REINFORCING CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES? CASE STUDIES OXFAM SOLIDARITY AND MEDICINE FOR THE THIRD WORLD.

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ELS DE SCHRYVER

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PROMOTOR: (PROF.) DR. C. PARKER

COMMISSARIS: S. VERTOMMEN

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Abstract

The concept of civil society has provided the neo-liberal development discourse with new entry points, focusing on the question of democratisation. Non-governmental organisations, as part of third sector aid, operate in this framework, whereby they are both accountable towards third donors and the political context in which they can move. However, NGOs are conceived as an alternative for development aid, focusing on small-scale projects and programs, concentrating on the local population. This research focuses on two Belgian NGOs and their partners in the occupied Palestinian territories. Whether or not Belgian NGOs take the local population and their needs in consideration when drafting programs was touched upon via semi-structured interviews with all the different parties. Their understanding and usage of the concept of civil society was questioned. It appears that Oxfam Solidarity and Medicine for the Third World can be placed in the category of small-scaled NGOs on the global level, whereby they are characterised with sustainability in approach, trust in their partners and with a focus on local civil society.

Belgian non-governmental organisations – the occupied Palestinian territories – civil society – qualitative research

Abstract (NL)


Belgische niet-gouvernementele organisaties – de bezette Palestijnse gebieden – maatschappelijk middenveld – kwalitatief onderzoek
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Acknowledgments
# Content

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................... 2  
Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................................. 3  
Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 5  
Civil society: historical origins and its usage in the neo-liberal development discourses .................. 5  
NGOs as actors in civil society .................................................................................................................. 7  
A new definition of civil society ............................................................................................................. 8  
The question of Arab civil societies ........................................................................................................ 8  
Civil society in the occupied Palestinian territories ............................................................................... 9  
Case studies: Medicine for the Third World (Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld) and Oxfam Solidarity (Oxfam Solidariteit) ........................................................................................................... 12  
Discussion of key findings ..................................................................................................................... 14  
  
  History of the Palestinian NGOs and their partnerships .................................................................. 14  
  Interpretations of civil society .............................................................................................................. 15  
  Funding mechanisms and the space of autonomous decisions .......................................................... 17  
  The relationship between civil society and politics .......................................................................... 18  
  Points of critique .................................................................................................................................. 19  
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 20  
Bibliography .......................................................................................................................................... 22
Introduction

Aid is ‘big business’ in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), visible in every aspect of Palestinian society. Since the Oslo Accords in 1993, the focus of bilateral aid shifted from a sustainable and development orientation towards emergency assistance ‘to alleviate the social impact of the severe economic and budgetary crises’. The international community is trying to avoid a total collapse of the economy and sustaining the development of the Palestinian Authority (Le More, 2005). In this regard, aid is used as a band aid for the failing political and diplomatic progress, but made the Territories more dependent and less viable (Sayigh, 2004). Central to this donor thinking has been the aspiration to improve the living standards of the 3.6 million Palestinians living in the oPt, focusing on upgrading the infrastructure and increasing the incomes (Le More, 2005). As a result, Palestinians are among the world’s largest aid recipients, receiving 2.5 billion dollars in 2010 (4th High Level on Aid Effectiveness, 2012; The Portland Trust, 2011). This research will focus on third sector aid, moreover non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with special attention to small-scale projects and programs, directly concentrating on the local population. NGOs are an alternative for governments to support development. They have their own original approach to development, away from emergency projects (Falcitelli & Montanarini, 1999). The theoretical framework of this study is built on the concept of ‘civil society’, its implications for the development discourse and the question of Arab civil societies.

The research question is: How is the concept of civil society used by Belgian NGOs to legitimise their presence and projects/programs in the West Bank? By using two case studies, some trends in the Belgian NGO-sector will be made visible.

Civil society: historical origins and its usage in the neo-liberal development discourses

The concept of civil society is characterised by the absence of a coherent, all-covering definition. It is broadly interpreted as a social phenomenon, socio-politically constructed by certain actors (Norton, 2001; Beauclerck, 2011). The concept was developed and adapted during the sixteenth and seventeenth century ‘to explore the possibility and limits of collective self-determination on the eve of the “democratic revolutions”’ (Challand, 2008, p. 398). It was redeveloped in the nineteenth and early twentieth century by authors as Hegel, Marx and Gramsci, inserting the distinction between civil society and the state. After the 1960s, the concept was used to justify the upcoming social movements in the Eastern European context (Challand, 2009, pp. 26 - 27). Throughout the twentieth century, opinions about this concept will vary from the inability to grasp it (Bilic, 2011), to civil society as a ‘hurrah word’ (Chandhoke, 2007). As mentioned, civil society is often comprehended from a classical state versus society perspective (Challand, 2008). Civil society becomes a sphere within society, distinct from the state and the market, ‘and superior in its commitment to civic virtues’ (Payes, 2005). It can be regarded either as an actor or as a certain sphere (Keck & Von Bülow, 2011), whereby
attention is drawn to the local level and citizen input. Civil society is important for sustainable human development by a diversity in actors, roles and functions (Beauclerck, 2011). Even though we discussed that independence of the state is one of its main characteristics, this does not mean that civil society develops in a vacuum. It responds to and interacts with developments in the state, which on its own reacts to developments in civil society (Sassoon, 2000; Mikheilidze & Pirozzi, 2008). Civil society therefore can only exist because the government allows it to (Challand, 2009, p. 27).

The concept of civil society is introduced in the development discourse due to the neo-liberal paradigm in the 1980s and 1990s, dealing with the question of democratization. ‘Civil society is an important entry point for the ‘promotion of accountability, legitimacy, transparency and participation as it is these factors which empower civil society and reduce the power of the state’ (Challand, 2009, p. 29). In this discourse, civil society becomes an important agent of change, counterbalancing the power of the state. A powerful role is given to NGOs, who are part of the ‘aided, globalised and tamed’ sphere in society (Beauclerck, 2001, p. 871). Its actors are considered to be part of the aid chain instead of executing important functions in the social and political order itself. Civil society becomes therefore analytically divided into two main categories: non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social movements (Payes, 2005), characterised as non-compulsive institutions (Katz, 2006). In reality, civil society consists of many more organisations; incorporating community-based organisations, trade unions, faith organisations and issue-based social movements (Beauclerck, 2011). However, Challand (2009, p. 29) points to the NGOs’ questionable democratic, representative and accountable character. NGOs can be business- or government influenced, royal or tribal of origin or even male-controlled. He therefore urges to not mix civil society and NGOs under the same label.

As indicated, the neo-liberal development discourse is closely linked to the agenda of an institution such as the World Bank, related to the leitmotiv of ‘good governance’. Good governance intrinsically refers to the effort of creating development and progress, combined with strengthening of the civil sphere. Moreover, good governance is the process of decision making, which needs to be ‘participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law’ (UN ESCAP, 2011). The impact of a neo-liberal agenda, which ‘makes possible or should make possible the economic and social development of societies through a partnership of government, private enterprise and the non-profit sector’ (Ben Nefissa, 2001) should not be underestimated. The World Bank believes ‘social capital and civil society can promote welfare and economic development’, especially when the state is weak or not interested. Civil society becomes the dogma of the World Bank in terms of agents of change, incorporating elements of the Post-Washington consensus in civil society (Challand, 2009, p. 31).
NGOs as actors in civil society

The growth of NGOs is seen as proof for the weakening of traditional ideological parties and the end of states providing basic social services. NGOs arise as a result of and act in response to the imposed neo-liberal structural adjustment policies (Jad, 2007), whereby they provide ‘services to the poor cheaply, equitably and efficiently’ (Payes, 2005, p. 19). In a way, they are expected to counterpart the state as a component of the (funded) aid sector, but on the other hand they cannot exist without neo-liberal funding (programmes) and act in direct competition with other movements for the grant of local governments and activist communities to be able to operate (Jad, 2007). From a leftist point of view, civil society and its NGOs are ‘part of the neo-liberal ideology of weakening the state politically, promoting self-help and choice in society and cheapening the cost of aid’ (Allen, 1997, p. 335). A commonly heard critique is that aid in this regard is undermining local capacity building rather than constructing it. As mentioned before, civil society is not a synonym of NGOs, because ‘it must go beyond’. But in reality, NGOs dominate the aid-funded part of this realm of life (Beauclercck, 2011).

An NGO is a ‘voluntary non-state, non-profit, nonreligious and non-military association’ (Iriye, 2002). However, this definition cannot be seen as absolute. NGOs are commonly envisioned as means for the empowerment of minority groups and of the political system itself. Likewise, NGOs are a Western synonym for ‘carriers of democratisation and economic reform’ (Payes, 2005), whereby the South is underdeveloped, and the North is set as the example. During the last decades, bilateral aid of governments was under question. Therefore, the allocation of multilateral NGO aid is alleged to be less biased by commercial and political mandates of official development aid (ODA), but this is also debatable when looking at the source of funding (Nunnenkamp, Weingarth & Weisser, 2009).

The neo-liberal framework in which NGOs operate, poses some difficulties and consequences for their functioning and image. It is therefore necessary to observe these actors in a process dependent on the political context (not only related to the state, but also to foreign governments and their funds) in which they operate, and to show the boundaries of the space in which NGOs can manoeuvre. A second problem relates to the nature of NGOs, who regard themselves as non-political actors, and therefore provide mostly technical solutions for problems with a political root. Hence, they do not challenge the (political) framework, and as such do not affect the need for new institutions in which the marginalised actors they try to ‘empower’ can fully act. ‘The issue, in other words, is not only how NGOs facilitate the political participation of previously excluded groups, but also what are the implications of this participation for existing power dynamics’ (Payes, 2005, p. 26). Beauclercck (2011, p. 873) points to the importance of esteeming NGOs as a means for a stronger civil society, instead of seeing them as an end.
A new definition of civil society

The underlying assumption of civil society departs from a western point of view. This means civil society becomes a concept which can be transported to other regions, in this case the occupied Palestinian territories, whereby the western road to democratisation is often the ultimate goal. It is therefore more useful to look at civil society promotion through the lens of different cultures, ‘since donors expect to promote a different content to civil society because of the perceived cultural differences, while local recipients tend to formulate the message of civil society through different cultural expedients’ (Challand, 2009, p. 8). Civil society in this regard will become autonomous and becomes defined as a space ‘for voluntary collective deliberations and actions that function as a source of autonomy’ (Challand, 2008, pp. 398 – 399). By doing this, the underlying dynamics of an internal construction (by society itself) and the external push for civil society (via foreign donors) can become visible. But civil society cannot be autonomous when it is imposed with norms, values and institutions that do not reflect the images of that society (Challand, 2009). It therefore means that NGOs and external actors need to pay attention to the wishes of the society wherein they operate. The local civil society needs to have autonomy from these actors in order to have the autonomy to decide.

The question of Arab civil societies

A lot has been written on the democratic deficit and the so-called ‘backwardness’ of Arab societies. It is mostly related to the Orientalist tradition whereby the Orient is constructed as everything the Occident is not, and vice versa (Challand, 2009). According to this paradigm, the problem in the Arab world is inspired by cultural motives, especially the Islam as main cause for the democratic deficit. This (neo-)Orientalist discourse underscores Islam as the origin of formal causation and regard the historical conditions of the Orient as unchangeable. It is therefore often regarded as a discourse of domination, using generalisations and simplifications (Halliday, 2003). It is needless to say that the usage of this discourse has far reaching implications for perceptions of the Orient, in general by the West. A second explanation for the lack of democratisation and democratisation efforts by civil society actors in the Arab world is linked to authoritarian rule (Yom, 2005; Berman, 2003; Wiktorowicz, 2000). However, this idea is still inspired by the role Islam provides in the construction of an Arab (political) society (Challand, 2009, p. 43). Others, like Valadbigi & Ghobadi (2011), characterise Middle Eastern civil societies and its actors by an independence from and opposition to the regimes who are limiting the liberties of their citizen. Ben Nefissa (2001) on the other hand explores civil society’s fragile character, mostly dominated by a political elite and acting under strict surveillance of the state. This has implications for the view of the West, who strongly believes that financing civil society will be a necessary form of panacea for bringing their concept of ‘democracy’ to the region (Challand, 2008).
In defining Arab civil society actors, there are three different points of view. These vary, whereby the most pessimistic one is that of the nonexistence of civil society, due to a lack of freedom and autonomy of the individuals in society. The importance of civil society organisations is acknowledged, but due to the lack of civil rights, civil society organisations cannot be said to be existing. A less pessimistic view can be found in Ibrahim’s contention of an Arab civil society, which he limits in form. He rejects Islamist groups from being part of civil society (because of their use of violent actions) but he also discards traditional and inherited associations (such as tribes, clans, families, or organisations that depend on religion, sectarianism or blood descent). Ibrahim’s ideas are impelled by a simplistic view whereby all Islamist groups are considered violent, and whereby traditional is the opposite of modern, and hence democracy (as cited in Challand, 2009; Shawa, 2001). Lastly, Burhan Ghalioun has the most positive outlook whereby every organization, never mind their nature, is considered as part of civil society because of the ‘potential impact towards transforming society’. ‘His claim is that the criterion of inclusion into the category of ‘civil society’ is the mere social action for a positive common good’ (as cited in Challand, 2009, pp. 54 – 55). We can therefore conclude that there is no all covering view of Arab civil society; it greatly depends on the author and his framework of writing. In this research, the discourse of the existence of a diverse Arab civil society will be used, because of its all-encompassing view of civil society by not excluding any organisation working on the needs of the people. This view will be combined with five criteria for a theoretical model of civil society. Kamali prescribes these as: relative autonomy of a societal sphere from the state; relative autonomous access of some societal actors to the state or its elite; existence of a relatively independent public sphere; legal and/or normative protection of societal agents and institutions; and existence of a ‘solidarity sphere’ based on redistribution of resources (as cited in Challand, 2009, p. 57). This in stark contrast to certain organisations who receive recognition by the (donors of the) West only because they are connected to notions as pluralism, democracy and the rule of law (Challand, 2009, p. 55). Now, the specificities of a Palestinian civil society will be looked upon in detail, which proves to be an exceptional case in the Middle East. The focus is put on how this civil society looks like and is shaped by its history.

Civil society in the occupied Palestinian territories

Civil society in the occupied Palestinian territories (this article focuses only on the West Bank) operates under special circumstances for three reasons. First, the territories are fragmented under Israeli military and/or administrative occupation, divided in Area A, B and C. Secondly, the oPt are characterised with the absence of a sovereign and democratic state; and lastly, there is a great dependence of civil society organisations on foreign funding (Mikhelidze & Pirozzi, 2008; Le More, 2005; Giacaman, 2000). Palestinian society in general has been influenced by its history of occupation, starting with the Ottoman rule (until 1918), the British (until 1948), followed by the
Jordanian for the West Bank (Egyptian for the Gaza Strip), and since 1967 the Israeli rule (Challand, 2009). All these authorities limited the space of movement for civil society organisations by using different policies (Brouwer, 2000). However, despite these restrictions, civil society organisations were capable of providing important social services in the oPt.

The Ottoman Law, which continued to apply in a more strict manner during the British Mandate, compelled new associations to notify the government of their establishment. From the 1920s on, most associations were formed around traditional religious charity or on an apolitical basis (Payes, 2005; Palestinian Centre For Human Rights, 1995; DeVoir & Tartir, 2009). The Balfour Declaration of 1917 - in which the Brits commit themselves to establishing a Jewish home in Palestine, even though they would ‘not prejudice the rights of non-Jewish communities’ – gave rise to Jewish organisations dedicated to Zionist objectives and proceeded to diminish the rights of Palestinians (International Centre for Not-For-Profit Law, 2011; Palestinian Centre For Human Rights, 1995, p. 10). Under Jordanian rule over the West Bank, the Joint Palestinian-Jordanian Committee (between 1979 and 1986 annually worth between 420 and 463 million dollars) influenced the rules and policies for NGOs, whereby a powerful network of NGOs was built around notable families and relied on a system of patronage. Even though the role of these families as patrons gradually diminished from the 1970s to the prejudice of a new urban nationalist (pro-PLO) elite, this network kept being active and influential until 1988, 20 years after the Jordanians lost official control over the West Bank (Challand, 2009). The Israeli occupation, starting after the ’67 War, is the strictest regulated period of all. Civil society development from that period on is built against a background of firm ‘repression of rights and freedoms, economic strangulation and denial of access to health, education and other services’ (Rishmawi & Morris, 2007, p. 19). Organisations active in the West Bank are administered through the Israeli Military Order 686, limiting civic activities and institutions (Rishmawi & Morris, 2007; Challand, 2009). This period sparked the development of a lively Palestinian NGO movement, because of the absence of a government or national leaders, despite the Israeli Military Order. NGOs became the main service providers of the Palestinians and moreover were the actors developing the philosophy behind future Palestinian society (DeVoir & Tartir, 2009; Falcitelli & Montanarini, 1999).

At the same time, political parties were banned from public life, which resulted in the establishment of local associations with close political affiliation (Brouwer, 2005; Challand, 2009). Especially from the First Intifada (1987) onwards, NGOs became more and more institutionalised in society, because of their leading role of resistance against the occupation, in combination with the promotion of services, values and mass mobilisation (Falcitelli & Montanarini, 1999).

The creation of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in 1994 had consequences for the NGO community, who until then always worked in the absence of Palestinian governmental restraints (Elbayar, 2005, p. 21). Due to the establishment of the PNA, NGOs were called to join the new
ministries – or at least to offer their services. Many of the NGOs with close affiliation to Fatah listened, but others refused, causing countless important service delivery organisations to work in opposition to or independent from the PNA (Challand, 2009). But even independent NGOs are required to establish a direct relationship with the PNA, whose first concern was to cut their power or to control them (Jarrar, 2005; Elbayar, 2005). One of the consequences of the state-building project from 1994 onwards, is the shifting of funding in the donor community from NGOs towards the PNA (Falcitelli & Montanarini, 1999). Whereas the pre-Oslo period was characterised by mass grassroots organisations (mostly funded by other Arab governments), the post-Oslo period marked the change towards small organisations, run by an urban middle-class elite and dependent on foreign – Western -funding (Jad, 2007). The number of local NGOs dropped drastically during these Peace Accord years, ‘not only as a result of the re-directing of funding to the PNA, but also as consequence of the institutional necessity to adapt to new requirements relayed by these larger, more professionalized (and often more governmental) donors that replaced smaller and more solidarity-based donor organizations’. This ‘governmentalisation of funding’ is – again – a consequence of the power of governments trying to influence the political negotiations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Challand, 2009, p. 84).

To conclude, a new generation of political elite arose after the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority, some with roots in Palestinian civil society NGOs. However, the creation of this Authority led to more fragmentation of Palestinian civil society (Jad, 2007), whereby its form, content, shape, institutional forms and framing of its action are different than its western counterpart (Challand, 2008). This article will focus on the civil society agenda Belgian NGOs bring into the oPt under the guise of development projects/programs. As is well known, NGOs in the oPt receive a high amount of international funding, under the assumption that they play a vital role as a catalyst in terms of liberalisation, democratisation and as important actors in the peace process (Kassis, 2001). This underscores the opinion that democratisation has to come from within society itself, whereby the promotion and imposition of the agenda of donors will be questioned1 (Challand, 2008). The stakes are too high: if the values imposed by the West are not reconcilable with those possessed by the Palestinian NGOs, there is a significant chance that the long-term impact of those projects will be minimal.

1 Challand (2008) has conducted well documented research on how international actors ‘contribute to the partial failure of democratization by creation a situation of heteronomy whereby local actors (…) are not able to define their own priorities but have to follow the conditions and working modalities set up by external donors’
Case studies: Medicine for the Third World (Geneeskunde voor de Derde Wereld) and Oxfam Solidarity (Oxfam Solidariteit)

Two very different types of NGOs were investigated in this research. Medicine for the Third World (G3W) is a small-scaled NGO, working on issues related to ‘the right to health’. For the program ‘empowerment for the right to health’, they receive funds from DG Development (G3W, 2012a). G3W has 9 partners in 5 different countries (G3W, 2012b). They opt to reduce the number of Belgian health workers in partner-countries for emergency projects only (G3W, 2012c). At this moment (April 2012), no Belgian health worker is active for G3W in any of the partner countries. In the case of the occupied Palestinian territories, they work together with the Palestinian NGO Health Work Committees (HWC).

Oxfam Solidarity on the other hand is part of the Oxfam International network, and is one of the biggest NGOs in Belgium (Carlier, 2010). Oxfam Belgium focuses on development and humanitarian actions and has partners in more than 20 countries around the globe (Oxfam Solidarity, 2012a). The main external funding for their projects comes from DG Development and the European Commission (for emergency aid) (NGO Openboek, 2011). Oxfam Solidarity focuses in Palestine on food sovereignty projects and social basic needs (Oxfam Solidarity, 2012b). To reach their project goals, they work together with three Palestinian NGOs in the West Bank. They have two European employees currently working in the oPt. (For a brief summary of the case studies, please refer to tables 1-3)

The field work was carried out in two periods: April 2011 (Oxfam Solidarity in the oPt and HWC) and March – April 2012 (G3W and the three partners of Oxfam Solidarity). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the program directors, external relations directors or the administration organisers of the Palestinian NGOs, and with the person responsible for the projects/programs in G3W and Oxfam Solidarity.

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2 ‘Directie-Generaal Ontwikkelingssamenwerking’ (DGD) is under the capacity of the Belgian Minister of Development, and represents the different aspects of Belgian development policies.

3 The last health worker sent out was in late 2008 when a neurosurgeon went to Gaza.
## TABLE 1 - Overview of the two Belgian case study NGOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Studies</th>
<th>Establishment Date</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Political Affiliation</th>
<th>Main Activities / Themes</th>
<th>Budget in oPt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oxfam Solidariteit (Oxfam Solidarity)</strong></td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Oxfam established in Great Britain in 1942, food emergency project in occupied Greece</td>
<td>Not defined</td>
<td>Food sovereignty, dignified work, gender equality and access to social services</td>
<td>2 029 170 euros (2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## TABLE 2 - Partner of G3W

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Studies</th>
<th>Establishment Date</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Starting date of partnership</th>
<th>Main Activities / Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Health Work Committees (HWC)</strong></td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Voluntary health workers</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Health clinics, health care, emergency services and health programs. Partnership: youth networks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## TABLE 3 - Partners of Oxfam Solidarity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Studies</th>
<th>Establishment Date</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Starting date of partnership</th>
<th>Main Activities / Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC)</strong></td>
<td>1986 (Ramallah)</td>
<td>Volunteers and agronomists</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>To improve the living conditions of the Palestinian agricultural society, within a comprehensive framework of sustainable rural development in a manner that would enhance self-reliance and activate the role of local agricultural committees and the concept of voluntary and team work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Palestinian Medical Relief Society (PMRS)</strong></td>
<td>1979 (Ramallah)</td>
<td>Palestinian doctors and health professionals</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>To improve the overall physical, mental, and social well being of all Palestinians by health services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BADIL (Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights)</strong></td>
<td>1998 (Bethlehem)</td>
<td>Recommendations by refugee conferences</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Defend and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees and IDPs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion of key findings

To measure whether (and to what extent) Belgian NGOs take the local Palestinian context in consideration in their partnerships, interviews were conducted with all the different players. The standard questions in the interviews gauged the starting point of the partnership, levels of cooperation, how programs are being made, etc. Afterwards, these interviews were compared to the aforementioned literature. The findings are bundled into four main categories related to the discourse around civil society and NGOs. Below is a discussion of the similarities and differences between the diverse NGOs. Out of respect for the privacy of the interviewees, there will be only references to the names of the organisations, since they also express the opinion of these.

History of the Palestinian NGOs and their partnerships

A first remarkable trend, is that all Palestinian NGOs (except Badil) were founded before the first Intifada. According to research, 47.5 percent of the NGOs active in 2001, were created between ’68 and ’93 (Challand, 2009, p. 62). This means that half of the local committees have roots which can be traced back to an active culture of resistance in civil society. These Palestinian NGOs underline their long historical origins which can be situated in a network of local volunteers, which first resulted in the foundation of local committees, and later into NGOs. In a second stage, the question regarding the origin or conditions for a partnership arose. G3W underlines very clearly that the vision of their partner needs to be closely related to their own, which is evident in the partnerships they have in other countries. They have three other aspects to decide whether or not they want to partner up. These are: the NGO needs to have a decent level of capacity, a clear strategy to build a counter-power in society and lastly, complementary with and synergy to a broader approach of society in general (Interview G3W, April 18, 2012). Their partner, HWC, also agrees on the importance of an identical philosophy as a necessary condition to team up. ‘On this grant, the two organisations started to work on common grounds’ (Interview HWC, April 20, 2011). For Oxfam Solidarity, one of the main reasons to start working with a local NGO, is adherence to each other’s strategies (Interview Oxfam Solidarity, April 22, 2011). UAWC clearly underlines this statement, saying ‘We [Oxfam Solidarity and UAWC] have one vision to support the Palestinian farmers here’ (Interview UAWC, March 12, 2012). PMRS did not recall the origin of the partnership, but endorsed the importance of a solid mutual understanding and responsiveness that exists with Oxfam Solidarity (Interview PMRS, March 20, 2012). Badil did not refer to having the same vision or strategy, but they did say that they ‘are very fortunate to have the relationship they have with Oxfam Solidarity’ (Interview Badil, March 14, 2012). Given that Oxfam Solidarity provides support via core funding to Badil, it means that Oxfam Solidarity shares Badils’ approach and vision of the right of return. Concluding, we mark the importance for the two
Belgian NGOs and their partners in both sharing one vision and one strategy towards solving the problems in Palestinian society.

**Interpretations of civil society**

According to Challand (2009, p. 29), there are a number of factors empowering civil society: ‘accountability, legitimacy, transparency and participation’. Anheier (2001) suggest that when civil society is used as an operational definition, ‘it refers to the activities, values and other key characteristics of institutions, organisations and individuals located among the market, the state and the family’. To define whether, and to what extent, Belgian NGOs take local society into consideration, the determination of programs and projects with their Palestinian partner is looked upon in detail. The three partners of Oxfam Solidarity stress in this regard that they work on the basis of needs assessments of the people or area they target (Interview UAWC, March 12, 2012; Interview PMRS, March 20, 2012), or that participation and feedback is integrated in the pillars of their strategic plan (Interview Badil, March 14, 2012). Many Palestinian NGOs have over time professionalised and institutionalised their work in society in a way that enlarged the gap between the elite (NGO-workers) and the community (Challand, 2009). However, the four partners of both Oxfam Solidarity and G3W have maintained a close relationship with the community during their enlargement, institutionalisation and professionalisation. These ties can be found in different local farmer committees which are also assembled in a national conference by UAWC (Interview UAWC, March 12, 2012), questionnaires about satisfaction filled in by patients targeted by PMRS (Interview PMRS, March 22, 2012) and campaigns and capacity building efforts (followed by evaluations) aimed at the Palestinian refugee community by Badil (Interview Badil, March 14, 2012). Health Work Committees emphasised the community-based approach used in their programs. Much attention is drawn towards empowering volunteers, which provides the programs more sustainability and a wider audience (Interview HWC, April 20, 2011). They value the input of society and want to be close to their needs. The local focus is as well emphasised by the Belgian NGOs. Oxfam Solidarity states in this regard: ‘The idea for us through the projects is to shift away from the support through service delivery to really enhance community mobilisation’ (Interview Oxfam Solidarity, April 22, 2011). G3W has a program around youth networks, and states: ‘It is *their* cause. What is important for us is that we are able to support them’ (Interview G3W, April 18, 2012). It is therefore right to conclude that the programs in which Oxfam Solidarity and G3W work together with their partners, they focus on empowering civil society by participation of the people and accountability. This validates the assumption made by Mikhelidze & Pirozzi (2008): ‘By working directly with local populations on the ground, civil society is also able to assess the situation more effectively than top levels of governance or external actors’. The four Palestinian NGOs have their roots in the local context and want to represent the population through
their programs and projects (bottom-up approach), and see the flaws that are not touched upon enough by the PNA.

Related to this topic, civil society promotion by the donors needs to be looked upon through the lens of different cultures. Local civil society actors need to have autonomy from foreign actors to decide what is believed to be necessary for the internal construction of their society (Challand, 2009). The Palestinian NGOs were asked how programs are designed – and how the donor fits in this. Their independence to formulate the strategic plan of their organisation appeared to be the most sacred thing for them. Even when it comes to making programs, they work together on an equal level regarding input, but all clearly underline their freedom to decide on what grounds they want to work together with partners. UAWC clearly states that ‘we will not accept that some conditions from any other organisation come. And never having that they obligate us or someone else to get us to do some work which is not the needs [of society]’ (Interview UAWC, March 12, 2012). PMRS confirms this: ‘Of course we are dependent on the funds, but we are independent in our decisions and our design of how to respond to the community’s needs in that particular opportunity’ (Interview PMRS, March 20, 2012). Badil receives core funding from Oxfam Solidarity, which means they do not interfere in the type of work they are carrying out (Interview Badil, March 14, 2012). HWC also marks its independence and character: ‘we know our objectives very clear, so where our objectives fit with any proposal, with any of the donors, we work with them’ (Interview HWC, April 20, 2011). All these NGOs have a clear autonomy in designing what is important for building up Palestinian civil society. It is a positive sign that G3W and Oxfam Solidarity value non-interference in the strategy planning of the Palestinian NGO, that decisions regarding programs/projects are made on an equal level, and that the implementation is completely in the hands of the Palestinians partners.

Payes (2005) further refers to NGOs as ‘means for the empowerment of minority groups’. When the programs of Oxfam Solidarity and G3W with its partners are touched upon, the target audience can be situated in a realm of the development spectrum the PNA does not or cannot touch upon. One of the main programs Oxfam Solidarity finances with PMRS, is mobile clinics that go into areas of the West Bank where there are no hospitals (Interview PMRS, March 20, 2012). With UAWC, they established a seed bank (focusing on sustainable resources), and also fund food sovereignty projects through supporting farmers, mainly in Area C (Interview UAWC, March 12, 2012). Badil on the other hand works around the defence and promotion of the right of return, still a taboo subject for a lot of internationals and Palestinians (Interview Badil, March 14, 2012). G3W chose to work together with HWC in (East-) Jerusalem, an area where the PNA also does not have any authority (Interview G3W, April 18, 2012). This leads to the deduction that the two Belgian case studies do not back away from working around sensitive issues or in difficult areas. This is also confirmed by Falcitelli & Montanarini (1999, p. 11): ‘Not only do NGOs target marginalised population, which tend to be neglected by official policies or to which the latter do not have easy access’.
Funding mechanisms and the space of autonomous decisions

In the literature we discussed that ‘allocation of multilateral NGO aid is alleged to be less biased by commercial and political mandates of ODA, but this is also debatable when looking at the source of funding’ (Nunnenkamp, Weingarth & Weisser, 2009). First, we therefore take a look at the third donors through which G3W and Oxfam Solidarity are capable of carrying out programs in the West Bank. G3W is able to perform its program around ‘empowerment of youth networks’ by the support of DGD. G3W explained that when the content of the program is decided, they send the proposal to DGD, which then decides whether or not they will offer support. Before agreeing to co-finance, some small adjustments can be requested. Once the final program is decided upon, G3W receives full autonomy regarding the implementation. The only requirements are the annual sending of evaluations and financial (external) auditing reports (Interview G3W, April 18, 2012). Oxfam Solidarity is able to perform projects and programs by the support of DGD and the European Union (NGO Openboek, 2011; Oxfam Solidarity, 2010). But also here, the two biggest Palestinian partners acknowledge that besides evaluation policies or an autonomous financial audit, they only deal with Oxfam Solidarity and not with third donors (Interview UAWC, March 12, 2012; Interview PMRS, March 20, 2012). This is a relative new trend in the European Union, whereby the EU has an increasing commitment to strengthening societies in the world. ‘The NGOs are guarantors of the correct allocation of aid to the recipient populations in places where respect for human rights and legitimate government is often lacking’ (Falcitelli & Montanarini, 1999, p. 13). In this way, small sized NGOs receive funding because of their motivation and the commitment of their personnel, whereby their expertise allows rapid and effective action at lower cost compared to governmental actions.

Also, a distinction has to be made between project funding and program funding. In the past, many NGOs opted for funding projects: limited funding for a short duration, in a specific area to reach specific goals (BTC, 2012). For six years, G3W has worked together with its Palestinian partner using a program (Interview G3W, April 18, 2012; G3W, 2012d). Programmes are longer in duration (mostly two or three years) and provide the NGOs with the opportunity to approach problems in a more sustainable way (Challand, 2009). Oxfam Solidarity uses a combination of all possible funding mechanisms: they work partly via project funding (service delivery projects mainly for humanitarian reasons with PMRS), via program funding (most of their partnerships are based on this mechanism with UAWC and PMRS) and even core funding (Badil: 3.82% of their budget comes from Oxfam Solidarity), which gives the recipient free usage of the money for any type of legitimate expenses (Challand, 2009; Interview Badil, March 14, 2012). Programs and core funding are in terms of sustainability a better approach to development in general than projects.
The relationship between civil society and politics

Middle Eastern civil societies and its actors are characterized by an independence from and opposition to the regimes who are limiting the lives of their citizen (Valadbigi & Ghobadi, 2011). The question here is which authority is limiting the lives and freedoms of the Palestinian people? The rules, regulations and laws by the Israeli authority in Area B and C are restraining the freedom to move for Palestinian NGOs enormously. On the other hand, the Palestinian Authority is theoretically the biggest player in deciding the direction in which Palestinian civil society is moving. However, it is estimated that Palestinian NGOs cover around 70% of service provision in the oPt, which has obviously driven a rift between civil society organisations and those of the PNA (Daiq, 2005). But the Palestinian NGOs do not work in a vacuum, they work in cooperation with the PNA as part of a National Strategic Plan with the Ministry (Interview UAWC, March 12, 2012). PMRS also has an agreement with the PNA, whereby they only go into areas where the Ministry of Health or UNRWA does not have any hospitals (Interview PMRS, March 20, 2012). HWC also ‘cultivated cooperative working relationships with the Palestinian Ministry of Health and Palestinian charitable organizations’ (HWC, 2012a). Badil on the other hand is touching upon a subject which is not incorporated in a National Strategic Plan or Ministry. They get most of their funds from the NGO Development Centre, an umbrella NGO ‘in response to the need of having a sustainable Palestinian mechanism for providing support to the NGOs sector’4 (Interview Badil, March 14, 2012; NDC, 2012). All of these partnerships and cooperations between the Ministries and NGOs confirm that ‘civil society responds to and interacts with developments in the state, which on its own reacts to development in civil society’ (Sassoon, 2000; Mikhelidze & Pirozzi, 2008). Moreover, NGOs can be regarded as performing complementary services to the PNA.

The literature pointed out that problems arise concerning the nature of NGOs, ‘who regard themselves as non-political actors, and therefore provide mostly technical solutions for problems with a political root’ (Payes, 2005). However, the context of the occupied Palestinian territories is proving to be an exception when it comes to being ‘non-political’. Oxfam Solidarity said in the interview that working on certain issues, like health or land, is always connected to the political context, because it is not only related to health per se, but also to conditions which are limiting the working options. ‘So it’s not, we don’t make it political, it is political per se here’ (Interview Oxfam, April 22, 2011). G3W on the other hand already has a political approach to work in issues related to health, but confirms what Oxfam says. They believe that the health situation is determined by political, economical and social factors rather than by biomedical conditions. They use a broad interpretation whereby the right to health and

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4 Funds for this NGO come from the World Bank, the European Union and religious inspired charity organisations.
everything that limits this right is believed as a crucial entry point in development (Interview G3W, April 18, 2012).

**Points of critique**

The only points of critique that were heard, concerned the more practical issues of the partnerships. The first remark made by the two oldest partners of Oxfam Solidarity, was the recent swap of personnel in the oPt (Interview PMRS, March 20, 2012; Interview UAWC, March 12, 2012). Since the start of the Oxfam Solidarity partnerships, one person had been responsible in Jerusalem from mid 1990s until 2010. Thanks to this, the partners were able to build an enormous trust with the same person inside an NGO for more than 15 years. This is extraordinary given that the same person inside an NGO is responsible and present in the partner country for such a long period. This provides the partners continuity, trust, and a solid mutual understanding  (Interview PMRS, March 20, 2012). A second critique concerned the future plans of Oxfam International to merge all the Oxfams working in the occupied Palestinian territories into one framework. The three partners of Oxfam Solidarity raised concerns about the implications this would have for the relationship with Oxfam Solidarity, the fear of loss of grown trust and fear of interference of other Oxfams (eg. Oxfam USA or Oxfam GB). They shared the fright that this could have major implications for working in Area C (Interview PMRS, March 20, 2012; Interview UAWC, March 12, 2012) or for the ideology: ‘The ideology of Oxfam Belgium is different than other’ (Interview UAWC, March 12, 2012), ‘They [Oxfam Solidarity] are definitely one of the more renegade and progressive international donors’ (Interview Badil, March 14, 2012). But they all clearly underlined that these are pure speculations on their part, and that the future will tell (Interview Badil, March 14, 2012; Interview PMRS, March 22, 2012; Interview UAWC, March 12, 2012). It appears that Oxfam International is aligning in imitation of the Declaration of Paris, but it appears to have some possibly negative consequences for the partners of the more progressive Oxfams within Oxfam International. One hope of the partners is that Oxfam Solidarity might take the lead in the areas and fields of their expertise (in this case: health, agriculture and advocacy work) (Interview Badil, March 14, 2012; Interview PMRS, March 22, 2012; Interview UAWC, March 12, 2012). This merging will definitely be worth further investigation.

Lastly, there was the impression that the NGOs spoke freely in the interviews conducted, without being afraid that their statements might harm the relationship between the two NGOs. Only Badil informed me that they contacted Oxfam Solidarity before the interview took place. All the interviewees showed signs of being comfortable about the questions asked, they seemed relaxed to talk about themself and their Belgian partner and did not give the impression they were responding

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with standard answers. I tend to interpret this, together with the answers in the interviews, as a sign of solid partnerships, which are characterised by a great level of trust in each other. However, these are only estimations on my behalf, because ‘influence’ cannot be really measured. It does give us a more complete picture about the context of the interviews, and hence about the content.

**Conclusion**

It is very hard to disconnect aid from politics in the occupied Palestinian territories. Therefore, in the case of NGO-aid, the choice of partners and programs signifies a hidden political preference of how (in this case) the Belgian NGOs want to aid the Palestinian people. Oxfam Solidarity and G3W chose about 15 years ago to focus on strengthening civil society by projects/programs with a direct influence on the Palestinian people. Oxfam Solidarity wants to do this via health and agricultural programs/projects and in the future also expand their current advocacy work, while G3W tries to strengthen civil society by the right to health. The observations following the interviews concluded that both Oxfam Solidarity and G3W tend to believe in assistance, based on the needs of society. Their partners have a strong base in civil society, which has been built and expanded before, during and following the two intifadas. The partners have a bottom-up approach as to define their programs/projects and strategy, whereby input of the Palestinian people is put central. This means that also Oxfam Solidarity and G3W value the input made by the local people and programs and projects based on their needs, instead of the needs or requests of the donors. However, since no research has been conducted with the local people themselves, these are deductions based on the interviews with the NGOs and their partners. It is likely that – since service delivery can never target 100% of the population or area – the project/program also excludes certain people.

The relationship between the NGOs and politics taught us that the two Belgian NGOs have a different focus in dealing with the political realm of development issues. G3W – and hence, also their partner - use a political approach to tackle the right to health by the empowerment of youth networks. Oxfam Solidarity on the other hand bases their interference on humanitarian grounds, but emphasises that the context of working in the occupied Palestinian territories makes it political. Challand (2009, p. 199) notes that Palestinian NGOs were marked in the past as important socio-political movements, but now move more and more towards service-providers without socio-political attachment. However, the Palestinian partners of the two Belgian case studies prove that they include the socio-political affiliation in their mission and goals. PMRS views health as an important entry point for social change (PMRS, 2012), UAWC focuses on agricultural needs as to respond to the Israeli occupation and the empowerment of a viable farmer community (UAWC, 2012), whereas Badil works around the promotion and defence of the rights of Palestinian refugees and IDP’s (Internally Displaced People) (Badil, 2012). HWC lastly, believes health care can only be effective when it is part of a bigger social
change (HWC, 2012b). All four Palestinian NGOs use service provision as entry point to society, but enclose this in a broader socio-political framework.

Thirdly, we discovered that the two Belgian NGOs do not focus on funding a variety of partners, but instead focus on expanding financial support of their historical partners. This could mean that Oxfam Solidarity and G3W focus on or contribute to the promotion of a pluralism of content, instead of a pluralism in number (Challand, 2009). This is also visible in the evolution in funding, whereby the two Belgian case studies shifted their funding (or the major part of it) from project towards program funding, providing more long-term funding, and in that regard respond more to the needs of the population (Interview G3W, April 18, 2012; Interview Oxfam Solidarity, April 22, 2011; Challand, 2009). This type of funding can be regarded as complementary to the traditional bilateral aid between countries, whereby the focus of NGO-aid is more locally based and filling up the holes in traditional aid.

The two Belgian case studies appear to be on one side of the development spectrum, which is characterised by sustainability in approach, trust and with a focus on local civil society. It appears that the two Belgian NGOs use a rather unique approach towards development for the occupied Palestinian territories. They focus on capacity building in and strengthening of the Palestinian NGOs themselves, have a strong connection and relationship with their partner, focus on the needs of the Palestinian people and enlarge their programs with advocacy or campaign work in Belgium (or the world). It looks as if they found the bridge to close the gap between donor and beneficiary, because neither of the Belgian NGOs were described as ‘donors’, but as ‘partners’. Compared to the global level of donors and the NGO community, the budget of the Belgian NGOs in the occupied Palestinian territories must also be put in perspective. G3W (one of the smaller Belgian NGOs) has a working budget in the oPt of 134,450 euros (for 2011), whereas one of the biggest Belgian NGOs, Oxfam Solidarity, has a working budget of 2 million euros (for 2010). However, compared to the global level, any NGO with a budget less than 2 million euros is considered a small player (Challand, 2009). The two Belgian case studies, as a result of their small-scale and strategy towards development, cannot be heavily criticised for their programs in the occupied Palestinian territories. The question that follows is: should we encourage the approach of these NGOs in difficult conflicts or should we question the relevance of these small-scaled initiatives? It is my opinion that, no matter how small-scaled their input is, for the partners this approach works in the field, and they value their encouragement, expertise and contribution. The Palestinian NGOs emphasised the importance to keep focusing on areas or issues that are sensitive for the political context, and thus often lack the support of big NGOs. Too often, the focus shifts away from local-based community approaches or the needs of the Palestinian people to popular service delivery. To help reduce the aid dependency of Palestinians, it is important to focus on strengthening civil society by working on what they actually need and not what the ‘West’ believes they need.
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