

# Strengthened Partnerships for Principled & Effective Humanitarian Action

Principles of Partnership Workshops

**REPORT**



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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## Acknowledgement

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# 1. Background

The '**Principles of Partnership (PoP)**' consist of five core principles that succinctly articulate the core elements governing partnerships and relationships among humanitarian actors.

**The five principles of partnership are:**

- Equality
- Transparency
- Results-Oriented Approach
- Responsibility
- Complementarity

**Equality** reflects the heart of mutual respect and rectification of power imbalances in fully costed relationships.

**Transparency** touches on all aspects of communication, relation, and trust among partners.

**Results-Oriented Approach** requires result-oriented coordination based on effective capabilities and concrete operational capacities. All partnerships should strive to meet the key operational performance criteria articulated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development/Development Assistance Committee. These are relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability.

**Responsibility** ensures a principled and accountable approach with affected persons at its centre, fully ensuring all staff members are kept safe and risks are appropriately shared with all necessary safeguarding measures taken.

**Complementarity** encapsulates the statement as local as possible and as international as necessary and calls upon humanitarian actors to provide effective capacity-strengthening support to ensure effective future local leadership.

The Principles of Partnership were developed in 2007 in the framework of the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) which was established by leaders of 40 humanitarian organisations including NGOs, UN Agencies, the World Bank, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. ICVA is an active member of the GHP and has throughout the years conducted various activities to promote the PoP and their application, including a [campaign](#) in the days leading up to the World Humanitarian Summit.<sup>1</sup> Developed with the aim of addressing weaknesses and gaps within the humanitarian sector, the PoP remain very relevant even today. They continue to cover the heart of what is required to advance the localisation agenda and are of relevance to different ongoing processes including the Grand Bargain.

Therefore, with the objective of using the PoP to advance good partnership practices, including 'identifying practical solutions to overcome key challenges,' throughout 2023 and 2024, ICVA, with the support of the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), organised four regional workshops. The workshops brought together International NGOs (INGOs) and Local and National NGOs (L/NNGOs) as well as invited donors and UN actors, to both review the PoP and reflect on good practices, challenges, and potential solutions in their implementation.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on ICVA work on PoP please visit [here](#).

This report summarises the key findings and recommendations from the four workshops.<sup>2</sup>

## Principles of Partnership (PoP)

### A Statement of Commitment

Endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform, 12 July 2007

The Global Humanitarian Platform, created in July 2006, brings together UN and non-UN humanitarian organisations on an equal footing. The platform's mission involves:

Striving to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian action, based on an ethical obligation and accountability to the populations we serve,

Acknowledging diversity as an asset of the humanitarian community and recognising the interdependence among humanitarian organisations,

Commitment to building and nurturing an effective partnership.

... the organisations participating in the Global Humanitarian Platform agree to base their partnership on the following principles:

### Equality

Equality requires mutual respect between members of the partnership irrespective of size and power. The participants must respect each other's mandates, obligations and independence and recognise each other's constraints and commitments. Mutual respect must not preclude organisations from engaging in constructive dissent.

### Transparency

Transparency is achieved through dialogue (on equal footing), with an emphasis on early consultations and early sharing of information. Communications and transparency, including financial transparency, increase the level of trust among organisations.

### Results-oriented approach

Effective humanitarian action must be reality-based and action-oriented. This requires results-oriented coordination based on effective capabilities and concrete operational capacities.

### Responsibility

Humanitarian organisations have an ethical obligation to each other to accomplish their tasks responsibly, with integrity and in a relevant and appropriate way. They must make sure they commit to activities only when they have the means, competencies, skills and capacity to deliver on their commitments. Decisive and robust prevention of abuses committed by humanitarians must also be a constant effort.

### Complementarity

The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other's contributions. Local capacity is one of the main assets to enhance and on which to build. Whenever possible, humanitarian organisations should strive to make it an integral part in emergency response. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome.

Text Box: Extracted from Humanitarian Reform: Basic Information Leaflet Series – Principles of Partnership.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Participation and Methodology

Combined, the workshops brought together over 112 participants from 102 international and local/national NGOs (INGOs and L/NNGOs), and NGO Fora, with 68% of the participants coming from L/NNGOs. The workshops also included representatives from donors and UN agencies as guests to contribute to relevant discussions. Each of the workshops ranged from 1.5 to 3 days. The PoP were presented, including their relevance for effective localisation. Safe spaces were facilitated to foster open and honest conversations among the international and national/local NGO participants, allowing them to celebrate successes and identify, particularly from the perspective of L/NNGOs, the areas they still find challenging when collaborating with international partners.

## 3. Key Findings and Recommendations

Before examining the findings under each Principle, it is important to highlight that the workshops were warmly received. The PoP were regarded as a valuable tool for both individual and collective advocacy as well as guidance to frame partnership conversations and find solutions.

<sup>2</sup> East and Southern Africa region on 14 - 15 November 2023; Asia-Pacific region on 14 - 15 December 2023; MENA region on 22 - 23 January 2024; and Latin America and the Caribbean region on 26 - 27 February 2024.

<sup>3</sup> See Humanitarian Reform: Basic Information Leaflet Series – Principles of Partnership, The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project, 2010  
<https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2021/09/NGO-Humanitarian-Reform-Principles-of-Partnership.pdf>

As per pre- and post-learning assessments, across the workshops, the percentage of respondents who reported **understanding the objectives of the PoP and to whom they apply** 'very to extremely well' rose significantly from 0% to 87%. Although the participants may not have been aware of the PoP as an instrument before the workshops, many felt that the principles themselves were included within their policies and approaches to partnership, some even advocated for their use in collaborations with private sector and government partners.

Most participants felt the PoP were relevant, but that partnerships and intermediary relationships required more collective effort to ensure the PoP were effectively represented. **The participants also felt that the workshops succeeded in providing a safe and open space for honest dialogue.** There was a strong request to continue providing these spaces, including through the NGO Fora as well as conducting more research and development into the PoP to ensure effective implementation.

'Partnerships should start on a basis of trust that all sides are competent and capable of doing the work.'

Bangkok PoP, December 2023

#### **Recommendations:**

- The PoP should continue to be used as an effective tool to remind all international and national partners of the essential elements that should be included in all partnerships and intermediary relations.
- Donors should resource and encourage both international and local organisations to have clear partnership policies based on the PoP. These policies should be tailored to the context, considering the type of partnerships, cultural factors, and alignment with other organisational policies.

## 4. Good Practices, Challenges and Recommendations per Principle

### Equality

**Key Characteristics:** Mutual respect, including assessing and using the qualities and strengths of others; recognising and proactively addressing power imbalances; participatory decision-making processes; ensuring budgets are fully costed, including administrative costs and indirect costs; and enabling partners to use and respect their policies.

#### **Good Practices:**

- Trust and mutual respect were recognised as the foundation of quality partnerships.
- It was emphasised that all partners play a key role in building and sustaining the partnership relationship. This mutuality needed to be further reinforced.
- The adoption of localisation strategies and action plans based on PoP were commended.
- When partners recognised the role and contributions of local and national partners, respected cultural norms, and practices, ensured strong communications, and

supported organisational development, local actors felt valued, and partnerships were stronger.

- NGO Fora were one of the good means identified to advance collective L/NGO interests and address power imbalances.
- Fostering direct contact between L/NNGOs and the back donors was also seen as a strong good practice to address power imbalances (break what was perceived as a golf course interaction among international actors). It was considered important to ensure donors hear what L/NNGOs are saying and guarantee that responses/projects are contextually and culturally relevant to the needs of communities.
- The Humanitarian Partnership Cycle was considered too complex; however, the partnership guidance documents, including those from the INGO partners, were helpful.

'Power imbalances remain a key barrier to quality partnerships.'

Bangkok PoP,  
December 2023

### Challenges:

- Fundamentally, L/NNGOs felt that money talked. Equality in partnerships was hard to achieve, notably because processes like communication, decision-making, resource allocation, and capacity were determined by the funding partner.
- Many local and national NGO participants felt they had no feasible recourse or accountability mechanisms when INGO or UN partners did not uphold their partnership commitments.
- L/NNGOs were too often challenged having to juggle contradictory partners and government regulatory frameworks. L/NNGOs often failed to meet their own human resource policies and salary scales due to partner's budgetary or regulatory requirements.
- L/NNGOs administrative costs and/or indirect costs were rarely fully covered, weakening the L/NNGOs and too often jeopardising effective risk management and project oversight.

### General Recommendations:

- To build equitable partnerships, all partners need to invest in culturally relevant mechanisms addressing power imbalances and building an environment of trust.
- All need to do more to foster direct contact between L/NNGOs and donors, break down direct funding barriers, and ensure local partners have a voice in decision-making, communication, resource allocation, and capacity development discussions from the start of partnership discussions.
- ICVA (and all partners) should continue to support NGO Fora and their role in strengthening effective partnerships and intermediary relationships.
- All partners and donors need to collaborate to ensure that programme and project budgets are fully costed, effectively covering a fair share of indirect costs. See reference to the [IASC guidance](#).

## Transparency

**Key Characteristics:** open and regular communication and dialogue; sharing full information; providing safe spaces to provide confidential information (including allegations of fraud or aid diversion); and ensuring effective coordination among actors.

### **Good Practices:**

- Clear discussion and agreement on partnership goals and expectations were strongly emphasised by participants as key to avoiding miscommunication and misunderstanding.
- Direct engagement with donors and partners throughout the program cycle could help alleviate some concerns by improving understanding of what donors and partners value and discussing how challenges can be addressed.
- Regular partnership interactions and a culture of trust and dialogue among staff were considered essential.
- Confidential call lines and other methods for providing confidential information, while respecting privacy concerns, were also regarded as good practice.

### **Challenges:**

- Although it was recognised that INGOs organised periodic partnership meetings and annual partnership reviews were organised by INGOs, local NGOs felt it difficult to provide critical feedback or be fully transparent on their partnership experience for fear of losing funding opportunities.
- Communications between partners are considered extractive rather than two-way. Reports are also submitted upwards to the funding partner, with few processes focused on reporting back to the implementing partners. This misses opportunities for building trust and mutual accountability.
- While most participants understood the value of open and clear communication, it was acknowledged that, in general, partners only shared what they felt was relevant to the other party, such as specific budget lines and operational responsibilities. This approach created a distance between partners and the overall goals.
- Diverse cultural norms and differing expectations of open communication were highlighted as a challenge.
- Some participants highlighted privacy concerns as a barrier to open communications.

### **General Recommendations:**

- Mutually accountable and enforceable processes need to be agreed upon and institutionalised by partner organisations.
- Confidential feedback mechanisms and safe spaces for partner feedback must be put in place and followed up on.
- Communication means and channels must be culturally appropriate and shaped for the partners.



## Results-Oriented Approach

**Key Characteristics:** Together ensuring the partnership results in **relevant, coherent, effective, efficient, impactful, and sustainable** humanitarian action; effective engagement of partners in project design; ensuring contracting and due diligence processes are quick and easy; enabling rapid response; budget flexibility and quality financing.

'Due diligence procedures are excessive and can impede quality localised response.'

Bangkok PoP,  
December 2023

### Good Practices:

- Building trust and bringing in partners from the beginning of the partnership cycle was seen as essential for effective programming.
- The effects of due diligence reform were beginning to be seen, with more examples of partners either passporting or harmonising due diligence practices.
- Fair and transparent partnership selection processes were recognised as important for achieving programme results and building quality partnerships.

### Challenges:

- Short-term contracts, even within multi-year funding contexts, were perceived as time-wasting and to prevent partners from voicing disagreement or complaints about the partnerships.
- Due diligence processes continue to be repetitive and duplicative for L/NNGOs with multiple international partners.
- Participants felt that donors and INGOs placed too much emphasis on due diligence requirements in a mechanical way, rather than selecting the right partners who can ensure quality community outcomes and are best placed according to socio-cultural dynamics.
- Local partners considered due diligence and partnership requirements to give little weight to the other partnerships local actors hold, resulting in duplication of due diligence procedures. Many participants noted that the due diligence process remained the same regardless of the funding amount or the number of partnerships already held; for example, a contract for \$10,000 often has the same due diligence requirements as one for \$500,000.
- For L/NNGOs, completing due diligence processes involved using core institutional resources not covered by the project grants or indirect cost recovery.

### General Recommendations:

- Contract length should never be used to keep partners in check and should always reflect funding and programmatic realities and programmatic efficiencies.
- Efforts should continue in due diligence reform.

- Donors and international partners need to better ensure that due diligence indicators reflect factors that assess the extent of meaningful and trusted partnerships between communities and local organisations.
- Donors and intermediaries should collaborate with each other to streamline and harmonise due diligence assessment tools and requirements. They must also accept each other's due diligence assessments.

'LNNGOs mainly receive shorter-term projects. The humanitarian partnership cycle appears to be more of a process that should be adaptable to all contexts.'

Nairobi PoP, November 2023

## Responsibility

**Key Characteristics:** Ensuring accountability to affected populations and a people-centred approach, partners work together to effectively share risks, prevent and address fraud, aid diversion, and fully abide by all safeguarding principles.

### Good Practices:

- Recognising that L/NNGOs play a critical role in highlighting the impact and outcomes experienced by communities.
- Engaging in open and trustful dialogue on PSEA risks and including safeguarding principles in partnership contracts.
- Supporting partners to identify risks throughout the partnership and ensuring that prevention and mitigation efforts are in place.

### Challenges:

- Effective risk sharing and identification among partners.
- L/NNGOs need to ensure they are communicating community feedback as well as what is and is not working. This does not have to be done individually but can be done through national or local NGO Fora, which often have a stronger collective voice and existing connections with key international stakeholders.

### Recommendations:

- Placing Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) principles at the heart of partnership design and implementation.
- Ensure all aspects of AAP, PSEA, and Risk Sharing are key components of all partnership conversations.

## Complementarity

**Key Characteristics:** Encapsulated in the statement as local as possible and as international as necessary; international partners seeing their role as complementary to national capacities; investing in partners' capacities, fundraising, and networking.

### Good Practices:

- The use of standardised organisational assessment tools, such as the Organisational Capacity Assessment, was considered a good practice.

- Co-creating capacity-building plans, which balanced project requirements with organisational needs and highlighted the contributions of local partners, was seen as good practice.

### **Challenges:**

- Investment in tailored capacity strengthening is valued by participants as an important part of any partnership. However, many local partners felt that priority was still given to building capacity based on the needs of the funding partner, rather than the needs and vision of the local or national NGOs.
- Processes for capacity assessment were also noted to be rigid, failing to distinguish between short- and long-term needs or the capacities that were desired or could be shared by the local partner.
- While there is significant investment in capacity strengthening, L/NNGOs are not supported with the additional resources needed to adequately translate the required capacities into organisational practices.

### **General Recommendations:**

- Capacity-strengthening support must be demand-driven and build on the capacities and gaps of all partners involved. To the greatest extent possible, the transfer of resources should also support the sustainability of organisations, enabling them to respond effectively and consistently.

## **5. Recommendations**

### **Donors**

- Support understanding and compliance with the principles in the PoP and promote opportunities for safe and open dialogue among INGOs and L/NNGOs.
- Foster direct engagement and inclusion of local partners in strategic and policy level discussions.
- Engage directly with L/NNGOs, even when funded through intermediaries. Seek their feedback, including on programme design and partnership dynamics.
- Encourage problem sharing, feedback and questions from partners, and take time to familiarise partners with expectations and processes.
- Support and encourage flexible partnership approaches including project design, implementation strategies, and resource allocation.
- Ensure partnerships are fully costed including downstream partners' costs and capacity strengthening needs.
- Collaborate with other donors and international partners to simplify and harmonise due diligence and reporting processes.
- Engage proactively in risk-sharing discussions among partners as appropriate.
- Keep the pressure and invest in the reform of the humanitarian system to ensure equal say by L/NGOs and relations among actors built on the PoP.

## International Partners (INGOs, UN)

- Treat your partners as you would like them to treat you by proactively putting yourself in their position and encouraging your staff to do the same.
- Collaborate with partners to establish processes where result-oriented partnerships are prioritised.
- Foster the exchange of good partnership practices among humanitarian partners.
- Support capacity strengthening that aligns with partners' actual needs and is also followed up by the transfer of resources, prioritises impact and long-term sustainability over short-term project needs and existing assets, and enhances partners' access to direct funding.
- Engender clear, consistent, and transparent communication when collaborating with partners, taking into consideration cultural norms and ways of communicating.
- Provide quality, flexible funding, including, where possible, long-term partnership contracts.
- Support and work with local actors to directly engage with donors and build an understanding of the context, challenges, and opportunities within which local actors are working.
- Fully cover administrative costs and provide flexible unearmarked indirect cost recovery.<sup>4</sup>
- Engage proactively in risk-sharing discussions and solutions with partners.
- Apply partnership and due diligence standards that are proportionate to the support provided and are balanced with the goals of the humanitarian action.

## Local NGOs

- Actively seek and advocate for equal participation in decision-making processes. This includes dialogues with donors and INGOs to establish clear roles and responsibilities within partnerships.
- Participate in co-learning and knowledge-sharing activities to enhance the collective understanding of effective partnership principles and practices. Share experiences and best practices with other local and international partners.
- Communicate and commit to clear accountability and transparency standards in all aspects of project implementation and partnership management. This includes open communication with partners and stakeholders.
- Actively invest and use NGO Fora to pursue collective advocacy, coordination, and peer-to-peer learning.
- Proactively engage in risk-sharing discussions, including learning from peer organisations.

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<sup>4</sup> [IASC guidance- Provision of overheads to local and national partners](#)

## ICVA's Next Steps

ICVA will continue to work on localisation as per its 2030 Strategy. The content of this work is further elaborated in Annex 1 of this document. In addition, ICVA will:

- Encourage due diligence reform through the facilitation of a community of practice, bringing together donors, partners, and intermediaries to share good practices and seek synergies and complementarity in their work.<sup>5</sup>
- Develop a guidance document for partners that expands on the PoP and highlights examples of good practices.
- Continue facilitated dialogues among INGOs and L/NNGOs through the NGO fora to share the PoP as a benchmark for partnership qualities, enabling these qualities to be embraced and owned by the various partners.
- Further unpack risk sharing, as experienced by both the L/NNGOs and the INGOs, and highlight good practices, including those among donors and intermediary funding agencies.
- Ensure the PoP are incorporated in the localisation measurement efforts being rolled out by ICVA in the Sahel and MENA regions.
- Continue to support Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) efforts, notably through the ICVA's PSEA Fund, providing direct support to L/NNGO PSEA efforts.

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<sup>5</sup> ICVA, as part of the LOCAL Consortium (ICVA, HQAI, DRC and SPONG) is delighted to launch the Community of Practice (CoP) on Due Diligence Reform. The platform is supported by Save the Children and will bring together agencies currently working or planning projects in due diligence reform to share lessons learned, promote synergies and avoid duplication. The CoP is [open to all](#) staff interested in due diligence including UN, NGOs, CBOs, NGO networks and donors.

## Annex 1: ICVA's Work in Localisation

[Localisation](#) is crucial within the ICVA 2030 strategy, where ICVA focuses on supporting the local actors directly and influencing the overall humanitarian architecture to create an enabling environment and inclusive humanitarian leadership. The goal is to ensure that strategic decision-making processes and funding are more accessible and inclusive for local actors, with a particular emphasis on women and refugee-led organisations and local networks. Additionally, ICVA is committed to enhancing the existing capacities of local actors, enabling them to coordinate effectively and lead various collective advocacy actions, including accessing better qualitative funding.

Localisation is a cross-cutting thematic area linked to ICVA's key strategic areas: Forced Migration, Humanitarian Coordination and Humanitarian Financing.

ICVA has been working with NGO members and partners on the following key pillars:

- **Local actor participation:** Strengthen the meaningful participation of local actors in leadership and decision-making within humanitarian coordination platforms.
- **Create space for complex discussions:** Organising strategic convenings for LNNGOs to exchange and discuss with their INGO counterparts and donors.
- **Strengthening resources, capacities, and mutual learning:** Enhance and support the capacities and resources of local and national NGOs by enabling NGO Fora to support their members' access to financing and organisational sustainability, and by supporting the strengthening of the leadership of women-led and refugee-led NGOs.
- **Reducing barriers:** Address and reduce barriers preventing local actors from advancing their leadership roles and improving the quality of partnerships to support local advocacy.
- **Evidence-based advocacy:** Support the creation of localisation frameworks, strategies, and measurable objectives, using recent examples like [Ukraine](#) and [Yemen](#) to guide advocacy efforts.
- **Support collective action:** Support both international and local NGO fora in their efforts to develop collective localisation strategies.
- **Influencing donors:** Engage donors and member states to address barriers and leverage opportunities, referencing initiatives like DG ECHO's equitable partnership and USAID's localisation guidance.
- **Local ownership and sustainability:** Promote local ownership of humanitarian responses by supporting grassroots, women-led, and refugee-led organisations, particularly through the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus approach in conflict and crisis-affected areas.

### ICVA Publications on Localisation

- [A Humanitarian Localisation Baseline for Ukraine – Progress Report 2024](#)
- [Localisation in Humanitarian Leadership](#)
- [Crossing The Bridge – A Practical Guide to Support Good Intermediary Practice](#)
- [A Humanitarian Localisation Baseline for Ukraine](#)
- [Measuring Humanitarian Localisation in Yemen – Baseline Report](#)

- [Localization in Humanitarian Leadership](#)
- [Reinforce, Reinforce, Reinforce: Localization in the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response](#)
- [ICVA Briefing Paper: Unpacking Localisation](#)
- [Measuring Localisation: Framework and Tools](#)
- [Localisation Examined: An ICVA Briefing Paper](#)
- [Mapping and Rapid Assessment of Existing National NGO Coordination Mechanisms Focusing on Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova](#)



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## Geneva Office

Humanitarian Hub, La Voie-Creuse 16, 1202 Geneva  
[secretariat@icvanetwork.org](mailto:secretariat@icvanetwork.org)  
[www.icvanetwork.org](http://www.icvanetwork.org)