

RISK, PROTECTION &
LOCALLY-LED
HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

**A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO
RESPONSIBLE PARTNERSHIPS**

2024





RESPONSIBLE PARTNERSHIPS

NP's Responsible Partnerships Framework has largely grown out of NP's partnerships in Ukraine as outlined in the earlier **Responsible Partnerships Brief**, which describes the risks faced by Ukrainian organizations responding to civilian needs following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NP's approach to partnerships has been informed by Peace Direct's report '**Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation**', which offers a series of accessible approaches to building and sustaining better partnerships between civil society actors, INGOs, and intermediaries.

SUMMARY

More than ever, the role of effective, just, and responsible partnerships are mission critical to the protection of civilians and the access of populations to humanitarian aid. As conflicts around the world increase in scale and complexity, a simultaneous restriction in international humanitarian access is being observed. To respond to urgent material and protection needs of affected civilians, INGOs and donors are increasingly relying on NNGOs, CSOs, and CBOs.

As partnerships between INGOs and national humanitarian actors increase in number and scale, it is essential that partnerships are based on trusted, collaborative, and transparent processes in which partners share a common vision, goals, and values. Currently, this is not often the case, with local actors often expected to implement partnership agreements without a shared understanding of risk, impact, responsibility or context.

In the worst examples, INGOs use local actors to offload their own programmatic and security risks, with partners often expected to maintain higher risk tolerance in comparison to their international counterparts and continue to conduct humanitarian activities in harder-to-reach territories, including frontline areas. There is often little shared understanding of what responsible and equitable partnerships entail in practice. In partnerships with INGOs and donors, NNGOs, CSOs, and CBOs often have limited access to funding, are constrained by burdensome due diligence requirements, carry a disproportionate risk in terms of accessing frontline populations, and are excluded from international humanitarian coordination fora.

NP's Responsible Partnerships Framework offers practical guidance on how partnerships between INGOs and NNGOs, CSOs, and CBOs can be practiced more responsibly. NP's intention is to cultivate spaces for civil society and international actors to reflect, plan and learn together; build trust by providing advice when asked and offer ourselves as a sounding board for ideas, challenges and opportunities faced by our partners. NP's approach to responsible partnerships is rooted in UCP, which offers a pathway to intentional engagement with local communities as leaders in their own protection and action.

ABBREVIATIONS

CBO
Community-based Organization

CSO
Civil Society Organization

INGO
International Non-governmental Organization

NNGO
National Non-governmental Organization

NP
Nonviolent Peaceforce

UCP
Unarmed Civilian Protection

DEFINING 'PARTNERSHIPS'

Across the humanitarian field, there are significant differences between various actors' understandings of what partnership means and what it should and can look like in practice. This can create confusion as international and civil society actors seek to work together more often and in different ways, with a range of material, political, and social expectations often unexpressed and unmet. Partnerships are also often understood as limited to financial structures without considering and clarifying opportunities for collaborations that recognize the unique capacities and contributions of each group and prioritize co-creation in programme design and implementation.

Under a Responsible Partnerships approach, it is crucial that partnership expectations are defined clearly and revisited frequently to ensure that partnerships adapt to changing needs and contexts. At NP, we invite (prospective) partners to share their partnership principles, values, and behaviors, and agree on how to put these into practice. This involves co-creating a vision document that outlines the aims and purpose of the partnership, distinct from funding. What this co-creation looks like needs to be tailored to different contexts and to the needs of different partners.

For example, NP's team working on anti-Asian bias in Queens, New York, has an intentional process when creating new partnerships for joint actions (such as de-escalation trainings or protest safety support) that includes an initial conversation, the co-creation of a Partnership Agreement which covers services and resources provided by all parties, and a discussion and review of the agreement before the joint action takes place. Throughout this process, expectations and contributions of each group are clearly identified, values are exchanged, and a relational approach is prioritized.

Partnership Agreements highlight the two-way nature of the relationship by recognizing the contributions of partner organizations such as contextual knowledge, recruitment of volunteers, and sharing of testimonies about the action. Such agreements codify the added value and purpose of partnerships which enable ongoing work in situations where civil society actors have too much work to do on their own.

RECOMMENDATION

Clearly define and frequently revisit expectations and responsibilities for partnerships.

FUNDING

Despite commitments to re-direct funding to support locally-led humanitarian response efforts, the localization agenda has seen slow progress globally with only 1.2% of humanitarian funding going directly to NNGOs, CSOs, and CBOs in 2022 (1). UN Agencies and INGOs remain a significant funding source for local actors, often through sub-granting arrangements. And while funding is only one dimension of partnership, it is the most visible and most contentious manifestation of most partnership (2).

Sub-granting can often lead to transactional partnerships, which focus on fulfilling short-term, service-oriented objectives defined by the donor (i.e., INGO) and expected to be fulfilled by the recipient (i.e., partner). As this system perpetuates, it can increase dependency of NNGOs and CSOs on international humanitarian actors, locking in the status quo and further entrenching power imbalances that are difficult to counter. The sub-granting model does not promote equity in partnership or truly locally-led action; rather, it acts as an obstacle to NNGOs' and CSOs' meaningful participation in programme and project design processes to meet the urgent needs of communities affected by violence.

Instead, donors and sub-granting organisations need to move beyond sub-granting-type partnerships towards longer-term, responsible, and equitable partnerships by providing direct, multi-year, and flexible funding to NNGOs, CSOs, and CBOs. Additionally, donors should work towards passing through Project Support Costs (PSC) to respond to organizational capacity strengthening needs, while working to establish country-based pooled funds earmarked for locally-led humanitarian initiatives.

While NP advocates for these changes, we seek to transform our own role as an intermediary between institutional donors and locally-led efforts. To create greater opportunities for small(er) local organisations, we strive to provide flexible funding to enable partners to adapt to changes in a given context. We are committed to improving the way we design programmes and co-create them together with partners, while being prepared to change our assumptions and plans if they don't align with our partners' needs.

RECOMMENDATION

Move beyond sub-granting-type partnerships towards longer-term, responsible, and equitable partnerships by providing direct, multi-year, and flexible funding to NNGOs, CSOs, and CBOs.

(1) Passing the Buck: The Economics of Localizing Aid in Ukraine, Refugees International, July 2024.

(2) Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation: a practical resource for civil society, donors, INGOs and intermediaries, PeaceDirect, September 2023.

In Ukraine, for example, NP issues sub-grants to NNGOs, CSOs, and CBOs with the purpose of increasing safety and security of affected populations. The sub-grants include emergency or contingency funds to enable partners to adapt quickly to the rapid changes in the context. We also work closely with major institutional donors – such as the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) – to facilitate direct funding of our partners and include them in national consortia arrangements as equal members. Donors who are willing to advocate for and put in place requirements for more equitable practices are essential partners in achieving transformation toward more responsible partnership models.

DUE DILIGENCE

Current humanitarian funding mechanisms – including due diligence requirements – do not foster equitable partnerships among humanitarian actors. On the contrary, conventional due diligence processes often act as barriers between NNGOs, CSOs and access to funding. Due diligence policies, often standardized within INGOs, place primary emphasis on financial accountability, sidelining partnership quality and leaving little space for national actors to adapt these policies to country-specific contexts.

The levels of control imposed on partners – the requirement to complete multiple, dispersed, one-size-fits-all capacity assessments – place a disproportionate burden on smaller, more informal organizations, which conduct life-saving activities along conflict frontlines and otherwise hard-to-reach areas where few (if any) INGOs are able or willing to sustain presence. Due diligence requirements that are attached to sub-grants use valuable time and energy that would otherwise be expended serving communities. In the worst case scenario, a lack of support with meeting compliance requirements also means that many organizations miss out on much needed resources completely.

Ukrainian NGOs cannot afford to fill out grant applications in volume, nor multiple, repetitive, lengthy due diligence procedures, by some designated international deadline. We are working in the conditions of hostilities. [...] we can demonstrate our legitimacy in other ways, through our actions on the ground and the validation of our peers, the networks that we belong to and the communities we serve

National Network of Local Philanthropy Development, *If Not Now, When?*

RECOMMENDATION

Graduate due diligence requirements and criteria according to specific partner needs.

A key aspect contributing to the evolution of NP's approach to responsible partnerships is the understanding that supporting local partners goes beyond compliance requirements and project implementation. NP calls for INGOs and donors to adopt simpler, more flexible due diligence criteria that supports NNGOs and CSOs not only as implementers of humanitarian programmes but as key actors in civil society.

Both INGOs and partners need to continuously assess their internal structures, resources, existing capacities and capacity strengthening needs to help manage each other's expectations and codify partnership principles and behaviors that matter to them most. The term 'capacity' should be defined in relation to specific contexts and crises. This should also be understood as a mutual process of capacity-strengthening, where NNGOs and CSOs contribute different understandings and skill sets to INGOs, as well as the other way around. Where opportunities for capacity strengthening for local actors are identified, responsible partnership arrangement will ensure that support and resources are directed toward addressing the gaps (3).

At NP, we are aware how the need to access funding – from both NP and partner sides – can result in civil society actors having to comply with burdensome standards and eligibility criteria. With this in mind, we have replaced due diligence checklists with a Mutual Organizational Capacity Plan, which necessitates NP teams and partners to develop partnership accountability mechanisms during and after partnership. The Plan encourages mutual risk assessment, determines steps for improving each other's financial viability, and focuses on mutual sustainability.

RECOMMENDATION

Provide wraparound security support to identify and mitigate security risks assumed by partners.

FROM RISK OUTSOURCING TO RISK SHARING

The increasing reliance of INGOs and donors on NNGOs, CSOs, and CBOs to access hard-to-reach and high-risk areas has resulted in tremendous risk outsourcing to civil society actors without appropriate supports to acknowledge and mitigate these risks. Local actors take on extreme risks to deliver aid, often without formalized agreements or any safety and security support. Such partnerships are unethical, and all actors across the sector need to take action to prevent this kind of exploitative implementation.

(3) Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation: a practical resource for civil society, donors, INGOs and intermediaries, PeaceDirect, September 2023.

Rather than risk-outsourcing, responsible partnerships need to be envisioned on a basis on risk-sharing. Though different parties to partnerships may have different risk thresholds, there needs to be a mutual understanding and informed consent about the risks that different parties agree to in implementation, and structures in place to mitigate and manage these risks.

INGOs, who often have stricter risk thresholds in place than local actors, need to provide ongoing support to implementing partners in assessing and understanding safety and security risks related to their work, as well as putting effective measures in place to mitigate those risks. This goes beyond the baseline consideration of do no harm principles to the proactive recognition of risks that partners face and prioritization of partners' welfare and safety.

NP is working to expand the number of flak jackets and helmets available, but it's not just about providing equipment – it's about changing attitudes. That's why NP is also advocating for this practice to be adopted by other international actors. Together, we can keep volunteers safe and ensure that humanitarian efforts continue to make a meaningful impact on the ground.

Lending a Hand, Lending a Bulletproof Vest

Effective supports vary by context but must consider the holistic safety of partners, including risks to physical safety incurred through partnership activities as well as long-lasting psychological and social risks assumed by partners. Pooled funds and donors should implement minimum standards for protection and security support for any grants or subgrants they provide, ensuring that these supports are built into programming from the beginning. Key to a responsible partnerships approach is frequent dialogue around partners' safety and security needs and rapid response to any risks they highlight.

In our own application of a responsible partnership approach, NP strives to ensure that local actors have access to Personal Protective Equipment (PEE), first aid and trauma kits, training in emergency first aid, psychological first aid, and mine action awareness. NP commits to increasing informational and technical support to partners, including knowledge and operationalizing safety and security procedures, such as field risk assessments, and contingency and movement planning. As other risks are identified and arise, we are committed to dialogue with our partners and flexibly responding to the dynamic risk environments we operate within together.

RECOMMENDATION

Provide wraparound security support to identify and mitigate security risks assumed by partners.

When NP designed a project in Ukraine, a critical gap that was identified was the lack of wraparound safety and security frameworks and resources that local organisations had access to – despite carrying out the vast majority of high risk, frontline work. NP designed our work in Ukraine to address this gap, supporting partners through a PPE Lending Programme, Fuel & Stipends Request Programme, First Aid and Psychological First Aid Trainings, a Volunteer Insurance Programme, a Volunteer Resilience Programme, sharing of policies and procedures/good practices around safety and risk mitigations, increasing safety around volunteer premises, and supporting volunteers with procuring visibility materials. Under a Responsible Partnerships approach, these kinds of supports, tailored to the needs of different contexts and groups, should be standard and adapted from context to context.

LANGUAGE

Language presents a common challenge as participation in, and the shaping of the international humanitarian system. Not only is the sector dominated by the use of English, French, or Spanish as operational languages, but also by the use of sector-specific humanitarian jargon. This can further alienate NNGOs and CSOs from engagement in humanitarian coordination, especially at the national and regional coordination levels.

To facilitate direct civil society, civilian, and community-level participation and contributions in local, national, regional, and international levels, it is important that INGOs and donors encourage and support coordination and management of humanitarian efforts in local languages, and also examine what must be done differently in the day-to-day work and at the individual, organizational and systemic levels to better orient responses around the needs of local actors.

At NP, we acknowledge that more needs to be done to increase teams' intercultural competence and educate ourselves around cultural norms in communication in countries in which they conduct activities. Establishing reciprocal feedback loops with partners and cultivating an environment where feedback is valued and encouraged is equally important.

RECOMMENDATION

Coordinate and manage humanitarian efforts in local languages.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Clearly **define** and frequently revisit **expectations** and responsibilities for partnerships.



Move beyond sub-granting-type partnerships towards longer-term, responsible, and equitable partnerships by providing **direct**, multi-year, and flexible **funding** to NNGOs, CSOs, and CBOs.



Adapt due diligence **requirements** and criteria to specific partner needs.



Provide wraparound security **support** to identify and mitigate security risks assumed by partners.



Coordinate and manage humanitarian efforts **in local languages**.

