

We know our wounds: National and local organisations involved in humanitarian response in Lebanon

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Front cover photo: 'We know our wounds and our wounds will heal us' Credit: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

Back cover photo: 'Dignity' Credit: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

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About ALNAP's research into National NGOs

One of the most striking findings of the State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) 2015 report is that 4 out of 5 of the 4,480 humanitarian organisations are national NGOs working in country. These organisations have not only increased in numbers, but also in influence. There has been a growing recognition that national NGOs and civil society organisations should lead future humanitarian responses for them to be more relevant, timely and effective.

Although lots of research has addressed the need for an increased role for national NGOs in humanitarian response, the research, advocacy and evaluative pieces are commissioned and elaborated on from the perspective of international actors, primarily international NGOs.

ALNAP's new research seeks to address this gap and interviewed national and local NGOs to find out more about the work they do in disaster and emergency response, from their perspective. What are their priorities and commitments? What motivates and guides their decisions and activities?

The project will seek to fill the current gap in understanding around what humanitarian action looks like in national NGOs' own terms. Through interviews with a wide range of organisations across the humanitarian sector – from DRR and WASH, to livelihoods and organisations of self-mobilised affected-people – in two countries with diverse needs and experiences (Colombia and Lebanon), this project will produce an in-depth qualitative study of the national and local NGO landscape.

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1. Introduction

This research reflects the understanding, perceptions, motivation and experiences of 11 national and local organisations in Lebanon that are active and involved in humanitarian response. It is based on a desire to hear what they have to say in their own terms.

Using and adapting Grounded Theory for data collection and analysis, ALNAP conducted intensive interviews with the organisations, without applying a preconceived hypothesis to validate or refute and without pre-established questionnaires and assumptions as to who these organisations are, how they work and what they should be achieving. The aim of the research was to pose one question to research participants and actively listen to their answers: **What are your experiences, motivations, practices and engagement in humanitarian response in Lebanon?** More than 300 pages of transcripts from interviews were analysed and coded line by line, to let the interviewees' concepts, understandings and meanings emerge.

This report does not claim to represent the wide diversity of Lebanese civil society. Rather, it delves into understanding how these organisations conceive and implement actions and processes to support individuals and population affected by conflict, inequality, exclusion, discrimination, displacement and violence in Lebanon, showing common patterns and trends that have resonance among the organisations interviewed. Additional country profiling and contextual interviews with national coordination bodies and local think-tanks informed and triangulated the research.

Among the organisations interviewed were large ones established during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990); younger ones – some of them constituted by self-organised Lebanese and Syrian volunteers and activists – derived from the Syrian uprising, conflict and the arrival of an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees; and several feminist ones created at the beginning of the 2000s².

The report is organised in four sections, according to the main themes and processes emerging from analysis of the interviews. These themes were those most frequently raised and discussed with the greatest intensity by the organisations interviewed. Keeping a close consideration of what participants said about themselves, helps us to go beyond simple description to a deeper analysis of elements which lie at the core of their collective action and organisational work.

The first theme explored in section 2 is around the organisations' identity, motivations and practices, by looking at emerging patterns as to how they understand collective action and how they shape and define their organisational identity and roles. It is based on the key idea that the organisations interviewed for this research 'know their wounds'³. This knowledge often enables them to mediate between international actors and affected communities – 'People come sometimes and ask us how to deal with this.'⁴ Their position and understanding of the Lebanese context and what humanitarian action means for them, enables the emergence of a crafted collective action to heal wounds.

“A key idea is that the organisations interviewed for this research ‘know their wounds’... enabling them to mediate between international actors and the affected communities”

Section 3 addresses the influence the context of Lebanon has on the work of the organisations, and further factors that help shape their work. Fragmentation is defined as a key feature of the context. Two further themes are explored here: the complexities of the recurrent crisis, including violence in all its forms, from armed confrontation to discriminatory and harmful practices towards particular social groups; and organisations' conflictive relationship with a state, defined by the sectarian nature of Lebanese political and social systems. The overall discussion is on how violence and sectarianism have shaped and influenced the experiences and meanings interviewees give to working with affected communities.

Perceptions around humanitarian response and particularly the international humanitarian system's involvement in Lebanon are analysed in section 4. It specifically addresses historical aspects of international involvement in Lebanon and the effects of the Syrian uprising and crisis in the country.

Interviewees often expressed their frustration with the forces that led to fragmentation in the Lebanese context, as well as with the perceived impositions by both the state and international actors. National and local organisations challenge these authorities, to claim their own agency and resist the forces of fragmentation and the imposition of authority. It is from their position of knowledge and understanding of their own wounds that they engage in redress and collective action, going beyond basic needs to encompass transformational social goals. Organisations actively defined themselves as much by their common opposition to the fragmentation and impositions that permeate humanitarian response, as by their shared passion to contribute to the dignified treatment of people affected by crisis.



What do you want to say? 'Prevention, Protection, Response'.

Photo: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

2. Enduring as a base for healing: the organisations

In the words of the organisations interviewed, collective action in Lebanon is a task that requires high levels of commitment and capacity to manage the frustrations that arise from a context defined by fragmentation, coercive violence and imposition. The narrative of national and local organisations appeals to an understanding of contextual patterns in Lebanon. These patterns are derived from historical experiences in Lebanon, particularly from the way that fragmentation and violence have shaped collective action in the country. Organisations use their knowledge of the context to claim status as actors with the capacity to weigh the pros and cons of collective action for affected communities. In particular (given the scope of this report), the organisations use this knowledge to provide a strong legitimacy for their actions in conceptualising and implementing humanitarian response.

A key element of this contextual knowledge is a deep understanding of ‘endurance’. People have endured violence in the form of armed confrontation, patriarchal violence, and sectarian and discriminatory dynamics. This endurance is not passive – it is a basis for healing, and the idea of endurance for healing is a key influence on organisations’ identity and conception of work with affected communities. It also helps us understand who the interviewed organisations are in terms of how they engage, strategise, tackle decision-making and establish their priorities.

The conception of endurance here is closely associated with ideas of ‘resistance’, a politically charged term in Lebanon and the Middle East. Resistance to fragmentation permeates social collective action. This is resistance to the fragmentation caused by sectarianism, and also by national, regional and international powers, patriarchal structures, and class and gender discrimination. All of these, as forces of fragmentation, can trigger collective action to endure and to heal.

Collective action, in the words of the organisations interviewed, comes from an engagement against the forces of fragmentation that occur in the political and social systems in the country.

‘In our idea, equal to equal. The main goal [is] how we can develop humanity as one [...] without consideration to religious, political and geographic divisions. We didn’t choose our family, our nationality, our religion, we inherit this. What we can do together is in each other. Our main goal [is to work] together, but that’s equal to equal.’⁵

The identity of the organisations comes from a reaction to inequality, prejudices, sectarian and divisive dynamics, from an opposition to perceived fragmentation and impositions. A series of oppositions emerged strongly in the interviews. The Lebanese system is defined as sectarian. Collective action defines itself as non-sectarian. Powerful elements of Lebanese society are defined as conservative, racist, judgemental, classist and disliking of difference. Collective action defines itself as open to everyone,

“Collective action in Lebanon is a task that requires high levels of commitment and capacity to manage the frustrations that arise from a context defined by fragmentation, coercive violence and imposition”

encompassing diversity and actively looking to reach out to everyone, challenging sectarian, class and gender hegemonies at the representation levels of Lebanese political and social systems.

‘The organisation was established in 2005. It’s a feminist organisation and a secular one, and we say secular because basically in Lebanon, you know, it’s a multi-confessional country so we are diverse and we offer support to women who are victims of violence coming from different nationalities, different religious sects [...] secular meaning we don’t want any, any religious sect or religious law to interfere with our issues and lives as citizens and that we should be treated equally as individuals living in, in Lebanon and without being discriminated against. Particularly as women by the patriarchal religious laws and also not to be discriminated, like among each other. Because if I belong to the religious sect as a woman, you belong to another religious sect, we don’t have equal rights as women.’⁶

Thus collective action becomes a tool beyond reaction against fragmentation to encompass a transformative vision of how society should frame relationships between citizens.

‘We are an example of an organisation, a lay organisation, that has Syrian youth from all different backgrounds, from all regions. We have Christians, Muslims, Sunnis, Alawis, Kurds [...]. So yaani [Arabic expression, similar to ‘listen’], we are telling, we are trying in an indirect way to say there is an alternative. And we can form a place where we, together we can make a place where everyone can contribute.’⁷

2.1 Engagement by being open to everyone

‘Understanding our wounds to heal ourselves’ is not an exclusionary effort. The engagement and decision-making of the organisations interviewed are carefully crafted around ideas of inclusiveness and being open to everyone as a key distinctive element of national/local collective action that is able to create safe spaces for diversity to express itself. Being open to everyone is a form of endurance that, in itself, allows healing from the damage caused by divisive forces.

‘The common thing between all of us is that we have the same values, we believe in the same things, we hate discrimination, racism, we are open to all cultures, to all [...] we believe in diversity.’⁸

This also entails flexibility, admission of learning processes and mistakes as well as ‘mutual learning and respect’⁹, adaptability, ‘treating everyone with the respect they deserve’¹⁰ and understanding that affected people have agency and the capacity to take their own decisions. Collective action by the organisation facilitates rather than imposes options and actions.

‘You don’t have the right to decide on her behalf. So I don’t think we really have a choice, yeah, except offer the guidance, show the danger, the threats, the options and just leave it up to her.’¹¹

Being open to others allows collaborations which create referral systems to cover areas beyond one organisation’s expertise; partnerships are defined as positive if they include elements of debate, space for listening and mutual engagement that are perceived as non-imposed (see section four). Listening and debating as a source of organisational focus are often remarked on as essential, not just to organisation members but also to affected communities, reinforcing their sense of agency.

‘[Listening] is very important, we have a programme that is called community-based rehabilitation, so we have people who go into the different communities. They’re part of the social programme. They go into the different communities and they understand the need from the people. They speak to people, they understand what else do you need? Is this person integrated? What is happening here? Then you realise [...] by talking to people you realise what they’re trying to tell you. This is the main way we, we find the needs from the ground, by going there and by going out.’¹²

Advocating and defining themselves as inclusive organisations, and listening to other voices, does not preclude criticism of other organisations and divisions with regard to the diverse forms of engagement and reaching out to people in need.

‘Usually in Lebanon they [...] do not believe in engaging men. They look at the men as their enemy. We believe men are our partners; we cannot work alone. Most of the organisations work on women’s empowerment and they forget the men [...] sometimes the men who are visiting the centre what they only want is someone to listen to them and if there is space where they can cry and not be judged for crying. In our culture, men are not allowed to cry. It’s against the masculinities and whatever. So society is putting pressure on the men [...] A lot of organisations have fought them on this. When we first started our programmes on engaging men, they opposed this. And another thing also we believe, engaging religious leaders in ending violence [...] Oh my God what happened two years ago! All the organisations: ‘No, you cannot engage the religious leaders, they hate us, no, civil society is different than the religious leaders, we cannot engage them in our programmes.’¹³

Opposition – or in some cases selective support – from society is linked again in turn to fragmentation and divisive forces within the society such as class and patriarchal ideas influencing behaviour. For instance, some organisations working on violence against women gain support from Lebanese society when working on issues around intra-family violence, but face opposition when working with migrant females from other nationalities or on issues around the gender orientation of their clients. Again, exclusionary dynamics within Lebanese society emerge: it is acceptable to work with Lebanese women but not with foreigners – be they refugees or migrants.

Finally, being open to everyone as a form of endurance to allow healing from divisive forces and fragmentation had particular resonance in terms of the inclusion of youth in collective action. Youth are targeted as both an excluded group and an active one in collectivism to overcome discrimination. Several organisations noted that young people in Lebanon, whether they are of Lebanese, Palestinian or Syrian origin, often join forces in collective action to overcome fragmentation.

‘At the level of participation also I can, we are noticing that the number of the Lebanese, especially young people, they are much more involved in our advocacy actions. We are approaching them, first of all. So they are getting much more knowledge about the situation of Palestinians and they are motivated to participate in the different committees. For instance, for the right to work we have youth committees that are mixed, Lebanese, Palestinian youth mainly.’¹⁴

Youth involvement is particularly noticeable in campaigning and fundraising through social media.¹⁵

‘I think at the beginning Facebook played a big part of it, yaani. You know, the first activity we did in the first winter was, on a big scale was a Facebook event to gather some blankets. We wanted to collect 200 blankets and the results was like we collected 3,000 I think [...] Facebook has done a lot of harm for the Syrian cause but also has done some good. It gave us an outreach, last year during, we had the campaign before winter saying look, we need your support to raise some money for the winter, for the families in Beqaa, until the beginning of the year we raised only €2,000. Then when the storm happened on 4 or 2 January, someone of our staff took a photo of the tents surrounded by snow. We published it on Facebook and said, this is the situation and every contribution counts. \$4 can buy a stack of firewood for one week. So in the next 10 days, we raised \$135,000.’¹⁶

2.2 Strategising implies going beyond basic needs

In terms of strategies, national and local organisations working in Lebanon try to use an integral approach, again, attempting to heal fragmentation. In the words of the interviewees, this includes awareness about the environmental aspects of aid – going beyond basic needs to encompass advocacy elements that target discriminatory laws or developmental issues ‘to overcome a narrow definition of emergency, development work is necessary [...] to avoid turning certain problems into emergencies later on down the line’.¹⁷ The most frequently remarked aspect of an integral approach relates to giving central importance to being with communities and involving them in the work: working beyond addressing basic needs to include how to relate to communities. In the words of an interviewee, that means going ‘from the community to the community’.¹⁸

‘You have like some kind of duty to do [being in the field/with the families]. And you started something and you can’t just leave in the middle or get tired, you don’t have any other chance. So yeah, that’s volunteer [interviewer: And what’s the motivation behind this? Interviewee seems surprised.] Motivation? The people! They are now used to us, because we are always with them on the ground. Not like other organisations, we always go to the families, ask the families about their needs, we do our statistics without the shaweesh.¹⁹ So it’s more into the people and we go and sit inside the tents, the community centre also helps us to make these connections with the families because it’s inside the camp. And during the storms we’ve been there and we stayed for five days for the first storm, the second storm for six days. And also during the fire, because the camp that we are responsible for, there is a fire that happened there and all the camp was burnt. So for five or six days we stayed there.’²⁰

Listening, flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness to expressed needs are at the core of an integral approach, because collective action is part of how communities should be, as opposed to them being shaped by fragmentation. And – critically – the organisations are part of the community.

‘So we have always these discussions, do we stop the relief or not? Because sometimes you feel it has a lot, it brings a lot of burden and everything but we can’t. If we were an international organisation it would be the easiest of decisions to make. Khalas [Arabic, that is it], we stop it and we say we don’t distribute any more food. But for us as a Syrian organisation that is staying here in the community and proclaiming to be, yaani, responding to the community’s need, we cannot do it because we cannot, if a father comes to ask us for food for his hungry kid, we cannot tell him simply no, we cannot give you food but you can send your kid to the school. As Syrians we cannot do it. Maybe I don’t know an international organisation could say, a programme manager coming from somewhere in the world for six months, he can easily tell him no we don’t have food here, sorry. But for us, because we want to be here, to be staying with the community, we want to build something for the future, it is not easy and taking these kind of decision would only, yaani, would badly affect every other effort we make.’²¹

To accomplish this, interviewees often appealed to the need to work on building the capacities of affected people, developing – often jointly – tools for self-management with a clear focus on avoiding and/or overcoming dependency.

‘We take in women and their children, or girls, survivors of violence, for a temporary time and we work with them so they regain a sense of safety and stability and the ability to think clearly and peacefully so they can think about the future steps they need to take for their lives.

One of the women, whom we took in with her children, three children, had been subjected to a number of shocks during her journey from Syria to Lebanon [...] forced to multiple displacements, or the sexual harassment she was subjected to and torture by the different parties in conflict in Syria. After that she was able to reach Lebanon. While in Lebanon she lost the support of her family and her husband left her, because they considered that, well, a person who is subjected to sexual harassment or rape becomes outcast and they are blamed for what happened, they are told they are the reason this happened to them. So she was rejected by her community and society [...] she was subjected to violence anew from her family and her husband and this is what pushed her to ask for protection. She was at the [refuge shelter] for about five months. During this time she was followed up by the specialised team there and participated in a number of activities, offered both to her and her children. This helped her be more independent and more able in general, to be able to identify her weaknesses and strengths.’²²

There is a need to work at the required diverse speeds and timings of different intervention objectives, while acknowledging the limitations of emergency work against the complex task of challenging perceptions and divisive forces deeply rooted in Lebanese society.

‘You learn this game of how the consciousness and resistance work together and you learn the flow and you become more okay with it. You, you understand it. You listen more. I think eventually, yaani, one reaches that point.’²³

The limits of emergency work were highlighted when the majority of organisations stressed the importance of linking service provision with advocacy messages and specific campaigns to challenge the status quo and fragmentation and divisive forces.

‘But we also do believe that, within the context of the Palestinian refugee situation in Lebanon with the community lack, lack of access to any of the human rights, development means bullshit. Whatever you provide, the achievement will be limited. In terms of development, it’s much more personal development and not community development. You can make some changes at the practice level, at attitude level. But it’s not easy to break down the whole isolation system and discrimination system around you, if you are not breaking down the discriminatory laws against Palestinians. Which is opening the door for the development. Otherwise it will, you will be discriminated and it’s on-going. Because of that we started the advocacy. We linked the advocacy.’²⁴

It is interesting to note some parallels between organisations that have been working for years with Palestinian refugees and those that have worked with Syrian refugees since the uprising and armed conflict. A pivotal moment for all is the realisation that the crisis and violence have evolved into a protracted crisis, of a prolonged nature. This awareness often alters the focus of collective action. In the quote below, referring to the Syrian crisis, it is shown to have led to a reorientation of activities and organisational focus as a means to go beyond responding to basic needs to encompass advocacy towards political solutions and medium-/longer-term objectives.

'It was very clear at that time for us that it is, it is going to be a long crisis so we were asking ourselves would we be only reacting to every new wave of newcomers coming to Lebanon, new refugees? Or should we take the initiative in our hands, yaani, and do something. So even though it was very difficult to convince ourselves that no, the refugees are coming and they are going to stay some time yaani. For us, for every one of us was involved in the Syrian uprising, everyone thought it is a manner of few months and we will go back to Syria, celebrating the new country of freedom and dignity we were dreaming of. So it was difficult even to admit to ourselves that this is not the case now.'²⁵

Focusing exclusively on material assistance and basic needs is seen as a form of trap that enables the continuation of discriminatory and other divisive forms of control in political and social terms.



What do you want to say? 'By the community, for the community. Treat everyone with the respect they deserve.'

Photo: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

3. Understanding fragmentation: the context

Understanding fragmentation requires an understanding of the Lebanese context, and this understanding, including a historical perspective, is central to the narratives of the organisations interviewed. In particular, fragmentation is linked to the 1940s and the creation of the country and historical regional and international influences. How Lebanon's fragmentation reflects the Middle East's divisive and conflictual dynamics is explicit in the narrative of interviewees.

'The main problem in our region is the Palestinian problem. We can't talk about stability if there is no fair solution for the Palestinians [...] In Lebanon you should know that is the mirror and the laboratory of all this region. All the problems in our region have a place here in Lebanon. Everything is there. For that our situation is very complicated.'²⁶

Understanding the Lebanese context of fragmentation requires a focus on its complexity, the exercise of violence since the creation of the country and the sectarian nature of the political system. Lebanese historian Fawwaz Traboulsi highlights distinctive elements, some of which the interviews echoed:

'Two distinctive features have a significant impact on the shaping of modern Lebanon: its sizeable Christian population, on the one hand, and the country's long exposure to the West on the other. The combined effect largely accounts for the main themes around which Lebanon's modern history is articulated: (1) a political system based on the institutionalisation of religious sects ('sectarianism'); (2) an extroverted liberal economic system based on the service sector; and (3) a problematic relationship with its regional setting.'²⁷

The next subsection addresses these factors in order to better understand the origin and nature of organised collective action by national and local organisations.

3.1 Crisis, violence and armed confrontation as a source of collective action

'Previously I had a foggy idea about the Lebanese Civil War, the gist of which was that it was a war between progressives and reactionaries set in motion by colonialism. But I realise now that the matter went much deeper than that. The Lebanese problem seemed like an enormous quilt of multi-coloured strands that were entangled with each other, so that separating them out became an impossible task. Whenever I followed one of the threads, it brought me to the complete sectarian divide that made Lebanon unique among Arab countries.'²⁸

This quote from the Egyptian writer Sonallah Ibrahim illustrates the daunting complexity of the Lebanese context and particularly the heritage of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). It is beyond the scope of this research to analyse the multiple and numerous violent conflicts across Lebanon, and other forms of exercise of violence that the population has suffered since its creation in the 1940s. That said, the interviews were plagued with references to particular violent crises mentioned as triggers of collective action, from general references to the Lebanese Civil War²⁹ to specific events within the war such as the massacre of Ain el-Rummaneh in East Beirut (1975), the massacre of Tel el Zataar Palestinian Refugee Camp (1976, leading to the first Syrian intervention), the Israeli invasion and occupation of Southern Lebanon (1982-2002), the July War between Israel and Hezbollah (2006), the confrontation and armed conflict in Nar al-Bared Palestinian Refugee Camp near Tripoli (2007) and the Syrian uprising and armed conflict (2011-today) and its effects on Lebanese territory, with specific peaks of violence in areas such as Aarsal, Beqaa and Akkar.³⁰

In Lebanon, given the political settlement that gave birth to the country in the 1940s, and the resulting number of different groups, the potential for explosion seems to be avoided by gliding over certain groups or the totality of civilians on 'not necessarily a cyclical but a recurrent basis'³¹: there is awareness that things can turn violent and there is experience intervening in crisis. Several of the organisations acknowledged collective action being triggered as a result of violent crisis, and of a desire not to 'glide over' or ignore the needs of specific affected groups:

'I founded the organisation after the first Israeli aggression in south of Lebanon [1982]. Before I was working during the siege of Nabaa in Tel el Zataar.'³²

'We started 30 years ago, in 1985, during the civil war. During, in this war it, it was all the different groups fighting each other. So Muslim, Christian, Sunni, Shia, within the Christian groups, everybody was fighting everybody, Syrian, Palestinian, Israeli. We were born from a need from the ground and it's how we usually work. So it started from a need from the ground that was that a group of friends found themselves a few of them with no legs from one day to the other, or with no hands. So they became handicapped because of, because of the war, because of mines. They got together and they started doing like a, they call it the godfather or the système de parrainage. So giving each other advice [...]. And then slowly the group grew because people heard about it and people started coming.'³³

‘The association was founded at the beginning of the civil war in 1977 focusing mainly on displaced women. Female-headed households. Due to the destruction of one of the Palestinian camps [Tel el Zaatar Palestinian Refugee Camp was besieged for three months and attacked on a full military scale for up to 35 days during 1976] and the displacement of all population, but at that time all, almost all men were killed.’³⁴

Younger organisations were born of developments following the Syria uprising and armed conflict:

‘So when the uprising started in Syria, I found myself involved with helping some of our friends, activists inside Syria. In making their voice heard, supplying them with what they need. Sometimes making them known to medical organisations or field hospitals, meeting journalists. The first two years, year and a half, there were not many refugees in Lebanon. Until summer 2012 [...]. So when news broke out of battles all around Syria, and especially in Aleppo, it was a famous battle. And people started coming to Lebanon with big numbers. So I met with a group, group of Syrian friends and Lebanese friends who were wondering what to do. During the summer there was a lot of refugees who came and no one was prepared here and there was no presence at that time of international organisation as there is now. So as volunteers we went here and there to see what we can do. We collected some clothes.’³⁵

Three of the interviewed organisations were founded in the 2000s as a response to other forms of violence, less sudden or visible than armed confrontation but equally related to fragmentation and the exercise of power over particular groups, (expressed as the patriarchal system, gender-based violence and discriminatory laws) and a desire to ensure that these groups were not silently ignored:

‘[The first organisation for] Lebanese protection for LGBT [lesbians, gay, bisexual and transgender] people was established in, about 11 years ago [...] and through meetings with the LGBT community and they wanted to start advocacy, and working on LGBT rights and protection [...] about 2008 or 2009 they saw a needed to have a sexual health clinic for the LGBT community [...]. Especially at the time in Lebanon we had Penal Code 534, we still have it and it punishes everyone who has sex against nature. And they use it against homosexuals basically. And you could pay a fine and go to jail up to one year if you get condemned for it [...]. Our priority clients here are those who are an emergency case, like sexual violence, sexual trauma, gender identity [...]. So we mostly get LGBT clients. We have trans individuals who are, have been attacked over the past year during the implementation of the trans project we noticed it was a lot of violence against trans individuals. Two individuals were kidnapped in a van, one of them was robbed and beaten, the other one was robbed and raped and beaten as well.’³⁷

“Some organisations were not set up and do not define themselves as humanitarian organisations, but the scope and magnitude of the Syrian conflict have led them to engage in emergency work.”

Some organisations were not set up and do not define themselves as humanitarian organisations, but the scope and magnitude of the Syrian conflict have led them to engage in emergency work.

‘In the response to the emergency [...] what we did during the past two years, we did the clinical management of rape. We are trying different hospitals and health facilities on how to, how to deal with survivors. Rape survivors of mainly or sexual assault, focusing on men, women and children. There was a lot of challenges, the survivors are not willing to come to the hospitals. You know, in Lebanon it’s a bit hard to talk about these issues. It’s still a taboo. And especially in the Syrian communities. Sometimes it may lead to honour killing for the survivor.’³⁸

The threat and/or exercise of violence towards individuals because of their affiliation with a particular social group triggers collective action that encompasses both service provision and a strong advocacy focus aimed at meeting immediate needs but also healing society by bringing these individuals and groups from a status of invisibility to one of full equality within a healed society.

3.2 A state that is not able to respond to the needs of its own citizens³⁹

Reference was often made to the limits of Lebanese state when it comes to recognition and derived entitlements, including the provision of services for the population. In fact, the mere recognition of people as citizens with full rights is challenged by expressions of discrimination based on religion and sect affiliation, nationality, social class and a patriarchal system. The state itself is fragmented. Exclusionary dynamics even sometimes manifest in the form of targeted violence that goes underreported and is often rendered invisible (because of the victim’s nationality, gender or sexual orientation, for instance). The organisations highlighted state elements defined as conservative, sectarian and judgemental.

There was overwhelming agreement on the weaknesses of the public sector and the lack of functioning services. This weakness, often visible in diverse forms of omission or inaction, is not politically neutral or necessarily derived from scarcity of resources.

‘Here the politics system is reduced to the part of the fight for power. The strategy for the country is kind of forgotten, which means there is a void and somebody needs to do it. Somebody needs to work on education, on agriculture, on environment. Someone needs to do it. And who is it? It’s the social, the civil society. It’s gonna be the people. Represented by NGOs or by a Hezbollah movement that opens their own school, their own hospital, their own things. And that’s why they are so, so popular, because they are filling a void that the government is not doing. Providing, so that’s why you see so many NGOs in Lebanon and I think that per capita we’re one of the countries with the highest NGOs. We have 10,000ish. 10,000 NGOs registered and 6,000 active, which is a lot.’⁴⁰

So private initiatives attempt to compensate for the weaknesses of the system, with a flourishing civil society expressed in a myriad of social, religious and charity movements present throughout the history of the country.

‘In Lebanon, the political system is sectarian, and in Lebanon we have about 6000 NGOs. The political system in Lebanon is liberal. Around since the independence in Lebanon, we have chosen a policy to have, to give the role of the private sector. The public sector in Lebanon is weak since independence. And the [...] to try to have a compensation about that in the past we had the religious association working as a service, as a charity [...]. And also when we are talking about civil society we try to say is the NGOs, and this is not true [...] and we give the role of the NGOs not only to give services but also advocacy. In Lebanon, the role of civil society is very strong. Is the strongest from around the world in comparison of the number of population. And we succeed during the Civil War. Since 1975 until 1989 to protect the existence of the society. And also during the Israeli occupation during 22 years. And when you talk about NGOs ... is ... is beginning of democracy.’⁴¹

In interpreting the role of collective action in Lebanon, two elements emerge strongly: a historical involvement of private – understood as non-public/state, rather than purely ‘for profit’ – initiative and a clear awareness of the limits and the trap the weak public sector signifies for collective action in Lebanon.

First, as one interviewee stressed, the historical roots of private and social initiative are paramount to understanding their working context.

‘[Lebanon has] a long tradition of social work since the 1960s, particularly the notion of community work, either because it has been delegated by the state or secular work since the 1960s [...] the relationships with the state are always conflictive on one hand given the lack of clear public policies and regulation, on the other hand given the nepotism and desires to make profit.’⁴²

History creeps in when analysing the current crisis and humanitarian response shapers in Lebanon, and the precedent of how Palestinian refugees have been perceived and dealt with is again an illustrative example of processes and dynamics of collective action in Lebanon.

‘Since 1948 there have been movements of the Palestinian population towards Lebanon, [with] a tacit agreement to accept a process of ‘autonomy’ [referred to a degree of self-government] of social work in the Palestinian camps within Lebanese territory. The Palestinians and the PLO [Palestinian Liberation Organisation] have been at the birth of national policy for refugee camps in Lebanon, with the agreement of the Lebanese state, ghettos were created, a double edge aspect [...] so the social is side-lined from Lebanese public responsibilities, even the UN has a differential policy for the Palestinians with UNRWA [UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East]. When we talk about camps in Lebanon, in the collective memory there was this idea they were provisional, leaving the choice of normalisation of ghettos an open way, the state takes a security approach and no one says anything, the refugees want to survive [...] a life lived on crumbs.’²⁴³

This model – a weak public sector with a security-based approach to the displaced/refugee population, leaving basic needs and service provision to private and social initiative – seems also to have been used in the current Syrian crisis response. But prior to addressing the effects of the Syrian crisis on Lebanese organised collective action, we need also to understand the risks and dangers of the state delegating social work to civil society: the ‘traps’ mentioned above.

The interviews show an awareness of the limits and pressures a weak public sector puts on society, and the way that civil society, by ‘filling gaps’, can contribute to weakening government accountability. The fact that Lebanese people are resourceful was widely commented on and even joked about. During the recent waste management crisis (which started in summer 2015), one Beirut writer complained on social media, ‘I just saw a woman walking past a mountain of garbage with a garland of gardenias pressed to her nose. That’s the Lebanese in a nutshell: always coming up with creative solutions to never have to challenge the status quo.’²⁴⁴ This quote and the narrative of the interviewed organisations coincide:

‘We do not have a real state that is there with very clear structure or, yaani, we, we have laws but law enforcement is very hard. Political life in Lebanon is very hard so it becomes extremely difficult for us to present our alternatives and plans to decision-makers. And there’s the slow performance on one hand and on the other hand a lot of corruption and religious influence. So these are the things that slow us down, that weigh us down, and, because we, we have the, we have a lot of recommendation and suggestions. I think most of the NGOs, like sometimes they really know what needs to be done. They just do it.’²⁴⁵

But most of the organisations interviewed strongly opposed acceptance of this status quo.

‘But because we don’t have a functional state in Lebanon. And the state has delegated all its responsibilities to non-governmental associations, it’s another trap that the state I think built for us. [For example for us] the women now having a place to go to, they’d say ‘Oh okay we have an option.’ There is an association that can support us, when they come here, and many of them reach some kind of solution, it’s encouraging for others [...]. What builds this, the trust of people in your work. But it’s also a trap. Because they think you’re the state now. Which means you can offer the magical solutions, you have the resources to avail, of finding jobs for women and providing them financial independence or finding them homes or after bringing the best verdict on earth as if you are the judge. But you’re not. You’re just pushing, you’re just, you’re just offering the tools, supporting, advising, guiding, that’s what you can do. As an organisation.’⁴⁶

The Syrian crisis is accepted as highlighting and exacerbating the weaknesses and limits of Lebanon’s public sector – ‘The refugee crisis in a way highlights our failures’⁴⁷ – although the enormity of the problem might defeat even a more resilient state:

‘I wouldn’t say all our problems are from the Syrian crisis. It’s believed the Syrian crisis is a magnifying glass that shows us the vulnerabilities of the system, of the Lebanese system. Our system is not able to absorb even a small crisis and it’s not that we have been asked. We’ve seen ourselves trying to help with a huge crisis. So this is where I mean, just I mean imagine, take the number of people in Lebanon, the Lebanese, take the number of Palestinians in Lebanon, take the number of Syrian refugees who are now in Lebanon, and do the maths. And try to compare it with any other country. Eh, tell me, in any other developed country, how would they have managed? With good institutions, with solid institutions, so what do you imagine is happening here? With, we have been I mean, we’re in a political deadlock. We’re in an almost governmental paralysis. We’re having a parliament that has extended a term. We’re not even, we’re not even being able to solve our solid waste issues. What are we asking this country to do?’⁴⁸

The state’s security approach was referenced again with regard to the treatment of Syrians: ‘Refugees in Lebanon are under constant threat, at risk of any moment probably deportation or, or jail or having to pay fines.’⁴⁹ Parallels between Palestinian and Syrian refugee treatment were often explicit in interviewees’ responses:

'Racism. At the governmental but also the population level. With stereotyping refugees, stereotyping refugees. Putting all bad things now happening in the country, referred to the refugees. Ah [laughs] as if they are not used and exploited by the Lebanese. It's not easy to deal with this. It's not easy [interviewer: And you see parallels in the situation in the way Palestinians have been treated and now Syrians are being treated?] Same, same.'⁵⁰

Some interviewees noted that a higher proportion of Syrians in Lebanon nowadays is often routinely treated as a security threat.

'In Lebanon the reaction is from a security perspective, in Lebanon we have 30,000 prisoners, 19% are Syrian. In a big jail and room, we have 3,000 prisoners, 1,000 are Syrian. In general because of economic and social problems.'⁵¹

There are disparities in the narratives when it comes to the effect the Syrian crisis in general and the arrival of refugees in particular have had in Lebanon. While some organisations highlight tensions between Syrian refugees and host communities as having 'increased dramatically'⁵² and while Lebanese communities have raised complaints about the preferential targeting of Syrians only⁵³, others suggest that these tensions are exacerbated by the 'scapegoating' of Syrians by some elements of society and the state: 'Now we have traffic jam because of the Syrians, we have garbage. Really, garbage because of the Syrians and school problems because of the Syrians. So everything is blamed on them'.⁵⁴

'For example, the sewage system has been stretched because, and has been dysfunctional because when it was planned or when it was done, it was done for 20 houses for example in villages that would accommodate 100 persons. And now within six months, within eight months, you're accommodating 200 plus persons. This doesn't mean the problem was, that they [Syrians] created the issue. The issue was the, in the beginning this sewage system was not properly planned. And having this influx coming in made it just explode. But this is an infrastructure development issue, we're humanitarians.'⁵⁵

Some organisations directly challenge the negative narrative regarding Syrians in Lebanon:

‘You know the impact of the Syrian crisis is not only UNHCR [UN High Commissioner for Refugees] numbers of what, you know, our definitions, what defines as a Syrian refugee, vulnerable Syrian refugees. If you want to really assess what is the impact of the Syrian influx to Lebanon, we also have to see these middle classes and upper maybe classes. Of Syrians that are coming to Lebanon, are creating jobs, are opening businesses, are spending money in Lebanon. Opening restaurants. And play music, they’ve changed the arts scene completely! Like there’s a much more vital art scenes, there’s more art galleries. There’s more venues for performance. Like all of the intellectuals who couldn’t flee came to Beirut and created this completely different [...] I mean it’s also un brasage culturel, I mean if we put the socioeconomic factor aside that is important, there is also this mixity. I mean some Lebanese are discovering Syrians because of the burden of the Civil War and the Syrian occupation in Lebanon, some Lebanese never put a foot in Syria. And always for them the Syrian was the soldier at the checkpoint [referred to the Syrian occupation of Lebanon 1976-April 2005].’⁵⁶

Interviewees also highlighted that the current ‘emergency’ approach that the Lebanon authorities, and by extension the international community, are taking to the Syrian refugees is not realistic or sustainable.

‘Everyone knows Syrian refugees cannot continue here in Lebanon for any longer receiving aid. The aid money is already dropping significantly. We cannot keep doing distributions forever so we have to help them do something and provide for themselves. The problem is everyone knew this but no one is willing to draw the red lines. Like the government is against anything that goes on livelihoods with the Syrian refugees because yaani, I don’t believe it. They think it might cause competition with the local market, which is totally stupid because what those refugees are working in was never a field of competition with the Lebanese market. No one from international organisations is willing to challenge those rules or even to manoeuvre to see how we can push this, those red lines a little bit farther, yaani. Here in the camps there is no one who’s going to ask anyone if he has a work permit or not. Then there is a lot, we are not opening here, we are not helping someone to start a business to, that might be a threat to anyone.’⁵⁷

4. Challenging perceived impositions and obstacles: international involvement

Lebanon has a long tradition of exposure to external influences, particularly from the West, which in turn has influenced the interpretation of international involvement in Lebanon in general and the way humanitarian work in particular is conceived and implemented. Interviewees often referred to Western conceptions of humanitarian action, understood as emergency action, and the need to go beyond basic needs,⁵⁸ as we have seen. Such humanitarian response is interpreted using a historical lens, covering the experience of diverse forms of historical international engagement in the country,⁵⁹ ranging from the missionary and colonial enterprise to the 1960s and 1970s solidarity movement to fair cause and tiers mondisme. Nowadays, humanitarian work is perceived as being professional and technical, and criticised either for acting as a 'business' or as charity. Section 5 will develop the analysis on these concepts and perceptions.

International actors are accused of 'acting like in any previous crisis anywhere'⁶⁰ and thus often meet frustration and rejection. Programme standardisation, a one-size-fits-all approach and a tendency to apply formulas from other countries, is perceived as a lack of listening and willingness to engage in the dialogue and debate that are important to many local and national organisations.

"The international organisation responding to the crisis we were so, yaani, insulted by the idea that most of them came with the pre-set of programmes they wanted to implement because they did implement them somewhere. At the beginning, yaani, I used to hear whenever I met someone coming from an international organisation telling me, you know back in Africa and back in Afghanistan [...]. So most of them, they were coming in this white man mentality that they know what to do and we don't know how to help our people even. The results were that most of the most vulnerable were left without any help because they were always focusing on big numbers."⁶¹

International expertise is eroded when it is perceived as context-blind (in opposition to the rich contextual knowledge of the local organisations), particularly regarding attitudes and capacity to listen to local and national actors.

‘One of our observations, because we have all been involved either in our academic studies or as practitioners, I mean my colleagues and I here, one of our observations is that every time there’s a humanitarian crisis or a war. You have a lot of international organisations and agencies that arrive to Lebanon and that do like tabula rasa. And act like there is no context, there is no local expertise, that there is [...] many times, as if there were like, in French we would say it is a little bit mean, as if ils inventent l’eau chaude [inventing hot water]. You know? So this is a problem because I mean, there is a lot of academic and expert literature on civil local, national civil society in Lebanon. So we know there is something.’⁶²

It is not necessarily that national organisations expect international actors to know the context perfectly; rather, they should be ready to listen, engage and discuss with them. Failure to do this not only leads to less effective programming, but also goes against the values of open debate and discussion that underpin the work of many Lebanese NGOs. What is privileged: systemic knowledge or contextual and communitarian knowledge?

‘Who defines people’s needs? The internationals? The locals? Is this done in common? Internationals impose standardised programmes that are inadequate to the context, donors come out with a tender to fill in two days, where is the space for concertation and cooperation under these conditions? Often the prerequisite is implementation in short term, while some sectors require a longer-term vision, such as education that is not supported by the state in the first place. With donors is always a dance to reach out for funds. These short-term standardised programmes do not match the need to respond to the structuring of Lebanon, take an approach to sustainability, with ethical criteria, criteria for social work against a mafia system, trapped by private sector without legal framework [...]. In the private sector in this country you cannot be competitive without resorting to non-legal means [...] it is a failure of international development, there is no connection with the totality.’⁶³

Discussions around international involvement in Lebanon did not necessarily blame internationals per se but rather identified the need to establish spaces of exchange and debate, avoiding perceived impositions and rigidity. The issue of human resources was a significant example abundantly mentioned in the interviews. What is valued when it comes to hiring staff, international or national?

‘The export of humanitarian human resources on the part of donors and international NGOs, where the associative experience or background and qualifications are not so privileged as the expertise on the system; no experience or knowledge in the third world or the Lebanese context but on the humanitarian system, they are ‘aid cowboys’ ignoring the problems of the country they are in.’⁶⁴

“It is not necessarily that national organisations expect international actors to know the context perfectly; rather, they should be ready to listen, engage and discuss with them. ”

‘There is some vision, the staff working [with us] since the foundation is not the good staff. We should change staff. And we have an example, someone from the Netherlands, he was the head of the Syrian refugee programme with us. One day he visited our centre in Aarsal, he came here, he said we should change all the staff. And I said to him, ‘Without this staff, we can’t do anything!’ because the staff are very implanted in this field and through the staff you can do your work. And we had a fight between this kind of staff, the staff with good relations with the local community but they don’t have the capacity to talk English or French to use the computers. We try to develop the capacity of the staff but to also have a good relationship between the new staff with the knowledge and the staff with commitment in the field. Then I discovered there is a spirit [...] it’s a human thing to have, like having power, sulta [authority].’⁶⁵

Critiques related to staff capacity were not limited to international actors: several interviewees pointed out challenges related to the type of Lebanese staff hired by international agencies working in the country. Like the international agencies, these staff do not always ‘know their wounds’ and have the experience of endurance that is central to organisational identity:

‘Often it goes back to basics. Sometimes it goes back to the quality of the people hired because at the beginning of the crisis in 2013, I mean at the beginning they were, they [international agencies involved in humanitarian response] had shortage of staff and they just needed people who could be English literate or having a small experience that would just work. But this is not enough because sometimes those people, Lebanese, often fresh graduates from Beirut, have, have a certain attitude and when you have an attitude on the field, you’re not effective. Even though you might know more than all of us here, but if you go on the field, people sense that you’re not honest with them or people sense you’re kind of having this uhh, how do you say, une attitude hautaine this [...] arrogance and ash’a bil hal [self-absorption] just like this way they will not make it easy for you.’⁶⁶

‘Sometimes Lebanese working at international organisations not always giving the accurate idea. Either because they’re first graduate, they don’t know it well. Either because they haven’t worked in civil society before. So this is their first experience and they’re learning it the hard way, they’re learning it in a difficult humanitarian crisis. So sometimes it could be they just don’t know better. And this is, this is also what’s, I mean, sometimes you have a project that was approved and you need to start and you need staff and looking into the pool of candidates, you try to select the best but even the best is not good enough. So this is where you’re, I’m not exonerating the international organisations from the responsibility but I’m just saying that this could be one of the reasons.’⁶⁷

International agencies starting from scratch, privileging system expertise over experience in social work, contextual knowledge and field experience, are perceived as rejecting the qualities national and local organisations and staff may bring to the table. And it is precisely because organisations claim to know their wounds and from this understanding to interpret and design collective action that international involvement is often fiercely criticised and generates frustration.

Long experience of social work and work embedded in communities are sources of recognition and legitimacy for the organisations interviewed, which go back to their roots at independence in 1943 and the birth of their awareness as citizens, an issue reinforced during the Civil War period.⁶⁸ The characteristics of humility, patience and adaptability, and avoidance of imposition,⁶⁹ as already noted in Section 2, sometimes clash with the requirements of emergency work as defined by the international actors present in Lebanon. In this sense, tensions between specialised international agencies and national/local organisations with an integral, more ‘community-based’ approach (see Section 2.2) emerged regularly and intensely in the narrative.

‘Lebanese society has a part that is pluralist and progressive, compared against wealthy elites that are connected [only] to their communities, even the private sector is confessional. But the pluralist part of Lebanese society when they want to create links and relationships with the international community cannot find a common sense of community development but a very specialised international sector. When I want to approach an international NGO to help someone in the neighbourhood, I have to talk with 10 different entities: I am just health, I am just WASH, I am just food distributions [...] while people have integral needs. I have cases here in the neighbourhood, we are here since the early 1990s, people know us, they know the staff, when I know a father goes into debt to be able to pay the coffin for his son, and that no international organisations will help because they are specialised and do not have a perspective of community work.’⁷⁰

‘In one case the area was an organisation that spent thousands of dollars on child-friendly spaces at the very first beginnings of the crisis and no one was coming. No children were coming to those spaces. And they asked for our help in bringing the kids we were working with in this area to those friendly spaces and it was difficult to communicate with them to explain that you know, now people have left Syria, their country. Most of them came here with just the clothes they were wearing. So they had much for basic needs than to send their kids to friendly space. So this is why we, yaani this was very obvious for us, yaani, that someone that is hungry who don't know to stay, who doesn't have any clothes, any basic needs, you cannot just ask him to send his kid. If you, if you don't help him in other aspects of his life.’⁷¹

Tensions around pace and timing of design and implementation were often noted when discussing the establishment of partnerships between international and national organisations. Positive partnerships are based on trust, working as equals and enabling spaces for exchange and debate⁷² and have a common strategy as a departure point.⁷³

‘For, for the first period we were doing this emergency by sending food and clothes and blankets but then at the time we didn't want to duplicate at a time when we noticed that what is being distributed by the international organisation is enough, we stopped it, doing it like everywhere [...]. We started thinking why we don't do it in a more organised way, not only on personal connection but an organised way that helps them have, sustain their businesses? So we designed a programme. We went looking for donors to support it. It wasn't easy because this is one of the main problems that donors come with this pre-set of priorities and programmes to implement and just they want implementers. I think most of them are liars when they talk about partnerships. It is not partnerships, it is subcontracting and having contractors to execute, to reach the numbers they cannot reach on their own.’⁷⁴

Frustration among the local and national organisations was not related to rejection, but rather reflected a sense of disappointment and frustration at a perceived resistance on behalf of internationals to recognise and use local knowledge and experiences. The Syrian crisis has exacerbated this in terms of the perceived rigidity of the response system and the way emergency funding has influenced collective action in Lebanon.

‘However you don’t want to be as well as rigid as an international organisation. In the sense of, in the sense of all the bureaucracy that they can have. In the sense of well we have this security whatever clearance security. Notice, you’re not allowed to stay [...] procedures, you’re not allowed to stay until whatever after that time. Things in the field are not like that. They’re not like that. You might see things, I mean throughout this three, four years I believe I just asked my team to get out of the field maybe once. Or twice and that’s it. I mean that’s, that’s it whereas other organisations, I think had a little bit more of, of this. Umm, bureaucracy in the sense of waiting to have an approval from X who would have an approval from Y who would have an approval from Z. Before doing something whereas we can just meet. We can just come to my office saying we need to do X, Y, Z like okay, let’s move ahead. Let’s move ahead, let’s do this.’⁷⁵

Some organisations explicitly defined their identity as being in opposition to the standardised, specialist, rigid and ‘professional’ approach of the internationals. The quote below comes from an organisation that started as volunteer groups and has tried to preserve this spirit of voluntarism in its evolution.

‘To protect us, to protect the whole hard work, the hard work we’ve done so far, the good reputation we’ve built. It has, it has to have a framework. And especially when you have a lot of new people joining your team. Then it might not be easy to just transform the spirit by the oral tradition, yaani. You have to have something written and how we, our way of doing things. It has to be written now. But what, what we do is always to make this extra effort to make sure that when we are writing things down, when we are putting some procedures, it is not uhh, done in a way, bureaucratic way that make, just make us another big, fat, lazy organisation.’⁷⁶



What do you want to say? ‘The poor before the rich, the weak before the strong. The others before ourselves.’

Photo: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

Others had preferred to stay as voluntary groups to ‘preserve their freedom’ and avoid the perceived rigidity of professional organisations:

‘But for us as a team ... we would like to stay as volunteers. Not to get paid for that. Because when you start to take salaries it will be different. You have ... you will take a salary of \$500 for this day, this day and this day, I will do nothing for the other days. But when we are volunteers ... I don’t know we can go now to the camp. So it’s more, it’s more, you’re more free to participate. You’re not forced to do anything. Because then there is a sense of freedom and so you are more likely and willing to give up your time and self. It’s not a job anymore. And then considering other, like other groups who might fail after they enter this field. Of like salaries, changing the whole way of working, the whole concept. And we would like to give these donations directly to the beneficiaries. Not to pass through all of these administration jobs. So if we have \$600 we need all these \$600 to go directly to the beneficiaries.’⁷⁷

Finally, international involvement in Lebanon, in particular the financial flows following the Syrian crisis, are seen as a political imposition, strengthening both the Lebanese state and furthering the interests of other states at the expense of civil society.

‘Important quantities of humanitarian money are given directly to the state, while it delegates 80% of social work to elements of civil society, in a country that does not have social system security; the Lebanese pay taxes but do not profit from its benefits. This relation with the state renders problematic the relationship with the [international] donor. Because they do humanitarian and politics at the same time, having a double language. And because they impose procedures and mechanisms of control as if they were in a Western country; tools of verification, evaluations and audits give you the impression that you are treated like a thief rather than a real partner. Autonomy and egalitarian relations are never achieved.’⁷⁸

As Section 3.2 noted, there are thousands of national and local organisations operating in Lebanon, many considered affiliated to political parties or figures, religious groups and private interests.

‘And these we call them, the ones that are political party or rich individuals, we call them GONGOs. Which means governmental NGOs [...]. A lot of the aid that these countries [international assistance] give to Lebanon goes to GONGOs because it is political aid and not really government aid.’⁷⁹

‘The money is going to the United Nations, for that we should fight against the spirit of technicity, charity business and BONGO: Business Oriented ... we should work as a partner equal to equal, not the spirit of neo-colonialism to teach us what we should do. And we stay here, we are living here, we know the situation more than anybody, we have the will to work with others. But as a partner, not as a neo-colonialism culture existing.’⁸⁰

Organisations were divided with regard to acceptance of international money arriving as a result of the Syrian crisis and refugees to Lebanon. Some refuse to change their organisational focus: ‘You know, there are some NGOs that changed their whole work plan to accommodate the Syrian conflict because the money was going there, and we did not want to do that [...]. So we are not going to kneel to our funders at the end because we have the community as a priority’.⁸¹ Others have gone through intense debates on whether and how to respond to the Syrian crisis.⁸²

‘[Some organisations] well it’s a way to survive and they started writing proposals that were under the title of emergency programmes. In order to get some funds. They were doing the work but many other, yaani the other task we should always be doing were compromised, yeah. As for like two years we did not, we did not and as because we want to do something that is more thought of and that can be sustainable not just shifting our focus for a very short period of time. And not having needed skills for doing this job.’⁸³



What do you want to say? ‘Partnership is a two way street’.

Photo: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

The quote below is perhaps the most critical response to the perceived impositions and obstacles derived from the flow of funds and the arrival of numerous international organisations, exacerbating the perception that emergency work has become a business and associated abuses have emerged.

‘What I have seen that even emergency became a business. I don’t know the number of the international NGOs, they jumped. In Lebanon implementing directly emergency projects. Despite the fact that they don’t know the community. They don’t know the country, they don’t know anything. They have different culture. They don’t have any background. This is one. Second, the emergency money also was abused. And I heard from so many women, displaced women, that they were abused by members of international NGOs. They don’t follow the code of conduct. They don’t do any kind of accountability [Interviewer: a delicate affair] Mmm, mmm, not even with the international agencies, I have to say. International, I’m speaking about all UN agencies. [Interviewer, is this a hidden subject?] It’s not hidden when you go, yaani, talking with the beneficiaries. They speak a lot. Clearly they speak. Or they give examples of something happened with them. Now with the deficit and cut of the emergency fund, so many of the international NGOs, they went back to their countries. They stopped. A big part of the emergency money goes for the administration of the international NGOs. A big part. There is a big difference between the money allocated for the administration for local NGOs and for international NGOs. Usually the local NGOs, they stay for instance I’m giving examples, in popular areas. While the international agencies, they go to expensive areas. The salaries are high for international agencies. They use taxis or they rent cars while the local NGOs, they don’t do all of this [Interviewer: so in terms of costs?] Taba’an (Arabic: of course) This is one. [...] The second, in terms of the distribution. I mean despite the kind of in-kind or voucher distribution or whatever, or even the debit cards, corruption, corruption. They make deals with the suppliers, decreasing the amount for beneficiaries, taking some money from the, money should go directly to the beneficiaries [...] Yeah, they come. Usually we raise the demand over the NGOs if we know them. We tell them. To confront, some, they took action. But some they don’t listen, they don’t take any action.’⁸⁴

5. Conclusion: challenging authority which is based on imposition and fragmentation

‘What are we asking this country to do? What are we asking the Lebanese civil society to do? It’s also a question I would want to ask the international community. What are you expecting Lebanese civil society to do? Do you expect them to be partners with you and team up with you? Or do you expect them to be employees? Because partnership is also a two-way end. You might know a great deal about programming, you might know a great deal about financing, system things. But you don’t know as much as we do our, our, our field. So it’s also listening to us in terms of what we need and how we think things are getting done. It’s having this dialogue when you say, ‘This could be a better idea, why don’t you do this?’ It’s in a sense, I believe that when you’re, if someone is smart, whenever they are addressing any other people, they’re addressing other people assuming they are smart as well. So it’s just have this assumption that the people you’re talking with, I wouldn’t say smart, I’d just say decent. And just deal with that. So it’s also a question, what do you expect from Lebanese civil society to do?’⁸⁵

What stands out from interviews with national and local Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian organisations interviewed for this research is the awareness and local knowledge of the interlinked threads of the complex dynamics in Lebanon. These organisations not only know their context but also derive from this a confidence to criticise the state and international response to the crisis.

Knowledge of context – knowledge of wounds – is more than a useful input to programme design. It is the foundation of national and local organisations’ endurance, their ability to resist and, over time, to build and heal. The idea of a society building itself stands in stark opposition to the fragmentation and impositions that come from the state or international actors. Healing requires collective action: being open to everyone, beyond divisive dynamics, and going beyond basic physical needs to achieve social and political states: the ability to engage with openness, hold dignified and honest exchange and dialogue with affected communities, and reject violence in all its forms.

These organisations broadly share an integral approach with an aspiration to transform their divisive system and society. Acknowledging and learning from the lessons of history to understand the context and communitarian aspects of Lebanon’s situation is at the core of their conception of humanitarian action. Paraphrasing Kierkegaard, to live forwards you need to understand backwards. It is from the knowledge of their wounds that healing will emerge:

‘For us it is not – we don’t see ourselves as a humanitarian organisation. Responding to crisis. We see ourselves as a Syrian civil society organisation working for the future of Syria. And our work is not related only to the current crisis. So this is something essential in our thinking and for the way we think for the future, how we plan things. So one of our strategic goals is to build the capacity of our staff. And to contribute to the rebuilding of Syria from now [...]. So we are doing our part of it, our small part of it by training people, by building their capacity, putting them in front of some difficult challenges. We cannot afford to wait until the war end so this is why we should expand, keep expanding to reach out as much as possible to communities that are not reached by anyone. And to train as much as we can of people [...]. And we can form a place where we, together we can make a place where everyone can contribute.’⁸⁶

These organisations claim their position as active agents, rejecting being subjects of imposition and fragmentation. In particular, they are reacting here to the Lebanese state’s initial inaction and later security approach towards the arrival of Syrian refugees (which mirrored earlier responses to Palestinian refugees), and to the humanitarian ‘machine’ disembarking in Lebanon with the Syrian crisis with standardised programmes and emergency funds, triggering competition. It is in this sense that they challenge the authority of the state and international actors; in a similar way, and in line with their own underlying philosophy, they aim to achieve the establishment of relationships as equals and, when engaging with affected communities, to go beyond material assistance and short-term emergency activities and gain the trust of the people.

‘At the beginning they used to come and ask us, ‘Where is the food baskets?’ but now they are asking, ‘When are you going to come and sit with us?’ So it’s different now the relation between us and them, it’s totally different. Even in the Fares camp where we are doing the agriculture project, they used always to say, ‘Where is the food ... the food baskets and the diapers and the milk?’ Now they are so proud of themselves, their dignity is so high. Because they are doing these projects and they are benefiting from them.’⁸⁷

‘I think they trusted us because we did not pretend we were coming in to give them food or money and then not come back, or to provide them with homes or offer false promises. We just went and partnered with people interested in working with us, like the animators, we weren’t like strangers anymore.’⁸⁸

From a position of knowledge and understanding, organisations claim their space: ‘We should work for efficiency not for visibility.’⁸⁹

French philosopher Simone Weil said attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. These organisations challenge fragmentation and imposition as forms of an authority that does not listen; their confidence emerges from knowing the context, the communities, their wounds. In an ever-changing situation, where several organisations have lost staff who ‘have migrated to Europe out of despair’,⁹⁰ their endurance prevails: ‘We know it is a long, long term, long fight [...]. Still, we have a future.’⁹¹



What do you want to say? ‘We have a future’.

Photo: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

Endnotes

1. 'We know our wounds, and from our wounds we will heal us' – research participant interview, Beirut, 20 October 2015.
2. Annex 1 lists the organisations interviewed for this report.
3. Research participant interview, Beirut, 20 October 2015.
4. Research participant interview, Beirut, 6 October 2015.
5. Research participant interview, Beirut, 5 October 2015.
6. Research participant interview, Beirut, 20 October 2015.
7. Research participant interview, Beirut, 27 October 2015.
8. Research participant interview, Beirut, 6 October 2015.
9. Research participant interview, Beirut, 27 October 2015.
10. Research participant interview, Beirut, 8 October 2015.
11. Research participant interview, Beirut, 20 October 2015.
12. Research participant interview, Beirut, 22 October 2015.
13. Research participant interview, Beirut, 6 October 2015.
14. Research participant interview, Beirut, 24 October 2015.
15. Research participant interviews, Beirut, 6 and 22 October 2015.
16. Research participant interview, Beirut, 27 October 2015.
17. Research participant interview, Beirut, 21 October 2015.
18. Research participant interview, Beirut, 8 October 2015.
19. The shaweesh is an Arabic term for the one who is responsible for each refugee settlement.
20. Research participant interview, Beirut, 6 October 2015.
21. Research participant interview, Beirut, 27 October 2015.
22. Research participant interview, Beirut, 6 October 2015.
23. Research participant interview, Beirut, 20 October 2015.
24. Research participant interview, Beirut, 24 October 2015.
25. Research participant interview, Beirut, 27 October 2015.
26. Participant interview, Beirut, 5 October 2015.
27. Traboulsi, F. (2012) *A history of modern Lebanon*. 2nd edition. London: Pluto Press (p.vii).

28. Ibrahim, S. (1988) *Beirut, Beirut*. London: Bloomsbury.
29. Research participant interviews, Beirut, 22, 24 and 28 October 2015.
30. Research participant interviews, Beirut, 6, 20, 21, 27 and 28 October 2015.
31. Research participant interview, Beirut, 28 October 2015.
32. Research participant interview, Beirut, 5 October 2015.
33. Research participant interview, Beirut, 22 October 2015.
34. Research participant interview, Beirut, 24 October 2015.
35. Research participant interview, Beirut, 27 October 2015.
36. Research participant interview, Beirut, 6 October 2015.
37. Research participant interview, Beirut, 8 October 2015.
38. Research participant interview, Beirut, 6 October 2015.
39. In vivo code, direct quote from a research participant interview, Beirut, 21 October 2015.
40. Research participant interview, Beirut, 22 October 2015.
41. Research participant interview, Beirut, 5 October 2015.
42. Research participant interview, Beirut, 21 October 2015.
43. Research participant interview, Beirut, 21 October 2015.
44. Lina Mounzer, social media at the peak stages of protest because of the waste management crisis, Beirut, July 2015.
45. Research participant interview, Beirut, 20 October 2015.
46. Research participant interview, Beirut, 20 October 2015.
47. Research participant interview, Beirut, 20 October 2015.
48. Research participant interview, Beirut, 22 October 2015.
49. Research participant interview, Beirut, 20 October 2015.
50. Research participant interview, Beirut, 24 October 2015.
51. Research participant interview, Beirut, 5 October 2015.
52. Research participant interview, Beirut, 6 October 2015.
53. Research participant interview, Beirut, 28 October 2015.
54. Research participant interview, Beirut, 20 October 2015.
55. Research participant interview, Beirut, 22 October 2015.

56. Research participant interview, Beirut, 28 October 2015.
57. Research participant interview, Beirut, 27 October 2015.
58. Research participant interviews, Beirut, 5, 8, 24 and 27 October 2015.
59. Research participant interviews, Beirut, 5, 21, 22 and 24 October 2015.
60. Research participant interview, Beirut, 21 October 2015.
61. Research participant interview, Beirut, 27 October 2015.
62. Research participant interview, Beirut, 28 October 2015.
63. Research participant interview, Beirut, 28 October 2015.
64. Research participant interview, Beirut, 28 October 2015.
65. Research participant interview, Beirut, 5 October 2015.
66. Research participant interview, Beirut, 22 October 2015.
67. Research participant interview, Beirut, 21 October 2015.
68. Research participant interviews, Beirut, 5, 22 and 24 October 2015.
69. Research participant interviews, Beirut, 6, 8, 20, 22 and 24 October 2015.
70. Research participant interviews, Beirut, 21 October 2015.
71. Research participant interview, Beirut, 27 October 2015.
72. Research participant interviews, Beirut, 5, 8, 21, 22, 24 and 27 October 2015.
73. Research participant interviews, Beirut, 5, 8, 24 and 27 October 2015.
74. Research participant interviews, Beirut, 27 October 2015.
75. Research participant interview, Beirut, 21 October 2015.
76. Research participant interview, Beirut, 27 October 2015.
77. Research participant interview, Beirut, 6 October 2015.
78. Research participant interview, Beirut, 21 October 2015.
79. Research participant interview, Beirut, 22 October 2015.
80. Research participant interview, Beirut, 5 October 2015.
81. Research participant interview, Beirut, 8 October 2015.
82. Research participant interviews, Beirut, 5, 24 and 27 October 2015.
83. Research participant interview, Beirut, 20 October 2015.

84. Research participant interview, Beirut, 24 October 2015. The interviewee clarified that claims of abuse against displaced women had been reported to the NGOs concerned.
85. Research participant interview, Beirut, 22 October 2015.
86. Research participant interview, Beirut, 27 October 2015.
87. Research participant interview, Beirut, 6 October 2015.
88. Research participant interview, Beirut, 20 October 2015.
89. Research participant interview, Beirut, 5 October 2015.
90. Research participant interview, Beirut, 27 October 2015, echoed by research participant interview, Beirut, 8 October 2015.
91. Research participant interview, Beirut, 24 October 2015.

Annex 1. Interviewed organisations

- ABAAD Resource Centre for Gender Equality
- Al-Najdeh Association
- Akkar Network for Development (AND)
- AMEL Association
- Arc-en-Ciel
- Association Libanaise pour la Promotion Humaine et l'Alphabetisation (ALPHA)
- Basmeh and Zeitouneh
- Bioforce
- Caritas Migrant Lebanon
- Daleel Madani/ Lebanon Support
- KAFA (Enough) Violence & Exploitation
- Marsa Sexual Health Centre
- Syrian Eyes

Annex 2. Methodological approach adapting Grounded Theory

Sampling methodology for the selection of organisations and individuals for interview

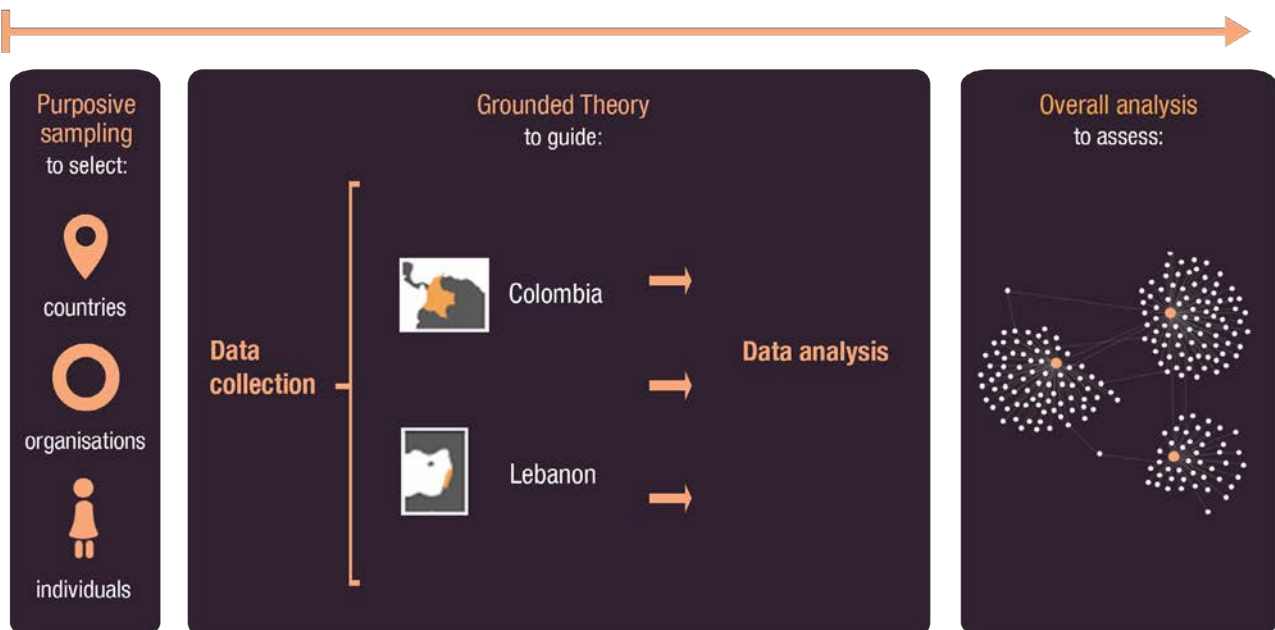
The unit of analysis of the research is responses to emergencies and disasters implemented – partially or completely – by NNGOs in Lebanon.

The data will initially be obtained from individuals working within the NNGO selected for the research. Country profiling prior to the data collection will enable contextualisation and the identification of potential emergency and disaster responses to initiate interviews, but interviewees' selection of disaster/emergency responses will constitute the major criteria for inclusion.

Methodological approach to data collection and analysis

Purposive sampling was used for the selection of countries, organisations and individuals, in three stages:

Figure 1: Phases in the research using a mixed methodology



Stage 1: Country selection

Country selection was determined by (i) limitations in terms of resources, notably time, human and budgetary resources, which made wider country coverage impossible; and (ii), perhaps more importantly, an understanding that it is difficult to find homogeneity among the 100+ countries in which emergencies and disasters recur, even if we consider only non-Western countries.

Under these premises, the criteria to select the countries were:

1. A certain degree of geographical representation, with a sample that includes diverse continents and regions, to capture various experiences at national and local level from a qualitative perspective;
2. Countries that have an active mixed humanitarian profile with multi-risks/hazards, including natural and manmade disasters – often including armed confrontation – and displacement;
3. Countries with evidence of existing and active national organisations and platforms;
4. Countries that, for different reasons – including language barriers – have not received as much attention in research related to the work of NNGOs in emergency and disaster response.

Stage 2: Organisation selection

The initial sampling of NNGOs was carried out through profiling of the country selected and key informant interviews:

1. Country profiling to determine and improve understanding of the risks and hazards resulting in disasters and crisis, in order to understand humanitarian needs and its responses, including mapping of national and local organisations according to available data;
2. Key informant interviews to identify on the one hand critical contextual elements, ranging from cultural awareness to issues around language, security and accessibility, and on the other, potential NNGOs to invite to participate in the research. The criteria for selection aimed for some degree of representativeness of the diversity of situations within the country of research and included size (small/large), geographic scope (national/local), orientation/composition (women's organisations, self-organised-affected communities, minority groups) and a degree of subjectivity in terms of particular interest associated with quality of response, including scope and magnitude or response to specific needs of most vulnerable groups.

Selection of key informants was done through ALNAP network member organisations and/or contacts, and included nationals and/or widely experienced people in the selected country, including diaspora individuals.

Organisations were contacted to explore their potential interest in participating in the research, with mixed results. Therefore, participation in the research was determined by the organisations who accepted the invitation and volunteered to be interviewed.

The ALNAP Community of Practice (CoP) was another source of potential organisations, including the both Humanitarian Evaluation Community of Practice and the Urban Response Community of Practice, and provided further contacts.

ALNAP Members recommended two types of organisations: former or current partners involved in humanitarian response; known national and local organisations in the country because of their trajectory in emergency response, their reputational credentials in the country of research and the presence of specific individuals working in said national/local organisations with an individual trajectory in the humanitarian sector. This may also include individuals with a mixed trajectory of work with both international and national organisations. Some ALNAP members were particularly supportive on the dissemination of the NNGO Research Info Sheet, including the Disasters Emergency Committee, Sphere and the host organisations in the selected countries, Save the Children for Colombia and Lebanon.

Stage 3: Individual selection

Once national/local organisations had been invited to participate in the research and had accepted, most of the time they appointed particular individuals to be interviewed. Organisations were invited to participate through individual or group interviews. Group interviews were limited to a maximum of three individuals, given the requirements of the methodological choices involving adapted Grounded Theory. In most cases, organisations preferred to do one-to-one interviews, with only a few organisations preferring to do group interviews.

The only exception to these individual selection and inclusion criteria was when ALNAP members, organisations referred by interviewees (through snowballing) or diaspora/country experts pointed to particular individuals within the suggested organisations. In this case, inclusion criteria targeted particular individuals. In practice, this was possible within the limits of the individuals' availability for intensive interviews.

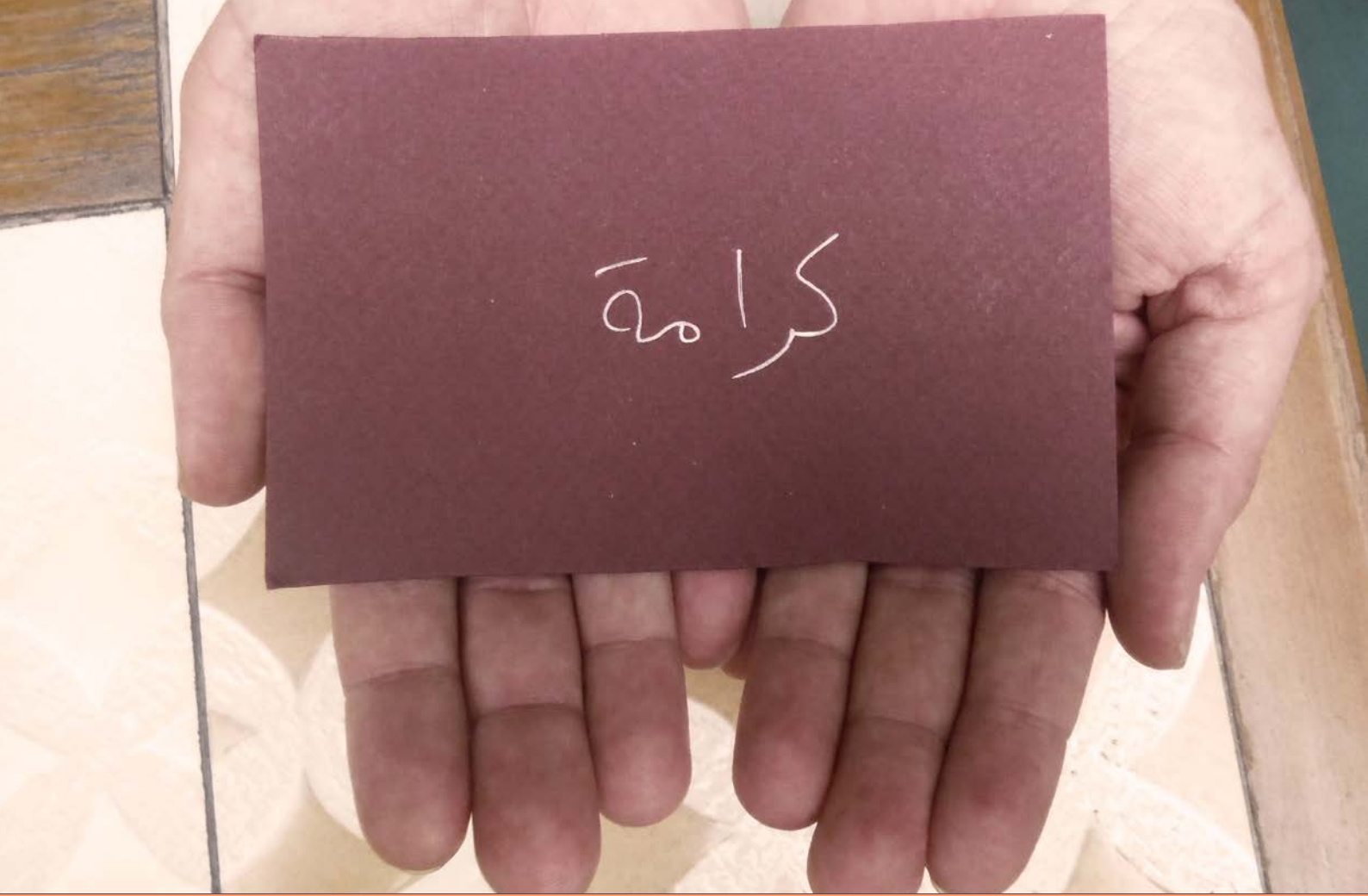
Data collection and analysis adapting Grounded theory

Intensive interviews with national/local organisations were not conducted with a preconceived questionnaire.

The interviews – lasting between one and two hours depending on participants' availability – were very open and based on active listening. They started with the open question: 'Tell me about the experiences, motivations and practices behind your organisation's involvement in disaster and emergency response.' Interviewees would then explain and the researcher's role was only to come back to certain points to clarify and look for examples to ensure understanding of the interviewees' explanations in their own terms.

Grounded Theory methodology was then used to analyse this material in three stages:

1. Initial line-by-line coding (MAXQDA)
2. Focus coding and intensive comparative tools (between codes, between incidents and between codes and direct data from the transcripts), to identify a core category of codes and key issues such as frequency and intensity and help define the dimensions of selected core codes. In this stage, we gave particular attention to in vivo codes, which are codes extracted from the direct words of the interviewees;
3. Clustering of core codes (including their sub-codes and dimensions) and further comparison, particularly around identified key 'incidents' (such as 'dealing with security' or 'departing from a personal experience') in order to define the structure and flow of writing and reporting.



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