

FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO CIVIL SOCIETY TO COMBAT SGBV IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS

LEARNINGS ON SUBGRANTING TO WOMEN RIGHTS
ORGANISATIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY
ORGANISATIONS IN YEMEN, IRAQ AND THE
OCCUPIED PALESTIAN TERRITORIES



[[PHOTO CREDIT: QADER STAFF, RAZAN ZAHDEH]]

naseej نسيج

CONNECTING VOICES AND ACTION
to End Violence Against Women and Girls
in the MENA Region



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ACRONYMS

EU	European Union
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territory
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
WRO	Women Rights Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
GDRSC	Gender Development Research & Studies Center
CPMU	Country Project Management Unit
RPMU	Region Project Management Unit
AWID	Association for Women’s Rights in Development

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

‘Naseej: Connecting Voices and Action to End Violence Against Women and Girls in the MENA Region’ aimed to contribute to more gender-equitable societies in Iraq, Yemen, and OPT, in which women and girls live free from violence across all spheres of life (overall objective of the action) and to support civil society to effectively prevent and respond to SGBV during conflict (specific objective). More information on the project is available to this [link](#).

This learning exercise focused specifically on the ‘Sub-granting’ Scheme established across the 3 countries with the two-fold objective of providing funding to WROs/CSOs working on SGBV and supporting grantees to deliver their interventions more effectively. The goal is to try to give a comprehensive answer to the following question: **“to which extent is the Naseej’s Sub-granting Scheme/s integrating and coherent with Feminist (Funding) Principles with the ultimate goal of improving partner WROs/CSOs organisational capacity to function more independently and effectively to deliver prevention, response, and advocacy programmes/initiatives on ending SGBV?”**

The key lessons that have emerged from the project learning process can be summarised in the following areas of analysis:

1) NASEEJ SUB-GRANTING SCHEME’S STRATEGY AND APPROACH VIS A VIS PROJECT GOAL:

- ❁ **On sub-granting scheme design**, the main lesson learnt focus on the need for regular and well-structured communication, transparency of Oxfam's principles, policies and vision, and the opportunity for new partnerships.
- ❁ **On contribution to improved sustainability of WROs and/or CSOs**, the main learnings are the importance of a long-term approach and the capacity-strengthening component.
- ❁ **On contribution to an enabling ecosystem for women rights and gender justice**, the learning process highlights the importance of networking among sub-grantees, which can help them share challenges and problems and benefit from lessons learnt.

2) SUB-GRANTING TECHNICAL ASPECTS:

- ❁ **On selection process, contracting and grant implementation**, the main lesson learnt concern the importance of clear and effective communication during the selection phase, a critical approach in proposing feminist values and tools to sub-grantees, and the challenge of adopting new tools and/or adapting organisational procedures to the needs of the grant programme.

The most important recommendations that may be considered useful for similar future initiatives:

- ✿ **To have more formalized and stable communication channels with sub-grantees** in order to ensure continuous exchange of information even in case of staff turnover.
- ✿ **To include capacity-sharing sessions from the very beginning of the project**, so that this represents an added value for the project itself.
- ✿ **To incentivize a true peer horizontal partnership.**
- ✿ **To give greater importance to proposals' sustainability as a selection criterion** and work together with the WROs and CSOs for the formulation of the sustainability elements of the grant proposal.
- ✿ **To invest more time in explaining the call for proposals** in order to avoid mistakes and misunderstandings in the application.
- ✿ **To simplify as much as possible the application process** whenever possible, in line with local capacities and contexts.
- ✿ **To have more moments of learning and sharing experiences among sub-grantees** in order to create synergies, foster mutual learning and knowledge sharing with local partners.
- ✿ **To expand the pool of Oxfam's partner organisations through the sub-granting** in order to enrich its partnerships within a country.
- ✿ **To ensure clear and effective communication during the selection phase.**

2 INTRODUCTION

'Naseej: Connecting Voices and Action to End Violence Against Women and Girls in the MENA Region' provided a regional response to one of the most critical issues affecting the realisation of women's empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in conflict and fragile settings. The project targeted the 3 fragile and conflict-affected countries of Yemen (North and the South, specifically in Lahj, Aden and Taiz and partially in Sana'a), Iraq (retaken governorates of Diyala and Anbar), and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT – West Bank Area C, East Jerusalem, Gaza Strip). Implemented from March 2019 to end-February 2023, Naseej was co-funded by the European Union and led by Oxfam.

Naseej aimed to contribute to more gender-equitable societies in Iraq, Yemen, and OPT, in which women and girls live free from violence across all spheres of life (overall objective of the action) and to support civil society to effectively prevent and respond to SGBV during conflict (specific objective).

A grant scheme was established in all three countries and 20 grantees (WROs and/or CSOs) were selected to provide three main activity streams:

- strengthening support and referral services and reporting system for women and girls SGBV survivors;
- transforming the social norms that perpetuate SGBV;
- strengthening development and implementation of national SGBV legislation.

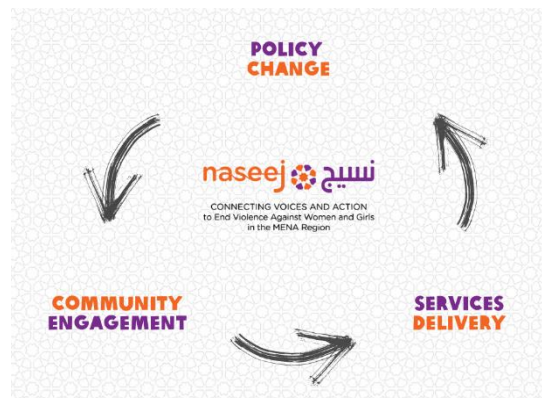


Figure 1 – Diagram of the Naseej's holistic approach.
Source: Oxfam project team.

The grant scheme was combined with capacity strengthening activities with the aim of amplifying the impact of the funding mechanism and support a longer-term organisational development.

The decision to investigate and reflect on the financial support to third parties' mechanism (so-called sub-granting) stems from a twofold awareness that Oxfam has had the opportunity to develop in the framework of the Naseej project. Firstly, the importance of supporting cross-country knowledge transfer on promising approaches to addressing SGBV. Secondly, the necessity of linking and learning between different fragile and conflict-affected contexts and supporting joint advocacy through regional and international platforms.

The learning process is a process that involves all actors of the Naseej initiative in an activity that aims to highlight and disseminate the experiences and lessons learnt from the project implementation. In other words, the learning is a building process aimed at consolidating the “capital” built by the project, with the following objectives:

- ✿ Identifying good practices;
- ✿ Using the knowledge acquired within the projects for future planning;
- ✿ Making the knowledge and outputs generated by projects more accessible, thus improving the transfer of knowledge, among partners and beyond;
- ✿ Raising awareness and improving communication of results in the thematic area of the project.

This Naseej’s learning exercise will focus specifically on the ‘sub-granting’ scheme established across the 3 countries with the two-fold objective of providing funding to WROs/CSOs working on SGBV and supporting grantees to deliver their interventions more effectively. The main learning goal is to try to give a comprehensive answer to the following question: **“to which extent is the Naseej’s Sub-granting Scheme integrating and coherent with Feminist (Funding) Principles with the ultimate goal of improving partner WROs/CSOs organisational capacity to function more independently and effectively in delivering prevention, response, and advocacy programmes/initiatives on ending SGBV?”**

By Feminist (Funding) Principles, we refer to the application to funding mechanisms of Oxfam’s Feminist principles, namely:

- ✿ Power sharing
- ✿ The personal is political
- ✿ Feminism is a local-global movement
- ✿ Nothing about us without us
- ✿ Engaging with men and masculinities
- ✿ There is no economic, social and environmental justice without gender justice
- ✿ Diversity and inclusion – gender mainstreaming and intersectional analysis
- ✿ Safety
- ✿ Care and Solidarity
- ✿ Development as Freedom
- ✿ Elimination of all forms of GBV.

Moreover, these principles integrate Oxfam’s partnership’s principles. **Feminist funding** is considered as a funding approach that contributes to promote the advancement of women rights and feminist movements. In this sense, the effectiveness and impact of a funding mechanism is assessed against its contribution to a conducive funding ecosystem for local feminist movements.

A feminist approach to funding and grant-making is the result of the experience and internal reflection on funding practices of a number of large and smaller funding and philanthropy organisations across the world which have been trying to democratize and review their practices to be more in line with their values. Among these organisations we can recall AWID, which has developed in 2019 a specific report to indicate best practices in creating a “Feminist funding ecosystem”¹. Other organisations are the Astarte Foundation, FRIDA (young feminists), MAMA Cash and others.

While Oxfam is yet to produce a specific framework on feminist funding, this learning exercise has identified some **key values** that allow for the translation of Oxfam’s feminist principles into its grant-making practices. For each of this value, moreover, key learning questions were developed:

- ✿ **Participation**. Were potential beneficiaries involved in the definition of funding priorities, eligibility and selection criteria? To what extent applicants are able to propose their own strategies and activities?
- ✿ **Empowerment**. Were grants’ conditions aligned with potential grantees’ needs and organisational capacities? Was the sub-granting mechanism designed to facilitate and promote WROs and CSOs leadership (especially in terms of feminist transformative leadership)? Were Oxfam’s communication practices with grantees allowing for horizontal information exchange and sharing?
- ✿ **Inclusiveness**. Are eligibility criteria leaving out important actors of the women rights’ movement in the countries? To what extent did the sub-granting scheme’s priorities and objectives reflect the diversity of existing actors within the women rights’ movement? Was inclusiveness mainstreamed as a key value to adhere to into the grantees’ projects?
- ✿ **Equality**. To what extent was the sub-granting mechanism allowing for the inclusion of costs related to guaranteeing accessibility, inclusion and equality in grantees’ projects?
- ✿ **Transparency**. Were applicants allowed to get full access to the reasons of their ineligibility or rejection? Is the decision-making process of funds’ award clearly and fully publicly explained?
- ✿ **Accountability**. Was there a 2-way communication and feedback complaint mechanism in place including also the sub-granting? Were corrective actions taken by Oxfam following grantees’ feedback/complaints (if any)? Was Oxfam providing specific time and avenues to discuss selection’s results individually with applicants? Was accountability towards communities included as a key aspect to be of proposals?
- ✿ **Solidarity**. Was the sub-granting mechanism designed with the aim, also, to enhance solidarity within the women movement rather than competition? Were there ways to stream part of the funding directly to social/ grass-roots movements initiatives?

¹ See https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/AWID_Funding_Ecosystem_2019_FINAL_Eng.pdf.

- ✿ **Power Dynamics.** Is the sub-granting mechanism allowing for the participation and actual possibility of influencing the decisions on funding (i.e., participation in evaluation/selection committee)? Is the due diligence process done in a spirit of mutual accountability? Are contractual conditions recreating power unbalances?
- ✿ **Relevance.** To what extent the funding priorities are in line with the women rights movement's priorities in the country? Are selection criteria relevant and realistic for the local context? Are they phrased and expressed in the local language and prevalent terminology?
- ✿ **Accessibility.** Is the sub-granting mechanism foreseeing ways to reach and involve actors with diverse skills and capacities? Are outreach activities foreseen to ensure the most marginalized actors get access to the funding opportunities? Was requesting and receiving support on the application process easy and affordable (also timewise) for potential applicants? Did grants management's procedures, including reporting, create a heavy workload on grantees?
- ✿ **Effectiveness.** Are eligible costs reflecting the real needs of local actors for organisational long-term investment?
- ✿ **Potential transformative change.** Are selection criteria valuing the unique expertise, experience and resilience of different actors over conformity to standardized practices? Are selection criteria valuing the non-monetary contribution of applicants in terms of activism, volunteering, time dedicated, risks taken to challenge the system, etc.? Are initiatives across movements and themes supported? Is there specific support for coalition building/strengthening?

This learning paper is articulated in three main sections. Section I, methodology and desk review, focuses on how the analysis has been carried out and the importance of situating financial support to third parties consistent with feminist principles within a conceptual, analytic and strategic framework. Section II, lessons learnt, identifies and discusses topics and knowledge come to light with regards to four elements of the practice: (1) sub-granting scheme design, (2) contribution to improved sustainability of WROs and/or CSOs, (3) contribution to an enabling ecosystem for women rights and gender justice, (4) selection processes, contracting and grant implementation. Section III, recommendations and conclusions, systematise the main issues that emerged from the interviews, compares them with some key theses in the literature, and provides a series of ways forward and conclusions.

The paper will be shared within Oxfam and among the stakeholders involved.

3 METHODOLOGY

Naseej's learning process has been managed by Oxfam Italy's project team with the engagement of all stakeholders, including project co-applicant GDRSC, the sub-grantees, and Oxfam project teams in Yemen, Iraq, and OPT. The Desk review and data collection were conducted during the final 3 months of the project (December-January-February 2023), while the learning paper has been finalized after the project's completion date (28 February 2023).

The process' goal was to try to provide a comprehensive answer to the following question: **“to which extent is the Naseej's Sub-granting Scheme integrating and coherent with Feminist (Funding) Principles with the ultimate goal of improving partner WROs/CSOs organisational capacity to function more independently and effectively to deliver prevention, response, and advocacy programmes/initiatives on ending SGBV?”**

The methodology used combined secondary and primary data. The secondary data included project reports and documents produced, i.e. Naseej's Sub-Granting Component documents and reports and/or any other project's deliverable. In addition, primary data were gathered in the three Naseej countries through two online surveys (**Annex I**), nine interviews with sub-grantees and five interviews with Oxfam CPMU-RPMU and GDRSC in order to get a more comprehensive and consistent learning.²

With regard to the survey of sub-grantees (**Annex II**), a total of fourteen (14) closed questions were asked, of which three with the possibility to argue the answer. The total number of participants in this survey was thirty-six (36)³. The survey addressed to Oxfam CPMU-RPMU consisted of fourteen (14) closed questions (**Annex III**). The total number of participants was six (6)⁴.

It should be noted that non-selected organisations were not involved in the writing of this learning.

Adequate gender participation was ensured, taking care to involve people of different ages and conditions (e.g. disability, work in the sector of SGBV, type of urban context, different attitudes towards WROs/CSOs etc.).

For both surveys and interviews, the following interrelated areas of analysis were explored:

² 7 out of 9 interviews with sub-grantees were conducted in person. The interviews with Oxfam CPMU-RPMU were all conducted online, using Microsoft Teams.

³ The survey was created on Microsoft Forms and included the possibility for respondents to select the language, English or Arabic.

⁴ This survey, also created on Microsoft Forms, was only in English.

- ✿ **Naseej Sub-granting Scheme’s strategy and approach vis a vis project goal:** (i) Sub-Granting scheme design, (ii) Contribution to improved sustainability of WROs and/or CSOs, (iii) Contribution to an enabling ecosystem for women rights and gender justice.
- ✿ **Sub-Granting technical aspects:** (i) Selection processes, contracting and grant implementation.

4 DESK REVIEW

A Desk review of secondary data was conducted, which included a number of documents, namely:

- ✿ **Project-related documents** such as:
 - monitoring, evaluation and research documents produced during the project: Naseej Project Mid-Term review, a Survey with non-selected organisations (Iraq);
 - sub-granting manuals and tools such as the 3 Grant Manuals (part 1 on Selection and part 2 on Grant Management) produced in Iraq, OPT and Yemen;
 - Reports on the sub-granting and project activities such as the Final Award Evaluation Reports produced in each country at the end of the award process, the Project’s Interim Reports, Financial Reports;
- ✿ **Research papers** conducted during the project, such as:
 - the National Research on SGBV conducted in OPT as part of the project’s activities;
 - the Naseej Project Baseline studies conducted in the 3 countries to gather data for the project’s indicators and MEAL framework;
- ✿ **Policy and planning** documents and tools related to the humanitarian response and the specific national policies on SGBV in the 3 countries, such as:
 - the humanitarian responses frameworks (including multiple responses within the same country such as Iraq whose response is linked to the internal war with ISIS and the regional Syria refugee crisis), to understand to what extent SGBV was included within each countries’ humanitarian responses and how many resources were directed towards SGBV specifically;
 - the UN/OCHA monitoring dashboards on the countries’ humanitarian responses, to get data on any gaps in addressing SGBV’s needs within the humanitarian responses;
 - National policies and strategies on SGBV whenever existing, to capture the approaches and legal frameworks of SGBV response and services within each country.

Through the analysis of these documents, it was possible to draw these conclusions:

- ✿ SGBV remains an extremely under-funded component in these countries, both within the humanitarian responses and within general public budget;
- ✿ SGBV needs remain extremely high in all these countries;
- ✿ WROs and CBOs working on gender justice in these countries are extremely underfunded and can usually only rely on short term, project-based international funding, hindering their chances for long-term investments and organizational development;
- ✿ SGBV funding ecosystem in these countries is mainly dominated by international agencies while local public funding and philanthropy are extremely limited or non-existent.

In the development of the desk review, therefore, an attempt was made to move through the aforementioned areas of analysis and to identify learnings that already emerge as well as aspects, on the other hand, to be further investigated through the other qualitative research tools.

Starting from the **sub-granting scheme design**, it emerges that Oxfam tailored the sub-granting mechanism to the context. Due to the conflict and the delicate situation in **Yemen**, it was not appropriate to launch an open call for proposals and Oxfam decided to opt for a restricted call with a number of pre-selected small and medium-sized organisations and a direct award for a large organisation. An extensive mapping exercise was conducted by Oxfam partnership team in Yemen to identify organisations working on gender-related activities before the design of the sub-granting scheme. The pre-selection was based on the information gathered through this exercise. The direct award allowed for the channelling of resources towards the most active and established women rights organisation, the only organisation able to provide high quality SGBV services throughout the country. In **Iraq**, the team discussed measures to ensure the grant programme would reach women's rights organisations beyond those already identified by Oxfam during a preliminary mapping exercise carried out by Country Project Management Unit within a previous project, funded by the Canadian International Cooperation (GAC).

To ensure accessibility of the call also to smaller organisations, which are less likely to have English proficient staff, all the application documents were translated into Arabic. The submission was possible in Arabic or in English. Outreach activities were also implemented, like the publication of the call for proposals in local media or the organisation of online meetings to present the call and the templates to be submitted. A key action to ensure better access to the sub-granting program was the decision to propose 3 windows of application over 5 months and to dedicate the last deadline only to small organisations. This decision was taken to ensure small organisations would have more time to prepare their applications and would not be exposed to direct competition with bigger organisations. As the sub-granting scheme was limited to Diyala and Anbar governorates, where a lower number of

CSOs is present compared to other urban areas, ensuring accessibility to smaller and less structured organisations was key because this is the kind of organisation that is prevalent in these areas.

Finally, in **OPT**, the establishment of the sub-granting scheme required an in-depth analysis of the country in order to adapt it to the context. The team therefore decided to prioritise support to small organisations in order to promote local ownership and diversify the pool of small organisations that could have been Naseej beneficiaries, and to encourage partnerships between small and large organisations. To this end, outreach activities were carried out, including the announcement and presentation of the call for proposals in the GBV sub-clusters coordinated by UNFPA and attended by various national and local NGOs and CBOs in the West Bank and Gaza. In addition, all application documents were translated into Arabic to ensure accessibility for small organisations that are less likely to have English-speaking staff. Specific priority in the sub-granting was given, beside WROs also to organisations operating in remote areas and underserved communities, human rights organisations, youth-led organisations and registered networks of CSOs.

It is also worthy to mention that a specific focus in the design and set-up of the 3 sub-granting schemes was given to the **criteria to define the different size** of the organisations. The amount of funds that could be accessed was in fact, depending on the size of the applicant organisation; different amounts were available for small, medium, and large organisations. The criteria to define the different size were tailored to the country context as they took into consideration the specificities of CSOs in terms of overall budget, number of staffs, geographical outreach, etc.

5 LESSONS LEARNT

This section is dedicated to the lessons learnt from the sub-granting scheme of the Naseej project. What follows is the result of what emerged from the surveys and interviews, which has been revised in order to gather the lessons learnt and subsequent recommendations.

5.1 NASEEJ SUB-GRANTING SCHEME'S STRATEGY AND APPROACH VIS A VIS PROJECT GOAL

5.1.1 SUB-GRANTING SCHEME DESIGN

The sub-granting mechanism (Grant Scheme) was at the core of Naseej's strategy designed to reach the overall and specific objectives. During the first year of the project, the process of setting up and establishing grant schemes was initiated, with the dual aim of providing funding to WROs and CSOs working on SGBV and supporting them in implementing their interventions.

The approach aimed at ensuring recognition of the power, agency and autonomy issues of sub-grantees and built on their strengths through an interactive and mutual sharing of knowledge and experience. The sub-granting scheme was adapted to the specific national contexts and needs of WROs and CSOs.

The following learnings about the sub-granting scheme design emerged.

The need and importance to integrate a regular and well-structured communication between Oxfam (as grant-maker) and the sub-grantees within the sub-granting scheme. Communication between Oxfam and the sub-grantees was considered good and essential during the selection and implementation phases. This was evident from both surveys and interviews.

Outreach measures, such as sharing the call for proposals with local networks or organizing online meetings to present the call and the templates to be submitted, were implemented to ensure that WROs were informed about this funding opportunity, knew how to apply, and increased their chances of being eligible and selected.

Oxfam's teams also supported sub-grantees to refine their proposed budget and activities to ensure alignment with the overall objective, outcomes, and general sub-granting guidelines of Naseej.

During implementation, Oxfam teams made regular visits to project sites to monitor and support sub-grantees. In addition, regular meetings were held to ensure the accuracy of reports and data collection. During the project, however, there were times when communication was interrupted. The turnover of Oxfam staff and sub-grantees sometimes caused delays in responses and reporting.

These problems were exacerbated by the fact that communication flow and approaches between Oxfam and the sub-grantees were not deeply discussed during the design phase of the sub-granting scheme which resulted in a lack of clarity and effectiveness.

The need to be very open and transparent about Oxfam's principles, policies, and vision. After selection, initial workshops were conducted, either individually for each sub-grantee or by grouping several organisations together. EU guidelines on finance, procurement and visibility were presented to ensure that sub-grantees practices were in line with Oxfam and EU practices. Each organisation also received an introduction to safeguarding and safe programming according to Oxfam's standards, with discussions on the code of conduct, prevention of fraud and terrorist financing, and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse in the workplace. However, it would be helpful if this phase took place already during the development of the call, ensuring Oxfam's principles, policies and vision are included and well explained. Oxfam's approach should be very open in terms of sharing principles and values, which must be clear from the outset and the partnership must be based on a shared vision.

Otherwise, there is a risk that the policies between Oxfam and the partners will conflict and jeopardize the implementation of the project.

In this sense, it is important to mention that 2 organisations which had been awarded a grant, one in OPT and one in Yemen, refused to sign the grant contract in disagreement with some of Oxfam and EU's policies, namely Oxfam's aid diversion policy and the contractual requirements on social security and labour taxes.

The potential of sub-granting schemes as an opportunity for strategically expanding the pool of Oxfam's partner organisations. The Naseej project offered Oxfam the opportunity to further develop and strengthen partnerships with women rights organisations for long-term interventions, responding to their interest in benefiting from Oxfam's expertise, particularly in project management and advocacy on GBV, in targeted countries. For instance, in OPT Oxfam prioritised support for small organisations to encourage local ownership and diversify the pool of small organisations that could have been recipients of Naseej. This resulted in collaboration with new WROs and CBOs that had not been working with Oxfam before, contributing to increasing Oxfam's accountability and credibility. One of the sub-grantees interviewed admitted: *'We made a mistake at the beginning in choosing the call for applications. We chose the one for small organisations because we were not already Oxfam partners and we thought we had no chance of participating in the one for medium-sized organisations. We thought that those with which Oxfam had already collaborated would have priority'*.

5.1.2 CONTRIBUTION TO IMPROVED SUSTAINABILITY OF WROS AND/OR CSOS

Financial stability is one of the main problems related to the effectiveness of WROs programs, which are often dependent on funds or grants, resulting in a lack of sustainability. This factor is amplified in fragile contexts. In order to enable their organisational development for effectiveness and further sustainability beyond grants, Naseej supported WROs and CSOs in their capacity to effectively initiate and manage projects and functions.

The main learnings regarding the improvement to WROs and/or CSOs sustainability are described as follows.

The importance of a long-term approach that prioritises the sustainability of projects. Naseej's capacity-strengthening component was widely appreciated by the sub-grantees as well as the financial support. Access to the grant enabled them to deploy new services, expand their work area, recruit new people, and extend their WROs/CSOs network to create synergies and work better with local communities. With regard to financial sustainability, all sub-grantees interviewed reported being able

to access new sources of funding during the course of the project. Some believe that their work with Oxfam has provided their organisation the confidence to reach out and connect with other donors, both because of the skills they have acquired and because in the eyes of donors, they have become a reliable organisation. Oxfam also provided them with complementary support through additional grants, prioritizing bridging funding and networking opportunities for further sustainability of their work.

The importance of the capacity-strengthening component. One of Naseej's intermediate outcomes concerned the improved ability of WROs/CSOs to function more independently and effectively to deliver prevention, response, and advocacy programs/initiatives on ending SGBV. To this purpose, plans for capacity-strengthening were developed in consultation with the WROs/CSOs and were based on the gaps identified together during the capacity assessment, carried out both during the selection process and once the sub-grantees have been selected.

Most of the sub-grantees recognized the importance of training on Finance, Project Management and Reporting, as well as on technical aspects of gender and SGBV, which they received.

One of the interviewees reported: *'Naseej is one of the best projects in terms of capacity strengthening that our organisation has participated in'*. It enabled them to improve the quality of their activities but also the organisation's own capacity to reporting and managing projects. However, interviews with sub-grantees revealed that they received the trainings at the end, during the last year and therefore, the skills learnt were not fully applied in the project itself. This would have been an added value for Naseej.

It should be mentioned also that 5 organisations (3 in Iraq, 1 in OPT and 1 in Yemen) which were initially selected, were not awarded the grant contract because of failure to pass the due diligence process conducted after the selection. This element points to the fact that while valuable proposals were submitted, the grant scheme was not able to sustain the risks related with contracting less structured organisations.

The lack of capacities is also apparent through the overall success rate of applicants; in facts, only around 50% of the applications submitted were eligible.

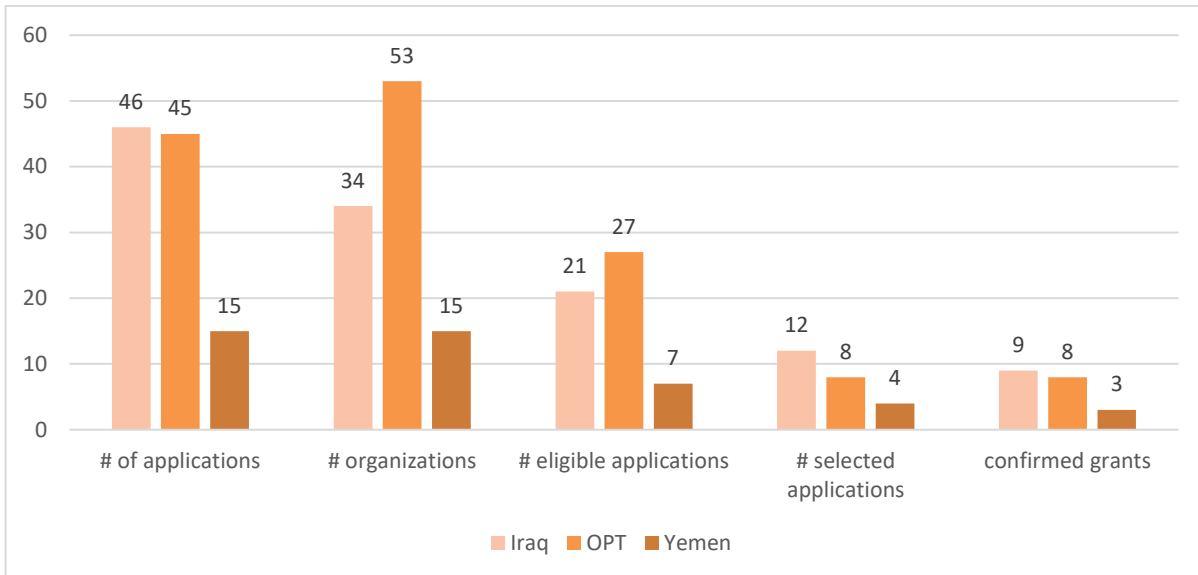


Figure 2 The overall success rate of applicants to the Call of Proposals. Source: Annex IVa] Sub-granting Scheme – Project Year 2 Interim Narrative Report.

5.1.3 CONTRIBUTION TO AN ENABLING ECOSYSTEM FOR WOMEN RIGHTS AND GENDER JUSTICE

Naseej supported WROs and CSOs, focusing on underserved and underfunded areas and organisations. Within the context of protracted conflict, a project like Naseej is also particularly important because it provides additional resources, not necessarily linked to the humanitarian SGBV needs, in order to support the creation of a long-term enabling ecosystem for gender justice; moreover, in these contexts where public services for SGBV are often weak and fragmented, the state pays little attention to gender equality, and all donors divert their funds to emergency programmes, an intervention like Naseej can ensure that advocacy and women’s movements’ objectives are promoted and not overlooked.

As a result, WROs and CSOs not only face challenges such as restrictions on civil society space and the general increase in insecurity in some areas, but also the difficulty in accessing donor and NGO funds, which are crucial to carry out their work.

As for the contribution to an enabling ecosystem for women rights and gender justice, the following main learnings emerged.

The importance of networking among sub-grantees. The relevance of networking and sharing experiences emerged as central in the project implementation. One respondent said: *‘when we share our activities with all partners, this provides us with more knowledge and practices. Sharing and meetings give strength to the network and to our organisation, which does not feel alone’.*

Having regular partnership meetings, both at country and regional level, fosters the exchange of experiences. It can help sub-grantees share challenges and problems and benefit together from lessons learnt. Annual meetings of the three countries do not seem sufficient. Moreover, networking activities were limited and hindered by the Covid restrictions during the project implementation. While online meetings provided at least some opportunity for interaction among subgrantees across the 3 countries, they could not replace the richness of in person networking experiences. Networking also increases the ownership of the people we work with directly and their commitment for the overall objective of the action.

5.2 SUB-GRANTING TECHNICAL ASPECTS

5.2.1 SELECTION PROCESSES, CONTRACTING AND GRANT IMPLEMENTATION

The Grant manuals developed for the three countries outlined the process, guidelines and selection criteria for WROs/CSOs as well as all contents related to their financial and technical support. During the implementation of the project, Oxfam teams carried out regular visits to partner project sites and coordination meetings to ensure the proper implementation of activities and monitor progress.

The main learnings regarding the selection processes, contracting and grant implementation are described as follow.

The importance of clear and effective communication during the selection phase. Although outreach activities were organized to present the call for proposals and application documents, interviews revealed that sub-grantees experienced problems in understanding the call. Some organisations reported that they did not know to which size their organisation belonged (small, medium, large) and therefore to which lot to apply. In Iraq, a further misunderstanding occurred with the various deadlines; some sub-grantees said during the interview that they did not realise that they had several possibilities to apply, and that each deadline corresponded to a different project implementation period. As one interviewee reported, *'we thought that each part had a specific timeframe and budget and that we could only apply for one of them. This confusion led to a first contract of only 6 months and a second phase to proceed with the extension'*.

The importance to have a critical approach by Oxfam in proposing its feminist values and tools to subgrantees. Within the capacity strengthening component, Oxfam proposed, for instance a capacity assessment tool (CAT) that integrates Oxfam's feminist principles, making them the backbone, and focuses on organisational strengthening (transformational leadership, gender-just structures, resilience and sustainability, strategic linkages, programming and advocacy and safeguarding). Flexibility and adaptability are supposed to be one of the strengths of this tool. However, it emerged

that Oxfam failed to meaningfully tailor this tool to the subgrantees' needs and views. Some interviewees stressed that Oxfam should be more flexible and align its policies and procedures with the local context. Also, Oxfam is a feminist organisation, but in some countries talking about feminism is a very sensitive issue. The term itself can have a negative connotation, as it is seen as a product of the Western agenda.

The challenge of adopting new tools and/or adjusting organisational procedures to the grant scheme's needs. While the sub-granting scheme allowed Oxfam to reach out to mostly "new" organisations that had not been working with Oxfam before, this also required the conduction of a quite lengthy due diligence process in order to verify selected organisations' capacities to implement the grant. Oxfam adjusted its due diligence and partnership assessment's tools to Naseej grant scheme's needs, but the whole process took several months, reducing the implementation period available to grantees.

This is an example of the challenge that implementing a sub-granting scheme can pose to an NGO in terms of adapting and adjusting its procedures. Some of the sub-grantees interviewed listed Oxfam's procedures as one of the biggest challenges faced during the project by adding: *'We have policies for procurement, finance, and travel, but unfortunately Oxfam did not accept these policies as other donors such as OCHA, UNFPA, UNHCR, UN Women, GIZ and IRC do. In the agreement, Oxfam asked to follow its policies, and we were very surprised because we have internationally recognised policies, but we accepted this request'*.

In this sense, for instance, specific letters of agreement templates had to be developed for Oxfam country offices to ensure compliance with the EU's regulations on financial support to third parties and also to meet the needs of the sub-granting scheme.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the specific lessons learnt in the four main focus areas listed above, there are some general recommendations that can be considered useful for similar future initiatives:

- 🌸 **To have more formalized and stable communication channels with sub-grantees** in order to ensure continuous exchange of information even in case of staff turnover. While in some cases monthly meetings took place regularly, it would be important to ensure to

have at least monthly meetings with the WROs/CSOs in order to be constantly updated of any internal changes and issues.

- ✿ **To include capacity-sharing sessions from the very beginning of the project**, so that WROs/CSOs can immediately put into practice what they have learnt and so that this represents an added value for the project itself.
- ✿ **To incentivize a true peer horizontal partnership**, Oxfam on the one hand must clearly present what its values and principles are and how it intends to implement them, and on the other hand, it must recognize the values and capacities of the partner since partnership is a two-way process.
- ✿ **To give greater importance to proposals' sustainability as a selection criterion**. Since the definition of the criteria for the selection of the proposals to be supported, financial and social substantiality should be included as one of the key factors for the grant assignment. Considering the implicit challenges of the sustainability, Oxfam should support the proposals design phase embracing a co-production approach, in order to work together with the WROs and CSOs for the formulation of the sustainability elements of the grant proposal.
- ✿ **To invest more time in explaining the call for proposals** in order to avoid mistakes and misunderstandings in the application that may affect the size of the grant accessed and the duration of the project.
- ✿ **To simplify as much as possible the application process** whenever possible, in line with local capacities and contexts.
- ✿ **To have more moments of learning and sharing experiences among sub-grantees** in order to create synergies, foster mutual learning and knowledge sharing with local partners.
- ✿ **To expand the pool of Oxfam's partner organisations through the sub-granting** in order to enrich its partnerships within a country, reaching diverse actors that would be hardly engaged through Oxfam's traditional partnership building activities and procedures (ex. small CSOs, informal groups, etc.).
- ✿ **To ensure clear and effective communication during the selection phase**; for instance, Oxfam should provide non-selected organisations with a well-articulated response about motivations of process results in order to increase mutual accountability and trust with local stakeholders.

7 CONCLUSIONS

Naseej supported WROs and CSOs, focusing on underserved and underfunded areas and organisations. In fragile and protracted conflict contexts, a project such as Naseej has been particularly important as it has contributed to creating an ecosystem conducive to gender justice, providing additional resources not only for humanitarian needs in SGBV, but also to support the advocacy efforts of women's movements.

Naseej has been also important for the partners in terms of identity. A sense of belonging and an impressive level of ownership emerged during this learning process and throughout the project. Capacity strengthening sessions and networking opportunities were perceived by the sub-grantees as the real added value of this initiative. In the first case, Naseej enhanced their organisation's technical capacity in areas such as finance, project management, reporting, as well as women's rights and gender justice. As regards the networking component, as stated by one interviewee: *'when we share our activities with all partners, this provides us with more knowledge and practices. Sharing and meetings give strength to the network and to our organization, which does not feel alone'*.

The first of Oxfam's feminist principles is 'power sharing'. This principle also needs to be taken into account in partnerships, as the learning process revealed that some WROs perceived Oxfam's approach as inflexible and not very participatory. There should be greater trust and recognition of the policies and work of the partners, otherwise, the risk is to recreate the same power dynamics that Oxfam wants to dismantle. This means working on at least two levels. At the operational level, including WROs and CSOs in the design phase in order to work together on the sustainability of the proposal. At the values level, having a critical eye in proposing one's feminist values and tools to partners by tailoring them to their needs, visions and contexts.

8 LIST OF ANNEXES

Annex I Surveys analysis report.

Annex II Survey to sub-grantees.

Annex III Survey to Oxfam CPMU-RPMU.

This case study was written by Sabrina Falini, Carla Pratesi, Paola Beltrami and Lorenzo Paoli. Oxfam acknowledges the contribution of Jessica Valerani, Maria Nella Lippi, Majdi Faqeeh and all the Naseej team in its production. It is part of a series of papers and reports written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

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