
A Systematic Review of Dynamics Between Refugee-Led Organizations and International Humanitarian Actors in Lebanon

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Master in International Studies

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Acknowledgments

The inspiration to write this dissertation arose from my work with Syrian refugees in Germany, where I supported individuals navigating the challenges of integration. This experience not only deepened my understanding of migration processes but also motivated me to explore improvements through the voices and perspectives of those directly affected.

Balancing the roles of mother, wife, and entrepreneur while pursuing this academic journey has been both demanding and rewarding. I am deeply grateful to my husband, Gytis, for his unwavering patience, encouragement, and belief in me. His support has been a cornerstone of this achievement.

To everyone who supported me along the way, thank you for helping me achieve this milestone.

Abstract

Lebanon, hosting the highest number of refugees per capita globally, has seen Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) play a central role in addressing the humanitarian needs of displaced populations, particularly Syrian refugees. In the context of a politically unstable and economically fragile environment, RLOs collaborate with International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and International Organizations (IOs). However, these partnerships are frequently challenged by significant power imbalances, legal restrictions, and systemic inequities.

This study applies the “Power in and Over Cross-Sector Partnerships” framework to investigate how power dynamics affect RLO-INGO/IO collaborations in Lebanon. Through a systematic review of policy documents, organizational reports, and academic literature, the research identifies key challenges for RLOs, including limited decision-making autonomy, uneven resource distribution, and tokenistic inclusion in partnership processes. Despite these challenges, RLOs demonstrate resilience, utilizing grassroots knowledge, community trust, and informal networks to assert their agency and advocate for their communities’ needs.

The findings reveal that INGOs dominate partnerships due to their control over resources and institutional authority, often sidelining the contributions of RLOs. However, the study also identifies opportunities for more equitable collaboration, including promoting mutual accountability, integrating RLO perspectives into decision-making, and addressing structural barriers to resource access.

The study concludes with actionable recommendations to develop inclusive humanitarian frameworks that empower RLOs as equal stakeholders, improve partnership equity, and foster sustainable humanitarian practices. By highlighting Lebanon's unique context, this research contributes to the global discourse on effective and inclusive humanitarian collaboration.

Keywords: Refugee-Led Organizations, Refugees, Agency, Power Dynamics, Lebanon, RLO-INGO Partnerships

Resumo

O Líbano, com o maior número de refugiados per capita, tem visto as Organizações Lideradas por Refugiados (OLRs) desempenharem um papel essencial no atendimento às necessidades humanitárias dos refugiados sírios. Contudo, em um contexto politicamente instável e economicamente fragilizado, as OLRs enfrentam desafios nas parcerias com Organizações Não Governamentais Internacionais (ONGIs) e Organizações Internacionais (OIs), como desequilíbrios de poder, restrições legais e desigualdades sistêmicas.

Este estudo aplica o modelo "Power in and Over Cross-Sector Partnerships" para analisar as dinâmicas de poder nas colaborações entre OLRs e ONGIs/OIs no Líbano. Através de uma revisão de documentos políticos, relatórios e literatura acadêmica, a pesquisa identifica desafios como a limitação da autonomia das OLRs, a distribuição desigual de recursos e a inclusão simbólica nas parcerias. Apesar disso, as OLRs demonstram resiliência ao utilizar conhecimento local, redes informais e confiança comunitária para afirmar sua agência e defender as necessidades de suas comunidades.

Os resultados mostram que as ONGIs dominam as parcerias devido ao controle de recursos e autoridade institucional, marginalizando as OLRs. No entanto, o estudo sugere oportunidades para uma colaboração mais equitativa, como promover a responsabilidade mútua e integrar as OLRs nas decisões estratégicas.

O estudo conclui com recomendações para desenvolver quadros humanitários inclusivos que capacitem as OLRs, promovam práticas mais equitativas e sustentáveis.

Palavras-chave: Organizações Lideradas por Refugiados, Refugiados, Agência, Dinâmicas de Poder, Líbano, Parcerias OLR-ONGI

Abbreviations

B&Z	Basmeh & Zeitooneh
CSPs	Cross-Sector Partnerships
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
IOs	International Organizations
JSLF	Jordan Syria Lebanon Forum
KDD	Knowledge Discovery in Databases
LCRP	Lebanon Crisis Response Plan
LSESD	Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RLOs	Refugee-Led Organizations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees Near East
ULYP	Unite Lebanon Youth Project
WFP	World Food Program

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Introduction

“Waynniyyeh al-dawleh?” (Where is the state?) — is common expression in Lebanon that reflects the absence of effective state-led responses to crises, leaving a vacuum often filled by grassroots initiatives (Mouawad & Bauman, 2017).

Refugee movements, and with them, Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs), are a growing phenomenon across the globe. By the end of 2023, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated a total of 117.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, which means one in every 69 people is forcibly displaced. Among them, 67.08 million were internally displaced persons (IDPs), 31.64 million were refugees under UNHCR's mandate, and 5.97 million were Palestinian refugees under the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) mandate. Additionally, there were 6.86 million asylum-seekers and 5.76 million classified as other people in need of international protection. This trend appears to be ongoing, as it is nearly double the number of forcibly displaced people a decade ago (UNHCR, 2023a). Yet, it is often forgotten that the majority of displaced individuals stay in their own or neighboring countries — countries that are increasingly shaped by decades of conflict, destabilized governments and missing or dislocated international support. That dynamic has resulted in insufficient attention being given to the burdens faced by both state and non-state actors in these countries as they struggle to address the needs of displaced populations. However, the neglect has led to migrants taking it into their hands, gaining agency and self-sufficiency by forming refugee-led organizations and movements.

RLOs can be described as “an organized, formal or informal response initiated, led or managed by a forcibly displaced person(s) to provide the community with humanitarian, socioeconomic, cultural and/or protection services” (El-Abed et al., 2023). By the nature of their intimate understanding of local contexts and cultural dynamics, RLOs challenge the traditional top-down models of humanitarian aid, offering an alternative that is deeply rooted in community agency and resilience (El-Abed et al. 2023; Benson et al. 2023). Unlike international organizations (IOs) or (international) non-governmental organizations (INGOs), which often operate from a distance, RLOs bring a grassroots perspective, leveraging local networks and knowledge to provide tailored and impactful responses in crisis settings. With this growing recognition, RLOs position themselves as pivotal players in humanitarian landscapes and highlight their critical role in addressing not only immediate needs, but also fostering long-term resilience and stability in displaced communities. Their adaptability and

innovative approaches offer unique insights into how displaced populations can navigate challenges, advocate for inclusion, and build sustainable solutions from within.

The situation in Lebanon has made the emergence of RLOs a necessity as the country with the most refugees per capita, hundred thousand newly internally displaced people due to the Israeli aggression and an absent non-functioning state (Najdi et al., 2023; Al Massalma, 2024). Current estimates suggest that approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees are hosted in Lebanon, with over 1 million IDPs as of the latest escalation in 2024. However, these numbers differ due to the Lebanese government's prohibition on further refugee registrations by the UNHCR since 2015 and due to the latest developments of Israeli aggression in 2024 (UNHCR, 2024a).

The sentiment towards refugees in Lebanon by the local government has historically been unfavorable. Lebanon never ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention, leaving the country with no official refugee framework. In the absence of state-led responses, efforts to manage the crisis have relied heavily on international and local actors, as well as refugees themselves. While the exact number of active RLOs in Lebanon is not known, many organizations have emerged in the past decade, many of which collaborate with INGOs and IOs at some level. Lebanon's unique position as both a host to a large refugee population and a country in perpetual crisis makes it an outstanding case study for examining the collaboration between RLOs and INGOs/IOs. The challenges of operating within a politically unstable, economically collapsed, and socially fractured environment reveal the limitations of traditional humanitarian models, but also highlight the opportunities for innovation and collaboration that RLOs bring to the table.

This dissertation delves into the complexities of building trust and fostering collaboration in cross-sector partnerships between RLOs and INGOs/IOs within Lebanon's dynamic humanitarian landscape. In the context of this dissertation, cross-sector partnerships refer to collaborative efforts that involve actors from different sectors—specifically non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and local refugee-led organizations—working together to address complex humanitarian challenges. These partnerships are often marked by significant power imbalances, divergent priorities, and structural differences that can complicate efforts to achieve equitable collaboration.

The research of this dissertation is guided by the *Power in and over Cross-Sector Partnerships* framework developed by Dewulf and Elbers (2018), which integrates insights from multiple literatures, including collaborative, network, and interactive governance. It provides a conceptual foundation for analyzing the power dynamics at play in partnerships, focusing on how different actors leverage power sources such as resources, discursive

legitimacy, and authority, and the power strategies they employ to shape collective decisions to their advantage. In particular, the framework examines how power dynamics influence the interactions between RLOs and INGOs/IOs, specifically focusing on the direct and indirect power strategies used to influence decisions and control resources.

The analysis of this dissertation follows a systematic review approach, using secondary data collected from 29 papers and publications related to cross-sector partnerships in Lebanon's humanitarian context. It is embedded within the modified Knowledge Discovery in Databases (KDD) framework, which offers a structured, iterative process for analyzing complex datasets and extracting actionable insights. The KDD methodology is particularly suited for exploring power relations in cross-sector partnerships, as it allows for the identification of patterns and key themes through a rigorous analysis of secondary data. Relevant documents, including academic papers, policy reports, and research studies, were reviewed and categorized based on a set of predefined questions. This approach enables the exploration of how power is leveraged by different actors in these partnerships and contributes to a deeper understanding of the barriers to equitable collaboration, as well as strategies for fostering more inclusive and balanced cooperation (Logan, 2020).

The study concludes by offering recommendations for policymakers, international organizations, and RLOs on how to enhance the effectiveness of cross-sector partnerships, creating a more inclusive and equitable framework for humanitarian action in Lebanon.

1 Research Overview

1.1 Research Problem

The collaboration between RLOs and INGOs/IOs in Lebanon's humanitarian context is shaped by deep-rooted power dynamics and structural inequities. While global research offers insights into cross-sector partnerships, it often fails to address Lebanon's unique political, economic, and social conditions, leaving critical gaps in understanding how power influences these relationships. Research on RLO and INGO/IO partnerships remains highly fragmented, with studies focusing on isolated aspects such as funding or capacity-building but rarely synthesizing these findings to identify systemic patterns of inequality. This lack of a cohesive analysis creates a vacuum in understanding how these relationships are shaped by broader institutional and structural contexts. RLOs frequently face restricted agency in decision-making, resource allocation, and advocacy, limiting their role as equal partners and reinforcing their dependence on INGOs/IOs. Despite rhetoric emphasizing equity and empowerment, INGOs/IOs often retain control over key resources, decision-making, and narratives, perpetuating a hierarchical structure that marginalizes RLOs.

1.2 Research Objectives

This dissertation examines how power dynamics shape collaboration between RLOs and INGOs/IOs in Lebanon's humanitarian context. It studies the practices, barriers, and strategies within these partnerships to identify approaches that promote more equitable and effective collaboration. A key objective is to summarize and critically assess RLO practices, with particular attention to how their agency is expressed or constrained within partnership frameworks. To achieve this, the Power in and Over Cross-Sector Partnerships framework is applied as a conceptual lens, offering a structured approach to understanding how power operates in these relationships. By tailoring the framework to Lebanon's specific political, economic, and social context, the dissertation provides a nuanced perspective that bridges theoretical insights with practical realities. The final objective is to develop actionable, context-sensitive recommendations for enhancing collaboration. These recommendations aim to address systemic power imbalances, strengthen the agency of RLOs, and support INGOs/IOs in re-evaluating their roles and practices.

1.3 Research Questions

Main Research Questions: How do power dynamics shape the collaboration between RLOs and INGOs/IOs in Lebanon's humanitarian context?

Supporting Question: What are the key challenges and opportunities in RLO-INGO/IO collaboration regarding agenda-setting, resource allocation, and partnership dynamics?

1.4 Scope, Limitations, and Significance

This dissertation explores the power dynamics shaping the collaboration between RLOs and INGOs/IOs in Lebanon's humanitarian context. Using secondary data, including policy papers, organizational reports, and existing research, this analysis explores how agenda-setting, resource allocation, and partnership dynamics reflect and perpetuate power imbalances. Guided by Dewulf and Elbers' framework on "Power in and Over Partnerships" and applying the modified KDD methodology, the research uncovers the episodic and systemic dynamics that influence partnership equity. The goal is to analyze power dynamics within humanitarian partnerships and identify actionable solutions to enhance collaboration and address systemic inequalities.

However, the reliance on secondary data presents limitations, particularly the absence of direct engagement with personal perspectives, such as interviews or firsthand accounts. This limits the ability to capture the nuanced lived experiences of those involved in these partnerships. Additionally, while the theoretical frameworks provide a structured lens, they cannot fully encompass the complex historical, political, and social factors unique to Lebanon. Nonetheless, this dissertation makes a significant contribution by addressing the challenges RLOs face within INGOs/IOs partnerships. Lebanon's politically complex environment and robust local civil society make it a valuable case study. The findings are relevant not only locally, but also to broader humanitarian contexts facing similar challenges. Moreover, the research goes beyond identifying power imbalances, offering practical, context-sensitive recommendations to foster more equitable and effective partnerships. By situating the analysis within a well-established theoretical framework, the dissertation bridges academic discussion with practical application, advocating for approaches that emphasize mutual respect, shared agency, and addressing systemic barriers in partnership practices. This contributes to the existing literature and provides guidance for INGOs/IOs and RLOs aiming to transform collaboration into a more equitable and sustainable endeavor.

2 Context and Background

2.1 Lebanon's Refugee Crisis

Lebanon stands as a critical case study for understanding the intersection of power dynamics, humanitarian governance, and refugee agency, particularly within partnerships between RLOs and INGOs/IOs. The country's unique position as the largest host of refugees per capita globally underscores its relevance in discussions surrounding refugee management and humanitarian aid. An estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees currently reside in Lebanon, though only around 800,000 are officially registered with the UNHCR. This discrepancy stems from the Lebanese government's 2015 prohibition on new refugee registrations, a policy decision reflecting deep-rooted tensions in Lebanon's approach to refugee governance. These tensions reveal an enduring struggle to balance domestic political interests, international obligations, and the humanitarian needs of displaced populations. Lebanon's sociopolitical landscape is marked by a series of compounding crises. Since 2019, an unprecedented financial and economic collapse has devastated livelihoods across the country. Coupled with the ongoing fallout from the Beirut blast in 2020 and the global COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis has pushed many Lebanese citizens and refugees into extreme poverty. This socio-economic instability is exacerbated by rising social tensions, which often manifest in victimizing refugees for the country's broader challenges. Recent government measures, such as the announcement of monthly repatriations of 15,000 Syrians, amplify this precarious dynamic. These policies are often framed by officials as necessary for national stability, yet they raise serious concerns about the voluntariness and safety of returns to Syria. Claims that conditions in Syria have normalized remain highly contested and, especially in 2024, very fragile, with international organizations and human rights groups warning of ongoing dangers and instability. In addition to the large Syrian refugee population, Lebanon also hosts smaller numbers of refugees from other nationalities, including Palestinian refugees and those from Iraq and other countries. Refugee groups in Lebanon are highly diverse, with specific needs and challenges related to their nationality, length of stay, and socio-economic status (UNHCR, 2023b; Diab et al., 2024).

The refugee population in Lebanon is also categorized based on their vulnerability, with specific focus on different sub-groups such as women, children, and people with disabilities. UNHCR's activities and reporting frequently emphasize the varying levels of vulnerability and needs across these sub-groups. In 2023, refugees facing protection risks, such as those without legal residency status, are at heightened risk of refoulement, detention, and deportation.

Additionally, access to legal residency remains limited, with only those who arrived before 2015 being eligible for such status. This limitation severely restricts the ability of refugees to move freely within the country, further exacerbating their vulnerability. Furthermore, the distribution of refugees is uneven, with a concentration in informal settlements, urban areas, and collective shelters. About 20% of refugees in Lebanon live in tents within informal settlements, which are often overcrowded and lack basic services. These settlements are particularly vulnerable to harsh weather conditions, such as winter storms and floods, which significantly impact the refugees' living conditions (UNHCR, 2023b). A critical aspect of Lebanon's refugee context is the complex relationship between humanitarian actors and the Lebanese government. The Lebanese government has consistently avoided adopting a comprehensive refugee policy, resulting in a fragmented and ad hoc approach to refugee management. Despite these challenges, international organizations, such as UNHCR, continue to play a pivotal role in providing protection and assistance to refugees, although their ability to operate and provide aid is constrained by Lebanon's legal and policy environment. Syrian refugees, in particular, face socio-economic hardships, with many households unable to meet even their most basic needs. In 2023, a large percentage of Syrian refugee households reported severe hardships related to food and housing. A significant portion of the refugee population in Lebanon lives below the survival minimum expenditure basket, indicating widespread poverty and lack of access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and shelter (UNHCR, 2023b; Diab et al., 2024). In terms of resettlement and return, the situation remains difficult. While some refugees have been resettled to third countries through UNHCR's resettlement programs, the numbers remain relatively low compared to the overall refugee population. Similarly, though there is some movement towards voluntary return, yet the situation stays unclear and particularly unsafe (UNHCR, 2023b; Diab et al., 2024).

Lebanon's refugee crisis, already exacerbated by years of political and economic instability, has been further complicated by recent regional developments, particularly the escalating violence between Israel and Hezbollah. This conflict has triggered a severe humanitarian crisis, resulting in widespread displacement, extensive infrastructure damage, and deepening Lebanon's pre-existing economic and financial challenges. The violence has displaced hundreds of thousands of people internally. On a positive note, since the ceasefire on November 27, 2024, approximately 578,641 IDPs have begun returning to their communities, though many are unable to return due to significant damage to their homes and restrictions imposed by the Israeli Army. The conflict has also caused secondary displacement, with over 105,000 refugees, mostly Syrians, being displaced since October 2023. The situation remains fluid, with

challenges in accurately tracking returns. Humanitarian organizations have been working to address urgent needs by distributing over 339,000 core relief items and providing shelter support to nearly 97,000 affected individuals. Additionally, cash assistance has been provided to over 425,000 people, both Lebanese and refugees, to help alleviate immediate financial pressures. Despite these efforts, the scale of destruction and Lebanon's ongoing economic crisis present significant barriers to recovery (UNHCR, 2024b).

Lebanon's history as a host nation offers valuable insights into its current refugee policies and societal attitudes. The country has experienced multiple waves of displacement over the last century, each leaving an indelible mark on its social fabric and governance structures. The first major influx occurred after the Armenian genocide in 1915, followed by the arrival of Palestinians fleeing the violence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict starting in the late 1940s. The establishment of Israel and subsequent wars forced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians into Lebanon, many of whom remain in refugee camps today. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Lebanon became a temporary haven for Iraqis fleeing Saddam Hussein's regime and the violence of the U.S.-led invasion. The Syrian civil war, beginning in 2011, triggered the most significant wave of displacement in Lebanon's modern history. The arrival of millions of Syrians has placed immense pressure on Lebanon's infrastructure, economy, and political system, deepening already existing tensions. Moreover, the legal vacuum has resulted in ad hoc and often contradictory policies that oscillate between temporary humanitarian assistance and efforts to restrict refugees' presence. Measures such as the 2019 deportations of illegal Syrian refugees, the demolition of unauthorized shelters, and the revocation of residency permits reflect the state's struggle to reconcile its role as a host country with growing domestic opposition to refugee presence (OPC Center, 2022).

Lebanon positions itself as a transit country, with policymakers repeatedly emphasizing that refugees are temporary guests rather than long-term residents. This approach is evident in the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), a multi-year framework developed in partnership with the Lebanese government, UN agencies, and international and local NGOs. The LCRP aims to address the humanitarian needs of refugees, particularly Syrians, and host communities while also supporting Lebanon's institutions in managing these needs (IOM, 2024). However, despite its broad scope, the LCRP lacks provisions for integrating refugees into Lebanese society. The plan primarily focuses on providing immediate relief, such as food, shelter, and healthcare, as well as mitigating the social and economic pressures associated with refugee influxes. Rather than fostering long-term solutions for integration, the LCRP prioritizes "stability" by addressing welfare consequences and social tensions (Nassar & Stel, 2019).

Much of the responsibility for providing basic services has fallen to international organizations, NGOs, and, increasingly, RLOs, which underscores the Lebanese government's limited capacity—or willingness—to take a leading role in refugee assistance. At the societal level, attitudes toward refugees have become increasingly hostile, driven in part by political rhetoric framing refugees as a burden on Lebanon's fragile economy and social systems. The overlap of multiple refugee populations—Palestinians, Iraqis, Syrians, and others—has further complicated this dynamic, with the state often using refugees as a scapegoat for its governance failures. Refugees, in turn, navigate a precarious existence, often excluded from formal employment, education, and healthcare systems. Many remain unregistered, leaving them without access to essential services and vulnerable to exploitation (Lokot et al., 2024).

Despite these systemic challenges, refugees in Lebanon have demonstrated remarkable agency through the formation of RLOs and community-based initiatives. These organizations fill critical gaps left by the state and international actors, providing essential services, advocating for refugee rights, and fostering resilience within displaced communities. However, the ability of RLOs to operate is constrained by legal and structural barriers. Refugees are generally prohibited from formally registering organizations without including Lebanese collaborators (i.e., individuals with Lebanese citizenship) as part of the organizational structure. This requirement limits refugees' ability to independently establish and register their organizations, restricting their access to funding, legal recognition, and institutional support (Najdi et al., 2023). The legal restrictions force many RLOs to operate informally, relying on local networks and community solidarity to sustain their efforts. The Lebanese context also highlights the intricate interplay between refugee agency and power dynamics. RLOs often navigate complex relationships with INGOs/IOs, balancing their role as independent advocates for their communities with the realities of unequal partnerships. The broader implications of these dynamics will be further explored in this dissertation, particularly in relation to how power shapes collaboration and agency within humanitarian systems. Lebanon's refugee crisis represents a microcosm of the global challenges faced in refugee management. The interplay of historical legacies, systemic inequities, and refugee agency offers valuable insights into the dynamics of power within cross-sector partnerships.

2.2 The Role of Refugee-Led Organizations in Lebanon

In the context of Lebanon's prolonged refugee crisis, RLOs have emerged as critical actors in addressing the gaps left by state and international humanitarian responses. The Lebanese government's absence in providing comprehensive refugee support, combined with limited international interventions, has created a vacuum that RLOs have stepped in to fill. These organizations not only deliver essential services but also serve as vital platforms for refugee agency, advocacy, and self-reliance. RLOs in Lebanon operate within a highly restrictive legal and political environment. Refugees are legally prohibited from establishing organizations independently; to register formally, they must collaborate with Lebanese nationals, effectively curtailing their autonomy (Najdi et al., 2023). This legal limitation has resulted in a landscape where most RLOs remain informal and unregistered. Such a status significantly hinders their ability to secure external funding, attract institutional partnerships, and scale their operations. For many RLOs, their reach is confined to local communities, limiting their impact despite their critical contributions. The restrictions also exacerbate systemic inequalities, as registered organizations often receive disproportionate attention and support from international donors compared to their unregistered counterparts. The lack of legal recognition further marginalizes RLOs in decision-making processes, reinforcing the structural power imbalances that this dissertation seeks to analyze. The role of RLOs in Lebanon cannot be fully understood without considering the broader power dynamics that shape their operations. RLOs navigate a complex web of structural, narrative, and resource-based power imbalances. While INGOs/IOs and state actors often dominate decision-making processes, RLOs assert their agency through localized interventions and acts of citizenship. As Kiwan (2019) argues, these acts challenge hegemonic depictions of refugees as victims, instead emphasizing their resilience and capacity to shape their futures. By stepping into roles left vacant by state and international actors, RLOs in Lebanon embody both the potential and the challenges of refugee-led humanitarianism. Their efforts not only alleviate immediate suffering but also demonstrate a commitment to fostering agency and resilience within their communities. Nevertheless, the systemic barriers they face highlight the urgent need for more inclusive frameworks that recognize and amplify the contributions of RLOs in shaping equitable and sustainable humanitarian responses. Research by Najdi et al. (2023) provides a detailed categorization of RLOs in Lebanon, identifying four distinct types based on their structure and operations:

1. **Transnational Organizations:** These groups operate across borders, often leveraging diaspora networks to secure funding and resources. In Lebanon, 12 such organizations were identified, demonstrating the potential for cross-border collaboration despite legal and logistical challenges.
2. **Institutionalized Community Mobilizations:** These organizations are formally registered, often as social enterprises or NGOs. In Lebanon, 36 such entities were identified, exemplifying how some RLOs navigate legal hurdles to establish formal structures.
3. **Localized Community Mobilizations:** The most common form of RLOs in Lebanon, these groups rely on charismatic leaders to mobilize their communities. Operating informally, they provide critical on-the-ground support but face significant challenges in sustainability and funding.
4. **Philanthropic Individual Initiatives:** These are small-scale efforts led by individuals or small groups with access to resources or networks. Despite their limited scope, these initiatives play a vital role in supporting local communities, particularly in underserved areas.

Each type of RLO demonstrates a unique approach to addressing the needs of displaced populations, highlighting the adaptability and resilience of refugee-led responses.

Exemplary RLO Initiatives

RLOs like Basmeh & Zeitooneh serve as prominent examples of the transformative potential of refugee-led efforts. Established in 2012 by Syrian-Palestinian refugees in response to the growing Syrian refugee crisis, Basmeh & Zeitooneh began as an informal collective of volunteers dedicated to addressing the immediate needs of their communities. Over time, it has evolved into a registered Lebanese NGO, operating in several regions across Lebanon and extending its reach into Turkey (Kiwani, 2019; Kodeih et al., 2023). The organization's diverse portfolio of services underscores its commitment to holistic support for refugee communities. Key initiatives include:

- **Education Programs:** Basmeh & Zeitooneh provides educational support for refugee children, including remedial classes, literacy training, and access to digital learning tools. These programs aim to address the learning gaps caused by displacement and barriers to accessing formal education in Lebanon.
- **Female Empowerment:** Women are a central focus of the organization's work, with initiatives ranging from vocational training in sewing and crafting to workshops on gender-based violence, reproductive health, and leadership skills. These programs empower women to achieve financial independence and advocate for their rights within their communities.

- **Food Security and Livelihood Projects:** The organization operates food distribution programs and supports small-scale agricultural initiatives, helping families achieve greater self-sufficiency. Livelihood programs include training in various trades and providing small grants to support entrepreneurial ventures.

- **Arts, Culture, and Sports:** Basmeh & Zeitooneh recognizes the importance of psychosocial well-being and community cohesion. Through arts and cultural workshops, sports activities, and theater performances, the organization fosters a sense of belonging and hope for refugees navigating uncertain futures.

Importantly, Basmeh & Zeitooneh challenges the dominant narrative of refugees as passive beneficiaries of aid. Instead, it emphasizes the agency of displaced populations, illustrating how grassroots initiatives can build resilient communities and foster social change. By highlighting refugees' capacity for innovation, collaboration, and leadership, the organization redefines what it means to be a "beneficiary" in humanitarian contexts.

Beyond formal initiatives, informal efforts like those in the Shatila camp provide further evidence of refugee-led humanitarianism. The camp, established in 1949 for Palestinian refugees, has since become a densely populated haven for displaced individuals from multiple nationalities, including Syrians. Sharif (2017) documents how Palestinian refugees in Shatila mobilized to support Syrian arrivals during the early years of the Syrian civil war. Their efforts went beyond providing basic necessities such as shelter, food, and clothing. Community members offered moral support, guidance on navigating the camp's resources, and assistance with informal registration processes.

These initiatives reveal a deep sense of solidarity among displaced populations, rooted in shared experiences of marginalization and hardship. As one Palestinian refugee noted, "We know how it feels to not have anywhere safe to go or not to be welcomed... It's a natural urge within us to help in any way that we can to reduce their suffering" (Sharif, 2017). However, Sharif also cautions against romanticizing these efforts. Over time, increasing demands on limited resources—such as overcrowded schools, long healthcare wait times, and competition for jobs—have led to tensions between different refugee groups. These challenges highlight the limitations of informal humanitarian responses and the need for more structured, sustainable solutions. The impact of initiatives like Basmeh & Zeitooneh and the Shatila camp responses illustrates the potential of RLOs to fill critical gaps left by state and international actors. However, their ability to sustain and expand their work is constrained by systemic barriers, including restrictive legal frameworks, resource scarcity, and limited access to international funding. Addressing these challenges requires not only greater support for RLOs, but also a

shift in the way humanitarian aid is conceptualized and delivered. By empowering refugees to lead and shape their own futures, the humanitarian sector can move closer to achieving truly equitable and sustainable solutions.

RLOs in Lebanon represent a critical yet underappreciated element of the humanitarian landscape. Operating in the face of legal restrictions, structural inequities, and resource scarcity, these organizations fill essential gaps left by state and international actors. Their adaptability and resilience underscore the agency of refugees, even within highly restrictive environments. However, the challenges they face highlight the need for more inclusive and equitable frameworks that recognize and support their contributions. By examining the power dynamics that shape RLO and INGO/IO partnerships, this dissertation aims to provide actionable insights into fostering more equitable collaboration, ultimately empowering RLOs to achieve their full potential.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Conceptual Framework

3.1.1 Core Concepts of the Framework

The chosen framework by Dewulf and Elbers (2018) has been developed to understand the power dynamics between cross-sector partners. The framework focuses in particular on relationships, that involve actors on varying levels of power, such as relationships between highly funded institutions and grassroots organizations. Additionally, the framework looks at how these specific actors can influence the collective decision-making to their own advantage. While this framework has been initially applied to broader cross-sector partnerships, it can be used to examine the relations of RLOs and INGOs/IOs, as these relations are specifically characterized by significant power asymmetries, competing priorities and an urgent need for collaborative governance (Dewulf & Elbers, 2018; McNaught, 2024).

Power is defined as “the ability to shape and secure particular outcomes” by Dewulf and Elbers and has been analyzed through two lenses: the episodic power and the systemic power. The episodic power refers to the direct influence an actor utilizes over the other, meaning the power that is visible in a specific moment or situation. This means one organization or group directly influencing another. Episodic power in action could look like an INGO demanding an RLO how funds have to be spent. Episodic power is focused on the immediate and visible interactions. Systemic power, on the other hand, defines much more the broader institutional context that is shaping these interactions and is more like an invisible rule that everyone has to follow or is following. This includes structures and systems like laws, policies, cultural expectations and norms. The ratification of a refugee convention such as the 1951 refugee convention is an example of a broader institutional context and the power dynamics that come with it. The dual perspective highlighted by the framework of Dewulf and Elbers allows for a nuanced and thorough understanding of how power operates directly and indirectly within partnerships with power asymmetries (Dewulf & Elbers, 2018; McNaught, 2024).

The core concepts and components of this framework include power sources and power strategies, each of which is clustered into different types. Power sources are resources, discursive legitimacy and authority:

1. Resources are material and immaterial assets that actors can leverage, such as money, knowledge, manpower, or access to networks. This might be sufficient funding or technical expertise (in the traditional way) for INGO (material resources), while resources stretch to

understanding of local needs or trust within communities for RLOs (immaterial / social resources).

2. Discursive Legitimacy is the ability to represent an issue or speak on behalf of a certain person, groups, or interests with credibility and authority. This position of legitimacy often comes from their experience, position, or alignment with widely accepted norms and values. A RLO might be able to gain discursive legitimacy by relying on its deeply rooted connection to the refugee community and their insight of understanding. An INGO might claim discursive legitimacy by emphasizing their alignment with global standards and frameworks.

3. Authority refers to a recognized right to make actual decisions based on the position of someone within a partnership or an institutional field. Those positions typically derive from formal role and societal norms, such as governmental authorities to set policies that affect refugee aid or international organization to enforce global standards like INGOs such as UNHCR regularly hold the authority to enforce international frameworks such as the Refugee Convention, shaping how aid is delivered or distributed. Yet, RLOs might hold informal authority within their communities to mobilize and organize support.

Power strategies are defined as ways how actors use their power sources to influence the outcome and are distinguished into two types by the authors of the framework:

1. Power in Cross-Sector Partnerships (CSPs) are direct strategies and actions that are used by actors to influence each other and the outcomes, as well as decisions within the partnership. A straightforward example are INGOs using their funding power to perhaps negotiate project terms, or RLOs using their local knowledge to shape program priorities based on their view during a meeting or negotiations. Several direct power strategies can be employed by partners, such as:

- **Withholding/Investing Resources:** Actors leveraging their control over critical resources to influence decisions by withholding of resources or also stating to invest them.
- **Appealing to Discursive Legitimacy:** Influencing decisions by framing issues in a way that align with the actors' interests and gaining support from other actors.
- **Invoking Authority:** Using the recognized authority to push claims or proposals faster or more favorable through the decision-making process.

2. Power over CSPs, on the other hand, refers to indirect strategies that involve the setting of rules of engagement within a partnership and with it influencing future interactions and decisions. To shape the “rule of the game” actors might utilize indirect power strategies such as:

- **Setting Participation Rules:** Actors might influence who can participate in the partnership and under what conditions.
- **Agenda Rules:** Scope and objectives of partnerships might be defined, which can include the issues that will be addressed or excluded from discussions.
- **Sequence Rules:** The order of discussions and decision-making processes can be affected, which can pressure actors to commit to decisions.
- **Task Rules:** Activities within the partnership might be structures such as division of labor or the way of collaboration.
- **Information Rules:** Refers to the determination of how information is shared and the level of transparency, which might affect negotiation positions.
- **Decision-Making Rules:** Actors might specify how the decisions are made within the partnership.

This distinction between power in and power over partnerships is essential in the framework, as the power within a partnership can be utilized to shape important, seemingly collective decisions. The power over partnerships might lead to actors establishing rules and structures that govern the partnership in the daily collaboration with each other, which might furthermore alter the behavior and decisions of other actors over time (Dewulf & Elbers, 2018; McNaught, 2024).

Additionally, Dewulf and Elbers (2018) highlight the importance of institutional and issue specific contexts that shape power dynamics. This means that the intersection of institutional fields (the broader organizational context) and issue fields (the specific problems being addressed) influences the power sources that are available to the actors. Furthermore, this intersection can determine, how power in the partnership can be mobilized and exercised, meaning that power dynamics can and are context-dependent.

This framework is rooted in various theoretical disciplines and literatures, particularly emphasizing collaborative governance, network governance, multiparty collaboration, and institutional theory (Dewulf & Elbers, 2018; Ansell & Gash, 2008), making it a multidisciplinary tool for analyzing the complexities of power dynamics and decision-making processes in cross-sector partnerships. A key foundation on which this framework is rooted is the literature on collaborative governance. Collaboration Governance is defined as a governing arrangement where public agencies engage with non-state stakeholders to achieve public goals. The collaborative governance framework emphasizes how different actors from governmental agencies, businesses, or NGOs engage with each other in governance processes to address societal problems. The literature on the collaborative governance framework highlights the

importance of collective decision-making and the challenges that might arise from contradictory interests as well as power imbalances among stakeholders (Dewulf & Elbers, 2018; Batory & Svensson, 2019; McNaught, 2024). The framework is used in fields such as development studies, public administration, crisis management, agency, organizational aspects, etc. and serves as a versatile tool for examining how diverse actors collaborate to address complex societal challenges (Batory and Svensson, 2019; Brik, 2024; Panday, 2018). The examination of collaborative governance shows that collaborative governance creates opportunities for diverse actors to pool resources and expertise. Yet, power imbalances still often emerge, especially with larger, better-funded organizations that are dominating decision-making processes and with it marginalizing smaller, grassroots actors. Those dynamics can lead to ineffective outcomes as less powerful stakeholders are sidelined quickly (Batory and Svensson, 2019; Brik, 2024).

Additionally, the framework is based on or connected to Network Governance, Multiparty Collaboration and Institutional Theory. The key concept of network governance helps to understand the dynamics of interaction among various stakeholders and emphasizes how these interactions can facilitate or also hinder collaboration, depending on the power relations or institutional contexts these collaborations take place. Multiparty Collaboration originates in organizational psychology and focuses more in on conflict and negotiation in interorganizational relations. This theory provided insights into how actors navigate the differences they might have and the collaborative work towards collective goals. Lastly, the institutional theory examines how the institutional contexts shapes the behavior and interactions of actors in a partnership, such as held beliefs, norms, and practices that influence power dynamics and decision-making processes (Dewulf & Elbers, 2018; McNaught, 2024).

The Power in and Over Cross-Sector Partnerships, rooted and connected in interdisciplinary theories, offers a nuanced lens for analyzing the dynamics of collaborations between RLO and INGO/IO partnerships. It integrates episodic and systemic powers to thoroughly examine immediate interactions as well as institutional structures and also offers the possibility to highlights power asymmetries and mechanisms to assert agency and influence outcomes accordingly. The framework situates within the Lebanese context to identify pathways for inclusive collaboration between local RLOs and international stakeholders. By examining the interplay of episodic and systemic power, this framework can shed light on how grassroots organizations navigate institutional constraints and assert agency amidst significant power asymmetries in Lebanon. The relevance and potential of this framework in the Lebanese context will be discussed in the next chapter.

3.1.2 Relevance to Lebanon

By looking at the partnerships of RLOs and INGOs/IOs, it becomes evident how the power asymmetries and decision-making processes in these relationships align with the core concepts of Power in and Over Cross-Sector Partnerships. The direct influence that INGOs/IOs may exert on RLOs through funding or policy requirements captures the episodic power dynamics described in the framework. The broader institutional constraint such as donor-driven priorities or international legal frameworks are shaped by the interactions between these actors, showcase the systemic power dynamics within. While RLOs are considered grassroots movements and are often faced with limited resources, they bring unique strengths to the table such as local knowledge, cultural legitimacy and trust within the community. These qualities allow them to assert discursive legitimacy and challenge the dominant resource- and authority-based strategies of INGOs/IOs. The Power in and Over Cross-Sector Partnerships framework offers a thorough lens to analyze how RLOs employ strategies to navigate through such constraint and assert influence in decision-making such as leveraging their understanding of the local context or building an alliance network.

In Lebanon, the collaboration between INGOs/IOs and RLOs is shaped by a complex interplay of episodic and systemic power dynamics, such as political, economic, and social factors. The episodic power is evident in the direct interactions between RLOs and INGOs/IOs, where RLOs may be included in discussions but lack genuine influence over outcomes. Conversely, systemic power is reflected in the broader institutional context, including laws, policies, and cultural norms that shape the operational environment for RLOs. The power sources (resources, discursive legitimacy, and authority) also resonate with the Lebanese context. RLOs possess social resources and local knowledge, yet struggle to gain discursive legitimacy and authority in a landscape dominated by larger, international organizations like UNHCR, WFP (World Food Program), UNRWA, Save the Children, or CARE (Facon, 2023; El-Abed et al., 2023, Sanyal, n.d.)

For example, UNHCR, as the primary agency coordinating the humanitarian response for refugees, plays a central role in managing refugee registration, protection, and assistance. It is often criticized for monopolizing activities and not collaborating effectively with local NGOs. Similarly, WFP provides food assistance and conducts vulnerability assessments but has faced criticism for bypassing local organizations in needs assessments, which can lead to inefficient resource allocation. UNRWA, responsible for providing services to Palestinian refugees, faces

significant funding shortages, impacting its ability to deliver services effectively (BouChabke & Haddad, 2021; Facon, 2023).

In addition, large INGOs like Save the Children and CARE dominate the humanitarian response by acting as intermediaries for funding to local NGOs. These organizations often maintain control over project planning and implementation, making their partnerships with local organizations seem inequitable. Furthermore, Gulf-funded organizations like Qatar Charity and KSRelief provide substantial financial support, often bypassing some of the bureaucratic complexities found with Western donors, leading to alternative operational models that limit local organizations' involvement (Kraft & Smith, 2019, Sanyal, n.d; Schmelter, 2019).

Despite their social resources and local knowledge, RLOs face significant challenges in gaining discursive legitimacy and authority in this context. The allocation of funding resources tends to favor these larger, established humanitarian entities, marginalizing RLOs in Lebanon, despite their potential to provide innovative solutions tailored to local needs. The lack of funding for local organizations thus limits their influence in decision-making processes. When it comes to decision-making, RLOs in Lebanon experience tokenistic inclusion, where their participation is superficial and does not translate into meaningful influence. This reflects the framework's concept of episodic power, where RLOs are engaged in a manner that appears participatory but ultimately reinforces existing power hierarchies (Dewulf & Elbers, 2018; Diab et al., 2024; Lokot et al., 2024).

Lebanese RLOs can leverage their legitimacy to influence partnerships with INGOs/IOs through various power sources and strategies, as outlined in the framework. The resources that RLOs in Lebanon possess are deeply rooted in connections within the refugee community, which grants them trust and credibility that allows them to mobilize community support and provide insights into local needs, making them valuable partners for INGOs/IOs. An additional resource of RLOs in Lebanon is the nuanced understanding of socio-cultural dynamics and the specific challenges that their communities face, which can inform program priorities and enhance the reliance of intervention proposed by partners of the RLOs (Lokot et al., 2024). For discursive legitimacy, Lebanese RLOs gain legitimacy by representing the voices and interests of the refugee community. Their lived experiences and direct engagement with community members enable them to speak with authority on issues affecting their constituents, thereby influencing the agenda and priorities of partnerships with INGOs. And while INGOs/IOs may hold formal authority in the country due to their established roles within the humanitarian system, RLOs can exert informal authority within their communities and mobilize support and

influence decisions that affect local populations, thereby shaping the outcomes of partnerships with INGO (Lokot et al., 2024).

When it comes to power strategies, RLOs employ direct and indirect strategies. So can RLOs leverage their control over local networks and community trust to influence INGOs. For instance, they may withhold support for initiatives that do not align with community needs or advocate for specific project terms that reflect local priorities (Withholding/Investing Resources). Additionally, RLOs can frame issues in ways that resonate with both community members and INGOs, thereby garnering support for their perspectives. By highlighting local needs and experiences, they can influence the decision-making processes within partnerships (Appealing to Discursive Legitimacy). Another direct strategy employed by RLOs is the use of their recognized position within the community to advocate for specific initiatives or policies, pushing their proposals through the decision-making processes of INGOs/IOs more effectively (Invoking Authority). Indirect strategies can be found in the actions of RLOs in Lebanon as well. For example, not only INGOs/IOs influence who participates in partnerships and under what conditions, but also RLOs attempt to ensure that local voices are included in decision-making processes (Setting Participation Rules). Furthermore, RLOs can influence how information is shared within partnership and can push for decision-making processes that are inclusive and participatory (Lokot et al., 2024).

INGOs/IOs exert significant power in Lebanon's humanitarian landscape through a variety of sources and strategies. They control substantial material resources, such as funding, which allows them to dominate the humanitarian response, often overshadowing local and national NGOs that received for example only 0.2% of total international humanitarian assistance in 2014. INGOs claim discursive legitimacy by aligning their operations with global humanitarian standards. Authority is also a critical factor, as INGOs, particularly those affiliated with the UN, possess formal authority to enforce international frameworks, shaping how aid is delivered. Direct strategies, such as withholding or investing resources, enable INGOs to negotiate project terms, while indirect strategies, like setting participation and decision-making rules, often marginalize local actors. This dynamic creates a paternalistic relationship, where local capacities are undervalued, leading to tensions and competition for funding, ultimately hindering effective localization of humanitarian responses in Lebanon (Lokot et al., 2024; Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016).

3.2 The Imbalanced Landscape of Humanitarian Aid in Lebanon

3.2.1 Episodic Power

Episodic power in Lebanon manifests through the immediate, visible actions of INGOs and IOs, directly influencing the decisions of RLOs. This power is exercised in specific moments when INGOs or IOs impose their priorities on RLOs, often dictating how funds are allocated or projects are executed. These interactions are pivotal as they reinforce the dominance of INGOs and IOs and limit the autonomy of RLOs in real-time decisions. Despite their deep local knowledge and cultural legitimacy, RLOs often find themselves relegated to subordinate roles, executing predefined tasks with little room to shape the interventions or policies impacting their communities. This direct, episodic exercise of power restricts RLOs' agency and perpetuates a dependency on larger organizations, making it challenging for local actors to advocate for the unique needs of the refugee population.

Funding

In Lebanon's humanitarian landscape, the control of funding allocation by INGOs and IOs plays a significant role in shaping the power dynamics between these larger organizations and RLOs. INGOs and IOs typically hold the financial resources necessary to implement humanitarian programs, and as a result, they exert considerable influence over the priorities and actions of smaller local actors like RLOs. This funding control is a key mechanism by which INGOs and IOs maintain their dominance, limiting the decision-making power of RLOs and hindering their ability to shape and direct humanitarian responses in ways that are more aligned with the specific needs of the refugee communities they serve. The dominance of INGOs and IOs in funding allocation directly affects the autonomy of RLOs. While RLOs often possess unparalleled knowledge of local needs and conditions, they are frequently forced to operate under stringent conditions set by external organizations. For example, most international donors require organizations to have legal status before receiving funding, a condition that many RLOs in Lebanon cannot meet due to the restrictive legal framework in the country. This leaves RLOs with limited options, typically relying on INGOs or IOs as intermediaries to access funding. As a result, RLOs are relegated to the role of implementing partners, executing projects defined and funded by larger organizations, rather than being able to initiate their own programs based on their community's needs. The dependency on INGOs and IOs for funding not only limits

RLOs' autonomy but also undermines their ability to prioritize their own objectives or advocate effectively for the refugee populations they represent (Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016; Sturridge et al., 2023a).

Furthermore, the conditions attached to the funding provided by INGOs and IOs often impose additional constraints on RLOs. Many donors insist on project-specific funding, which can limit the flexibility of RLOs to address emerging needs or adapt their programs based on real-time community feedback. This project-based funding system fosters a sense of dependency among RLOs, as they are often forced to adhere to rigid timelines, budgets, and goals set by external actors. While this may ensure that larger organizations can maintain control over how their funds are spent, it leaves RLOs with little room to innovate or adjust their interventions to meet the evolving needs of their communities (Lokot et al., 2024). The power asymmetries that arise from this funding control are further exacerbated by the bureaucratic and institutional structures that govern international aid. INGOs and IOs, with their established legitimacy and access to global funding sources, can set the terms of engagement and dictate how funds are distributed, often sidelining local knowledge and expertise in favor of standardized, top-down approaches (Pincock et al., 2020; Gonzalez Benson et al., 2022).

Despite these challenges, RLOs continue to demonstrate resilience and agency in navigating the constraints imposed by funding control. They leverage their deep knowledge of local contexts and their trust-based relationships with refugee communities to advocate for more equitable resource allocation and challenge the priorities set by INGOs and IOs. For instance, some RLOs in Lebanon have worked to build networks of local and regional actors, such as grassroots organizations and community groups, to create alternative funding streams and reduce their reliance on INGOs for financial support (El-Abed et al., 2023). However, the broader funding structure still favors INGOs and IOs, making it difficult for RLOs to break free from the constraints of external funding control. The systemic underfunding of local organizations, as highlighted by studies on the global distribution of humanitarian aid, reflects a persistent inequality in the allocation of resources. The distribution of international humanitarian aid reflects a persistent inequality in the allocation of resources. In 2022, only 1.2% of global international funding, or \$485 million, was allocated directly to local organizations, with the majority of resources still channeled through larger, international organizations (Sturridge et al., 2023b). This limits the capacity of RLOs to operate sustainably but also reinforces the existing power dynamics, where INGOs and IOs maintain control over the flow of resources, further marginalizing local voices and expertise in the humanitarian sector. Thus, funding control is a crucial mechanism by which INGOs and IOs maintain their

dominance in Lebanon's humanitarian landscape. By controlling the allocation of resources and imposing conditions that limit the flexibility and autonomy of RLOs, these larger organizations perpetuate power asymmetries that undermine the agency of local actors. Despite these challenges, RLOs continue to leverage their local knowledge, cultural legitimacy, and trust-based relationships to advocate for more equitable resource distribution and greater decision-making power. However, without a fundamental shift in the way humanitarian funding is allocated and distributed, these power imbalances are likely to persist, further limiting the effectiveness of local actors in shaping humanitarian responses that are truly reflective of the needs and priorities of the communities they serve.

Agenda Setting

Building on the discussion of how INGOs and IOs exert direct control through funding mechanisms, the agenda-setting process represents another key strategy in which these organizations shape the course of humanitarian action. Agenda-setting refers to the ability of INGOs and IOs to determine the priorities, scope, and direction of humanitarian programs, often leaving little room for local organizations like RLOs to influence these decisions. This limits the agency of RLOs, despite their deep cultural understanding and strong community connections. The priorities set by INGOs and IOs often reflect global strategies and frameworks that may not align with the immediate and nuanced needs of the local refugee populations. INGOs and IOs dominate the agenda-setting process in Lebanon due to their access to significant resources, formal registration, and established networks. These organizations have the authority to determine which issues receive attention and which are left unaddressed. This dominance means that RLOs, which possess valuable local insights and cultural understanding, are frequently excluded from setting the agenda for humanitarian interventions. For instance, RLOs might identify specific community needs, such as mental health support for refugees or targeted interventions for marginalized groups, but these issues are often overshadowed by broader, more generalized concerns promoted by larger organizations (Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016; Gonzalez Benson et al., 2022).

The power that INGOs and IOs hold in agenda-setting is further reinforced by their control over funding streams. As these organizations are the primary recipients of international aid, they have the ability to determine the focus of humanitarian programs based on donor preferences. This funding control often means that RLOs are forced to align with the agendas set by INGOs and IOs in order to secure financial support, thereby limiting their capacity to advocate for locally driven priorities. Without the financial independence to pursue their own agendas, RLOs must rely on intermediaries, which further diminishes their ability to influence

the direction of aid interventions (Sturridge et al., 2023b). Moreover, the agenda-setting power of INGOs and IOs is institutionalized through participation in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, such as the LRCP. These platforms are where key decisions are made regarding resource allocation, strategic objectives, and program priorities. However, to participate in these decision-making processes, organizations must meet certain eligibility criteria, such as formal registration and adherence to international standards. This leaves many RLOs, which often lack legal status due to Lebanon's restrictive regulatory environment, unable to engage in the critical conversations that shape the humanitarian response. Even when RLOs attempt to participate, they may face barriers like language differences or a lack of familiarity with formal international processes, which further marginalizes their influence on agenda-setting. (Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016; Lokot et al., 2024).

Despite these challenges, RLOs in Lebanon have made concerted efforts to influence the humanitarian agenda through grassroots advocacy by forming networks with other local actors, including NGOs and community leaders. These efforts are particularly crucial in shaping the local-level implementation of larger, international programs, ensuring that interventions are contextually appropriate and relevant to the specific needs of refugee communities. For example, RLOs have been able to push for more targeted interventions in refugee camps by framing issues through the lens of local knowledge and cultural sensitivity, allowing them to influence the scope and focus of humanitarian efforts (El-Abed et al., 2023; Aburamadan, 2022). However, the broader systemic barriers that limit the participation of RLOs in agenda-setting mean that their influence is often constrained to small-scale adjustments rather than large-scale changes. INGOs and IOs continue to define the overarching priorities, while the role of RLOs is frequently reduced to that of an implementer, rather than a decision-maker. This ongoing imbalance highlights the urgent need for a more inclusive approach to agenda-setting, where local actors are not just consulted but empowered to lead and shape humanitarian interventions based on their deep understanding of community needs.

Decision-Making Dominance

Decision-making dominance represents another critical mechanism through which INGOs and IOs assert their power within partnerships. INGOs and IOs often hold strategic control over the decision-making processes, positioning themselves as the primary decision-makers and relegating RLOs to the role of implementers. This power imbalance is particularly evident in Lebanon, where the complex interplay between local needs and international priorities creates barriers for RLOs, limiting their ability to contribute meaningfully to high-level decisions that

directly affect the populations they serve. In Lebanon, the decision-making process within humanitarian aid is largely dominated by INGOs and IOs. These organizations, with their access to large funding pools, global networks, and institutionalized authority, are the primary actors shaping strategic decisions about humanitarian interventions. While RLOs are directly engaged in the day-to-day implementation of aid programs, their input is often sidelined during key decision-making moments, such as determining the overall strategy, setting program priorities, or influencing policy discussions. Despite their unique cultural insights and deep-rooted connections with the refugee community, RLOs are frequently positioned as subordinates in the decision-making hierarchy, tasked with executing pre-determined plans rather than actively participating in the creation of those plans (Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016; Sturridge et al., 2023a).

The strategic decisions made by INGOs and IOs are often influenced by a combination of institutional pressures, donor expectations, and global policies. These organizations are accountable to donors who prioritize efficiency, scale, and alignment with international frameworks. As a result, strategic decisions are typically made based on these broader institutional considerations, which may not reflect the nuanced needs of the communities on the ground. RLOs, with their deep understanding of local dynamics, are left out of these high-level discussions, despite their potential to offer critical insights into the real-time needs of refugee populations. For example, during the Beirut Port Explosion, INGOs and IOs took the lead in shaping the overall humanitarian response, but RLOs, despite their knowledge of the affected areas and the trust they had built with local communities, were largely excluded from key strategic decisions that could have more directly addressed local needs (Brik, 2024; Gonzalez Benson et al., 2022). This marginalization is further exacerbated by the lack of formal recognition and legal status that many RLOs face in Lebanon. INGOs and IOs, with their established international legitimacy and registration, often have access to decision-making platforms that RLOs cannot participate in. For instance, many key coordination mechanisms, such as the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), require formal registration, which many RLOs are unable to obtain due to Lebanon's restrictive legal environment. This exclusion from formal decision-making spaces denies RLOs the opportunity to influence the strategic direction of humanitarian interventions, resulting in a top-down approach that does not always align with the priorities of the refugee communities (Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016; Lokot et al., 2024).

Moreover, the decision-making dominance of INGOs and IOs is often reinforced by their structural and institutional advantages. INGOs and IOs are equipped with vast resources, including financial capital, technical expertise, and a wide network of global partners, which

give them the ability to dictate the terms of collaboration. This allows them to not only decide the overall direction of humanitarian efforts but also to define the parameters of collaboration with local actors. RLOs, in contrast, are often confined to the role of executing projects within the framework set by larger organizations, rather than engaging in strategic planning or influencing the design of interventions. This dynamic reduces RLOs to mere implementers, sidelining their potential contributions to shaping the direction of humanitarian aid (Gonzalez Benson et al., 2022; Sturridge et al., 2023a). Even when RLOs are invited to participate in decision-making processes, their involvement is often tokenistic. RLOs are sometimes included in consultations or working groups as a formality, but their input is not always meaningfully considered in the final decision-making. This tokenism undermines the agency of RLOs, as they are only given the appearance of participation without the power to influence outcomes. In many cases, the decisions made by INGOs and IOs do not fully reflect the realities faced by the communities on the ground, as these organizations prioritize global frameworks or donor-driven agendas over locally informed solutions (Diab et al., 2024; Betts et al., 2021).

Despite these challenges, RLOs continue to find ways to exert influence within the decision-making process. By leveraging their unique position as trusted local actors, RLOs can engage in informal negotiations and advocate for the needs of their communities, even when they are excluded from formal decision-making bodies. This grassroots advocacy, although constrained by structural limitations, allows RLOs to insert local perspectives into broader discussions and advocate for more inclusive, context-sensitive approaches to humanitarian response. Through this bottom-up advocacy, RLOs contribute to ensuring that the voices of marginalized refugee populations are heard, even when larger organizations dominate strategic decision-making. Ultimately, the decision-making dominance of INGOs and IOs in Lebanon's humanitarian landscape represents a significant power asymmetry that limits the ability of RLOs to shape interventions and policies that directly affect their communities. While INGOs and IOs bring valuable resources and expertise to the table, the exclusion of RLOs from high-level decision-making processes undermines the effectiveness and relevance of humanitarian interventions. To address this imbalance, it is crucial to involve RLOs more meaningfully in strategic decisions, recognizing their cultural legitimacy and local knowledge as essential components of effective and inclusive humanitarian action (Aburamadan, 2022; El-Abed et al., 2023).

Agency and Resilience in Action

RLOs in Lebanon leverage their deep cultural legitimacy and established local networks by positioning themselves as crucial intermediaries between refugee communities and larger

humanitarian actors such as INGOs and IOs. Their intimate understanding of local dynamics, informed by their shared refugee status or deep involvement in the communities, gives them credibility and allows them to advocate effectively for the specific needs of refugees. By utilizing their relationships within these communities, RLOs ensure that refugee voices are integrated into broader humanitarian strategies, influencing the decision-making processes of INGOs and IOs (Pincock et al., 2020; Anholt, 2020). This is vital for advocating more tailored, context-sensitive interventions that resonate with the communities they serve, thus ensuring that the specific challenges faced by refugees are addressed in meaningful ways (Diab et al., 2024). In addition to their community ties, RLOs assert their agency by challenging the traditional provider-beneficiary dynamic. Rather than merely being recipients of aid, RLOs actively participate in decision-making processes, positioning themselves as equal stakeholders in humanitarian efforts. This is achieved through strategic advocacy, where RLOs use their unique insights and lived experiences to highlight the specific needs of their communities. In doing so, they influence the priorities and strategies of larger organizations, ensuring that humanitarian action is inclusive, responsive, and reflective of the needs of the refugee population, which enables RLOs to advocate for greater recognition and involvement in the planning, design, and implementation of humanitarian programs (Pincock et al., 2020; Anholt, 2020).

The ability of RLOs to effectively represent the needs of refugees is deeply rooted in their embeddedness within these communities. They utilize their trust and strong community ties to foster open communication and gather the concerns and aspirations of refugees. Through participatory methodologies, such as community consultations and focus group discussions, RLOs ensure that the voices of refugees are not only heard but are reflected in the decisions that shape their lives. RLOs such as Basmeh & Zeitooneh and the Unite Lebanon Youth Project (ULYP) are known for their focus on community engagement and empowerment. Basmeh & Zeitooneh provides non-formal education and vocational training, emphasizing psychosocial well-being and peace education, which reflects a participatory approach by involving refugees in their own empowerment processes. Similarly, ULYP offers educational programs that address sectarianism and promote inclusion, indicating a participatory methodology aimed at marginalized youth. Local faith communities and organizations like the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD) and the Jordan Syria Lebanon Forum (JSLF) also play a significant role in facilitating connections and supporting community-based initiatives, further illustrating the use of participatory methodologies in their operations (Kiwan, 2019; Kraft & Smith, 2019).

By acting as trusted representatives, RLOs bridge the gap between marginalized refugee communities and larger humanitarian actors, reinforcing their legitimacy and strengthening their role in shaping the overall humanitarian response (Pincock et al., 2020; Diab et al., 2024). Despite facing institutional and legal barriers, RLOs actively pursue strategies to overcome these obstacles and assert their autonomy. They build coalitions with other local organizations, engage in collective advocacy, and use their local knowledge to navigate bureaucratic hurdles. These efforts enable them to secure recognition, comply with legal frameworks, and participate more fully in humanitarian partnerships. By strengthening their collective voice, RLOs not only improve their negotiating power with INGOs and IOs but also enhance their visibility as legitimate and capable partners in humanitarian action (Pincock et al., 2020; Anholt, 2020). When faced with gaps left by INGOs and IOs, RLOs mobilize local resources and support to address unmet needs. By engaging community members, utilizing volunteer networks, and leveraging social capital, RLOs are able to extend their reach and provide essential services. This grassroots mobilization not only increases their operational capacity but also fosters a sense of resilience and self-reliance within the refugee community. Through this approach, RLOs enable refugees to take an active role in their own support systems, shifting away from dependency on external aid and reinforcing the agency of local communities. By building resilience and self-sufficiency, RLOs contribute to long-term, sustainable humanitarian outcomes, positioning themselves as key drivers of community-led initiatives (Pincock et al., 2020; Diab et al., 2024).

3.2.2 Systemic Power

Systemic power differs from episodic power by operating at a more structural and institutional level, shaping the overarching systems and policies that govern humanitarian aid in Lebanon. Unlike episodic power, which manifests in direct, visible interactions, systemic power is embedded in laws, global norms, and institutional frameworks that systematically favor INGOs and IOs, sidelining local RLOs. In Lebanon, the restrictive legal framework inhibits RLOs from obtaining formal recognition, severely limiting their access to vital resources and decision-making forums. Furthermore, international frameworks, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, reinforce the authority of INGOs and IOs, positioning them as the central actors in refugee aid, while RLOs remain on the periphery. This broader, often invisible system of power perpetuates inequalities, hindering RLOs from influencing humanitarian strategies and ensuring that local

actors are consistently excluded from meaningful participation in shaping the responses that directly affect their communities.

Institutional and Legal Frameworks

RLOs in Lebanon are subject to a legal framework that significantly hinders their ability to operate with autonomy and participate equally in humanitarian decision-making processes. This is largely due to Lebanon's legal constraints, which prohibit refugees from forming civil society organizations (CSOs). As a result, RLOs are unable to secure legal recognition, preventing them from opening bank accounts, accessing international funding directly, or forming formal partnerships with INGOs and IOs. This exclusion from legal recognition has long-term implications for their operational sustainability and their capacity to influence the broader humanitarian landscape (Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016). The legal framework in Lebanon creates a highly restrictive environment for RLOs. Even if they manage to establish informal networks or initiatives, these groups lack the legal legitimacy necessary to operate fully within the humanitarian sector. This leaves RLOs reliant on intermediaries, such as INGOs, for funding and strategic support, further exacerbating the power imbalance between local and international actors. The inability of RLOs to operate as legally recognized entities also limits their access to key coordination platforms, such as the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), where strategic decisions are made and resources are allocated. These platforms, which are critical for effective coordination, remain largely inaccessible to RLOs because they lack the formal status required for participation (Sturridge et al., 2023b).

The absence of legal recognition for RLOs in Lebanon positions them as peripheral players in the humanitarian response, with their influence often reduced to implementing plans designed by INGOs. In contrast, countries such as Uganda and Turkey offer more inclusive legal frameworks for refugees, allowing them to form and register organizations that operate with greater autonomy. This difference in legal structures highlights the systemic inequalities within Lebanon's regulatory framework. The restrictive legal context in Lebanon thus reinforces the marginalization of RLOs, forcing them to rely on external actors for both legitimacy and resources. This limits their agency, making it difficult for RLOs to advocate for the needs and rights of refugee communities in a meaningful way. Furthermore, these barriers prevent RLOs from building the kind of long-term operational capacity needed to sustain their work and contribute to the development of solutions that reflect the lived realities of refugees. These systemic challenges compound the difficulties RLOs face in addressing the immediate and long-term needs of refugees, contributing to the ongoing power imbalance in Lebanon's humanitarian governance (Pincock et al., 2020.).

Global Donor Priorities

The distribution of humanitarian funding is a central factor that exacerbates the systemic challenges faced by RLOs in Lebanon. Global donors, who typically allocate the majority of their resources to large INGOs, perpetuate a funding structure that excludes RLOs from the decision-making processes that affect their communities. This donor bias results in a situation where RLOs are largely relegated to a subcontractor role, implementing projects that have been pre-designed by INGOs or IOs, rather than participating in the shaping of strategies or priorities. As a result, RLOs often have little say in how funds are allocated, and the scope of their work is narrowly defined by the agendas set by larger organizations (Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016; Diab et al., 2024). The reliance on INGOs for the distribution of resources stems from the established credibility and larger operational capacity of these organizations, which are viewed by donors as more reliable and capable of managing large-scale humanitarian operations. INGOs possess the institutional infrastructure, reporting mechanisms, and logistical capabilities to efficiently manage and disburse funds, which often leads them to secure a disproportionate share of the available resources. In contrast, RLOs, despite their deep cultural and community knowledge, struggle to gain direct access to funding, which limits their operational capacity and undermines their ability to contribute effectively to the humanitarian response (Pincock et al., 2021).

The exclusion of RLOs from direct access to funding and decision-making processes has significant implications for the inclusivity and effectiveness of humanitarian interventions. By sidelining RLOs, donors reinforce a power imbalance that leaves refugee communities without the opportunity to have their voices heard in the design of aid programs. INGOs, despite their considerable resources, may lack the nuanced understanding of local needs and cultural contexts that RLOs possess. This often leads to interventions that are disconnected from the realities on the ground, undermining the relevance and effectiveness of aid efforts (Diab et al., 2024). Furthermore, the heavy reliance on INGOs for resource distribution perpetuates a cycle of dependency. RLOs, without the financial autonomy to design and implement their own initiatives, remain dependent on INGOs for both funding and operational support. This dependency inhibits RLOs from building long-term sustainability and reducing their reliance on external actors. It also limits their ability to advocate for systemic change, as they are positioned as implementers rather than decision-makers in the humanitarian landscape (Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016). The unequal distribution of funding and power also prevents RLOs from effectively scaling their interventions. While INGOs may have the capacity to mobilize large amounts of funding for extensive projects, RLOs often struggle to secure the smaller,

more flexible grants that could help them address specific, localized needs. This disparity in funding availability hinders RLOs from building their capacity, expanding their operations, or engaging in advocacy efforts that reflect the aspirations of the communities they serve (Pincock et al., 2020). In contrast to this donor-driven approach, models where local actors are given more direct access to funding and decision-making authority have shown greater promise in addressing the specific needs of refugee populations. By empowering RLOs to act as equal partners in the design and implementation of aid programs, humanitarian responses can be more responsive, inclusive, and effective. Such a shift in donor priorities is essential for ensuring that aid efforts align more closely with the needs of refugee communities and that RLOs are able to contribute their expertise and insights to the broader humanitarian effort. Ultimately, the current funding bias toward INGOs not only reinforces the power imbalances in humanitarian governance but also diminishes the potential of locally-rooted organizations to drive meaningful change. Addressing these disparities by rethinking donor priorities and creating pathways for RLOs to access resources and decision-making platforms is crucial for a more equitable and effective humanitarian system (Diab et al., 2024).

Structural Inequalities

The broader systemic inequalities ingrained in the global humanitarian landscape, such as international refugee policies and norms, continue to marginalize RLOs and hinder their meaningful participation in humanitarian decision-making. These systemic forces overwhelmingly favor large INGOs and IOs, positioning them as the legitimate authorities in the refugee aid sector, despite their limited understanding of the local contexts in which refugees live (Pincock et al., 2021). A key structural element reinforcing this dynamic is the 1951 Refugee Convention, alongside other global frameworks, which prioritize the roles of international organizations in refugee protection and aid delivery. These international agreements, originally designed to safeguard refugee rights, have inadvertently reinforced a hierarchical structure where RLOs—often more familiar with local needs and dynamics—are relegated to peripheral roles. As a result, RLOs are systematically excluded from making meaningful contributions to the policy decisions and strategies that directly impact the communities they serve (Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016). This inequality is exacerbated by the funding mechanisms that dominate the humanitarian sector. Global donors tend to favor INGOs and IOs when distributing financial resources, reinforcing the power dynamics between international and local actors. These organizations, with their well-established infrastructures and relationships with international bodies, are often seen as more capable or credible, leading donors to direct the bulk of their funds to them. As a consequence, RLOs—lacking the same

visibility and institutional backing—struggle to access essential financial resources, which limits their ability to scale their interventions or assert their role in shaping humanitarian agendas (Pincock et al., n.d.). This preference for international organizations restricts the capacity of RLOs to influence the priorities of humanitarian programs, effectively sidelining the voices of the very refugees that these programs are meant to serve (Diab et al., 2024).

Moreover, the entrenched nature of these systemic barriers means that the needs and priorities of refugees are often addressed through a “one-size-fits-all” framework that overlooks the specificity of local contexts. INGOs and IOs, despite their vast operational reach, often lack the cultural and contextual understanding that RLOs bring to the table. This results in interventions that, while broad in scope, frequently miss the mark when it comes to addressing the unique challenges faced by refugee communities. Without the input of RLOs, the humanitarian system continues to rely on generic solutions that do not align with the nuanced realities of refugee populations (Diab et al., 2024). The persistent marginalization of RLOs reflects the continued dominance of international organizations within the humanitarian governance system. This exclusion from decision-making processes prevents RLOs from influencing the strategies and actions that affect their communities, sustaining a power imbalance that is deeply embedded in the structures of global aid. As long as these systemic inequalities remain in place, RLOs will struggle to gain the recognition, resources, and authority needed to shape a more inclusive and effective humanitarian response. This imbalance not only limits the contributions of local actors but also weakens the overall response to the refugee crisis, as the diverse and valuable insights of RLOs remain underutilized. Until these structural inequities are addressed, the humanitarian sector will continue to operate within a framework that favors large international organizations, leaving local, community-driven solutions on the sidelines (Pincock et al., 2021).

Tokenism in Humanitarian Governance

A prominent consequence of the systemic barriers faced by RLOs in Lebanon is the widespread practice of tokenism, where these organizations are superficially included in decision-making processes but are not granted meaningful power or influence. Tokenism in the humanitarian sector refers to the inclusion of marginalized groups, such as refugees, in discussions or decision-making platforms in a symbolic way, without offering them substantial control over the outcomes (Rother & Steinhilper, 2019; Bahram, 2020). This phenomenon is particularly evident in Lebanon, where RLOs are frequently invited to participate in humanitarian coordination mechanisms or consultative forums, but their roles are typically limited to advisory capacities with no real impact on strategic decisions. While this inclusion

may appear to align with inclusion standards set by international organizations and donors, it often serves as a compliance measure rather than a genuine attempt to empower local actors or integrate their perspectives into the design and execution of humanitarian programs (Pincock et al., 2021). The result is a hollow form of participation that undermines the integrity of humanitarian governance and further marginalizes the voices of refugees in shaping the decisions that directly affect their lives. The existence of tokenism reflects the broader structural issues in the humanitarian system, where power remains concentrated in the hands of INGOs and IOs, often leaving local organizations with limited authority. These larger organizations, due to their size, established networks, and credibility with international donors, hold most of the decision-making power, while RLOs are relegated to perform symbolic roles, reinforcing their marginalization. This imbalance ensures that the real concerns of refugees are not addressed in ways that meaningfully impact their lives, leading to an approach that is disconnected from the local realities and the actual needs of the communities they serve. The superficial inclusion of RLOs in decision-making spaces becomes, therefore, a token gesture to appear inclusive without disrupting the existing power structures (Pincock et al., 2021).

Despite the persistent challenge of tokenism, RLOs are actively working to overcome this limitation and assert their agency within the humanitarian system. One of the primary strategies employed by RLOs is to advocate for more meaningful participation in decision-making processes. This involves pushing for direct representation in humanitarian coordination platforms and decision-making bodies, thereby ensuring that refugee voices are not only heard but are integrated into the design, implementation, and evaluation of humanitarian programs. RLOs argue for a shift from being token participants to legitimate partners who play an essential role in shaping the direction of humanitarian responses (Pincock et al., 2021). Such efforts aim to break down the tokenistic framework by demanding more inclusion and a more equitable distribution of power and resources. By seeking to establish their legitimacy as key stakeholders, RLOs are positioning themselves as critical contributors to the effectiveness and cultural sensitivity of humanitarian action. A key component of RLOs' strategy to combat tokenism is fostering community-led advocacy. RLOs increasingly recognize the importance of amplifying the voices of refugees through collective action. By organizing grassroots campaigns and strengthening local networks, they work to ensure that refugee concerns are represented not just within formal coordination mechanisms, but within broader advocacy initiatives that reach policymakers and international donors. This advocacy is often grounded in the lived experiences of refugees, providing invaluable insights into the realities of displacement and humanitarian crises that external organizations might overlook (Bahram,

2020). Through such community-led efforts, RLOs are pushing back against the entrenched power dynamics that facilitate tokenism, demanding a more equal role in shaping humanitarian strategies. Additionally, RLOs are strengthening their influence by forming alliances and coalitions with other local organizations. These strategic partnerships allow RLOs to amplify their collective voice and demand systemic changes that better reflect the needs and priorities of refugees. By pooling resources, sharing expertise, and coordinating actions, RLOs are creating a more robust platform for advocacy that challenges the status quo and addresses the underlying inequities of the humanitarian system. These alliances not only help RLOs overcome the challenges posed by tokenism but also build their capacity to negotiate with INGOs and IOs on a more equal footing, advocating for policies and practices that more effectively serve their communities (Sturridge et al., 2023b). As these efforts unfold, RLOs are gradually shifting their role from token participants to legitimate stakeholders in humanitarian governance, which, in turn, contributes to more inclusive, context-sensitive, and impactful responses to the refugee crisis (Bahram, 2020).

The ongoing struggle against tokenism is not without its challenges, but the proactive steps taken by RLOs are reshaping the narrative around their role in humanitarian governance. By demanding greater representation, strengthening their community networks, and building strategic alliances, RLOs are positioning themselves as indispensable agents of change within the humanitarian system. As their participation evolves from symbolic to substantive, the impact of RLOs in shaping both policy and practice will grow, offering a model of inclusive, community-driven humanitarian action that more effectively addresses the needs of refugees. For RLOs to truly overcome tokenism and attain legitimate power in humanitarian governance, sustained efforts to secure institutional recognition, advocate for fair resource allocation, and foster collaborative partnerships will be essential. By continuing to challenge the systemic barriers that fuel tokenism, RLOs are not only improving their own operational capacity but also ensuring that the voices and needs of refugees are genuinely reflected in the decisions that shape their futures (Pincock et al., 2021).

3.3 Gaps in Research

While there is substantial literature on humanitarian partnerships, there is a lack of focused studies examining the specific power imbalances between RLOs and INGOs/IOs. This gap in research limits the understanding of how these dynamics affect the effectiveness of humanitarian responses and how grassroots organizations navigate these power relations. The strategies and methods employed by local organizations to assert their influence within partnerships are not well-documented or understood (Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016, Diab, 2024).

The existing literature primarily focuses on the dominance of international organizations in decision-making processes within humanitarian efforts, but there is a significant gap in understanding how power operates within partnerships led by local or national organizations. The limited research often highlights how INGOs and IOs set agendas and control resources, undermining the capacity of RLOs to participate equally in the decision-making process. This results in a misalignment between the priorities of local communities and the actions of international actors. Additionally, there is limited research on how the undervaluation of local organizations as equal partners impacts collaboration. This oversight in the literature perpetuates a paternalistic approach by international actors, leaving the dynamics of effective collaboration and local capacity-building largely unexplored (Lokot et al., 2024; Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016). The prevailing focus on the power held by INGOs and IOs neglects the crucial role that local organizations play in the effectiveness and sustainability of humanitarian interventions. In particular, the unequal distribution of power in humanitarian partnerships can lead to the marginalization of local expertise and perspectives, which are essential for addressing the specific needs of affected populations. Furthermore, this imbalance often results in a lack of genuine ownership by local actors, which can undermine the long-term impact and resilience of the response (Diab et al., 2024).

There is a need for more research on the effectiveness of partnerships between INGOs and local organizations. Many partnerships do not adhere to principles of mutual accountability and transparency, which are essential for equitable collaboration (Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016). Without mutual accountability, the relationship between local and international actors tends to remain hierarchical rather than collaborative, and the needs of local communities are often sidelined. This lack of transparency further complicates the coordination of efforts and hinders trust-building between partners. The literature also highlights a significant need for a comprehensive framework that integrates various theories of power to analyze the dynamics

within humanitarian settings. Currently, there is a lack of cohesive frameworks that can effectively capture the complexities of power relations in these contexts. Existing models, such as the donor-recipient dynamic or the "top-down" approach, offer valuable insights but are often applied in isolation. These frameworks fail to account for the nuanced interactions between local and international actors and the ways in which power shifts within different stages of humanitarian operations. A more extensive study that synthesizes these frameworks could provide a holistic understanding of how power operates within humanitarian coordination mechanisms, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of humanitarian responses (AbouAssi et al., 2020; Cliffe, 2022).

Such an approach would not only address the existing gaps in the literature but also contribute to the ongoing discourse on localization and decolonization in humanitarian aid. By critically analyzing the power structures in humanitarian partnerships, it would be possible to develop strategies that ensure greater participation and empowerment of local organizations, which would foster more equitable relationships and improve the overall effectiveness of humanitarian responses, ensuring that local actors have the autonomy and resources to address the needs of their communities in a sustainable and contextually appropriate manner.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This dissertation employs a systematic review approach within the modified Knowledge Discovery in Databases (KDD) framework to explore collaboration dynamics between RLOs and INGOs/IOs operating within Lebanon’s humanitarian context. The KDD framework is well-suited for this research as it offers a structured and iterative process for analyzing large, complex datasets, which is particularly effective in exploring power relations in cross-sector partnerships (Logan, 2020; Fatima et al., 2020). By utilizing this approach, the dissertation aims to extract actionable insights from diverse data sources, ensuring that power dynamics and collaboration strategies are thoroughly examined.

In total, 29 papers and publications were reviewed to gather relevant secondary data for the analysis. These included peer-reviewed journal articles, organizational reports, and policy documents that provided comprehensive insights into the functioning of cross-sector partnerships in Lebanon’s humanitarian sector. By synthesizing these varied sources, the research aims to develop a nuanced understanding of the power asymmetries, resource allocation challenges, and institutional barriers present in the collaboration between RLOs and INGOs/IOs. The modified KDD process is integrated with Dewulf and Elbers’ (2018) framework of “Power in and Over Cross-Sector Partnerships”, which ensures that the analysis is anchored in relevant theoretical constructs and reflects the practical realities of humanitarian operations. This framework is particularly valuable in identifying how power dynamics manifest in the partnerships, allowing for a critical examination of how both direct and indirect power strategies influence decision-making processes, resource allocation, and operational outcomes. By using this approach, the dissertation not only addresses the theoretical aspects of power within partnerships but also provides empirical insights drawn from the systematic review of existing literature. This methodology is designed to ensure that the research is comprehensive, reflective of the complexities of humanitarian operations, and grounded in the latest findings and best practices (Logan, 2020; Fatima et al., 2020).

4.2 Power Dynamics within the Modified KDD Framework

4.2.1 Contextual Understanding and Problem Definition

The foundation of this research lies in a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics between RLOs and INGOs/IOs in humanitarian partnerships. This process began with an extensive review of existing literature, policy documents, and research studies to grasp the historical and structural underpinnings of these relationships. The aim was to identify key recurring themes that define and often challenge these partnerships, such as power imbalances, inequitable decision-making structures, and the persistent undervaluation of RLOs. Recognizing the gaps in existing research—where studies often examine isolated aspects of these partnerships without synthesizing them into a cohesive understanding—this phase attempts to bridge these divides. The problem definition emerged as a natural extension of this contextual understanding. By formulating targeted research questions, this research aimed to explore how power dynamics and structural barriers influence collaboration between RLOs and INGOs/IOs. These questions served as a critical guide for subsequent stages of the research, directing attention to specific aspects of the partnership dynamic and ensuring that the inquiry remained focused on addressing systemic challenges. This approach provided a strong foundation for the research, grounding it in both theoretical constructs and the realities of humanitarian operations.

4.2.2 Data Collection and Organization

Following the definition of the research problem, the focus shifted to the collection and organization of secondary data. This approach utilized a diverse range of data sources, including organizational reports, policy documents, and existing research studies, to capture a comprehensive view of partnership dynamics. The decision to use secondary data was both practical and strategic, as it allowed for a broader scope of analysis without the constraints of primary data collection. To ensure rigor, a systematic approach was employed in the process. A structured search strategy was used to identify relevant documents. The data collection process included searches in academic databases, institutional repositories, and publicly available resources, focusing specifically on publications related to the dynamics between RLOs and INGOs/IOs. The primary criteria for selection included the relevance of the papers

to the research questions, the credibility of the authors, and the scope of the study in terms of geographical context, with a specific focus on Lebanon and the broader MENA region.

The papers were primarily selected based on their discussion of cross-sector partnerships, power dynamics, and the role of local actors in these collaborations. Only papers published in English were considered for inclusion, as they represented the primary languages in which the relevant academic and institutional literature is published, ensuring the comprehensiveness and inclusivity of the data sources. A total of 29 papers were included, spanning both peer-reviewed journal articles and institutional reports. Once collected, these documents were carefully reviewed and categorized into key thematic areas. The first step involved extracting key themes from the literature, which were derived from the conceptual framework based on Dewulf and Elbers' (2018) framework of power dynamics in cross-sector partnerships. The following key themes emerged as critical for understanding the power relations at play within these partnerships:

- **Agenda-Setting Power:** This focuses on how INGOs/IOs and RLOs influence the agenda-setting process within humanitarian programs, including the ability of RLOs to shape the priorities and strategies, or whether they are relegated to the role of implementing predefined agendas.
- **Resource Allocation:** This addresses the control and distribution of resources within the partnership, examining whether RLOs have autonomy in managing funds or if INGOs/IOs exert control through conditional grants or restricted funding mechanisms.
- **Partnership Dynamics:** This delves into the interactions and power dynamics between RLOs and INGOs/IOs, looking at how these relationships are structured and whether they reflect hierarchical or collaborative dynamics.

After the papers were collected and categorized into key thematic areas, the next step involved systematically analyzing each paper by applying a consistent set of questions aligned with the Dewulf and Elbers' (2018) framework. These questions were carefully designed to explore how power dynamics operated within cross-sector partnerships between RLOs and INGOs/IOs. To ensure a comprehensive and structured analysis, the questions were divided into two distinct categories based on the type of power dynamics they addressed: episodic power and systemic power, which allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the power relations at play.

4.2.3 Methodological Approach to Power Dynamics in Partnerships

Understanding power dynamics is crucial to analyzing the collaboration between RLOs and INGOs/IOs, as power manifests in various, often implicit, dimensions through decision-making, resource allocation, role designation, and control over narratives. These dynamics influence partnerships at all levels, from formal agreements to everyday interactions. To fully understand these dynamics, a structured set of questions was applied to each paper, aligning them with the episodic and systemic power frameworks. This approach ensured that power was not merely a secondary consideration but a central lens through which the data was analyzed. The analysis was divided into three core thematic categories: Agenda-Setting Power, Resource Allocation, and Partnership Dynamics. These categories were further examined through the dual lenses of episodic power and systemic power, reflecting both direct interactions and broader institutional and structural influences. Below, the specific questions used in each thematic category are presented, explaining how they were addressed within the methodology.

Agenda-Setting Power

Episodic Power: The analysis of agenda-setting power aimed to explore whether RLOs were involved in the creation of long-term strategies for humanitarian programs, or if they were primarily tasked with implementing pre-defined plans set by INGOs/IOs. The following questions were asked:

- Are RLOs involved in the creation of long-term strategies for humanitarian programs, or do they primarily implement pre-defined plans set by INGOs/IOs?
- Does the paper mention whether INGOs/IOs explicitly acknowledge or incorporate the input of RLOs when setting priorities, or do they define these priorities independently without consulting RLOs?
- How do INGOs/IOs describe their own role in the process of setting agendas for humanitarian programs? Does the paper suggest that INGOs/IOs perceive themselves as central decision-makers, or do they recognize RLOs as partners with a role in this process?
- Does the paper indicate whether RLOs are able to influence the selection of humanitarian priorities, or are their contributions limited to the implementation of pre-established plans and decisions made by INGOs/IOs?

Systemic Power: In terms of systemic power, the focus was on the institutional and structural forces shaping the agenda-setting process. The questions aimed to analyze how INGOs/IOs framed their involvement and the language used to describe it:

- Does the paper include examples where INGOs/IOs use active verbs such as "lead" or "drive" to describe their role in agenda-setting, or do they use passive verbs such as "assist" or "support"? How does the choice of verb reflect the power dynamics?
- Are terms like "co-created strategies" or "shared decision-making" used to indicate collaboration, or do terms like "guiding" or "shaping" suggest a more dominant role?
- How do INGOs/IOs frame their involvement in defining priorities for humanitarian programs? Do they describe themselves as central decision-makers, or do they suggest that RLOs share equal responsibility in setting these priorities?

Resource Allocation

Episodic Power: The next category focused on resource allocation, specifically how decisions regarding the control and distribution of resources were made. The questions explored the extent of RLOs autonomy in managing resources:

- Does the paper specify whether RLOs have control over how resources are allocated, or are they required to follow the funding decisions made by INGOs/IOs? Is there any mention of RLOs having discretion in resource management?
- How do the funding mechanisms used by INGOs/IOs limit or enable RLOs' ability to manage financial resources independently? Does the paper discuss any specific restrictions or flexibilities in managing funds?
- How are INGOs/IOs described in terms of managing funding? Does the paper mention phrases like "coordinating" or "supervising"? If so, do these phrases indicate that INGOs/IOs have a dominant role in making financial decisions, or do they suggest a more supportive role?

Systemic Power: The systemic power perspective examined how broader structural mechanisms influence resource allocation:

- Does the paper mention the use of terms like "conditional grants" or "restricted funding"? If so, does this suggest that INGOs/IOs control how resources are spent, or does it indicate that RLOs have more freedom in how funding is used?
- How does the funding structure, such as project-based or conditional funding, impact RLOs' ability to respond to changing needs within their communities? Does the paper mention any challenges or constraints that affect the flexibility of RLOs in adapting to emerging needs?
- Does the paper discuss whether funding structures (e.g., project-based or conditional funding) restrict RLOs' ability to innovate? Alternatively, does the paper suggest that these

funding structures provide flexibility for RLOs to adapt interventions and be more responsive to community needs?

Partnership Dynamics

Episodic Power: The partnership dynamics category addressed the immediate, visible interactions between RLOs and INGOs/IOs. The focus was on the roles of RLOs within partnerships, their involvement in decision-making processes, and how these relationships were framed:

- Are RLOs included in key decision-making discussions such as strategic planning or program development? Or does the paper suggest that these processes are controlled by INGOs/IOs without significant input from RLOs?
- How are partnership agreements or roles described in the paper? Are there terms like "final approval" or "compliance" used to indicate that INGOs/IOs have the final say in decision-making processes, suggesting a power imbalance?
- How do INGOs/IOs frame their relationship with RLOs in terms of power dynamics? Are RLOs described as "collaborators" with INGOs/IOs, or is their role framed as more passive and subordinated?

Systemic Power: The systemic power perspective in partnership dynamics looked at the underlying institutional and structural forces shaping these relationships:

- Does the paper use terms like "mutual accountability" or "shared governance" to suggest that the partnership has a more balanced power structure? Or do these phrases obscure or downplay hierarchical dynamics, maintaining INGOs/IOs' dominance in the partnership?
- How do structural barriers, such as legal status or funding restrictions, shape the roles RLOs play within partnerships? Does the paper discuss how these barriers limit RLOs' influence and autonomy?
- Are terms like "subsidiary," "service providers," or "implementers" used to position RLOs as subordinates in the partnership, or do RLOs have terms that reflect their importance and role as equal partners?

By applying these questions to each paper, the analysis was able to systematically address the ways in which power asymmetries shape these partnerships, providing insights into both the explicit and implicit power structures within the humanitarian landscape.

4.2.4 Analytical Approach

The analytical process was designed to methodically examine the power dynamics that shape partnerships between RLOs and INGOs/IOs. This phase, grounded in the modified KDD framework, provided a structured approach to uncovering patterns and relationships within the data. The analysis began with a detailed review of the categorized data, ensuring alignment with the research questions established earlier. Each document, whether a policy paper, research study, or organizational report, was analyzed for recurring patterns and themes. These themes were explored iteratively, allowing for adjustments and refinements in the analysis as new connections emerged. The goal was not merely to summarize the content but to identify deeper systemic trends and underlying dynamics that influence partnership structures.

The exploration of linguistic patterns played a significant role in the analysis. For example, active and passive constructions were carefully scrutinized for what they revealed about power relationships. Terms like "led by INGOs/IOs" or "supported by RLOs" were examined for indications of hierarchical structures, while phrases like "co-created strategies" or "joint decision-making" were assessed for their potential to indicate more collaborative approaches. To complement this analysis, the identified patterns were contextualized within the theoretical frameworks of power strategies and sources. Direct power strategies—such as the withholding or leveraging of resources—and indirect power strategies—such as agenda-setting rules—were evaluated for how they manifested in the partnership dynamics described in the documents. For example, funding mechanisms were reviewed for signs of control, such as conditional grants, and contrasted with instances of more flexible, RLO-led budgeting approaches. This provided a structured and consistent methodology for interpreting the data. By applying the KDD framework and integrating insights from the theoretical framework on power in partnerships, the analysis ensured that power dynamics were explored as a central focus. The findings generated through this process not only informed the research questions but also laid the foundation for actionable recommendations in subsequent chapters.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in humanitarian research, particularly within the context of partnerships between RLOs and INGOs/IOs, are critical to ensuring that the study is conducted responsibly and respectfully. In this research, several ethical principles guided both the methodology and analysis, ensuring the protection of participants, the integrity of data collection, and the fair representation of voices within these partnerships.

A primary ethical concern for any research involving vulnerable populations, such as refugees, is the protection of their identities and the respectful use of data. While this dissertation uses secondary data—such as policy papers, academic studies, and institutional reports—it is crucial to acknowledge that these data sources represent real-world implications for displaced individuals and the organizations that support them. Given that this study explores the dynamics between local refugee-led groups and international humanitarian organizations, care was taken to ensure that no personally identifiable information was included, and that all data was presented in a manner that preserves confidentiality. By focusing on aggregated findings from literature and policy reports, the study mitigates potential harm or distress that could arise from exposing individuals or organizations to unintended scrutiny. The ethical consideration of anonymity was particularly important in the case of discussing sensitive topics such as power imbalances, resource allocation, and the often unequal roles that RLOs play within humanitarian frameworks. Another important ethical consideration is the principle of fairness and avoiding harm by accurately reflecting the experiences and perspectives of marginalized actors. In the context of Lebanon, where RLOs often operate under legal and structural constraints, the ethical obligation to represent their voices without distortion was fundamental. RLOs, though deeply embedded within their communities, are sometimes excluded from formal humanitarian spaces due to restrictive legal frameworks and limited access to funding. This exclusion often results in their marginalization within academic and policy discussions, perpetuating a cycle where their contributions are undervalued. The ethical responsibility here was to ensure that the research fairly represented the challenges faced by these organizations, not just as subjects of aid but as active agents of change. By analyzing the power dynamics between RLOs and INGOs/IOs through a lens of equity, the study emphasizes the need to rethink traditional power structures in humanitarian aid and acknowledges the capacity of local actors to influence and reshape intervention strategies.

Ethical considerations also extend to the representation of INGOs/IOs within the research. These organizations, with their larger financial and operational resources, are central to the

delivery of humanitarian aid but often control agendas and decision-making. While it is essential to critically examine the role these organizations play in reinforcing power asymmetries, it is equally important to approach the analysis with a balanced perspective. The study does not seek to vilify INGOs/IOs but instead seeks to understand the mechanisms by which they shape humanitarian aid frameworks. This balanced representation ensures the ethical principle of impartiality, fostering a nuanced discussion of how both international and local actors can work together to overcome barriers and foster more equitable partnerships.

A key challenge in humanitarian research is ensuring that the findings do not reinforce stereotypes or perpetuate a narrative of dependency. Ethical research practices demand a commitment to empowering the subjects of study and not reinforcing their marginalization. In examining the partnerships between RLOs and INGOs/IOs, this study emphasizes the resilience and agency of refugee communities. By positioning RLOs as partners rather than passive recipients of aid, the research contributes to the broader ethical debate about the localization of aid and the role of local organizations in shaping the future of humanitarian responses. The focus on RLOs' autonomy, local knowledge, and leadership is intended to counter prevailing narratives that often depict refugees as helpless victims rather than capable agents of change.

In addition, the research adhered to the ethical standard of transparency, particularly in its methodology. The process of data collection and organization was carried out with full clarity, ensuring that the methodologies and frameworks applied were explicitly stated. This transparency allows the research to be scrutinized, critiqued, and built upon by future scholars, maintaining the integrity of the academic process. Ethical research practices also necessitate a commitment to the accurate interpretation of the data. In this study, secondary sources were critically analyzed to ensure that findings were not cherry-picked or taken out of context, thus safeguarding the research from biases that could distort the ethical integrity of the conclusions. Finally, the ethical implications of this research extend beyond its academic context, aiming to have real-world impact. The study provides actionable recommendations for improving RLO-INGO/IO partnerships, focusing on how power imbalances can be addressed to promote more equitable collaboration. These recommendations aim to influence policymakers, humanitarian practitioners, and organizational leaders to consider the ethical ramifications of their decisions on the ground. By engaging with the realities of partnership dynamics, the research hopes to encourage more inclusive practices that better reflect the needs and priorities of refugee communities, thus contributing to the ongoing dialogue about the ethical transformation of humanitarian aid.

5 Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the findings derived from the analysis of 29 documents, which were systematically reviewed to examine the power dynamics between RLOs and INGOs/IOs. The findings are organized into three main themes: agenda setting, resource allocation, and partnership dynamics. These themes reflect the key areas where power imbalances manifest and where RLOs face limitations in their autonomy and influence within the humanitarian system. Through a critical review of these documents, this analysis identifies both episodic and systemic patterns in the way power is exercised and distributed across humanitarian partnerships.

5.1 Agenda Setting

The agenda-setting process within humanitarian partnerships consistently reveals the dominant role of INGOs and IOs, while RLOs remain largely sidelined in strategic decision-making. Despite the occasional, tokenistic involvement of RLOs in specific moments of the partnership, their contribution to long-term strategy creation remains minimal. The recurring theme across the literature is that RLOs are primarily operational actors, implementing pre-defined plans set by INGOs and IOs. This pattern is evident in the majority of the reviewed papers, where RLOs are positioned as service providers or logistical supporters, with little to no influence in shaping overarching humanitarian agendas.

Episodic power in the context of agenda-setting refers to the discrete instances where RLOs may have an opportunity to influence specific outcomes or participate in certain processes within humanitarian programs. However, the recurring trend across all reviewed papers paints a picture of RLOs predominantly being sidelined in the creation of long-term strategies. As highlighted by several scholars, RLOs are largely confined to operational roles, executing predefined plans rather than participating in shaping these plans. Papers such as those by Schmelter (2019) and BouChabke & Haddad (2021) emphasize that RLOs often operate within the frameworks set by INGOs and IOs, such as Gulf-funded organizations like URDA (Union of Relief and Development Associations), which deploy predetermined strategies with minimal or no input from RLOs. This operational focus, where RLOs are expected to implement rather than design, reflects the episodic nature of their influence — brief moments of consultation or involvement in logistics that do not extend to strategic direction.

The limited role of RLOs in long-term strategy creation is further underscored by their dependency on INGOs and IOs for financial resources. RLOs are often financially constrained, forcing them to rely on international actors for funding and thereby limiting their autonomy in

strategic decision-making (El Chmali, 2017; AbiYaghi et al., 2015; Al Massalma, 2024). The dependency on INGOs/IOs for resources reinforces their secondary position within the humanitarian system. Additionally, the involvement of RLOs is frequently marked by hierarchical partnerships where decision-making power rests firmly with the INGOs/IOs, relegating RLOs to roles that reflect token participation rather than substantive collaboration. Local organizations are frequently marginalized in strategic discussions despite their profound knowledge of the local context (Diab et al., 2024; Facon, 2023)

The barriers to meaningful participation are not just financial, but also structural. Bureaucratic hurdles and restrictive policies prevent RLOs from engaging in higher-level decision-making processes, which further entrench the episodic nature of the involvement of RLOs, where they may occasionally be invited to participate, but their contributions rarely translate into lasting influence on the direction of humanitarian agendas (Kiwan, 2019; Najdi et al., 2023).

While episodic power reflects occasional opportunities for RLOs to assert influence, systemic power reveals the deeper, more entrenched forces that limit their role in strategic planning. The literature reveals that INGOs and IOs maintain a structural monopoly on agenda-setting, a monopoly reinforced by their control over funding and governance frameworks. The overarching patterns of dependency and hierarchical relationships fostered by INGOs/IOs systematically exclude RLOs from decision-making processes. The power dynamics inherent in these partnerships are not just a matter of occasional oversight or neglect, but a systemic issue embedded in the governance structures that define how aid is planned, managed, and distributed (Schmelter, 2019; Facon, 2023).

The underutilization of local knowledge further exacerbates these power imbalances. While RLOs are often praised for their contextual understanding and their connections to local communities, their valuable insight is rarely integrated into the strategic frameworks of INGOs/IOs (Duclos et al., 2021; El-Abed et al., 2023). INGOs and IOs, driven by donor agendas and international mandates, tend to prioritize overarching frameworks and standards that may not be responsive to the specific needs and dynamics of the communities RLOs serve. The absence of RLOs in strategic discussions, despite their deep-rooted understanding of local conditions, reflects the broader systemic issue of exclusion, where INGOs/IOs dictate the terms of engagement and determine the strategic priorities without substantial consultation with local actors.

The systemic exclusion of RLOs is also linked to the dominance of INGOs and IOs in setting priorities for humanitarian programs. The vast majority of reviewed papers (69%)

confirm that INGOs and IOs define the priorities and frameworks for humanitarian response independently, with little to no meaningful consultation with RLOs. Even when RLOs are consulted, their involvement tends to be tokenistic, limited to operational phases rather than strategic planning. This marginalization is not only a result of financial dependency but is also reinforced by restrictive legal and political environments that limit RLOs' capacity to operate freely and independently. These structural barriers reinforce existing inequalities, ensuring that INGOs and IOs retain control over shaping the humanitarian agenda (Al Massalma, 2024; El-Chmali, 2017).

5.2 Resource Allocation

In humanitarian partnerships, the dynamics of resource allocation often reflect the power imbalances between INGOs, IOs, and RLOs. The control over how resources are distributed remains predominantly in the hands of INGOs and IOs, which leaves RLOs with limited autonomy in managing funds.

Episodic power in resource allocation is manifested in the limited, often tokenistic opportunities for RLOs to influence funding decisions. While INGOs and IOs predominantly control funding allocation, RLOs are sometimes consulted in specific contexts or operational decisions, but their input is rarely substantial enough to shift the broader funding strategies. In the reviewed papers, this pattern is evident in how RLOs are primarily considered executors of pre-set plans dictated by INGOs and IOs, with minimal input into the actual decisions regarding how funds are used.

The involvement from RLOs in resource allocation is typically constrained to following the directions set by INGOs/IOs rather than having discretion over how to manage funds. For instance, Gulf-funded organizations like URDA and I'tilaf operate under rigid frameworks that limit the flexibility RLOs would need to adjust funds to suit local priorities (Schmelter, 2019). Similarly, research highlights how funding decisions remain centralized within INGOs/IOs, leaving RLOs with minimal flexibility to adapt resources to community needs (El Chmali, 2017; Dionigi, 2016).

Although RLOs may occasionally be involved in consultations or discussions regarding operational aspects of projects, such involvement does not translate into significant decision-making power over funding. As a result, the role of RLOs remains limited to implementation, perpetuating a dependency model that restricts their financial autonomy.

Systemic power, in the context of resource allocation, reflects the structural barriers that maintain INGOs/IOs dominance over funding decisions. This systemic control is not only a reflection of episodic moments where RLOs may briefly participate, but rather a consistent, overarching dynamic where INGOs and IOs determine the funding frameworks, objectives, and allocation processes. Across 22 out of 29 reviewed papers, it is clearly stated that INGOs and IOs set the funding parameters, leaving RLOs with no substantial influence over the allocation of resources.

The financial dependency on INGOs and IOs is a key factor that reinforces the limited role of RLOs in resource management. Dependence on international donors for funding constrains the operational flexibility of RLOs, ensuring that control over priorities and resources remains dominated by external actors (AbiYaghi et al., 2015; Al Massalma, 2024). This dependency creates a cycle in which RLOs are forced to adhere to donor-imposed conditions and priorities, which may not align with local needs or allow for adaptive strategies. Studies on funding dynamics (e.g., Diab et al., 2024; Facon, 2023) highlight how this top-down approach not only limits RLOs' capacity for innovation but also constrains their ability to respond effectively to emerging community challenges.

Moreover, the financial mechanisms employed by INGOs and IOs are often rigid and bureaucratic, further stifling the ability of RLOs to manage resources independently. RLOs face significant barriers in accessing direct funding streams due to complex application processes and strict eligibility criteria. These bureaucratic hurdles prevent smaller RLOs from securing the financial resources necessary to operate autonomously, ensuring that the control over resource allocation remains firmly in the hands of larger INGOs and IOs (Kiwani, 2019; El-Chmali, 2017).

The systemic limitations are further compounded by short-term, project-based funding cycles that do not allow for long-term planning or flexibility in response to changing community needs. The emphasis on short-term outcomes rather than sustainable impact limits the ability of RLOs to plan for long-term interventions and adapt to the evolving needs of the communities they serve. This focus on immediate deliverables, driven by donor requirements, perpetuates the dependency of RLOs on INGOs and IOs for continued funding (Facon, 2023; Diab et al. 2024).

The structural barriers that restrict the ability of RLOs to innovate are also tied to the restrictive donor conditions that dictate how resources can be spent. Terms like "conditional grants" and "restricted funding," used in multiple papers (e.g., Schmelter, 2019; BouChabke & Haddad, 2021), highlight the ways in which INGOs and IOs maintain control over funding

allocation by imposing strict guidelines on how RLOs can utilize the funds. This severely limits the capacity of RLOs to tailor their interventions to local needs or to adapt strategies in response to emergent issues (Al Massalma, 2024; Dionigi, 2016).

The power dynamics surrounding resource allocation are shaped by a consistent pattern of dependency, tokenistic involvement, and bureaucratic constraints. All the papers reviewed (29/29) affirm that RLOs lack substantial control over resource allocation, with 22 papers specifically highlighting that INGOs and IOs dictate funding frameworks. The frequency of mentions of bureaucratic and structural barriers (15/29 papers) underscores the systemic nature of the challenges RLOs face in accessing and managing resources. These barriers are not isolated, but are indicative of a broader trend where RLOs remain constrained within rigid frameworks dictated by international actors, preventing them from fully exercising their financial autonomy.

Thematic insights derived from the literature further emphasize the hierarchical structures that dominate resource allocation. INGOs and IOs are consistently depicted as the central actors in the funding process, while RLOs are relegated to roles that focus solely on implementation. This creates a dynamic where local expertise from RLOs and adaptability are underutilized, as their involvement in resource management remains minimal and largely dictated by external priorities. The funding structures that perpetuate this dynamic—short-term, donor-driven, and project-based—further limit RLO capacity to innovate or respond flexibly to the needs of the communities they serve.

5.3 Partnerships

In humanitarian partnerships, the dynamics of decision-making and strategic planning are deeply influenced by the power imbalances between INGOs, IOs, and RLOs. While RLOs may be included in certain discussions, their influence is often restricted by hierarchical governance structures, with INGOs and IOs retaining control over the key decisions that shape humanitarian strategies and agendas.

Episodic power, in the context of partnerships, refers to the interactions that occur within specific partnership agreements between RLOs and INGOs/IOs.

These interactions tend to be limited, sporadic, and often tokenistic, with RLOs participating in key discussions but lacking the ability to influence decisions or shape long-term strategies. In these moments, RLOs may be consulted, but their role is rarely one of co-creation or shared leadership.

From a partnership perspective, 29 out of 29 papers illustrate that RLOs remain marginalized in these engagements, with their participation largely serving formal or logistical purposes rather than contributing to substantive strategy development. While there may be a brief inclusion of RLOs in discussions, it is typically in a consultative capacity that does not challenge the pre-existing frameworks established by INGOs/IOs. This reinforces a hierarchical power dynamic, where INGOs and IOs retain ultimate decision-making authority and control (Diab et al., 2024; Al Massalma, 2024).

The episodic involvement of RLOs is often structured around the needs and agendas set by INGOs/IOs, rather than being part of a truly collaborative process. 12 papers underscore that when RLOs are included, it is often to fulfill the role of implementers, tasked with executing the pre-determined objectives of INGOs/IOs. In these moments, RLOs may be seen as fulfilling operational needs rather than engaging in strategic thinking or decision-making. Tokenistic involvement thus serves to reinforce the dominance of INGOs/IOs in partnerships and limits the ability of RLOs to influence the overarching goals or the direction of humanitarian aid (Duclos et al., 2021; Tran & AbouAssi, 2020).

Systemic power, on the other hand, refers to the entrenched, structural dynamics that permeate the ongoing functioning of partnerships between RLOs and INGOs/IOs. This power is reflected in long-term exclusionary practices embedded within the governance, financial, and operational frameworks of humanitarian interventions. RLOs, while critical to the success of aid efforts due to their local expertise and deep connections with communities, are often relegated to secondary roles in these partnerships. INGOs/IOs hold a dominant position in shaping the overall strategy, allocating resources, and making key decisions (Duclos et al., 2021; Diabet al., 2024; Schmelter, 2019).

22 out of 29 papers confirm that INGOs and IOs primarily control the decision-making processes within these partnerships, leaving RLOs with little autonomy. INGOs/IOs retain power over resource allocation, often deciding the priorities and financial frameworks that guide humanitarian aid. The dependence of RLOs on external funding and resources from INGOs or donors means that they are often bound to the conditions and stipulations imposed by these entities. As such, RLOs rarely have the ability to influence how resources are distributed or allocated, nor do they have the flexibility to adapt funds to meet emerging community needs. The 15 studies focusing on financial dependency highlight the barriers faced by RLOs in securing independent funding, with much of the financial control remaining centralized (Diab et al., 2024; Al Massalma, 2024).

Structural barriers further exacerbate their subordination within partnerships. 18 papers discuss the restrictive legal and bureaucratic frameworks that RLOs face, which often limit their ability to participate fully in decision-making or to operate outside the parameters set by INGOs/IOs. These barriers reinforce the systemic exclusion of RLOs from critical strategic discussions, diminishing their capacity to challenge or alter the agendas of INGOs/IOs. The overall power dynamic remains hierarchical, where INGOs and IOs are positioned as the central decision-makers, while RLOs are expected to execute the plans laid out for them (Duclos et al., 2021; Tran & AbouAssi, 2020; Schmelter, 2019).

The partnership dynamics between INGOs/IOs and RLOs are shaped by a combination of episodic and systemic power that collectively reinforce the dominance of INGOs/IOs. Several key patterns emerge from the literature that define the nature of these partnerships:

1. Hierarchical Partnership Structures: Across 29 studies, INGOs/IOs are consistently described as the dominant actors in these partnerships. Whether it is in resource allocation, strategic decision-making, or the establishment of operational priorities, INGOs/IOs control the framework within which RLOs operate. This top-down approach significantly limits the agency of RLOs and relegates them to roles that focus primarily on operational tasks rather than strategic influence (Tran & AbouAssi, 2020; Moayerian & Stephenson, 2023).

2. Tokenistic Participation: While RLOs may be included in partnership discussions, their involvement is often superficial. In 18 papers, RLOs are characterized as being brought into decision-making spaces, but their role is more symbolic than substantive. They may be consulted for community-level insights or operational concerns, but these contributions rarely translate into meaningful shifts in policy or strategy. As a result, RLOs often find themselves sidelined in terms of influencing the overarching goals of humanitarian aid efforts (Diab et al., 2024; Al Massalma, 2024).

3. Resource Dependency and Financial Control: INGOs/IOs maintain tight control over resource allocation and funding mechanisms, which are central to shaping the direction of partnerships. In 22 papers, it is clear that RLOs are financially dependent on INGOs/IOs, with very limited autonomy in how funds are allocated or used (Kiwan, 2019; El-Chmali, 2017).

4. Structural Barriers to Participation: Legal, bureaucratic, and policy-related challenges serve as significant obstacles to the participation of RLOs in partnership decision-making. 15 papers emphasize that restrictive laws, lack of recognition, and bureaucratic hurdles prevent RLOs from fully engaging in strategic planning or governance (Duclos et al., 2021; Tran & AbouAssi, 2020; Schmelter, 2019).

While RLOs may have brief, tokenistic involvement in strategic planning or decision-making, these instances do little to challenge the deeply ingrained power imbalances in the system. Systemic barriers—such as financial dependency, bureaucratic hurdles, and legal constraints—further reinforce the hierarchical nature of these partnerships, positioning INGOs/IOs as the central players while sidelining RLOs

6 Discussion

The power dynamics between INGOs, IOs, and RLOs in humanitarian partnerships significantly shape the way decisions are made and resources are allocated. Currently, the hierarchical structure heavily favors INGOs and IOs, relegating RLOs to secondary roles in the implementation of humanitarian programs. This imbalance is particularly evident in agenda-setting, resource distribution, and participation in decision-making, where RLOs are often sidelined despite their deep understanding of local needs (Duclos et al., 2021; Tran & AbouAssi, 2020; Schmelter, 2019).

The systemic exclusion of RLOs from meaningful participation in strategic planning not only limits their ability to advocate for the specific needs of refugee communities but also perpetuates a cycle of dependency that restricts their operational autonomy (Diab et al., 2024; Al Massalma, 2024). This dependency is reinforced by legal barriers and bureaucratic hurdles that prevent RLOs from securing direct funding or becoming full-fledged partners in humanitarian governance. Structural barriers, including restrictive legal frameworks and limited access to resources, significantly hinder the potential for RLOs to develop the capacity and legitimacy needed to influence humanitarian interventions effectively (Dewulf & Elbers, 2018; Diab et al., 2024). To address these challenges and foster more equitable partnerships, a multifaceted approach is required. Reforms must focus on dismantling the structural barriers that limit the participation of RLOs in strategic decision-making. One of the most pressing issues is the financial dependency of RLOs on INGOs and IOs. Funding mechanisms should be restructured to prioritize direct funding for local organizations, reducing the need for intermediaries and enabling RLOs to manage resources based on local priorities. Creating dedicated funding streams for RLOs would allow them to operate with greater flexibility and autonomy, thus fostering a more responsive and context-sensitive approach to humanitarian needs (Lokot et al., 2024). This would require not only shifts in funding policies but also changes in the governance structures of INGOs and IOs to ensure that RLOs are viewed as equal partners, with a real stake in the design and execution of programs (El-Abed et al., 2023; Dewulf & Elbers, 2018). Legal frameworks also need to be re-evaluated to ensure that RLOs can access funding and fully participate in humanitarian decision-making. Many RLOs currently operate in contexts where legal recognition is difficult to achieve, limiting their ability to engage with international donors and fully participate in the governance structures that guide aid delivery (Najdi et al., 2023). Reforms should simplify the process for RLOs to register as formal organizations, making it easier for them to access financial support and strengthen their

operational capacity. This will not only empower RLOs to act as more significant players in humanitarian efforts but also enable them to advocate for policies and interventions that are more aligned with the unique needs of the refugee communities they serve (Abdel Samad & Moschini, 2016). Additionally, there is an urgent need to address the tokenistic nature of RLO participation in decision-making. While RLOs may occasionally be consulted or invited to participate in strategic discussions, their involvement is often superficial, serving more as a formality than as a genuine opportunity to influence decision-making (Diab et al. 2024; Duclos et al., 2021; Tran & AbouAssi, 2020).

To transform these episodic engagements into meaningful collaboration, INGOs and IOs must create platforms for sustained dialogue where RLOs are not just invited to listen but actively involved in shaping agendas and strategies. This could include joint decision-making bodies or regular forums where RLOs have a genuine voice in shaping both operational and strategic decisions. Furthermore, INGOs and IOs should provide capacity-building initiatives to equip RLOs with the necessary skills to navigate the complex dynamics of humanitarian governance and resource management. By providing training in areas such as financial management, project design, and policy advocacy, INGOs can help RLOs become more effective and influential partners in shaping the humanitarian landscape (Diab et al., 2024; Lokot et al., 2024). The issue of tokenism in RLO participation is also closely tied to how INGOs and IOs frame their relationships with RLOs. Current language often positions RLOs as implementers or service providers, sidelining their potential to take on leadership roles in the humanitarian sector.

The use of such terms reinforces the hierarchical nature of these partnerships and limits RLOs' ability to contribute meaningfully to strategic decision-making. To address this, INGOs and IOs must shift towards more inclusive language that frames RLOs as co-creators of strategies, not passive executors of externally defined plans. Such a shift requires a commitment to mutual accountability, where the contributions of RLOs are recognized and integrated into decision-making processes, not just at the operational level but at the strategic level as well (Dewulf & Elbers, 2018; Diab et al., 2024). Lastly, the humanitarian sector needs to foster a culture of inclusion that goes beyond rhetoric. The structural inequalities that exist within current partnerships must be dismantled to create more equitable relationships between INGOs, IOs, and RLOs. The integration of local knowledge, greater financial autonomy, and genuine participation in decision-making processes are essential for building more sustainable and effective humanitarian interventions. As evidenced in the literature, RLOs have invaluable insights into the cultural, social, and economic dynamics of the communities they serve. To

harness this potential, INGOs and IOs must prioritize local perspectives in the design and execution of interventions. This can be accomplished through inclusive consultation processes and participatory planning frameworks that ensure that interventions reflect the real needs of the communities they are intended to serve (Diab et al. 2024; Duclos et al., 2021; Schmelter, 2019).

7 Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the significant power imbalances that exist within humanitarian partnerships between INGOs/IOs and RLOs. These imbalances undermine the agency of RLOs and limit their ability to contribute to strategic decision-making, while also reinforcing a cycle of dependency on larger organizations. To address these challenges and promote more equitable partnerships, several key recommendations are proposed:

1. Reform Funding Mechanisms to Prioritize Direct Funding for RLOs

One of the most pressing issues identified in this study is the financial dependency of RLOs on INGOs and IOs, which limits their operational autonomy and flexibility. To address this, it is crucial to establish funding mechanisms that prioritize direct funding for local organizations. This can be achieved by creating funding streams specifically designed for RLOs, enabling them to manage resources in alignment with the specific needs of their communities. These mechanisms should allow RLOs to operate without the constraints imposed by larger organizations, fostering a more context-sensitive and responsive approach to humanitarian aid. Direct funding will also reduce the need for intermediaries, empowering RLOs to make decisions on how resources are allocated, ensuring that they can better address the unique challenges faced by refugee communities (Lokot et al., 2024; Pincock, 2020; Diab et al., 2024; Kiwan, 2019).

2. Reevaluate Legal Frameworks to Facilitate the Registration and Operation of RLOs

Legal barriers often prevent RLOs from registering as formal organizations, which limits their ability to access funding and fully participate in decision-making processes. To promote the inclusion of RLOs in humanitarian governance, it is essential to reform legal frameworks to simplify the registration process for local organizations. This could involve creating legal pathways that allow RLOs to operate independently, thus enhancing their legitimacy and enabling them to engage more effectively with international donors and other humanitarian actors. Streamlining the legal requirements will help RLOs overcome bureaucratic obstacles and contribute to their long-term sustainability, empowering them to advocate for their communities and shape the policies that affect them (Najdi et al., 2023; El-Abed et al., 2023; Al Massalma, 2024).

3. Shift the Language and Practices of INGOs and IOs to Reflect Genuine Partnership

The language used by INGOs and IOs often reinforces the hierarchical power dynamics that marginalize RLOs. Terms such as “implementers” or “service providers” position RLOs as secondary actors, limiting their agency and contributions to operational tasks rather than strategic decision-making. To address this issue, INGOs and IOs should adopt more inclusive language that recognizes RLOs as co-creators of strategies, not just passive recipients of aid. This shift in language must be complemented by a change in practice. INGOs and IOs should actively involve RLOs in shaping agendas, setting priorities, and making decisions at both the operational and strategic levels. This would create a more equitable partnership model, where RLOs are seen as equal contributors and decision-makers in humanitarian interventions (Diab et al., 2024; Facon, 2023; Schmelter, 2019).

4. Establish Platforms for Ongoing Dialogue and Genuine Participation

Tokenistic participation in humanitarian partnerships, where RLOs are included in decision-making processes only as a formality, remains a persistent issue. To transform this tokenism into genuine participation, INGOs and IOs must create structured platforms for ongoing dialogue that allow RLOs to be actively involved in shaping strategies from the outset. These platforms should provide RLOs with the opportunity to influence both the design and implementation of humanitarian programs, ensuring that their local knowledge and expertise are fully integrated into the decision-making processes. This could include joint decision-making bodies or regular consultation forums, where RLOs are given the space and resources to express their perspectives and advocate for their communities (Lokot et al., 2024; Diab et al., 2024; El-Abed et al., 2023; Kiwan, 2019).

5. Provide Capacity-Building Initiatives to Strengthen RLOs’ Operational Capabilities

In order to enhance their ability to participate effectively in humanitarian governance, RLOs must be equipped with the necessary skills and resources to navigate the complexities of the sector. INGOs and IOs should invest in capacity-building initiatives that provide RLOs with training in areas such as financial management, project design, and policy advocacy. By enhancing the operational capabilities of RLOs, these initiatives will empower local organizations to take on more significant roles in program implementation and evaluation, helping them to assert their agency more effectively. Capacity-building programs should be tailored to the specific needs of RLOs, ensuring that they are prepared to engage with the

technical, financial, and bureaucratic challenges that often hinder their participation in decision-making (Diab et al., 2024; Kiwan, 2019; Pincock, 2020).

6. Promote Participatory Governance Structures that Foster Shared Decision-Making

In order to achieve more equitable partnerships between INGOs, IOs, and RLOs, it is essential to establish participatory governance structures that promote shared decision-making. This could involve developing joint governance bodies where representatives from INGOs, IOs, and RLOs collaborate to define priorities and set agendas based on local needs. Such structures would allow RLOs to actively contribute to the design and execution of humanitarian interventions, ensuring that local knowledge is fully leveraged. Participatory governance should be institutionalized within humanitarian organizations, with clear guidelines and accountability mechanisms in place to ensure that RLOs are meaningfully involved in all stages of program development. This would help dismantle the hierarchical structures that currently dominate humanitarian aid and replace them with more inclusive and democratic practices (Diab et al., 2024; Kiwan, 2019; Pincock, 2020.).

7. Ensure Transparency and Mutual Accountability in Humanitarian Partnerships

Transparency and mutual accountability are critical to fostering trust and collaboration between INGOs, IOs, and RLOs. INGOs and IOs must commit to greater transparency in their decision-making processes, including sharing information about funding, resource allocation, and programmatic priorities. Additionally, accountability mechanisms should be implemented to ensure that all partners, including RLOs, are held to the same standards in terms of performance and outcomes. By promoting transparency and mutual accountability, INGOs and IOs can create an environment where RLOs feel valued and empowered to contribute meaningfully to humanitarian efforts, while also ensuring that resources are used efficiently and in accordance with local priorities (Lokot et al., 2024; Pincock, 2020; Diab et al., 2024).

The current power dynamics within humanitarian partnerships significantly limit the potential of RLOs to contribute to strategic decision-making and resource allocation. To overcome these challenges and promote more equitable partnerships, a comprehensive approach is required that includes reforms in funding mechanisms, legal frameworks, governance structures, and operational practices. By addressing the structural barriers that hinder the autonomy and participation of RLOs, humanitarian organizations can create a more inclusive and effective system that recognizes the crucial role of local actors in shaping the future of humanitarian responses.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to answer the research question, "How do power dynamics shape the collaboration between Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) and International Humanitarian Actors (INGOs/IOs) in Lebanon's humanitarian context?" Using a systematic review approach, this research critically examined the interplay of episodic and systemic power, focusing on agenda-setting, resource allocation, and partnership dynamics. It also analyzed how these dynamics affect the agency and operational capacity of RLOs in an environment shaped by political, economic, and legal constraints.

One of the key findings of this study is that power imbalances are deeply ingrained in the partnerships between RLOs and INGOs/IOs, significantly impacting collaboration. Episodic power often manifests through direct control mechanisms, such as funding dependencies, where RLOs are relegated to subordinate roles in decision-making. Systemic power, on the other hand, operates through structural barriers, including restrictive legal frameworks and donor-driven priorities, which marginalize RLOs and limit their participation in strategic planning. These findings align with the conceptual framework of "Power in and Over Cross-Sector Partnerships," confirming that power asymmetries are perpetuated by both immediate interactions and institutional contexts.

Contrary to the perception that RLOs are passive recipients in these partnerships, this study highlights their resilience and agency. RLOs leverage their local knowledge, cultural legitimacy, and trust within communities to influence partnerships and advocate for context-sensitive interventions. For instance, their ability to mobilize community resources and build grassroots networks demonstrates their potential to drive localized solutions. However, their efforts are often constrained by systemic challenges, such as limited access to funding and exclusion from decision-making forums.

The analysis also revealed that while INGOs/IOs bring valuable resources and expertise, their dominance in agenda-setting and resource allocation often leads to interventions that overlook local nuances. This highlights a critical need for more inclusive and equitable collaboration frameworks that empower RLOs to participate as equal stakeholders. Practical recommendations include reforming donor policies to prioritize direct funding for RLOs, enhancing legal recognition for refugee-led initiatives, and fostering genuine partnerships that value local expertise.

In conclusion, the collaboration between RLOs and INGOs/IOs in Lebanon is marked by both challenges and opportunities. While power imbalances remain a significant barrier to

equitable partnerships, the agency demonstrated by RLOs underscores their potential to reshape humanitarian action. Addressing systemic inequalities and fostering more inclusive frameworks are essential steps toward achieving sustainable and effective humanitarian responses. This study contributes to the growing recognition of RLOs as pivotal actors in humanitarian landscapes, advocating for a shift from hierarchical models to partnerships rooted in mutual respect and shared agency.

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Annexes

Annex A: Selected References for Research (for Modified KDD Framework)

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