

## NGOs Agenda and Palestinian National Goals

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### Abstract

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*Palestinian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are always an interesting topic to study due to their historical roles in protecting Palestinian identity and fulfilling public needs. A lot of changing have happened to these NGOs, especially after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. Now, NGOs looks like suspicious organizations, people are questioning their agendas. To answer the article main question: to what extent Palestinian NGOs are contributing to the achievement of the Palestinian national goals, the article used a mixed of data collection methods. While most of NGOs believe in the Palestinian national goals, the findings point out that they believe that they are not responsible for their attainment. When NGOs are advocating Palestinian national goals, they do so within the framework of Palestinian Authority's agendas and institutions, whether perceived as transitional or permanent self-rule structure. The dynamics of politics and foreign aid has played a significant role in weakening NGOs adherence to national goals and public priorities. This is also true for politically-affiliated NGOs that take advantage of the civil society arena as a substitute for direct and open engagement in politics and national struggle. Also, the findings show that less than one-third of organizations is working on top two priorities of the public which are poverty reduction and job creation compared to few organizations are responding to needs in education and health.*

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**Key words:** NGOs, Palestinian National Goals, Agenda, and Public needs

### 1. Introduction

Does the title sound strange? Well, the Palestinians are living under occupation for tens of years. They are seeking their independence to enjoy freedom, benefit from their natural resources and raise the quality of their lives. Independence and national freedom are an important matter for all organizations: political parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), voluntary and associations. All these organizations should work together to meet Palestinian goals. Historically Palestinian organizations have had two main roles; protecting Palestinian identity and work in fulfilling public needs. Until 1948, Palestinian voluntary organisations were standing against the Zionist movement through a focus on preservation of its identity. Between 1948 -1967, Palestinian organisations existed, but were restricted by the respective laws in force to service provision (Constantine et al., 2011). Between 1967 and the First Intifada in late 1987, Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) promoted the formulation of voluntary work committees, youth and women's organisations and health and education organisation (Hamammi, 2000). Many of these organisations had later become NGOs and very influential in their respective sectors with the adoption of a developmental agenda in agriculture, water, environment, and political participation sectors (Abdulahdi, 2004). The era also saw the birth of new political party ' Hamas Movement ' and the ' popular committees ' (Samara, 2001). Along with popular committees that sprung and served as neighbourhood watch, educational and health committees during the First Intifada. The unparalleled level of public participated in popular committees helped fill in the institutional void (Ashrawi, 2009) so that the first 6 months of the First Intifada were described as was the golden period for public participation (Hamammi, 2000; Samara, 2001) even though participation occurred outside the frameworks of state and political representation.

Under Israeli occupation, NGOs activities revolved mainly around basic services and relief and humanitarian assistance, although human rights organisations flourished in the early 1990s to document Israeli violations of Palestinians' rights. After the 1994 Oslo Accords, organisations suddenly increased in number, type and focus. NGOs coexisted with a plethora of mass/service delivery organisations already in place; e.g. labor unions, students' unions. A new generation of NGOs emerged after the creation of the PA that by 1996 comprised about 40% of organisations (MAS, cited in Costantini et al., 2011). This generation of organisations has been accused of lacking linkages to communities and/or donor-driven mostly due to competition over funding between the PA and the NGOs.

A combination of data collection methods, personal interview, survey, case study and focus groups, was used to answer the article main question: to what extent does NGOs are contributing to achieve the Palestinian national goals. The article contains seven sections: first section shows relations to nationals' goals followed by NGOs understanding of these goals, then a designated section to analyse NGOs Activities in advancing national goals and community based organizations (CBOs) perceptions of national goals, after that an investigating on NGOs Agenda and section six allowing people expressing their own needs, and finally the conclusion.

## **2. Relation to National Goals**

Palestinian national goals, as stated by the PLO National Council, are the formal agreement among of the various components of Palestinian society, including NGOs. As said before, Palestinians view the Palestinian Authority (PA) as either a transitional arrangement in the way towards statehood or as a final self-rule structure coexisting with the occupation, and with or without a special temporary arrangement with Jordan. The second view prevails given the PA inability to realize Palestinian national goals particularly statehood, the return of Palestinian refugees, and Israel's withdrawal from the entire oPt, Jerusalem included, to the 1967 boundaries (JA., interview, 31 March).

Aware of its limitations, the NGO sector interacts with the PA upon donors' encouragement although NGOs are generally reluctant to participate in the preparation and execution of PA national and sectoral plans. The NGOs that do so believe that PA planning is important for improving people's life (HA., interview, 10 February) and therefore use PA plans as a basis for NGOs own planning (HA., interview, 10 February; SA., interview, 1 February). However, most NGOs seem unaware of PA plans or uninterested in taking part in formal processes set to prepare, review or audit PA Plans. Some NGOs even refuse to familiarize themselves with PA plans despite their recognition that they address the needs of all groups and sectors: women, youth, children, agricultural, detainees, education...etc. While some NGOs managers are unaware of PA sectoral planning (ET., interview, 15 March) some are wary of PA intentions and reform policies to reject outright the mere proposition of partnering with the PA. A deep seated mistrust in the PA leads NGO activists to conclude that such partnership is virtually impossible and believe that the NGOs should play a very important role in exposing the PA that represents the interest of few elites (ER., interview, 15 December).

## **3. NGOs Understating of National goals**

The findings show that most NGOs believe in the Palestinian national goals but they do not see themselves responsible for their attainment. For NGOs, this is the role of Palestinian political parties, PLO and the PA. This is a common perspective expressed during focus groups discussions and interviews with NGO managers. In fact, participants cautioned against NGOs involvement in political issues because that would import political interests and conflicts into the NGOs. For participants, NGOs should bypass political activism to proactive involvement in combating poverty, local economy development, and empowerment of youth and women because they participants consider as "non-political issues" (Kafreyat focus group, 19 March). NGOs are far more important for the preservation of the Palestinian national and cultural identity than for working on political issues such as the national goals.

Regardless of this popular opinion, some NGOs are directly involved in some national issues. For example, many NGOs specialize in advocating the refugees' right to return, monitoring land confiscation, settlement expansion and construction of the Separation Wall. The entire human rights sector is also involved in monitoring violations Israeli and Palestinian violations of human rights in the oPt and Israeli violations of Palestinians rights in Jerusalem. One focus group in refugee camps detailed the activities women's NGOs organize in the areas of refugee return and promotion of cultural identity among the new generation through music, embroidery and other folk arts.

In addition, women CBOs organize exhibitions, seminars, and awareness raising activities on many important laws and political participation issues. Both types of activities may encourage NGOs to pay much more attention to Palestinian national goals. (El-Amari focus group, 31 May).

In addition, the results of the organisational survey in table 1 show that NGOs performance is generally characterised as acceptable or less in certain areas. Almost half than the respondents said that the NGOs performed less than they should in advancing national goals scored 47% compared to those who believe that this role is acceptable scored 35% or good scored 18%. The results were the same with regard to the promotion of democracy and preservation of national identity, combating corruption, promotion of human rights or improvement of the public's quality of life. Finally, NGOs performance seems to be the worst in the area of public infrastructure improvement.

The study sample of 40 NGOs answered all survey questions except for the last one responded to by 39 NGOs.

Statement	No. Of NGOs					
	Very poor	Poor	Acceptable	Good	Very good	Total
<i>NGOs efforts towards:</i>						
Achievement of independence & statehood	7	15	14	7	0	40
Preservation of national identity	6	15	12	6	1	40
Realization of national goals	5	14	14	5	2	40
Betterment of the public's quality of life	5	16	10	8	1	40
Enforcement of Human rights	4	18	12	6	0	40
Promotion of democracy	4	15	14	7	0	40
Combating corruption	7	15	13	5	0	40
Strengthening public infrastructure	15	14	9	1	0	39

When asked how they perceived NGOs role should be, an overwhelming percentage 77% to 85% of respondent Board of Director (BoD) members and managers agreed that NGOs should play important roles in all of the identified areas compared to 12% to 18% who believe that NGOs should play a role along with other players. A small percentage of 2% to 5% feels that NGOs should have such involvement but not become the main domain of their activities.

#### 4. NGOs Activities in Advancing National Goals

Table 1 above depicted the results of the organisational survey on the opinions of NGOs managers and BoD members on a number of statements. In this section, the previous results will be compared to the results of the NGO employee survey as depicted in the table 2.

Position/Statement	Weak - Very Weak (rank: 1-2)		Acceptable (rank:3)		Good- Very Good (rank: 4-5)	
	Top Mgt	Staff	Top Mgt	Staff	Top Mgt	Staff
<i>NGOs efforts towards</i>						
Preserving national identity	52.5%	48%	30%	45%	17.5%	7%
Achieving National Goals	47.5%	51%	35%	47%	17.5%	2%
Achieving independence	55%	82%	32.5	18%	2.5%	0%
Enhancing quality of public life	52.5%	84%	25%	15%	22.5%	1%
Promoting human rights	55%	78%	30%	20%	15%	2%
promoting democracy	47.5%	59%	35%	39%	17.5%	2%
Combating corruption	65%	69%	20%	31%	15%	0%
Enhancing Public infrastructure	74%	80.6%	23.1%	19.4%	2.6%	0%

The table combines results or organisational survey filled in by top managers and BoD members of 40 NGOs and the results of staff survey filled by 100 staff members. Respondents ranked their opinions on a scale of 1-5, 5 being the highest rank.

Clearly, there is a consistent divergence between the two groups in their opinions with regards to NGOs contribution to the realization of national goals, independence and statehood more than their opinions of NGOs efforts for the protection of national identity. About 82% of staff said that NGOs are doing a very poor job in this regard compared to 55% of NGOs management and governance boards who believe so. Similarly, only 18% of NGOs staff feels that NGOs performance is acceptable but no respondent believed that NGOs have serious contribution towards Palestinian statehood and independence. The results validate the research assumption that NGOs activities do not help advance national goals.

The dichotomy is more obvious in the domain of NGO contribution to the national goals. About 52% to 48% of both groups almost agree on the NGOs very weak performance in this regard but NGOs staffs disagree with the top management on characterizing that performance as acceptable or very good. 30% of managers and 45% of staff are more convinced of their contribution to national identity protection. The same is true with regards to NGOs contribution to the attainment of national goals as expressed by 7.5% of managers and 2% of staff. Both groups realize that the NGO sector is not doing that good towards statehood and independence. While 52% of managers are more satisfied of NGO promotion of democracy, about 59% of surveyed staff members are less satisfied by such performance. Managers are more satisfied than staff of NGOs contribution to combating corruption (69%), the promotion of human rights (78%), infrastructure building (80%) and enhancing the quality of public life (84%). According to staff, NGOs performance is least satisfactory in the areas of combating corruption and public infrastructure building.

Moreover, a deeper look into the findings of the organisational survey indicates that NGOs vary in their belief in national goals depending on the historical period each NGO was created. Table 3 below shows that more than half of sample believes that NGOs are not doing a good job on all of the eight accounts:

Statement	Before Madrid	Between Madrid - Intifada II	After Intifada II	Total NGOs
<i>NGOs efforts towards:</i>				
Preserving national identity	4	6	9	19
Achieving Palestinian national Goals	3	7	11	21
Enhancing quality of public life	3	6	10	19
Promoting human rights	5	7	6	18
Promoting democracy	4	8	9	21
Achieving statehood / independence	1	6	11	18
Combating corruption	4	4	6	14
Enhancing public infrastructure	2	3	5	10

Sample size of 40 NGOs, all of which responded to all question except for the last one. NGO sample included 9 NGOs created before Madrid (1990), 13 were formed after Madrid and before the second intifada (1991- 2000) and 18 NGOs established after the second *Intifada* (2000 -2010)

On the basis of NGOs generation (i.e. political era corresponding to their date of creation), the survey results show that:

- NGOs created between Madrid and Second *Intifada* distance themselves from national issues in preference for advocacy and contribution to PA policy making processes. The newer generation of NGOs created the Second *Intifada* think that the PA does address national issues and goals.
- By contrast, the older generation of NGOs ranked themselves the lowest with regards to NGOs contribution towards the attainment of statehood, independence; national goals and improvement of quality of public life. This is understandable given that this generation of NGOs is perceived as ‘national institutions’ born at the height of Palestinian struggle against occupation.

The above findings show that the NGOs in the study sample are not involved in national goals–related activities either because of their dependence on foreign funds or because their attention is directed to other areas such as human rights, democracy, conflict resolution, health, agriculture, women and youth empowerment, all under the umbrella of PA and donors’ policies.

Table 4 shows that urban-based NGOs are more likely than local ones to have programs and funds spending determined by their donors while some CBOs have more autonomy because of the diversity of activities including those seeking the preservation of national identity.

<b>Services/Programs</b>	<b>Less than 100,000 USD</b>	<b>100,000- .5 million USD</b>	<b>More than 0.5 million USD</b>	<b>Total</b>
Education	1	0	0	<b>1</b>
Health and social services	9	1	1	<b>11</b>
Democracy, human rights, public policy	8	6	4	<b>18</b>
Community development	0	2	1	<b>3</b>
Educational credit and loans	0	0	1	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>34</b>

34 NGOs out of 40 responded to the questions on their financial status. Six NGOs declined.

NGOs themselves believe that they should take a back-up role rather than be the leader of national struggle through involvement in protection of national, heritage and interests of future generations. The analysis of some NGO strategic plans shows that NGOs function within the framework of PA rather than to help obtain national goals. In addition, the organisational survey revealed that NGOs are admittedly negligent of their duties without indicating that these objectives would be picked up in the near future. NGOs seem to distance themselves from these political areas in order to ensure registration and safety in the face of PA aggressive policies and practices to NGOs which deepen the divide between NGOs and the public (SA., interview, 1 February).

This is also the case for politically affiliated NGOs which one hopes that they are more interested in pursuing national goals. In reality, political parties distract the NGOs affiliated to them from larger national issue and occupy them with narrow factional and political agendas. Neither they seem capable of incorporating into their agenda visions and strategies consistent with national goals (DW., interview, 22 April). Many factors played a role in NGO pacification including the fact that political parties’ structures after 1994 were forced to work openly rather than underground making it easier for the PA and Israel alike to target the factions’ political and military leadership. As it stands today, the discourse of non-violent resistance dominates the political arena so that very limited armed activities against the occupation are taking place under the PA in the West Bank prior to the rise of Mahmud Abbas to power. After his election to the presidential office, he managed to instate non-violence as a popular national strategy through the institutionalization of many ways to curb armed resistance including detention of members of political parties, factions, or movements advocating violent means of resistance.

However, when it serves PA interests NGOs and CBOs are allowed to adopt political agendas. For example, NGOs support PA plans for boycotting products of Israeli settlement (SA., interview, 1 February) and NGOs supported the PLO and PA president when Al-Jazeera satellite TV launched a campaign against the PA leadership for the way it tackled the final negotiations (BA., interview, 10 May). But the overall sentiment among NGOs is to stay clear from politics because it is a major threat to their existence.

**5. CBOs Perceptions of National Goals**

The following question was posed during the interviews and focus group discussions: How do the CBOs and grassroots perceive the national struggle against occupation? Groups answered the question by (a) reflecting on the possibility of continued armed resistance, and (b) by suggesting alternative methods to violence that they think may help in the attainment of national goals.

CBO leaders and activists sounded more pragmatic in advocating peaceful resistance as clearly expressed in the following quotes from the field:

- “Today we follow non-violent means. I don’t know what the future holds, but it is more of a ‘timeout’ or a break time for armed resistance”, (Kafreyat focus group, 19 March).
- “Before, I used to encourage participation in activists against the occupation, today I will not take a responsibility for anyone’s death and the suffering it brings to their families. No one would take care of our families if something happens to us now as it was 20 years ago” (Beita case study, 10 May).

Certainly, people do not value human life more now but there is a general feeling of tiredness of the long resistance struggle and tragedies brought about by the occupation. Two *Intifadas* and years of closures and curfews led people to lose hope and long for a normal life. Despite the Palestinian conviction in their national goals, they are discouraged to continue armed resistance because they do not want more victimization. Palestinians came up to a conclusion, or maybe directed to come up with such a conclusion, that using violent means in the current international political balance will cause for more suffering.<sup>1</sup>

But there are other facets to national struggle. In the opinion of a CBO women leader “national struggle is not limited to politics, stone-throwing and flaunting guns. It is also a struggle to remain in your homeland, resisting immigration and self-exile. Politicians should value this too” (Kh., interview, 10 May). Many leaders lend their support to this view and classify many acts under ‘resistance’ including ‘cultivating our land’ ‘consuming Palestinian products’ ‘boycotting Israeli product’, ‘educating children and women’ and even ‘rejecting USAID conditions and donors’ conditions because they all keep organisations and BoDs loyal to Palestinian national goals.’

By analogy, all of NGOs activities can be marketed as ‘resistance strategies’ even their focus on the promotion of dialogue and non-violence education all of which can be justified as seeking to find ‘peaceful alternatives to conflict’. Yet these activities conceal other political objectives, not necessarily pro-Palestinian ones, under the pretexts of promoting ‘co-existence’ and ‘normalization’ with Israeli occupation.

What the above has to do with NGOs and governance? The study findings already established that NGOs both urban and CBOs see their roles more in community work, preservation of cultural identity, and in meeting the public’s needs of services and better quality of life. All of this is done under the overarching objectives of ‘strengthening the self-reliance and steadfastness of Palestinian people in their lands’. Thus, the next section discusses how does this objective fit with the NGOs agenda(s) and their role in responding to public needs?

## 6. NGOs Agenda(s)

This research investigated the current agenda of NGOs against the assumption, supported by historical review, suggesting that NGOs agendas usually fluctuate depending on political situation, funding, and motivation of the NGO leaders. To probe into these areas, various questions were posed in all research instruments used.

First, respondents to the organisational survey were asked to respond to few questions:

- At present, what is the NGO’s major field of operation? What are the services provided?
- At present, what is the NGO’s overall objective or goal?
- Have the overall objective/goal changed over time? If yes, what are the reasons?
- How did the goal change? How was the decision taken?
- Specify three objectives that your NGO seeks to achieve in the next few years?

Furthermore, some sector-focused questions were asked:

- In your opinion, what are three main priorities of the public?
- Which of the above public priorities your NGO responds to?
- How do you see the goals of your NGO vis-à-vis the PA plans and the national goals?
- Do you think that the NGO sector should derive its goals from the national goals?

The findings show that most NGOs (24 out of 40 NGOs) deliver one type or more of public services while 8

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<sup>1</sup> I listened to a conversation between few men and an NGO leader who asked the men if they built their own houses. When the three replied negatively, the NGO leader said: “we [political leaders] used to tell who was more likely to continue being involved in resistance from those who wouldn’t simply by asking them if they care about building their own houses. If they do, it is more likely to choose peaceful means of resistance or not be involved at all because a house represents wealthy interests and objectives more beneficial than national resistance. I intercepted with two questions: do houses protect Palestinian land from settlements? And have you (the leader) built your own house yet? The leader replied that Palestinian homes curtail settlement expansion even though Israel demolishes and occupies Palestinian home to erect Jewish settlements even in the densely inhabited Palestinian areas like Hebron. The answer to the other question was a yes I have, said with a tense laugh! Have this NGO leader gone back to armed struggle!!!!!! Of course not.

NGOs are active in domains such as advocacy, training, documentation of violations, etc. Eight NGOs have a mixture of advocacy and service delivery programs. These results are presented in table 5 that shows a pronounced preference for targeting ‘traditionally vulnerable groups’ such as women, children, students, and poor households. Keeping in mind that 18 NGOs were created after 2000, the need for service delivery increased so does NGOs recourse to deliver such programs, even if they are originally non-service oriented. This point out that actual public needs made service delivery a necessity as a result of the deteriorating economic and security conditions after the second *Intifada*.

<b>NGOs Current Activities</b>	<b>No of NGO Respondents</b>
Women’s (economic) empowerment	9
Children education & rehabilitation	7
Education	7
Welfare, relief and assistance to families in hardship	7
Youth	6
Rehabilitation of the Disabled / victims of torture	3
Democracy Promotion	2
Rural and Community Development	2
Human Rights	1
Sample of 40 NGOs, some of which provide more than one service.	

Out of the 40 NGOs, only four respondents indicated that their organisations have in fact changed their original objectives. Two NGOs said they did so because they previously worked according to an ambiguous, very wide mandate. Another two organisations said they expanded their activities form or a very narrow domain limited to certain aspect of relief operation. Other respondent provided vague explanations, attributing the change to the “experience of BoD, staff or NGO itself (2, 1, and 1 organisation respectively).

However, the aforementioned traditional charitable-service delivery approach, despite its instantaneous impact, can hardly create long lasting effects. When the NGOs were asked about their priorities for the near future, the response openly indicated organisational survival as the main concern. Table 6 shows that, in terms of organisational priorities in the coming years, most NGOs apparently seek more funding through income generation projects or marketing of their products. A total of four NGOs desire to construct their own offices and service facilities to avoid rent and improve the physical conditions of their facilities.

<b>Table 6: NGOs Priorities for the Next Two Years</b>			
<b>NGOs Organisational Priorities</b>			
Income Generation for NGO		3	
Office and facility construction		2	
Improvement of services & quality		2	
Marketing of NGO products		1	
Regional and international exchange		1	
Kindergarten for staff		1	
Computer and other equipment		1	
Core funding		1	
Production unit		1	
Specialized staff (in conflict resolution)		1	
<b>NGOs Programmatic Priorities#</b>			
<b>Enhancing quality of life / economic status of beneficiaries (mixed groups)</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Other sectors:</b>	<b>#</b>
- Distribution of food/aid	1	- Land reclamation and legal assistance	2
- Employment generation /	3	- Media documentation/production	1
- Adult / continuing education	1	- Tourism development	1
- Continued service provision	2	- Human rights monitoring	1
- Distribution of food/aid	1	- Advocacy and lobbying	1
- Employment generation /	3	- Democracy promotion / civic peace	1
- Adult / continuing education	1	- Political participation/civic empowerment	1
- Continued service provision	2		
<b>Youth and children focused activities:</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>Women Focused activities:</b>	<b>#</b>
- Leadership courses	3	- Vocational training	2
- Scholarship & sponsorship	2	- Other training courses	2
- Supplementary courses	2	- Counselling / legal aid	1
- Economic production / entrepreneurship	2		
- Educational improvement	1		
- Sports	1		

In terms of NGOs programmatic goals, almost all respondents prioritized the need to improve the quality and scope of their public services or at least maintain such programs. When responses are broken down to the activity level, the results confirm NGOs preoccupation with the economic status of their beneficiaries, especially women and the unemployed. Upon closer examination, (women's) economic empowerment is the common goal for cross-sectoral or sector-specific activities including entrepreneurship promotion, vocational training, micro-credit, land reclamation, food for work/training, aid distribution, scholarships, and adult education. Tourism is not a short-term priority because this sector, despite its economic importance, is the hardest hit by the decade-long Israeli siege on the oPt.

Nevertheless, table 7 indicates that NGOs are not interested, or unable to work as they so desire, in democracy, human rights, political participation, civic empowerment, advocacy or lobbying. This seems the case despite donor funding and pressure to do so because the public and NGOs prioritize the daily issues and both are not that optimistic about the future. Participants in the survey and focus groups agreed that the top public priorities are:

- 1- Combating poverty and unemployment, and assistance to limited income families.
- 2- Improvement of the quality and quantity of education in at all levels (i.e. pre-school, after-school, university, higher education and adult education).
- 3- Improvement of health services in terms of better quality, reduced cost, and wider geographical coverage.



<b>Public Priority</b>	<b>No of NGOs</b>	<b>Public Priority</b>	<b>No of NGOs</b>
Jobs	20	Restrictions on movement	1
Poverty reduction	19	Youth identity crisis	1
(Higher) Education	14	Civic participation	1
Health	12	Civic Education	1
Rehabilitation	3	Income generation	1
Land Reclamation	3	Productive projects	1
Infrastructure	3	Farmer education	1
Recreational facilities / parks	3	Technology	1
Scientific research	2		

The sample size for the above table is 40 NGOs

It is noticeable from table 8 below that the NGOs perception of public priorities is different from those indicated by the focus groups. NGOs seem public priorities as largely the domain of states and public sector whose responsibility is service provision to their citizens. The findings point out repeatedly to the PA's failure in fulfilling both of its services and developmental duties<sup>2</sup>. If this is indeed the case, one would expect at least half the NGOs to contribute to responding to the top four public priorities: employment /job creation, poverty reduction, education and health.

<b>Public Priority</b>	<b>Priority</b>	<b>No of NGOs</b>
Priorities 1 -2: Job creation & poverty reduction	Vocational Training for women and youth	2
	Employment placement and internship	1
	Training of fresh graduates	1
	Productive projects /	2
	Micro-Credit	1
	Youth entrepreneurship	1
	Land reclamation	2
	Food aid distribution	2
	Child sponsorship	1
	Production equipment donation	1
Priority 3: Education (pre-school to higher education)	Day care centres / kindergartens	2
	Building a college	1
	Teacher training	1
	Computers and other equipment	1
	Education on tolerance, anti-violence, youth rights	2
	Students voluntarism	1
Priorities 4 -5: Health and rehabilitation	Psycho-social counselling	2
	Physical rehabilitation / treatment	2
Empowerment & Civic participation	Legal aid for women	1
	Awareness raising on women's rights	1
	Youth leadership and participation	3
	Promotion of democracy and civic peace	2

<sup>2</sup> On August 23, 2011, UNCTAD published a report on the economic growth in the oPt and the broad economic divergence between the Gaza Strip and West Bank. The economic improvement is described aid-driven, jobless economic growth since the economy has an eroded productive base and manufacturing capacity combined with persistently high levels of poverty, food insecurity and unemployment undermining the quality of human capital. The oPt economy is aggravated by the Israeli separation barrier which deepens its isolation from global markets and its heavy dependence on trade with Israel leading to a worsening trade deficit and a high fiscal vulnerability despite PA's austerity measures. Last accessed on 29 November 2011. Source: <http://www.unctad.org/templates/meeting.asp?intItemID=2068&lang=1&m=21649>.

A comparison between the tables 5.17 and 5.18 reveals that less than one third of the surveyed NGOs actually work on the top two priorities (poverty and job creation) identified by 50% of the NGO sample. In fact, the percentage is lower than 30% because individual NGOs usually provide more than one activity of the reported list. For the third priorities, less than 25% of NGOs work in all level of education, carrying out soft activities such as students' awareness raising, voluntarism and teacher training. As for the fourth priority, only four NGOs (10%) only work on health and rehabilitation compared to 7 organisations (17%) who conduct empowerment and civic participation activities for youth and women. The overwhelming majority of the surveyed NGOs seem to play a secondary or supportive role to the above sectors rather than being specialized institutions or service providers. It is also noticeable that none of the NGOs are active in many of the areas identified as less important public priorities including scientific research, technology and infrastructure in addition to the obviously political areas such as lobbying for abolition of movement restrictions.

It is worth noting in this regard, that many large international organisations<sup>3</sup> are directly engaged in major public services either as direct implementers or in partnership with line ministries, private sector, and/or civil society organisations. This explains why NGOs contribution is very limited in areas affecting the entire population. In addition, most Palestinian NGOs are relatively small in size and capacity to partner with INGOs in implementation or large-scale projects or capital-intensive interventions. This is the major reasons why major donors prefer to directly fund INGOs that later provide small grants to NGOs or outsource soft component of their projects to local implementers. Also, it is very important to keep in mind that involvement with the public sector facilities, such as schools, is both capital-intensive and fraught with bureaucratic constraints with the ministries that deter NGOs from investing in such sectors.

It seems from the above discussion that NGOs have opted or forced to steer their agendas to meeting or communicating these needs to donors rather than deriving their agendas from the national (political) goals that represent the interests of the entire Palestinian society. From another perspective, would it be feasible for NGOs to forgo basic needs and pursue national goals at a hostile time when few political parties think they are achievable given the current circumstances and power balance?

Finally, NGO respondents could not agree on a set of priorities for the entire NGOs sector. The results presented in Table 9 found no pattern to highlight, or maybe it is the lack of a tendency that is the real answer as it highlights the inability of individual NGOs to think collectively as a sector and the very push-pull factors taking the sector in many different directions all at once.

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<sup>3</sup> Examples include: Chemonics International which simultaneously implements 3 major USAID-funded programs in health (USD 80 million), PA capacity building (65 million) and justice (45 millions). UNRWA also has its own clinics, schools and training centres in refugee camps. In addition, Care, CHF, DAI, SCF, CRS, NORAD, ARD, etc. all carry out large projects involving public infrastructure, equipment procurement, capacity building and food donation and other relief services.

<b>Table 9: NGOs Perceptions of Priorities of the NGOs Sector</b>	
<b>Sector Priority</b>	<b>No of NGOs</b>
Relief /Service delivery (wider, improved, or specialized	4
Focus on development as an agenda for all NGOs	3
Job creation and poverty reduction	2
Partnership with / support to PA developmental plans	2
Preservation of national identity	1
Lobbying and democracy promotion	1
Partnership with the private sector	1
Increasing transparency in NGOs and PA	1
NGO participation in PA decision making	1
Raising public awareness of a variety of issues	1
Promotion of democracy	1
Financial support from the PA (to NGOs)	1
Financial support from local sources (to NGOs)	1
Modification of the NGO LAW	1
Skill training	1
Involvement in investment projects	1
Development of agricultural sector	1
NGO refrain from politics / adopt a political agenda	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>
Sample 40 NGOs of which only 25 responded to the question	

The above table clearly demonstrates the various voices within the sector calling for NGOs to develop a service delivery and developmental agenda (total of 7 NGOs) compared to those that see themselves as an auxiliary to PA as the main developmental actor. There are also hints here and there about NGOs role in civic engagement and policy dialogue. Others are however being self-centred and pre-occupied with the sector's own legal and financial needs to even think of identifying a role to play in society.

The organisational survey shows that NGOs efforts in enhancing Palestinian identity and realizing national goals are weak and less than satisfactory. The NGO generation, or date of establishment, seem to influence respondents' views. The pre-Oslo generation of NGOs evolved during the golden era of Palestinian nationalism and have a clearer notion of the national goals than the newer NGOs generations. NGOs created in the aftermath of Oslo Accords and most recently after the second *Intifada* were given higher scores mainly because of their developed institutionally, disconnected from public, and its leaders benefit personally from foreign funding (Samara, 2000; Jad, 2003). Some are even perceived as profiteering from people's misery and donor funding which earned them the label donor-driven' NGOs (HN., interview, 17 March). Managers and leaders try to link their NGOs' activities to the national goals through PA plans without engagement in politics and national struggle. It is interesting to note that of all NGO types<sup>4</sup>, men-only organisations rated as lowest NGOs performance in the areas of enhancing national goals and identity compared to women and mixed gender organisations.

## 7. People Express Their Own Needs

From the public's perspective, their needs revolve around poverty reduction, employment generation, and delivery of good quality, affordable health, education services and other social services. As expected, individual opinions vary depending on the respondent's current status, priorities, and whether s/he focus on getting by or hoping to afford university education for their children. Even today, universities increase tuition fees when faced with financial crisis resulting from reduced PA support and foreign aid. So if the families do not respond to fee inflation, there is always the threat of student dismissal. The ability of applicants to pay university tuitions is a major factor in admission decision<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> NGOs type refers to: men only, women only, and mixed organizations

<sup>5</sup> Admissions criteria in Palestinian universities include student's grades obtained in secondary school general examination, non-academic interests, talents, and financial capacity among other criteria. However, universities admit some students to certain faculties; even if their scores are below the minimum scores in return for payment of fees higher than the established rate. This scheme is known as "parallel education". Universities justify this strategy on the ground of generating more

So students and their families feel not entitled to education unless they can afford its cost given that 36.2 % of West Bank population is below the national poverty line estimated for 477 USD per month family of 6 persons. About 8.8% of the population live in extreme poverty on a monthly income of 385 USD for a family of the same size (PCBS, 2010). Families divided their disposable incomes between food, services, and other utilities.<sup>6</sup> Faced with poverty and inflation, people assume NGOs should help with such situation when there is no Palestinian state to assume responsibility towards its citizens and provide the services they need (male resident of Ebwain, interview, 3 April). Another resident<sup>7</sup>, an old farmer who inherited an agricultural land, said

“I try to protect the land by keeping it arable. I urge the children to do the same. Tomorrow I may not be alive to attend to the olive trees. The families cannot survive on olive oil and legumes alone so we need organisations to help us farmers with tractors and building of retaining walls. We farmers do not have the cash to buy a tractor ourselves or pay its daily cost for fuel, insurance, maintenance, and driver fees” (HE, interview, 3 April).

Another farmer suggested that the PA should help in facilitating production and marketing of local agricultural products, through measures for protection from Israeli and foreign imports. “We cannot compete with their lower prices and people cannot afford our prices even when they want to buy Palestinian products. So we sell for prices that hardly cover the expenses we incurred. We need NGOs to help with water wells, irrigation pumps and systems, fertilizers, and pesticides. The PA needs to stop Israel products flooding our markets” (a resident of Dora, interview, 2 April).

A Palestinian journalist believes it is the time for NGOs to “start thinking of spending foreign aid effectively on real projects that minimize poverty and generate income. This is doable if the PA and NGOs use foreign funds wisely to open new factories and development of Palestinian agricultural sector that increase their workforce” (H.E., interview, 2 April). In other words, NGOs and the PA should stop the ad hoc spending and adopt a unified vision for development and community action.

The young generation also concurs with this viewpoint. A fresh graduate with a degree in marketing is jobless despite the many job applications he submitted. Oddly enough, he was attending marketing courses an NGO organized for enhancing graduates’ employability (a residence of Ebwain, interview, 3 April). It sounds unreasonable to train someone who already received four years of university education on the same topics. This resonates with comments made by Ministry of Social Affairs Director General on the uselessness of project-based training without a careful study of their possible impact on trainees (A.H., interview, 15 Feb). Moreover, some NGOs offer small loans for starting micro projects by individuals and certain groups including farmers, women, and youth. These loans are not interest-free; in fact the NGO interest rate is higher than bank rates and requires almost the same procedures and guarantees<sup>8</sup>.

The expansion of Israeli settlements threatens the West Bank by the confiscation and halt of Palestinian expansion and urban development. To the inhabitants, people needs revolve around (a) rehabilitation of roads, sewerage and other infrastructure, (b) land reclamation, and (c) construction of agricultural roads, water wells and retaining walls.

Water-related needs seem to be the first priority in all villages including Dora which survives without water supply for months from governmental sources. Village council attempts to find a solution remained went unanswered by the PA, the Water Authority and *Al-Quds* District Water Undertaking. Finally, one specialized NGO built about 44 wells for roof-top rainwater harvesting in private homes that provide families with water supply throughout the year. This is an example where NGOs activities help meeting people needs. These efforts do not go unnoticed by the villagers. The NGO intervention in this case was favourably acknowledged by the residents because not only it supplied water but helped construct wells that the farmers could afford on their own (Dora interviews, 2 April).

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revenue for the universities while being affordable to Palestinian families than sending their children to private Arab and Western universities.

<sup>6</sup> Palestinian central Bureau of Statistics. (2011). Family Expenditure and Consumption Survey in 2010, reviewed from <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/PCBS/Downloads/book1785.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ebwain is an agricultural village of 6000 inhabitants located in the Western parts of Ramallah District.

<sup>8</sup> Yearly interest rate in the oPt banks ranges between 7% - 10% depending on the total amount and the duration of the loan. However, in an NGO it ranges between 13-24%. That is 240 of interests on a USD 1000 loan.

NGOs simply cannot meet public priorities without the public's participation in their services and projects. When they neglect the public, NGO activities fail to reflect the real demand. Of the notorious examples of dysfunctional projects are those promoting Israeli-Palestinian dialogue and conflict mitigation projects. Encouraged by donors, dialogue projects presuppose that when the people of the opposite sides interact, gradually they would come to understand each other and ultimately resolve the conflict. In mid 1990s, dialogue projects were in vogue during the Oslo years and took various forms ranging between dialogue groups to joint economic ventures. It is estimated that in the seven years' period following Oslo, 1993-2000, Western government and organisations spent around USD 20-25 million on dialogue projects (San Francisco Chronicle cited in Hamdan, 2010).

Dialogue works when both parties to the conflict need to clarify their positions. The Palestinian question, however, requires an international solution and an international will to implement it. The Palestinians have to mobilize the international community in support of their national rights and ending the Israeli occupation not to convince Israel of them. To some it is precisely the failure of the international community to promote a just solution that made them turn to supporting dialogue programs in order to conceal the unresolved conflict even though these programs failed to produce any tangible influence on the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. One NGO activist comments:

In theory, breaking down the wall between oneself and the "Other" should be seen as a positive step toward reconciliation, along with putting aside the harsh realities of daily life under occupation, to open the mind and heart to "objective" dialogue with the occupier. But can this actually happen? Can it be fair and rewarding? In most of human history, attempts for understanding and reconciliation between the occupier and the occupied have taken place only after the end of occupation or colonization, when the parties stood on equal or near-equal ground<sup>9</sup> (Hamdan, 2010, p. 3).

The answer to the good questions above came from a study conducted by Bashir Bargouthi on the impact of dialogue projects on 290 Palestinian youths. The study concluded that the most obvious impact was giving the youth a chance to travel abroad (Hamdan, 2010). The findings show that

- Only 16 participants (5.5%) said that these programs "might enhance peace culture and good dialogue amongst the participants". 41% of youth saw that "only the other party benefited by appearing as peace lovers."
- 220 participants (76%) felt that "it was a good chance to travel and enjoy a new place", while only 33 (11%) answered with "I now have new human perspective and maybe something mutual with the other party."
- Most significantly, 119 participants (41%) affirmed that they have not changed their opinions of the other party but were "more convinced now that they are only enemies." About 40 (14%) responded that they "realized that they have people that like peace. But 26 said that they hated "them now more than ever before" and 64 were "more convinced that peace is difficult and almost impossible" (Hamdan, 2010, p. 3).

The same study reported that 32 Palestinian NGOs have been involved in Israeli -Palestinian dialogue projects but without expressing it as a public priority. In my field research, not once the need for dialogue was mentioned by interviewees or participants in focus group, NGOs or in any formal or informal communication with the survey respondents. On the contrary, some participants stressed that dialogue projects have not produced any worthwhile or positive outcomes. The public, NGOs, PA and political parties saw them as forced normalization (RN., interview, 25 April). Despite this consensus, NGO leaders continue to engage in such projects to benefit from donor funding to joint Israeli-Palestinian ventures. Hamdan explains this by saying:

The donor community, comprised principally of the US and the EU, proposed to donate money after Oslo was signed to work for lasting peace and the creation of an independent Palestinian state. A fever of joint Palestinian-Israeli projects took over and an obsession of dialogue and reconciliation programs took hold. Local organisations that carried out relevant projects received more money; those that did not, not only experienced a drop in funding, but were threatened with being labelled anti-peace or even terrorists (Hamdan, 2010, p. 4)

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<sup>9</sup> Hamdan, S., 2010. Talk is Silver. Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Palestine, reviewed from [http://www.palestine.rosalux.org/fileadmin/ab\\_palestine/pdf/RLF\\_newsletters\\_EN/RLF\\_PAL\\_Hamdan\\_Talk-is-silver.pdf](http://www.palestine.rosalux.org/fileadmin/ab_palestine/pdf/RLF_newsletters_EN/RLF_PAL_Hamdan_Talk-is-silver.pdf)

Based on all of the above, it is clear that NGOs activities do not take public needs into consideration or consult with the local community. The findings also affirm the research assumptions that NGOs, run by self-serving leaders, are disconnected from the public and engaged in projects the public do not need because donors' use their funding to impose their agendas on the NGO sector.

## 9. Conclusion

While most Palestinian NGOs believe in the Palestinian national goals, the findings point out that NGOs sector believes that the PLO, PA and political parties, not NGOs, are responsible for their attainment. When NGOs are involved in advocating Palestinian national goals, they do so within the framework of PA's agendas and institutions, whether perceived as transitional or permanent self-rule structure. The dynamics of politics and foreign aid played a significant role in weakening NGOs adherence to national goals and public priorities. This is also true for politically-affiliated NGOs that take advantage of civil society arena as a substitute for direct and open engagement in politics and national struggle.

The findings show that less than one third of the surveyed NGOs actually work on top two priorities (poverty reduction and job creation) compared to less than 25% of NGOs responding to the third priority (education), and 10% focus on the fourth priority (health). Even when NGOs acknowledge the aforementioned public priorities, the surveyed NGOs could not agree on a set of priorities for the NGO sector because of their pre-occupation with short-term material needs. NGOs fragmentation is not a sign of vibrant civil society but rather a sign of the sector's lack of a unified vision and real autonomy from foreign donors.

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**Personal Interview**

JA, 31 March

HA, 10 February

SA, 1 February

ET, 15 March

ER 15 December

HE, 3 April

DW, 22 April

BA, 10 May

KH, 10 may

RN, 25 April

HN, 17 March

AH, 15 February

Ebwain, 3 April

Dora, 2 April

**Focus group**

El-Amari focus group, 31 May.

Hafreyat focus group, 19 March.