

**DRAFT FOR COMMENT**

**An Appeal by Palestinian Civil Society to the International Community to  
Respect Our Right to Self Determination in the Aid System**

by

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April 19, 2011

## Glossary

***Aid actor*** – An individual or organization that works in the international humanitarian or development aid system working on development or other aspects of the aid process.

***Aid recipient*** – An individual or organization that receives funding to implement humanitarian or development activities and/or benefits directly or indirectly from aid.

***Civil Society*** – Also known as the “third sector” to distinguish it from the public/governmental and private sectors, civil society includes individual activists and organizations of various sizes that work, often voluntarily, for the public interest.

***CSO*** – Civil society organization.

***Development Aid*** – Government-funded assistance for longer-term development objectives; often subject to conditionality.

***Donor*** – An individual or organization that gives money for the wellbeing of beneficiaries; used primarily in this case to refer to governmental donors (i.e. overseas development assistance).

***Grassroots Civil Society*** – Refers to people and organizations at the community level who do civil society work, usually voluntarily, in their own communities (as distinct from professional civil society organizations with professional staff).

***Humanitarian Aid*** – Government-funded assistance that is emergency/relief oriented and short-term and governed by international principles including impartiality and neutrality.

***INGO*** – International non-governmental organization working in more than one national context and almost always outside their country of origin.

***NGO*** – Non-governmental organization or non-profit organization working on a national or local level.

## **Acknowledgements**

We sincerely thank Nora Lester Murad, PhD, former founding executive director of Dalia Association, for leading this research and authoring the report. We also thank those who participated in or supported the workshops (see Annex B for a complete list) for taking part in the process of claiming their rights by sharing their experiences and hopes for change.

Moreover, this project would not have been possible without the help of those who facilitated or took notes at the workshops: Randa Hilal, Hedaya Shimon, Shahira Shelabi, Abdel Fattah Abu Srouf, Tahrir ‘Atiq, Mona Khadr, Ifraj Saadi and Lisa Bhungalia; and the volunteer research team who helped design the methodology and analyze workshop transcripts: Randa Hilal, Khalil Nakhleh, Lisa Bhungalia, Azza Shoaibi, Rami Hinawi, Weeam Hammoudeh, Mohammad Khalaf, and Sabri Saidam.

We extend our gratitude to others whose volunteer efforts contributed significantly to the design and analysis of the research and the commentary in the report: Christina Bermann-Harms, Prashan Thalayasingam, Amer Shomali (cartoons), Morgan Cooper, Abdullah Dkaidek, and Turbo Design.

Thanks also to those who commented on early drafts of this report: Peter Schaefer, Katharine Lester, Robin Myers, Claire Schouten, Catherine Smith, Jochen Stoll; and to those provided opportunities to present the ideas reflected in this report: Synergos Institute Global Fellows Meeting (Namibia) and World Congress of Muslim Philanthropists (Qatar).



***PREFACE: Reforming “Aid” to Enable Development***

The paper reports on research that is part of an effort by Palestinian civil society actors to advocate for reform of the international aid system, which does not, in Dalia Association’s view, respect Palestinians’ right to self-determination.

The report primarily addresses the audience of international aid actors—a diverse group of generally well-meaning people who often make substantial personal sacrifices in their efforts to address poverty and other global problems. Given their good intentions, it is understandable when they say, “Although we may not be perfect, we’re doing the best we can.” However, this attitude wrongly defends individuals rather than focusing on problems within the system. It stifles learning and discourages much-needed reform.

The paper is also aimed at Palestinian civil society and other aid-dependent civil societies around the world. As aid recipients, Palestinians play a critical role in the aid system; the system cannot stay as it is without their participation, nor can it change without their leadership.

***Isn’t “aid” supposed to “help?”***

It seems no one is truly satisfied with the international aid system as it is. Critiques by development think tanks are published so quickly there is hardly time to read them, much less implement the recommendations.<sup>1</sup> Some critiques focus on the tremendous amount of money spent without corresponding reductions in poverty; while others focus on uneven application of international standards in donor practice, thus undermining the effectiveness and sustainability of development outcomes.

In response, international aid actors have started to take steps towards improving their performance. The Paris Declaration, Accra Agenda for Action, and other development initiatives demonstrate a major step towards recognizing the need for new paradigms in aid-funded development. Unfortunately, while aid coordination and harmonization actions have begun, they seem only to add an additional level of bureaucracy to an already-complicated system.

More importantly, what coordination does exist is usually among large international organizations, rather than between these organizations, recipient state governments and recipient civil society.

**Aid vs. Philanthropy**

Official aid (the topic of this paper) is distinct from philanthropy, which refers to individuals or organizations that proactively and intentionally contribute their own resources to a cause of their choosing.

Most people are involved with official aid either as citizens of aid-recipient governments, or as taxpayers to aid-providing governments. This official aid may be transferred (1) from government to government as budgetary support or project funding (directly or through multilateral agencies like the World Bank or United Nations); (2) from government to international NGO (non governmental organization) either for implementation of projects or re-granting to national (or local) NGOs; or (3) directly from governments to national NGOs in recipient nations.

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<sup>1</sup> See Annex B for recommended readings.

Civil society groups in recipient nations are also dissatisfied, but their voices have not, for the most part, been given space in the global discourse. One reason may be that recipients silence themselves for fear of angering the donors upon whom they depend. Another reason may be that when they do complain, little changes. We argue that recipient civil society, especially grassroots civil society groups comprised of poor people who work collectively to serve their own communities, can offer unique and valuable insight into the problems of the current international aid system.

### ***Exposing the Unintended Consequences of Dependence on Aid***

Since its inception as the first Palestinian community foundation in 2007, Dalia Association has heard grievances against the international aid system from Palestinian civil society groups. Apparently, many policies and procedures, while perhaps justified from the donors' point of view, have a deleterious affect on Palestinian civil society's ability to be accountable to its own communities and be sustainable.

#### **Who are aid actors?**

Aid actors include governmental donors, multilaterals (e.g., United Nations, World Bank), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), national NGOs, local community-based organizations (grassroots groups formally or informally structured), and the network of for-profit development agencies, consultants, vendors, and others who serve and benefit from the aid system. Local governments, professionals, industry associations and "beneficiaries" also play important roles in the aid system. Generally, the international aid actors represent givers while the local aid actors represent receivers.

In fact, Dalia Association was founded on the basis of research conducted by Dalia Association founders in 2005-2006 that sought to better understand the problem of dependence on international aid. Even then, few of the over 150 civil society activists and development professionals who were interviewed defended the aid system. Most complained about donor-driven agendas, wasted resources, fraudulent practices (both by donors and NGO recipients), and inaccessibility of aid to those grassroots activists best positioned to make real contributions on the ground.

Notably, most interviewees argued that international aid is needed, despite the unintended negative consequences. They said, however, aid is currently administered in a way that disempowers Palestinian civil society by undermining local agendas, ignoring local leadership, and discouraging local initiative. In the long-term, trust in local institutions is damaged because communities perceive their NGOs as serving donors' foreign agendas, rather than local ones.

Of course, some important local actors do not consider the consequences of aid to be "unintended." They point to the imbalanced and unjust political motivations of donors (especially Western donors) and the self-serving economic incentives which are built into the aid system. They believe that aid to Palestine, as well as aid to other aid-dependent peoples in the global south, is intentionally unjust and dehumanizing and suggest we simply refuse aid (especially budgetary support to the Palestinian Authority, but also aid to civil society). Others, while conceding that donors represent governments with political interests that won't

change easily, believe that some aid policies and procedures can be reformed, thus dramatically improving the impact of aid – at least in the short term.

In 2009-2010, in order to further advance the debate about international aid and what we, Palestinians, can do given our dependence, Dalia Association took the initiative to encourage Palestinian civil society to engage with international aid actors as equal parties, aware of their rights, articulating their requirements with dignity, and transcending the inaccurate and dehumanizing attitude of dependency that “we have no choice but to take aid on their terms.” This paper reports on the first phase of this initiative, which was research to empower grassroots civil society groups to articulate their experiences with, objections to, and proposals for international aid. The rest of the initiative will take shape in response to readers of this paper.

Are international aid actors willing to hear Palestinians’ views? Are they willing to hear criticism, even when it isn’t expressed diplomatically or is based on an incomplete understanding of the aid system? Are they willing to consider that some of the processes common to international aid practice may actually cause harm?

On the other hand, are Palestinian civil society activists willing to consider their own complicity in perpetuating this system? Are they willing to admit that their participation has diverted them, sometimes substantially, from their responsibility to address local priorities? Are they willing to acknowledge that too often, they allow themselves to be accountable to foreign donors rather than the communities they claim to serve?

### *An Invitation to Engage*

Reform requires honest appraisal of the current system, and Palestine presents a microcosm—a case study—which can offer international aid actors new insight into possibilities for systematic change.

Are international aid actors and Palestinian civil society activists willing to engage with one another in responsible discussion about how the international aid system in Palestine can be improved through a rights framework? We think so.

In fact, we think that through constructive engagement among local civil society, including grassroots activists, and international aid actors, we can:

- (1) immediately reform the aid system in small, but meaningful ways;
- (2) see ourselves and one another differently, thus transforming unequal relationships to ones based on mutual respect and a rights framework;
- (3) work together towards accountability mechanisms and other innovations that make the aid system work for development; and
- (4) inspire positive change in other aid-dependent contexts.

The first step, we believe, is the “speaking aloud” of objections and proposals that grassroots Palestinian civil society actors have previously been unable to express in an organized way. Some will find this document too harsh. They might feel threatened by the idea that aid is not helping the way they think it should. Others may find this document too weak. They will say that reform of an inherently unjust system is impossible and we ought to end aid. Even these grassroots voices, from different locations and different types of organizations, do not always

agree, but the effort to understand them can prove highly worthwhile.

Please consider this an invitation to explore, together, how to improve the aid system. Further steps are suggested in this document but depend on the initiative of those who choose to participate. We invite those who read to engage the ideas and share their views—to get involved at [info@dalia.ps](mailto:info@dalia.ps).

Respectfully,

Dalia Association, Palestine  
[www.Dalia.ps](http://www.Dalia.ps)

## An Appeal by Palestinian Civil Society

### *The Global Discourse is Missing the Point*

There are two emergent global discourses in development that both fail to address the vital topic of rights in aid. While one discourse focuses on rights-based development, as opposed to needs-based development, the other deals with aid effectiveness, a debate paving the way for the next High Level Forum in Korea in late 2011. However, neither of these discourses addresses aid recipients' rights to self determination in the aid process.

More and more, aid recipients (both local civil society groups and the communities they serve) are recognized as having the right to lead their own development agenda, but this does not extend to deciding how international resources are used on their behalf. So, despite the rhetoric of empowerment of, and local ownership by, “beneficiaries,” they are rendered marginal in the aid process—just as in so many other aspects of their lives.

Ultimately, “aid,” as currently practiced, risks doing the same harm it claims to address.

### *Palestine is an Extreme Case, But Not Unique*

Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt<sup>2</sup>) – are the largest per capita recipients of international humanitarian and development aid. In fact, a recent study published by Palestine Economic Research Institute (MAS) (2009) states: “Between 1999 and 2008, external aid to the West Bank and Gaza Strip increased by over 600% to 3.25 billion US Dollars per year.” This aid is intended to reduce poverty, increase respect for rights, and promote stability.

Yet while billions of dollars are being spent, very little development is taking place, and even less that is sustainable. Numerable World Bank and United Nations reports point out persistent poverty, inequality, violence, destruction of infrastructure, lack of rule of law, unemployment, inaccessibility of basic services, loss of land and land rights, restricted mobility, forced displacement, food insecurity, chronic depression and other emotional illness.

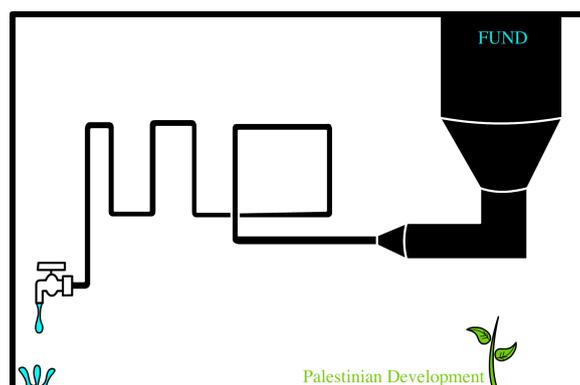
So, while dependence on aid has increased, it is clear to all that the state-building aspects of the international community’s promised “peace dividend” have failed to materialize, if they were, in fact, ever intended.

The aid system is not responsible for Palestinian suffering, but neither has it responded adequately.

### *What about Palestinians in Israel?*

Palestinian citizens of Israel, who are integral to and inseparable from the Palestinian community, are also subject to distorted donor analyses and severe restrictions, though different than those imposed in the oPt. Many donors won’t fund Palestinians inside Israel because Israel is not considered a developing country, ignoring the fact that development of non-Jews in a self-proclaimed Jewish state is constrained by design. Ironically, other donors won’t fund them because of the boycott against Israel; in other words, they don’t wish to inadvertently assist Israel economically. The result is that this important segment of the Palestinian population is left with few funding options, most of them being Zionist organizations with sometimes unacceptable political agendas.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to the West Bank and Gaza Strip



Funding processes divert resources away from local development priorities

Like in other aid-dependent environments, the aid system in the oPt has claimed and been granted inordinate power to direct resources according to donors' political preferences, priorities and values. Palestinians are included to some extent, but almost never empowered as decision-makers.

So, despite ostensible international support for the principle of self-determination enshrined in international law, Palestinians have no control and very little influence over their lives – not only due to Israeli occupation – but also due to the hegemonic and distorting influence of the aid system.

### ***Research Methodology***

In 2010 Dalia Association convened focus group workshops with civil society groups working throughout the West Bank, including Jerusalem; Gaza Strip; and Nazareth (Israel).<sup>3</sup> Specifically, workshops were held in Bethlehem, Jericho, Jenin, Qalqilya, Hebron, North Gaza, Central Gaza, Southern Gaza, and Ramallah.<sup>4</sup> One focus group was by invitation to members of the Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO) which represents larger NGOs that collectively receive the great majority of international aid in Palestine. A complete list of participating civil society groups is available in Annex B.

Workshop participants were selected randomly from lists of community groups provided by governorates (West Bank) or compiled by NGO networks (Gaza, Nazareth). Only groups with at least one experience with external aid in the past 3 years were deemed eligible for participation. The invitation was extended to the NGO director or the person who works most directly with international aid actors. Each focus group had approximately 18-25 participants and was held locally in each governorate at a location deemed accessible and credible (e.g., municipality building).

The workshops enabled civil society participants to discuss their best and worst experiences with international aid; prioritize the problems in the aid system that most undermine their ability to respond to their communities' priorities and become sustainable as organizations;

<sup>3</sup> A second focus group was scheduled for Haifa but had to be cancelled due to weather.

<sup>4</sup> A second focus group was held in Ramallah for Jerusalem-based organizations because the facilitator could not get a permit to enter Jerusalem.

and transform their most important complaints into responsible proposals for change directed to aid actors.

The workshop agenda was piloted and revised before being delivered by professional facilitators with note takers documenting the proceedings. In each workshop, participants prioritized their objections and complaints in order of the negative effect each had on their ability to serve their communities' priorities and be sustainable. Then, they transformed the high priority objections into proposals or requests for change. They next prioritized their proposals in order of importance (i.e. changes that would most help them do better work were ranked highest).

An experienced research team analyzed the summaries and transcripts, working independently as well as together to extract themes of objections and proposals using primarily qualitative methods. Each workshop established the order of priority of their objections and proposals; the research team assessed the themes across groups and, based on the data, prioritized the objections and proposals as they are stated in this paper.<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Emphasis on Rights***

Some participants in the early workshops had difficulty imagining themselves engaging with donors to call for change. They feared angering donors by appearing ungrateful. They quickly excused any problems they had faced by saying that aid is needed regardless of the conditions. Some said donors are doing the best they can. Others expressed doubt that donors would change even if they were confronted with new information.

Compelled by this experience, Dalia Association realized the need to raise awareness through the workshops about Palestinians' rights in the aid process. We researched international laws, conventions, declarations, and statements of good practice and referred to them in every workshop. The inclusion of rights changed the dynamics significantly and seemed to give participants the confidence to share their criticisms.

In addition, Dalia Association made a point at every workshop to acknowledge the hegemonic influence of the aid system, but challenged Palestinian tendencies to react either as victim, accepting the "take-it-or-leave-it" modus operandi, or by trying to

#### **Rights in Aid-Funded Development**

- "... every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural, and political development...."<sup>6</sup>
- All peoples who have not yet gained independence have the right to receive aid.<sup>7</sup>
- Aid actors should ensure all activities do no harm.<sup>8</sup>
- The right to development imposes obligations on the international community to promote fair

<sup>5</sup> Further details about data analysis are available upon request.

<sup>6</sup> *Declaration on the Right to Development (1986) -- General Assembly Resolution 41/128*

<sup>7</sup> *UN Charter, Chapter XI: Declaration Regarding Non-Self Governing Territories, Article 73 (1945)*

<sup>8</sup> *Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States (2005)*

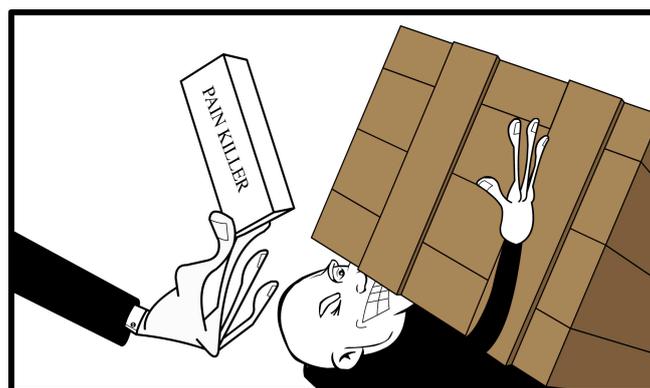
outsmart the system, compromising Palestinian integrity and credibility. This also seemed to contribute to a more responsible and self-reflective tone in the discussion.

development policies and effective international cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

- We acknowledge that our fundamental accountability must be to those we seek to assist.<sup>10</sup>
- INGOs are accountable to their stakeholders including peoples whose rights they seek to protect and advance ....<sup>11</sup>
- Donors commit to respect partner country leadership and help strengthen their capacity to exercise it.<sup>12</sup>
- Donors will deepen engagement with CSOs as independent development actors in their own right whose efforts complement those of governments and the private sector.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Results of the Workshops: Objections in Order of Priority***

1 – According to workshop findings, the top objection of grassroots Palestinian civil society is that most donors fund relief, not development: “Donors keep funding easy and less important activities that force us to come back for more aid.” Funding guidelines, such as 1-2 year project durations, often prevent or undermine civil society groups from taking on long-term work. Moreover, a focus on the number of beneficiaries leads to shallow interventions that touch many people lightly rather than invest in substantial change.



<sup>9</sup> *World Conference on Human Rights (1993); reaffirmed by Vienna Declaration & Programme of Action (1993)*

<sup>10</sup> *Sphere Humanitarian Charter*

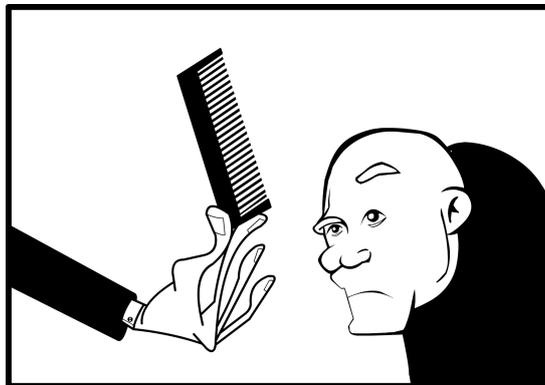
<sup>11</sup> *International Non-Governmental Organizations Accountability Charter (2005)*

<sup>12</sup> *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, Article 15 (2005)*

<sup>13</sup> *Accra Agenda for Action, Point 20 (2008)*

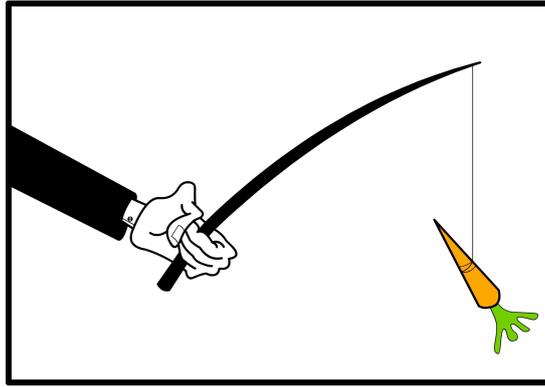
2- Workshop participants complained about the use of intermediaries when their role is harmful to local civil society's effectiveness and sustainability. They particularly complained about INGOs that compete with local civil society groups. "Instead of funding us directly, donors give through intermediaries that impose additional restrictions, confuse communication, and take the credit for the work we do." One participant told a fairly typical story about receiving funding through an INGO that contracted many local NGO partners to implement a project. Before the project was finished, the entire project was cancelled for reasons never explained by the intermediary. It was rumored that one of the local NGO partners had misused funds. All the NGOs had their work cancelled midstream, with no recourse or explanation. Notably, workshops in Gaza did not share this objection; Gazan participants generally believed intermediaries were acting appropriately by giving them access to aid they would otherwise not have.

3-The third objection expressed in workshops was that aid organizations impose unrealistic and unfair procedures. "Aid actors are supposed to know the challenges we face, politically and organizationally. Isn't that why we need aid? But instead of modifying their procedures to fit our reality, they have complicated requirements that exclude small and new NGOs" (such as registration, audited financial reports, annual reports in English). Some complained that aid actors favor bigger and more established NGOs, assuming that local NGOs lack capacity. Others admitted they lack capacity in some areas but complained that they are unable to build capacity because aid actors won't give them projects.



Resources that don't address local priorities aren't valuable

4- "Aid actors have their own, fixed ideas about what they want us to do. They impose their agendas on us," was the fourth objection. Some donors impose their choice of sectors, target groups or methodologies, thereby pulling civil society groups away from local ways of working. Aid-receiving civil society groups end up hiring staff who can deliver on donor preferences (e.g., bilingual) rather than those with roots in and commitments to the communities they serve.



Aid entices civil society groups to follow donors' agendas

5-Next, participants shared the objection that aid actors don't appreciate the time or grief it takes to apply for funds. "We often spend days or weeks, sometimes even months (sometimes years!), investing in the development of a proposal. It costs time and money and effort. But many aid actors don't even acknowledge they received our proposal, or they take months to give an answer and when they do, it's just a standard rejection without any information about what we should do differently next time."

6-Similarly, participants complained that proposals and reports usually cannot be in Arabic. "It's a lot of extra effort and expense for us to prepare proposals and present ourselves well in English and in foreign currency. They are working in Palestine. They should let us do our work in our own language."

7-The seventh most common objection among workshop participants was that some donors fund using political criteria. They ask about the political orientation of an NGO before funding, sometimes relying on unreliable sources or sources with opposing political views. They sometimes demand that recipient groups add or remove board members or beneficiaries based on the donor's political biases. Civil society groups consider this a degree of political interference that contradicts international principles of impartiality and neutrality. "The poor are our poor. The children are our children. The donors should not tell us there are some people we can't serve because donors don't like their political views. And they shouldn't fund or not fund based on political criteria imposed on us-- only objective, professional criteria."

8-Reinforcing the objection that aid processes do not take local conditions into account, workshop participants objected to funding schemes that are designed not to cover all costs. "They fund a project but don't give us enough to do it completely or well. In our circumstances, where are we supposed to get the rest of the money?" These and other donor requirements are sometimes used as an excuse or explanation for exaggeration of budgets and lack of honesty in reporting. In other words, Palestinian civil society groups admit to some corrupt practices but believe they are necessitated, or at least prompted, by the aid system.

9-Workshop participants complained about insufficient local leadership in the formulation of agendas and in decision-making. "They make the decisions about the projects, not us. We just sign where they tell us to. We should be leading our own development, not the donors

and INGOs.” This objection extends to aid actors who hand pick “community” advisory committees from among a group of Palestinian elite who are perceived as profiting personally rather than serving their communities. Participants complained that local NGOs are used as tools rather than treated as true partners.

**10**—While seen as an extremely harmful policy, the anti-terrorism certification, which participants considered racist, was not prioritized as a major objection. Some expressed outrage: “Why do international aid actors treat us like we are terrorists!” but most seemed resigned to sign, regardless of their intention to comply, or they avoid donors that require signing, resigned to miss out on much-needed funds.

**11**—Lastly, and with some initial hesitation, workshop participants complained that some aid actors do not fulfill their contractual obligations. “A lot of times, aid actors are very unprofessional. They promise a grant and they don’t give it -- sometimes even when there is a signed contract. Or, they change the grant terms in the middle of the project or even stop the project altogether, without good reason.” This lack of professionalism is, unfortunately, not uncommon. According to workshop participants, lack of professionalism by aid actors can cause all kinds of financial and community problems, including forcing local NGOs to renege on commitments they have made to beneficiaries or staff.

Additionally, some participants protested against outright fraud and corruption among aid actors. In one case, an INGO signed a contract with a Palestinian NGO, but never transferred any money and never responded to any inquiries from the Palestinian side. A year later, the Palestinian NGO received an email asking them to sign the interim grant report, which they refused to do. Shortly after, the INGO representative arrived in Palestine and tried to pressure the Palestinian NGO to sign. He told the NGO that if they signed, they could go to the bank “right now” and withdraw the payment on the first phase, that hadn’t been paid. The Palestinian told the INGO representative to simply transfer funds for the next phase to the NGO’s account and they could work on the second phase, but the INGO representative said it was better for them to go together to the bank and withdraw cash because it gave them both more flexibility!

### ***Results of the Workshops: Proposals in Order of Priority***

Within the context of the discussion about rights, and in the spirit of constructive reform of the international aid system, participants engaged in the last and most important activity of the workshop. They transformed their most crucial objections into responsible proposals. This act – electing to stop complaining and to proactively propose change – is itself transformational. It signals the willingness of at least some in grassroots Palestinian civil society to engage on mutually-respectful terms with aid actors, thus overcoming one of the most harmful side-effects of aid dependence – passivity.

The list of proposals as articulated by grassroots Palestinian civil society will likely look familiar to international aid actors, who believe they function by these principles already. Sadly, grassroots Palestinian civil society expressed the view in our workshops that international aid actors actually fall significantly short of these principles. The gap between perceptions of international aid actors and Palestinian civil society is quite large.

For example, as their top priority, grassroots Palestinian civil society groups ask that aid actors apply fair and transparent processes to the selection and evaluation of funding proposals by civil society groups.

In fact, in the interest of fair and transparent processes, many donors circulate a public call for proposals, publicize the scoring system, screen applicants according to criteria, and announce the groups they fund. But despite the intention, grassroots Palestinian civil society do not necessarily consider these bureaucratic approaches “fair.” These procedures and criteria discriminate against small groups, which are often community-based, in favor of the professionalized NGOs that have the capacities donors value (English skills, logframe skills, financial reporting systems, and other approaches based in linear, Western thinking.). Sometimes these small groups who are overlooked are more able to serve their communities’ needs.

Other aid actors use a very personalized approach. They get to know potential grantees, spend time in the field, and work in partnership using flexible criteria. But while those who are funded appreciate this approach, those who are not funded often consider it unfair and non-transparent. This is because such donors are providing funding to those who they know and trust – not necessarily those most trusted by the community or with the most relevant programs. The relationships are very personal.

Recognizing our rights in aid, Palestinian grassroots civil society groups propose that aid actors:

- 1 Apply fair and transparent processes to the selection and evaluation of funding to civil society groups.
- 2 Fulfill commitments.
- 3 Respect local priorities and capacities.
- 4 Follow up, genuinely.
- 5 Don’t fund through unprofessional intermediaries.
- 6 Give aid on professional, not political, criteria.
- 7 Make the aid process more accessible and less burdensome.
- 8 Enable sustainability through longer and more flexible funding.
- 9 Invest in local capacity, not INGOs at Palestinians’ expense.

### **Apply fair and transparent processes to the selection and evaluation of funding to civil society groups.**

Another issue is that while aid actors often start with the assumption that they are fair unless they act unfairly, Palestinians often start, perhaps for historic reasons, with the assumption that international actors are unfair, unless they proactively, visibly and consistently prove themselves fair. There are at least two reasons for this dramatically different set of starting assumptions. First, while aid actors tend to see themselves as change agents within their governments (or at least trying to do good things despite the lack of political will by their governments), Palestinians tend to see donors / aid actors as extensions of the governments that fund them. Since Palestinians hold the international community, at least partly, responsible for lack of a political resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, donors are often seen as tainted at best or hypocritical at worst.

So what is an aid actor to do? Some ideas to consider:

- Be straightforward. If you don't fund small groups, new groups or groups without perfect English skills, say so. If you only have money to fund a certain number of groups, say so.
- Reconsider your criteria. For example, are you defining "capacity" as the capacity to serve communities well or as the capacity to fulfill your administrative requirements?
- Publish the criteria you use to evaluate proposals. You can't fund every NGO, so how will you decide?
- Publish the process you use in detail (e.g., Do you require an anti-terrorism certification? How long will it take you to notify grantees? How long until funds are received? Do grantees have to advance funds? Are grants renewable?) and then stick to the process you've published. Don't say applicants will be notified in 3 months if it will really take six. (If delays occur, applicants won't care that it wasn't your fault. They will consider your organization responsible for its commitments.)
- Give feedback. Applicants have invested a great deal into submitting a proposal. If aid actors only say "your project wasn't funded" (or don't answer at all), applicants will get the impression that the application was not really read at all. They will think that the funder had already chosen grantees prior to the call for proposals and that the call for proposals was a masquerade. Giving feedback (individualized or in training sessions) may take time and effort, but it is critical in order to actually help.

The second priority proposal of grassroots Palestinian civil society is that donors fulfill their commitments. It may surprise some people that the workshops uncovered a pervasive and systemic problem of unfulfilled promises to civil society groups. Some were informal promises but others were written, legal contracts. A donor's inability to fulfill a promise may be due to bureaucratic reasons beyond the donor's control (donor didn't get the expected funding, donor didn't realize that the type of grant was not allowed by their own agency). But, Palestinian civil society groups may consider this behavior unprofessional and unacceptable.

### **Fulfill your commitments.**

Moreover, civil society groups are also undermined by other types of commitments that aren't fulfilled. Have you ever promised to go to a grantee's event and not shown up? Or said you would comment on a draft document that you never had time to do? Stated that you'd return a phone call in the next few days but never gotten around to it? These experiences may be "normal" from the aid actors' point of view; it is true that people are busy and plans change. However, from the perspective of grassroots civil society, the consistent repetition of international donors and aid actors failing to do what they say they are going to do, leads to a crisis of confidence. Donors appear to be insincere, unprofessional, and disrespectful.

One of the most important issues in the fulfillment of commitments is the timing of payments on promised grants. Over and over, the funded period starts before the funding arrives. The grantee is usually not allowed to delay implementation, and if they are, they may have made commitments to staff, vendors, and constituents that make delay very costly. At the same time, they do not have the funds to implement. Therefore, the grantee is forced to borrow money from other funded projects to cover the funds that are delayed in coming – which is likely to get them in trouble with other donors. For these reasons, ensuring timely payments is absolutely critical to the functioning of internationally-funded projects and, from the recipients' point of view, a matter of integrity.

So what is an aid actor to do? Some ideas to consider:

- Only commit after you are sure you can deliver. Realize that for Palestinians, a verbal commitment is your word and should mean just as much or more than a legal contract.
- Treat your grantees as respectfully as you would treat your boss. Resist the attitude that “they should be grateful for whatever I give them whenever it is convenient for me.”
- Agree to accountability mechanisms such as an independent complaint board, ombudsman or mediation/arbitration body. Just because there is no government in Palestine does not mean that donors and aid actors should act without any local accountability.

### **Respect local priorities and capacities.**

The third priority proposal from grassroots Palestinian civil society is that donors and aid actors respect local priorities and capacities. Of course, donors and aid actors generally believe they already do respect local priorities and capacities. Therefore, this proposal exposes one of the biggest discrepancies in perception between local and international actors.

Certainly donors who are spending their own money or their taxpayers’ money have a right to decide how to spend it. They may be interested in women’s empowerment or water and sanitation or sports. So, it makes sense that donors consider their own values and interests and put together funding programs that reflect what they want to accomplish.

At the same time, Palestinians have rights, enshrined in international law, to pursue their own developmental priorities. If they had their own money to fund their own activities, no one would question this right. However, since Palestinian resources have been stolen through Israeli dispossession, colonization, and occupation – with the complicity of the international community – Palestinians no longer have control over the resources they need to fund their own developmental priorities. Does that mean, then, that they lose the right to develop according to their own priorities? Or do donors have some obligation to fund in accordance with local priorities as defined locally and democratically?

On a more practical level we can ask, whose aid is it? Do the funds belong to the donor throughout the length of the funded project, until its conclusion? In this case, donors are implementing their own programs, but contracting local civil society groups to do the work. Or, alternatively, does the money belong to the donor only until it is transferred to a grantee? In that case, the funds belong to Palestinians upon receipt, and while they are still obliged to comply with their agreements with the donors; in fact, the money is theirs and they are responsible for the outcomes. The answer to this question has significant impact on the quality of working relationships, learning, the need for control mechanisms, local ownership, cost-effectiveness, and sustainability.

It is also true that when donors and aid actors bring “tools” such as logframes, monitoring and evaluation plans, and budgeting templates, they do so to share international best practices with the local community, thus upgrading local skills and standards. But it is equally true that these foreign frameworks are being imposed upon local actors, who are then judged by how

well they imitate foreigners – without regard to local practices in planning, monitoring and reporting.

There is also a problem of complicity. Too often, Palestinians who take funds for a sewing machine won't have money for electricity or those who take funding for greenhouses might not have access to water. They may think they are benefiting as best they can from a flawed system, but they are actually perpetuating and legitimizing the system.

So what is an aid actor to do? Some ideas to consider:

- Be more flexible. There are lots of ways to promote food security besides distributing imported food packages, which are harmful in many ways. You can address the land rights of farmers or invest in small, organic food production for local consumption.
- Don't assume that Palestinians are starting from zero, even when, as a result of occupation, locals participate in devaluating their own in-kind and human resources. All aid actors benefit by building on what already exists.
- Ask over and over and over again what it is that local people think is important. Don't ask about "needs" because the needs are endless and your work will invariably meet some need or another. Instead, ask about *priorities*.
- Involve local people in creating solutions. Participatory needs' assessments lose relevance when the solutions are not also participatory and respectful of locals' rights to lead their own development.

Fourth, grassroots Palestinian civil society proposes that donors and aid actors follow up, genuinely. This proposal may surprise some donors who believe that Palestinians want to get money and be left alone to do anything they want without obligation to follow procedures or report back. True, some Palestinians may wish for this type of freedom with funds, but they aren't the responsible members of civil society. Most responsible members of Palestinian civil society, including at the grassroots, understand that they are accountable to their donors for the use of funds and that their donors are, in turn, accountable to their governments for the use of funds. Their objections, however, are about unreasonable administrative burden (see below), and the *lack* of follow up.

## **Follow up, genuinely.**

Can you imagine working on a project you care about for one year or more, sitting to do an analysis of what worked and what didn't, submitting your final report to the donor and never receiving a single comment? This is a very common experience. Civil society complains that donors care only about the timely submission of reports, but not the content. The same is true of site visits. Too many donors visit an NGO's office to check on their financial reporting, but they don't go to the field to see the work the NGO is doing. Sometimes they don't even ask.

Most likely, the lack of genuine follow up is merely the result of lack of time. Donors and aid agencies are often understaffed. One program officer follows many grantees. Staff turnover is frequent making it hard to develop long-term relationships with grantees. Moreover, the head

office back at home may not be interested in outcomes or impact, but only bureaucratic compliance. This puts the field officer in a difficult position.

So what is an aid actor to do? Some ideas to consider:

- Only ask for reports that you will read and comment on. If there will be a delay in your comments, say so. Distinguish between comments that are suggestions and requirements.
- Plan site visits thoughtfully. Let grantees help decide when, where and how long the site visit should be. Review notes from your last site visit so you can refer back.
- Be sure to communicate between reports and site visits. Understand the challenges grantees face and take them into account in future cooperation plans. Suggest resources that might be useful for the project. Take the time to show that you genuinely care about the outcomes of your grantees' work, and use these exchanges to build capacity – your own and theirs.

## **Do not fund through unprofessional intermediaries.**

Additionally, grassroots Palestinian civil society asks donors not to fund through unprofessional intermediaries, usually international NGOs but also Palestinian NGOs, PA entities, or anyone else whose participation undermines local civil society's ability to respond to local priorities and be sustainable.

But what is an unprofessional intermediary? It is one that has a conflict of interest (e.g., competes with local civil society for funding from donors). It is one that charges high fees to administer grants. It is one that doesn't fully communicate the requirements and restrictions on participation to local groups before they commit. It is a group that takes credit for the work done by local NGOs, sometimes not even mentioning the latter's participation.

Donors sometimes prefer to fund through intermediaries because the intermediaries guarantee that procedures will be followed, including timely and accurate reporting. Unfortunately, many intermediaries don't only fulfill the restrictions imposed by the donor, but they add to them. Intermediaries may impose their own preferences about the location of activities, the types of beneficiaries, or even what staff should be hired.

Donors should only fund through intermediaries when the intermediary is adding significant value to the local grantee or project outcomes – not when the intermediary is adding value only to the donor. When donors choose to fund through intermediaries to lessen their own administrative burden, the burden is often transferred onto local civil society groups.

## **Give aid on professional, not political, criteria.**

When grassroots Palestinian civil society proposes that donors and aid actors fund on professional, not political, criteria, they are not pretending that donors don't have political agendas nor are they pretending that they don't have political agendas. However, when it

comes to professional civil society – NGOs that serve communities – political views should not be a factor: either for the donor in choosing grantees or for the recipient NGO in choosing beneficiaries. In other words, the political views of the staff or board of an NGO should not affect a donor’s willingness to fund their activities if the activities are professional and serve community’s needs without regard to political affiliation.

Unfortunately, donors frequently require that NGOs use political criteria when selecting beneficiaries, thus promoting discrimination by Palestinian civil society against their own people. Unfortunately, this type of discrimination may be enforced by laws in the donor’s home country. This discrimination in aid promotes intra-communal conflict and contradicts principles of impartiality and neutrality.

So what can be done? When policies require that donors, international aid actors or locals discriminate on the basis of political views, aid actors (international or Palestinian) should refuse to comply. Period. Political affiliation does not, by itself, give insight into the quality of the organization’s work on behalf of local communities. Complying with these policies exposes the foreign policy-intentions of aid (“We fund people who promote our political objectives in the region.”).

Obviously, an organization, international or local, that depends on this type of politically restricted funding will have great difficulty taking such a stand, nor will their refusal have impact unless aid actors take a collective stand against politically-motivated funding decisions. A true boycott can make a difference. In the meantime, aid actors can seek to reduce their dependence on compromised funding sources by mobilizing philanthropy from individuals and social change-oriented foundations. In other words, aid actors’ own dependence (not just local communities’ dependence) on politically-compromised aid is part of the systemic problem that must be addressed.

## **Make the aid process more accessible and less burdensome.**

Not surprisingly, among civil society’s proposals is that donors and aid actors make the aid process more accessible and less burdensome. Unfortunately, many donors are short of staff and must ask applicants to do the work they don’t have the capacity to do themselves (e.g., read proposals in Arabic, make multiple copies, etc.).

So what is an aid actor to do? Some ideas to consider:

- Hire translators so that applicants can submit in their language or employ Arabic speakers as officers. Alternatively, reimburse applicants the cost of translating their applications into English.
- Hire administrative staff to make copies of applications, if needed, and generally minimize the administrative burden on applicants by providing them services.
- Advertise the availability (and criteria) of grants in Arabic and through networks and media that grassroots people use.
- Accept budgets and financial reports in local currencies.
- Respond as quickly as possible to grant requests. The time between submission of a proposal and a donor’s response can be stressful for applicants. They don’t know if they

should plan (or not plan) to receive the funds and if they should apply elsewhere for funding for the activity (or not). A quick response (with feedback) goes far to decrease the burden of the funding process on applicants.

## **Enable sustainability through longer and more flexible funding.**

Palestinians are often misunderstood as complaining that there isn't enough grant money. On the contrary, workshop participants objected not to the amount of funding, but to the severe restrictions on the use of funds, restrictions that decrease the value of the aid. Grassroots Palestinian civil society proposes that donors and aid actors enable sustainability through longer and more flexible funding.

Would you feel secure if your bank account was empty at the end of every year and you didn't know if more funds were coming? Yet donors require that civil society groups have a zero bank balance at the end of every project causing them to focus on getting more funding instead of serving their communities. If every dollar of your funding was allocated, would you feel secure enough to invest in training, to think strategically, or to be innovative? Or would you spend the year trying to raise money to ensure you can stay open next year? That is, of course, what civil society organizations do as a result of the need to either spend all project money by the end of the project term or return it.

Project funding, that is, funds for activities that are often conceived specifically for the purpose of getting funding, must be phased out in favor of program funding that is in line with the long-term interests and commitments of local communities. In addition, unrestricted operating funds must be made available to enable civil society organizations to grow and become sustainable.

In addition, funding should not work on short cycles or be one-time support. Donors should commit to support civil society organizations long enough for grantees to have a chance of success and institutionalization. In other words, funding cycles should respond to local realities on the ground rather than bureaucratic or political cycles in donor countries.

Moreover, while the concept of "local contribution" makes sense (people will have more ownership over activities they contribute their own resources to), the combination of imposed agendas, funding restrictions and local contributions often results in a situation where funds are wasted. For example, imagine locals are supposed to contribute 10% but they don't have the cash so the project stalls. There are also cases in which locals are actually subsidizing the funded project's waste, for example, when an organization is granted free office furniture but has to pay rent to store it.

On the other hand, when donors pay all expenses, local community members may feel entitled, passive, and actually sabotage projects in their community that they do not personally benefit from.

So what is an aid actor to do? Some ideas to consider:

- Make funding longer, renewable, and less restrictive.
- Make it easier and quicker for grantees to get approval for changes to the project plan and budget.
- Invest in grantees' capacity and sustainability (e.g., staff training) not just "outputs" that have a high beneficiary count.

## **Invest in local capacity, not INGOs at Palestinians' expense.**

The concept of investing in grassroots Palestinian civil society comes up again in their proposal that donors and aid actors invest in local capacity, not in international NGOs at Palestinians' expense.

Over and over, donors claim that INGOs have higher capacity than local NGOs because they have more qualified staff, better facilities, and longer experience managing large and complex development projects. There is truth to this claim, but one must ask if donor policies themselves are partly responsible. Donors allow high overheads to INGOs, enabling them to grow and build capacity. Donors also allow INGOs to pay their staff two, three or four times the local salary rates. Could it be that donors give project after project to INGOs, enabling them to develop long and deep experience while local civil society struggles for small change, thus perpetuating the capacity gap between INGOs and local NGOs?

The fact is that the role of international NGOs should be scrutinized. When they are providing services that Palestinians can't provide or don't want to provide, they are needed. But to the extent that they compete with local civil society, distort the market for staff and beneficiaries, and build their own capacity and sustainability at the expense of local civil society, they need to be challenged.

So what is an aid actor to do? Some ideas to consider:

- Invest in a local civil society organization whenever possible.
- When you do fund an international NGO working locally, be sure they are adding value to the beneficiaries and the project, not just to you.
- Hold international NGOs accountable for following local priorities.
- Do not enable international NGOs to waste funds that are earmarked for Palestinian development. Take into consideration how locals define "waste."

### ***Changing the Discourse, Engaging Ideas***

This report constructively challenges current discourses and practices. It prioritizes respect for aid recipients' rights to self determination -- without which "development" is impossible. Moreover, as suggested in the preface, Palestine presents a case study for learning that can give fuel to a new paradigm that will benefit development efforts in other aid-dependent societies. For these reasons, the report merits serious consideration.

However, a report can only be a beginning. Much more self-reflection is needed by Palestinian civil society; and much more self-reflection is needed by international aid actors. Only then can the power imbalances between "giver" and "receiver" be challenged and

transformed into a new partnership that recognizes the mutual objectives and interdependence of aid actors and aid recipients.

The inequality may be complicated by lack of agreement about what “aid” means in the first place and who gets to decide if aid is helpful or not. Donors sometimes seem to define “good aid” according to their own practice of conceiving, distributing and reporting on aid (aid effectiveness). They do so without reference to the outcomes of the aid (development effectiveness). This parallels physicians who assess being a “good doctor” according to the knowledge and skills of the doctor, rather than the health and well-being of their patients.

Doesn't it make sense that if “aid” is supposed to be “helpful,” the intended beneficiaries should be the ones to decide how helpful the aid is?

### ***AFTERWORD: Next Steps in Claiming Rights***

Dalia Association intends for this report to have meaningful impact, jump starting a process of self-reflection and dialogue.

To this end, we envision the following steps:

- Release report to workshop participants to ensure it reflects, as much as possible, the sentiments expressed in workshops.
- Release report to local Palestinian civil society more broadly in order to validate and deepen the findings. This should be done through public meetings and by use of the media.
- Selectively release report to donors and international aid actors (soft launch) in order to get feedback on the ideas and presentation.
- Modify the report to incorporate feedback. Release report widely in Arabic and English.
- Bring together a coalition of Palestinian civil society groups and international allies to learn from international best practices and work together to suggest processes and mechanisms to revamp the aid system in Palestine.
- Engage constructively with international donors and aid actors working in Palestine to lobby for changes in their aid processes and support for accountability mechanisms.
- Build on and contribute to international discourses related to aid, including by contributing to the High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Korea in 2011, and exchanging ideas with aid-dependent civil societies in the global south and advocacy organizations in the global north.

**Get involved by contacting Saeeda Mousa, Acting Director, Dalia Association in Ramallah at +970-2-298-9121 or [saeedam@dalia.ps](mailto:saeedam@dalia.ps).**

## Annex A: About Dalia Association

Dalia Association was established in 2007 by members of the Palestinian community from the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Gaza Strip, Israel, and the Diaspora. We are diverse in terms of age, gender, religion and politics, yet we are united by our vision -- to realize our rights as Palestinians to control our resources and sustain our own development for generations to come. Our mission is to mobilize and properly utilize resources necessary to empower a vibrant, independent and accountable civil society.

To achieve our mission, we:

- Make grants to support inspirational and relevant civil society initiatives, especially grassroots efforts that are supplementing local resources. Community-controlled grantmaking increases the transparency, accountability and professionalism of local initiatives.
- Link resources by introducing people with expertise, ideas, contacts, equipment, and other assets to community activists who can use them to serve their communities. Effectively utilizing resources that already exist in our abundant community helps decrease our dependence on outside resources.
- Encourage giving by local people, companies, and refugee and Diaspora Palestinians. We revive local traditions of philanthropy and volunteerism and create new systems that make giving easier, safer and more trustworthy. A permanent endowment will be built over time to ensure sustainable income for current and future generations.
- Advocate for systemic change in the international aid system so that it respects Palestinian rights and responds to local priorities. Advocacy includes constructive engagement with innovative donors who want a local partner to help them improve their policies and maximize their impact.

**[www.Dalia.ps](http://www.Dalia.ps)**  
**[info@Dalia.ps](mailto:info@Dalia.ps)**

## **Annex B: Workshop Participants**

*Participants in the focus group workshops represented the following Palestinian civil society groups:*

### **Qalqilya Governorate**

- Qalqilya Governorate
- Society for Palestine Tomorrow
- Society of the Quran and Sunnah
- Qalqilya Women's Society
- Falamyeh Women's Society
- Qalqilya Farmers Society
- Society for Rescue and Development
- Charitable Society for Good Deeds and Reform, Azzoun Village
- Society of Women's Initiative
- Palestinian Riders Club
- Society of Youth Creativity
- Young Women's Society of the Prophet Elias
- Forum of Intellectuals Society
- Society for the Propagation of Charity
- Qalqilya Governorate

### **Jenin Governorate**

- Society of Kafr El-Ra'i for Development and Culture
- Society for Charitable Blessings, Marka Village
- Zababdeh Charitable Society
- Society of the Rehabilitation of the Disabled of Qabatiya
- Society for Senior Citizens Home
- Romana Charitable Society
- Society of the Center for the Palestinian Child
- Society for Social Aid
- Society We Will Not Forget, Jenin Refugee Camp
- Youth Wish Center
- Jalameh Youth Club
- Women's Heritage Society
- Municipality of Jenin

### **Hebron Governorate**

- Women's Society of Hebron
- Blind Society
- Happy Homes Society
- Society of Benevolence
- Center for Happy Childhood
- Society for the Development of Our Own Capacities
- Society of Orphanages
- Society Forum for Parents
- Ahli Hospital
- Society for Revitalization of Rural Women
- Municipality of Hebron
- Hebron Governorate

#### Jericho Governorate

- Ein El-Sultan Society for Irrigation
- The Cooperative Society for Agricultural Crops
- Society of Palestinian Farmers
- Reform Charitable Society
- Women's Society of Jericho
- Farmers Union
- Union for Agricultural Work
- Al-Isra Charitable Society
- Jericho Governorate

#### Nazareth

- Association of Tomorrow's Flowers
- Society of Children of the Future
- The Department of Community Centers
- MADA Al-Carmel, Haifa

#### Bethlehem Governorate

- Society Marah Rabah
- Association of Health Work Committees
- Applied Research Institute
- House of Assembly
- Wildlife Society of Palestine
- Orphan Care Association
- Za'tara Ta'amreh Charitable Society
- Environmental Education Center
- Beit Sahour Medical Center

#### Jerusalem Governorate

- Home of the Arab Child Association
- National Society for the Visually Impaired
- Peace Center for the Blind
- Flowers Kindergarten
- Jerusalem Governorate
- Union of Charitable Societies

#### Rafah and Khan Younis

- National Society for Democracy and Law
- Air and Light Agricultural Development Society
- Rural Society for Agricultural Development
- Youth Development Association
- Center for Women's Programs, Rafah
- Southern Media Forum, Rafah
- Society of Friends of the Palestinian Child
- Fukhara Society for Development
- Mawasi Young Women's Center

#### Gaza Governorate

- Women's Candles Club
- Our Olives Society for Charitable Development
- Tomorrow's Palestine Society for Development
- Friends of Jabalya for Development
- Freedom Society for Community Development
- Center for Women's Programs, Daraj
- Generations of Creativity and Development Society
- Charitable Society for Family Development
- Society for Revival of Culture

#### Gaza Central Province - Deir al-Balah

- Society for Rehabilitation and Development of the Palestinian Home
- Sunna Al-Iradeh Society
- Center for Civil Society Studies
- Youth Media Gathering
- Manal Society for the Development of the Rural Woman
- Rise of Freedom Society for Training and Women's Rehabilitation
- Local Society for Community Services
- Society for Capacity Development of Rural Women
- Radwan Charitable Society
- Center for Women's Programs, Nuseirat
- Center for Women Empowerment and the Community, Nuseirat
- Center for Women's Programs, Al-Bureij

#### Nablus

- Nablus Governorate

#### PNGO Members:

- Palestinian NGO Network
- The Palestinian Centre for Peace and Democracy
- Resource (Al Mawrid)
- Society of the Union of Palestinian Farmers
- Palestinian Counseling Center
- Palestinian Working Women Society
- Arab Thought Forum
- Society of the Union of Palestinian Youth
- Faten: The Palestinian Association for Financing of Small Projects
- Popular Arts Center

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