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## **NGOs in development: opportunities and challenges**

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## Abbreviations

CHF	Cooperative Housing Foundation
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
UNESCWA	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia

## Abstract

Over the past two decades, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have increased in number, size and scope and established themselves in pivotal positions in social, economic and political landscapes across the globe. Their role in the development world specifically has been transformed. Originally situated on the periphery of the development community and often directly opposed to its mainstream, NGOs are now central to contemporary development discourse and practice. They have also been heralded as new agents with the capacity and commitment to make up for the shortcomings of the state and the market in promoting development. In this context, this paper examines the evolving role of NGOs in the changing development landscape, the main strengths and weaknesses of the sector and its latent opportunities and constraints. A case study analysis of the involvement of an international NGO in rural community development projects in Lebanon is also presented, documenting the developmental roles of a specific NGO and the operational and qualitative impacts of NGO developmental interventions in a developing country context.

**KEYWORDS:** *Non-governmental organisations, opportunities, constraints, development, Lebanon*

Over the past two decades, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have increased in number, size and scope and established themselves in pivotal positions in social, economic and political landscapes across the globe (Fernando and Heston 1997). Their role in development has been transformed. Originally situated on the periphery of the development community and often directly opposed to its mainstream, NGOs are now central to development discourse and practice (Stirrat and Henkel 1997). Increasingly, development NGOs are taking over obligations traditionally performed by government agencies as distributors and administrators of development funds, but also as organisers of whole sectors, such as health care, education and rural development. They are also known for their relief activities, their educational publicity and lobbying efforts, their advocacy of human rights and empowerment of women, and their local services and development activities (Korten 1991; Streeten 1997).

The NGO sector in both developed and developing countries has experienced considerable growth in recent years. While statistics on the global numbers of NGOs are incomplete, the Directory of NGOs maintained by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) had information on 2,970 registered development NGOs in OECD countries in 1993 compared with 1,600 in 1980. The total spending of NGOs increased from \$2.8 billion in 1980 to \$7.7 billion in 1994. The number of international NGOs similarly increased from 176 in 1909 to 30,000 in 1994 (Streeten 1997). It is estimated that there are more than 50,000 NGOs in developing

countries, in addition to hundreds of thousands of small grassroots organisations. Over 10 per cent of public development aid is now channeled through NGOs (Fernando and Heston 1997). The local, regional and global networks organised by NGOs function as new venues for dialogue on social transformation and for influencing forums traditionally dominated by state actors.

Many scholars suggest that the increasing influence of NGOs is evidence of a historical break from the conventional wisdom that social development is primarily the responsibility of the state (Korten 1990; Fernando and Heston 1997). The 1980s indeed saw a growing disillusionment with the myth that government is the sole legitimate agent for development and a new orthodoxy that celebrated, among other things, the role of NGOs in dealing with the development crisis, particularly in the South. The agreeable fit between NGOs and current enthusiasms for civil society has also coincided with a growing appreciation of NGOs' distinct developmental roles and contributions. In this context, NGOs need to critically re-examine their roles and goals in a rapidly changing world and evaluate the operational and qualitative impact of their work as they assume a greater role in development work and assistance. This paper is intended to aid NGOs in this endeavour.

## NGOs in a changing development landscape

The term 'NGOs' embraces a wide variety of voluntary, public service and people's organisations. One problem in defining NGOs' legitimate development roles is that

the term 'NGO' is commonly used to describe such a bewildering array of groups and organisations—from activist groups reclaiming the streets to development organisations delivering aid and providing essential public services. The World Bank's operational directive on NGOs (No. 14.70, August 1989) defines them as 'groups and institutions that are entirely/largely independent of government and characterised primarily by humanitarian or cooperative rather than commercial objectives' and also as 'private organisations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, or undertake community development'.

NGOs have traditionally performed a variety of roles and functions in the context of developed and developing countries. They are primarily renowned for their critical service role and for leading the way in responding to pressing public needs. They also play a vital advocacy role in mobilising broader public attention to societal needs, making it possible to highlight significant social and political concerns, to give voice to under-represented people and points of view, and to integrate these perspectives into social and political life. NGOs also play a community-building role, involving the creation and maintenance of what scholars have come to refer to as 'social capital', that is the bonds of trust and reciprocity necessary for a democratic society and market economy to function effectively (Korten 1991; Salamon 1998).

In recent years, NGOs have increasingly assumed an additional role as promoters of development. The idea that government

should assume sole responsibility for development decisionmaking and the management of development resources has recently been discredited (Korten 1990; Fernando and Heston 1997). It is now widely accepted that civil society has a pivotal role to play in both and that the hope for dealing with the development crisis rests in particular with the more forward-looking NGOs, opening possibilities for mobilising a far greater range of human talent, institutional capacity and social energy in the service of development than governments could ever hope to achieve. NGOs are increasingly heralded as alternative agents of development, particularly in view of state retreat and retrenchment (Paul 1991; Henderson 1997). This trend has been reinforced by a growing appreciation among donors/governments of the distinctive development roles of NGOs and by new strategic alliances between NGOs and international organisations.

Recent years have seen international agencies nurture more substantive patterns of collaboration with NGOs, on the basis of the simple realisation that NGOs can serve as vehicles of democratisation and civil society development, goals to which most donor governments aspire. NGOs are indeed considered to be integral to the success of the dominant development ideology, geared towards state disengagement, privatisation, competition and grassroots participation, because of their capacity to fill the gaps left by government retrenchment, encourage private sector enterprises and involve beneficiaries in development activities (Hudock 1999).

Furthermore, NGOs are regarded as expressions of the people or civil society, rather than the dominant institutions of society (Fernando and Heston 1997). It is therefore not surprising that strategic interaction between NGOs and international agencies increased throughout the 1990s. For example, whereas between 1973 and 1988 only 6 per cent of World Bank-financed projects involved NGOs, in 1993 over one-third of all approved projects included some form of NGO involvement, and this percentage increased to one-half in 1994 (Hudock 1999). There is an increasing consensus that, while international agencies have the expertise and knowledge to provide 'development hardware' (macro policies, economic modeling, baseline research sector work), NGOs, because they are smaller, more adaptable and locally informed, make the best providers of 'development software' (participatory approaches, community organising, stakeholder ownership strategies) (Mercer 2002).

Given recent trends in funding and the lingering challenges of development, NGOs are expected to increase in number and in level of responsibility, taking on more roles/functions and development tasks, in the future (UNESCWA 1998). Hence, there seems to be a strong case at this critical juncture for a careful and dispassionate assessment of NGOs' distinctive competencies and limitations in the development process. NGOs bring special strengths to the development process, primary among these being *flexibility*, or the capacity to react quickly to new circumstances and needs and to accommodate and encourage diverse approaches to challenges. Relative

*independence* of or freedom from market and state constraints is also important, giving NGOs the ability to address neglected issues and concerns. *Neutrality* adds impartiality to independence. It enables NGOs to mediate among actors in contested interactions, including disputes and allocation decisions. Added to this are NGOs' general *accessibility* and *responsiveness*, which allow them to maintain close ties to affected communities and groups, including many that tend to be ignored by mainstream institutions (Paul 1991; Streeten 1997; UNESCWA 1998).

The comparative strengths of NGOs enable them to make distinctive contributions to the development process. These include

- empowerment, or the mobilisation of grassroots energies through self-help, mutual aid and the promotion of various sorts of social participation
- issue identification, involving the identification and bringing to public attention of new issues
- resource mobilisation, or mobilising untapped human and financial resources and bringing them to bear on the task of development
- mediation, or acting as liaison among social groups, between fields, and across political boundaries, thus reducing the divisions that often impede effective action
- change promotion, involving the exertion of pressure outside the political system in order to produce change in public/private policies
- monitoring, or serving as watchdogs to ensure the fair and effective implementation of public policies

**Table 1 Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats confronting NGOs in the process of development**

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Flexibility, independence, and ability to generate commitment from staff and volunteers	Lack of a clear vision of program objectives, working procedures and governing regulations	Can stimulate market-based economic growth, develop policy frameworks, and provide through the formation of community-based organisations strong voluntary actors in civil society	A legal framework that has not evolved enough over time to deal effectively with the roles/functions of NGOs in the changing development environment
Accessibility, innovation and experimentation	Vague objectives, management problems, lack of sustainability and low project replicability	Can empower communities, heighten public participation and strengthen democratic processes	Inadequate support from governments and international agencies
High level of dedication and principled decisionmaking/conduct	Lack of capacity to prepare project documents and studies that meet donor requirements	Can fill the gaps created by bureaucratic delays and the ineffectiveness of local governments	Passive or active resistance on the part of elected officials or direct conflict of interest with governments or governmental institutions
Responsiveness, direct connection with the poor, independent assessment of issues and problems	Limited mobilisation of internal and external funding or limited income generating activities	Policy research and advocacy, networking, communication, issue identification, resource mobilisation, mediation, change promotion, monitoring, leadership development, ensuring representation, legitimisation and participation	Limited access to decisionmaking circles or limited opportunities for open dialogue
Effective representation of views and flexible mechanism of response to grassroots concerns	Lack of coordination and rivalry with other NGOs as well as with ministries, contributing to inefficient use of resources and duplication of efforts		Restricted access to relevant information
Cost-effective project implementation with attention to environmental sustainability	Negative biases against, and misconceptions of, government or the private sector		Public misperceptions of NGOs or passivity among the targets of development efforts

**Source:** Streeten, P., 1997. 'Non governmental organizations and development', in J.L. Fernando and A.W. Heston (eds), *The Role of NGOs: charity and empowerment*, Sage Publications, London; The Institute for Policy Studies, 1996. 'Non profits and development: the challenge and the opportunity', The Institute for Policy Studies at Johns Hopkins University, <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itdhr/0198/jide/salsdb.htm> (accessed 10 May 2003); United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 1998. *The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Water Sector in the ESCWA Member Countries*, United Nations, New York.

- leadership development, or facilitating the emergence of a new leadership cadre and offering opportunities for meaningful engagement in public issues to large numbers of community activists
- ensuring representation, or representing alternative perspectives on important issues and ensuring that these perspectives are heard
- legitimisation, or helping to secure popular support for needed policies
- promoting participation, or securing the active participation of various actors/ social strata in development activities, thus minimising the dangers of exclusion either of particular groups or points of view (The Institute for Policy Studies 1996; Streeten 1997; UNESCWA 1998).

NGOs also contribute to the long-term viability and sustainability of development projects by promoting open and transparent procedures and rules for public participation in the consideration of investment projects; fairer and more equitable distribution of the economic return to investment projects; reasonable prices and/or universal or widespread service access (in the case of infrastructure utilities); employment opportunities for local labour and the protection of natural resources for socioeconomic benefits (Doh and Teegen 2002).

Despite their strengths, NGOs confront problems and constraints that can undermine their contributions. The most commonly identified weaknesses of the sector relate to objectives that are sometimes vague, management problems, limited institutional capacity, lack of financial sustainability, and low project replicability coupled with isolation or lack of

coordination with other NGOs (Paul 1991; Streeten 1997; UNESCWA 1998). Among the environmental impediments are inadequate support from governments, international agencies and the business sector coupled with passive or active resistance on the part of elected officials; excessive legislative and regulatory controls; limited access to decisionmaking circles or limited opportunities for open dialogue; restricted access to relevant information; direct conflict of interest with governments or governmental institutions (especially in the case of human rights and environmental issues); public misperceptions of NGOs or passivity among those who are the targets of development efforts. Table 1 presents a compilation of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats confronting NGOs in the process of development.

### **NGO developmental interventions in Lebanon: a case study**

This section presents a case study analysis of the involvement of an international NGO, the Cooperative Housing Foundation (CHF), in rural community development projects in Lebanon, documenting the developmental contributions to be made and constraints typically encountered in developing countries. Field surveys and interviews were conducted with local beneficiaries in a total of eight village clusters representing 21 villages where 56 CHF-funded projects had been financed and implemented. Thus, through direct feedback from stakeholders, the effects and contributions as well as the limitations of CHF-funded projects in selected rural areas were assessed. Following an introductory

contextual background, the study assesses various indicators (for example, capacity-building, motivation among participants, community leadership, processes and relationships, conflict and stability) in order to make an overall evaluation of the success of the NGO's interventions. The study concludes with remarks on the limitations of the field survey and conclusions about the developmental contributions of NGOs in developing countries.

## Background

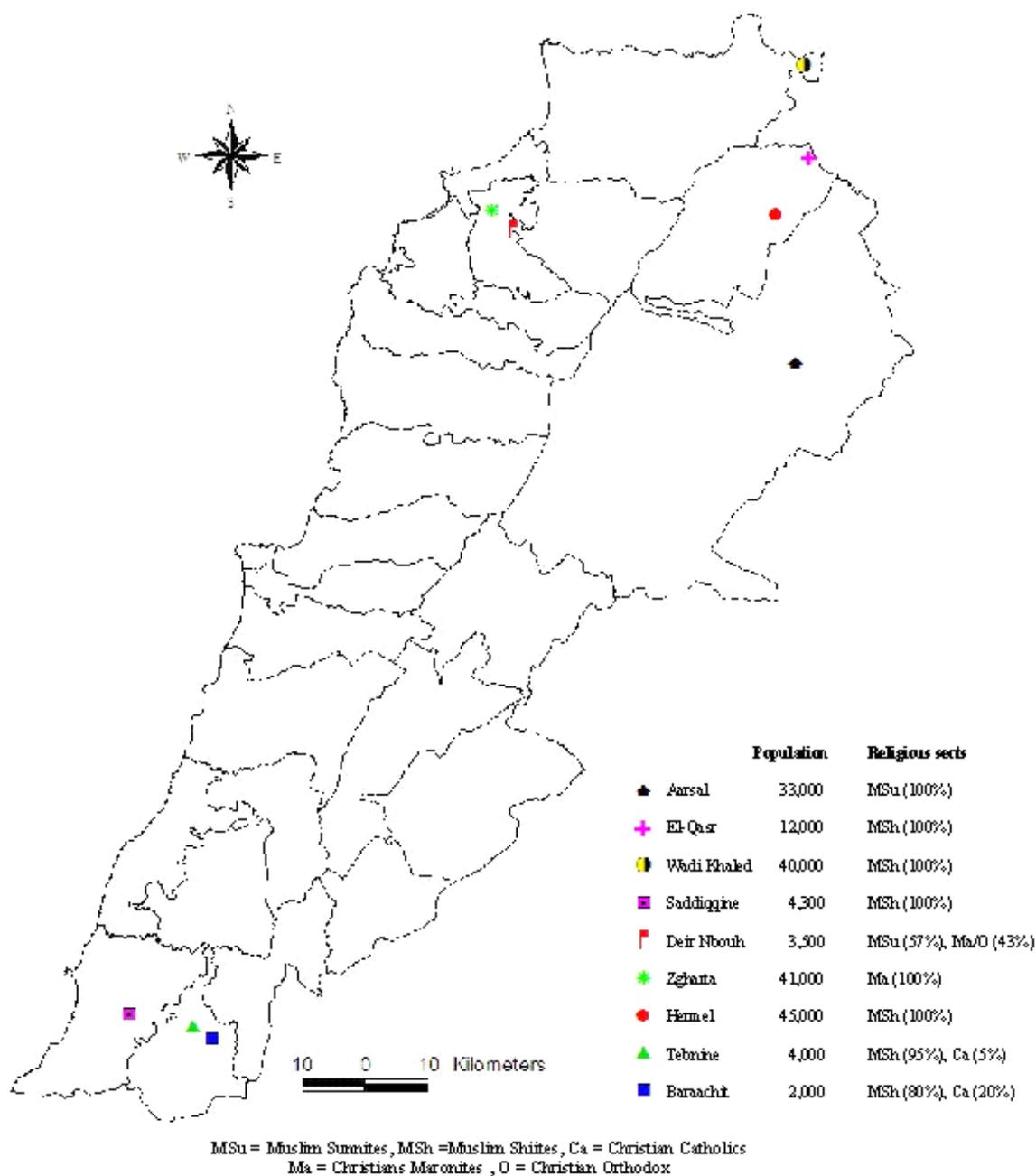
Throughout its recent history, Lebanon has been the scene of diverse socioeconomic and sectarian conflicts. Sixteen years of civil unrest between 1975 and 1991 brought about stagnation of the national economy (based heavily on tourism and trade), destruction of infrastructure in towns and villages, displacement of communities, and disruption of the nation's delicate social fabric (involving Muslim-Christian cohabitation). Following the civil war, latent social and sectarian tensions remained and resulted in occasional clashes. As a result of these conflicts, the socioeconomic situation in most Lebanese villages has deteriorated, leading to the migration of many rural communities to the large cities, especially the capital Beirut and its suburbs, which house more than 50 per cent of the country's population. The return of these communities to their home villages has been a top priority for the government, but it has been hampered by national economic stagnation and the lack of basic developmental projects and economic opportunities within rural areas.

After the civil war, CHF International, based in Washington, expressed interest in

providing help to Lebanon as part of its ongoing efforts to help societies undergo the transition from conflict to peace. Its programs focus on leadership motivation, the creation of socio-economic opportunities, and support for communities in developing democratic processes and resolving conflicts. The main aim of CHF International is to bring different groups together, nurture democratic management practices, inoculate societies against further violence, and build solid constituencies capable of managing processes that influence key policy decisions and demand greater responsiveness from policymakers. Accordingly, CHF Beirut has worked with several rural communities throughout Lebanon to provide basic needs and services and introduce collective and transparent decisionmaking through the creation of village committees.

The general methodology adopted by CHF comprises several steps. First, CHF representatives meet with key community figures, such as the mayor, municipality representatives, existing cooperatives and local NGOs, to introduce CHF's objectives and discuss the community's needs. Following this meeting, CHF requests the formation of a village committee whose major role would be the management of CHF-funded projects within the village. Once formed, the village committee meets with CHF to discuss and identify priority needs in terms of projects for the village. After agreeing on a particular project, CHF and the village committee secure the proper permits from the government (if needed) and solicit offers from at least three contractors in an open bidding process

Figure 1 Location of surveyed clusters



**Table 2 Typical CHF-funded projects in surveyed villages**

Cluster/Village	Project type
Deir Nbouh	Water filtration system Water irrigation network Groundwater well for domestic and irrigation supply Schools with laboratory equipment Irrigation canals
Zgharta	Milk factory with laboratory Water purification equipment Plant and tree nursery Waxing and fruit packaging accessories
Saddiqine	Potable water supply system Honey production equipment Public school laboratory Reservoir and pipe network Hay production equipment
Tebnine	Equipment for teachers' training centre Internet centre for public library Tree planting Agricultural roads and equipment Municipal solid waste plant
Baraachit	Agricultural equipment and machinery Rehabilitating and lining irrigation lakes Forestation Laboratory school equipment Reservoir and pipe network
Wadi Khaled	Road construction and rehabilitation Medical centre with equipment Vocational school with computers and equipment Equipment for nursery school Repair and completion of Al-Fared School Irrigation canals
Hermel	Development of an eco-tourism site Reforestation Slaughterhouse construction Equipment for vocational training centre Equipment for tuberculosis centre Equipment for public schools Livestock marketplace Lake and pump station
Aarsal	Road construction Public school construction Equipment for nursery school Equipment for vocational school

based on pre-set specifications and evaluation criteria made known to all contractors to ensure complete transparency. The village committee and CHF representatives supervise the progress of the contractor's work and report to the CHF office. Upon project completion, the village committee can assume responsibility for the operation of the project or else transfer responsibility to another party (municipality or governmental authority). CHF has also been striving to establish cluster committees connecting separate villages among those it serves. These cluster committees are intended to manage projects that encompass several villages and to raise the level of public involvement, cooperation and decision making at a cluster or regional level. Cluster committees are formed by a conglomerate representing the various village committees from a specific geographic area.

CHF involvement in community development across Lebanon began in 1990. Since then, CHF has funded 174 projects in 49 villages. The projects have encompassed diverse sectors, attempting to fulfil the specific needs identified by the various communities. Figure 1 shows the locations of the eight surveyed clusters representing 21 villages where different CHF projects were financed and/or implemented.<sup>1</sup> Table 2 outlines the various types of funded projects.

### **Village committees: achievements and challenges**

In the surveyed clusters, the village committees moved villagers to make capacity-building efforts in order to acquire basic management and technical skills. They

also motivated the involvement of a wide range of participants in community development projects. CHF interventions made through the village committees also fostered more democratic leadership and decisionmaking patterns, allowing residents and villagers to take part in discussions and decisions. CHF-funded projects required, for example, the approval and signature of all village committee members prior to project implementation. Municipal projects on the other hand necessitate only the signature of the mayor, with the approval of 50 per cent of the municipal council. The requirement of the CHF-funded projects has nurtured community confidence in village committees.

With the exception of financial constraints, the village committees did not face major obstacles or opposition during project implementation. Communities were eager to ensure the success of projects in order to enhance their quality of life, since the projects catered to their basic needs for economic growth, health and education. The Tebnine village committee was the only committee for which a non-financial constraint delayed the implementation of a proposed project. In this case, the village committee had to put up with a reluctant mayor whose signature and approval were required for the implementation of a solid-waste plan for the village. The plan consisted of a composting facility and a sanitary landfill to eliminate the improper disposal and open burning of municipal solid wastes generated from the village. While the mayor expressed support for the project, he raised concerns about the financial burden on the municipality of operational expenses, thus the committee could not ensure his long-

**Table 3 Achievements and challenges of village committees**

Capacity building	<p>The surveyed clusters/villages suffer from high illiteracy rates and a lack of skilled and experienced personnel to implement and/or manage projects. The assistance of CHF was thus needed in all steps of the process. In this respect, CHF assisted the village committees by providing technical expertise, preparing terms of reference, participating in the selection of the most suitable bid and promoting transparent processes within the village committees. The village committees are responsible for approving payments for contractors and following up on projects during construction and operation even when the projects are handed over to government agencies. The financial assistance provided by CHF coupled with the adopted work procedures helped communities develop managerial and technical skills. Note that capacity building in this context is directly proportional to the scale and nature of the implemented projects.</p> <p>Management skills: The main skills acquired by committee members included identifying procedures for implementing an open bidding process, developing a project's terms and conditions for contractors, budgeting and developing priority lists, and ensuring transparency within the various steps of project implementation.</p> <p>Technical skills: Technical skills were mostly related to construction activities and exposure to new agricultural equipment such as milking equipment, hay producing equipment, packaging and waxing equipment, and honey production equipment. The introduction of elementary and vocational schools as well as teacher training centres equipped with teaching aids helped build the know-how of local educators.</p>
Motivation among participants	<p>The motivation for most village committee participants to join CHF-funded projects was to obtain funding for developmental projects within their villages. The involvement of CHF and the formation of the village committees have motivated residents and farmers to volunteer and contribute within their means (monetary, land, labour, equipment, and so on) whenever possible, in order to enhance their surroundings and the socioeconomic status of their community. Some communities have contributed to more than 50 per cent of the total costs of CHF-funded projects in their villages (monetary and non-monetary). Because of the conservative culture of the surveyed clusters, which tends to undermine women's participation in decisionmaking processes, women have not been directly involved in most village committees. The village committees in Tebnine and Hermel, however, were able to attract and accommodate the involvement of women, with one woman sitting on the Tebnine village committee and two on the Hermel village committee. It is worthwhile noting that no committee members left a project prior to its completion, an illustration of village committee participants' commitment.</p>
Community leadership	<p>Selection/election process: Committee members were selected by the residents of each village after CHF had met with the community's key figures, such as the mayor, the <i>mukhtar</i>, municipality representatives,</p>

local NGOs and municipality and agricultural cooperatives to introduce its program in an open public meeting. The community was then requested to elect/select members to represent them in CHF-financed projects. This selection/election process generally occurred in a public meeting where interested candidates openly declared their candidacy. This approach ensured transparency and brought about a balanced representation in villages as well as community support. No complaints were voiced about the process in any of the surveyed clusters. Leaders in the village committees: In general, leaders within the surveyed clusters/villages were more affluent and better educated than other community members—mostly farmers, many of whom were illiterate—and had more time to invest in the committee. Most VCs also incorporated farmers representing agricultural cooperatives and individuals associated with local educational institutions. Generally, village committee members did not aspire to political leadership and seemed keen simply to provide local public services and promote a better quality of life in their communities. Committee members had generally already gained the respect of the community and participated in various social activities on an individual basis prior to the involvement of CHF. These members were motivated to participate in the CHF program to improve the quality of life in their villages; they were keen to provide public services and maintain their leadership role. The formation of the village committee also facilitated the transition from individual leadership to collective decision making.

Collective  
decisionmaking

CHF initiated its involvement in the surveyed clusters with the creation of a village committee representing each community's different stakeholders. Committee members were selected during a public meeting at which interested villagers, municipality members, opposition constituencies and under-represented stakeholders were invited to join the village committee. In most villages, the village committee comprises representatives from the municipality and agricultural cooperatives—if present—along with other members who have expressed interest in public service. As such, the village committees complement the municipal councils and/or functioning cooperatives by incorporating new and active members into the decision-making process. The creation of the village committees harmonised members' views and boosted their confidence in their capacity to bring about change. Members have also learned to voice concerns and explore issues together, and this in turn has boosted their confidence in their ability to manage the collective decision-making process. Currently, farmers are more comfortable and open in discussing their aspirations and problems with their cooperatives than before. Thus, the collective decisionmaking process has enhanced democratic processes among beneficiaries.

Processes and  
relationships

The village committees enhance social integration and encourage tolerance within their villages by providing a common forum for inhabitants to openly discuss and inquire about developmental projects in their villages. Where applicable, village committees have included minority representation to ensure the involvement of minorities in village

development and thus promote community integration. This occurred for example in the village of Baraachit, where Christians, whose total number in the village is less than 20 per cent of the total population, account for nearly half the VC membership. CHF-funded projects have catalysed enthusiasm and community participation at various levels, as displayed for example in donations of land, financial contributions, and increased labour efforts. Little cooperation is evident however between the surveyed clusters/villages and other nearby villages, despite efforts to initiate cluster committees covering different areas. This can be attributed to the prevalence of small-scale projects affecting specific villages rather than larger-scale projects requiring inter-village collaboration. The only instances of inter-village collaboration occurred when certain agricultural projects necessitated the pooling of the resources of several small cooperatives.

#### Conflict and stability

No major conflicts occurred during identification and implementation of projects. Committee members/residents have generally expressed satisfaction with the management processes adopted, all the more so because they are based on public participation, comprehensive representation and transparency. In addition, CHF projects have enhanced the socioeconomic situation of many villagers, thus indirectly reducing tensions and conflicts associated with the management of scarce resources such as agricultural equipment and water. Where disputes arose, they were resolved through discussions, meetings and collective decision making. The formation of the village committee has encouraged the adoption of such processes among committee members while ensuring the representation of various stakeholders in the village (for example, the municipality, opposition members and minorities). The fact that CHF projects require the approval of all committee members has also promoted discussion, negotiation and consensus building among participants. In addition, village committees allow minorities to express their opinions and take part in the decisionmaking process, thus increasing these people's sense of security, which in turn would translate into less conflicts and increased social stability. Two problems were encountered. In Tebnine, an integrated solid waste management plan with a composting plant and sanitary landfill at its core was proposed, however the mayor was reluctant to approve the project for fear it would become an economic burden once its operation had been transferred to the municipality in one year. A similar obstacle was encountered in the village of El-Qasr, where the mayor prevented the construction of a wastewater treatment plant by not allowing the expenditure of municipal funds on the wastewater collection system (citing other priorities on his agenda).

term commitment, illustrating the vulnerability of the process to the discretion of powerful individuals. A similar situation has recently been encountered in El-Qasar village, where the newly appointed mayor stalled the construction of a wastewater treatment plant to which the previous mayor had agreed. In this case, differences in political orientation and personal priorities prevented the implementation of the project. Table 3 shows the achievements and challenges of the village committees, using various indicators (for example, capacity building, motivation among participants, community leadership, collective decisionmaking, processes and relationships, conflict and stability) to make an overall evaluation of the success of the NGO's interventions.

## Limitations

The current study has limitations that should be taken into consideration when generalisations are made. To start with, the limited number of villages surveyed prevents generalisation across the country. A larger sample may be needed for this purpose, though the results already obtained can be taken to indicate trends to be explored further. Moreover, interviews were conducted primarily with members of village committees. Because these individuals ultimately derive the most benefit from the projects, particularly if they occupy leadership positions, they may be biased towards the CHF program. The fact that interviewees were mainly village committee members and municipality officials also needs to be taken into consideration because it means the opinions

of totally unrelated individuals were not represented. Finally, the time period between the beginning of CHF involvement in the surveyed villages and the present assessment could be too short for the CHF's goals to be achieved. In this respect, long-term monitoring and following up are required.

## Conclusions

By capitalising on their strengths and competencies, NGOs can make distinctive development contributions at the community level, thus presenting an effective alternative model of local intervention for planners and policymakers. The case study of a specific NGO's development interventions in Lebanese rural villages presented here confirms this. The present study suggests that by capitalising on its flexibility, responsiveness and direct connection with local residents the NGO in question was able to generate commitment from locals and volunteers, direct attention and build consensus around community development priorities and needs while promoting economic empowerment, self-determination and basic democratic processes.

The assessment suggests that the NGO in question was successful in promoting empowerment, as indicated by the increased propensity and capacity of locals in the surveyed clusters to make relevant decisions affecting their lives. Discernible efforts were made to involve a wider range of stakeholders and build community consensus around development problems and priorities. The NGO was therefore successful in catalysing wider participation,

**Table 4 Summary qualitative assessment of specific indicators in surveyed villages**

Criteria	Deir Nbouth	Zgharta	Tebnine	Saddiqine	Baraachit	Wadi Khaled	Hermel	Aarsal
Participation of minorities	+	+	0	0	+	0	0	0
Participation of women	0	+	+	0	0	0	+	0
Promotion of stability/reduction of conflicts	+	+	-/+	+	+	+	0	+
Reduction of tensions	+	+	-	+	+	+	0	+
Stimulation of cooperation	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Promotion of democratic decisionmaking	+	+	-/+	+	+	+	+	+
Handling of opposition	0	0	+	0	0	0	0	0
Promotion of socioeconomic development	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Introduction of technical and management skills	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

**Notes:** + = positive effect; - = negative effect; 0 = neutral effect

better representation and more democratic leadership and decisionmaking processes. Table 4 provides a summary of how specific indicators were affected by implemented projects.

In the final analysis, however, while the NGO's program has undoubtedly contributed positively to various development indicators, little change has occurred in the existing social and economic status quo. Nor have institutional and financial sustainability been achieved. The long-term effects of the program remain uncertain at best, particularly in view of its vulnerability to personal and political pressures, bias and government influence. With regards to the participation of women, cultural and religious constraints leave much to be desired, and women remain an untapped resource whose participation, because of its potential capacity to bring about positive social change, should be at the core of future programs targeting developing countries.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> CHF involvement has targeted rural areas (in North, East, and South Lebanon) that historically received minimal resources from the government because of their remoteness from the capital, Beirut.

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