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## Report

# Syria: engaging with local actors to increase humanitarian outreach

Monday 9 – Wednesday 11 March 2015 | WP1384

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Held in Jordan

### Executive Summary

Syria has entered its fifth year of civil war and currently presents the world's largest humanitarian crisis. With no resolution of the conflict in sight, humanitarian organisations are facing challenges that seriously hamper an effective humanitarian response. International organisations have increasingly limited access due to restrictions imposed by either the government or armed groups in Syria. This gap has been filled by Syrian local organisations, using their connections and networks in the country to provide aid and protection to the population. However, these local groups also struggle to maintain their operations, in part due to the difficulty in accessing funds. The way in which humanitarian action is conducted, the lack of cooperation and trust between organisations, the impact of counter-terrorism legislation and international sanctions, as well as the lack of flexibility in funding need to change to enhance humanitarian action.

In order to confront these issues there needs to be a narrative centred on the Syrian population affected by the conflict, as well as genuine partnerships enabling local and international organisations to complement one another and work more effectively. Core, long term, flexible funding for Syrian organisations is vital in order for them not only to continue, but to strengthen their work. Appropriate training, adapted to their specific needs, would also enable local organisations to attain a more professional level, thereby meeting generally accepted professional standards.

Possible concrete measures include the creation of new umbrella frameworks or platforms among local Syrian and diaspora groups to provide information exchange, coordination and adequate training. These would bring together creative ways to look at funding, and promote joint advocacy and partnerships. Openness and commitment is crucial for the emergence of a renewed efficient aid model in Syria and functional ways for international and local groups to work together.

### Context

Syria has entered its fifth year of conflict with no end in sight. With an estimated 220,000 deaths, 7.6 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and more than 3 million Syrians displaced to neighbouring countries<sup>1</sup>, humanitarian action is needed more than ever. Since the beginning of the conflict, UN agencies and international NGOs (INGOs) have expanded their cooperation with local organisations (CSOs) that have developed structures to provide aid and assistance around and inside Syria. However, many local/regional organisations still work either loosely attached or completely independently from the formal system. The current situation is marked by a lack of understanding of each other's roles and capabilities, but also by disagreements on objectives and methods. The question then is, where and how, can local and international organisations work together, what are the diverging

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, 15/02/2015

opinions and when do they choose to work separately. How can local and international organisations cooperate efficiently together and within their own groups? What challenges do they face on a daily basis? What is their ability to provide humanitarian assistance?

Against this backdrop, the workshop « Syria: engaging with local actors to increase humanitarian outreach » aimed to provide an open dialogue between the donor community, international organisations and local/regional organisations. Indeed, each entity addresses only part of the approach to deliver aid into Syria, but none has found a comprehensive solution. This report provides a summary of discussions that took place during the workshop: it examines the challenges and gaps in the aid community's ability to provide humanitarian assistance; the requirements and changes needed in order to better assist those in dire humanitarian need; and identifies certain operational models that might be better suited to the current crisis.

## **Challenges and gaps**

The provision of humanitarian aid, implemented by international and local organisations faces a number of different challenges.

### **Lack of trust**

1. The atmosphere of distrust between the different components of the humanitarian system appears to be increasingly slipping towards an adversarial type of relationship. There has been widespread frustration at the lack of political solutions among humanitarian agencies who have felt overwhelmed by the scale and gravity of the conflict. Among Syrian organisations there is a sense of disappointment in the face of inaction by the international community. Trust issues are particularly manifest in the reluctance to share information because of the perception that it could fall into the wrong hands and thereby endanger aid workers or beneficiaries. Suspicion can lead to the creation of completely parallel systems, which seriously challenges any attempt at cooperation, despite pressing needs.

### **Syrian civil society**

2. Syrian civil society organisations (CSOs) are conducting a significant number of projects on the ground and in neighbouring countries, with support from local councils in Syria and some with support from donors and international organisations. Although they are able to provide a wide range of activities and to reach across various sectors of society, local organisations and their networks are facing a multitude of obstacles. Many CSOs are no older than the conflict itself and admit that they lack the necessary experience and professional skills required to respond to needs. There is a perceived high degree of unwillingness from many donors to directly support local initiatives. Mainly those CSOs who have established relationships with large Syrian organisations overseas find the adequate support needed to operate effectively.
3. The Syrian people need the international community. The international community however has to take into consideration the traditions and ways Syrian organisations operate, and adjust some of its regulations. Non-Syrian actors often face difficulties in understanding the Syrian mosaic, its cultural elements and even the language. Despite the fact that humanitarian assistance should be a partnership and an alliance, Syrians are seldom asked about their opinion. This can lead to the perception that CSOs are solely agents implementing other organisations' strategy and taking all the risks, without however the commensurate recognition or support.

### **Humanitarian practice and counter-terrorism legislation**

4. Humanitarian organisations need to resist the temptation to take a standardised approach. There is the need to adapt to the context and recognise that approaches developed during other conflicts might not readily be applicable to Syria. The safety of staff, both international and local adds to an already complex operating environment. Few international organisations manage to have direct access to populations due to general insecurity stemming from intense fighting, administrative hurdles and deliberate

obstruction by belligerents.

5. In an attempt to counter terrorism states collectively and individually have passed legislation restricting funding flows, imposing sanctions such as travel bans or declaring individuals or groups as proscribed terrorist entities. Humanitarian organisations need to be aware of the potential detrimental impact these measures can have on their work. For example, do they hamper the ability of aid agencies to negotiate access with proscribed groups? According to an international humanitarian worker, “when working in ISIS areas, counter-terror legislation almost trumps international humanitarian law”. There is an unspoken assumption that people under ISIS rule may not be deserving of aid despite the humanitarian imperative of providing aid to all those in need. Certain important topics are also relatively absent in the discussions, for example international refugee law or the question of “non-refoulement”.

#### **Politicisation of aid**

6. Politics and the politicisation of aid is a defining issue for the provision of humanitarian assistance in Syria though looking back at the history of humanitarian action it is clear that it is not a new phenomenon. Humanitarians, local organisations, and the United Nations are feeling the consequence of political issues. The burden placed on new organisations to prove that they can do the job is, for many, viewed as unfair. There is a tenuous situation in government and opposition held areas in Syria, and a great deal of pressure is put on organisations to provide assistance based on political agendas of various stakeholders. Politics are part of the conflict, but humanitarians should not let themselves be politicised and many participants agreed that there is a need to re-evaluate how we are looking at humanitarian assistance and development, how it is funded and how it should be firewalled from politics.
7. Donors have their own challenges to deal with. Financial constraints, but also their internal structure, that might not always be conducive to linkages between those ministerial departments in charge of emergencies and those responsible for development issues. In addition, they have many urgent and complex crises to attend and some smaller donor countries do not necessarily have the human resources capacity to manage them all and thus have to prioritise their resources.

#### **Bureaucracy and lack of flexibility**

8. Many local organisations have no formal structure and cannot sign official agreements or issue receipts, all of which are requirements imposed by donors and INGOs. Monitoring the delivery of assistance, and demonstrating delivery, is particularly difficult in the Syrian environment. Consequently, most international organisations are often unable to support local organisations. In order to respond to this challenge, donors and international organisations do not need to radically change the system but rather adjust it to the circumstances and see what requirements can be adapted to the reality on the ground or dropped altogether.
9. There seems to be little willingness overall from either INGOs or donors to become more flexible and responsive by, for example, providing direct funding to Syrian NGOs. Indeed, many local actors have to spend much of their time and resources on formalising their structures and operating models, adding another layer of bureaucracy and paperwork. In addition, many international organisations have hired Syrians and pay high salaries, meaning that national organisations cannot compete. As a result, many of their Syrian staff inside Syria left to work with international organisations, creating a significant gap in the local response to the crisis.
10. Sanctions imposed to counter terrorism have adversely affected the ability of Syrian NGOs to open bank accounts or transfer funds. Banks are understandably wary of engaging in activities that might violate their obligations under counter-terror legislation. This is a complex issue and international organisations and donors should prompt legislators to consider when a sanctions regime adversely impacts on humanitarian action. Additionally, Syrian organisations face great delays when receiving and transferring funds for projects in Syria, which means that they cannot pay salaries or



rely on external sources of income; instead they look for funding locally. They are also relying on multiple banks, and would benefit from being able to use one single bank.

11. Risks are often delegated to small organisations working in Syria. Funds are rarely sufficient to include security provisions, insurance and compensation for families in case of incidents arising in fulfilment of work contracts. Due to security issues, many projects will have to stop and assistance will soon be limited only to easily accessible areas. International actors need to be much more conscious of the risks faced by key local partners and identify measures to share the responsibility adequately.

#### **Inadequate trainings**

12. Syrian CSOs have received a plethora of ad hoc training sessions and both local and international participants agreed that these were mostly inadequate. For example, local staff received trainings on proposal writing, but donors were not funding proposals because the local organisations were not registered. Another example would be providing activist training when local organisations would rather need institutional training to help them manage growing staff numbers. Local organisations are asking for specific training programs that suit the needs of each organisation.

### **Requirement and needs**

In order to bridge the gaps identified above, specific measures were discussed.

#### **People first agenda and genuine partnerships**

13. Many highlighted that the narrative on Syria needs to change and focus on a people first agenda and the effect the conflict is having on them. There is a need to set aside the politicisation that is hampering humanitarian action. Each component of the international community carries a part of the responsibility in responding to the situation. Syrian organisations tend to have better access; international organisations on the other hand bring technical know-how and donors have the capacity to fund meaningful initiatives. They must work together, as equal partners, contributing unique assets to the solution. There needs to be a division of labour, and an avenue for all levels to work together through honest dialogue in order to understand each other's strengths and weaknesses and complement one another through genuine partnerships.

#### **Core, long term, flexible funding**

14. Syrian organisations need to have the funds and the capacity to pay salaries and overhead costs. This includes core funding but also programmatic funding that would enable them to survive in the long term, for example to plan ahead and hire employees that might not get funded on project based financing. There should also be more flexible funding for activities that do not fall into specific categories, including renewing passports for Syrian activists for example, and an emphasis put on cash transfers, which is logistically easier to manage, attracts less attention, and is adapted to the rapid changes on the ground. Moreover, CSOs need to find more sustainable fundraising mechanisms than ad-hoc project funding.

#### **Adequate training**

15. Syrian organisations need to articulate their training requirements to INGOs and donors. Greater focus is needed on capacity building under a training umbrella, and a learning process of adapting to the international world through structural measures. This could include language courses, project management, fundraising, financial management or human resources. This should however not be limited to technical training, but also ensure monitoring and strategy planning. Additionally, there needs to be remote training systems for projects in besieged areas as these are particularly difficult to monitor and evaluate. International organisations are also well placed to introduce a system of long-term mentoring of Syrian CSOs as a means of training.

#### **Advocacy**

16. The discourse on Syria often focuses on specific issues such as terrorism. Indeed, the public hears little about the work on the ground and challenges in conflict-affected

areas for both local and international organisations. There need to be ways to do more public work and appeal to the media to relay the right stories.

## Possible avenues

The workshop did not only seek to identify challenges and needs, but also to bring forward concrete solutions.

### 17. Platforms to provide adequate training and give a stronger voice

- Create umbrella organisations of Syrian diaspora groups that can collectively approach potential funders, and also support smaller Syrian NGOs with training.
- Conduct a comprehensive mapping exercise looking at different capacity building programmes that exist and develop a comparative analysis on “what works and what doesn’t and who should take the lead on each element”.
- Focus on how Syrian NGOs can work better among themselves and identify how they can better cooperate with INGOs to give equal chance to all Syrian NGOs and not privilege those who already have access to international entities and funds.

### 18. Creative ways to look at funding

- Pooled funding mechanisms can help ease contractual funding relationships and donors can increase the portions of funds and direct access. Removing transaction fees would be an important step as would be providing cash transfers.
- It is important to be aware of donor fatigue, which could be alleviated by providing smaller grants or by mobilising development budgets in order to help carry the burden on the humanitarian system, and provide a longer-term vision for assistance. Donors in turn should start providing insurance for local staff who work inside Syria. NGOs can push donors towards a more flexible stance and respond to the needs by developing consortia and joint funding mechanisms.
- Joint fundraising campaigns could be useful for local organisations that do not necessarily have access and exposure to funding. INGOS have the credibility and trust of donor communities and local NGOs have examples and cases to attract donations.
- INGOs or other grant-giving bodies are able to sign contracts and budgets to operate, and could for example facilitate the registration of local organisations with local banks or draw money in the absence of an existing account.
- There are a number of multinational funds available for NGOs of all kinds which act as vehicles for financing local activities. A mapping of different funding mechanisms – other than INGOs, the UN and individual states – would be useful to identify new funding sources.

### 19. One voice: advocacy and partnerships

- Invest in a flexible advocacy platform “that is more than the sum of multiple meetings repeating the same issues”. Forums already exist (INGOS, UN coordination systems), but there is not enough investment into coordinated efforts. Local organisations should also come to donors and INGOs with concrete projects to build projects of cooperation.
- Implement a “time out” with donor states in order to discuss the damage politics has done to humanitarian efforts and how it has harmed the ability to work together.
- It is important for local and international organisations not only to share information when there are contractual agreements, but to do so frequently and extensively, in order to be better informed, to be able to assess the gaps and respond collectively.

## Conclusion

The international community, humanitarian organisations and academics often meet during and after conflicts and produce studies, lessons learned and recommendations to avoid future problems. But follow-up is not necessarily undertaken and there needs to be an implementation of these recommendations. The greatest challenge is to bring together a workable initiative to bridge the gap between the international community, government institutions, large humanitarian organisations and Syrian NGOs. This can be done in

different ways such as lowering requirements to facilitate collaboration, increasing incentives through donor policies, demonstrating the cost of negative policies, self-organising and mobilising more effectively. There is a need to be clear on joint objectives and a charter for change in order to have concrete and targeted results, and enable humanitarian aid to be provided to all Syrians affected by the conflict.

**Delphine Mechoulan**

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