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Doing (No) Harm?
Inequalities in The Non-Governmental Organizations
Sector in Iraq

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Submitted by
Muntadher Hassan Al-Khaqani (Muntather Hassan)

Supervised by
Wolfgang Dietrich

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DFI	Development Fund for Iraq
DNGO	Directorate of Non-Governmental Organizations
ECM	Elicitive Conflict Mapping
EU	European Union
EUD	EU Delegation to Iraq
GDI	Gender Development Index
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation)
HDI	Human Development Index
HQ	Headquarters
IAA	Iraqi Al-Amal Association
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IC	Indirect Costs
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP(s)	Internally Displaced Persons
INGO(s)	International Non-Governmental Organization(s)
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IQD	Iraqi Dinars
IRC	International Rescue Committee
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Sham
KFW	Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (German Development Bank)
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
LGBTQIA	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual
LNGOs	Local NGOs
MP	Members of Parliament
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
NICRA	Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
QGOs	Quasi-Governmental Organizations
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Group
USA, or US	United States of America
USAID	US Agency for International Development
USD	US Dollars
USG	United States Government

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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims to explore the complex inequalities between International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and Local Non-Governmental Organizations (LNGOs) in Iraq. The focus is on understanding the dynamics, factors, and structures that contribute to and sustain these disparities. The research will examine how these inequalities manifest in areas such as access to funding, organizational capacities, and human resources. It will also check how these imbalances affect the overall development efforts within the country. Central to this inquiry is the question of how INGOs can build more equitable partnerships that empower LNGOs, ensuring a stronger and more sustainable local civil society.

The premise of this study is that LNGOs in Iraq face significant disadvantages when compared to INGOs. Particularly regarding their ability to secure funds, develop capacities, and sustain growth. These disparities, which are embedded in complex social, economic, and political environments, weaken Iraqi civil society and maintain the dominance of INGOs.

This thesis will investigate the mechanisms through which INGOs, with their established structures and resources, often overshadow LNGOs. Also, how these power imbalances can be addressed to create more equitable and empowering partnerships between local and international organizations.

This introduction chapter is about stating my current and previous experiences in the Iraqi Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) sector. The aim is to identify the research interests of this thesis, including drawing the research problem and pinning its questions. I also demonstrate the suitable methods and structure and outline the literature review.

1.1.Author's Perspective

After the US (United States of America) war on Iraq in 2003 that overthrew Saddam Hussein's¹ dictatorship and the Ba'athist party² rule, I started to perceive the USA and UN (United Nations) as 'liberators.' However, I think it took me a long time to understand their differences until 2012. During 2003 and 2004, seeing the US troops was a daily routine. They were generally friendly and welcoming in the beginning. Then, I started to see them more in action: warplanes bomb, rifles shoot, and helicopters fire. However, I was a ten-year-old child who fiercely supported the liberators, motivated by the fantasies that they would make Iraq a new South Korea, as my teacher once said. Their ability to destroy the oppressors -Saddam Hussein, his regime, and the Ba'athist party- supported my view.

The harsh poverty my family and I lived in before the 2003 war, which gradually cleared after 2003, supported the narrative of liberators. My father's monthly salary was less than eighty US Cents, barely enough to buy thirty eggs. Our home was hardly equipped. We only had a stove, and a refillable gas can that were my grandparents' gift, and two beds and two blankets split between my parents and the three siblings we were. I do not remember that I wore anything other than second-hand clothes.

Therefore, I adopted my father's view toward war and the US-international intervention as the only hope. After the war, my father's salary suddenly became two hundred USD (US Dollar). I also received study kits with logos of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The 2003 war resembles a

¹ Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq officially from 1979 to 2003 and executed in 2006. He was the second person in the Ba'athist party before 1979, he participated in the failed coup of 1963 and the successful one in 1968 to start the Ba'athist rule in Iraq. Marr 2012, 137, 142-144, 175-212, 302

² The Ba'athist party: is a Pan-Arabist political party founded in 1943. The party ruled in Iraq from 1968 to 2003 when it was overthrown by the US war on Iraq. The Syrian branch of the party is still ruling in Syria since 1963. Marr 2012, pp. 137-213.

sudden shift in my perception of international intervention from being demonized by Saddam Hussein's regime to being romanticized and overly hopeful.

The changes in perception of international intervention in Iraq changed in correlation to my struggles and positions. After the changes in economic status from poverty to a 'mid-class,' my fluctuating ideological, religious, and spiritual journey has profoundly affected my perceptions of international intervention. When I became very religious from 2003 until 2012, in today's terms, a Shiite extremist, I was pro-the US coalition forces. The reason was that the US forces granted the space for the Shiite community achieved after the 2003 war and the civil war in 2006 and 2007.

However, I became more skeptical after 2012 and defined myself as agnostic in 2016. The main drivers were, first, the rise and cruelty of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), which occupied one-third of Iraq. Second, opposing Shiite militias rose to form the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Third, the Islamist parties' political failure. Last, simply the personal inability to commit to religious duties.

Now, I define myself as only spiritual, using music, painting, and secular meditation while embracing the fluidity and complexity of self-identification. This identification freed me from sectarian- and religious-based narratives. It also freed me from blindly supporting certain Iraqi and international actors. Nevertheless, skepticism, problematization, and questioning are my current personal tendencies, especially when dealing with structures. This is a personal skill that I will rely on in this thesis.

I link my engagement with the NGO sector, civil society, and peace work to the school times when I used to read poems and speeches to the pupils at the daily morning line-up. In my first year at Kufa University as a dental student in 2011, I learned about the Save Tigris

campaign³. At that time, it aimed to sign a petition by one million Iraqis to save Tigris from dryness by preventing Turkey from building the Ilisu Dam. I passionately participated and collected over three thousand signatures through Facebook and the university. Therefore, I link my passion for working in the NGO sector and the ability to take the initiative to those days coupled with the sweet feeling of recognition and achievement.

In late 2011, friends and I co-founded a secular volunteering team in my 'holy city' - Najaf, called *Moja*, which means wave. At its peak, we were 136 young volunteers who brought concepts of peaceful 'coexistence' to the people's attention in Najaf through community-based activities that used arts and sports. Alongside my religious struggles, there was an attack on us as a team using secularism as a synonym for atheism. Thus, we received direct death threats. I continued with *Moja* until March 2017. Throughout this period, the international agencies and NGOs resembled credibility, professionalism, and the supporters that we tried to bring their attention to us, a pattern similar to seeing them as saviors in 2003.

In September 2016, I started to work in the NGO sector as a youth peacebuilding coordinator at Iraqi Al-Amal Association⁴ (IAA), a national NGO that I still work with on conflict transformation, women's rights, and Human Rights. Then, I started developing project proposals in mid-2017, and in 2018, I became a project manager in parallel. Through my work, I deal with international entities such as NGOs and donors almost daily, mainly through reports, proposals, and direct communications. I have many hats within IAA that I can use to fill gaps in facilitation, training, monitoring and evaluation, and research.

³ Please see: <https://www.savethetigris.org/>

⁴ IAA is a national NGO works in Iraq since 1992 on human rights, gender equality, peace education and conflict transformation. For more see: <https://iraqi-alamal.org/>

Within my work in IAA, I experienced international intervention in the NGO sector based on the savior narrative, which creates a hierarchical relationship between the international- the helper and the local NGOs -the helped. I do not necessarily refuse this hierarchy, but I refuse the inequality, supremacy, and domination it brings to these relationships.

In the beginning, I started to deal with over-respect for the international staff of international entities whom I saw as ideal and superior. However, in a few months, I got angry because an international partner shared a post on Facebook that they had organized a training workshop on peacebuilding for Iraqi youth, completely overlooking IAA's efforts. It was the training I coordinated. At that point, I discovered that this partner deals with IAA as a contractor to implement *their* project. They use this format with all local NGOs and contractors. In the end, the achievements get attributed to the international entity. I then discovered the same pattern in the relationship of many international to national entities in the Iraqi NGO sector.

However, long before my work within the NGO sector, war experiences shaped my understanding of international intervention in Iraq during my childhood. At nine years old, I remember watching a brief scene repeated on the national television of Iraq, where two UN staff in blue vests were holding a small cage of dead white doves inside. I understand now that they were from International Atomic Energy Agency⁵ (IAEA) inspection teams for the massive destruction weapons in Iraq before the 2003 war. 'International intervention' was a synonym for war to me. The abstract news words of Uranium⁶, Security Council, ElBaradei⁷, Sanctions⁸,

⁵ IAEA started inspecting Iraq's ability to develop mass-destruction weapons from 1991 after the second gulf war. Mohammed ElBaradei stated days before the US war on Iraq in 2003 that there was no indication that Iraq was developing these weapons ElBaradei 2003

⁶ The word Uranium was used extensively in the news to refer to the Saddam's regime tries to have nuclear weapons. To me, it was a mysteriously terrifying word because I linked it to war.

⁷ Mohammed ElBaradei, the director general of IAEA at that time.

⁸ The financial and trade sanctions imposed by the UN security Council on Iraq after the second gulf war.

and Clinton⁹ used to terrify me as they were linked to war. At that time, I mistakenly understood that the UN is a part of the USA, and both were imposing sanctions on Iraq and waging war.

I see and experience such patterns continuously; for example, when IAA's logo should be 80% smaller than the funder's, or a proposal gets rejected just because IAA is an LNGO without bothering to check its capacity. I believe such relationships should be based on genuine cooperation rather than service-providing contracts dressed up as partnerships, empowerment of LNGOs, localization, and mutual understanding of roles and capacities.

I believe such inequality-based hierarchies create dependent LNGOs on international funding and offer one option other than tunneling it through INGOs. This prevents LNGOs from aspiring for direct donors' funding or creating local funding mechanisms. Therefore, the LNGOs' sustainability is diminished. Moreover, tunneling of funding is based on the premise that LNGOs have weak governance capacities, which creates no space for genuine empowerment of LNGOs but has them trapped in a loop of dependency and inability to grow. I believe the harm INGO partnerships cause to the Iraqi LNGOs needs to be closely examined and considered beyond abstract indicators and success-focused reports.

Recently, I started to take consultancy assignments in Iraq and Sudan on project development, organizational development, and monitoring and evaluation with international firms including GIZ Iraq, and Pax for Peace. Through four assignments, I have assisted thirteen LNGOs (eight Iraqi and five Sudanese) in developing project designs, Outcome Harvesting capacities, and organizational structure in a total of sixty-two working days. I will use the insights I gained on the capacities, commitments, and competence of the Iraqi LNGOs through these consultancies.

⁹ Bill Clinton who launched airstrikes campaign against Iraq in 1998. Therefore, to me, the warplanes were connected to his name in the news.

For all the mentioned above, I will use my seven years of professional experience in the Iraqi NGO sector as a resource for this thesis. Moreover, I will utilize the experiences of Iraqi colleagues with international that involve a broad spectrum from frustrations, supremacy, and discrimination to success, achievement, and passion.

1.2. Research Interests

I aim in this thesis to answer the following complex question: *What types of inequalities exist between the international and local NGOs in Iraq? What dynamics, factors, and structures create and maintain these inequalities? How can INGOs create partnerships that decrease inequalities and empower LNGOs?*

I base the question on the assumption that there are inequalities between local and international NGOs working on development in Iraq, such as in capacities, access to funds, and ability to grow. These inequalities cause harm to the LNGOs by preventing them from reaching their potential and reducing the quality of work to improve Iraqi people's lives. These inequalities are produced and maintained by diverse dynamics, narratives and justifications that are interconnected with the complex social, economic and political environment. To unpack this research problem and question, I focus on three aspects of inequalities between the International and local NGOs in Iraq that result in a weaker Iraqi civil society and assert the INGOs' dominance.

First, the INGOs entered the Iraqi context with well-developed structures, organizational capacities, high-quality technical support from their headquarters, and sustainable funding from their governments and public donations. On the contrary, most Iraqi NGOs are newly established, after 2003 mainly, have weak structures, and limited organizational capacities. Therefore, the granting process's competitive nature allows the INGOs and the UN agencies to receive the most of funding. Many donors encourage having LNGOs as partners and building their capacities to mitigate leaving the local NGOs behind (Humanitarian Response 2021).

However, most INGOs and UN agencies manage received grants, get credited for the achieved results, and use the local partners as mere implementing partners. Moreover, the capacity-building of local NGOs becomes a requirement to be fulfilled without a serious commitment to empowering the local NGOs. Additionally, employees who excel at LNGOs and have reasonable English language skills tend to continue their careers with INGOs for better payment and reputation. Therefore, the INGOs deprive the LNGOs of their best human resources, in addition to the stigma on LNGOs' staff as incompetent, corrupt, or inexperienced.

Second, the INGOs and UN agencies take full administrative costs of the grants and prevent the local partners from getting them. This practice results in the incapability of LNGOs to develop their own capacities and structures to grow and be sustainable. Meanwhile, INGOs and UN agencies conduct lengthy due diligence processes that usually require a long list of management and financial policies, standards, and procedures from LNGOs that are variant by the donor. However, there is usually no funding to develop such structures other than the indirect costs.

Moreover, INGOs and their international staff lack skin in the game¹⁰ in Iraq. When the security situation deteriorates, internationals are the first to leave, highlighting the importance of creating a strong and sustainable local civil society. Examples are the 2014 war against ISIS events and the Iraqi federal government's sanctions on the Kurdistan Region in 2017 (Khanjar 2019). Additionally, the deterioration of the economic situation benefits international individuals better as they receive higher salaries that are in US Dollars (USD). In comparison, Iraqi workers with many INGOs and LNGOs receive lower salaries that are in Iraqi Dinars (IQD). For example, recent drops in the IQD value versus the USD create losses for those with

¹⁰ A skin in the game means taking the risk by being fully involved in a cause or a goal where the leaving option is very costly. This is also a book title by Nassim Nicholas Talib that discusses power asymmetries.

IQD salaries and benefits for those with USD salaries.

Third, local NGOs' staff are mainly Arabic speaking with poor English, and it is the second language for those who are good in English, and the grant-writing is mainly in English. Even though some UN agencies accept proposals in Arabic, from my experience and communication with other LNGOs, such proposals are usually refused, and the winning ones receive significantly smaller funds than those written in English. I do not see that as a direct discrimination act but a systemic loop of constraints preventing LNGOs from receiving funds.

The language also complicates LNGO's reporting, understanding, and application of donor requirements, rules, laws, and procedures. Frequently, donors ask for all the project documents to be in English for external auditing, including thousands of receipts. Therefore, many LNGOs that succeed in getting funding fail to fulfill the donor requirements, which diminishes the possibility of getting new funding.

Moreover, no donor funds proposal development; therefore, LNGOs can only have project staff and cannot contract a proposal writer since it is not covered, nor develop its team capacity in this field. This results in relying totally on INGO partners or finding collateral ways of funding such a staff member, such as volunteering in addition to a job, or worse, using corrupt practices to save money for following proposals. I frequently refuse consultancies to develop proposals for LNGOs for that reason.

I am interested in researching the system's mechanisms that produce and maintain these complex inequalities between LNGOs and INGOs and their effect on the LNGOs and mapping these inequalities to find any patterns. Additionally, I aim to explore leverage points that can enhance equality and empower LNGOs. Therefore, I will utilize a systematic analysis that takes the complexity, feminist, and (de-)coloniality perspectives into account.

1.3.Method and Structure

I want this thesis to be analytical and critical, highlighting the patterns and systemic drivers of inequalities in the Iraqi NGO sector and providing suggestions to address them. Therefore, I decided to develop an empirical case study of inequalities in the Iraq NGO sector using Elicitive Conflict Mapping (ECM) to answer the research question. The cross-cutting perspectives of Systems Theory, (de-)coloniality, and critical development studies will be supportive to ECM.

I am fascinated with the beauty of ECM as it captures aspects that no other conflict analysis framework can provide. For example, I have practical experience using the UN's Conflict and Development Analysis (UNSDG 2016) and Lisa Schirch's Conflict Assessment and Peacebuilding Planning (2013). I decided not use these models mainly because the ECM is based on the transrational peace philosophy that provides a holistic and systemic overview rather than solely the modern and post-modern philosophies of the other two frameworks. Moreover, ECM is a dynamic tool that captures the complexity of the conflict examined without reduction or generalizations.

In a nutshell, I understand ECM as a tool that explores the conflict epicenter, the source of conflict energy, beyond its episodes from various layers, themes, levels, and principles (Dietrich 2018; Echavarría 2014). I see my entry point to use ECM in this research is with actors mapping the Iraqi civil society sector to understand the levels of the conflict using John Paul Lederach's model in peacebuilding (Lederach 1997, p. 39). Then, I explore the narratives around inequalities between local and international NGOs and staff to form the conflict themes using peaces families. Then, I will try to peel the layers of the conflict through analysis from the episode toward the epicenter. Moreover, the correspondence, resonance and homeostasis principles will be integrated in all the previous steps (Echavarría 2014).

Practically, I conduct ECM through in-person semi-structured interviews with sixteen NGO workers in Iraq, including seven women. The aim is to include the voices and perspectives of a diverse group to test the research assumptions and answer its questions. The interviewees are of four groups of classified on as Iraqis working in Iraqi NGOs (N` 10), Iraqis working in international NGOs (N` 2), and Internationals working in international NGOs (N` 4). It is essential to mention that I decided not to include internationals working for Iraqi NGOs as they are extremely few and do not constitute a pattern in the system.

Following the ECM, the structure of this thesis is four chapters. This introduction highlights this research's baseline and the relevant author's experiences. The second chapter is a desk review of the relevant terminologies, presenting the ECM, and providing a contextual orientation. The third chapter outlines the case study using the analyzed empirical data collected using ECM. Lastly, recommendations will be made on how to build more inclusive and equal partnerships among local and international NGOs in Iraq.

In addition to the outlined methods and my personal experience, I mainstream insights of gender, (de-)coloniality, and critical development studies. Rina Alluri's (2021a, 2021b) courses on "narratives in peace and conflict" and "identity and power politics" sensitized me to coloniality, colonization, and decolonization. Therefore, I became more able to see and analyze the patterns of control, the imposition of outsiders' perspectives on a context they are not part of, and the narratives used for justification.

1.4. State of The Art

Following up on the international development and humanitarian intervention behaviors in Ukraine recently ignited my interest in examining the similarities and patterns of emergency response in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, and Yemen. For example, I found good documentation of the repeating story that most international funding goes to UN agencies and

INGOs despite having little presence on the ground, especially in the areas in most need, compared to LNGOs and volunteer groups, the first respondents.

Ukrainian NGOs receive only 0.0003% of the international funding while significantly exceeding UN agencies and INGOs in number and average staff size (Humanitarian Outcomes 2022, 11,16). “Medium to small-sized Ukrainian NGOs (the majority) say they are unable to access funding support from international organizations for rapid response due to contracting processes that are stringent and slow.” (Humanitarian Outcomes 2022, p. 16). This disproportionate funding creates severe systemic challenges such as poor coordination, untransparent operations, and delayed responses to continuously changing needs.

Meanwhile, development narratives are not new and date back to the post World War II era and the implementation of President Truman’s inaugural address in 1949 (Dietrich 2013, p. 175). However, Iraq-specific international humanitarian assistance access started during the Second Gulf war in 1991 in the Security Council Resolution 688 after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. The resolution demanded that Iraq allow INGOs access to all the conflict-affected areas in Iraq, including Kurdistan. However, they could only access the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) as it gained autonomy then.

John F. Kennedy advocated for increased international support to developing countries. He suggested the 0.7% target for development aid in the 1960s. However, the formal commitment to this target was solidified by the UN in 1970. The goal was to urge developed countries to allocate 0.7% of their Gross National Income toward Official Development Assistance.

The international commitment to development was also brought up in 1996 at the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development setting “0.7 percent of gross national product for overall official development assistance” (UN DESA 2008). Then, in 2005, The Paris Declaration for Aid Effectiveness set five principles prioritizing local perspectives and

benefits to development aid. The Accra Agenda for Action followed in 2008 to make these principles actionable.

However, the 2011 evaluation showed controversial progress in most commitments (OECD 2005). 2016, the first World Humanitarian Summit was held in Istanbul, where the localization agenda was widely adopted (World Humanitarian Summit 2016). The summit also set the Platform for Actions, Commitments, and Transformations to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the commitments, which showed swinging levels of localization from 2017 to 2019 (McDevitt 2019, p. 3).

The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members are the primary governmental donors. The 2019 numbers show that most of the 22.4 billion USD aid volume came from the USA and European countries (Ahmad and Carey 2021). Iraq ranked the third most international aid receiver of 1,251 million USD. However, “Prior to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the four largest UN agencies and the Red Cross accounted for two-thirds of the total budget of the formal humanitarian system” (Robillard et al. 2021) and I believe the pattern is still valid with different percentages.

Moreover, most funding data are generalized and ambiguous as they do not provide details about the final receiver or the exact spending areas. For example, the US Foreign Assistance Data Platform¹¹ uses the term “Conflict, Peace, and Security” to describe 705 million USD in assistance to Iraq in 2020 that has 548 million for military assistance and 157 million for “economic” without any definition or explanation. It becomes harder to capture what the European Union and its individual governments are funding.

Therefore, the fragmentation of aid is a serious and long-standing problem that leads to poor donor coordination, transparency and accountability issues, and efforts duplication. Most

¹¹ See: <https://foreignassistance.gov/>

importantly, the aid usually fails to meet the local needs due to fragmentation and poor identification, the given system delay between identification and response that builds on the previous efforts. (Martin C. Steinwand 2015; Klingebiel et al. 2016).

Lederach (1997) beautifully sets the dilemmas in the NGO work that are still broadly valid, especially evaluations in his book *Building Peace*. It is insightful to me to link the importance of evaluation as a main parameter of funders to continue funding to the structural dilemmas of NGOs' work. These structural drivers for 'better evaluation results' make 'successful' NGOs spend great efforts in compliance with the funder criteria and requirements, which does not necessarily meet the needs on the ground. Thus, this creates a relationship of dominance between NGOs and funders, or in the case of my research, local and international NGOs.

Wolfgang Dietrich also discusses the politics of development aid through the lens of transrational peaces in the second book of his many peaces trilogy (2013, pp. 175–187). Reading this book and especially this subchapter, I better understood why the local communities are widely refusing development efforts. Moreover, Dietrich touches upon the relationship between NGOs and funders and how the money and ability to intervene in the other's space create this hierarchy. Dietrich also supports Lederach's call for a shift in the mode of funding toward more flexibility and better relationship and self-revelation between the 'partners' beyond the material aspect.

The structure of development aid favors big NGOs -mainly of the same nationality as the funder- and is not suitable for small NGOs to thrive due to requirements that are relevant only to the large NGOs. For example, evaluation is the primary "pressure on the smaller NGOs' to demonstrate effectiveness as their larger counterpart, their contexts are fundamentally different" since the "larger non-profits dominate academic literature and practice norms" (Kelly 2020, p. 5). Therefore, Robillard believes that "localization is a form of isomorphism

ensuring that local organizations become more like their international counterparts” (Robillard et al. 2021, p. 23).

Additionally, I engaged with more recent publications that question development work principles. Rosa Sanchez Salgado (2014) questions the Europeanizing of civil society, how European structures are being imposed on local civil society organizations, and how this makes them less effective. The western aid paradigm is challenged by Asian alternatives, mostly Chinese, by Jens Stilhoff Sørensen (2010) which indicates to me this linkage of aid to ‘internationally powerful states’ that in turn implicates the hierarchical relation between aid provider and receiver.

Oliver Walton et al.'s (2016) challenge to the INGO legitimacy is interesting and contributes to my research. Lastly, Roger Mac Ginty (2011) provides excellent examples of local resistance to peacebuilding from many aspects and countries, including Iraq, from an economic perspective.

A joint study by Oxfam and the Feinstein International Center on local humanitarian action in Iraq, Columbia, and Haiti (Robillard et al. 2020) and a localization landscape report (Robillard et al. 2021) shows an interesting analysis of the barriers and challenges to local humanitarian action and discusses the Iraqi case well. Funding coordination structures are identified as the main challenges. It discusses the locality of Iraq's humanitarian action to discover that it is fragile because of these barriers.

I found two relevant studies; the first is a dissertation by Abdulsalam Khanjar (2019) on The Role of LNGOs in humanitarian crises, the case study of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Khanjar analyzes the partnerships between local and international organizations and the strengths and weaknesses of LNGOs. Even though he follows the framework of the international humanitarian response, he concludes that the LNGOs can be more active in case of UN and INGOs' support.

The other thesis is a study of the internally displaced persons' (IDP) oriented humanitarian network in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, by Falastin Ismail and Soren Klaverkamp (2020). They call for hearing the “voice of local organizations and their desire for more input into how programs targeting IDPs are developed and implemented” by International NGOs through a discourse analysis study.

Moreover, I find the Visions of Peace of Professional Peace Workers book by Gijbert van Iterson Scholten (2019) interesting. It compares how Dutch and Lebanese peace workers see peace, giving a new perspective on disparities between local international actors. David Chandler's Peacebuilding, the Twenty Years Crisis (2017) has a chapter about turning to the local, highlighting the importance of local ownership for successful peace efforts.

Máté Szalai (2018) discusses the relations system between the non-governmental organization, the host state and the external partner in the Middle East and North Africa Region, including Iraq. The main findings included the NGOs' debatable agency, and strengthening the transnational sector does not necessarily limit states' leverage.

Moreover, insights from the ‘first generation’ of critical development scholars such as Wolfgang Sachs, Ivan Illich, Gustavo Esteva, C. Douglas Lummis, and Majid Rahnema will be used to challenge the current development framework in Iraq and set terminologies in the theory part of this research. These perspectives are also critical when dealing with the capitalist model of the NGO sector in Iraq as a third sector.

I also participated in validating a report on the perspectives of local Women's Rights Organizations on the UK's gender and women, peace and security practices in Iraq (Kaya et al. 2022). The report identifies five key issues summarized into the disconnection of international actors from the reality on the ground, exclusivity and hierarchy generated by international funding, and the need for better communication and transparency.

2. THEORY

This chapter aims to provide a theoretical background of the research topic and prepare for the case study (next chapter). At the start, I present and discuss core terms used in the communication and relationship between LNGOs and INGOs. I also highlight the problems created by a lack of mutual understanding and implementation of these concepts.

Then, I introduce Elicitive Conflict Mapping as an analysis tool for the case study (next chapter) by presenting its principles, levels, layers, and themes. The chapter also includes a brief orientation on Iraq's recent history, focusing on the NGO sector. I conclude by demonstrating a landscape of the current NGO sector in Iraq and the lived context on economic, political, and social levels.

2.1. Core Concepts and Terminology

The terminology of the development field is usually not straightforward and is tweaked toward 'positive' connotations and phrasing, especially the UN terminology, which usually hides important shadow aspects. The basic terms such as funds, aid, development, equality, partnership, collaboration, and support have different perceptions and meanings to the international and Iraqi NGO workers and entities. Therefore, I see it necessary for my thesis to start briefly setting a common ground for the relevant terminology.

At this stage, I researched two types of literature: the development terminologies used by the UN in their manuals and reports and the critical development studies' view of these terminologies. I started with the UN Sustainable Development Group's manual on result-based management (2010), the website of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) , and the Human Development Report (UNDP 2022) to briefly review the used terms and glossaries when available.

I noticed two patterns: the lack of attention to international-local intervention effects and dynamics and the mention of equalities other than the spaces for gender and poverty. The other pattern is the absence of focus on the problematic effects of the development aid on the NGOs relationship with each other and donors; instead, partnership, cooperation, and capacity-building are overly used.

On the other hand, I engaged with the Humanitarianism Keywords edited by Antonio De Lauri (2020) and The Development Dictionary edited by Wolfgang Sachs (2010). I find both important since they provide another perspective than the one used by the UN and its agencies since they tend to problematize. However, with the first book, I found a lesser tendency to criticize and more explanation, sometimes in line with the publicized meaning of such terms. Therefore, my research starting point will be discussing these perspectives to set the terminology I will use throughout the thesis.

2.1.1. *(In-)Equality*

This term is central to this thesis; hence, it is crucial to clarify its complexity and confusions, and set the used meaning. Equality bears mainly two interrelated meanings; the first is as justice and fair treatment – value; and the other is as sameness and homogeneity – allegation of fact (Lummis 2010).

Fair treatment means that people and organizations should be treated in a just way; thus, it is relational. I see that the core of such a value lies in the ‘should be,’ how it gets outlined, and who outlines it. The existing power relations among donors, INGOs, and LNGOs favor the donors as standard setters globally. The INGOs in the Iraqi context -at least- work on two ends: to translate these standards into practices and make the LNGOs meet them. Most LNGOs are passive receivers of these standards and have limited influence on changing them.

As a result, the standards of equality are not just since their generation processes are not highly inclusive of marginalized voices. However, I noticed recently increased

consultations by donors of the Iraqi NGOs, coupled with a tendency to increase funding through their representatives in Iraq, such as embassies and agencies.

For the alleged fact of sameness, I see that LNGOs and INGOs are simultaneously similar and different. With similarity, I mean alike structures, purposes, roles, and origins; and differences in size, complexity, capacities, and access. Therefore, equality in this sense is to respect similarities, acknowledge differences, abolish feelings of supremacy, and create a sense of complementarity and cooperation.

2.1.2. Development

The UN defines development as “a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and all individuals” (The UN General Assembly 1986). This definition emphasizes that development is complex, multi-dimensional, human-centered, and inclusive. It also assumes that improvement is constant and can be sustained.

Therefore, the UN’s definition of development is reflected in the ambitious SDGs. They set out a comprehensive agenda for improving the lives of people around the world while protecting the planet (The UN General Assembly 2015). The UN definition of development is noticeably positive and has an optimistic connotation. Meanwhile, there is no mention of shadow aspects and implications of the term.

However, development is widely criticized by the first generation of critical development studies. As Gustav Esteva puts it, “For those who make up two-thirds of the world’s population, to think of development – of any kind of development – requires first the perception of themselves as underdeveloped, with the whole burden of connotations that this carries” (2010). Moreover, even when the term *developing countries* was substituted for *underdeveloped* in the political discourse, the meaning stayed underdeveloped. Iraqis

beautifully play with the Arabic word *Namia* – *developing* by flipping its letters to *Naima* – *sleeping*, which reflects how the term negatively impacts the self-worth of Iraqi people.

I notice that INGOs and UN agencies are comfortable using the term in their public visibility materials according to the UN definition. However, LNGOs are more in a limbo when using the term. While they widely use it with international partners and donors, they rarely use it when communicating with their local communities. This signals avoidance of the term because of its negative perception indigenously.

2.1.3. Aid, Funding, and (Sub-) Grants

The word aid usually comes combined with development or humanitarian, and always refers to foreign aid. Aid can be of three primary forms:

- Unilateral, from one state to another, i.e., one way;
- Bilateral, from a donor state in exchange for benefits; and
- Multilateral, which includes a group of donors pooling funds to a specific country, usually in crisis.

Meanwhile, “Foreign aid is based on the foreign policy interests of donors, embedded in humanitarian and development projects” (Lauri 2020, p. 72). In the Iraqi civil society context, aid comes in the form of issue-specific grants from three prominent donors: the USA, the EU, and European individual states. Moreover, most of the aid to Iraq is directed at state-building, which focuses on security and militarization.

It is necessary to introduce historical context to understand how Iraqis perceive the words aid and fund. The UNSCR 1483 established the *Development Fund For Iraq* in May 2003, financed from Iraqi exports and frozen funds managed by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) until its dissolution in June 2004. The UNSCR 1956 terminated the Fund in June 2011. The Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction’s forensic report (2012) identified substantial fraudulent activities. A previous report showed that USD

8.8 billion out of a total of USD 23 billion held in the fund were inadequately accounted for during the CPA times.

Therefore, development funds are perceived as connected with corruption in the Iraqi context, entangled with a vast spread of corruption in Iraq. Therefore, Iraq scores 157/180 worldwide in the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International 2022).

2.1.4. Partnership

The relationship hierarchy in the Iraqi NGO sector follows the funds flow. It starts with the donors, then prime recipients, and lastly, sub-grantees, if any. Most donors are states, governmental agencies, or quasi-governmental organizations (QGOs). They have the authority to appropriate money to particular issues or regions following their political priorities.

The prime recipients are mostly INGOs, UN agencies, and very few LNGOs. They have a direct relationship with the donor and either implement projects or more frequently manage the fund, acting as intermediate. The sub-grantees are mostly LNGOs and less INGOs. They are responsible for implementing the project on the ground and reporting to the prime recipient. They are also known as implementing partners.

Therefore, the relationship of a prime recipient to sub-grantees can be reimagined as manager-implementers to be closer to reality. It is also expected that INGOs have exclusive access to their country's funds to Iraq, while LNGOs are constricted to implementer roles. The problem, in addition to the hierarchy this model creates, is that the majority of INGOs and UN agencies in Iraq define themselves as donors to LNGOs and call the actual donors 'back-donors.' Therefore, it creates a sense of supremacy over LNGOs and limits their access to funds. However, such relationships are described as partnerships.

Meanwhile, the UN General Assembly (2013) defines partnership as voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties in which all participants agree to work

together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task, as mutually agreed, to share risks and responsibilities, resources, and benefits. The discrepancy is apparent between definition and reality.

However, partnerships are usually contract-based. In other words, partnerships go through a tendering and contracting process. At the same time, such measures try to increase accountability and integrity. They fail to build sustainable and strategic partnerships. As a result, a paradox rises: the INGOs and UN agencies tend to get more comfortable with a partner for many reasons, including a complex spectrum of reasons from excellent results to corruptive relationships. Therefore, they tweak the tendering process so that the preferred entity wins. It is common for an INGO or a UN agency to have LNGO ‘darlings.’

I see the problem with the rigid system that prevents strategic partnerships, complicates building new partnerships, and fails to prevent corruption. However, I notice that more INGOs started to build strategic partnerships with LNGOs, while the UN agencies are still failing.

2.1.5. Due-Diligence and Auditing

Any partnership between INGO and LNGO usually starts with due diligence and auditing after project closing. Due diligence is a process of identifying, preventing, mitigating, and accounting for how to address actual and potential adverse effects (OECD 2011, p. 20). The INGO staff usually undergoes such a process with any LNGO they deal with for the first time. Donor governmental agencies and QGOs tend to contract external firms to undergo the process with their partners, making new partnerships harder and more costly.

Due diligence usually involves quantitative questionnaires that check organizational structures, policies and past performances. From personal experience, this raises two problems. First, some INGOs’ staff ask LNGOs to self-assess themselves using the forms. Second,

quantitative assessments abstract the reality of LNGOs and do not account for social capital, access, and other essential qualifications.

Moreover, some INGO branches in Iraq seem to overcome essential requirements magically; for example, I know three INGOs that are not registered in Iraq yet still receive funds and perform projects. I have also seen cases where due diligence findings were used to exclude undesired LNGOs rather than supporting them to resolve the gaps.

After the end of a project, a third party contracted by the donor, prime recipient, or implementer audits compliance with the due diligence findings. The audits include examining the organization's activities, processes, and systems to implement the project (OECD 2011, p. 22). Nonetheless, as there are different due diligence processes and requirements, there are also many auditing requirements. INGOs are usually audited by their donors. There are usually a few types of standards mainly European and USA. However, since LNGOs deal with different prime recipients, they must familiarize themselves and comply with more diverse auditing requirements and styles.

This puts pressure on design policies and structures that are donor-driven, not needs-driven. Therefore, they result in dummy policies and structures to get good auditing results but are not implemented. Moreover, in most contracts with INGOs, LNGOs must comply with the INGO's country laws. For example, comply with the US laws if the donor or prime NGO is US-based. The LNGOs, with their limited resources, are pushed to acquire legal expertise and consultations without support.

2.1.6. Reporting, Monitoring and Evaluation, and Visibility

Reporting is one of NGO workers' main tasks on internal, external, public, and private levels. The aim is to demonstrate the progress of a project toward its objectives and verify its implementation and effectiveness. Reporting includes narrative and financial reports with

supporting documents such as receipts, photos, attendance sheets, and evaluations. Moreover, reports have to be submitted on time according to set deadlines.

The reporting process entails various dilemmas and challenges. The first is what Lederach sets as a dilemma between accountability, transparency, comprehensiveness, and regularity on the one hand and confidentiality on the other, especially when dealing with sensitive topics such as peacebuilding and human rights violations (1997, p. 132). The challenges of cyber security added complexity to this already complex dilemma.

The default standard set by donors is that NGOs should be publicly open about the projects and use the necessary visibility means to promote the project and its donorship. Exceptions and waivers are usually given in limited cases when dealing with sensitive topics. This excludes the US and UK governmental funders who set a general waiver of mentioning them in public visibility. Furthermore, UN agencies and QGOs are preoccupied with public visibility as a priority to the extent of diminishing ownership of LNGOs.

The other reporting dilemma facing LNGOs is that donors (and prime recipients) require high-quality reports, which demand excellent reporting capacity that is usually inaccessible to LNGOs. Therefore, as prime recipients, INGOs usually report to the donor in addition to primarily remote management tasks. The result is as high as half of the fund being spent on bureaucracy.

The last problem with reporting I raise is the questionable utilization of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and other reporting means. “Evaluation findings are often overlooked or ignored due to competing sources of information, incompatibility of results against the beliefs, values, and interests of decision-makers, or because of a non-receptive institutional atmosphere” (Kelly 2020, p. 47). M&E reports are usually requirements to fulfill. For example, I rarely receive comments or questions on project reports I submit, which can indicate that

either the reports are perfect or the receiver did not have the time to go through them deeply. Furthermore, reports without utilization are a pointless bureaucratic burden.

2.1.7. Capacity (building)

Capacity building is “the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive” (United Nations 2023). Capacity building is an approach that uses many tools, including training, mentorship, co-creation, and others. Commonly, the INGOs and UN agencies build capacities of LNGOs in many topics. This implies that in a specific topic, INGOs are better than LNGOs. Therefore, they help them in this matter. Recently, most donors required the projects to have a capacity-building component for LNGOs.

However, training is the dominant tool in capacity building and is usually generic and repetitive. They also lack a comprehensive assessment of needs and existent capacities, leading to duplications and diminishing effectiveness. Furthermore, responsible NGOs deal with partners' capacity-building components as requirements to be fulfilled. I also witnessed many LNGOs admitting irrelevant staff to such training activities.

I also noticed that capacity-building activities are mostly focused on individuals rather than organizational levels. For example, it is rare to see an INGO helping LNGO to improve its structure and policies. Let alone prevent LNGOs from receiving core funds, as the funds are primarily project-specific. Therefore, LNGOs tend to adopt copied policies to fulfill partnership requirements rather than to develop relevant policies organically.

2.1.8. Indirect Costs, Administrative Costs, Overhead

Direct costs are the expenses that can be attributed to a project and activities. Indirect costs are the costs to run an organization and cannot be attributed to a project or activity such as rentals, support staff, electricity, and organizational development processes. They are calculated as a

rate from the direct costs, usually around 10%, and can reach up to 40% in some US-based organizations. Indirect costs, administrative costs, and overheads are used interchangeably. Indirect costs are essential for NGOs' survival and sustainability since they are non-profits.

It is common for INGOs to take all the indirect costs associated with a project and prevent their LINGO partners from budgeting these funds. In worse cases, INGOs even charge indirect costs for the entire project's direct costs, and they also take the indirect costs that belong to both their organization and their local partners. Such practices make LINGO starve and may push them toward corruptive practices to survive.

The other ugly dimension of indirect costs I noticed in the interviews is that most LINGO workers and Iraqi workers in INGOs do not even know the concept of indirect costs. This indicates that headquarters and senior management of INGOs and UN agencies restrict knowledge of the existence and details of such costs. Moreover, this longstanding issue has only recently been brought to focus by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2022). I will discuss this issue in depth in the next chapter.

2.1.9. *Localization*

The Grand Bargain 2.0 framework defines localization as “greater support is provided for the leadership, delivery, and capacity of local and national responders and the participation of affected communities in addressing humanitarian needs” (Grand Bargain Secretariat 2021). The Grand Bargain 2.0 is based on the Grand Bargain of the Humanitarian Summit in 2016 - and a follow-up of the Paris 2005 and the Accra 2008 Declarations- which sets a target that 25% of funding to local and national actors either directly or through one intermediary.

However, a recent independent evaluation states that “actual progress towards the target of providing 25% of funding to local/ national actors as directly as possible appears to have been very limited. [The] data suggest a further decline in the percentage of funding provided

for coordinated appeals reaching local actors” (Metcalf-Hough, V., Fenton, W. and Manji, F. 2023, p. 18). While I see it as good progress to limit intermediaries to one, I believe these intermediaries are the same ones used to control most of the funding, such as UN agencies, ICRC, and a few INGOs. Therefore, the system has no significant shift to foster genuine localization. Instead, the intermediary system stays preferred, perpetuating these intermediaries' existing power.

2.2. Theoretical Framework: Elicitive Conflict Mapping

Wolfgang Dietrich's pioneering work on the Peaces Families offers a compelling framework for navigating this complex peace and conflict work landscape. Each family represents a distinct perspective on peace, its pursuit, and its underlying thematic threads. I see them as analysis toolbox to explore and understand root causes of conflict, unmet needs, and possibilities for creative peaces. The ECM includes principles, levels, layers, and themes. Therefore, I present Elicitive Conflict Mapping (ECM) as a framework for analysis of the latter case study.

2.2.1. The Principles

ECM stands as a unique approach to conflict resolution, drawing its foundation from Transrational Peace Philosophy. “It is a tool for finding and keeping orientation in applied conflict work.” (Dietrich 2014a, p. 55). ECM operates through three guiding principles: correspondence, resonance, and homeostasis.

The tantric principle of *correspondence* is essential for ECM, stating that external events between individuals mirror their internal processes. As Dietrich (2014a, p. 55) explains, “the narrative about an interpersonal conflict tells the elicitive peace worker a lot about the internal processes, energies and blockades of the parties”. This principle suggests a profound

interconnectedness between the surface of conflict, manifested in the narratives, and the deeper internal layers of the individuals who are engaged in the conflict. Moreover, every shift in external dynamics reflects on the internal individual aspect and vice versa. Hence, understanding this interdependency is crucial to interpret narratives not only as superficial disagreements but also as gateways to the complexities within.

Another tantric principle, *resonance*, stresses the profound interconnectedness of individuals within a conflict. Dietrich (2014, p. 55) explains that "in a conflict we will see and hear an expressed narrative about the controversies on the surface, but the parties simultaneously resonate with each other on all the layers." This concept goes beyond simple agreement or disagreement towards deeper connection. Moreover, the conflict drivers often lies not in the overt topic of dispute but in blockages or imbalances on these deeper layers.

Awareness of resonance is necessary as the conflict workers themselves are part of the system, resonating with the parties in the conflict. Therefore, self-awareness, context and cultural sensitivity are essential for conflict work. Communication skills become the main tool to facilitate authentic connection and building trust. Moreover, the presence of a well-trained conflict worker introduces a new element into the dysfunctional social system, potentially disrupting its equilibrium and paving the way for positive change. However, this comes with a responsibility as Dietrich (2014a, p. 55) cautions, "unaware actors may harm and destroy even more."

The third principle, homeostasis, utilized from General System Theory (Bertalanffy 1968), describes the tendency of systems to maintain a dynamic equilibrium within their internal environment. Conflicts arise from disturbances to this homeostasis within social systems. Therefore, ECM aims to understand how to find a new dynamic equilibrium gradually. ECM also acknowledges that homeostasis is not a static end state but a dynamic process of rapprochement on all levels and themes within the conflict(Dietrich 2014a).

However, reaching perfect equilibrium remains abstract in the constantly evolving landscape of social systems. Therefore, homeostasis serves as a compass for conflict workers, offering direction and orientation not a perfect ideal.

2.2.2. The Levels: Understanding The Actors

The ECM framework draws upon John Paul Lederach's vertical categories of leadership, weaving them into a complex web of influence and interaction. This allows the capture of the inherited complexity of the social system. The actors' level is divided into three vertical parts of the pyramid: top, middle, and grassroots.

At the top level includes "the key political and military leaders" (Lederach 1997, p. 38), whose interventions widely affect the conflict landscape. High-ranking religious institutions and the senior management of large NGOs also find their place here. At the middle layer, there are influential "individuals who are highly respected as individuals and/or occupy formal positions of leadership in sectors such as education, business, agriculture or health" (Lederach 1997, p. 41). Networks, institutions, NGOs, and groups are also on this level, often operating locally and nationally. At the base of this pyramid lies the Grassroots level, where the "masses, the base of the society," reside (Lederach 1997, p. 42). In the case of this research, it also includes volunteers and NGOs' employees.

ECM fundamentally departs from a simplistic top-down or bottom-up approach, instead embracing Lederach's later concept of the "spider web," where interactions between these levels are "non-mechanistic" (Lederach 2005, p. 82). This metaphor reflects the dynamic, complex, and continuous interactive influence between and within the levels. This systemic perspective transcends the limitations of a linear pyramid, reminding us that "all actors interact across the various social strata" (Lederach 1997, p. 38). Each strand in this interconnected web contributes to the conflict and its potential transformation.

2.2.3. *The Conflict Layers*

Transrational Peace Philosophy understanding of peaces is multi-layered, extending beyond the surface perceptions of individuals and conflict. This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal and societal dimensions. Like a matryoshka doll, these layers influence each other bidirectionally, forming the complexity of human existence.

The layers, as described by Echavarría (2014), include the external societal dimensions of family, community, society, and policity. These eternal layers play a silent yet significant role in interpersonal conflicts. Similarly, intrapersonal layers, including the sexual, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects, influence behavior and conflict dynamics on the surface. Meanwhile, the contact boundary is the persona or the physical body. The principle of correspondence reinforces the interconnectedness of these layers as within equals outside.

The layered model overlaps with John Paul Lederach's vertical pyramid, creating a comprehensive illustration of transrational peaces. The layers emphasize the sophisticated connection between individual and collective processes along the human contact boundary. The matryoshka layers are not isolated but interact dynamically, challenging the notion of distinct categories to encourage a holistic perspective.

The systemic homeostasis principle is a metaphorical floor plan that balances the pyramid. This highlights the importance of considering all layers and levels in conflict work. The system's collapse is imminent when any aspect is overburdened or overemphasized. Therefore, conflict transformation requires attention to all layers, from the foundational societal layers to the personal and spiritual dimensions (Dietrich 2014a).

While some may perceive this layered model as complex, Dietrich (2014a) acknowledges that the social systems' dynamic and complex nature requires a model to understand this complexity and dynamicity. Moreover, reductionist rationality has limited

reach in understanding the intricacies of conflicts. Transrational peace research, therefore, necessitates a toolkit that embraces rationality alongside methods addressing the diverse layers of human nature.

2.2.4. The Themes: Five Peaces Families

Energetic Peace is based on a sense of the interconnectedness of nature, society, and divinity in a cosmic existence. This holistic worldview stems from ancient pantheistic and Eastern mystical traditions that viewed the individual as a part of a larger, unified whole. The thematic emphasis of energetic peace is around harmony and balance of the opposites. Therefore, peace cannot be maintained without keeping an equilibrium between internal and external, and individual and collective. As Dietrich emphasizes, individuals are not separate but always part and parcel of the larger relationality that, in turn, is ultimately a temporary manifestation of the primal, energetic Oneness of all beings (Dietrich 2014b).

Therefore, Peace is not a static utopia but a continuous process of balancing opposing forces. This necessitates resilience and adaptability to ever-changing environments and contexts. Echavarría (2014) states, "there is no permanent final state or situation, but an ongoing challenge to balance both the intra- and interpersonal layers of being."

Furthermore, recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings fosters a sense of compassion and responsibility towards each other. This translates as a main motivation for activism that prioritizes the well-being of the whole. As Dietrich (2014b) states, energetic peace approaches call for a holistic understanding of both human and natural systems, which implies a focus on the interrelatedness of all things and the need to act in ways that promote harmony and balance.

Moral peace is based on a dualistic framework that sees the world as a continuous conflict between good and evil, right and wrong. Divine law and absolute moral principles

guide the path toward peace, demanding adherence to righteousness and retribution for wrongdoings. The moral peace's thematic focus is around justice as a divine mandate. Pursuing justice is not simply a human practice and need but a divinely ordered duty. This often leads to a reliance on legal systems that have moral rules and punish wrongdoing; as Dietrich (2014b) states, peace shall be the reward for those following His rules.

The ultimate moral principles are derived from religious teachings to provide a fixed framework for navigating human interactions and achieving peace. This usually leads to polarization and alienation of those perceived as deviating from the established norms. Echavarría (2014, p. 62) points out that "polarities are interpreted as a dualism between true and false, good and evil, right and wrong, strong and weak." Moreover, it facilitates the assignment of specific individuals who introduce themselves as the only authorized to represent the divine will, establishing dogmatism and exclusion.

Therefore, true moral peace is not found in the earthly realm but in the realm of the divine. This longing for a future utopia where perfect justice and harmony reign can overshadow immediate concerns for addressing present conflicts. Dietrich (2014b) flags that peace through justice is not perceived in the present but is postponed to a better future, potentially fueling resentment and violence in the present.

Modern peace relies on reason, linear growth, and scientific logic. In contrast to moral peace, it assigns rationality as the guiding principle, viewing the universe as a mechanical system governed by predictable laws akin to the Newtonian/Cartesian world (Dietrich 2014b). This perspective focuses on earthly concerns, emphasizing development, security, and the perfectibility of human society through science. Therefore, peace becomes intertwined with linear growth for human evolution and the culmination of human evolution and enlightenment, as Dietrich (2018) notes.

Security is a central theme in modern peace, particularly in conflict situations. Peace turns into protection of material aspects, ensuring order within states, and safeguarding citizens from external threats, as exemplified by the idea of "peace out of security" (Dietrich 2014b, p. 197). The nation-state emerges as a sponsor of internal peace, offering a safe refuge within its borders for its citizens. Therefore, the duality gets emphasized through citizenship as citizens are seen as inherently good until they challenge the state rules or cooperate with external threats.

The modernist emphasis on security and development often translates into top-down interventions focused on state-building, legal frameworks, and economic models. These approaches usually yield tangible and quantifiable results such as growth indices and SDGs. However, they usually overlook local communities' lived experiences and needs and perpetuate structural inequalities.

Postmodern peace arise as a critical response to the disillusionment and violence woven into the fabric of modernity. Rejecting the grand narratives of progress and security, it celebrates the multiplicity of lived experiences and acknowledges the inherent contradictions and uncertainties within the human condition, as Echavarría (2014) points out. Rather than striving for a unified resolution of tensions, postmodern families embrace the "unspectacular, many peaces" (Dietrich and Sützl 2006) that emerge from diverse local contexts and encounters.

This approach challenges the singularity of truth prevalent towards a plurality of truths that coexist and evolve. Therefore, each conflict transformation interaction becomes focused on creating and negotiating meaning. The truths start to emerge from the lived experiences of those involved, as Echavarría (2014) emphasizes. Consequently, postmodern peace remains contingent, transitory, and ever-shifting, demanding constant reinterpretation and struggle in the face of instability and complexity.

Therefore, postmodern peaces leave the easy and straight forward explanations of the previous peace families towards embracing sophistication of the social realities. It calls for a shift towards bottom-up, horizontal, participatory approaches prioritizing dialogue, local knowledge, and grassroots initiatives. This necessitates acknowledging the plurality of voices and narratives within conflicts, fostering inclusive dialogues, and empowering communities to build peace from the ground up.

Transrational peaces emerge as a unique concept within peace studies, bridging the gap between the modernist emphasis on reason and materiality and the postmodern commitment to plurality and doubt. At its core lies the recognition that reason is but one mode of perception among many, opening doorways to incorporating the spiritual dimension into contemporary understandings of peacebuilding (Echavarría 2014).

This approach goes beyond strict adherence to any single peace family. Instead, transrational peaces, seek a dynamic equilibrium by integrating insights of energetic, moral, modern, and postmodern perspectives. As Dietrich (2013) emphasizes, transrational peace acknowledges the crucial roles of personal harmony, relational security, structural justice, and cultural truth in building sustainable peaces.

Transrational peaces reintroduce the spiritual component into peacebuilding discourse, viewing it through the lens of systemic approaches, deep ecology, and transpersonal understandings (Dietrich 2014b). The focus on harmony as a complex process including physical, biological, intellectual, and psychological dimensions within interpersonal encounters demonstrates that it is an essential element of peace work (Dietrich 2013).

Moreover, a transrational understanding of justice transcends the rigid legal and moral systems framework towards focusing on subjective and communal satisfaction of needs. This understanding rejects teleological views of growth as an absolute goal and instead prioritizes

addressing immediate necessities. Therefore recognizing the inherent value of present realities (Dietrich 2013).

Transrational philosophy calls for a shift from sovereign-centric security to relational security. The motivation behind that is the emergence of new conflicts that happen in civil settings not used to conventional state militaries. This necessitates civilian-military cooperation in peacekeeping missions, demanding a new type of soldier equipped with skills in socio-psychological processes and cultural sensitivity (Dietrich 2013).

Following the postmodern philosophies, transrational peaces embrace pluralistic notions of truth, moving from singular truth towards plural truths. This facilitates congruent communication across diverse cultural contexts. It also recognizes the exclusion brought by singular narratives. Therefore, it is essential to consider the multiple truths to facilitate collaborative peacebuilding efforts (Dietrich 2013).

Transrational peaces introduce a framework to navigate and understand the complexities of contemporary conflicts. What makes that possible is the integration of the peace families' insights and reintroducing the spiritual dimension. Transrational philosophy's commitment to plurality, inclusivity, and dynamic balance promises to foster more sustainable and holistic approaches to peacebuilding.

2.3. Historical and Contextual Orientation

This section focuses on developing a mutual understanding of the relationship between Iraq's recent history and current contexts to the foreign aid and NGO systems. I use three lenses to demonstrate that: security, economic, and social perspectives of wars, armed conflicts and crises and their link to the NGO sector.

2.3.1. *Endless Wars: 1980s and 1990s*

Iraq has a long history of a patriarchal welfare state, i.e., a state responsible for deciding and providing everything to its citizens. The clear start was when the communist party toppled the British-sponsored monarchy in the 1958 revolution. The newly established republic started the reform of the agricultural system by demolishing the feudal system and promoting the idea of a supreme leader dictatorship. Not a long time after, The Ba’thist party coups in 1963 and 1968 ended the socialist republic and started a Pan-Arabist one that is a single-party state and socialist. Then, Saddam Hussien’s fast climbing of the power ladder created a fierce supreme leader dictatorship. Until then, civil society was mainly students’ unions and workers' syndicates, but no NGOs existed. Moreover, these civil society structures underwent rapid Ba’athification processes, making them an unofficial portion of the Ba’ath party.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, the development indicators were hiking, especially in education, health, and average income. However, the long-term effects of the state’s abundant resources and incomes were terrible despite the positive outcomes of the immediate ability to spend on development (Al-Jebory 2017). The abundance of oil resources, dictatorial rule, and militarization after the 1968 coup, in addition to a masculinist patriarchal culture, led to the outbreak of the first Gulf War in 1980. The war causes can be attributed to fears of Shia influence over the region from Iran's revolution, and Saddam Hussein's ambition to solidify Iraq as a dominant power in the region, in addition to minor territory disputes. In eight years of war, around 125,000 Iraqis were killed, 255,000 were wounded, and 50 to 80 thousand soldiers were captured. Furthermore, the Anfal operations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq led to an estimated 50 to 100 thousand fatalities (Marr 2012).

Iraq exited the First Gulf War with debts amounted to about 50 billion USDs. Most of the industry had been transformed to serve the military and had lost about 45% of the workforce by then. Inflation was close to 28% (Marr 2012). The situation led to significant turbulences in

the social and economic system from which Iraq has not fully recovered. For example, displacement-induced demographic changes are still persistent.

Few years later, Iraq started the Second Gulf War in 1990. The Iraqi military took over Kuwait in less than 24 hours. Saddam Hussien announced annexing Kuwait as the governorate nineteen. The reasons included a dispute over border oil fields, and territory, in the Iraqi desire to dominate the Gulf region. The US and more than thirty nations formed a coalition to liberate Kuwait, that ended the occupation in February 28, 1991.

This war came up mainly as a cover-up for the state's failures and the economic deterioration since the First Gulf War, which had brought about growing debt, continuous spending on weapons of mass destruction, and militarization in general. The Second Gulf War ended with the loss of 10 to 30 thousand Iraqis and the capture of 86 to 90 thousand soldiers (Marr 2012). After the unsuccessful popular uprising against the regime in 1991, governmental suppression intensified, particularly in central and southern Iraq, fostering an unescapable climate of fear of authority and an averseness to voice any opposition, regardless of the oppression severity. It also produced a culture of lack of transparency and administrative corruption that is still firmly present today.

The Security Council imposed a cease-fire by Resolution 687 to end the Second Gulf War. It was followed by international sanctions to reduce Iraq's oil exports by 85% for six years from 1991 to 1997. As a result, the currency collapsed from 3.20 USD to the Iraqi Dinar before the war to 2600 Dinars to the USD in 1996 (Marr 2012). The education and health indicators dropped dramatically, forcing Iraq into an 'underdevelopment' condition. At that time, fearing imminent famine, the UN introduced the Oil-for-Food program, which in turn empowered the authoritarian state's grip on the Iraqi citizens (Mac Ginty 2011, p. 124). The Security Council also followed with other resolutions that included humanitarian aid.

The sanctions that lasted until 2003 brought disastrous effects on the social system in Iraq. Bribery became a socially acceptable practice by most public employees to compensate for their tiny salaries. For example, it was common in schools to hand over foodstuffs as a bribe to teachers as a condition for the success of students with medium and weak performance.

Moreover, the occupation of Kuwait (an Arab state) in the Second Gulf War, and the fact that Arab states joined to the US-led coalition to liberate Kuwait from the Iraqi troops had hardly hit the Pan-Arabist narrative of the Ba'athist party. Therefore, the regime resorted to the religion and patriarchal tribal system by launching a faith campaign in 1995 to Islamize the state and daily life and encourage radical Islamic tendencies, coinciding with the government's reconciliation with the tribes (Marr 2012). These moves ended the state's secular character that prevailed until the end of the 1980s. With these changes, religious extremism increased, and with it, masculine and patriarchal extremism. It led to an increase in early marriage rates for girls as a means of relieving their economic burden coupled with domestic violence and violence against women.

During these phases, the regime promoted the international actors, including the UN and INGOs, as imperialist interventions. Furthermore, the Iraqi state at that time actively used the western narrative around civil society as an opposition power to authoritarianism to eliminate any kind of social, religious, or political activism. I also remember that the word *organization* in Arabic (*Munadama*) was exclusively used to describe the Ba'ath party local division. The use was almost always in contexts of fear such as arrest or military recruitment campaigns. Nevertheless, a few LINGOs were operating from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) after the region's autonomy in 1991, or from outside Iraq and established by the Iraqi diaspora.

2.3.2. *The Liberation and Chaos: 2003 to 2010*

The UN and US imposed sanctions were slightly getting softer during the start of the second millennium. However, the US narrative of Iraq's mass destruction weapons program was getting more dominant and aggressive, especially after the events of 11 September 2001 and occupation of Afghanistan. The US war on Iraq became looming in the end of 2002, and I remember that both people and the state started to prepare for the war in that winter actively.

The US-led coalition started their military campaign on 20 March 2003, which was rapidly ended by the occupation of Baghdad and the toppling of the Iraqi government on 9 April 2003. The coalition forces were the liberators that allowed mass looting of public facilities, including military bases, banks, schools, universities, and hospitals by the hungry and indignant Iraqis.

Later, The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was formed as a US-led authority to govern the transition of Iraq toward a democratic state. The CPA's first order was to remove all full members (senior and junior) of the Ba'ath Party from employment (CPA 2003a), followed by the dissolution of the Iraqi military (CPA 2003c, p. 119) making more than 350 thousand well-trained fighters jobless. Moreover, many of the Ba'ath Party members were hunted down by the Shi'ite militias that were settled in Iran before 2003. The jobless fighters became essential assets to the Sunni resistance groups, and later extremist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

The civil war then started in late 2003 and spiked in 2006 and 2007, to end in 2008 with the defeat of Al-Qaeda. The main fueling narrative was that Shi'ites were the majority and were oppressed before 2003, while the power was held by Sunnis, making them the oppressing party who boycotted the new political system election. More than 120 thousand Iraqis were killed between 2003 and 2008 (Iraq Body Count 2012) and an unknown number were injured.

The civil war is a cause of a substantial collective trauma that hyped with the generational traumas that were poorly addressed by the internationally pushed reconciliation efforts. Average Iraqis and those in power refuse to use the term civil war to describe that period and prefer to use the overly simplified blaming of international jihadism. This denial is a sign of unhealed trauma.

The CPA also changed the economic system to a very open market by lifting all controls on imports, leading to a massive influx of goods that, from personal experience, were primarily of low quality, defective, or expired. Meanwhile, the local industry completely stopped as it was mostly state-owned and was already struggling before 2003. Until today, the local industry is still weak and unable to compete.

The CPA was optimistic about fast restarting and increasing oil production, but the security challenges, heavily damaged infrastructure, and inferior morality of field workers made this goal far to reach (Mac Ginty 2011, p. 122). Meanwhile, the UNSCR 1483 and CPA Regulation number 2 (2003) established the infamous Development Fund for Iraq (DFI), which was made up of Iraqi frozen funds and oil export revenues. While the DFI was publicized as a US and UN initiative and funding, it was no more than legitimizing the use of Iraqi money by the CPA.

Additionally, the CPA followed horrible practices in financial procedures. One example is the US troops used to hand cash to public facilities' managers without any proof of employees' records or payments. Another practice was awarding contracts to US contractors, including those close to US officials back in Washington and delivering aid funding mainly to US entities without competitive processes or taxation (Mac Ginty 2011, p. 122). These practices promoted the already existing culture of corruption among Iraqi officials and contractors due to a lack of accountability. In fact, many of the current militia leaders had benefited at some point from these kinds of unregulated spending.

Moreover, the CPA tried to impose a radical neoliberal model on the Iraqi economy and attempted to resuscitate the fragile and rudimentary private sector (Mac Ginty 2011, p. 119). However, the public sector employees were the first ones to have income (salary) after 2003, while private and informal sector workers suffered the most. Public sector salaries were pumped up to a flat rate of two-hundred US dollars, more than two-hundred-fifty times what most employees received before 2003. Therefore, public sector salaries were the most critical factor in saving the economy from collapsing into famine. Such experiences contribute actively to the current weakness of the Iraqi private sector and the absolute preference to work in the public sector (Costantini 2017).

Iraq was seen as steadily developing after 2003, even with the challenges of corruption, oil dependency, and weak accountability (Kulaksiz 2014). This optimism was supported by the relatively improved security situation after 2008 due to the military defeat of Al-Qaeda in western parts of Iraq, the decrease in sectarian incidents that had hiked during the civil war in 2006 and 2007, and the ‘explosive’ annual budgets exceeding one hundred billion dollars for the first time in Iraq’s.

Additionally, there were ‘reconciliation’ efforts by Al-Maliki’s government, especially with Sunni’ insurgent’ groups. Moreover, the signature of the Strategic Framework Agreement with the US government on 27 November 2008 after an internal Iraqi opponency (Marr 2012, p. 329) was also a significant advancement that facilitated the US troops’ withdrawal from Iraq by 2010.

At this stage, it is vital to understand the local perceptions and reactions on international development aid. After the bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad in 2003 and the attack on the International Committee of the Red Cross after two months, Nicolas de Torrenté, the executive director of Doctors Without Borders at that time, asked, “Are aid organizations irrevocably intertwined with the US and Western agenda in the minds of violent opponents

and, even more alarmingly, of the local population?” (Torrente 2004, p. 2). My answer to this fundamental question is yes.

From my experience, the international aid organization and the US troops were both seen as Western. Moreover, insecurity obliged international aid organizations to seek protection from US troops and their allies or private security companies. This, in turn, emphasized the original image that the troops and NGOs are two sides of the same coin, the Western ‘occupation’ or the Western ‘saviors.’

Five years later, Greg Hansen’s research showed that “most of those with whom we spoke to expressed unequivocal solidarity with the goals and ideals of humanitarian work conducted” (Hansen 2008, p. 120). The Iraqi culture has factors that impede the credibility of research inputs, such as trying to be nice to the interviewer and being in line with the general concepts of ‘goodness.’

Moreover, the fear of addressing problems was also evident given the thirty-year control of Saddam Hussiens’s oppressive regime and the civil war in 2005 to 2008. However, “in many cases, the [interviewed Iraqis’] enthusiasm was tainted by mistrust, evident in the examples they gave of low-quality or insensitive work by ‘NGOs’” (Hansen 2008, p. 122).

2.3.3. ISIS and the Rise of Militias: 2010 to 2019

2010 started with heated sectarian narratives to fuel the polarized voters of the parliamentary elections. The election results showed the victory of the secular-Sunni bloc over the Iran and US-supported prime minister at that time, Noori Al-Maliki. However, Al-Maliki succeeded in continuing for another term and exerted high legal oppression against the Sunni competitors. In 2012, protests started in Sunni areas opposing Al-Maliki sectarian policies that were simultaneous to the rise of ISIS in Syria (Marr 2012). Moreover, the Sunni

militias that were weaponized and trained by the US troops and the Iraqi government during Al-Malik's first term in 2007 and 2008 to oppose Al-Qaeda turned against him.

Within this context, ISIS's rise was slow but had impactful media messages during 2012 and 2013. Then, in June 2014, ISIS swiftly occupied one-third of Iraq's area and collapsed the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) there in only six days. This came as a shock not only for Iraqis but also to the optimistic international community.

Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, the most respected Shi'ite cleric, called for Jihad against ISIS to compensate for the ISF breakdown. As a result, thousands of Iraqis joined the militias and ISF units with the motivation of fighting ISIS, forming what is now called the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The PMF is a complex organization that is formally part of the ISF and under the prime minister's command. However, it is practically a paramilitary force formed by a coalition of competing Shi'ite militias. The PMF started to gain political power, especially after the end of ISIS.

More than six million persons, in total, got displaced because of the armed conflict against ISIS; 1.14 million of them are still displaced (IOM 2024). The displacement crisis created a massive demand for emergency humanitarian assistance. This, in turn, led the donors to focus on this area. However, the reality on the ground shows that the first emergency response came from the hosting communities. NGOs were waiting for funding to be allocated, and governmental institutions planned how to respond, which are 'normal' system delays of response.

After the immediate emergency phase, the IDPs' needs for protection, legal assistance, and restoring livelihoods become evident. However, governmental regulations and social reactions intentionally prevent the IDPs from integrating into the hosting communities for security and economic reasons (Khedir 2021). Therefore, the IDPs become dependent on humanitarian assistance, which, accompanied by the destruction of their home areas, makes

them even more dependent and refuse to return, creating a dilemma of prioritizing between humanitarian assistance, reconstruction, and reconciliation. All of that is a huge area of work for international and local NGOs now.

2014 events considerably shifted the locals' perception of INGOs toward more acceptance and dependency after mistrust. For example, in times of publicly traumatic events such as the bombing of Al-Karrada¹², Mosul's ferry¹³, and the October 2019 uprising¹⁴, I saw many calls on social media and petitions to request international intervention in the investigation due to low trust in the Iraqi government. However, limited international and UN reactions and dealing mainly with the untrusted Iraqi governments have also resulted in frustration and decreased trust in international bodies as well. Moreover, conspiracy narratives are still prevalent, stating that NGOs and embassies target the Iraqi community's Islamic values.

On 10 December 2017, the Iraqi prime minister announced a military victory against ISIS after the liberation of the main areas that were occupied. The severe destruction necessitated rapid reconstruction and rehabilitation responses. However, the military operations, coupled with the drop in oil prices, extremely pressured the government's ability to cover its expenses.

Therefore, the government went to international loans and aggressive austerity. The debts started to build up quickly, including more intervention by the World Bank in Iraqi

¹² On 3 July 2016, a massive car-bombing targeted a mall in Baghdad's crowded area, Alkarrada, killing more than 300 persons. A petition signed by 71,952 persons asking for UN Investigation did not result in any intervention from UN side at least publicly. The petition: https://www.change.org/p/un-international-investigation-for-baghdad-karradah-explosion?recruiter=570302927&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=share_email_responsive

¹³ On 21 March 2019, a ferry sank in Mosul during Eid celebrations killing 108 persons.

¹⁴ The broadest and most participated protesting movement in the Iraqi contemporary history that could overthrow the government.

economic policies toward neoliberalism. Hence, the government started to push toward incentivizing the private sector.

Meanwhile, the militia leaders and corrupt officials started to establish and grow their businesses. Today, the neoliberal policies resulted in a stronger private sector that is controlled mainly by money laundering heroes and highly abusive workers and undermined the governmental services. Meanwhile, the NGO sector stayed relatively out of the governmental and militias direct monopoly.

2.3.4. *Protests and Masks: 2019 to 2023*

The 2018 parliamentary election resulted in an intra-Shi'ite political division that resulted in the formation of a shaken government following the sectarian quota system. Meanwhile, "citizens [started] speaking out against their ethno-sectarian leaders and local and federal governments"(Mansour 2019, p. 20). The government faced complex post-ISIS challenges, including poor services, high unemployment rates, scarce resources, the return of fighters, and reconstruction needs.

The first prominent protests started in 2011, then in 2015 and 2017, mainly in Baghdad and Basra, and were linked with elections and failure to provide electricity during the boiling summer. Nevertheless, the 2019 protest movement was unprecedented in scale, reasons, and results. It marked the widest protest in Iraq's modern history, which was participated in by millions in Baghdad and the southern governorates.

It also showed evident discontent among the Shi'ite population of their leaders. The voiced reasons were emphasizing the problems of corruption, unemployment, and refusal of the quota system (International Republican Institute 2020). The narratives focused on national rather than sectarian demands. The direct result was the resignation of the 2018 government, canceling the governorate councils, and the setting a date for early elections.

The governmental and militia forces harshly oppressed the 2019 protests. More than eight hundred Iraqis were killed, hundreds were detained, disappeared, or kidnapped, and an estimated seven thousand were injured (UNAMI 2020). The government announced many curfews but failed to enforce them. The COVID-19 outbreak was the main reason for the protests to end.

The Iraqi NGO workers and local activists were influential in leading and mobilizing the protesting movement. They also utilized creative ways to overcome governmental curfews and internet blocks to advocate for the release of the detained and build consensus among protestors. The civil society activists contributed actively to maintaining the protests' peacefulness using non-violent resistance methods and incorporated lessons from around the world. Meanwhile, the main body of protestors were youth, either students or those who were unemployed.

I see it as an exaggeration to state that the Iraqi NGOs were influential in leading or directing the protests. However, this claim was adopted by a few overly proud NGO workers. At the same time, the militias used the same narrative but negatively inverted as the NGOs directed and inflamed the protests following US orders to kill an Iraqi-Chinese development agreement. The same narrative is still used to demonize and polarize the Iraqi NGOs, especially the ones active in human rights, development, and gender equality.

A provisional government was established in May 2020 amid the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus was shifted toward health and the imposition of the lockdown, which helped the government avoid protests. Urgent economic reforms and security and political adjustments were proposed due to international pressures, mainly US.

The early elections in October 2021 resulted in the rise of secular parties and politicians. Around forty newly elected Members of Parliament (MP) were independent, including some previous protests' influencers. Nevertheless, it took the political parties more

than a year to establish the current government, which is controlled by the same classic parties that are loyal to Iran and have active and influential armed groups.

The COVID-19 pandemic exerted enormous pressure on the Iraqi economy. Again, the established gap between the safer public and riskier private sector employment was emphasized. Most private sector workers lost their income while the entire public sector retained steady salaries even with the home lockdown. Meanwhile, NGO workers' situation fluctuated, but most of them retained their employment and income through working from home. This experience cemented the preference of workers to the public and NGO sectors while trying to avoid the private sector.

The local NGOs and volunteer teams were again the first and most effective emergency responders during COVID-19. Humanitarian aid through crowd-financing was progressively delivered to those in most need. Moreover, the local NGOs and volunteers assisted the fragile health system with equipment, human power, and campaigning on how to cope with the pandemic. Specific NGOs effectively delivered psycho-social support to medical workers and the virus victims' families. According to the Directorate of the NGOs (2020), more than 5.655 million Iraqis benefited from assistance delivered by 920 NGOs and sixty-four thousand volunteers between 22 March and 25 December 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic also showed the INGOs and UN agencies were slower in response, while donors were the slowest. The World Health Organization and COVAX Facility also showed foul discrimination in vaccine distribution. One ironic example is that I could get vaccinated on the first patch of Astra Zeneca vaccines in April 2021 as I was a health worker. The main reason that this vaccine arrived in Iraq quickly was the refusal of many European states to use the vaccine over safety concerns. The 'safer' vaccines took a long time to reach Iraq. This example affirms the global disparities in vaccine access and the unpredictable course of international emergency responses.

2.3.5. Iraq's Current Profile

Iraq's current population is above 43 million, according to the Ministry of Planning estimations (2023). Iraq's path in the sustainable development indicators is complicated due to significant challenges and inconsistent progress. Three key development indicators are Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Human Development Index (HDI), and Gender Development Index (GDI). While I believe the abstraction of development into numbers is inherently problematic, the values of these indicators still provide insights.

The current economic landscape emerges from recent turbulence toward unrealistic optimism. The 2022 GDP estimate of 264.3 billion USD reflects a 7.3% growth compared to 2021 according to the World Bank (2022), primarily driven by the hike in oil prices due to the Russia-Ukraine war. Iraq remains heavily reliant on rapidly changing oil markets, representing around 95% of Iraq's income (Kadhim 2021). Moreover, the government employed an additional 370 thousand people in 2023, mainly in the security sector, to the already congested public sector, putting the governmental budget on a clear path for a huge deficit.

The 2021 HDI of 0.686 puts Iraq within the medium human development category, indicating progress in education (average schooling years: 7.7) and health (life expectancy: 72 years) (Conceição and et. al. 2022) However, this score masks inequalities across geographic regions, social groups, and income levels and does not mention quality. Meanwhile, diversification of income sources is still a narrative overly used by the government and international entities but rarely applied.

The combination of GDP and HDI scores and the fact that Iraq is categorized as a middle-income country put Iraq outside of the priority countries for the donors. The Russia-Ukraine war, the breakout of the civil war in Sudan, and the Gaza-Israel war rapidly shifted the donors' attention away from Iraq after being known as one of the donors' darlings. This has

led to a rapid contraction of the NGO sector in Iraq due to scarcity of funding coupled with dependence of foreign funding.

Within the HDI framework, the GDI highlights gender equality. Iraq's 2021 GDI of 0.934 (Conceição and et. al. 2022) demonstrates progress in closing the gender gap, like better female educational attainment. However, inequalities persist in economic opportunities, political participation, and social mobility. Violence against women also stayed steady.

Politically, the government and the parliament are controlled by militia-backed Shi'ite parties, who also have substantial influence on the judicial system. The government has ambitious plans for improving services, focusing mainly on roads, transportation, and electricity. At the same time, the government and the leading parties are actively intervening to shrink civic spaces such as universities and NGOs.

The current prime minister has announced that 2023 was the year of services, but 2024 is the year of development, and launched the new Iraq Development Fund (The Council of Ministers 2023). However, governmental and militias violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms continued to increase. 2023 marked the start of the institutionalization of such violations after being solitary practices of extremist groups. In February 2023, the Ministry of Interior started a campaign to arrest and prosecute social media influencers for '*indecent content*' using laws from before 2003 (Tzabiras 2023).

Later, in July 2023, an informal campaign was started against NGOs, accusing them of promoting an agenda that destroys the Iraqi family while referring to women's empowerment and gender equality. This campaign was followed by a draft amendment to the counter prostitution law (no. 8 for 1988) to include homosexuality. This initiative came "in line with the human instinct and human nature on which God created humans, male and female, and to preserve the entity of Iraqi society from moral decay and calls for sexual deviances that invaded the world, and because Iraqi legislation is free of deterrent punishment for acts of

homosexuality and those who promote it"¹⁵(Iraq's Parliament 2023) Then, governmental institutions issued directives to ban dealing with specific NGOs. Moreover, governmental gender and women empowerment unit's named and mandates changed to be around family.

2023 witnessed a considerable setback in the work on gender equality. Religiously extremist groups conducted a broad campaign that focused on demonizing gender topics, misrepresenting them as solely promoting LGBTQIA issues and accusing such initiatives of undermining Iraqi Islamic values. As a result, many NGOs were bullied legally, and the government canceled or changed the name of women empowerment departments at all ministries. The General Secretariat of The Council of Ministries (2023) substituted the term "gender equality" with "justice between the two sexes."

Therefore, it seems that the Iraqi government is steadily and gradually shrinking the space for civil society, including the NGOs, and tightening the fundamental freedoms, especially the personal and of speech. On the other hand, it works on gaining communal support through providing basic rights such as social security, employment, and services. All that process happens under the name of development; therefore, it looks like the government is bargaining 'development' for human rights and freedoms. This marks a serious step toward an authoritarian political system disguised as a collective democracy.

2.3.6. A landscape of the NGO sector in Iraq

Iraq has around 5,915 registered LNGOs and at least 200 INGO branches according to the most recent statistics by the federal government's NGO Directorate(2023). Meanwhile, the DNGO has suspended 409 registered NGOs, solved six, and refused registration of 1038 entities (NGO Directorate 2024).

¹⁵ Original text:

" جاء انسجاما مع الفطرة الإنسانية والطبيعة البشرية التي خلق الله الانسان عليها من ذكر وانثى وحفاظا على كيان المجتمع العراقي من الانحلال الخلقي ودعوات الشذوذ الجنسي التي غزت العالم ولخلو التشريعات العراقية من العقاب الرادع لافعال الشذوذ الجنسي ومن يروج لها."

Similarly, around 5,600 NGOs were registered in KRI, with 299 being new in 2021. Overlap of registration in the federal and KRI's DNGOs is common, especially for NGOs that operate in both areas, due to a lack of coordination between Baghdad and Erbil. However, most of these organizations are thought to be inactive and have little impact (Diener et al. 2022, p. 2).

LNGOs' top four registration categories are humanitarian aid, culture, sustainable development, and human rights (Alshamary and Maqsoud 2022, p. 4). However, it is common for LNGOs not to stick to their principal mandate; instead, they usually follow the trend and the donors' directions.

Regarding Geography, 1989 out of around 4000 LNGOs are registered in Baghdad, the capital (Alshamary and Maqsoud 2022, p. 5). Najaf has 320 entities, while Basra has 310 organizations. However, there is no data about the exact number of INGOs operating in Iraq since most of them are based in KRI because of the easier registration requirements and the better security. Furthermore, a significant number of INGOs operate in Iraq without official registration or office.

From a legal perspective, the Iraqi constitution, Article 39/1, guarantees the right to form associations. Article 45/1 affirms that "the State shall seek to strengthen the role of civil society institutions, and to support, develop and preserve their independence in a way that is consistent with peaceful means to achieve their legitimate goals, and this shall be regulated by law." Moreover, the law no. 12 for 2010 came to provide the legal coverage for NGO work in Iraq, including establishment, registration, and solvency.

Regarding governance, the federal DNGO is part of the General Secretariat for The Council of Ministers. It is the legally mandated institution to oversee and monitor all the NGOs' compliance in Iraq. Meanwhile, there is at least one department or unit at each ministry at the federal level, each directorate at the local levels, and the local government such as governorate

councils and governor offices. These departments and units are mainly for coordination and security aspects of the NGOs' activities with the respective institutions. Moreover, NGOs are also monitored by security entities such as intelligence, national security apparatus and advisory, ministry of interior, and PMF. Recently, overlap and paradoxical directives started to arise due to different trends of these actors.

The funding landscape for LNGOs shows both diversity of resources and deep disparities. Most of the organizations are tiny and self-financed through membership fees or member donations, particularly in the south and south-central regions; they heavily depend on the founders (Alshamary and Maqsoud 2022, p. 26). This pattern limits their growth, prevents its activities, and usually creates an unhealthy dependency on a few founders, usually partly volunteers. Therefore, it is common to see a large number of LNGOs get suspended because the founders lost interest and ceased their support.

These organizations lack the capacity to access international grants and perceive themselves as neglected (Alshamary and Maqsoud 2022, p. 26). Also, self-financed organizations struggle to gain recognition of INGOs despite seeking collaboration or capacity building. This limited access to international and local funding hinders Iraqi NGOs' overall development and impact.

The main source of funding for the few active LNGOs is still foreign as most organizations do not have any commercial projects due to legal restrictions. The LNGOs earn no revenue from their services or products and local companies do not usually contract them to provide training and consultations (Diener et al. 2022, p. 6). The Iraqi government has recently announced a fund for LNGOs and volunteer groups totaling five billion IQDs (around 3.2 million USD) for 2024. However, LNGOs believe these funds will be mainly tunneled to entities close to the government and ruling parties.

The relationship between the government and the NGOs is hazy and fluctuating. Most of the challenges arise from the fact that NGOs are independent and follow the authoritative directions of the government (Al-Bayati 2023, p. 8). Therefore, political parties and militias established NGOs and research centers to access funding and promote their ideologies (Al-Bayati 2023, p. 8). Additionally, an uncounted number of Human Rights Defenders and activists were legally bullied, detained, abducted, or forcibly missing due to voicing out critiques to the governmental entities or militias. For example, “the National Security Service also asked the NGO Directorate to provide a list of the names of all organizations that issued reports on alleged violations during the demonstrations, and then placed these organizations under additional surveillance” (Diener et al. 2022, p. 4).

For the foreign funding landscape, the US government is by far the primary donor to Iraq since the US war on Iraq in 2003 (Blanchard 2020; USAID 2020), followed by the European Union (European Commission 2023) and individual European countries such as The Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium. The allocation usually follows the donor’s Iraq strategy, which is a complex political process. The funds are then distributed directly to Iraqi governments, public institutes, private sectors, international and local NGOs, individuals, or indirectly through UN agencies, USAID, International NGOs, and international corporations.

Most active LNGOs operate reactively to the shifting funding priorities of donors due to a lack of strategic plans. This pattern is further worsened by a lack of well-defined democratic governance structures within most LNGOs (Diener et al. 2022, p. 5). Confusion regarding the distinct roles of administrative and governing bodies remains pervasive. Additionally, many organizations struggle to establish financial and human resource policies and implement clear internal rules and regulations. However, a few well-established LNGOs also strive to build the capacities of other smaller LNGOs.

In terms of economy, the NGO sector has relatively better employment opportunities,

especially in INGOs, that include better pay and rights and benefits than the public and private sectors and better rights and benefits than the private sector. The NGO sector also contributed to building needed capacities of local Iraqi communities, such as communication and negotiation skills, business development, and gender equality, leading to new initiatives in the private sector. The NGO training and employment also provided better space for individuals, especially women, to develop their capacities and influence inside their families and communities (Makki 2020).

3. THE CASE STUDY OF INEQUALITIES IN THE NGO SECTOR IN IRAQ

3.1. Methodology

This case study is empirical research of the key areas of inequalities in the NGO sector in Iraq for both individuals and organizations. I tried to test the research hypothesis and explore the research questions outlined in Chapter 1.2 using critical and analytical methods. The main framework for research analysis is the ECM introduced in chapter 2.2. Meanwhile, the case study is structured following the ECM's four themes: harmony, justice, security, and truth. The reason for choosing such a structure is that the researched inequalities are sustained and exerted using narratives. Therefore, it became necessary to understand and disassemble these narratives into themes linked to the organizations' and individuals' needs.

3.1.1. Data Collection and Participants

I used in-person semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method supported by available background information about the organization and observation. A semi-structured interview provides the structure to focus on the research interest and flexibility to follow up and further explore the points that arise during the interview. Moreover, it makes a good “use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important”(Brinkmann 2018, p. 1004). All the interviews were recorded and transcribed except for interviewee 15, upon his request.

Practically, the interview questions (Annex I) were structured in four main topics, the three inequalities aspects as identified in chapter 1.2: capacities, access to funds, and sustainability. Additionally, the interviews started by exploring the nature of existing partnerships. All the interview questions were meant to be conversation openers, but they relied on follow-up questions from the information the interviewees shared. Moreover, I used to study the organization from which I planned to interview a staff member, such as the fields of work,

current projects, and partnerships. I also supplied the interviews with a memo detailing my impressions and observations as a researcher during the interviews.

The studied population is NGO workers in Iraq. However, there are no statistics about the number of such workers, let alone their distribution and roles. Therefore, a flexible sampling strategy allows for selecting an insightful research group suitable for such a qualitative, in-depth analysis, which is necessary. Hence, I elected a Purposive Sampling strategy where the purpose of the study was central to selecting the sixteen research participants, allowing focus on those with extensive experience in the NGO sector (Punch 2012).

The data includes interviews with sixteen research participants who were carefully selected using the following criteria:

- Has at least a management role within their organization to ensure they understand the partnerships, projects, fundraising, and budgets. Senior management members are also included as they oversee the whole organization.
- Extensive experience in the Iraqi NGO sector, with at least five years of work in the country. This is to ensure excellent orientation with the Iraqi context.
- Field and non-managerial roles are excluded as they are usually in contact only with their managers. Therefore, they typically have no firsthand experience with partner NGOs.
- LNGO has active partnerships with INGOs, and vice-versa, within development projects.
- Gender balance is to ensure that the perspectives of men and women working in the field are included.
- UN agencies, governmental entities, and quasi-governmental organizations were excluded as they were out of the research scope.

Six of the sixteen participants are affiliated with INGOs, while the remaining ten are associated with LNGOs. In terms of nationality, four participants are international, whereas twelve are Iraqi nationals. Moreover, eleven participants are engaged in project management roles, and five hold senior management positions. The gender distribution is seven females and nine males.

The INGO participants come from five different organizations, including four internationals and two Iraqis, with four serving in project management roles. Conversely, the group from national NGOs comes from only three organizations and is comprised exclusively of Iraqi nationals. There are six males in this group, as opposed to four females; seven serve in project management roles.

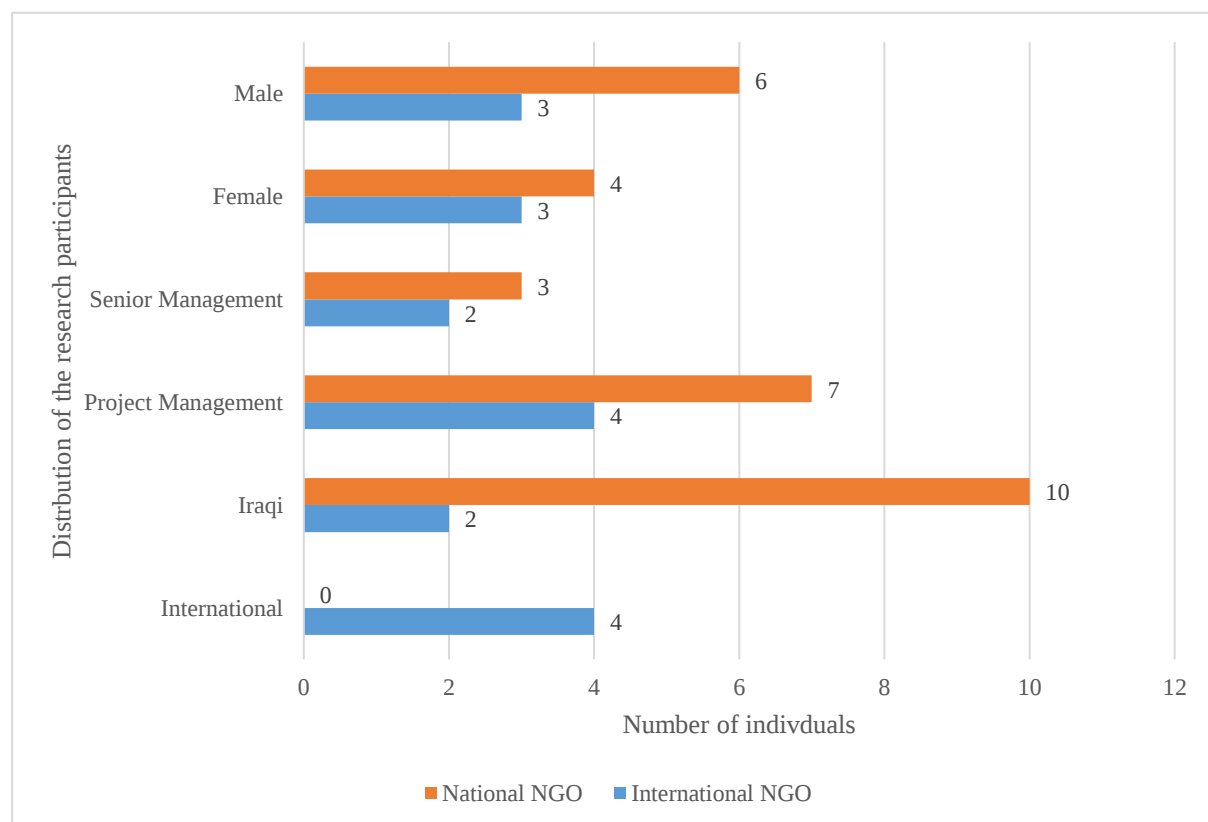


Figure 1 Distribution of research participants by association with either international or national NGOs, differentiated by sex, role, and nationality.



Figure 2 Distribution of research participants by management roles differentiated by sex, and nationality.

Here is a complete list of the research participants to show their backgrounds and provide a reference point for the quotations in the findings chapter.

<i>Interviewee #</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>NGO Type</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>NGO #</i>
01	Iraqi	Male	National	Senior Management	1
02	Iraqi	Male	National	Project Management	1
03	Iraqi	Male	National	Project Management	1
04	Iraqi	Female	National	Project Management	1
05	Iraqi	Female	National	Project Management	1
06	Iraqi	Male	National	Project Management	2
07	Iraqi	Male	National	Project Management	2
08	Iraqi	Female	National	Senior Management	2
09	Iraqi	Female	National	Project Management	2
10	Iraqi	Male	National	Senior Management	3
11	Iraqi	Female	International	Project Management	4
12	Iraqi	Male	International	Project Management	5
13	International	Female	International	Senior Management	5
14	International	Female	International	Project Management	6
15	International	Male	International	Project Management	7
16	International	Male	International	Senior Management	8

3.1.2. Data Analysis and Interpretation:

All the data analysis was done using MAXQDA 24Windows application. The initial data analysis phase started with the immersion process with the collected data. This involved multiple reviews of the transcribed interviews, complemented by revisiting the audio recordings whenever necessary. The aim was to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives and the larger picture of each interview.

Subsequently, the second step was crafting a hierarchical coding framework. The aim was to provide a systematic classification of the data. This framework was structured into four primary thematic categories based on the ECM: harmony, justice, security, and truth. Each category was further deepened into two sub-layers to allow for a multidimensional analysis. The guide for the development of coding layers was the research interest, coupled with insights from the immersion process.

Data was coded using a deductive approach, adhering to the pre-established hierarchical system. However, I also used inductive coding methods to ensure that the coding scheme encapsulated the full breadth of the data. This allowed for identifying and integrating emergent themes not initially identified in the coding system. The final coding system is in Annex II. Simultaneous to the coding process, I engaged in continuous memoing to synthesize the data. This involved cross-referencing coded material with observational notes and contextual background information.

The interpretive phase focused on analyzing the intersections and overlaps of the coded data. This technique uncovered deeper connections between segments to facilitate a more holistic understanding of the underlying themes. This step was critical in determining the significant pieces for quotation, ensuring that selected quotes authentically represent the data themes. The final step was to write the findings of this case study.

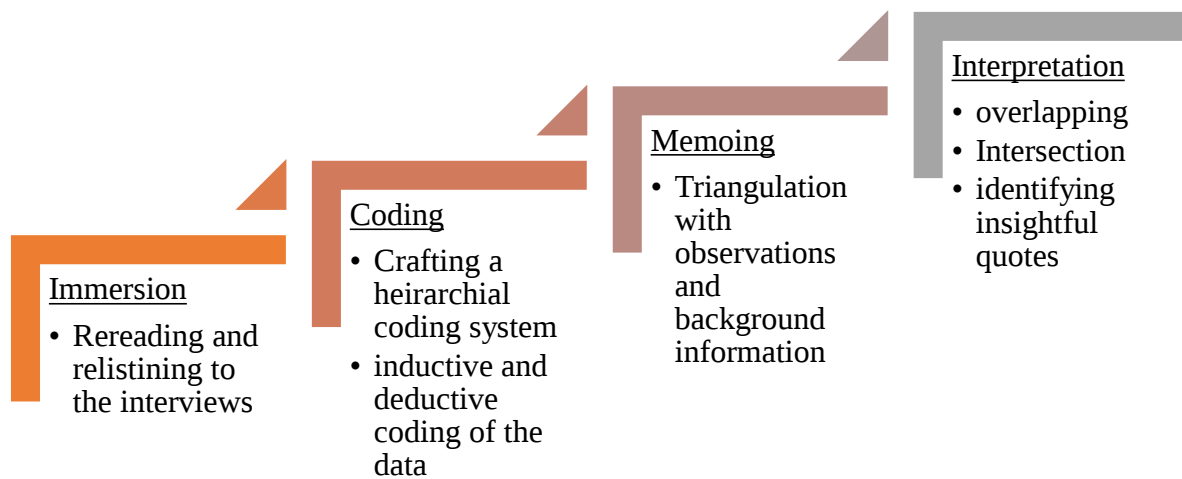


Figure 3 The data analysis process.

3.1.3. Challenges and Ethical Considerations

In conducting this research, I carefully navigated a range of ethical considerations and challenges that arose during the data collection and analysis stages and later planned the dissemination of findings. A foundational aspect of the study was obtaining informed consent from all participants. To this end, I employed both written forms and verbal confirmation to ensure participants were fully aware of the research's scope, their involvement, and right to withdraw at any time. This included consenting to the audio recording.

Moreover, I employed my pre-existing relationships with several participants to invite them to participate in this research. This awarded a level of trust that facilitated a richer, more open exchange of information. Despite this advantage, I tried to remain vigilant to the increased risk of oversight regarding any blind spots that might stem from shared knowledge and experiences. Another challenge was to balance the trust to share and the participants' personal sharing boundaries.

Then, to safeguard the identities of the participating individuals and organizations they are affiliated with, I anonymized them. Practically, I omitted the key identification characteristics, such as name, organization name, years of experience, and age. The aims are

to prevent any possible tracking and maintain the confidentiality of the research participants. Moreover, this anonymization avoids the need for bureaucratic approvals from some research participants from their organizations, which could inhibit certain aspects of the research. This measure was critical in ensuring the feasibility.

Related to that challenge is data security. I wiped the audio files of the interview recordings after the immersion phase. The transcription files' names are coded and kept on the MAXQDA server along with a local backup on my computer.

My position as an LNGO worker, which is part of the sector under study, excluded the possibility of maintaining neutrality or impartiality, let alone the fact that I believe they are impractical ideals. Recognizing this, I approached the research with the aim of inclusivity to represent diverse perspectives and experiences. Meanwhile, I admit that I purposefully focused on the perspective of Iraqis and LNGOs, as their voices are usually unheard due to the sector's hierarchy.

I also acknowledge the potential for negative consequences on my professional career within the NGO sector, particularly concerning any possible future engagements with international NGOs and UN agencies. I have received many verbal recommendations not to be 'too critical' of the INGOs and UN agencies when sharing my research idea. This awareness has made me sensitive to the level of detail to include in the findings. However, as an activist for equality between INGOs and LNGOs, I see this risk as demonstrating the power imbalance in this sector. Moreover, this follows principles of beneficence (doing good) and non-maleficence (avoiding harm) for both the researcher and research participants.

3.2. The Findings: Inequalities Between Local and International NGOs In Iraq

In this part, I focus on introducing the findings from the data analysis. The four peace families' themes are used to structure the main themes of the findings: Energetic Peace – Harmony, Moral Peace – Justice, Modern Peace – Security, and Postmodern Peaces – Truth. Meanwhile,

the fifth family, transrational peaces, is left to guide the conclusions chapter as it can bring a holistic perspective to the themes' findings.

3.2.1. Initial and General findings

The transcribed data set of 16 interviews totaled 64,816 words. After coding, 19% of the data was found irrelevant to the research questions. Therefore, this volume was excluded from the coding process and analysis. Meanwhile, the four themes of Harmony, Justice, Security, and Truth covered comparable amounts of the coded segments. Only the Truth theme covered a slightly larger amount of data. This indicates that the interviewees discussed aspects of the research problem with similar depth and interest. Figures 4 and 5 show the percentage and segment count of each theme.

A quick review of the interviews' sizes and durations showed that those at senior management levels shared almost double what those in project management roles shared. The average interview data size is 5,728 words compared to 3,288 words for the latter. A similar trend can be seen when comparing interviewees working for international NGOs (average 5,049 words) to those working for national NGOs (average 3,718 words).

These quantitative indicators may indicate higher field knowledge among senior managers and INGO workers. They can also refer to more confidence and comfort among those participants in sharing and participating in interviews. Meanwhile, it can also indicate fear and lack of extensive knowledge among respondents working at the project management level with LNGOs. For example, interviewee 07 tended initially to answer using generic and positive phrases. Then, after gaining trust, he started to share more critical statements.

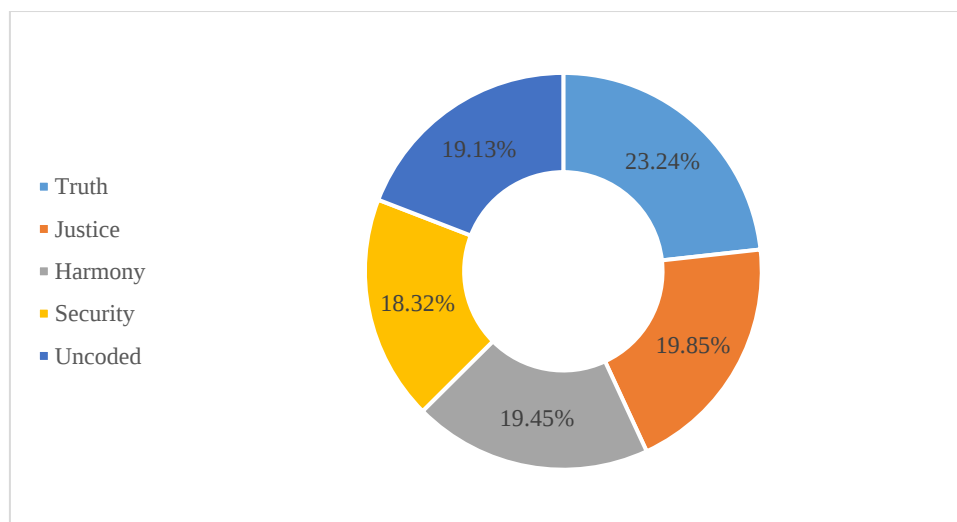


Figure 4 Percentage of coded segments per theme

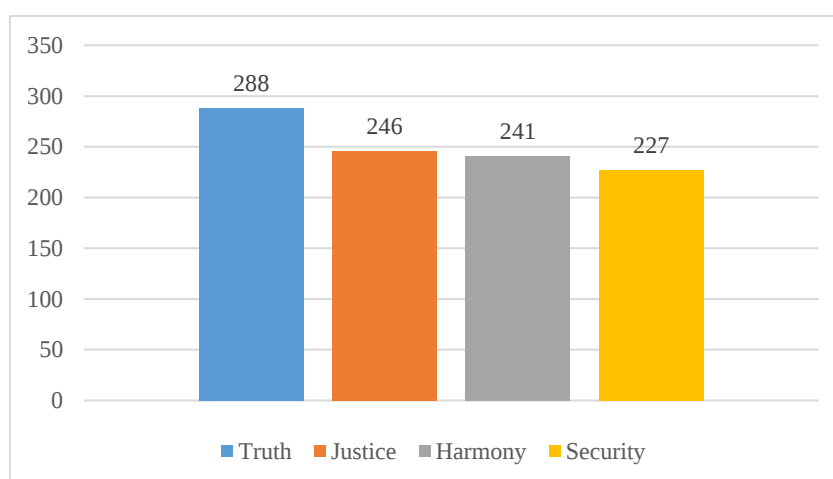


Figure 5 Number of coded segments per theme

More exciting trends can be seen when breaking the occurrence of the codes based on the NGO type with which the respondents are affiliated. INGO workers focused on narratives related to the Truth theme, such as questioning the reality of partnerships, addressing areas of discrimination, and doing harm. Meanwhile, LNGO workers had a balanced focus on the four themes. When comparing what LNGO and INGO covered, a disparity in focusing on the Harmony theme appears. This is manifested by more interest of LNGO workers in communication, transparency, and equal partnership over INGO workers.

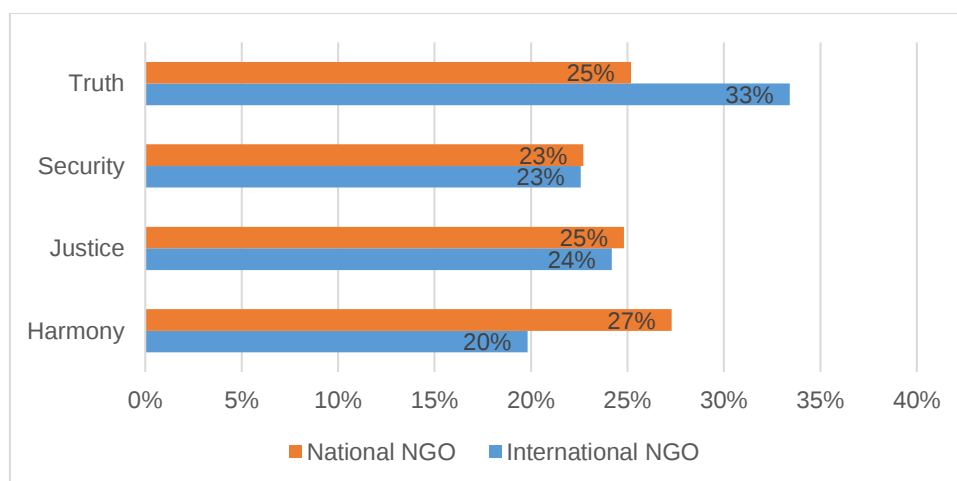


Figure 6 Coded segment coverage percents per NGO type

The main difference between interviewees in senior and project management roles is the focus of the second on Truth-related themes. Meanwhile, the senior staff showed a comparably higher interest in Security aspects, including sustainability, policies and structures and localization. This indicates an expected difference in interest in the daily practices contained in the Truth theme and the more strategic aspects.

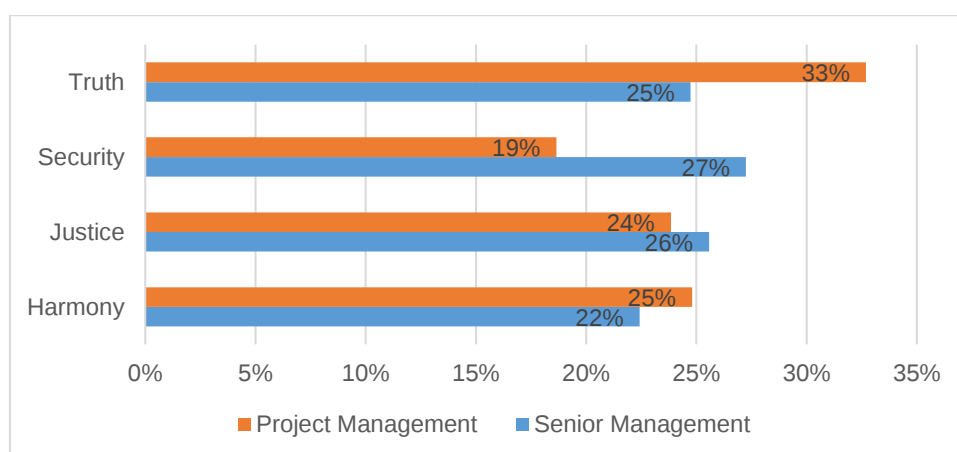


Figure 7 Coded segments coverage per interviewees' roles

Bringing the gender perspective, women demonstrated the highest interest in the Truth themes, surpassing all other themes by a relatively huge margin. Meanwhile, men showed balanced interest in the themes, while slightly less interest was in the Truth theme. This indicates that the interviewed women focused more on questioning the daily practices and lived realities, such as discrimination and doing harm.

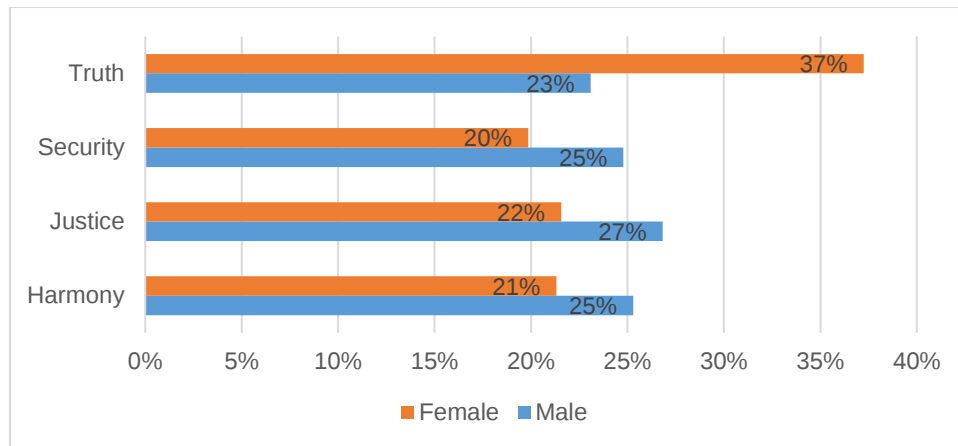


Figure 8 Coded segments coverage per interviewees' sex

3.2.2. Harmony – Partnership and Communication

In this part, I bring the perspectives of the Energetic Peace family to analyze the relationship between INGOs and LNGOs. It orbits around the theme of harmony. Both types of organizations are in direct and continuous contact in their daily lives. Therefore, examining this relationship using the lenses of communication and partnership is essential.

In the communication aspects, expected roles and responsibilities will be discussed, and how they lead to miscommunication and dependency. Mutual transparency is also a crucial communication principle, which can contribute to nepotism and corruption when hindered. Language barriers and gatekeeping of knowledge and access will also be discussed.

In the partnership patterns, hierarchy, and power imbalance are evident themes. I will discuss them using critical analysis. The resulting patriarchal power relations will also be explored along with the autonomy of LNGOs.

(Mis-)communication and (mis-)understanding

In this part, I use communication as a term to refer to a process beyond conveying factual information to include aspects of relationship, appeal, and self-revelation as per Schulz Von Thon's communication square (Dietrich 2013, p. 94). Moreover, the quotes from the interviews

are analyzed to add dimension to the need, especially regarding judgments that reveal unmet needs, according to Marshall Rosenberg (Dietrich 2013, p. 80) .

Moreover, I used Ruth Cohn's theme-centered-interaction model, I – We – Theme, (Dietrich 2013, p. 85). It reveals that there is usually a conflict between what the interviewees wanted to express as their opinions and beliefs, and what they think should introduce their organizations to me as a researcher.

Communication between INGOs and LNGOs usually reveals, establishes, and reinforces a power relationship. "In the context of development policies, a discourse free of domination is purely theoretical" (Dietrich 2013, p. 183). The INGOs usually have the money and are better connected to the source of that money, the donors, and have the power to interfere in the sphere of the LNGOs. Therefore, the communication challenges usually orbit around the appeal and relationship parts of the messages. In other words, misunderstanding usually happens around what the partners want from each other and how they see and define their relationship.

The initial critical finding from the interviews is the misunderstanding of roles and responsibilities – the relationship between INGOs and LNGOs. Interviewee 16 (2024) articulated this well: "In terms of communication, I won't say that there are challenges, but I think there is sometimes a misunderstanding [...] of the roles and responsibilities of the donor, or the INGO, and the LNGO as well." At this point, asking why such a misunderstanding exists is valid.

The hierarchical relationships between INGOs and LNGOs often lead to intimidation and silence. The INGO usually sets the roles and responsibilities while LNGOs become passive recipients. Interviewee 14 (2023) expressed, "We always wonder why you [LNGO worker] fear the foreign person? He does not hold a sword to your neck. Then why do not speak to

them? They [LNGO workers] fear to speak frankly¹⁶.” She pins down the culture of fear and silence from the foreigners among LNGO workers.

It is essential to explore the reasons for such an issue. I usually blame the lack of space to talk, discuss, and disagree freely and safely, which is the responsibility of the power holder, not the dominated. The LNGO workers she refers to are usually fearful for their organizations’ funding and sustainability. They are afraid of the perceived power the foreigner has within the relationship.

Therefore, when they do not understand something, they avoid asking so as not to be labeled as ignorant or, using the NGO terms, have low capacity. Hence, reputation concerns play an important role in causing LNGO workers to start policing each other. “If someone else talked to the foreigner, they would blame him for that, and say you have harmed our reputation”¹⁷ (Interviewee 11, 2023).

Moreover, this fear of being sincere with international counterparts also stems from a cultural norm regarding respect and hierarchy and maybe past experiences of consequences of miscommunication. also Hence, important messages may not be communicated effectively, leading to misunderstandings and inefficiencies. Which, in turn, reinforces the power imbalance.

Funding dynamics also significantly impact communication patterns between INGOs and LNGOs. Interviewee 16 highlighted the dependency of LNGOs on INGOs for funding, "For the [LNGOs] to be able to sustain themselves, they need funding, which is now mainly controlled by INGOs in the country." This dependency perpetuates a power imbalance where

¹⁶ The original text in Arabic is: " نحن نتساءل هم لماذا يخافون من الشخص الاجنبي هو لم يمسك سيف ويضعه على رقبتك فلماذا لا " "تتحدث معه، لذا هم لا يتحدثون بشكل صريح معهم

¹⁷ The original text in Arabic is: لو ان شخص اخر تحدث مع الشخص الاجنبي سوف يلومونه على ذلك ويقول لقد أسأت الى سمعتنا.

LNGOs have no option but to comply with the demands and conditions set by INGOs. Sometimes at the expense of their own priorities and strategies.

The lack of direct access to donors further complicates communication patterns. Interviewee 12 (2023) questioned, “Why cannot local organizations get grants from the donor itself, but there should be international organizations that get the money and then give it to local organizations?”¹⁸ This highlights the structural barriers that prevent LNGOs from establishing direct relationships with donors, forcing them to rely on international intermediaries. Such intermediaries often have their own agendas and priorities, which may not always align with the needs and goals of local organizations.

Furthermore, Interviewee 11 described her experience within her organization: "Iraqi staff, in particular, are very excluded from finding funds and writing proposals. This is also gatekeeping because they would think that if they lose us to another NGO, they will lose all the connections." To analyze this, I must dig deeper into causes and effects.

First, I sense additional reasons for such gatekeeping of critical skills and connections. Employing a colonization of the mind perspective can help to understand such motives where expats may feel that these skills can make Iraqi workers compete with them in their positions. The other reason might be paradoxical, but it can stem from the belief of the inferiority of Iraqi staff that they cannot handle such complex tasks. However, these are speculations suggested by the nature of the portrayed relationship. It is essential to mention that this is not a language barrier as the interviewee speaks and writes perfect English.

Second, this gatekeeping results in dependency that hinders the professional growth of local staff within INGOs. Moreover, the lack of participation of local staff in designing and

¹⁸ The original text in Arabic is: لماذا لا تستطيع المنظمات المحلية الحصول على المنح من المانح نفسه بل يجب ان تكون هناك منظمات دولية هي التي تحصل على منح من المال ثم تعطيها الى المنظمات المحلية?

writing project proposals surely results in poor connections to actual realities. The local staff are usually first-hand experienced with the conflict and the context in which they work and live. Skipping them can only result in weak conflict and context sensitivity.

Cultural differences and context sensitivity also present significant communication barriers. Interviewee 12 noted his experience in communicating with his counterparts at the INGO headquarters, “you have to be very careful to talk to them and not to share all the problems at once. You have to be precise in choosing what problems you will present to them. Sometimes, they also do not understand because they are not in the same context.”¹⁹ This shows that the fear of communicating with the international staff is a lived experience for LNGO workers and Iraqi staff within INGO.

Moreover, this quote highlights the difficulty LNGOs face when conveying local-specific issues to INGOs who might not fully grasp the details. For instance, issues related to gender and security are profoundly contextual and require a nuanced understanding that might be lost in translation when communicated to international staff who do not reside in Iraq or lack on-ground experience.

Furthermore, Interviewee 13 (2013) observed the burden imposed on the LNGOs by the mode of communication preferred by INGOs. “When it comes to knowing the field, the communities, access to the community, and so on, national organizations they know best. But because they cannot use their words or do not have enough time to actually sit in the office and write fancy emails and fancy proposals and reports, they are then seen at a loss.” This clearly shows that despite the deep understanding of local contexts, LNGOs are marginalized due to their perceived lack of formal communication skills.

¹⁹ The original text in Arabic is: يجب ان تكون حذر بشكل كبير للتحدث معهم وان لا تطرح عليهم كل المشاكل بل يجب ان تكون دقيق في اختيارائك للمشاكل التي ستعرضها عليهم واحيانا ايضا هم لا يفهمون عليك لانهم ليسوا في نفس السياق الذي انت فيه.

However, language barriers and the time needed to perform such communication activities are at play here. From my experience, LNGOs are usually blamed by their international counterparts for not being responsive to emails. Meanwhile, they oversee that there is no culture of emails in Iraq, the need to balance demanding field and office work and that even Iraqi staff who speak English put twice the effort and time to write.

Furthermore, language barriers are a complicated challenge in the communication between INGOs and LNGOs. As noted by Interviewee 13, "Language becomes another issue, and language is not only English, Arabic, and Kurdish, but also, do you know the donor lingo?" This stresses that the challenge extends beyond simple translation. It includes understanding the specific terminologies and abbreviations used by donors and INGOs. It is also crucial to mention that "the back donor language that the [INGO] use was usually created through the findings and the work of the larger INGOs around the world." (Interviewee 16)

Interviewee 10 (2022) provided an example of a lived reality. "One of the discriminations that exist is that the official language in Iraq is Arabic and Kurdish. But the donor comes to Iraq, we should communicate with them in English, and they only communicate with [us] in English."²⁰ By the donor, he refers mainly to INGOs. He also highlights that she finds herself forced to have a translator, while the donors and INGOs do not bother to hire translators and prefer to communicate in English.

This emphasizes the frustration LNGOs face when required to communicate in English. It might not be their first or second language while dealing with complex funding applications and reporting requirements. This language barrier can lead to misunderstandings and

²⁰ The original text in Arabic is:

أحد هذا التمييز الموجود هو أن اللغة الرسمية في العراق هي عربي و كردي لكن ال donor يأتون للعراق يجب ان نتواصل معه باللغة الانجليزية ولا يتواصل معك الا بالإنجليزية.

misinterpretations. It ultimately affects the relationship between organizations, let alone the projects.

Moreover, this makes certain leadership positions within LNGOs exclusive to those with good English command. It signals a structural block to most LNGOs staff's career development. Interviewee 02 (2022) highlights this issue, stating, "Only the Executive Director and one or two other employees have access [to the donor], while the rest do not have such access, and this can pose a risk to the organization in the future."²¹

Conflicting organizational policies and procedures add another layer of complexity to INGO-LNGO communication. Interviewee 16 noted, "A finance individual has been working with the policies of IRC²² for five years. For example, he comes in and has to follow a new policy for the next three years. We see that there is a gap of understanding and a gap of following." The constant adaptation required from local staff to align with varying policies from different INGOs is straining.

These procedural misalignments often lead to incompetence and frustration on both sides caused by incongruent communication. For example, an LNGO might struggle with meeting the reporting requirements of multiple INGOs, each with its own set of rules and expectations. This drains resources and diverts focus from the actual project implementation to administrative compliance. Interviewee 16 further elaborated, "Our systems are very different. Our policies are different than in other NGOs they used to. So, they need to come and understand us a bit better and how much they can work with us." This also indicates that INGOs need to be more flexible to allow LNGOs to build and follow their own policies and procedures.

²¹ Original text in Arabic is: فقط المدير التنفيذي و ١ أو ٢ من الموظفين يستطيعون الوصول للمتاح اما البقية ليس لديهم وصول وهذا ممكن ان يشكل خطر على المنظمة في المستقبل

²² IRC is acronym of the International Relief Committee.

In conclusion, miscommunication and misunderstanding are common among international and local NGOs. They come due to language barriers, unexpressed expectations, different organizational environments and structures, and knowledge and sensitivity of the local contexts. The communication patterns also reflect the relationship between the two types of NGOs. They frequently portray the dominance of INGOs and the gatekeeping of direct communication with the donor entities. Furthermore, LNGOs are closer to their communities, and their programs can benefit from direct relationships with donors.

Transparency, corruption, and nepotism

Transparency within the relationships between INGOs and LNGOs is essential to examine. The lack of transparency is circularly linked to corruption and nepotism. The first dimension is the lack of mutuality between the INGOs and LNGOs. The donor and the INGOs almost always conduct a due diligence process for new local partners. The process involves going through the new partner's financial and management policies, systems, and procedures. It also commonly includes reviewing the past three years' audited accounts and relevant projects' budgets and reports. Meanwhile, neither the donors nor the INGO share such information about themselves. The final reviews, evaluations, and audits also include fundamentally similar practices.

Interviewee 01 (2022) pins down the double standard around transparency and the lack of mutuality. He rhetorically asked, "As a local organization, I request the government to be transparent, but how much can I make the foreign organization transparent? And will they accept being transparent with me?"²³ This also indicates that requirements' enforcement is a one-way practice that follows the hierarchies of the relationship.

²³ The original Arabic text is: كمنظمة محلية اطلب من الحكومة ان تكون شفافة معي كم لدي من قدرة بأن اجعل المنظمة الاجنبية شفافة معي وهل ستسمح المنظمة الأجنبية بأن تكون شفافة معي؟

Meanwhile, Interviewee 12 emphasizes that INGOs' lack of complete transparency towards their local partners leads to a sense of injustice. He mentions that “there’s injustice [in consortiums]. International organizations do not fully disclose grant details to local organizations.²⁴” This also indicates poor collaboration to design and agree on the project details. Also, interviewee 04 (2022) confirmed that “We share our policy with the rest of the organizations, [...] but they honestly do not share their policies with us.²⁵”

This lack of transparency can also be motivated by gatekeeping essential skills and information from the LNGO. One common practice in this domain is not sharing the full project documents, such as budgets and proposals, with the local partners. The reason for such denial of access to information is usually linked to fears related to funding, such as having direct contact between the LNGO and the donor. Another reason is to avoid letting the LNGO know the scale of salaries of the INGO staff, which usually creates a sense of injustice due to the lack of equal pay. In extreme cases, such practices allow higher control over the LNGO, and make them implement activities beyond what is shared with the donor.

On the other hand, the LNGO workers also gatekeep their relationship with local stakeholders, especially governmental officials. Interviewee 11 notes that local coordinators often withhold information and links to maintain their perceived power source within the partnership with INGOs. This shows that cautiousness is mutually dominant within such partnerships.

Shady operations can facilitate corrupt practices and aid nepotism. Interviewee 13 points out that the system's complexity and the lack of proper checks enable some organizations to pass audits without genuinely adhering to policies. She highlights the disparity where some

²⁴ هناك غبن (في التحالفات) حيث المنظمات الدولية لا تكون شفافة بشكل كامل مع المنظمات المحلية

²⁵ نحن نقوم بمشاركة سياساتنا مع بقية المنظمات (...) لكن هم بصراحة لا يشاركون سياساتهم معنا.

organizations excel in passing financial audits merely because they understand the system better. Meanwhile, smaller NGOs and those focused on implementation face considerable audit problems. This ability to meet policy requirements without actual implementation can mask corrupt practices. She asks, "Are they really implementing it? Who's checking that? Nobody is."

Interviewee 14 states that funds can be misused without adequate oversight, leading to poor quality implementation. "They need to monitor where the funds are going and the quality of execution."²⁶ Interviewee 12 also notes that local power dynamics complicate the problem. Threats and undue influences create an environment where transparency is sacrificed for security in the best cases or personal gain in the worst. "The international team is prone to pressure [...]. Sometimes, another international or local organization offers a percentage, a salary, or opportunities in exchange of funds. [...] but if you discover a violation within their work [...] you will get threatened."²⁷

Moreover, Interviewee 09 (2023) provides a concrete example of how a lack of transparency in salary agreements leads to exploitation. Local employees are forced to sign contracts for inflated salaries while receiving much less, the difference pocketed by corrupt managers or simply as a saving for the organization. She states:

"In some organizations, and what happened with my sister in particular. Let us assume her salary is USD 1200. They do not give her all this salary and make her sign a contract to be shared with the donor for this salary of USD 1200. However, internally, she signed a contract of USD 600 or USD 700. Honestly, it is also possible that the project manager and the organization sign these higher contracts instead of the employee. The reason is that making the employee sign two contracts with different salaries is not logical. Meanwhile, some people defend the organization and hide such information. At the same time, other people object to such behavior. Therefore, the

²⁶ The original Arabic text is: أنهم بحاجة إلى أن تكون هناك رقابة على الأموال إلى أين تذهب، ثانيا جودة التنفيذ

²⁷ The original Arabic text is: الفريق الدولي هو معرض للكثير من الضغوطات (...) ففي بعض الاحيان مثلا تأتيك عروض من المنظمات المحلية او الدولية بان تعطيهم مشاريع معينة ونعطيك نحن نسبة معينة من هذه الاموال ونعطيك راتب او نفث لك فرص. (...) إذا فرضا اكتشفت اي انتهاك في هذا العمل (..) سوف تتعرض للتهديد

organization is not confident that this employee will react positively if you take part of their salary. Thus, they make the employee sign the salary they want to give her. At the same time, they sign a contract to send to the donor. The [local] organization does this for the sake of sustainability and preservation of the organization. They also believe that this employee's work should be partly voluntary, or he must donate part of their money to the organization to maintain its sustainability. [...] Therefore, employees are forced to pay part of their salary.²⁸

This practice is, unfortunately, common within the Iraqi NGOs. Therefore, it is vital to understand it more deeply. There are many factors and possibilities at play here. The first is possible corrupt directors and managers who commit such misconduct for personal gain. The second, and more subtle, is the lack of funding beyond the exact project activities and periods. Therefore, many LNGOs tend to save part of the employees' salaries to retain core staff and cover indirect costs. It is also one of the harmful effects of INGOs denial of the INGOs' indirect costs from the projects. Third, the fact that some NGOs still use cash for the salaries gives room for such manipulations. However, this is becoming less common within organizations that do bank transactions for their employees' salaries.

The issues of favoritism and nepotism are evident on individual and organizational levels. For individual employees who are "friends with the country director, [they] know it's smooth sailing for them regardless of performance" (interviewee 13). Nepotism also starts at the employment and contracting stages. For example, a UN agency I know once appointed a new country director. After a few months, that agency recruited new employees from the same

²⁸ The original text in Arabic is:

ببعض المنظمات وما حدث مع اختي بالذات لنفرض ان راتبها هو 1200 دولار انا لا اعطيها كل هذا الراتب واجعلها توقع على عقد امام المانح لمقدار هذا الراتب 1200 دولار، لكن داخليا العقد الحقيقي الذي قامت بالتوقيع عليه هو 600 أو 700 دولار او للأمانة من الممكن ان يقوم هو مدير المشروع والمنظمة بالتوقيع على هذه العقود بدلا من الموظف ان يوقع بنفسه لأنه ليس من المنطقي ان يقوم بجعل الموظف يعني وقع على عقدين برواتب مختلفة وهناك اشخاص من الممكن ان تدافع عن المنظمة وتخبي هكذا معلومات لكن بنفس الوقت هناك اشخاص اخرين سوف يعترضون على هكذا تصرف والمنظمة ليس لديها ثقة كامله بان هذا الموظف اذا اخذت جزء من راتبه سوف يكون رد فعله ايجابي هي لا تعلم اساسا ما هو رد فعله لذا بالتالي انا اجعله يوقع على الراتب الذي اريد ان اعطيه له مثلا 500 دولار وفي نفس الوقت اذهب ووقع بنفسه نفس التوقيع على الراتب الحقيقي وارسله للمانح وهو يقوم بذلك من باب الاستدامة والمحافظة على المنظمة او هو يفكر بان عمل هذا الموظف يجب ان يكون جزء منه بشكل تطوعي او يجب ان يتبرع بجزء من امواله والمنظمة لأنه يجب ان تحافظ على استدامتها والموظف هنا هو مجبور على ان يأتي ويدفع جزء من راتبه.

nationality as the new director. He was then expelled for corruption. Another example is contracting the same consultants repeatedly for various tasks.

On an organizational level, favoritism is mainly about access to funds. Interviewee 10 points out that political affiliations and nationality dictate donor control over some financing processes. "Funding is managed in invisible ways. For example, if UNDP calls for applications for a project funded by a French donor, the European Union, or USAID. Then, I need to partner with a French or American partner to access the funding."²⁹ In fact, it seems that it is a donor policy to favor their national NGOs that work in Iraq over other nationalities and Iraqi NGOs.

Meanwhile, Interviewee 13 further underscores how networking and personal relationships may outweigh the weight of project proposals. She states that access to funding is more about "whether your country director knows their country director," which clearly indicates nepotism overshadowing transparency.

However, I must push back on this argument. It is prevalent that funding follows favoritism of INGOs to specific LNGOs due to good direct relationships, results, or even mutual corruption. However, I noticed this is mostly the case in humanitarian and emergency response projects since they are goods- and cash-based. Moreover, positive relations with the donors and intermediate INGOs can bring funding, but sustaining that funding for more projects is another story. High effectiveness and efficiency should be proved, and clean audits and robust internal controls are required.

Interviewee 10 sheds light on an overlooked aspect of favoritism in funding. Most INGOs and UN agencies are required by their policies and donors to go through public bids at a certain threshold. However, "When they announce a certain [call for] proposal, I sit with my

²⁹ The original Arabic text is:

لا يزال التمويل مسير بطريقة غير مرئية بمعنى عندما يكون هناك إعلان مشروع من UNDP فيه ممول فرنسي أو مثلا الاتحاد الأوروبي أو USAID ، أنا هنا يجب افكر بشريك فرنسي أو أمريكي كي ادخل معه لذا بالنتيجة الشريك سوف يأخذ حصة الأسد من هذا التمويل

teammates who write it and tell them not to submit. They ask me why. I tell them this must go to a specific person.³⁰” Therefore, this creates a lack of trust and generalizes a stigma of corruption over the civil society. Moreover, NGOs that do not have such information about these practices would spend time, effort, and money developing proposals that are already deemed to be rejected.

Moreover, it is crucial to mention that LNGOs are prone to corruption and nepotism within their processes. Interviewee 07 (2022) states, “Not all civil society organizations are independent, but some of them are affiliated with political parties or currents. These organizations either aim to achieve gains or to tarnish the remaining organizations' reputations.³¹” This fundamental challenge should be recognized and addressed in the funding mechanisms and background checks. However, it should not be a justification for coercion and patriarchal patronage by INGOs over LNOGs. It is also essential to understand that NGOs are part of the Iraqi society and system. The perception of corruption is very high, whether it is actual or perceived. Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index is evidence of that, ranking Iraq 154 out of 180 countries (2022) .

In conclusion, the lack of transparency strongly increases nepotism and corruption, and vice-versa. Therefore, enhancing transparency is one essential step to mitigate corruption and nepotism. Meanwhile, this quest for transparency should not be used as a policing tool of INGOs over LNGOs but rather as a mutual commitment. Hence, INGOs and LNGOs must adopt transparent practices and ensure all partners have access to the same information. The

³⁰ The original Arabic text is:

عندما يعلنون عن proposal معين أجلس مع زملائي في الفريق الذين يكتبونه وأقول لهم لا تقدموه بسألوني لماذا أقول لهم هذا يجب ان يخرج للشخص الفلاني

³¹ The original text in Arabic is:

ليس كل منظمات المجتمع المدني مستقلة، بل نسبة منها هي تابعة لأحزاب أو جهات سياسية أو تيارات، هذه المنظمات لتحقيق مكاسب أو ربما هي موجودة كي تشوه سمعة المنظمات الباقية

financial audits and policy implementations should also genuinely reflect and embody ethical standards.

Partnerships, power imbalances, and hierarchies

The relationship between INGOs and LNGOs in Iraq is characterized by significant power imbalances and rigid hierarchies, as revealed in the above communication part. These differences impact decision-making, operations, funding, and the overall efficacy of the NGO's work. Here, I explore the nature and implications of these power imbalances and how they contribute to creating hierarchies.

A primary aspect of power imbalance is the control of INGOs over funding and decision-making processes. Interviewee 13 highlights that INGOs often introduce themselves and act as donors rather than fostering equal partnerships. "From my observation, I know that INGOs pretend to be donors when they are not. By partnership, they do not mean equal partnership. They mean like a power imbalance where they are the donor or the dictator sometimes." Interviewee 09 confirms that "the local organization always feels that it should implement what the international organization tells without any talk or discussion because they are the commanders. They give funding [...] that if you discuss them, they will withdraw it at any moment."³²

This, in turn, creates dependencies where LNGOs feel fearful and required to accommodate to the INGOs' demands to secure even minimal funding. Interviewee 13 also notes, "National NGOs eventually are also dependent on INGO so that they will agree to

³² The original text in Arabic: دائما تشعر المنظمة المحلية بان المنظمة الدولية يجب ان تنفذ كلامها دون اي كلام او نقاش لأنها هي الامر الناهي لأنها من تعطينا التمويل وهم الجهة المسؤولة التي اذا قمت بمناقشتهم سوف يسحبون التمويل باي لحظه

anything. Getting peanuts is better than getting nothing at all, rather than standing for their rights.”

The other demonstration of power imbalance is the retention of indirect costs by the INGO headquarters. The indirect costs cover the NGO’s non-allocable and running costs by NGOs ranging from 7% to as high as 40%. Despite most or all of the programmatic work is executed by LNGOs and local offices of INGOs, the INGOs’ headquarters often retain this portion of the budget. Interviewee 13 demonstrates that "all the programmatic everything is being done in-country by the NGO, but headquarters retains the indirect cost." Preventing LNGOs from indirect costs is usually illegal by some donors and certainly unethical as it is a shared right of both types of NGOs and the adverse effects on local nonprofits.

Moreover, as Interviewee 12 points out, there is a perception that INGOs capture and misuse parts of funds allocated for local operations. He mentions, "Unfortunately, international organizations consider this percentage as their personal gain and put it in their pockets because there is no monitoring by the donor."³³ This highlights a lack of transparency and accountability in the financial practices of INGOs. This raises mistrust and anger among LNGOs towards their international partners. However, I will discuss indirect costs in depth in the security chapter.

Decision-making processes further prove the power imbalances between INGOs and LNGOs. While INGOs often promise cooperative and equal relationships, the reality is usually different. Interviewee 12 explains that despite such assurances, the ultimate decision-making

³³ The original text in Arabic: مع الاسف المنظمات الدولية تعتبر هذه النسبة هي لها بشكل شخصي ويضعونها في جيوبهم لأنه ليس هناك اي متابعه من قبل المانح حول هذه النسبة

power is with the INGOs. "You will hear from many international organizations that they will work with you equally, but in the end, they are the only decision-makers."³⁴

Interviewee 09 echoes and deeply explores such power imbalances, given that she worked with INGOs and then shifted to LNGOs. She stated that INGOs' approach with employees is often directive, while the LNGOs are more consultative. She notes that "international organizations order the employees to carry out their requests, while the local organization tries to understand why they want to do so [...] always the foreigner gives the order that we must implement"³⁵. This highlights that such a dynamic is a lived culture within INGOs. Then, the culture of commanding rather than creating and reaching decisions also finds its way to the partnerships.

Meanwhile, Interviewee 11 shed light on the sense of superiority INGOs induce in their staff. "I was told, like, we were the masters of the world, we are international. We work with expats and then work with locals." Therefore, she "expected it would be a downgrade" for her to work for an LNGO coming from INGO.

Interviewee 14 highlights disparities among INGOs' staff, noting that individuals who excel within INGOs can become targets for suppression. "There will be a threat of power, and they will silence him if space is unsafe. Therefore, power imbalance comes to the favor of the strong, not the weak"³⁶. This suggests that the power held by expatriates in INGOs has personal consequences for local staff, as well as affects organizational dynamics.

Furthermore, Interviewee 16 describes that "Other INGOs take on the full responsibility of the program and have local NGOs work, as you know, quote quote, it is a bit of a shame,

³⁴ The original text in Arabic: ستسمع بشكل كثير من المنظمات الدولية بانهم سيقومون بالعمل معك بشكل متوازي وتكون العلاقة جدا متوازية لكن يبقى في النهاية هو فقط صاحب القرار

³⁵ The original text in Arabic: المنظمات الدولية تامر الموظفين العاملين بتنفيذ طلباتهم لكن المنظمة المحلية تحاول ان تفهمك لماذا يريدون ودائما يجب ان يقوم الاجنبي بالأمر ونحن ننفذ [...] القيام بذلك

³⁶ The original text in Arabic: سيحدث هناك تهديد بالقوة ويقومون بأسكاته اذا كانت المساحة غير آمنة لذا عدم توازن القوى تأتي من مصلحة القوي وليس الضعيف

but as foot soldiers.” In such relationships the INGO is responsible to the donor by reporting and management. At the same time, the LNGO works to implement all the activities and faces all the local risks. This dynamic diminishes LNGOs' potential contributions. It also reinforces a hierarchical relationship that prioritizes the interests of INGOs over the needs and expertise of local organizations.

Serious efforts are needed from donors, INGOs, and LNGOs to redefine the nature of these imbalanced partnerships. One critical step is running mechanisms that promote accountability and transparency in the financial practices of INGOs. As Interviewee 12 suggests, donors need better monitoring and oversight to ensure that funds are used appropriately and benefit the intended recipients.

Power imbalances in the relationships between INGOs and LNGOs usually translate into strict hierarchies with patriarchal structures and dynamics. These hierarchies influence interactions, including decision-making processes, grant management, and operations. In this part, I examine the nature and implications of these structures.

The hierarchical nature of INGO-LNGO relationships is mainly visible in controlling policies and compliance requirements. Interviewee 16 highlights how INGOs impose their policies on local partners. The reason is the perceived inadequacies in the LNGOs' management systems. "Our policy dominates the local partner's policy because it's identified that a local partner's policy in terms of finance is not strong enough to cover the compliance part of donor requirements or audit requirements." Such imposition is constantly introduced as a form of capacity building of LNGOs. However, this practice forces LNGOs to adapt continually to multiple donor and INGO policies, which are sometimes different and conflicting. Therefore, it prevents LNGOs from organically developing and implementing policies that fit their needs.

One crucial consequence of this practice is reinforcing dependency by the need to align with the ever-changing requirements of different donors. Interviewee 16 underscores the resulting frustration: "This creates problems for the local partners because they have to adapt to multi-donor financial policies, keeping them in a constant state of adaptation, unable to develop a financial policy they can independently follow."

This hierarchical structure includes the dominance of international staff over Iraqi employees within an INGO. Interviewee 11 describes an incident where her international superior overrode an invitation to her. "An invitation was directed to me from the American ambassador in Baghdad. But the head of the office, an expat staff from the US, removed my name and put his own". Such practices undermine the local staff's professional growth and networks and demonstrate nationality-based hierarchy and misuse of power.

Interviewee 11's experience also reflects gendered exclusion. She also describes being forced by her superior to draft a letter of gratitude on his behalf that he sent to the event host. This also includes patriarchal practices where senior, often male, staff dominate and control interactions with high-level stakeholders. He also seems less skilled or willing to put effort in following up after the meeting.

Moreover, Interviewee 12 points out that local organizations often perceive themselves as mere contractors. They execute tasks assigned by INGOs without a sense of ownership or the power to decide. "[LNGOs] consider themselves executive partners, like contractors, where a company comes and tells them to do this and that for the following fees"³⁷. This perception is reinforced by the hierarchical structures between the INGOs and LNGOs, where decisions are centralized and top-down.

³⁷ Original text in Arabic: انهم يعتبرون انفسهم شريك تنفيذي يعتبرون انفسهم كشركه مقاولات تأتيهم الشركة الفلانية تقول لهم هذه هي الاجور وقوموا بعمل كذا وكذا

Limiting LNGOs to mere executors rather than equal partners limits their ability to contribute to the project's design. This also entails the exclusion of local voices in key decision-making processes, which illustrates patriarchal practices fatherly. Interviewee 01 elaborates that “the local organization [...] does not have ownership of the project and does not develop it with the international organization. They merely execute what the international organization has written. Therefore, they become contractors, not partners³⁸”

The perception of LNGOs as mere contractors or implementers rather than equal partners perpetuates a cycle of dependency and disempowerment. Interviewee 12 describes how local organizations are reluctant to challenge INGOs or negotiate for better terms due to fear of losing funding. "Local organizations are afraid to open this discussion with international organizations because they fear losing the grant," they explain. This fear inhibits LNGOs from advocating for their interests and contributes to the perpetuation of hierarchical and patriarchal dynamics.

These patriarchal practices and dynamics also hinder the capacity-building and empowerment of local organizations. As Interviewee 01 further notes, many INGOs operate independently without building local capacity or creating a culture of participation. Moreover, INGOs create an authoritarian culture within the Iraqi NGO sector. He explains:

“Some international organizations work alone, so they do not build capacity or a culture of participation. The majority or all of the people who came out of international organizations and started their local organizations built them in an arrogant and patriarchal way. The employees do not have space or freedom available to make decisions. Therefore, this culture was taken from

³⁸ Original text in Arabic: لمنظمة المحلية ليس لديها ملكية بالمشروع ولم تعمل بالمشروع معها وبالتالي هي تنفذ ما كتبه المنظمة الأجنبية وبالتالي هي فعلياً تتحول إلى جهة تنفيذية أكثر مما هي جهة شراكة،

the foreign organization. This culture does not build a system with real participation in making decisions.³⁹”

The hierarchical dominance of INGOs often results in a lack of contextual understanding and responsiveness to local needs. Interviewee 06 (2022) stresses that INGOs frequently fail to grasp the realities of working in Iraq, leading to unrealistic demands and expectations. "They don't read the Iraqi context and the work inside Iraq correctly. They also do not know the extent of the difficulties we face. Therefore, they ask for a more significant effort, but we are really making a considerable effort to deal with the work and the context's obstacles and risks.⁴⁰" This lack of contextual understanding eventually leads to interventions that do not address the root causes of issues nor align with the local context. Moreover, the tension between INGOs and LNGOs usually stems from such unmatched perspectives.

Furthermore, the expressed feeling of poor appreciation of the challenges faced and efforts put in by LNGOs results in dissatisfaction on both sides. The LNGO staff usually feel insufficient, unheard of, and considered inefficient. Meanwhile, their international counterparts typically feel they must put more effort into 'guiding' and 'supporting' their local partner. Therefore, tensions arise, and stereotypes deepen due to such discrepancies in understanding.

One aspect of these tensions is that local organizations and individuals push back against hierarchical and patriarchal practices. Interviewee 09 shares her frustration with the assumption that expatriates possess superior knowledge and expertise. "The foreigner is not from this region and does not know everything to come and write a project plan by themselves, without consulting us,⁴¹" she asserts. This is a common practice by INGOs, where the project

³⁹ Original text in Arabic: بعض المنظمات الأجنبية تعمل بمفردها لذا بالتالي لا تبني قدرات ولا ثقافة مشاركة، لأن غالبية الناس التي خرجت من المنظمات الأجنبية قاموا بعمل منظماتهم المحلية بطريقة فورية وأبوية وليس بها سلطة متاحة لاتخاذ القرار ولا مساحة الحرية متاحة. لذا هذه الثقافة تم اخذها من المنظمة الأجنبية وهذه الثقافة لم يبني بها نظام به مشاركة حقيقية لاتخاذ القرار

⁴⁰ انهم لا يقرأون الشارع العراقي والعمل داخل العراق بصورة صحيحة ولا يعلمون مدى الصعوبات لذا هم يطالبون بجهد اكبر لكن نحن فعلا نبذل جهد كبير لكن هذه العوائق و المؤثرات داخل العمل و في الشارع تحدث بكثرة

⁴¹ The original Arabic text is: والاجنبي هو ليس من هذه المنطقة ويعرف كل شيء كي يأتي ويقوم بكتابه خطه مشروع بنفسه ويعمل على اساسه بدون ان يكون لدي رأي

planning and development teams are made up of international persons (usually from the US or Europe). It takes time for them to get oriented with the local context. However, most of them lack firsthand experiences of the Iraqi context. Therefore, projects rely on inputs from local stakeholders and reduced to match secondary data sources such as research and reports. It is crucial to flag that such secondary sources are few, and do not capture the full complexity of the local dynamics.

There are efforts to adopt more inclusive and participatory practices from the INGOs side. These efforts include building capacities and facilitating the forming of consortiums among local organizations to secure funding. However, the INGO is usually the leader of such consortiums and has the final say and control in the distribution of funding of the LNGO partners. Moreover, the established culture of INGO-leading grants and consortiums is so profound that many LNGOs refuse to form consortiums led by them, as Interviewee 14 indicated. Also, interviewee 16 highlights that “a lot of the local organizations tend to wait and have the INGO take the lead.”

Moreover, some expatriate staff recognize and challenge these hierarchical practices. They also advocate for the inclusion and recognition of local staff. Interviewee 11, who is a local staff member at INGO, recounted that an expatriate staff member refused to take her place at an important event, insisting that the invitation was personally directed to her. Such acts of solidarity and advocacy are crucial in challenging and dismantling patriarchal structures within INGOs.

At this point, it is critical to explore how to address the hierarchical and patriarchal dynamics in INGO-LNGO relationships. First, deliberate and sustained efforts are required to promote equitable and inclusive partnerships. This is the responsibility of the donors and INGOs, mainly as power holders in these relationships. Second, it also requires the LNGOs to voice their concerns and needs and actively advocate for meaningful changes in the power

dynamics. The approaches can include building genuine collaborations where the added value of each partner is well understood and appreciated. Decentralizing decision-making and giving more autonomy and responsibility to LNGOs is also fundamental. Additionally, the INGO staff must recognize the value and expertise of local organizations and staff.

To address the dominance of INGOs' policies over the LNGOs', it is critical to ensure that financial policies are co-created with local partners. Such a step can lead to the development of robust and contextually relevant systems. Interviewee 16 suggests moving away from imposing external policies to supporting the development of local frameworks can enhance the autonomy and capacity of LNGOs. This involves INGOs providing the necessary resources and support for LNGOs to develop their own financial policies that meet donor requirements. This will also distract LNGOs from different and even conflicting policies of various INGOs, donors, and UN agencies.

Additionally, INGOs must proactively work to dismantle patriarchal structures by promoting gender equity within their partnerships. This involves recognizing and valuing the contributions of all staff, providing opportunities for professional growth, and ensuring that decision-making processes are inclusive. Interviewee 12 emphasizes that "the hierarchical structure of local organizations, where decisions are concentrated at the top, limits strategic growth and flexibility,"⁴². Notably, most of the LNGOs tend to concentrate power to one person. The reasons are multifaceted, including the influence of the social and patriarchal culture, the fact that democratic management structures require more resources, and the fact that INGOs prefer to deal with one person rather than the organization team.

⁴² The original Arabic text is:

في المنظمات المحلية دائما ما نرى لديها هيكلية بالإدارة [...] ونجد ان القرارات كلها محصورة عند المدير فقط وهذا الشيء [...] قلل الفرص من ان يتم بناء عمل استراتيجي

Moreover, INGOs should prioritize building local capacities based on actual needs. This includes investing in training and development programs for local staff beyond the classical – and usually superficial- training workshops. Coaching and exchange opportunities can aid in promoting local leadership as well. The donors and INGOs are also responsible for creating opportunities for LNGOs to take on more significant roles in project design and implementation. Interviewee 01 highlights that “some INGOs operate independently without building local capacity or fostering a culture of participation”⁴³.

Finally, INGOs must engage in continuous self-reflection and evaluation to ensure that their practices align with principles of equity and inclusion. This involves regularly seeking feedback from local partners to assess their impact on local organizations and communities. They should also consider making necessary adjustments to their practices. By doing so, INGOs can create more equitable and sustainable partnerships that genuinely empower local organizations.

In conclusion, the relationship between INGOs and LNGOs in Iraq is marked by significant power imbalances and rigid hierarchies. This profoundly impacts decision-making, operations, funding, and overall efficacy. INGOs typically control funding and decision-making processes, often acting as donors rather than equal partners. This dynamic creates dependencies and forces LNGOs to comply with INGOs' demands to secure funding. Despite most of the programmatic work being executed by LNGOs, the retention of indirect costs by INGOs' headquarters is one example of this imbalance. Such practices increase mistrust and anger among LNGOs, leading to strained partnerships and limited local capacity.

Intensive efforts from donors, INGOs, and LNGOs are required to address these hierarchical and patriarchal dynamics. Equitable and inclusive partnerships and robust

⁴³ The original Arabic text is: بعض المنظمات الأجنبية تعمل بمفردها لذا بالتالي لا تبني القدرات المحلية و لا ثقافة مشاركة

mechanisms for accountability and transparency should be promoted. LNGOs should be given more autonomy and responsibility by decentralizing decision-making. INGOs must also work towards dismantling patriarchal structures within their relationship to LNGOs. Continuous self-reflection and evaluation by INGOs can ensure practices align with equity and inclusion principles to create empowering partnerships.

3.2.3. Justice – Capacities and Funding

In this theme, justice in access to resources and capacities is discussed. A critical aspect of the inequality between INGOs and LNGOs is the access to international funding within donors' changing contexts and priorities. Meanwhile, reliance and dependency on foreign funding will also be examined.

The unequal capacities the international and local NGOs have will be compared, and dynamics of competitiveness will be explored. Furthermore, the capacity building of LNGOs as a fundamental justification of the INGOs presence will be critically discussed. This includes failure for genuine needs assessments and reliance on assumptions and prejudices in designing capacity-building programs.

Access to funding

Iraqi NGOs are massively dependent on foreign funding. According to a report by the Washington Institute, the majority of funding for Iraqi NGOs comes from international donors rather than domestic sources. This reliance began post-2003 when Iraqi NGOs started to form and emerge after years of banning. Many LNGOs have gone through the rapid growth phase, especially in relation to emergency responses (The Washington Institute 2024). I have gone through the annual accounts of six other Iraqi NGOs within my work. They all scored 92% to 99% of their annual income from international sources. Throughout all the interviews with

national NGOs, it was a fundamental concept that international entities fund projects. This was stated both explicitly and implicitly.

The LNGOs' modality to access international funding is majorly through INGO intermediates. Hence, issues of injustice and dependency arise due to the power imbalance created by the proximity of INGOs to international donors. This situation is not unique to Iraq, and reflects broader patterns seen in the global NGO sector. International funding systems often perpetuate inequalities and dependencies rather than support development and autonomy for local organizations (Banks et al. 2015).

The international donors, mainly the European and US, usually have restrictive criteria that often exclude local organizations. Interviewee 13 states, "A call [for proposals] will say only German organizations are eligible to apply or Dutch organizations are eligible to apply, so they are already skimming everybody off." Also, many donors require a certain annual turnover threshold, which inherently disadvantages most LNGOs. David Sogge (2009) also argues that donor policies frequently marginalize local NGOs by setting barriers that only larger, often international organizations can overcome.

"[LNGOs'] sustainability is in the hands of the INGOs that have that specific relationship with the donors." Interviewee 08 (2022) stated. This dependency is reinforced by donor policies that favor partnerships with their own national organizations, as both Interviewees 12 and 10 confirmed. This dependency is echoed by Interviewee 01. He mentioned that their "organization's projects are more than 95% dependent on donor funding or partnerships with INGOs."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The original Arabic text is: مشاريعنا بشكل رئيسي اكثر من ٩٥% تعتمد على التمويل من الجهات المانحة أو الشراكات مع المنظمات الدولية

A significant consequence of this funding dynamic is the perpetuation of power imbalances. INGOs, often seen as gatekeepers of donor funds, apply substantial influence over local NGOs. This dynamic can lead to situations where LNGOs are compelled to agree to bad terms to secure funding. Interviewee 13 states that "national NGOs eventually are also dependent on INGOs so that they will agree to anything. Getting peanuts is better than getting nothing at all." Therefore, these power asymmetries undermine the autonomy of local organizations.

Another consequence is that reliance on foreign funding also means that LNGOs must align with the donors' agendas and policies. This often comes at the expense of addressing local needs. The dynamic behind that is impeded in the structure of the process of granting. NGOs respond to public or direct calls for applications by donors. These calls include clear priorities and themes of intervention that are introduced from the donor's perspective.

One significant reason for the dependency on foreign funding is the application of the Iraqi legal system. The Iraqi NGOs Law number 12 for 2010, Article 13, allows NGOs to generate revenue from their activities and have income from grants and membership. Meanwhile, most foreign grants do not allow NGOs to generate revenue. Also, the Iraqi Directorate of NGOs used Article 17 to allow only public utility NGOs to generate income and have exemptions from taxes. According to Article 17 Third, the status of "public utility" is given solely by the Council of Ministers based on a proposal by the Secretary General of the Council of Ministers. This makes it nearly impossible to get this status and attain local governmental funding or generate income.

Therefore, the amount of time needed to respond to the local needs is limited by what the donor already sets. Interviewee 14 says, "We are following the donor's agenda, not the

country's needs.⁴⁵" Consequently, INGOs limit the role of LNGOs to mere implementers rather than autonomous entities capable of addressing local issues independently.

Accessing funding is further complicated by the need for local NGOs to demonstrate their capacity and credibility proactively. Interviewee 03 (2022) states, "We have people who manage projects well, write well, and work on political participation and elections. So, we are an organization that can meet the donor's needs."⁴⁶ Here, I notice the language that the LNGO strives to satisfy the donor through technical capacities rather than focusing on the communities they serve. The other note concerns the ability to market themselves, often hindered by the lack of direct access to donors.

Moreover, there is a massive disparity in the level of effort required by local NGOs to secure funding compared to INGOs. "Local organizations have staff who work hard on the ground [...] because they know that delivering results will allow them to get funding. International organizations, however, often secure funding [...] without demonstrating real achievements on the ground"⁴⁷ (interviewee 9). This disparity stresses the systemic bias that favors INGOs. They can access funds more quickly due to their established relationships with donors and perceived credibility.

LNGOs also internally guard connection with donors and INGO. Interviewee 02 states that "only the executive director and one or two staff members have access [to the donors]; others do not, which could endanger the organization."⁴⁸ There are many factors in play here.

⁴⁵ The original text in Arabic is: نحن نسير على اجنده المانح وليس على احتياجات البلد

⁴⁶ The original text in Arabic is: لدينا أشخاص تدير المشاريع بشكل جيد و أشخاص يكتبون بشكل جيد و يعملون على قضايا المشاركة السياسية و الانتخابات و غيرها ،لذا نحن مؤسسة تستطيع تلبية الأشياء التي يريد المانح

⁴⁷ The original text in Arabic:

المنظمات المحلية لديها كوادربذل الجهد على ارض الواقع (...) لأنه يعلم جيدا اذا قدم هذه الخدمة وحصل على نتيجة هذه النتيجة هي التي سوف تسمح له بالحصول على التمويل، لكن المنظمات الدولية هي تضمن بشكل كبير بانها تستطيع الحصول على التمويل (..) لذلك هي لا تحتاج الى ان تثبت ذلك من خلال تنفيذ انشطه كثيره

⁴⁸ The original text in Arabic:

فقط المدير التنفيذي و ١ أو ٢ من الموظفين يستطيعون الوصول (للمانحين) اما البقية ليس لديهم وصول وهذا ممكن ان يشكل خطر على المنظمة في المستقبل

First, LNGO executives consider the relationship with the donor or the intermediate too important to risk. Also, usually, few staff members have the ability to communicate effectively with their international counterparts. It can also indicate poor trust between the LNGO executives and their staff.

The shifting geographic priorities in international funding also pose significant challenge to access funds in Iraq. The reduction in available funds to Iraq is influenced by global attention shifting to other crises, such as Ukraine, Sudan, and Palestine. Interviewee 8 stated, "Now, every amount that comes is accounted for and has become less because there are other international interests, and Iraq has taken long years and large amounts."⁴⁹ Meanwhile, interviewee 03 reiterated, "If the world has been funding us for nineteen years, how long will it continue to give us grant money?"⁵⁰

This situation forces LNGOs to navigate funding that is not fully aligned with their evolving needs. Interviewee 01 stated, "Sometimes you have to make concessions and work in areas where your capacity to reach or work is difficult."⁵¹ The available funding is sometimes inappropriate for the LNGO's needs and capacities. Therefore, they are compelled to respond swiftly or risk to bankruptcy. Consequently, they work in challenging areas or under unsuitable conditions. The misalignment between funding priorities and actual needs complicates risk management and the overall effectiveness of LNGOs.

In response to the diminished funding, interviewee 7 stated, "If there are no projects, there is no need to appoint a project [proposal] writer. [...] Why do we appoint someone and pay them a salary?"⁵² This is quite problematic stance. It shows that LNGO has no perspective

⁴⁹ The original text in Arabic is: الآن كل ما يأتي من مبالغ يتم حسابه وأصبحت أقل لأن هناك اهتمامات دولية أخرى و العراق اخذ سنوات طويلة و مبالغ كبيرة

⁵⁰ منذ ١٩ سنة نحصل على تمويل، اذا هذا العالم إلى متى سيستمر بأعطائنا أموال منح؟

⁵¹ The original text in Arabic: تضطر احيانا ان تقدم بعض التنازلات و تعمل في مناطق قدرتك للوصول لها صعبة او العمل بها صعب

⁵² The original text in Arabic: اذا لم يكن هناك مشاريع ليس هناك داع لتعيين شخص كاتب مشاريع (...) لماذا نعين شخص وندفع له راتب؟

of fundraising beyond international grants. Logically, the need for fundraising experts increases when the funds decrease, not the opposite. However, specialized fundraising staff are usually recruited as project staff. They do project implementation work and fundraising to cover their salaries, as donors do not cover the fundraising expenses.

Therefore, this approach stresses a broader issue. The scarcity of funding leads LNGOs to operate on a project-by-project basis and be unable to maintain a stable workforce or long-term planning. This lack of consistent funding and ad-hoc hiring practices inhibit the growth and sustainability of LNGOS. It also limits their ability to build capacity and respond effectively to ongoing and emerging community needs.

Moreover, the issue of language barriers, including the specific jargon of donors, presents additional obstacles. This was detailed in the previous chapter about communication challenges. The other obstacle is the lack of transparency and its relation to increased nepotism and corruption, which was also detailed before.

Transparency in sharing the project documents can indirectly improve the LNGO's capacity to access funding. The dynamic is that the LNGO will see a sample of a successful proposal and can learn from it to design better projects. Interviewee 01 states, "it helped us once to write a project better. [...] It was a completely different project, but we learned the methodology. This thing happened as an indirect result, and they certainly did not mean this. That is why many organizations will not accept sharing the project documents with us."⁵³ Hence, denying the sharing of project documents usually leads to fear of LNGO competitiveness. I hear justifications around privacy and data protection, which is

⁵³ The original text in Arabic is: نحن ساعدتنا في إحدى المرات بأن نكتب مشروع بشكل أفضل (...) كان مشروع مختلف تماما لكن تحسنت لدينا المنهجية، هذا الشيء يحدث بنتيجة غير مباشرة وبالتأكيد هم لم يكونوا قاصدين لهذا الشيء، ولهذا الكثير من المنظمات لن تقبل بأن تشارك المشروع معنا

understandable when sharing such important files with third parties. However, they make no sense when preventing a project partner from accessing them.

To address these issues, there must be a concerted effort to establish fair funding mechanisms that allow equal access for local NGOs. Donors should set clear and inclusive criteria, especially for smaller LNGOs. Donors should also prioritize providing opportunities for direct engagement with local organizations. This includes simplifying application processes, providing capacity-building support, and adopting direct relationships between donors and local NGOs. Furthermore, there is a need for a shift in donor policies to recognize and address the structural barriers local NGOs face.

Organizational Capacities

Organizational capacities refer to the systems, processes, and resources applied inside an organization to function efficiently and achieve its goals. These capacities include governance, organizational management, project and program management, human resources, and financial management. Also, there are tools to assess these capacities and provide capacity-building plans. One example is Advancing Partners & Communities, the Organizational Capacity Assessment (2018).

Organizational capacity building is different from individual capacity building. It includes more than just financial support. Instead, organizations should be provided with the necessary tools and knowledge to improve their overall performance. Examples include strategic planning, developing governance structures, improving financial management systems, and enhancing human resource practices. **The Stanford Social Innovation Review** (Malipatil and Brainard 2024) shows that capacity building should focus on helping organizations become more cost-effective, sustainable, and scalable. This includes networking opportunities and empowering them to develop their own policies and procedures.

On the ground, INGO comes with relatively high organizational capacities. This includes well-structured governance and decision-making processes. They also have policies and procedures that comply with the prominent donors' requirements. Meanwhile, most LNGOs have few or no policies and very fluid, sometimes chaotic structures. This disparity usually causes confusion and inaccurate assumptions and predictions. Moreover, INGOs are backed by their headquarters, which typically have better technical expertise. Meanwhile, Iraqi NGOs are primarily young and became active after 2003.

The first critical issue is the lack of significant investment in the LNGOs' organizational capacities. Instead, it is usually seen as the sole responsibility of LNGO to live up to the INGOs' and donors' standards. One factor is the reliance of international actors on short-term project funding. This modality prioritizes immediate results over long-term institutional development. While it might be suitable for emergency and humanitarian response, it fails in the context of development. Interviewee 13 notes, "When it comes to organizational capacity then they will not invest in that. When it comes to actually sitting with their partner, developing their strategies." Instead, the focus is on one project-specific capacity that contributes very little to the organization's capacity itself.

The main effect of unwillingness to invest in organizational capacity building is the failure of LNGOs to develop robust internal systems and processes. Interviewee 16 highlights that "investment through funding is always a bit challenging because our financial procedures are very strict in terms of releasing funding for certain capacity building for local partners." This tells that the priority is to implement the project, not to build the capacity of LNGOs.

Therefore, LNGOs find themselves without the necessary capacities to deal directly with a donor. As a result, a perpetual state of adaptation is created. Also, LNGOs are forced to align with the diverse and often conflicting policies of multiple donors and INGOs. Therefore, their ability to establish independent and effective systems is inhibited. Consequently, they

remain in a cycle of dependency, unable to build the internal capacities needed for long-term sustainability.

The lack of investment in organizational capacities keeps Iraq's civil society weak and immature. Interviewee 14 emphasizes this point by comparing the local civil society to those in other Middle Eastern countries. "The local civil society in Iraq is significantly weak compared to other countries in the Middle East[...]. It is still small and has not had the opportunity to mature as a civil society."⁵⁴

This immaturity is partly due to the historical focus on humanitarian responses rather than long-term development. Since 2003, much of the international aid directed toward Iraqi NGOs has been emergency-focused. It aimed at addressing immediate crises rather than building local institutions. Thus, when the focus of international donors in Iraq shifted toward the development agenda, many LNGOs found themselves unable to cope. However, even with development intervention, which should require longer times to show results, INGOs and UN agencies still prefer the short-term projects modality of funding.

This project-centric approach limits the ability of LNGOs to invest in strategic planning and internal governance. Interviewee 09 observes that local NGO staff often must juggle multiple roles due to the lack of specialized departments. The result is a further reduction in their ability to focus on strategic and long-term initiatives. "In local organizations, you perform 10,000 functions at the same time. [...] This means the financial officer is also the human resources officer, project manager, and more."⁵⁵ This multitasking is necessary for survival. However, it prevents LNGOs from dedicating the required time and resources to strategic

⁵⁴ The original Arabic text is: ولا يزال صغيرا (...) ولم يأخذ فرصته بان ينضج كمجتمع مدني

⁵⁵ The original Arabic text is: في المنظمات المحلية انت تقوم ب 10,000 وظيفة في نفس الوقت ما يعني ان صاحب المالية هو نفسه صاحب التوظيف ونفسه يقوم بوظائف كثيره في المؤسسة

aspects. It also prevents them from having more profound and more professional knowledge of specific fields.

Additionally, short-term projects require ultimate focus on implementation to meet tight deadlines. From my experience, it is common to have projects between three and six months, let alone those one-month projects. Therefore, LNGOs become primarily concerned with meeting immediate project requirements rather than building long-term capacities. Interviewee 10 notes that many funding models prioritize the execution of contractually defined activities over the development of organizational capacities. "There are projects, but does every organization have a certain percentage of income or funding for institutional capacity building? No, there is not."⁵⁶

This short-term focus is reinforced by the tough compliance requirements imposed by donors. They often demand detailed documentation and adherence to predefined protocols that the LNGOs are unfamiliar with. For example, an organization receiving a fund from a US donor above 25,000 USD must adhere to sophisticated US legal requirements. The applicable Codes of Federal Regulation and vetting requirements can go as long as 400 pages of dry legal texts in English. Therefore, it becomes impossible for a small NGO with one or two persons speaking standard English to understand and adhere to these texts.

Furthermore, the weak civil society is exacerbated by the constant turnover of personnel within LNGOs. Interviewee 14 points out that frequent staff changes necessitate repeated training sessions, which impedes the continuity and cumulative growth of organizational knowledge and skills. The charm of better-paying jobs with INGOs often drives this high turnover rate. It disrupts the internal stability of LNGOs and undermines their institutional memory.

⁵⁶ The original text in Arabic: هناك مشاريع لكن هل كل منظمة لديها نسبة معينة من الدخل أو التمويل للبناء المؤسسي؟ لا يوجد ذلك

Interviewee 16 also explains that staff turnover frequently affects local partners' financial operations. "Usually, the finance teams of local partners are there for a short while... they stay for a year or two, invest in that department, but then find a job with the INGO. And then, everything in the local organization's capacity that has been invested in is removed."

Each time a trained staff member leaves, the LNGO has to start from scratch, investing time and resources in training new personnel. This cycle of attrition and replacement prevents LNGOs from achieving the stability and expertise needed to manage complex projects and operations effectively.

The high turnover rate is due to systemic issues within the local NGO sector. Low salaries, limited career development opportunities, and the instability of project-based funding contribute to the frequent movement of staff. Interviewee 14 highlights that even when local NGOs are offered capacity-building support and opportunities for strategic partnerships, they often struggle to retain trained personnel due to these systemic challenges. This instability undermines the potential for LNGOs to grow and develop.

INGOs play an essential role in this mind-draining dynamic. On one hand, they force partner LNGOs to have low salary scales that are not higher than the Iraqi market standards. They also fail to follow up on employees' rights like social security, health insurance, and overtime payments. Meanwhile, they offer salaries triple what the LNGO offers for even lower effort, specific job descriptions, and guaranteed benefits. Thus, it becomes an obvious choice for an employee working with LNGO if they can shift to INGO. In conclusion, the poor working standards for LNGO workers are direct and indirect results of the practices of INGOs and donors.

Concerning organizational capacities, LNGOs in Iraq face many challenges. In particular, there is a lack of investment in organizational capacities from donors and INGOs, an immature civil society, and a constant personnel turnover. The factors include the focus on

project implementation over strategic development and the restrictive environment with LNGOs.

Capacity Building

One of the main narratives justifying the presence of INGOs in Iraq is building the capacities of local civil society. The aim is to help LNGOs be effective and take the initiative to address local needs. Therefore, most programs and projects led by INGOs have capacity-building components for local actors, including civil society, local leadership, and governmental entities. However, there is no comprehensive study of the effectiveness of these capacity-building efforts. Therefore, I will highlight three main factors: needs assessment, capacity-building methods, and the willingness to improve.

One critical issue hindering practical capacity-building efforts is the lack of thorough and continuous needs assessments. Therefore, INGOs usually focus on what they think the LNGOs need by relying on assumptions and prejudices. Interviewee 15 (2022), who works as a project manager with an INGO, stated that LNGOs are weak and lack everything, so any capacity-building program will benefit them. Interviewee 7 affirmed that “International organizations see local organizations as inferior and consider them as of no importance.⁵⁷” Therefore, such prejudices and rivalries usually cause genuine needs assessment to be overlooked.

Interviewee 08 believes that INGOs “know that [LNGOs] have taken a lot of these training courses [...], but they come and repeat it because of the [financial] allocation⁵⁸”. This highlights that many INGOs approach the capacity-building components as a requirement to

⁵⁷ The original Arabic text: المنظمات الدولية لديهم نظرة دنيا للمنظمات المحلية ويعتبرونها ليست ذات اهمية

⁵⁸ The original Arabic text: هم يعلمون ان (المنظمات المحلية) أخذت الكثير من هذه التدريبات (...) لكنهم يأتون ويعيدونها بسبب التخصيص (المالي)

check and report to donors. I have many experiences with this where capacity-building is written with fancy language in the proposals, resulting in a quick online presentation of little value or effect.

Meanwhile, Interviewee 12 brings a noteworthy perspective: “International organizations always say that local organizations in Iraq are not ready. [...] If the international organization has been working as an intermediary for ten years and still needs to build capacities. Then, the flaw is with the international organization!” This failure to build strong and independent Iraqi NGOs indicates poorly linked and ineffective capacity-building efforts. Instead, the vicious cycle continues by justifying the need for INGOs as an intermediate.

Similarly, interviewee 14, who works for INGO, confesses, “Local organizations, and we as international organizations fight for opportunities. However, we see that civil society is a key partner. We, in turn, provide expertise and share experiences, but capacity building is not more than capacity sharing.⁵⁹” This perpetuates the continuous need for INGO capacities to reach funding opportunities. Hence, capacity-sharing approaches cultivate dependency rather than autonomy.

This persistent gap in communication and assessment can lead to misaligned capacity-building. For example, Interviewee 08 highlights that repeated training sessions often cover similar topics without adding new value. This indicates a separation between the training provided and the actual needs of the LNGOs. This repetition without addressing specific needs stresses the importance of tailored capacity-building programs based on comprehensive needs assessments. It is also essential to note that LNGOs come with vast experience in local

⁵⁹ The original Arabic text: المنظمات المحلية ونحن كمنظمات دوليه نتحارب على الفرص لكن نحن نرى ان المجتمع المدني هو شريك اساسي ونحن بدورنا نقدم الخبرات ونشارك الخبرات لكن ليس بناء قدرات اكثر من كونها مشاركه قدرات

dynamics but usually need improvement on the technical side. Hence, capacity-building programs should take that into serious consideration.

Additionally, effective capacity-building methods are essential for empowering LINGOs. However, the current practices fall short. Interviewee 02 criticizes the short duration of most training sessions, stating, "Most training sessions last two or three days, which is not sufficient, especially for newly established organizations with little experience."⁶⁰ This brief training period also indicates that the content is often introductory. Therefore, it usually fails to teach deep and practical knowledge and skills.

Moreover, interviewee 03 emphasizes that capacity-building methodologies should go beyond training. "It may come from work or a specific piece of information that I can benefit from. This is also considered capacity building, not only through training. In my opinion, the daily practice results are much better [...]. Of course, provided that working with someone who understands how things work, not anyone."⁶¹ Therefore, bringing technical experts who can coach and make hands-on contributions can be more effective. This is especially useful for organizational capacities such as policies and procedures.

Interviewee 16 emphasizes the importance of combining theoretical knowledge with practical application. He argued that more comprehensive programs like mentorships, technical training, and field visits "always cost money." This also indicates that the norm in capacity building is the lectures. Hence, INGOs and donors' combined responsibility is to ensure that capacity-building efforts respond to actual needs, are provided through effective methods, lead

⁶⁰ The original Arabic text is: اغلب التدريبات تستمر يومين أو ثلاث، هذا الشيء غير كافي وبالأخص للمنظمات الناشئة التي بدأت حديثا وليست ذات خبرة طويلة

⁶¹ The original Arabic text is: بناء قدرات ربما يأتي من العمل أو ربما الآن انت تعطيني معلومة معينة استفيد بها فهذا يعتبر بناء قدرات ،ليس فقط من خلال التدريب، أنا برأيي الممارسة اليومية نتائجها افضل بكثير (...) طبعا بشرط أن يكون العمل مع شخص يفهم كيف تجري الأمور ليس اي احد

to meaningful results, and have sufficient funding. Meanwhile, it is the responsibility of LNGOs to raise voices and refuse repetitive and mediocre capacity-building programs.

Interviewee 08 asked about the training effectiveness: “The same person attended ten training workshops on a similar topic, and they still did not understand anything. So why did they not understand?⁶²” She continues that can be attributed to that person's willingness, but more importantly to the training methods, and materials. I see the additional causes include a faulty selection process involving uninterested trainees that prevent more willing ones from participating. Also, relying on lecturing usually has no significant effect on the trainees' capacities or their organizations.

In addition to the systemic issues highlighted above, the willingness of LNGOs to improve is also crucial. Interviewee 14 mentions that some local organizations prefer to partner with INGOs rather than local ones. She explained that her organization offered capacity-building and technical assistance for three LNGOs to write a project proposal. They refused and preferred to join an INGO instead. This preference highlights a lack of trust among LNGOs themselves. It also reflects a perception that partnerships with INGOs secure more funding due to their higher capacities.

However, this reluctance to engage in local alliances can weaken local civil society and create rivalries. Interviewee 16 notes that many local organizations wait for INGOs to take the lead on significant issues. Therefore, this creates confusion and reinforces dependency. Nevertheless, I see that INGOs are also to blame here, in addition to the LNGOs. They created and reinforced the image that the LNGOs are weak and untrustworthy. Meanwhile, INGOs usually present themselves as superior and more capable.

⁶² The original Arabic text is: ممكن ان نرى نفس الشخص يحضر ١٠ تدريبات على موضوع معين وهو لا يزال لم يفهم منه شيء فلماذا لم يفهم؟

The internal structure and governance of LNGOs also play a role in their willingness and ability to improve. Interviewee 12 observes that decision-making in many local organizations is highly centralized. It limits their flexibility and strategic development. This hierarchical structure can restrain innovation and responsiveness, making it harder for LNGOs to adapt and improve.

3.2.4. Security – Policies and Sustainability

In this part, I discuss the sustainability of local NGOs from perspectives of growth compared to existing and continuously emerging risks. The contributing factors will be carefully analyzed, including indirect cost denial, staff overturn and mind draining, and funding scarcity.

This theme also includes exploring the recent international commitment to localization. I will explore the shared responsibilities of donors, INGOs, and LNGOs, and how they are realized. These responsibilities also crosscut with the capacities and growth aspects.

Sustainability, growth, and risks

The central existential question of the Iraqi civil society is how sustainable it is. Complex factors are at play here, including external funding and the relationship between INGOs and donors. Meanwhile, the changing local political and legal contexts also pose fundamental difficulties, such as attempts to change the current NGO law and increasing governmental and security efforts to control the sector. However, in this part, I discuss how the relation between INGOs and LNGO affects LNGO's sustainability.

Implementing projects in the complex and insecure environment of the Iraqi context brings a scale of risks. Interviewee 16 highlights, "When you have expats or people working with INGO's that are not aware of that local context, [...] it becomes sloppy and very risky program implementation". Relying on theoretical assumptions while distant from the

implementation area is usually the core cause. Therefore, the inherent dangers of working in a conflict area get transferred to and suffered mainly by the LNGO implementers. A failing approach may represent a lesson learned for INGO headquarters. Meanwhile, it can cause a loss of social capital, serious dangers to the livelihoods and lives of local NGO workers, and erosion of the implementing LNGO's credibility.

Tapping into the power relation and standard practices in project development and implementation is crucial. The INGOs often dictate project activities without adequate discussion, whether with their local staff or partner LNGO. They focus merely on the execution rather than the impact (Interviewee 09). This top-down approach usually results failures to achieve the planned objective. These projects try to address the INGO simplified image of the problem, not the complex problem on the ground. Hence, there is a widespread disappointment that NGO projects do not produce meaningful results despite being well-funded. I also find it important to dispute this disappointment since there is usually a desire for long-term results to happen instantly, which is an unrealistic expectation.

Additionally, two additional factors that pose significant risks to LNGO sustainability were discussed in the previous chapters. The first is limited direct access within LNGOs to funders. The second is the varying policies and practices among different funding bodies and INGOs. Both risks were reiterated by interviewees 01, 02, 05, 06, 09, 12, 13, and 16.

Another essential factor for the LNGOs' sustainability is the Indirect Costs (IC). They cover shared operational expenses that are hard to attribute to specific projects. They include running costs such as office space, utilities, maintenance, senior staff salaries, and organizational development. Therefore, donors do not audit ICs. Furthermore, one principal difference between NGOs and businesses is that they do not generate profit. Hence, covering IC is vital for the NGOs' to survive.

Nine out of the ten interviewed LNGO workers showed no or little knowledge of IC. This lack of knowledge suggests a control or deprivation of knowledge by INGO. Their power position of managing the administrative aspects of projects allows such control of information. The result is the actual deprivation of LNGOs of their right in IC. I witnessed incidents where the INGO leading partner budgeted for the LNGO's IC but withdrew these funds to their HQ without the LNGO knowing.

A common justification for depriving LNGOs of IC is the argument that INGOs conduct most of the administrative work of the grant. Thereby, they reduce the need for LNGOs to receive such funds. One disgraceful justification is to limit the corruption of LNGOs by preventing non-auditable funds (interviewees 01, 13, and 15). These justifications lead to what can be considered unethical and illegal practice where LNGOs are deprived of their rightful share of IC. Meanwhile, donors rarely enforce the IC rights of LNGOs since they often communicate exclusively with the lead INGO partner. This practice further marginalizes local organizations and prevents their growth.

Donor policies regarding IC vary greatly. The European Union typically offers a flat rate of 7% of the project's direct costs per their General Conditions (External Action of the European Union 2021). The US governmental funders allow for either the Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA) or a de minimis rate of 10% of the modified direct costs as per 2 CFR § 200.414(f) (U.S. Government 2014). Other donors, such as GIZ and the French Development Agency, grant between 7% to 10% for IC.

I witnessed cases where IC reached as high as 36% through Negotiated Indirect Costs Rate Agreement, and even up to 45%. The US funding rules explicitly say these rates apply to the prime recipients and subgrantees. Meanwhile, the EU and other donors do not reflect on that. This variability in IC allocation usually lies in the blind spot of Iraqi NGOs. Therefore, INGOs' ethical responsibility is to empower LNGOs to understand and obtain IC.

Interviewees 01, 10, 12, 13, and 14 confirmed the common practice that INGOs and UN agencies retain all or most of the indirect costs. They leave local partners with insufficient or insufficient funds to cover operational expenses. This practice contradicts the INGO's narrative around building local capacities. Without sufficient IC, local NGOs are left struggling to meet basic operational needs. This often leads LNGO to find 'creative' ways to cover expenses like saving on salaries or overcharging expenses. Thus, with a closer look at the power dynamics, the corruption in the local NGO sector is the fault of the INGOs as much as it is of the LNGOs.

Interview 13 gives a detailed example from her experience with Iraq's Humanitarian Pool Fund. The facility was established in response to the displacement crises during the war in 2014. She elaborates:

Within at least the country-based pool funds, they were allowed to take 13%. So, already, OCHA is being given that pool of money, right? So, they are taking their costs for managing it and so on and so forth, dispersing it. They also need a bunch of staff to manage it. Then, they would give the grant to a UN agency, which would collect another 13% of their direct costs as their indirect cost. They would then give it to an INGO, who would collect an additional 7% of their direct costs as their indirect cost. Then, it would go to a national NGO. Eventually, a national NGO implements the actual thing, but basically they do not incur any indirect costs.

Besides the complete deprivation of IC, many UN agencies and INGOs follow another modality. They force their partner LNGO to list all their administrative needs, such as occupancy, electricity, maintenance, and other running costs as direct costs. Then, they would approve certain lines to be funded or reimbursed. Interviewee 08 gives an astonishing example of how their INGO partner controls this process. "Usually, at the end of a fiscal year, they support their partner if they have a surplus. [...] They ask their partners for office needs of not more than USD 1500. Then, they prioritize the needs and buy and deliver the requested items

through a contractor.⁶³” With the practice, the INGO transforms what is a right of a local partner into a favor that deepens dependency.

Another critical effect of IC is the retention of core staff beyond the project end date. Notably, all INGOs request reports, documents, and other requirements from the local partner after the project ends. Sometimes, even a year after the project contract expires. Meanwhile, there are absolutely no funds to cover such a workload. Also, all the project’s staff contracts would expire by or before the end of the project (Interviewee 09). Therefore, it is a question of where the LINGO would cover these costs and meet these requirements.

Therefore, staff retention becomes a major challenge to LINGOs sustainability and growth in the absence of IC. Better opportunities and higher salaries in INGOs also drive the turnover of LINGO personnel. The short-term and project-based funding complicates the LINGO's effort to retain its staff. Consequently, this constant hurdle prevents building organizational knowledge and culture. The previous chapters also discussed how staff turnover negatively affects project management and capacity-building efforts. Interviewees 01, 08, 10, 12, and 16 confirmed that the constant need to prepare and rebuild teams prevents LINGOs from reaching a state of stability and maturity.

One last effect of IC deprivation is the inability of LINGOs to work on their organizational capacities. This includes drafting new policies, setting procedures, and establishing financial and management systems. The fundraising capacity is also negatively affected as direct costs are not allowable.

⁶³ The original Arabic text is:

عادةً كل نهاية سنة مالية بحسب ما يكون لديهم من الوفرة المالية هم يعطون دعم للشركاء (...) والدعم بأن يسألون الشريك ما هي احتياجاتكم المكتوبة بما لا يتجاوز ١٥٠٠ دولار، ويحددون الأولوية لمن ستكون وبعدها يقولون نحن سنشتري لكم من خلال شركة

Controlled localization

Shifting power and resources to local actors is the core of localization. In the NGO sector, LNGOs are expected to rise and take the initiative in this power shift. However, the responsibility for facilitating localization largely falls on international donors and INGOs. This starts by altering the criteria, processes, and roles for partnership. Interviewee 13 points out that donors often exclude local organizations by setting demanding eligibility criteria, like high annual turnover. This practice skims off many capable local NGOs. Additionally, eight out of the ten interviewees working with LNGOs showed no sign they know what localization is.

Meanwhile, there are two practices INGO advertises as localization. The first is filling up the local branches with local staff. Meanwhile, crucial tasks such as fundraising, donor relations, and grant management stay mainly with the regional offices or HQs. Also, the strategic directions and decisions stay primarily with the international authority and an international country director. The second practice is transforming a country branch into an independent local organization. The regional and HQ offices become for support, not governance. While the second model is closer to localization, the new organizations rarely act as LNGO but as local implementer to the mother organization.

The first step toward localization is ensuring the local NGO sector has the capacity, maturity, and resilience. Abrupt withdrawal of INGOs and a decrease in funding can lead to a collapse of the local NGO sector rather than localization. With the decreased international funding for Iraq, the competitiveness between NGOs has escalated recently. This is to be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

The second step to localization is to ensure an actual power shift with sustainable access to the necessary resources. This should carefully check that localization is not a process of making new dynamics that disguise the existing power imbalances. For example, I read in most of the calls for applications lately encouraging or even mandating to include a local partner

with the international applicant. However, these calls do not revisit or define the type of relationship. Consequently, including an LNGO becomes a ticking of a requirement rather than an actual partnership toward localization.

Third, understanding localization as a complete exit of INGOs is a flawed concept. The main reason is that the Iraqi government's political factions try to impose control over LNGOs by shrinking space for civic activism and violating freedoms of association and speech. On the other hand, the Iraqi government prioritizes a positive international image. Therefore, in-country international actors can still act as a main ally for the local civil society by exposing such pressures on the LNGOs. Furthermore, international funding to LNGOs also contributes to the enhanced independence of LNGOs from governmental control. Interviewee 02 states that successful partnerships between INGOs and LNGOs can pressure the government to adopt and address local issues.

Localization is also closely linked with the indirect costs issues discussed above. Simultaneously, the issues of capacity building, dominance of donors and INGO policies, dependance on INGOs, lack of communication lines with the donors, and the rigidity of the roles discussed before all contribute to preventing the growth of the local NGO sector. Therefore, localizing to fragile NGOs becomes a process of undermining rather than empowering them.

I should mention two recent examples of reasonable steps toward localization. As part of their new strategies, the Catholic Relief Services and International Relief Committee have decided not to implement directly in Iraq. Local partners will do all project implementation on the ground. Meanwhile, they provide technical assistance in fundraising and managing grants. This marks a positive step toward working with a diverse group of LNGOs. However, since they are internal documents, I did not have the chance to go deeper into their new strategies to

check how they portray their local partnerships. Also, time will tell about the actual implementation of these strategies.

The other excellent example of localization is the Nabni Facility. It is funded by the German Bank for Development (KFW). They have adjusted all the funding processes to empower LNGOs. They released a call for concept notes exclusively for LNGOs. After reviewing the concept notes, the successful applicants' organizational capacities were checked by a due diligence process. Then, successful NGOs present their ideas to a panel to decide who gets funded. After a mandatory conflict and needs assessment phase, the selected NGOs will be invited to a co-creation process to develop their complete projects. Still, there is room for improvement regarding smaller NGOs and addressing language barriers.

3.2.5. Truth – Harm and Recognition

In this part, I discuss how the interviewees questioned the current partnership models and introduced alternative aspired ones. The critical queries and truth-examining will focus on aspects of the mal-presentation of INGOs as donors. At the same time, how INGOs play the intermediate role and its effects on local ownership.

Furthermore, I also explore manifestations of discrimination within the themes of rights and identity perspectives. The levels are between organizations, and based on NGO affiliation, nationality, and ethnicity. Lastly, ways of doing harm by NGOs will be explored, with a focus on how INGOs are harming local communities and LNGOs. This includes undermining LNGO roles, competitiveness, cultural and context insensitivity, and violating workers' rights.

Questioning partnerships

During the interviews, a repeated theme when discussing the relationship between the INGO and LNGO was questioning the gap between the aspired and actual partnerships. It was related to the issues of power imbalance, hierarchy, LNGO autonomy, and dependency that were discussed. The need for better partnership models was usually expressed when criticizing and questioning the current modalities.

One aspect is the emphasis on INGO visibility, which often overshadows the contributions of local partners. For example, Interviewee 06 mentioned an instance where INGOs mandated his LNGO to publish about the training they received as a condition to receive resources and training materials. This example stresses the power imbalance and highlights how INGOs maintain control over narrative and recognition.

The visibility and communication guidelines are integral to the projects' contracts. Government donors such as the EU, USG, and embassies usually require minimum visibility. They also have flexible waivers to address security concerns. Meanwhile, the UN agencies, quasi-governmental organizations like GIZ, and INGOs go to the maximum. They require a particular setup, color schemes, and even logo sizes. For example, GIZ mandates that their logo be 80% larger than the implementer.

UN agencies even claim intellectual property for all materials they fund, including research and studies. Such practices introduce the LNGOs as submissive implementers without ownership of the project's results and achievements.

Moreover, a frequent narrative is that the INGOs introduce themselves as donors to the LNGOs. This claim is factually incorrect, as INGOs usually receive funds from other donors. Meanwhile, few LNGOs oppose this claim, relegating them to mere executors of projects designed and managed by the INGOs. Interviewee 13 observed that INGOs sometimes use this trick to reinforce their position of power. In turn, this creates dependencies rather than fostering

true partnerships. Hence, LNGOs must comply with the directives of INGOs to secure funding. Let alone the LNGOs' loss of sense of agency and ability to influence project outcomes.

INGOs' more factually accurate role is that they usually act as intermediaries between the local implementers and international donors. This role is perpetuated by the inability of most LNGOs to communicate or have direct access to international donors. Moreover, given the complex stereotypes around LNGOs as corrupt or inexperienced and incapable of managing funds directly, the INGO role shifts from managing projects to strict policing in extreme cases. This creates a cycle where INGOs' sense of added value comes from controlling LNGOs, resulting in abusive partnerships. Additionally, it is one of the main selling points that INGOs have for donors.

Moving toward aspired partnerships, enhancing local ownership is a crucial aspect. Although frequently mentioned in discussions about development effectiveness, this concept remains unseen in practice. Interviewee 12 noted that local ownership should involve more than just executing projects. It requires meaningful participation of LNGOs in decision-making processes, project design, and implementation.

The reality is often different. LNGOs find themselves with limited involvement in implementation rather than fulfilling strategic roles. Local ownership is thus reduced to a mere checkbox, not an integral part of the partnership. Furthermore, the narrative that LNGOs are not ready to take on more substantial roles is frequently used to justify their exclusion from decision-making processes.

The LNGOs' aspiration for true partnership goes beyond financial support and project implementation. As interviewees 01, 05 (2024), 08, 10 stated, it includes building trust among partners, respecting the knowledge and experience of local partners, and a collaborative space creation where LNGOs contribute to the decision-making processes. "The partnership is not

just a project to be funded but to the extent that they believe in us as an organization"⁶⁴ (Interviewee 08). Therefore, LNGOs' need for recognition as a credible equal is evident.

Other questions about the partnership's models focus on the rigidity of the INGOs' policies imposed on the LNGOs and preventing them from developing their own, which was discussed before. Interviewees also questioned inequality of capacities. Interviewees 01, 05, and 10 called for integrating the different capacities rather than seeing them through weak-strong duality. Each NGO has distinctive and unique capacities, networks, and experiences that should form the foundation of partnerships.

A shift towards more inclusive and supportive partnership models is urgently needed. The LNGOs' contributions should be genuinely valued. Therefore, the role of INGOs should transform from intermediaries to enablers of local civil society. This involves a commitment of donors and INGOs to make decisions collaboratively with LNGOs. As part of localization processes, they are also required to share resources and facilitate an environment where local organizations are supported to grow independently. Strategic partnerships can help to realize such commitments as they shift focus from short-term projects toward longer-term impact.

Manifestations of discrimination

Discrimination in the Iraqi NGO sector has both organizational and individual manifestations. The interviewees captured three main levels: from INGOs toward LNGOs and their workers, international staff toward Iraqi staff, and from the global north toward global south internationals.

⁶⁴ The original Arabic text is: الشراكة هي ليست مشروع و يتم تمويله فقط بقدر ما يؤمن بها كمنظمة ويريد العمل معك لأجلك كمنظمة

The discrimination of INGOs toward LNGOs is often institutional. It is part of the operational frameworks and policies that INGOs impose on their local partners. INGOs typically position themselves as the primary authority on project design, management, and execution. Therefore, LNGOs are automatically reduced to a secondary and implementational role. These aspects were discussed in detail in the previous chapters.

Interviewee 03 noted that INGOs tend to view local staff as "very basic staff." Therefore, capacity-building programs include rudimentary and repetitive training that does not touch complex issues. Interviewees 14 and 15 confirmed that Iraqis generally have a huge gap in critical thinking because of the educational system. I agree that there is a huge need to improve critical thinking among LNGO workers. Meanwhile, such a generalization prevents the INGO workers from seeing the richness of experiences and knowledge the LNGO workers have. Also, from my experience in assessing training needs and delivering training sessions, it is usually the tools for a structured and systemized approach to social problems that are needed. For example, young activists deeply understand the local conflict dynamics but find it hard to map that conflict on paper to develop specific interventions.

On a structural level, the inconsistent treatment of indirect costs comes as a manifestation of organizational oppression. The allocation disparity and details were discussed before. The unequal distribution of indirect costs or denying them stems from a view of LNGOs as weak and corrupt, which are inherently discriminatory.

Within INGOs, discrimination exists between international staff and Iraqi staff. It often takes the form of salary disparities and biased perceptions of competence. Interviewee 13 highlighted that there is a clear preference for Western individuals, often fresh graduates, over more experienced local staff within INGOs. This preference is reflected in hiring practices and the distribution of responsibilities and career advancement opportunities.

Iraqi staff are frequently paid less. They are also given less authority than their international counterparts despite having extensive knowledge of the local context. Interviewee 11 shared that she was refused a raise she requested for an increased workload in her project management role. Then she discovered that a European project assistant she used to manage was paid more than her. When she confronted the management, the justification was that the European colleague was compensated based on European standards. Meanwhile, they followed the Iraqi standard with her because she is an Iraqi.

Interviewee 10 confirms this; “one of the challenges is that there is what is called the average individual income. In Iraq, it is 700 to 800 USD. Meanwhile, a project manager in INGO can get a higher salary than the Iraqi Prime Minister’s! Their salaries follow New York or Geneva standards.”⁶⁵ While this statement carries an exaggeration, it is correct for a few INGOs. Further, it is accurate to state that all INGOs pay more than the Iraqi standard.

Inequal payment is a complex issue. One aspect is that international workers usually have a life in their original countries and one in Iraq. These two lives have different standards and requirements. Meanwhile, Iraqis working with INGOs are treated differently based on their organization’s policy. Some INGOs treat them following the organization’s original country’s standard, some follow elevated Iraqi standards, and others have something in between.

Therefore, Iraqi INGO workers usually prefer to work for organizations with the highest payment scale. Another issue with the payment is the currency, whether in IQD or USD. However, when comparing an average INGO salary scale to the Iraqi public sector’s, I found

⁶⁵ The original Arabic text is:

أحد التحديات التي لدي كان هناك معدل يسمى بدخل الفرد ممكن نعدل دخل الفرد في العراق ٧٠٠ إلى ٨٠٠ دولار. اتوقع ان رايس الوزراء لا يستلم مبلغ مالي بحجم المبلغ الذي يستلمه مدير المشروع في منظمة أجنبية بحيث أن الأموال التي يستلمها هو تعادل معيار نيويورك و جنيف

that a mid-level INGO employee with three to five years experience gets a salary equal to a PhD holder professor or a general director.

Discrimination between internationals from the global north and those from the global south is often subtle yet widespread. Underlying racial and cultural biases influence it. Interviewee 13 accounts that she is not being taken seriously by both national and international staff because she is a brown woman in a leadership position. Thus, racial and cultural prejudices influence perceptions of competence and authority within INGOs. The preference for Western, often white man, expatriates over equally or more qualified global South internationals reveals the privilege Western identities have in the development sector.

These biases harm the individuals directly affected and the broader organizational cultures. Such discrimination and prejudices undermine the values of equality and diversity NGOs claim to uphold. They also create an environment where Iraqis and global South internationals must constantly prove their worth and capabilities. They also face greater scrutiny and skepticism compared to their Western counterparts.

Many ways of doing harm

Mary Anderson (1999) first introduced the Do-No-Harm principle when she argued that aid in conflict zones can escalate tensions if not carefully provided. Although the concept is old, it has only recently found its way to aid and development work. Mainly when the Grand Bargain was adopted. NGOs typically plan and execute development actions with good intentions and ambitious results. However, the context in which they implement such actions is a complex system that does not follow the linear logic used in the planning phases. Therefore, it can react unexpectedly and sometimes negatively to the actions. Therefore, such actions can sometimes harm the implementing NGO, its partners and allies, and the communities they serve.

In terms of how the INGO is doing harm to LNGO, there are three primary themes: undermining LNGO credibility, perpetuating dependency, and exacerbating local inequalities. Such harm usually happens because of poor community consultation, competitiveness among NGOs, cultural insensitivity, improper expenditure, and the violation of staff rights.

INGOs often come into the local Iraqi contexts with pre-determined agendas and frameworks. They usually give little room for the local communities' consultation on strategic matters. As Interviewee 13 frustratingly put it, "People know what the solution is. Locals who are there, who are the so-called recipients of the aid. They know what the solution is. Why do not you just ask them?" Therefore, this usually leads to projects that misalign with the community's needs.

As discussed in the communication and power imbalances parts, usually, LNGOs have little to no input in the design of projects. Interviewee 12 points out that INGOs typically determine program design and implementation strategies to satisfy donor requirements, while LNGOs. This top-down approach reinforces power imbalances. It also marginalizes the LNGOs' valuable insights. Hence, the projects become less effective or harmful in the worst cases.

INGOs frequently deploy staff with limited understanding of the local culture, norms, and socio-political context. This cultural insensitivity can lead to significant slips and misunderstandings. Thus, they result in ineffective or even harmful program outcomes. Interviewee 13 shared a story illustrating this issue. An expat ignored local advice and gave money to a child beggar. Then, six other kids came asking for money. When he refused, they turned to the first child and started beating him to share the money with them. This scene shows how lacking contextual awareness and refusal of local advice can lead to negative consequences.

Project design and implementation are also prone to misunderstanding cultural differences. Interviewee 16 emphasized that INGOs usually risk implementing "sloppy and very risky programs." Such programs can exacerbate existing social tensions and vulnerabilities if an accurate understanding of the local context is not considered. Therefore, involving local actors and LNGOs can increase cultural relevance and appropriateness.

Meanwhile, few INGOs do the extreme opposite of relying entirely on the local actors' perspectives. They end up strengthening politically or even paramilitary-affiliated entities. Hence, other local actors see the INGO as affiliated to and supporting one conflicting stakeholder over others. Therefore, a deep understanding of local actors' motives and backgrounds is also crucial.

The following example makes it interesting to look at how the international actors bring the LNGOs to risk. In June 2023, extremist groups affiliated with the paramilitary Islamist groups started a well-coordinated campaign to demonize NGOs. It was called the anti-gender campaign. They used a straightforward narrative to reduce the term gender to promote LGBTQIA and the Western agenda. In reality, the NGO work in Iraq almost exclusively means women's rights when using the term gender. However, the campaign continued to target specific Iraqi NGOs and fewer INGOs. It resulted in the official banning of the term by the Council of Ministries. It also tarnished the public image of NGOs and activists. Assassinations, along with threats and failed attempts, targeted a few LGBTQIA community members and activists.

Two months before that campaign, I was in a meeting with a representative of the EU Delegation to Iraq (EUD). My organization has coordinated the meeting attended by five other LNGOs. We all sensed the early signs that the LGBTQIA topic would be used to attack the NGO sector. We raised that concern in the meeting. The EUD and European embassies actively – and provocatively promoted that topic, such as raising the Pride Flag in Baghdad. He

responded that it is impossible to go low profile as it is one of the priorities of the EU. In December 2023, the EUD hired a consultant to review all the documents and remove the term gender and all LGBTQIA-related terminology. If only they listened to the LNGOs' concerns, many risks might have been better mitigated.

In the same area, international actors and development agencies pushed hard for gender mainstreaming. Simultaneously, it was common sense that the Iraqi communities and political parties were overly sensitive and violently rejective. Currently, the push has resulted in highly adverse effects. A major one is that the Iraqi Parliament has officially criminalized homosexuality and its promotion by amending the Anti-prostitution law (2023).

The INGOs' responses were diverse. Few INGOs were proactive and offered support and even shelter for threatened LNGO leaders and activists. Meanwhile, many other INGOs took a stance where they saw it risky to deal with the targeted LNGOs. The reactions included zero visibility and avoidance of public linkage with such LNGOs.

UN agencies went extreme to pause the contracts with the concerned LNGOs. There was also implicit referral to the possibility of terminating the contracts if the relationship of these LNGOs does not improve with the Iraqi government. Suddenly, the LNGOs who were in danger became a burden for the UN Agencies, a few INGOs, and some QGOs. My organization was targeted. The organization's team, including me and the senior management, were dealing directly with the damage the campaign caused. We felt let down by such international entities. Also, they discussed no new projects with us since that campaign, which means ending partnerships. Hence, such practices prove that they saw us and other LNGOs as a threat to their operation rather than threatened and could use some support.

Moving to the decreased international funding to Iraq; it caused competition for resources among NGOs to escalate. Another factor is that some donors have started to push the localization agenda for funding. Therefore, many existing long-term collaborations between

international and local NGOs have shifted to competition. Dependency on donor funding is pushing INGOs to prioritize their own organizational survival over the local partners' as Interviewees 01, 05, and 14 stated.

This competition also motivated NGOs to engage in gatekeeping behaviors such as information about funding, networks, and donor access. It also discourages open communication and collaboration. Some INGOs try to reinforce the intermediary role by controlling the decision-making processes and influencing the donor's country-specific priorities. Therefore, localization started to be marketed as a disguised form of hierarchical partnership. LNGOs are again reduced to mere implementers rather than equal partners. Such practices perpetuate the cycle of LNGOs' dependency on INGOs for survival.

Some INGOs started to require exclusive teaming agreements to develop proposals in partnership with LNGOs. This agreement is used when forming a consortium to apply for a certain funding opportunity. However, most donors do not limit the consortiums a subgrantee can enter. They typically limit the applications to be received by a lead applicant, which is usually an INGO. Therefore, such exclusivity in teaming agreements prevents the LNGOs from joining other consortiums. Thus, it reduces their chances of getting funding. Also, the concept stems from the desire to reduce the ability of other NGOs to compete on that funding.

Another area of concern is the improper expenditure of funds by INGOs. I bring a shocking example from an Iraqi friend (2023) who used to work as an office manager for one of the biggest INGOs in the world. I did not interview him for this research. He explained that in 2015, during the displacement crisis in Mosul, he was commissioned to open an office for that INGO in Baghdad. They demanded that the office include recreational spaces, specifically an indoor pool. When the budget fell short of reaching this requirement, they reallocated money from the IDP program in Mosul to the Baghdad office to finance having that pool! At that moment, he resigned.

The misallocation of funds is particularly problematic in resource-scarce environments, let alone a displacement crisis. Interviewee 08 recounts instances where their INGO partner spent significant funds on security, administrative costs, and high-end accommodation for their staff. Meanwhile, they refused to support the needed amendments to the project activities. Such inequality of expenditure signals a disconnect between INGOs.

In the same vein, interviewee 09 noted that INGOs often prioritize administrative compliance and reporting over achieving meaningful outcomes. This focus can lead to superficial program evaluations and a lack of real impact. In turn, this further undermines the credibility and effectiveness of the NGO sector.

The maltreatment and exploitation of Iraqi staff represent a significant concern. Indigenous employees often encounter inequalities in salaries, benefits, and opportunities for professional advancement if compared to their expatriate colleagues. Interviewees 04, 09, 11, 12, 13 underscored this discrepancy. They referred to specific instances where local staff received significantly inferior compensation relative to their international colleagues performing similar roles. This unequal treatment causes anger and diminishes the morale of local employees.

Moreover, the short-term contracts and lack of job security for local staff of LNGOs further exacerbate their vulnerability. Interviewees 01, 05, 10, 09, and 13 mentioned that some LNGOs can only offer their staff three-month contracts. This risky nature of employment usually follows the short-term project contracts between INGOs and LNGOs. This practice undermines the stability of local organizations by making them unable to retain staff. It also limits the professional growth and development of such staff members. Ultimately, it prevents them from building long-term capacity and expertise to take up leadership roles.

Another exploitation aspect is of the volunteers. INGOs often require LNGOs to include and empower local activists, who are volunteers. Meanwhile, they push toward no

reimbursement of their necessary expenses, as interviewee 04 mentioned. Therefore, volunteers are expected to give time, effort, and money. However, volunteers with UN agencies and INGOs usually receive suitable compensation for their expenses.

The harm this double standard toward volunteers is causing is multi-faceted. First, they prefer volunteering with INGOs since they provide better reimbursement and recognition. This leads to less interest of them in volunteering with LNGOs. Second, they usually do not believe that the LNGO has no budget. Instead, they would accuse it of corruption, taking their money and using their efforts.

A similar pattern happens when it comes to travel expense reimbursement. Many UN agencies and INGOs use a rate for per diem that includes three meals and accommodation. They hand it in cash without being responsible for arranging such logistics. Therefore, participants commonly save by going to cheaper hotels and having decent meals. However, LNGOs typically prefer to provide such logistics as it is way more cost-effective. Participants knowing the INGO standard usually object and ask for cash. UN agencies primarily created such a culture and possible harm.

4. CONCLUSIONS: A TRANS-RATIONAL OVERVIEW

The relationship between international and local NGOs in Iraq is sophisticated. It has deeply embedded issues related to inequalities, doing harm, power imbalances, and others. These complexities hinder the effectiveness of humanitarian and development efforts of the NGO sector. Therefore, employing a transrational perspective allows a deeper understanding of how these inequalities interrelate and impact the NGO sector.

This chapter uses the holistic approach of the transrational peaces bring, transcending traditional rational analysis. This chapter re-presents the findings of the previous chapter's case study, focusing on how they inter-relate and reinforce each other. Therefore, miscommunication, power hierarchies, lack of transparency, capacity disparities, access to funding, sustainability challenges, and discrimination are revisited.

Furthermore, this chapter concludes by suggesting recommendations to encourage a more impactful NGO sector in Iraq. The emphasis is on genuine partnerships, capacity building, equitable resource distribution, and culturally and context-sensitive practices.

4.1. A holistic overview of Inequalities Between INGOs and LNGOs

Conflicts and inequalities are not merely the result of rational disagreements but are deeply rooted in relational, emotional, and existential dimensions (Dietrich 2014b). The relationship between INGOs and LNGOs in Iraq demonstrates this. Inequalities stem from interconnected issues that perpetuate a cycle of dependency and mistrust. Meanwhile, the bureaucracy of written policies, procedures, and contractual relationships disguises such conflicts as rational. This usually leads to unseen aspects of the conflicts and, therefore, the inability to address them suitably.

Miscommunication feeds many challenges faced by LNGOs in their interactions with INGOs. Communication is more than the exchange of factual information. It also includes self-revelation, relationship dynamics, and appeals for recognition and respect. LNGO workers often feel intimidated. They fear that expressing concerns or misunderstandings may jeopardize funding or label them incompetent. Cultural norms regarding respect for hierarchy and past experiences where open communication led to negative consequences usually sustain this fear. The result is typically a reluctance to ask questions or seek clarification. This, in turn, leads to misunderstandings that reinforce the power imbalance.

INGOs often control funding and decision-making processes. They also position themselves as donors rather than equal partners. This creates a patriarchal dynamic where LNGOs become passive implementers. LNGOs, hence, feel compelled to comply with INGO demands to secure funding. The hierarchical relationship is further reinforced through communication patterns that emphasize dominance. Therefore, LNGOs see that they have little agency in shaping projects or policies.

From a transrational perspective, this miscommunication is not just a failure of information exchange but a reflection of deeper relational tensions. LNGO staff's inability to communicate openly indicates a lack of harmony in the partnership. The unaddressed fears and unmet needs create a cycle of misunderstanding that maintains inequality. These power structures disrupt the harmony and balance essential for healthy partnerships.

Transparency issues are also linked to communication aspects. There is often a lack of mutual transparency. INGOs generally require extensive disclosures from LNGOs while withholding equivalent information about themselves. This one-sided transparency creates feelings of injustice and mistrust. Moreover, the gatekeeping of information becomes a tool for maintaining control. It also hinders open communication and establishes environments where corruption and nepotism can thrive. In contrast to the stereotypes, INGOs and LNGOs may

engage in such practices. This perpetuates a cycle of unethical behaviors that undermines the trust in and credibility of the NGO sector. This lack of reciprocity disrupts the harmony and balance necessary for equitable partnerships.

Capacity disparities contribute significantly to the inequalities. INGOs typically have well-established systems, resources, and expertise. Most LNGOs may lack the organizational capacities to meet donor requirements or manage complex projects. However, the capacity-building efforts by INGOs have questionable results on LNGOs' organizational capacities. The main reasons include relying on assumptions and prejudices rather than thorough needs assessments and ineffective and mediocre methods.

INGOs frequently approach capacity building from a prescriptive standpoint rather than elicitive. They assume they know what LNGOs need without conducting thorough needs assessments. This approach fails to recognize the unique contexts and challenges local organizations face. This misalignment fails to address the actual needs of LNGOs. It also perpetuates dependency, as LNGOs remain reliant on INGOs for guidance and resources.

Moreover, the high staff turnover from LNGOs to INGOs worsens capacity gaps. Skilled local staff are often drawn to INGOs due to better salaries and opportunities. This leads to a "brain drain" that hinders the development of solid and sustainable LNGOs.

LNGOs face sustainability challenges that are intertwined with capacity disparities. The primary challenges include funding dependencies, poor access to funding, and shifting donor priorities. Furthermore, denying indirect costs necessary for organizational development is a primary threat to LNGOs' sustainability. INGOs often retain indirect costs, leaving LNGOs vulnerable and unable to plan long-term. They deprive LNGOs of essential resources needed for operational sustainability and growth. This practice undermines the financial stability of LNGOs. It also signifies a more profound disregard for their autonomy and development.

Discrimination further compounds these inequalities. It manifests in unequal treatment based on nationality, ethnicity, and organizational affiliation. Local staff often receive lower compensation than international staff, even when performing similar roles. This disparity demonstrates inherent biases and a devaluation of local expertise. Exclusion from strategic decision-making processes also reinforces feelings of inferiority and marginalization among LNGOs and local staff. Such discrimination disrupts the harmony and connectedness essential for effective collaboration.

These aspects are not isolated issues but are deeply interconnected. Miscommunication reinforces power imbalances by preventing LNGOs from voicing their needs and concerns. Power imbalances enable INGOs to deny transparency and impose policies, exacerbating mistrust and dependency. Lack of transparency allows for unethical practices, including denying indirect costs and capacity-building opportunities. They both hinder the sustainability and growth of LNGOs. Capacity disparities maintain the hierarchical structure. In turn, they limit LNGOs' ability to advocate for themselves or challenge discriminatory practices. Discrimination perpetuates miscommunication and power imbalances, as marginalized voices are less likely to be heard or respected.

This interconnected network of inequalities creates a cycle that is difficult to break. Each aspect contributes to and reinforces the others. They also sustain a system where LNGOs remain dependent on INGOs, and genuine partnerships are hindered. From a transrational perspective, addressing these inequalities requires a holistic approach that considers all the dimensions of these relationships.

4.2. A Quest for an Impactful NGO Sector in Iraq

It is fundamental to address the complex inequalities between INGOs and LNGOs in order to have a more impactful NGO sector in Iraq. Using a transrational lens, this process should

involve approaches that promote harmony, justice, security, and truth in relationships and organizational practices. These approaches must be coupled with an accurate and deep understanding of the contexts and cultures at play.

Genuine partnerships should be based on mutual respect and recognition. This includes redefining relationships to move away from hierarchical structures towards collaborative models. Therefore, such a shift will allow LNGOs to become active participants in decision-making processes. Moreover, enhancing communication by establishing open channels for dialogue can encourage transparency and mutual understanding. Recognizing and integrating the unique capacities of LNGOs are also essential for equal partnerships. LNGOs' local knowledge and community connections can enrich program planning and implementation.

Promoting mutual transparency builds trust and accountability. Implementing reciprocal due diligence practices is valuable. Hence, both INGOs and LNGOs share relevant organizational information with each other. Furthermore, engaging in joint monitoring and evaluation processes ensures that all partners have a stake in assessing progress and outcomes. Partnerships can mitigate corruption and nepotism by addressing transparency issues. This, in turn, can create an ethical environment favorable to effective collaboration. Also, mutual transparency can help dismantle gatekeeping behaviors and reduce mistrust.

Investing in tailored capacity-building efforts is another key recommendation. Conducting thorough and timely needs assessments allows capacity-building programs to be aligned with the real needs of LNGOs. Exploring innovative capacity-building methods, such as mentorships, hands-on training, and long-term developmental support, is also recommended. Empowering LNGOs to develop their policies, systems, and strategies promotes autonomy and sustainability. However, these shifts need serious commitment and investment from INGOs and donors. Meanwhile, it can better address capacity disparities and supports the growth and independence of LNGOs. They only reduce dependency on INGOs in the longer term.

Ensuring fair access to funding is essential for the sustainability of LNGOs. Donors should simplify funding processes and lower barriers to entry, making funding more accessible to LNGOs. Simultaneously, evaluation of funding results and compliance should be more rigorous and coupled with capacity-building programs. Encouraging donors to provide grants directly to LNGOs reduces dependency on intermediaries. It also acknowledges their capability to manage resources effectively. Transparent allocation of indirect costs ensures that LNGOs receive their fair share to cover operational expenses and organizational growth. Donors should also closely check if INGOs give the LNGOs their IC share. Addressing funding inequalities helps alleviate sustainability challenges and empowers LNGOs to plan and operate long-term.

Dismantling power imbalances and hierarchical structures involves decentralizing decision-making and shifting authority to local organizations. It also should involve LNGOs in strategic planning and granting them autonomy in implementation. Such approaches help in raising a sense of ownership. Likewise, INGOs should reevaluate the imposition of policies and engage with LNGOs to co-create contextually relevant frameworks. These actions can mitigate discrimination and create a more balanced power dynamic.

Supporting organizational stability involves providing resources for LNGOs to retain staff, develop infrastructure, and plan strategically beyond project cycles. Therefore, localization should be based on gradually transferring responsibilities, resources, and leadership to LNGOs. Meanwhile, providing necessary support is essential. This approach addresses the sustainability challenges and encourages a gradual shift towards self-reliance for LNGOs.

It is also the INGOs' responsibility to cultivate cultural and context sensitivity. INGOs should ensure their international staff are trained in cultural competency and deeply understand the local context. Furthermore, involving local communities in project planning and implementation ensures relevance and effectiveness. The local involvement should be based

on sound and genuine respect for the local expertise. This can involve seriously considering the insights and recommendations of LNGOs and community members. Cultural and context sensitivity can reduce miscommunication and prevent insensitive practices that may cause harm.

Mitigating discrimination and promoting equality involves ensuring equal treatment of staff. Salary and opportunities disparities should be addressed to enhance morale and retention among local staff. Diversity and inclusion policies to prevent discrimination based on nationality, ethnicity, or gender should go beyond the code of conduct and complaints to build relevant sensitivity.

Empowering LNGOs to advocate for their needs and interests at national and international levels can enhance their influence. This can be supported through advocacy and policy engagement. Joint policy influence allows INGOs and LNGOs to work together to shape donor policies and practices that affect the NGO sector in Iraq. Likewise, protecting civic space in Iraq is crucial and urgent. International actors should advocate and use leverage to safeguard the NGO's operational environment against restrictive government measures.

Implementing the above-recommended strategies requires serious commitment from donors, INGOs, and LNGOs. Only through a holistic approach can transformative and meaningful changes be achieved. Hence, they can enable the NGO sector in Iraq to serve its communities better and contribute to lasting peaces.

By addressing the interconnected inequalities, fostering genuine partnerships, and promoting equitable practices, the NGO sector can realize its potential for positive impact. The journey towards an impactful and harmonious NGO sector is not just a strategic endeavor but a relational one. It demands a profound shift in how organizations perceive and engage with one another.

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Interviewee 04, an Iraqi female working in project management for an LNGO, was interviewed online on August 23, 2022.

Interviewee 05, an Iraqi female working in project management for an LNGO, was interviewed online on April 4, 2024.

Interviewee 06, an Iraqi male working in project management for an LNGO, was interviewed in person on August 22, 2022, in Baghdad.

Interviewee 07, an Iraqi male working in project management for an LNGO, was interviewed in person on August 22, 2022, in Baghdad.

Interviewee 08, an Iraqi female working as a senior manager for an LNGO, was interviewed in person on August 22, 2022, in Baghdad.

Interviewee 09, an Iraqi female working in project management for an LNGO, was interviewed in person on May 26, 2023, in Erbil.

Interviewee 10, an Iraqi male working as a senior manager for an LNGO, was interviewed in person on August 28, 2022, in Erbil.

Interviewee 11, an Iraqi female working in project management for an INGO, was interviewed in person on May 25, 2023, in Erbil.

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ANNEX I: CODE SYSTEM

Codes	Frequency
Code System	1239
General	0
Important	177
Respondent	0
NGO Type	0
INGO	6
NNGO	9
Nationality	0
Iraqi	11
International	4
Sex	0
Male	9
Female	6
Role	0
Senior	5
Project Management	10
Harmony	0
Communication	4
With stakeholders	5
Direct with the donors	14
Between partners	22
Language barriers	13
Transparency	17
Nepotism / comfort zone	30
Corruption	19
Mutuality	12
Partnership	3
INGO Isolation	4
Autonomy of NNGOs	9

Power imbalance	36
Hierarchy	35
Patriarchy	18
Justice	0
Capacities	4
NNGO willingness	15
Capacity building methods	26
Access to new knowledge	8
Limiting spaces for change	2
Needs identification	22
Support and backup	14
Organizational capacities	60
Funding	0
Changing priorities	11
Access to funding	54
Dependency	17
Reliance on foreign funding	7
Government support	6
Security	0
Policies and structures	3
Rigidity	6
Many requirements and systems	9
(In-)consistency	6
Localization	4
Donor responsibility	31
Gov responsibility	6
INGOs responsibility	27
NNGOs' staff development	3
Organizational growth	3
Risks	0
To the LNGO	16

Poor risk management	3
To the project results	6
Sustainability	15
Funding diversification	8
Indirect costs	50
Funding scarcity	9
Staff retention/overtake	13
Self sufficiency	9
Truth	1
Complaints	3
Partnership reality	3
Improvement	9
Aspired partnerships	13
Poor INGO capacity	11
Local ownership	15
Donor-implementer	21
Advocacy	6
Intermediary	16
Acknowledgement and Visibility	4
Reputation	4
Discrimination	1
LNGO/INGO	12
Inequal pay	21
Age, gender, and ethnicity	9
Iraqi vs expat	16
Doing Harm	1
Improper expenditure	8
Poor evaluation	6
Undermining LNGOs roles	9
Promoting corruption	11
Violating staff/volunteer rights	17

Community consultation	11
Cultural and context (in-)sensitivity	32
Competitiveness	28

ANNEX II: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Introduce yourself and your organization, including your role.
- Describe the partnerships your organization currently has with other NGOs.
- What are the main partnership challenges facing your organization?
- How does a partnership between NNGO and INGO look like?
- Transparency
- How do you evaluate capacity building your organization received/ delivered to other NGOs?
- For INGO respondent: how do you assess the capacity building needs of other NGOs?
- For LINGO respondent: What capacities does your organization need the most?
- What is organizational capacity building? Do you receive funding for that?
- What are your organization's main sources of funding?
- How do you evaluate your organization's access to funds?
- What capacities does your organization have for access to funds?
- What are the main challenges facing your organization's access to funds?
- What capacities does your organization need for access to funds?
- How do you evaluate your organization's sustainability?
- What are the challenges to your organization's sustainability?
- What are overhead/ indirect/ administrative costs? And does your organization obtain them?
- What is overhead/ Indirect/ administrative cost importance for your organization sustainability?