebanese organisations involved in peacebuilding should better articulate what works locally and strengthen the capacity of local NGOs and CSOs that are not specialists in peacebuilding.[26]

National and local CSOs are **more risk averse and vulnerable to failure** due to their embeddedness in communities and unstable funding streams. Lack of tangible impact in the short term may affect their reputation and funding prospects to a greater extent than INGOs. Therefore, peacebuilding work that does not produce immediately visible results can be riskier to local organisations. Donors can support local organisations' peacebuilding work by setting realistic objectives and expectations in their calls for proposals, developed through dialogue with local organisations and communities, and flexibility within funding frameworks (programme goals, approaches, results and budgets). Research participants suggested that both donors and INGOs could support the co-creation of projects that integrate community-level activities with short-term results and activities that contribute to longer-term change in systems and cultures.

Findings on the **risks of political pressure** faced by national and local NGOs were inconclusive. According to some informants, the risks of political pressure faced by local NGOs are not too different to the risks to INGOs, as many international organisations implement their programmes through local partners and are exposed to the same risks as their local partners. Other informants, however, believed that the pressure on national and local NGOs is inevitably greater than that on INGOs. The risks can be mitigated by proactively engaging all stakeholders in peacebuilding projects, including those who are less active in their communities or who are close to the traditional political parties. In the short term, undertaking research on sensitive topics or leading advocacy campaigns under the umbrella of networks and coalitions or with the visibility of an international partner can mitigate some of the risks of political interference.

> *"You can't criticise or analyse the role of official institutions without putting yourself at risk. If you work with Palestinians or Syrians a lot, you are at risk of being questioned. INGOs are not being treated by local authorities or powers as the locals."* – Research participant

Gender and inclusion implications for localisation

Requirements for mainstreaming gender and inclusion in all programmes have become commonplace and localised peacebuilding interventions need to ensure the participation of diverse

groups, as well as supporting processes that empower marginalised groups. Survey respondents stated that gender and inclusion need to be integrated by ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities (80.4%) and engaging local women and youth organisations in peacebuilding (80.4%). Training for marginalised groups was also seen as an effective strategy for inclusion (74.5%).

A review of activities implemented by both national and international organisations in the social-stability sector revealed a wider range of approaches to gender mainstreaming. Activities for social stability focused on gathering accurate gender-specific data, raising awareness about gender equality, and actively involving women and girls in shaping interventions and conducting assessments. An assessment led by International Alert in mid-2024 identified insufficient capacity for gender mainstreaming among social-stability partners, limited understanding of how gender intersects with other factors, and how it can be integrated from the project-design stage.[27] The review also identified that men and boys are not sufficiently involved in capacity-building initiatives on gender issues.

The survey responses on an open-ended question about strategies for mainstreaming gender and inclusion highlight the need for a holistic approach involving empowerment strategies, protection and gender-sensitive services, and working with communities to increase acceptance of women's participation. The lack of responses specifically referring to the need to include women in peacebuilding, reconciliation and conflict-resolution mechanisms at all levels – local and national – indicates, however, a limited understanding of the application of the women, peace and security agenda and the intersections of peacebuilding and gender overall. The ongoing gender mainstreaming process in the Social Stability Working Group provides an opportunity to strengthen knowledge of the dynamics between gender and conflict and how social-stability interventions can become gender responsive and gender transformative.
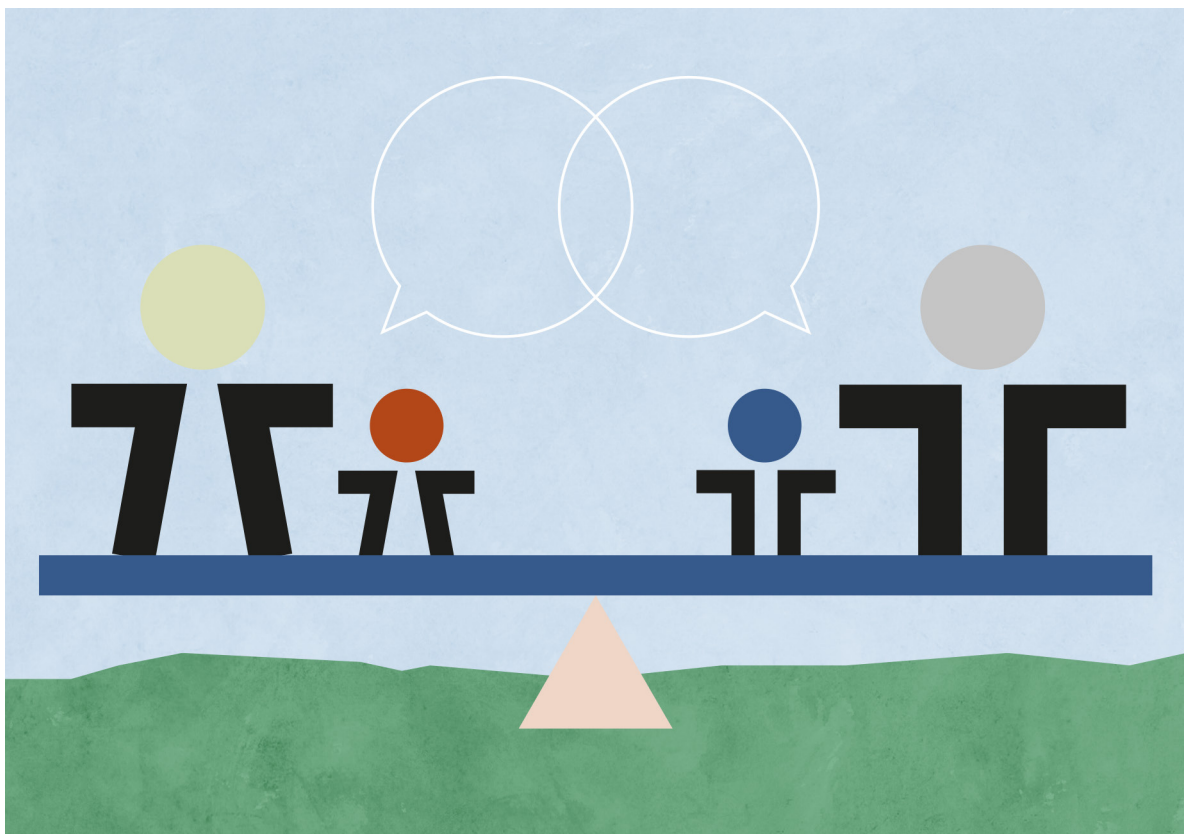
Two donors with different approaches to localisation and peacebuilding

Donor A has been supporting initiatives dealing with the past, ranging from workshops on memory and forgiveness, recording divergent historical narratives and supporting work on disappeared people. Donor A understands peacebuilding programming as connecting local processes with political processes and institutions, therefore it directly supports its civil society partners to develop strategies and engage with the institutions responsible for the disappeared. Although the issue is highly contentious and has been side-lined in the confessional power-sharing system in Lebanon since the end of the civil war, this donor believes that civil society needs to find ways to work with the authorities. The donor is actively engaged in implementation, offers technical capacity from experts, participates in meetings and facilitates access to decision-makers. For Donor A, if the projects do not link to 'Track 1', i.e. to official government structures and channels, there is no sustainability. "What we try to do is to push our local partners to be political … We are not a traditional donor; we are with them on the table. We tell them from the beginning that we are a partner."

Donor B works on alleviating the impacts of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon, including mainstreaming a social-stability approach into projects that increase protection and create livelihood opportunities. Donor B prioritises locally led projects, holding co-design sessions, and supporting grantees to revise their outcomes and targets. The team from the donor Donor B works on alleviating the impacts of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon, including mainstreaming a social-stability approach into projects that increase protection and create livelihood opportunities. Donor B prioritises locally led projects, holding co-design sessions, and supporting grantees to revise their outcomes and targets. The team from the donor programme spent a lot of time with shortlisted partners to "look at outcome pathways reducing the losses – for example, don't train 1,000 people if only 200 can get jobs". The donor

representative found it challenging to shift the NGOs' thinking from outputs to sustainable outcomes. "It is our failure, thinking of outputs, not the real sustainable change, for example, jobs created." Working with grantees in this way is labour intensive. Localisation requires a process of building the capacity of local NGOs; if localisation happens 'by default' this aspect may be overlooked. Donor B believes that the NGOs need to demand resources for their own development and include capacity strengthening in all projects and budgets. For localisation in peacebuilding, national and local NGOs need guidelines on how to integrate peacebuilding into their development projects.

– Quotes from research participants

Conclusion: Localisation 'by design' or 'by default'?

Lebanon has a strong peacebuilding sector and several donors have made efforts to strengthen local capacity for peacebuilding and social-stability work, as well as to develop the institutional capacity

of local organisations across sectors. Amid decreasing funding for peacebuilding this progress can easily be reversed. To support 'localisation by design', and not 'by default', donors and international, national and local NGOs working on peace need to continue their efforts on coordination, capacity-building and advocacy, while pushing for a more horizontal dialogue and agenda setting with donor agencies and a genuine shift in power to local organisations.

Coordination between national and local NGOs and CSOs is a priority for localisation and is even more important in peacebuilding work, where local organisations may lack legitimacy to engage with different communities due to social and political divides or to reach out to national-level institutions. Locally led networks and fora can provide a much-needed space for analysis, launching partnerships and joint advocacy.

Capacity strengthening and peer learning on peacebuilding and social-stability approaches are crucial for organisations looking to expand the range of their interventions while adapting to the local social and political context. Yet, capacity-building is not enough.

Real localisation cannot happen without a shift in power, which involves funding. While multi-year, flexible funding has been called for repeatedly, the trend has been reversed in peacebuilding funding. Traditional donors prioritise their UN commitments in times of funding crisis, which adds additional layers of bureaucracy to the grant-making process, reduces implementation timespans, and at times comes with additional constraints, such as payments based on reimbursement (rather than up-front payments), that do not allow smaller organisations to operate. A shift in power also requires the involvement of local actors in setting the funding agenda and informing funding goals, priorities and implementation strategies.

Localisation efforts supported by the Localisation Taskforce have not yet distinguished between the needs and capacities of organisations with humanitarian, development or peacebuilding missions. There is a need for a **more in-depth understanding of local perspectives on localisation**, including a more nuanced assessment of capacity and need depending on sectors of work, geographic area and organisational size and mission.

The localisation debate in Lebanon has not yet focused on **the 'triple nexus' approach**,[28] although it is being pioneered by key donors who are also supporting localisation programmes. The localisation and nexus approaches are complementary and highly relevant to the Lebanese context, where NGOs and CSOs at the sub-national level do not have explicit peacebuilding missions and prefer to integrate peace work in service delivery and development programmes that respond to immediate needs.

Local institutions such as municipalities, unions of municipalities and SDCs have a major role to play in local peacebuilding. The social-stability sector under the Lebanon Response Plan prioritises support to municipalities for social stability.[29] The ability of these institutions to contribute to peace depends, however, on the political will of its local leaders, the size and capacity of their local office, and the ability to raise and manage funding. Detailed guidance on assessing local institutions and engaging them as partners on peacebuilding and social-stability projects can help redefine their role within localisation in peacebuilding.

Collaborating with INGOs and UN agencies on issues where the latter have greater expertise and influence with national institutions and donors can help decrease the risks to local actors while working in a shrinking civil society space.

Recommendations

For national and local NGOs and CSOs

- Build on the progress made with knowledge sharing and coordination between national and local NGOs and CSOs to develop shared context analyses and joined-up strategies for peacebuilding and social stability. Share results with INGO partners and donors to inform donor strategies and realistic goal setting for peacebuilding and social-stability programmes and projects.
- Collaboratively develop unified tools for context monitoring and conflict sensitivity and for assessing peacebuilding and social-stability results and outcomes. The use of common tools will help align data on results, support accountability to donors and project participants, and facilitate learning from and adaptation of peacebuilding approaches.
- Advocate with donors to better inform their administrative requirements and to ensure that human resources required for effective localised implementation of peacebuilding programmes, coordination, learning and advocacy are included in project plans and budgets.
- Plan for continued capacity strengthening and how it can be integrated in upcoming projects. Prioritise the retention of trained staff and the development and enforcement of policies and systems that improve effectiveness and accountability of the organisation.
- Explore options to diversify funding sources while acknowledging the challenge of attracting private funding from individuals and foundations for standalone peacebuilding projects.
- Prioritise the strengthening and understanding of and capacity for peacebuilding work among local NGOs and CSOs and develop realistic strategies for reducing violence and transforming conflicts in each context. Develop the transfer of knowledge and skills from specialised peacebuilding organisations to non-specialised ones, while supporting local NGOs and CSOs to adapt the approaches and document the results in their own contexts.
- Provide transparent feedback to communities to improve accountability and (re-)build trust. Feedback needs to include both sharing project and assessment results and analysis of constraints and limitations. It can be accompanied by community consultations on proposed adaptations of services and programmes for optimising peacebuilding results.

For INGOs

- Make long-term commitments to local actors and sustain dialogue on the type of peacebuilding work that is relevant, impactful and sustainable. Strategic partnerships, technical backstopping and flexible funds for actions in response to emerging opportunities for positive change will strengthen both the capacity of local organisations working on peace and the acceptance of their work in communities.
- Ensure that local NGO and CSO partners have direct communication lines with donors to ensure donors understand the needs and challenges in communities.
- Co-design projects with local actors and trust local assessments of the level of change that is feasible.

- Provide guidance on how to integrate peacebuilding practices into humanitarian and development interventions and how to implement projects with a peacebuilding lens. Adapt tools to organisations of different sizes and missions, recognising their priorities and limitations.
- Develop working guidelines for donors and NGOs on supporting local institutions based on best practice from social-stability projects that have engaged municipalities and SDCs, as well as peacebuilding projects that have supported good governance and participation by women and youth at the local level.
- Conduct evaluations of capacity-strengthening projects to establish if institutional strengthening produces more sustainable results than staff training, while acknowledging the risks associated with reduced donor funding for peacebuilding.

For donor agencies and funding programmes

- Engage civil society to jointly develop programming goals in peacebuilding and social stability that are both ambitious and feasible and support grantees in facilitating access to decision-makers and political actors who may be reluctant to engage directly with NGOs.
- Provide funding frameworks that correspond to the actual needs for human resources, capacity strengthening and overhead costs, while acknowledging the nature of peacebuilding work. Consider reinstating core funding that allows NGOs the flexibility to respond to emerging opportunities for peacebuilding.
- Plan for adequate staffing models both on the side of funding programmes that support 'localisation by design' and on the side of consortia enabling inclusive decision-making and capacity transfer between members.

For localisation mechanisms (i.e. Localisation Taskforce, national reference group under the Grand Bargain and Charter for Change)

- Identify support needs for the integration of a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach to equip local and national NGOs with the skills and methodologies that are increasingly requested by donors.
- Engage peacebuilding organisations in the process of monitoring progress on the localisation agenda. Capturing and analysing challenges, risks and conflict-sensitivity concerns arising from localised aid delivery, development and peacebuilding are essential for informing and contextualising the localisation process.

Endnotes

1   Hezbollah opened what it called a "support front" for Gaza in October 2023, which started an exchange of strikes between Hezbollah and Israel and ultimately led to Israel's large-scale attacks and ground operation in September 2024.

2   Lebanon has been without a president since 31 October 2022 due to disagreement between the political parties. The president is elected by parliament and is responsible for the designation of a prime minister.
The four issues were identified at the Social Stability Working Group meeting, online, 30 July 2024. The working group brings together representatives of organisations working on social stability under the Lebanon Response Plan, the document guiding international support to Lebanon in response to the Syria crisis.

3   International Alert, Unpublished rapid context analysis, March 2024

4   The Grand Bargain is an agreement between humanitarian donors and aid organisations to make humanitarian aid more effective, launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016.

5   For more information about the project, see https://www.expertisefrance.fr/en/

6   For more information about the project, see https://postkodstiftelsen.se/en/projekt/practical-approaches-to-localisation/

7   The convenience sampling included CSOs that were part of ongoing programmes run by International Alert on strengthening local capacities for social cohesion.

8   The learning session was held within the scope of International Alert's project 'Enhancing CSOs' Ability to Foster Social Stability in Hasbaya and Southern Baalback', which offers training, mentoring and the development of policies for 16 CSOs. The CSOs were different to the ones included in the phase 1 FGDs.

9   'Convenience sampling' refers to a non-probability sampling method where units are selected for inclusion in the sample because they are the easiest for the researcher to access (e.g. due to geographical proximity, availability, willingness to engage etc.). 'Snowball sampling' refers to a non-probability sampling technique where existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances.

10   According to national perception surveys on social tensions; see UNDP-ARK, Regular perception surveys on social tensions throughout Lebanon, Waves 1-16, 2017-2024

11   The OECD defines localisation as "the process of recognising, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations and to prepare national actors for future humanitarian response". OECD, Localising the response: World Humanitarian Summit – Putting policy into practice, 2017, cited in RDPP, Localisation of aid in Jordan and Lebanon: A longitudinal qualitative study, December 2022

12   For more detail on the Localisation Framework, see page 5.

13   Out of 1064 municipal councils, 134 had been dissolved as of April 2024, mainly due to the death or resignation of at least half of the members; many other councils are dysfunctional due to internal conflict or lack of funds. For more detail, see M. Sfeir, A country on hold: The repeated postponement of Lebanon's municipal elections, Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy April 2024, https://timep.org/2024/04/24/a-country-on-hold-the-repeated-postponement-of-lebanons-municipal-elections/ and Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), Electoral Reform Consortium: Extension of municipal councils elections is rejected and alternatives are available, April 2024, https://lade.org.lb/getattachment/721c748b-2e27-4d2e-8493-4f55a054adb0/Electoral-Reform-Consortium-Extension-of-Municipa.aspx

14   Key informants made such observations and referenced examples from Jordan and Syria.

15   CSOs in Lebanon traditionally provide primary healthcare services, chronic medication, and vocational training, among other services.

16   Regular perception surveys on social tensions have consistently shown that Lebanese and Syrian people in Lebanon trust NGOs more than municipalities. See UNDP-ARK, Regular perception surveys on social tensions throughout Lebanon, Wave 1-18, 2017-2024

17   Research participant

18   The EU call under the Action Plan for Support to Culture, Social Cohesion and Democratic Participation had more favourable co-financing requirements for organisations registered in Lebanon than for European applicants. Another call on youth engagement in conflict prevention and peacebuilding outlined the role of INGOs as "transfer of knowledge, mediation and/or innovation, helping the local organisation(s) to strengthen relationships with their constituency and amplifying their outreach capacity".

19   Norwegian Refugee Council, Out of the ordinary: New approaches to financing NGO-led crisis response mechanisms, 2024, https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/out-of-the-ordinary/new-approaches-to-financing-ngo-led-crisis-response-mechanisms.pdf

20 One of these mechanisms – the Nabni-Building for Peace (B4P) facility for MENA – is directly working with a nexus approach and is hosted by an international peacebuilding NGO. At the time of writing, Nabni-B4P had not yet launched a call for proposals but had developed guidelines, which were available on their website: https://nabni-facility.org/

21 OECD, Peace and overseas development assistance, 2023, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/peace-and-official-development-assistance_fccfbffc-en.html

22 Research participant

23 According to one donor representative, a funding programme for Lebanon did not include 'social stability' as a stand-alone objective but invited applicants to mainstream social stability because it was "increasingly difficult to work on social stability alone".

24 For example of integrating conflict sensitivity and social stability into service provision, see: International Alert, Model on integrating conflict sensitivity and social stability into services provision, 2020, https://www.international-alert.org/publications/model-integrating-conflict-sensitivity-and-social-stability-services-provision/. Alert's work on social stability through education has informed a guidance note for educators: International Alert, Promoting social stability through education: Guidance for educators, 2023, https://www.international-alert.org/publications/promoting-social-stability-through-education-guidance-for-educators/

25 RDPP, Localisation of aid in Jordan and Lebanon: A longitudinal qualitative study, 2022

26 One such network is Wahdatouna Khalassouna (Our Unity is Our Salvation), a gathering of 30 NGOs and volunteers involved in peacebuilding. For more information, see: https://www.facebook.com/WahdatounaKhalasouna

27 International Alert, Strengthening gender mainstreaming in social stability activities in Lebanon: Mapping report, forthcoming

28 The humanitarian, development and peace ('triple') nexus is a planned core theme for the Grand Bargain 3.0. See for example, Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in humanitarian action (ALNAP), The humanitarian-development-peace nexus: Current status and discourse, 2023, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/humanitarian-development-peace-nexus-current-status-and-discourse

29 The Lebanon Response Plan coordinates the multi-sector response to addressing needs in Lebanon as a result of the overlapping crises that the country is experiencing: https://response.reliefweb.int/lebanon/lebanon-response-plan-lrp-updates

Acknowledgements

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