

It's not you, it's us — when locals speak (the brief)



[Qorras](#) May 6 2023

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Insights from Qorras' institutional partnerships with (I)NGOs (2019–2023)

Executive summary

Based on Qorras' experiences over the past four years, the open letter re-examines the conditions under which partnerships between local groups and (I)NGOs could be beneficial. We share insights from this process of self-assessment hoping to benefit other locally-based, community-driven, grassroots and non-grassroots, groups and organizations of different structures and scales, who may face similar questions or situations as they carry out their work. At the same time, the text addresses institutions looking to *localize, include, partner or collaborate* with local grassroots groups, and those who support and resource such approaches, with the aim to move towards healthier dynamics and mutually beneficial relationships.

The first section examines factors that impact the relationships between (I)NGOs and local groups before their beginning, highlighting some of the consequences of donors seeking to localize projects by imposing that (I)NGOs partner with local groups in order to access funding. In it we discuss the frame of mind with which partnerships are apprehended, which partner is seen to benefit from them, the boundaries of capacity building, and the need for compromise in working towards relationships of mutual trust and

accountability. The second section addresses issues in the implementation of the project. Here, we focus on how organizational hierarchies and individual positionalities result in different conceptions and attitudes towards risk, and discuss some of the effects of corporate practices on community dynamics. In the third and final section, we lay out how accountability is understood and practiced within partnerships between (I)NGOs and local groups in the absence of the state. We discuss how procedural requirements are at times an instrument for oppressing the local partner, and at other times trivialized by the (I)NGO, when they could constitute dynamic and transparent tools for diagnosing and improving the relationship.

To conclude, and as an invitation to engage and collaborate, we share preliminary thoughts on ways to move forward. Hereafter, we have compiled the main points made in the text in the form of recommendations addressing (I)NGOs, donors/funders, and local groups.

Recommendations

To (I)NGOs:

1. Ask yourself if you are ready to partner with a local/grassroots group and what this could imply on your own ways of work, internal policies and staff.
2. Engage in conversations with local groups outside of projects and evaluations: work to understand your potential partners' language, values and ways of working for what they are; work to understand what mutually beneficial, accountable partnerships should be.
3. Don't be a quasi-donor, as you don't have institutional donor processes. Don't be an activist, as you are too reliant on development funds. Position yourself clearly and communicate your position clearly.
4. Be transparent about the sources of and reasons for requirements.

5. Work to take on the burden of reporting and administration, as you take on the largest portion of funds too. Do not trivialize reporting, use it to listen to your partners' feedback and use it to improve the partnership as it unfolds.
6. Give your partner the benefit of the doubt and propose proactive solutions to obstacles.
7. Trust your partner's risk assessments and mitigation measures for safeguarding the community.
8. Mitigate high staff turnover by finding ways to ensure continuity and institutional memory across the different phases of the partnership.
9. In evaluations and community consultation, prioritize quality (in-depth long-term relationships with committed and engaged partners) over quantity (large focus groups and public questionnaires).
10. Capacity building needs to be self determined by those receiving it.

To donors:

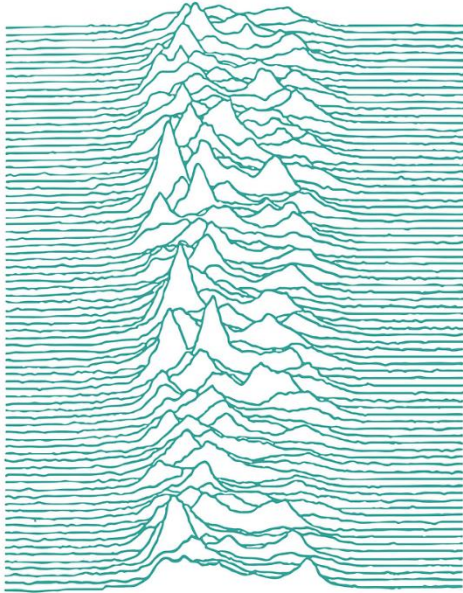
1. Rethink conditional funding and how its current setup tips the balance of power even further in favor of (I)NGOs at the expense of local/grassroots partners
2. In your evaluations, make efforts to hear from local groups. Be more hands-on with sub-grantees more generally during implementation, but also outside of grantmaking and pitching.
3. Adapt your requirements to the context of implementation and to the structures of organizations. To effectively include local groups, make provisions for their ways of work and ensure these provisions are transmitted to the (I)NGO partner.

4. Continue to support and increase your core, flexible support to local groups. Subgrants and partnerships might make local groups' annual budgets seem larger, but they allow us to do very little, in very little time and with large burdens on our team members. Sufficient core funding would allow greater autonomy, efficacy and flexibility for local groups.
5. Support your grantees in accessing core funds from other donors through facilitating donor-activist spaces.

To local groups:

1. Trust your instincts and speak out when something isn't working in the partnership. Take reporting as an opportunity to document all aspects of the partnership and to voice concerns.
 2. When in doubt, the community's safety and wellbeing comes first. You have the right to refuse.
 3. Conduct your own assessments and evaluations of partnerships.
 4. Build more intentional and intersectional solidarity with each other. Strategize together on fundraising and long-term planning to undo some of the competitiveness created between us by funding structures.
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it's not you, it's us – when locals speak



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(2019-2023)

Introduction

In this open letter, we reflect on some of the institutional partnerships that Qorras entered into over the past four years. These experiences have urged us to re-examine the conditions under which it is productive for our group, a largely grassroots operation, to partner with NGOs and INGOs [1]. We believe that sharing insights from this process of self-assessment could be beneficial to other local grassroots groups [2] who may face similar questions or situations as they carry out their work. At the same time, if these reflections are taken into

account by institutions looking to *localize, include, partner* or *collaborate* with local grassroots groups, or by those who support and resource such approaches, they could help move towards healthier dynamics and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Understandably, when one is in the midst of implementing a program, elbows-deep in the mud, there is little space to recognize where mistakes are made, and even less space to address them there and then. This does not mean that feedback is discouraged in the framework of institutional partnerships. But instead of it being something on which to build and act as the partnership unfolds, feedback is typically funneled into neatly filed reports, and becomes oriented towards an abstract future in which one hopes that similar mistakes will be averted. This future has arrived; we write this text today to outline some of the structural issues that make these mistakes so repetitive in our view, and to think of what this means for grassroots work.

Setting our cynicism aside, we recognize that the efforts and attempts recently made by NGOs and INGOs to evaluate their partnerships with local groups could be a sign that there is will to improve these relationships. And while we acknowledge the labor of the many independent evaluators carrying out this work, we must also accept that there are structural conditions that limit the effectiveness of these processes and the extent to which they are able to include the experience and perspective of local partners. For these reasons, we maintain that those through which the project is localized must speak and be heard on their own terms, and conduct their own evaluations of their experiences with (I)NGOs, and this is what we hope to do here. We also recognize that we voice these concerns from a position of privilege. Compared with other groups and organizations who may share our views and experiences, our grassroots ways of work and our non-profit status allow us to make this assessment and share it publicly without fearing for the livelihood of permanent staff, jeopardizing our own job security, or risking the financial sustainability of the organization.

1. Before the beginning: building on uneven terrain

1.1 The effects of conditional funding

To start, it is necessary to look at factors that impact a prospective partnership [3] before it has even begun. Here, we highlight the effect of funding that is awarded to (I)NGOs on the condition that they partner with a local grassroots group — or what we call conditional funding. While it may seem at first like a way for grantmakers to distribute resources more widely, and to increase participation by ensuring that local groups are included, requiring (I)NGOs to enter into otherwise unlikely partnerships in order to access resources creates an unhealthy dynamic between the (I)NGO and their would-be local partner. In these circumstances, local groups become instruments at best, and burdens or obstacles at worst, in the (I)NGOs' broader plan to grow fundraising prospects and secure financial sustainability.

At this early stage, it is difficult for a grassroots group to know exactly what they are entering into, because conditional funding is often wrapped in language that appears to value the same things as grassroots groups: localization, community accountability, mutual learning, and political engagement have become

buzzwords easily adopted, co-opted and thrown around in open calls and proposals, but rarely put in practice. Within (I)NGOs, this language (nevermind the values) is seldom mainstreamed across all concerned levels of the organization, and remains contained between management, program leads and the grassroots group. This internal inconsistency can lead to misunderstanding and conflict down the line, as soon as the grassroots group is faced with (I)NGO staff that is not familiar with grassroots language, values and ways of work, or whose conservative politics clash with ours (for instance, on questions of bodily agency, sexual freedoms, and others). Yet, while a shared language between partners is necessary, it is insufficient. Partners must be willing to explore the definitions of these terms together, and what it means to put them into practice. This process alone can expose significant differences or incompatibilities in political and organizational cultures, and it could indicate that the partnership is unlikely to be productive. This should be accepted in order to avoid a relationship that is based on misunderstanding from its very beginning.

1.2 The mindsets with which we envision the partnership

As a grassroots group, we recognize that there is much to learn in every partnership or project we take on. However, like many grassroots groups, our ways of work are structured around values that we share with a constituent community which we have built with care over the years and to whom we are accountable. This constitutes a hard boundary for the things that we are willing to change, formalize, professionalize, or for which we accept “capacity building”. Our experience has been that grassroots work becomes significantly distorted and weakened when accountability is made to flow towards a central leadership, or towards funders, as is often the case for (I)NGOs.

When (I)NGOs enter into partnerships assuming they have all the expertise and knowledge to share, this creates a power imbalance and prevents them from learning and benefiting from this particular kind of relationship. (I)NGOs need to consider and evaluate all the ways in which they benefit from partnering with grassroots groups, including but not limited to the legitimation of their interventions, discourse, work; the transfer of relevant knowledge and language from the ground up, and their subsequent access to similar grants as a result of this one. At the same time, (I)NGOs should be mindful that they are in fact

better resourced and often better shielded from risk than grassroots groups are. This consideration cannot be brushed off when it is convenient to portray the partnership as egalitarian, and must instead guide the ethics behind (I)NGOs' relationship with local grassroots groups.

In light of this, (I)NGOs need to consider if and how they can work in mutual accountability with their grassroots partner and really build a relationship of trust. They must recognize that partnering with a grassroots group does not make them immune to abuse of power, nor does it absolve their past abuses. Most importantly, it does not exempt them from having to demonstrate willingness to learn and goodwill through actions and language. As partners, we must demand that potential partner organizations be prepared to address forms of oppression present in their internal structure and culture, and that they be willing to restructure their ways of work in matters related to the partnership. This could be done in part by training and recruiting staff in alignment with the values at the core of the partnership, and by ensuring a flow of information across levels of the organizational hierarchy to avoid gatekeeping by senior managers while at the same time removing pressure off of junior staff coordinating the partnership.

2. Implementation: people, structures and dynamics

It is necessary here to examine the dynamic between members of the grassroots group and staff assigned by the (I)NGO to carry out the project. It is in these often overlooked everyday practices that the partnership effectively plays out and takes shape, and where organizational and political values are put in practice. In our experience, once the partnership agreement is signed, the initial excitement with which the project was co-conceived slips into the background along with the decision-makers with whom we were dealing. This is not the case within a grassroots group where positions of leadership and implementation are often occupied by the same person. From this point onwards, the project takes on a very different dimension. Often, while we were co-applicants and partners on paper, we found ourselves having to answer to our partner as though they were the donor and we were a sub-grantee. What is important to highlight in this dynamic is that local organizations are often treated similarly regardless of their position within the institutional relationship or the language used to describe it.

2.1 Organizational cultures, individual positionalities and risk

First, let us clarify that what follows is a generalization, and that exceptions to this generalization exist. This highlights something that we deeply believe: that the quality of individuals (their work ethics and political engagement) working in an organization can mitigate much of the harm that the structure itself brings with it — in other words: it matters *who* is doing the work. With this in mind, the high staff turnover rate we have seen within some partner (I)NGOs is worrying and highly disruptive to partnerships. To us, it reads as a clear difference of commitment to the relationship and the project.

We all exist beyond this project

As a “young” grassroots group, we often face condescending attitudes from staff in well-established or international organizations. Whenever convenient, the organization is presented to us as enormous, as having much going on outside of our partnership, and the staff too is busy with projects other than this one. It is assumed that the grassroots partner does not exist beyond the partnership, and should be grateful for the opportunity. As a result, grassroots groups are framed as the (I)NGO’s only problem partnership and end up under a great amount of pressure. In contrast with the attitudes of many (I)NGO staff, local groups often perform the unpaid labor of self-explaining, educating, and informing, as well as the emotional labor that accompanies our activism. What we bring to the table is rooted in the lived experiences of our communities and our members, where work, life and political engagement exist on one continuum. (I)NGOs rarely realize that partnerships and projects demand time and labor beyond the immediate scope of the project, and that this comes at a cost for their local partners.

The employee and the activist

We must also address the different positionalities occupied by the (I)NGO worker and the grassroots activist. While (I)NGOs have a high staff turnover rate, and while staff might sign off at the end of a workday or workweek, the line between work and life for grassroots activists is much more blurred. They are not just another employee or consultant hired to work on a project. Their work affects their life

directly and spills out of any contractual or transactional framework. In the case of Qorras as in the case of many other grassroots groups, the labor contributed by members is not confined to the 9 to 5 workday or the 40-hour workweek. It is not limited to the scope of a project or to a job description, and it is not conditioned to receiving payment or a salary at the end of the month. Unlike (I)NGO staff, we cannot resign from the work we have set out to do. And while (I)NGO staff are rarely personally liable for any developments in the project or partnership, grassroots activists are. In the case of Qorras, for instance, being registered as a non-profit civil company places core members under direct personal liability with the state, as is the case for individual activists and members of the community more generally. Grassroots groups should be recognized for having their “skin in the game” — wasn’t this why they were approached? This should encourage (I)NGOs to treat them with less skepticism, and instead trust that their motivations lie first and foremost in advancing justice for themselves and their communities.

Risk, community, and context

The different positions occupied by the (I)NGO employee and the grassroots activist means that they operate at different distances from the community and from the issues at stake. As a result, they may have widely differing conceptions of and attitudes towards risk. Similarly, (I)NGOs sometimes require their grassroots partner to make concessions with the community without realizing the risk this may pose. In the case of data collection practices, for instance, what may seem like a job well-done for an (I)NGO Monitoring and Evaluation Officer can be experienced as an invasive process by a grassroots group and their communities. Our high-risk context of state surveillance and violence against our communities are additional arguments against identity-based work which includes but is not limited to data collection. It is time to stop organizing focus groups on the basis of abstract definitions and categories of gender and sexual identity; to stop circulating large-scale surveys and questionnaires that require individuals to disclose their gender experience, sexual orientation and other intimate details about their lives; and to stop asking grassroots partners to facilitate access to community members on this basis. The cost of honesty from grassroots activists has become clear in the past two years: donors have enough information to expose a community that remains criminalized and reproduced as the social enemy. It suffices here to mention the leaks that originated in U.N. agencies and which led to the letter

banning events “promoting homosexuality” issued by the Minister of Interior in 2022, and to the subsequent violent repression and sometimes armed crackdowns on trans/queer individuals, gatherings and spaces throughout the country.

2.2 Corporate practices and their repercussions on community dynamics

Communication and misunderstanding

Communication between grassroots implementers and (I)NGO staff is strained by (I)NGOs’ organizational culture where one is always speaking with the hierarchy. Staff come off as simply passing on decision-making from above, a cog in the big well-oiled machine. However, in our experience, this is perhaps more accurately described as speaking “at” the hierarchy and not with it. When we as decision-makers within our own group have addressed the partner’s hierarchy and requested to be heard by its decision-makers in order to discuss issues with the partnership, this has been taken personally as an offensive and upsetting request. As a consequence, deep-running issues with the partnership remain seen as small incidents to be resolved “among staff” instead of leading to any meaningful change in the terms of the institutional relationship. Fundamental disagreements in organizational values and ways of work that remain undiscussed often result in what are diagnosed as “communication issues”. It is our experience that such issues are rarely a superficial matter to be resolved through further communication protocols and surveillance. Rather, they are usually symptoms of deeper misunderstandings.

The problem with inclusive hiring

In what they consider an additional measure to localize and be inclusive, (I)NGOs tend to hire local community members to manage and coordinate projects done in partnership with local grassroots groups. At the same time, these organizations rarely examine how their internal hierarchies could be contributing to oppressing their own staff, including these “inclusive hires”. For instance, this occurs when an (I)NGO partners with a trans/queer grassroots group, and hires trans/queer community members to manage and coordinate the project, but continues to overlook discrimination practiced by

conservative staff members, as well as the related security concerns in the context of Lebanon. Sadly, these individuals also become the focal points and implementers of (I)NGOs' monitoring and disciplining of their local grassroots partners. This practice places added pressure on the internal dynamics of a grassroots group and on community bonds. There is also a common practice among (I)NGOs of handpicking staff members based on their gender and sexual identity to make them the face or forefront of certain programs or outcomes. We see this simultaneously as a form of outing, tokenizing and pinkwashing, that absorbs sexual and political difference into the corporate culture of the (I)NGO without any structural change ever taking place. It also places these individuals in direct confrontation with communities that they are part of, strains and complicates their relationship, and prevents any form of genuine feedback or criticism.

Conceptions of failure

When failure is seen as something that the local partner is prone to, but not the (I)NGO, the ways in which these organizations are failing us becomes obfuscated. This affects how mistakes are viewed and who or what is seen as in need of improvement. Mistakes made in partnerships do not only impact partners' respective relationships with the funder of the program, they also have an impact on the partners that is often disregarded. This impact is all the more differentially felt by each partner as the power imbalance is greater between them. Often, in an attempt to avoid what they consider to be mistakes, (I)NGOs impose ever stricter ways of work on their local partners, holding them up to a level of scrutiny that is detrimental to the relationship and to the trust that such partnerships are meant to foster. Avoiding mistakes becomes the motto for the "expert" (I)NGO to discipline local partners under the guise of compliance and "capacity building."

We have also seen how problematic practices and crucial shortcomings in some partnerships are intentionally covered up by (I)NGOs for a number of reasons: protecting the interests of other ongoing partnerships, using the partnership to access other grants, maintaining and reproducing themselves as the experts, or competing with other organizations, are only a few. Over the years, these practices have resulted in a culture where accusations as severe as human trafficking and sexual assault are covered up

and remain uninvestigated. The lack of transparency and accountability in these settings means that one does not know what constitutes a red flag, or how seriously to take these signs. What does a queer grassroots group do with rumors of homophobia within a partner institution or a prospective one? Is there smoke without a fire? And what happens if no one ever checks for fires?

3. Accountability in the absence of the state

Working in the absence of a state is an additional challenge that facilitates the imposition of donors' and (I)NGOs' administrative politics on their local partner. The effective absence of a rule of law in Lebanon leads to the assumption that there are no forms of accountability whatsoever. However, as a grassroots group, our legitimacy and accountability, financial or otherwise, is motivated by our political engagement towards our community and our shared understanding of fairness and justice — and this remains unaffected by the fickleness of our state and its institutions. In that sense, our practices are unfazed by, and operate independently from state oversight. For instance, although the state fails to enforce taxation, we make these payments as a form of due diligence. So, when partner (I)NGOs request to see proof that taxes have been paid, the tone can only be read as accusatory. The apparent absence of a formal alternative to state accountability means that donors and (I)NGOs can dismiss informal practices in place and impose their own systems as unquestionable. The power of these organizations becomes clear when we see it extend to the banking sector, where acceptable documentation for financial reporting is directly negotiated between (I)NGO staff and the bank in order to facilitate their issuing when they are required during the reporting phase.

3.1 The tyranny of standard procedure

Policies and politics

Our experience has led us to ask: when is it that our partners choose to frame certain practices as a matter of values and politics, and when do they present them to us as imposed, top-down requirements that cannot be changed? The boundary between these two situations is unsurprisingly rigid and malleable at

once, and at the discretion of the more powerful partner — the (I)NGO. In one instance, it was seen as distasteful from our end to question the contents of a code of conduct we were asked to sign by our partner. (I)NGOs must understand that trans/queer activists will always question the most common of practices and take nothing as inalienable given. We see that even the seemingly standardized and technical is structured by political intention, and this is why we seek to reshape these instruments into useful and meaningful processes of reflection, redistribution and accountability.

Similarly, when donors choose to be removed from programmatic operations and outsource all aspects of the project to the lead applicant, it often becomes impossible for local partners to identify which requirements are being imposed by the partner (I)NGO, and which are required from both partners by the project donor. In these situations, (I)NGOs can easily avoid having to discuss and adapt their own procedures, and they can justify surveillance and disciplining measures by claiming that these measures originate from the donor. These practices are yet another sign of insecurity and distrust of locals, as we have found that in an attempt to shield the organization from risk, the requirements of (I)NGOs end up being much stricter than those of donors.

Meeting each other halfway

(I)NGOs operate under a corporate culture with requirements and processes that are different from those structuring grassroots work. Organizations should thus expect for their methods to be probed, questioned, even called out, and this should be viewed constructively as a learning experience and as a means to build mutual trust through transparency and cooperation. Organizations should not be surprised if some of their standard requests are met with refusal by a trans/queer grassroots group that wishes to remain as such. The underlying issue here is that organizations assume that grassroots groups want to institutionalize and professionalize their work and structure, but this is rarely true [4]. In partnering with grassroots groups, (I)NGOs should be ready to compromise on certain procedural requirements and instead, respect and work to understand their partner's ways of work even if they do not share them. In their efforts to remain compliant to their policies or those of donors, (I)NGOs can become dismissive of their partners and lose their capacity to adapt to the changing context. While

risking the very relevance of the intervention, this can also lead to the draining of resources where the quality of implementation and the individuals being paid to implement the project matter less than the money being spent as planned. As a result, (I)NGOs continue to make assumptions about the types of support that is needed and who is most apt to carry out certain types of work.

3.2 Waivers, compliance and reporting

The local partner as the exception

One symptom and consequence of (I)NGOs' arbitrary intransigence when dealing with grassroots groups is the proliferation of waivers necessary to justify grassroots ways of work. In this way, the grassroots partner and their collaborators are reproduced as an exception operating on the margins of the structure. These waivers often demand explanations for why the grassroots partner has chosen to work with one person and not another. Paradoxically, those requiring these waivers claim to encourage community participation and inclusion, but rarely account for grassroots ways of work or informal groups and practices. Instead, they require constant justification for grassroots practices that are regarded as in need of "capacity building".

Perhaps on some level, (I)NGOs that partner with local grassroots groups adopt the funder's perspective which sees the local group as the smaller, younger, riskier partner. The (I)NGO then becomes, willingly or not, a proxy for the funder. This is particularly true when grassroots groups are threatened with disallowance, or with the withholding of pre-allocated funds. These threats, no matter how sugar-coated, become a tool for pressure and oppression, and reveal the underlying distrust in (or of) locals and their capacities. When they occur after the work has been done and the outcomes delivered, they undermine and devalue the work itself. Such attitudes place the focus on having one's paperwork in order rather than actually doing the work and doing it well. This in turn makes it hard to deny that the pressuring partner places its financial (in)security above the local partner, their wellbeing, or the work they are doing. And we recognize that partner (I)NGOs are also under pressure from donors who choose to remain at a distance from implementation, and that this pressure trickles down. But instead of sharing the brunt

of any issue that may arise with the funder of the partnership, in our experience well-resourced (I)NGOs have been ready to throw their financial anxieties on the shoulders of grassroots groups that may not have survived had these anxieties come true. But the thing about queer grassroots groups is that they will do the work even if you withhold resources, because it is work that they know is necessary for their survival. In that sense, they transcend any threat that is meant to pressure them into doing things they are not convinced with for fear of not receiving payment.

The missed opportunities of project reporting

It is in this atmosphere that project reporting is de-politicized, diluted, and is often made out to be “all about the donor.” Reporting to the donor is usually led by the (I)NGO and rarely accounts for the experience or perspective of local partners, who are excluded from the narrative report-writing process. Within this process (I)NGOs have the power to frame the partnership, and to diagnose and articulate its shortcomings and those of their local partners on their own terms. Financial documentation becomes about the local partner disproving the suspicions of the (I)NGO rather than a straightforward process of documenting spending. These dynamics have deeply unsettling, but unsurprising, colonial undertones: Arabs squabbling over paperwork to please an often foreign/white source of money.

Conclusions and ways forward

As they stand, summits, resolutions, and agreements such as The Grand Bargain which push for localization, participation, and capacity building, fail to factor in those they seeks to include: these spaces are difficult to access for grassroots groups, informal groups, and other forms of organizing that do not resemble the development agency model or exist outside of it. When it comes to localization and community participation in development, the local community should be involved in the very conception of what it means to localize and participate, and in developing the mechanisms that allow this process to take place effectively and while minimizing harm and maximizing benefit. Ultimately, it might be useful to learn from some (I)NGOs' historical relation to the state and their complicity with corrupt, negligent

or dysfunctional governmental institutions. This should tell us enough about what these organizations really value, and that's not us.

A lot needs to change before partnerships between (I)NGOs and grassroots groups can be mutually beneficial, responsive and relevant to their contexts of implementation. One place to start could be for (I)NGOs to want to understand grassroots groups and work beyond grantmaking. It is important to connect and support grassroots work outside of projects and to build interpersonal relationships that enable better partnerships down the line. Similarly, evaluations of partnership and projects currently serve to improve the central structure of the (I)NGO, when they could be a place to start understanding the tensions, contradictions and conflicts between partners.

Many grassroots organizations need such partnerships to resource their work, and (I)NGOs will continue to need grassroots groups to implement their work. And we know that one grassroots group refusing to partner with an (I)NGO under certain terms can simply mean that the (I)NGO will look for another potential partner. Within the current funding structures, grassroots groups are bound to keep encountering the possibility of partnerships with (I)NGOs. This signals an urgent need for donors to reconsider their approach to funding, and be more hands-on in conversations with local partners.

We hope that the insights shared here can help us and other groups evaluate when it is more beneficial than it may be harmful to partner with an (I)NGO, and when to recognize the early signs that it's just not meant to be. We hope this text also helps us and others know when to say: it's not you, it's us, and this is just not working out. To those who have gone or are going through similar situations, and to those who find themselves doubting, we say: Friends, you are not alone, this has happened to others and is happening every day. Gather your strengths and cut your losses, there is plenty beyond the horizon of (I)NGOs when we work with each other.

[1] These reflections are based on Qorras' partnerships with NGOs and INGOs in specific, hence the use of the term (I)NGO throughout the text. However, it is important to note that these considerations are

also relevant to other large-scale entities in their attempts to localize, including but not limited to U.N. agencies, embassies, and others.

[2] In this text, we use the terms “local partner”, “grassroots group”, and combinations of these terms interchangeably to refer to locally-based, community-driven, grassroots and non-grassroots, groups and organizations of different structures and scales.

[3] While this text is based on our experience as co-applicants and partners under specific projects, it is also relevant to local groups in assessing relationships of sub-granting, co-application, participation in consortiums, and others.

[4] A useful resource on controversies of participation and the professionalization of grassroots activities, see Majid Rahnema’s chapter “Participation” in *The Development Dictionary: a guide to knowledge as power (2nd edition)* edited by Wolfgang Sachs (2010).

Acknowledgements

We thank our peers for their generous reviews and feedback on this text, and for their continued efforts and commitment to advance justice for our communities.

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