



**Lunch meeting**

## **Gulf Rush? Opportunities for diversification and challenges in making it work**

*13 May 2025, webinar*

*Summary report*

The international humanitarian sector is facing a turning point. The collapse of USAID funding, combined with structural budget cuts by several European governments, has created an unprecedented challenge. Business as usual is no longer an option; new markets need to be explored. One promising emerging donor region is the Gulf Cooperation Council states. The United Nations, several (mostly US-based) international NGOs, and the International Committee of the Red Cross have been working with partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council for decades. The Dutch development and humanitarian sectors, however, have been slow or absent in exploring these opportunities. On 13 May, KUNO organised a lunch meeting on the challenges and opportunities for exploring partnership with the Gulf Cooperation Council states in the humanitarian sector.

**Yannick du Pont**, Development Committee member at the Netherlands Advisory Council on International Affairs, Advisor for Glocalshift and Board Member of Dihad, discussed key developments in the field of humanitarian partnerships with the Gulf states and the underlying rationale for these collaborations. For decades, Western actors have had reservations about working with Gulf states, due to concerns about human rights and uncertainty about the origin of funds. While these are legitimate concerns, pragmatic and tailored approaches have been developed in finding partnerships with Gulf states. This is reflected in the growing acceptance of funding from the Gulf region by the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross, both of which are known for their rigorous due diligence in choosing partners. In addition, another major change occurred in early 2022 when the European Commission published a policy paper called 'The European Union strategic partnership with the Gulf'. The European Union had come to the realisation – after the Russian invasion in Ukraine – that it needed to strengthen its partnerships with the Gulf. In short, where such partnerships were once met with scepticism, a shift is occurring whereby these partnerships are increasingly accepted.

Forming partnerships with Gulf states can be complex as it requires careful consideration of the internal dynamics of the Gulf Cooperation Council and rivalry among member states – working with a specific Gulf state could make working with another more difficult. While the war in Gaza has created more unity within the Gulf, these dynamics still play a role beneath the surface. The Gaza war has also made Gulf states more hesitant to choose European partners, particularly because some European countries' positions on the conflict do not align with their own. The Netherlands has not prioritised partnerships with the Gulf states. Other European states, such as Switzerland and Norway, are much ahead in this regard.

Yannick closed with a call to the humanitarian field and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to mobilise in order to make the Netherlands a more prominent partner. Partnership with Gulf states has much to offer. For many (humanitarian) actors, the initial reaction to such a partnership is that it would be financially beneficial, especially in light of current extensive budget cuts. However, the main impact is not financial but rather improved access to difficult crisis zones. For example, it was possible for certain organisations to register in eastern Libya in eight days due to a partnership with the Islamic Development Bank, whereas this took other European-based organisations up to two years.

According to **Mohamed Skaik**, Gulf Cooperation Council Partnerships Director, and active with Glocalshift, it is not advisable to seek partnership with Gulf states solely for financial motives. If, however, an organisation seeks other added values, such as expansion of operations and increased reach within countries, it is recommended to think of such partnerships. How can partnerships be built? In the initial phases of building partnerships, it is crucial to be patient, as the narratives and strategies of European organisations are often not wholly aligned with those of their Gulf counterparts. It is not only a question of what European actors want or need. It is equally important to consider what European actors can offer Gulf counterparts, and to be responsive to their ways of working, preferences, and needs in order to build successful partnerships. This requires extensive communication, trust-building and transparency.

There are certain elements and topics to consider when seeking partnerships. Firstly, localisation is an important topic for many Gulf states. There is a concern that Western parties will enter a country, become the main implementing partner during a crisis, only to leave as soon as a project is finished. Therefore, choosing and working with local partners that are compatible with the Gulf states is crucial for Western humanitarian organisations. This way, the local partners can take the lead on local development once a project has finished. Secondly, Western organisations need to consider what the added value of working with them would be for Gulf states, such as

quality implementation, capacity building of local partners, providing support to beneficiaries, what networks they bring, etc. This is important because there is increasing competition for partnerships with the Gulf states organisations from the West, the East, and also the United Nations. Thirdly, organisations need to be aware and mindful of cultural and religious sensitivities within local contexts. This would build trust, which in turn opens new doors, such as possibly becoming a de facto strategic partner for specific activities, or in specific countries. Funding is not allocated through tenders; partnership building is the key approach. Lastly, partnership should not be framed merely as a funding mechanism, but as a broader, collaborative relationship on topics such as sharing expertise and networks, or gaining access in certain difficult contexts.

### **Reflection and discussion**

The audience raised the question of how Gulf states perceive working with INGOs. On the one hand, it is often recognised that INGOs have useful networks in Europe and the ability to influence policy in the West on topics such as the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. On the other hand, there is a negative perception of INGOs in terms of often having a redundant middleman or allocating a large share of funding to headquarter salaries. This also relates to localisation; Gulf states will not simply give funds to international organisations if they are not perceived well by local partners and they do not have true localisation policies.

A question was raised about how to collaborate with Gulf states, given concerns around security, limited development funding, and cultural incompatibilities. It was argued that the time has passed for considering cultural incompatibilities as a barrier to cooperation. Existing collaborations demonstrate that alignment of values and core missions between Western and Gulf counterparts is possible. For example, Glocalshift chose to align with the values of the Gulf Cooperation Council because the Council was often more understanding of local needs.

When organisations seek partnership opportunities with the Gulf, it is important to adopt strategic approaches in light of the increased competition for such cooperation. The speakers emphasised that the Dutch sector would benefit from coordinated approaches, working together with the Dutch government and creating a profile as a unit. Other countries such as Switzerland, Germany and France are far ahead of the Netherlands in this regard, which makes them more appealing partners. In addition to the Gulf Cooperation Council, INGOs can take into account other regional cooperation frameworks and actors operating in the Middle East. While the Arab League is not seen as operationally active or very influential, the Islamic Development Bank is important for the humanitarian sector, as it is highly influential, is a neutral body to work with, and has non-partisan funds available.

Aid funding from the Gulf Cooperation Council is allocated across various areas, including infrastructure, development, and humanitarian assistance. It can be unclear to Western actors what the specific division is and how this has been decided upon. However, this should not be a barrier to cooperation. Aligning with the Gulf Cooperation Council's funding priorities is advisable, as these allocations are based on a strong understanding of local needs and available capacities, supported by thorough planning. For example, Gulf states deployed aid trucks to Syria from Türkiye in less than 24 hours, after the catastrophic earthquake in 2023. Much of the international response came a month later. This example demonstrates that, in various cases, Gulf states are significantly ahead of Western organisations. Particularly in the current political climate—marked by funding cuts to humanitarian action—INGOs are no longer always in the lead. Significant benefits can be gained from partnering with Gulf Cooperation Council states that go beyond purely financial considerations.