

# GOAL Research Brief

## Power dynamics and participation within humanitarian coordination groups: A case study of the MHPSS Taskforce in Lebanon

Lokot, M., Zreik, T., El Masri, R., Char, S., Ali, R., Meksassi, B., Asmar, M., McKee, M., Roberts, B., & El Chammay, R. (War Child Holland, Lebanon, University of St. Joseph, National Mental Health Programme, Ministry of Public Health, Lebanon, and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine)

JUNE 2024

LONDON  
SCHOOL of  
HYGIENE  
& TROPICAL  
MEDICINE



---

# Summary

This research brief summarises the research paper: ['Power dynamics and participation within humanitarian coordination groups: A case study of the MHPSS Taskforce in Lebanon'](#).

The humanitarian sector faces ongoing criticism for its hierarchical power dynamics, which often result in a focus on the agendas of international actors while local expertise is sidelined. In this research brief, we examine the impact of power relations on the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Taskforce in Lebanon, a nationally-led coordination mechanism chaired by the Ministry of Public Health with UN agencies as co-chairs. We found that UN agencies and international NGOs are perceived as holding more decision-making power due to their access to funding and credibility—both shaped by the humanitarian system. Our findings also suggest that power dynamics arising mainly from differences in seniority, relations between 'local' and 'expat' staff, and language used in meetings may affect decision-making power and members' voices to varying degrees. We also show how the meeting agenda, meeting format, language, and existing relationships with Taskforce leaders can influence levels of participation and decision-making in Taskforce meetings, ranging from lack of participation through being informed or consulted about decisions to decisions made in partnership. Our findings have broader implications for coordinating service delivery within the humanitarian sector, emphasising the need to reflect upon power imbalances critically and continually and to ensure a shared understanding of decision-making processes.

# Introduction

---

The humanitarian sector, comprised of international and local NGOs, UN agencies, and civil society actors, has often faced criticism for its bureaucratic processes, hierarchical structure, and lack of accountability to populations affected by crises. In recent years, discussions about power dynamics in the humanitarian sector have become more common as part of the push to localise and decolonise humanitarian aid.

This research brief examines how power dynamics influence decision-making within the MHPSS Taskforce in Lebanon. The Taskforce is a humanitarian coordination mechanism focused on coordinating the MHPSS response to the needs of Syrian refugees, the Lebanese host community, Palestinian refugees and other vulnerable groups in Lebanon. It consists of around 60 member organisations including local and international NGOs, UN agencies, and relevant ministries, and is chaired by the National Mental Health Program at the Ministry of Public

Health in Lebanon and co-chaired by WHO and UNICEF. The MHPSS Taskforce in Lebanon serves as a unique example of a nationally-led coordination mechanism, reflecting broader trends toward localisation in humanitarian aid.

This study is part of the '[GOAL](#)' project, a three-year research project funded by UK Research and Innovation, which aimed at strengthening mental health systems for Syrian refugees and host communities in Lebanon.

# Methodology

---

We conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with members of the MHPSS Taskforce and a range of actors working on MHPSS in Lebanon. We also collected background information from Taskforce documents, including meeting minutes and a 2016 evaluation report. Transcripts were coded collaboratively by the research team using Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software application. Seven feedback sessions were conducted with participants, including the Taskforce leadership team to ensure their involvement in the analysis of the findings. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutions, and participants provided informed consent.

Throughout the research process, we remained mindful of our positionality and power dynamics, reflecting on how these factors influenced our engagement with the data and participant perspectives. We also reflected on the positionality of the Taskforce leadership, some of whom were involved in framing the study, as well as other participants, whose views about power may be based on their own positioning in the humanitarian system.

# Findings

---

Three key findings were identified and these are addressed below.

1

---

## UN agencies and international NGOs are perceived to have more influence in the Taskforce, reflecting their power within the humanitarian sector

---

Although the Taskforce is chaired by a local government body, participants highlighted the perceived influence of UN agencies, which according to one participant “kind of have a bit of weight (...) in the Taskforce,” as well as the perceived influence of international NGOs within the MHPSS Taskforce on decision-making processes. Participants linked this power to the organisations’ access to funding (“financial power”) and credibility within the broader humanitarian sector: “the bigger power dynamic goes to international NGOs, [and] especially UN agencies, and WHO. They are regarded always as the, the more credible.” Participants discussed how UN agencies and international NGOs often convene smaller meetings, excluding other stakeholders such as local NGOs, which some perceived as contributing to their influence within the Taskforce, although Taskforce leadership clarified that both local and international actors are involved in these meetings. Participants also shared the perception that a “core group” within the Taskforce is responsible for decision-making. Although the Taskforce leadership clarified there is no formal core group, participants suggested the need to diversify representation in the Taskforce to ensure greater inclusivity.

Participants situated the findings within broader dynamics within the humanitarian sector, highlighting

hierarchical structures within international agencies and the need to increase collaboration between local and international actors. Recommendations included increasing transparency in decision-making processes and increasing delegation to frontline workers who have more firsthand knowledge of the issues. Overall, participants emphasised the importance of locally-led coordination mechanisms such as the MHPSS Taskforce.

2

---

## *Power dynamics and other factors that influence decision-making and voice in the Taskforce meetings*

---

Despite feeling comfortable participating in Taskforce meetings, Taskforce members identified factors influencing participation in decision-making. Seniority was perceived to influence participation, with senior members often taking up more “space” in discussions due to holding “more experience” and knowledge, while a few participants referred to junior actors as “shy” and tending to share experiences from the field.

Participants had mixed perceptions regarding local-expatriate dynamics. Some felt that locals and expatriates occupied different positions in the power hierarchy, impacting decision-making and comfort levels in meetings. However, others felt that the Taskforce leadership gives equal attention and recognition to everyone. Participants emphasised the importance of understanding the Lebanese context irrespective of nationality.

Gender dynamics were generally perceived positively, and the large number of women in the Taskforce was perceived to promote participation. Meetings were described as “inclusive”, which also allowed space for

discussions on LGBTQ issues.

Participants noted challenges with meeting formats, particularly the change to larger, virtual meetings after COVID-19 which was seen to reduce active participation. Language barriers were linked to power hierarchies between locals and expatriates. The use of English during meetings was seen to also affect engagement, with suggestions for more Arabic-centred meetings with translation, “because not all the people that are in the field know English”.

Some participants felt meetings focused disproportionately on more clinical than psychosocial aspects of MHPSS. Established relationships with Taskforce leaders were seen to impact participation, with those having stronger ties to leaders feeling more confident to speak up.

Taskforce leadership as receptive to feedback, some felt excluded from decision-making despite being consulted. Although only a few examples were given of decisions made in partnership, Taskforce leadership described instances of joint document production and the creation of technical committees, indicating a move towards more intentional collaboration.

## 3

### **Varied forms of participation and decision-making power are evident within the Taskforce**

Participants discussed different levels of participation in the Taskforce. This included examples of no participation, related to groups who are not members of the Taskforce, including Syrian organisations and MHPSS service users. Participants shared examples of being informed, specifically receiving updates on decisions made by Taskforce leadership and receiving meeting minutes, and discussed how decisions might be made by Taskforce leadership and communicated back to Taskforce members for “validation”. Most examples of participation took the form of consultation, including being asked to provide feedback on documents produced by Taskforce leadership as well as input on drafts and action plans. While many perceived

# Conclusion

---

This research brief contributes to a deeper understanding of power dynamics within humanitarian coordination bodies and seeks to inform efforts to improve coordination and ensure a more inclusive and effective humanitarian response. Our findings highlight the strong influence of financial resources on power dynamics within a coordinating mechanism. Despite efforts to localise humanitarian responses, funding remains disproportionately directed through international actors, reflecting global power structures and causing localised effects on power dynamics within the MHPSS sector. Our study also suggests a need to define how decision-making occurs within the Taskforce more clearly, as well as a need for the Taskforce to continue to be aware of power dynamics and intentionally seek to centre the perspectives of junior and local actors who are often closest to field implementation. Language barriers, primarily English dominance, impact participation, with implications for inclusivity. Engaging persons with lived experience in the Taskforce through the newly established Service User Association may help ensure service users are consistently included. Clarifying decision-making processes and strengthening relationships can enhance Taskforce engagement and mitigate power imbalances. Further research on power dynamics within coordination groups may help with setting benchmarks for strengthening participation in decision-making and improving the effectiveness of MHPSS responses, as well as to contribute to ongoing momentum on the need to localise and decolonise humanitarian aid.

---

## Full paper available at:

Lokot M, Zreik T, El Masri R, Chaar S, Ali R, Meksassi B, et al. (2024) Power dynamics and participation within humanitarian coordination groups: A case study of the MHPSS Taskforce in Lebanon. PLOS Global Public Health 4(3): <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0003041>

This research was conducted as part of the [GOAL](#) project supported by UK Research and Innovation as part of UKRI Collective Fund Award UKRI GCRF Development-based approaches to protracted displacement, grant number ES/T00424X/1.

For any queries about this paper and research brief, please contact: Michelle Lokot ([michelle.lokot@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:michelle.lokot@lshtm.ac.uk))

London School of Hygiene &  
Tropical Medicine Keppel  
Street  
London WC1E 7HT



[lshtm.ac.uk/GOAL](https://lshtm.ac.uk/GOAL)

@GcrfGoal