LOCALIZING HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE:
RE-THINKING AVENUES FOR WORKING IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS

MEETING CHALLENGES AND LOOKING AHEAD
WORKSHOP OUTPUT DOCUMENT

Photo: Internally displaced children
Camp for IDPs in Atmeh, Syria
Courtesy of Freedom House

Photo: Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria
Courtesy of Jose Javier Martin Espartosaa

WORKSHOP
OUTPUT DOCUMENT

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INTRODUCTION

It is well understood that all those stakeholders who were present at the workshop have a shared interest in alleviating the plight of Syrians suffering due to the current crisis.[1] Working with local partners is a recognized avenue for expanding and improving humanitarian response, yet the complexities of the crisis reveal a number of obstacles in achieving this end. Integrating the shared input of the workshop participants, this strategy document presents a roadmap outlining future steps for addressing these obstacles and ultimately improving collaboration between Swiss and Syrian humanitarian communities.

The overall objective of the workshop was to seek strategies of collaboration between the Swiss and Syrian humanitarian communities by addressing two strategic goals. First, identifying ways of securing capable and trustworthy local Syrian partners. Second, exploring best practices to work with local Syrian Partners. Taking from the inputs and discussions of the workshop, this strategy document aims to explore the challenges and opportunities of achieving each goal, before concluding with a roadmap of suggested step for a localized approach to working in Syria.

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1   This document was prepared as a follow-up to the workshop entitled *"Localizing Humanitarian Response: Re-Thinking Avenues of Support for Syrian Organizations"* which took place at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, Switzerland on March 23rd, 2016. The workshop was attended by representatives of 5 Swiss NGOs, 1 Swiss donor, 2 Syrian NGOs and a major international foundation.

Main **Objective:**

Seeking strategies of collaboration between Swiss and Syrian humanitarian communities

Strategic **Goals:**

Goal One: *Identifying ways of securing local Syrian partners*

Goal Two: *Exploring best practices to work with local Syrian partners*

Photo: Gaziantep, Turkey
Courtesy of Elsa Romera Moreno

GOAL ONE:
IDENTIFYING WAYS OF SECURING LOCAL SYRIAN PARTNERS

The scale and capability of the Syrian local response to the crises is remarkable. Across regime and non-regime controlled areas there are hundreds of active Syrian NGOs. Among these Syrian organizations are those that work cross-border and/or have a presence within Syria. They can range in organizational size, sector specialization and financial means. From small 20 person outfits with a budget of 100,000 USD specializing in the needs of disabled children in isolated areas to large multi-sector organizations handling yearly budgets in the tens of millions, the melange of local NGOs represents a body of significant actual and potential capacity. However, while this body exists, it can be difficult to tap into. It is no small task to identify the "right" partner - one that operates 2,700km away and who most likely did not exist 6 years ago. Caution is both prudent and necessary in making sure that, when working with partners, resources are managed properly and projects executed effectively. There are a number of challenges on the path to opportunity and what follows is an examination of these challenges, particularly those raised in the workshop, and a discussion on ways in which they can be overcome.

Who are these local groups, what do they do, and where are they?

A collection of hundreds of NGOs, differing in organizational formality, size, and financial means. Some of these organizations have the familiar feel of Western NGOs - Large, gleaming offices, highly organized internal structures with several divisions, multiple international partners and funding streams, and the means to address a diverse range of sectors across a large geographical spread of Syria. Others are far more informal, often collections of professionals arranged in a loose network carrying out smaller scale projects in the sector corresponding to their areas of expertise. Many more can be identified as having characteristics between these two poles. Most are officially registered with the Turkish authorities as this facilitates their work, importantly allowing them to legally and transparently work with international bodies. This is especially important for easing the flow of funding between local and international organizations.

Box 1 - The Unique Character of the Syrian NGO Community

Before the crisis, the almost nonexistent Syrian civil society was tightly controlled by the state. It was an arduous task to register legally with the Ministry of Social and Labour Affairs (MOSAL). Subsequently, there were relatively few active registered organizations and these had a distinctly non-political character. Indeed, the vast majority of Syrian organizations now active, sprung up *after* the start of the crisis. Accordingly, it is remarkable the extent to which these organizations have developed over the course of a few short years. In large part, it appears as though this has been driven by a trio of factors:
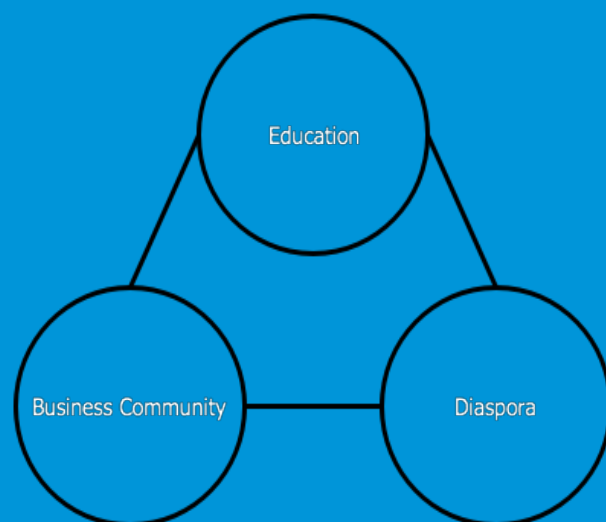

Education
The level of technical and vocational education in Syria was highly advanced and large swathes of the population hold advanced degrees and professional experience. Thus, while very few Syrians have direct experience in the humanitarian (or related) fields, many have transferable skills.

Business Community
Important in providing quick and substantial funds to the fledgling Syrian organizations. The financial injection from the wealthy and interested business community allowed the local NGOs to begin operations and gain experience in humanitarian programming from early on in the crisis.

Diaspora
Like the business community, the widespread and influential Syrian diaspora was important in securing funds for the Syrian NGOs. However, diasporic links, often in the form of Syrian-international board members, were also important in providing professional experience and forging contacts with the international community once the local sources of funding began to dry up.

The makeup of these organizations can differ, though it is possible to identify a common pattern for many. When the crisis started, many educated and active Syrians organized themselves into bodies addressing specific needs, generally in the cities they were based in. Often utilizing connections with members of the Syrian diaspora and/or business community **[see box 1]**, Syrian organizations secured funding from these sources to undertake humanitarian and relief projects. This funding generally came with little to no strings attached, rarely dependent on the meeting of certain formal criteria or standards. However, as the crisis dragged on, these avenues of funding dried up leaving many to re-focus their structure and look elsewhere for support. Now, many of these organizations are dependent on funding from INGOs, generally in the form of project costs. Some organizations, however, maintain independent fundraising capacities, using connections in other countries (mostly in the Gulf states, Western Europe and the US) to conduct charity drives. It is also not too uncommon for certain Syrian NGOs to receive funding from Gulf states, a form of funding which, again, generally comes with far less conditionality, standards and micro-management for its utilization.

The majority of accessible and active Syrian NGOs can be located in the city of Gaziantep in Turkey close to the border of Syria, though a number also exist in nearby Antakya and Reyhanli. The prevalence of local NGOs in Turkey, specifically Gaziantep, can be attributed to the unique legal status granted to Syrian migrants and refugees by the Turkish state. Unlike in other neighboring countries, Turkey allows both for Syrians to seek work and for the legal registration of Syrian NGOs. Importantly, this also makes it easier for Syrian NGOs to interact with international organizations - one of the key reasons why organizations previously solely located within Syrian borders have moved to Turkey and Gaziantep as local sources of funding have begun to diminish with the continuation of the crisis. Thus, many organizations present in Turkey also have several active chapters or offices within Syria from which to launch operations.

How is it possible to reconcile institutional requirements with such a complex environment?

Providing humanitarian assistance in a crisis presents a number of challenges for international organizations. These challenges are further heightened when having to shift to a remote operations modality, where INGOs partner with local NGOs and civil society to provide humanitarian assistance. International organizations looking to provide remote assistance tend to question local capacity, emphasizing concerns over compromised standards, accountability, and overall programming quality. Accordingly, for many INGOs, working remotely with partners is considered an unacceptable risk, one that ought to be avoided except when no other options exist. Indeed, the work of the research team uncovered that such attitudes were commonly held, with the concept of frequently partnerships regarded as a suboptimal solution or a deviation from "best practice". Consequently, the institutional framework that these organizations had for partnering were generally ad-hoc, lacking clearly embedded procedures for finding and working with local partners.

The challenges of working with partners, however, should not be considered prohibitive by INGOs. It is becoming increasingly clear that politically complex man-made humanitarian crises —crises where access and humanitarian space is limited by governance issues and security risks— are here to stay. This is evident in the growing complexity that has faced humanitarian efforts in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and now Syria. In these complex emergencies, working with local actors is frequently the only way to provide humanitarian response.

Thus, if the mindset and institutional frameworks of INGOs don't change, they run the risk of limiting their involvement in not only the Syrian crisis, but also any future complex humanitarian crisis. The likely future scenario is that they will be unable to access affected populations or, if they decide to work with local NGOs, they will be operating with limited effectiveness as such arrangements have been treated in an ad-hoc manner. The picture that emerges is that INGOs wishing to ensure access to current and future complex emergencies need to fundamentally reassess their relationship with local NGOs.

However, working with local partners is not often the *only* way to ensure access and provide humanitarian response, it is often frequently the *best* way to provide humanitarian response. Not just providing access, local NGOs have the proximity and contextual knowledge needed to provide a sustainable response that reflects the true needs of affected populations and better links relief, rehabilitation and development efforts. Thus, partnerships do not need to be seen as insurmountable challenges or as options of last resort. Partnering with local groups should be seen as an opportunity, and not a necessity. In fact, a push towards such a shift is being increasingly supported by the international humanitarian community, as seen in the 2015 World humanitarian summit talks.

This opportunity of providing a localized response and capitalizing on the gains of inclusive local partnerships is clearly present in the context of the Syrian crisis. Due to a complex and insecure environment, local Syrian NGOs are the first responders and main implementers on the ground. These Syrian NGOs form a key part of the humanitarian response and a growing body of research is highlighting that there lies true potential in adopting a localized mindset. The building of inclusive partnerships with Syrian NGOs, partnerships where both international and local NGOs work as equal partners to great effect, is a tangible goal and one that promises to provide better humanitarian response.

Such inclusive partnerships, although fewer in number, do exist in the Turkish hub and the repeated fieldwork visits of the research team demonstrate that they are on the increase. Over the last few years a number of INGOs and national agencies have learnt and adjusted their operations based on a localized response. Such partnerships, when successful, unlock the full capacities of both local and international partners resulting in a more effective overall response. Acknowledgement of these capacities and the benefits of carrying out a more localized response is also being recognized by certain donors, who are similarly understanding the need to adjust and adapt their standards and requirements accordingly. Furthermore, by investing in truly inclusive partnerships at this stage, these INGOs are preparing for the future, as the local NGOs that build experience and capacity at this stage will be instrumental in reconstruction and development work farther down the line.

There thus exists a great opportunity for humanitarian organizations to adopt a localized response for the Syrian crisis, and take part in inclusive partnerships, which treat local partners as equals and fully capitalize on the benefits of partnering with local actors, allowing for the delivery of effective and sustainable humanitarian assistance.

What avenues, mechanisms and strategies exist to reach out, learn about and work with local groups?

A key concern, expressed in the workshop and more generally, is that even if the value of working with partners is acknowledged, how is it possible to identify the right ones? Finding partners in this environment, partners with the relevant competency and experience to match up with the needs and aims of the international humanitarian community, presents a considerable challenge. Over the course of the last few years a number of avenues have emerged to open communication, particularly for the Gaziantep NGO community. A few of these avenues are explored here.

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the cluster system and the Humanitarian Pooled Fund (HPF)

Turkey is an official UN Hub of humanitarian response for the Syrian crisis and, accordingly, OCHA has offices located in Gaziantep as part of the *Whole of Syria* approach. As the lead UN agency in the Turkish hub, they maintain constant contact with all the active Syrian NGOs operating in and around Gaziantep. Indeed, our research confirmed that UNOCHA continually maps the Syrian NGO landscape and maintains semi-formal information on these organizations. It is understood that UNOCHA shares such information on a discretionary basis with INGOs in order to facilitate effective partnerships.

Additionally, the UN OCHA cluster system is considered an excellent medium through which international and local NGOs can make contact and forge working relationships. Meetings, grouped into clusters arranged by sector of humanitarian work, act as a point of contact for the coordination of activities between different interested actors. These clusters create areas where partnerships between international humanitarian actors, national and local authorities, and civil society can be made.

Furthermore, UNOCHA maintains the HPF which acts as a source of direct funding for NGOs working on Syrian projects. The HPF for the Syrian crisis attempts to maintain a focus on funding local NGOs and, as such, a proportion of its funds go directly to Syrian NGOs. As part of this process, UNOCHA maintains a risk assessment of local NGOs who apply for HPF funds. Designated as low, medium or high risk, this assessment can be indicative for INGOs looking for local partners.

However, it is necessary to point out that, although a visible connection point, many Syrian NGOs are not encapsulated by the UNOCHA system. Geo Expertise's study in the Orontes Basin, for example, reveals how only 16 of 320 organizations surveyed in the region were accredited by OCHA. According to one study, OCHA has mapped only 110 of at least 600 to 700 existing active Syrian NGOs.[2]

For more info on the HPF and its risk assessment, see the document located at: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/HPF%20 Accountability%20Framework_Web.pdf

Syrian Networks

The Syrian NGO community has, over time, developed meta-organizations which have a purpose of coordinating their actions, raising awareness and engaging in advocacy. This document explores 3 of these bodies that are particularly noteworthy.

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2   see Reliefweb, *Periodic Monitoring Report. 2015 Strategic Response Plan – Syrian Arab Republic* (2015), 7.
see also Eva Svoboda and Sara Pantuliano, *International and Local/diaspora Actors in the Syria Response* (London:ODI, 2015), iii.

The Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA)

Established in February 2014, the SNA was a response to a perceived growing need for better coordination and information exchange in humanitarian activities in Syra. Now comprised of 19 member organizations, it was originally formed by 5 Syrian organizations who felt the need to have a Syrian voice contributing to the international coordination effort emanating from the UNOCHA Turkish hub for Syria.

The SNA aims to manage, supervise and lead the humanitarian response to the Syrian Crisis. It is a voluntary body that is governed by membership criteria that comply with international standards, and it is run by a steering committee elected by the SNA General Assembly. The Steering Committee leads the management, administrative support and coordination. Arabic has been adopted as the primary language of communication within the coalition, amongst its members, and between partners and collaborators.

The basic objectives of the SNA are:

1) Improving the performance of the Syrian organizations through:

      1.1) Initializing proper monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

      1.2) Promoting IHL and basic standards of humanitarian action

      1.3) Providing capacity-building programs and trainings

2) Establishing working groups that address all sectors of humanitarian action, setting the environment for discussions of highly important issues making decisions in their regard

3) Coordinating and interacting with all humanitarian organizations and agencies that are outside the SNA

4) Coordinating and interacting with international non-governmental organizations and UN agencies working in the humanitarian field

5) Promoting the leading roles for the humanitarian Syrian organizations in planning, coordinating and implementing of humanitarian programs in Syria, and advocating humanitarian issues of the Syrian Crisis before the international community

The SNA appears to be exerting some notable influence in the humanitarian response efforts and has successfully advocated to be a representative in the Humanitarian Liaison Group (HLG). The HLG is a coordination body which features up to four international NGOs, up to four Syrian NGOs, the Turkish Red Crescent and up to three Turkish NGOs, four UN agencies, and up to four representatives from the donor community. It is chaired by the UN's Regional Humanitarian Coordinator.

The current director of the SNA is Dr Fadi Hakim, reachable at: coordinator@syrianna.org

The Syria Relief Network (SRN)

The Syria Relief Network is an umbrella of Syrian humanitarian NGOs working inside Syria and neighboring countries to provide relief to Syrians in desperate need of assistance. It was established by a number of Syrian non-partisan non-profit NGOs and has a number of members and links embedded across the whole of Syria.

Along with coordinating humanitarian efforts, the SRN aims to play a vital role in representing the interests of member organizations to the internationals humanitarian community as well as also highlighting their work and achievement. One of SRN's main goals is to conduct training workshops and provide guidance to member organizations in order to build capacity of these organizations to reach certain level of proficiency.

The SRN lists its "Network Duties" as:

1) Building a unified strategy for NGO's regarding relief field;
2) Coordinate efforts with the other organizations and associations working in the relief field;
3) Building a database for each and every material and human damage that took place in Syria in order to provide a basis upon which can be used later for the distribution of subsidies and compensation to the affected and stricken areas;
4) Drawing a comprehensive map of the affected areas and develop a common perception of the distribution mechanisms of relief and humanitarian aid;
5) Raise capability and proficiency of the working staff in the relief field;
6) Defining the relief and humanitarian situation and to mobilize the Arab and international public opinion to support the relief and humanitarian efforts;
7) Contribute a formulation of public policies and laws to support the relief and humanitarian efforts in Syria;
8) Forming a legal framework recognized by international relief organizations and institutional donors.

With more members than the SNA, the SRN focuses heavily on facilitating information sharing between its members themselves, and between members and INGOs. Indeed, the SRN explicitly confirmed to the research team that it looks to position itself as an information repository for INGOs looking to build partnerships with local actors.

The SRN has an active internet presence. More information, including contact details, can be found at: http://syriareliefnetwork.com/en/

The Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU)

The ACU was formed in December 2012 by the Syrian Coalition in order to coordinate urgent relief efforts to all victims of the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Thus, unlike the two other

networks mentioned in this report, the ACU has an overt political connection. Nonetheless, they adamantly profess a strict adherence to humanitarian principles.

The ACU focuses on establishing communication channels between donors and INGOs, on one hand, and various active individuals, local councils, and local NGOs inside Syria and neighboring countries, on the other hand. To this end, the ACU sets out its mission in four points:

1) Gather and analyze information in order to present humanitarian needs in reports and develop project proposals that are in-line with international standards;
2) Coordinate humanitarian aid to Syrians in-need;
3) Document and evaluate coordinated assistance;
4) Conduct gap analysis and relay feedback to humanitarian policy-makers.

Although like the other networks they have a focus on coordination, once again the ACU stands apart from the SNA and SRN in that it also assume the mantle of project design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. Accordingly, they handle cash and in-kind support. Cash donations to the ACU in 2014 totaled USD 26.6 million while their in-kind donations were valued at USD 169.4 million. They receive much of their support from the Gulf states but also count among their donors the U.S, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Norwegian Refugee Council.

The ACU has an extensive network of Syrian organizations operating within Syria, reportedly having upwards of 100 partners in its network. As such it has a broad coverage of Syria's most affected regions. In 2014, they reported that they were reaching nearly 5.5 million beneficiaries.

Like the SRN, the ACU has an active internet presence. More information, including contact details, can be found at: http://www.acu-sy.org/en/

Independent Facilitators

Occupying the space where research meets action, both Geo Expertise and the Graduate Institute Research Team have identified an opportunity for the humanitarian response in Syria. Using qualitative and quantitative research methods, these two teams have gained an insight into the ways in which Syrian NGOs operate and the ways in which they can be supported to improve the delivery of humanitarian assistance. As a consequence of their work, and with a continued presence in Southern Turkey and Northern Syria, these two teams are mapping out the local response to the Syrian crisis in these areas. Accordingly, they represent a conduit for identifying and working with Syrian NGOs.

Geo Expertise

With offices in Geneva, Switzerland and Reyhanli in Turkey, Geo Expertise is a Swiss-Syrian organization active in the water sector in the Syrian humanitarian response. Their core areas of expertise are:

– The application of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) on several research domains;
– Management of geo-referenced databases;
– The implementation of campaigns to collect geo –referenced databases based on innovative methods;
– The development of standards, methodologies and tools to improve the collection, storage and analysis of geo –referenced data;
– Conduct spatial analysis and generation of thematic map and statistical reports;
– Training in capacity building (technique and management of water resource) and Geographical information System.

Originating from a survey of water management in the Orontes river basin, Geo Expertise's began an active project with the support of the SDC to train local Syrian organization on project design, on the management of water resources, and on how to meet international standards. Stemming from this project, Geo Expertise began to map the active NGOs in the region. They now have a database of over 320 organizations.

Geo Expertise continues to work with the SDC in the Orontes region and remains a value source of information on small to mid-sized NGOs operating within northern Syria. They can be contacted at:
- ronald.jaubert@graduateinstitute.ch
- ahmed.haj-asaad@graduateinstitute.ch

Graduate Institute Research Team (on Syrian Localization)

Steven Dixon, Elsa Romera Moreno and Amal Sadozai have spent the last 11 months researching the role of local Syrian groups in the humanitarian response to the crisis. Focusing on the Syrian NGOs that operate in Southern Turkey, the research team has gathered substantial data on the existence, role and capacity of Syrian NGOs and the relationship dynamics they have with INGOs and donors. Possessing several months of fieldwork data between the three of them, the team has conducted upwards of 47 interviews with Syrian NGOs, Syrian networks, INGOs, international donors, UN agencies, and Swiss NGOs and donors. Through their work, the team has developed close relationships and contacts with numerous Syrian NGOs in and around the Gaziantep region which, coupled with their in depth database on the role and capability of NGOs, has the potential to be a valuable resource for linking Swiss and international NGO capacity with Syrian NGO capacity.

Syrian NGOs have made it clear that the research team can act as an informal facilitator, arranging contact and opening dialogue with INGOs and local NGOs. The team is reachable via email at:
- steven.dixon@graduateinstitute.ch
- elsa.romera@graduateinstitute.ch
- amal.sadozai@graduateinstitute.ch

GOAL TWO: EXPLORING BEST PRACTICES TO WORK WITH LOCAL SYRIAN PARTNERS

Identifying and reaching out to local partners represents only one half of the localization process. To get the most out of localization, the partnership must incorporate the relative strengths of both the local and the international partner. INGOs can bring a wealth of experience and operational know-how to humanitarian programming, whereas local partners can have a unique understanding of the situation, bringing access and vital contextual knowledge to the table. Predominantly, by virtue of available resources, it is the INGO which holds the "position of power" within a partnership. Thus, the burden of responsibility for ensuring that the relationship best serves the country in crisis and the affected populations falls heavily on the international partner. Working relationships of this sort in the humanitarian field are naturally complex, yet there exists a range of material and study which can inform any organization embarking on the process of forming one. What follows is an exploration of how to develop best practices within a partnership and how to foster a good working relationship that results, ultimately, in the best possible outcome for humanitarian response.

How do we address concerns over compromised donor requirements and standards?

One of the main challenges of operating in a complex crisis is a concern over compromised standards. This is linked to the challenge of identifying capable and trustworthy local partners, with INGOs having concerns over a perceived lack of capacity among local NGOs to meet international donor requirements.

While partnering and providing such humanitarian assistance, international organizations have to abide by standards of operations set by themselves, as well as by common international standards approved by the international humanitarian community and those specific to donors. Yet one must not underestimate the capacity, both actual and potential, of local NGOs. In the case of the Syrian NGO community, they have a demonstrable ability to meet standards. Generally the problem of meeting such standards is the result of difficulties in report writing rather than shortcoming in technical capacity. Currently the Syrian NGO community is going from strength to strength in learning how to meet these standards, and how to "speak the language" of the international humanitarian community. Indeed, over the course of the last few years Syrian NGOs have gone from a situation where even writing reports in appropriate English was a problem, to a situation were they have arranged complex networks of third-party monitoring among themselves.

A key component in Syrian NGOs developing to this level is the understanding that, at least in the first instance, they benefit from a flexibility of standards. Indeed, research shows that international standards can often be inappropriate, at times unfit for purpose. Rigid, wholesale application of standards often do not reflect the realities and needs on the ground. This is particularly the case in complex man-made humanitarian crises and particularly the case in Syria. A simple yet illustrative example of this can be found in some of the stricter standards on the M&E on distribution programs **[See box 2]**. While the importance of upholding standards for the provision of accountable humanitarian assistance is recognized by local actors, the proliferation and duplication of inflexible standards adds increasing pressure upon them. This can result in a further harming of current local capacities and the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance in a complex and sensitive environment. In fact, the detrimental effects of this are well recognized, with the proliferation of standards at every level leading to the Joint Standard Initiative's Common Humanitarian Standards and the Common Humanitarian Standard Alliance, both aiming to work towards the harmonization of international standards.

The research carried out on the Syrian crisis thus far highlights the opportunity for donors and international actors to take a localized approach. Taking a longer-term approach and engaging in meaningful, inclusive and equitable partnerships with local NGOs allows for the identification of appropriate standards in the working relationships. Naturally, INGOs are

beholden themselves to the requirements of donors and, when located further away from the action on the ground, there is a feeling that donors can be less understanding about the need for flexibility. Nonetheless the dire situation in Syria and the necessity of using local NGOs to gain humanitarian access has led many INGOs and donors to take a more flexible approach to standards and requirements. This is particularly evident in the Gaziantep NGO community and particularly evident when the effort to forge strong international-local partnerships has been made. In such circumstances trust can be built, and alternative, more appropriate measures of accountability can be developed.

Box 2 - Unwieldy Standards

Often donors and/or INGOs required detailed personal information (sometimes even photos) on beneficiaries residing in areas that were changing hands between different armed groups. Though local NGOs had the capacity to do this, it was understood that few among the vulnerable population were comfortable providing such information when its misuse could put them in danger. Standards were also commonly considered inappropriate when dealing with programs targeting besieged areas, where complicated distribution channels were not conducive to multiple levels of reporting.

From such a position, in these inclusive partnerships, the international NGO is in a key position to help build meaningful and long-lasting capacity of the local partner, further helping them meet international standards. This process should be seen as a goal in itself, given the key role the NGOs play in the current humanitarian response and the key role they must, and will, play in the future of Syria. In contexts where Syrian NGOs have had the chance to receive effective and relevant capacity building trainings, a number of these organizations have proven their ability to build on their existing capacities to meet international standards within the span of just a few years. This has enabled many Syrian organizations to secure continued partnerships and funding from international partners and donors. From the research of the Graduate Institute team, capacity building was most effective and durable in situations of inclusive partnerships where INGOs incorporated the suggestions of the local partners and provided more of a mentoring modality of capacity support, aimed at sustainable organizational capacity building. There therefore exists an important opportunity for donors and INGOs to engage in more localized and inclusive partnerships with local Syrian partners to make the most of their contextual knowledge and proximity and incorporating flexibility of standards and sustained capacity building.

A further, final point must be made regarding INGO and donor concerns over requirements on humanitarian principles. There are fears that working in areas outside the regime control may naturally result in the compromising of their own principles, yet such concerns are valid even

when working *inside* regime areas **[see box 3]**. While INGOs and donors may feel vulnerable operating outside the framework of governmental control, the reality is that the majority of those in need reside in these areas.

Box 3 - Working in Regime or Non-Regime Areas

International organizations must be aware of the specific setting in which they are operating. Few international organizations and aid agencies are conducting their activities directly within Syria. Indeed, the security context has prevented many organizations from entering a country in which they were largely absent prior the conflict. Many INGOs and UN agencies have therefore decided to work through Syrian organizations, either by creating partnerships or by subcontracting their activities to them. Almost uniformly, the Syrian NGO community, which mainly created in reaction to the crisis, operates outside of regime areas and does so against the wishes of the regime. Thus these organizations and their staff face threats from the regime and often find it difficult to work in areas where the regime and its military forces are present, though many still operate in these areas clandestinely. Though persecuted by the regime, the vast majority of Syrian NGOs adhere in their mission statements to humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Therefore, when deciding to work in regime-controlled areas, INGOs and aid agencies will beless likely to have contacts with Syrian organizations. Consequently, the overwhelming majority of Syrian organizations are not registered inside Syria with the government, but have rather opened offices in Turkey or are registered with the opposition. Many INGOs, aid and UN agencies make the choice to conduct their activities in this grey area, made possible by the cross-border humanitarian relief context.

For some Swiss organizations, the decision not to work with and through local partners was very much framed in terms of a loss of control and risk to humanitarian principles, regardless of context. Many humanitarian organizations are concerned with the risk of non-compliance with the principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality when creating partnerships with organizations not recognized by the government of the country where the crisis is taking place. Yet, Syrian organizations developing according to Western NGOs standards are particularly aware of the requirement of strictly following humanitarian principles. This has been imposed on them as a primary requirement to engage in humanitarian activities in collaboration with INGOs and aid agencies. Furthermore, this concern over compromised humanitarian principles exists for organizations with operations in areas still under the control of the regime as well. The reality is that it is very difficult for organizations to work in both regime and non-regime areas. To avoid any risk of compromise over their principles and provide assistance according to their humanitarian duties, organizations must therefore focus on responding to the needs according to their expertise and capacities. It is, in the end, an organizationally strategic decision made by each humanitarian organizations to start activities in a specific area instead of another.

How is it possible to engage in meaningful and sustainable partnerships?

How the term partnership is understood is key, going beyond simple semantics. Syrian organizations are interested in entering meaningful and sustainable partnerships with organizations and aid agencies that treat them equitably, respecting what they bring to the table and valuing their input. Indeed, evidence bears out that, when done correctly, equitable and inclusive partnerships are far more beneficial for humanitarian response from relief to the longer term. When Syrian organizations are used solely as an implementing entity, executing the will of the distant international partner, there is a far higher chance that programming will be of a "copy and paste" variety. Where the input of local actors is not sought and their local expertise is not taken onboard, projects generally focus on the distribution of emergency supplies which, although necessary, is limited in scope and can contribute to dependency problems. It is widely acknowledged that, in its sixth year, there is greater need and scope for programs that go beyond distribution. Where local NGOs are integrated successfully into a partnership, programs are often more innovative, help harder to reach beneficiaries, and have greater sustainability. In sum, equal partnerships, where the international partner respects the local partner and truly invests in supporting their capacity, have much more positive results for programming that a) is sensitive to local needs; b) covers a broader area; c) is more capable of spanning the range of relief, rehabilitation, and development; d) is more sustainable over the longer term.

In a recent research conducted by Joanna Pyres and Helga van Kampen on effective partnerships for humanitarian assistance in Syria, the authors highlighted that a partnership "has specific connotations of shared risk and benefit, aspiring towards a level of equity between those involved as 'partners' and a commitment to co-creating the partnering approach and project activities."[3] For that reason, Syrian organizations expect the creation of a real working relationship where they, where possible, are involved in all steps of the process, from project design through to its monitoring and evaluation. When working with local NGOs, equity and inclusiveness is paramount for a successful relationship that avoids animosity. In fact, for many Syrians, the term partnership is withheld when the relationship is simply one where the local partner is expected to act solely as the implementor, as the final link in "the chain". It must be noted that this feeling runs strong in the Syrian NGO community and well established Syrian organizations with their own means will even refuse projects with an organizations that limit them to a solely implementing role. A key aspect of this is that Syrian NGOs resent having programmatic risk transferred to them by the international partner without being given the respect of having their voices heard and their input considered.

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3   Joanna Pyres and Helga van Kampen, *Partnering for Syria: Observations and recommendations on how to build more effective partnerships for humanitarian assistance in Syria* (ICVA, 2015).

Many Syrian NGOs explained that they would naturally take on the risk of programming, no matter what, for their country and their people, but when they do under the aegis of partnership with an INGO or aid agency, they expect due respect, guidance and collaboration from the international organization.

Therefore, several Syrian organizations told the research team that they test their international partners in the same way they are tested by INGOs. For that reason, pilot projects are useful for partners to learn how to work together. The research team has interviewed local organizations in Gaziantep which have varied way of interacting with their international partners, with some maintaing daily contact and and others maintaing more sporadic contact. It is only by starting a collaboration that partners can best learn from the process, but both Syrian and international organizations have acknowledged that only a serious partnership would prove efficient. This requires to invest in multilingual communication and trust, as avoiding misunderstandings is key to the success of the partnership. Many Syrian organizations shared with the research team examples of long-lasting, effective partnerships. They considered to be learning a lot from the process, yet at the same time contributing actively to it. Many projects initially planned for 6 months were therefore extended.

Overall, there has been much study done on the practical dynamics of forging strong international-local humanitarian partnerships. From both a practitioner and academic standpoint the Syrian crisis holds a particular relevance for localization trends and practices and, subsequently, there have been a number of studies on the Syrian response and the dynamics between international and local humanitarian actors. The intimacy and depth of study by independent researchers makes them an excellent resource for understanding the best practices of partnering and a potential focal point for understanding and connecting with Syrian organizations. There are a number of studies and research teams which have made Syrian NGOs and partnership the subject of their study **[see box 4]**.

Box 4 - Independent Researchers

Tufts University Research Team

Kimberly Howe, Elizabeth Stites and Danya Chudacoff are researchers at Tufts University and the authors of US State Department sponsored report entitled, *Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings— The Cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan*, published in February 2015. The purpose of this study was to examine partnerships between international and local organizations engaging in humanitarian action in remote management and insecure settings.

In a longitudinal study, the team conducted repeated interviews with 5 Syrian NGOs based in Gaziantep, Turkey and their partners. They also interviewed an additional 27 international and local organizations responding to the Syrian conflict. Their findings demonstrated the vital role of local NGOs, disproportionate emphasis on M&E, and the ways in which partnerships can best thrive to the benefit of the overall humanitarian response.

Breaking the Hourglass can be found at:
http://fic.tufts.edu/assets/Breaking-the-Hourglass_Syria_Iraqi-Kurdistan.pdf

The Partnership Brokers Association (PBA) Research Team

Joanna Pyres and Helga van Kampen are approved associates working with and on behalf of the PBA. In that capacity they organized a workshop in Gaziantep in 2015 and published the report "Partnering for Syria (#partners4syria): Observations and recommendations on how to build more effective partnerships for humanitarian assistance in Syria" in November 2015. ICVA commissioned this research to understand the current state of partnerships in the context of the Syrian crisis with the aim to issue recommendations on how to improve those.

Eighteen organizations attended the workshop, but the researchers also conducted interviews and organized a strategic meeting with a consultative group (7 NGOs, 1 donor and 1 UN agency). Their approach was not only to identify challenges in partnerships but to suggest principles of good partnering practice. Their work and report is particularly relevant to any organization interested in entering an effective partnership.

Partnering for Syria can be found at:
http://tinyurl.com/jctslgw

ROADMAP:
LOOKING AHEAD

This document has disussed the local Syrian NGO community and its response to the Syrian crisis. It has explored the ways in which Syrian NGOs can be identified and the ways in which relationships with them can be most beneficial. In doing so, this document has attempted to address the issues raised in the workshop. Where the two prior sections serve as a reference point for parties interested in accessing the Syrian crisis and working with local partners, this third and final section serves the purpose of offering more concrete suggestions for these parties to proceed.

Roadmap

- **Shift the organizational mindset and institutional framework to consider partnerships as a necessary and integral part of responding to complex emergencies**
  - *Though there will always be a need for organizations to work directly, more must be done to understand that local NGOs are key to sustainable and successful long-term humanitarian response.*

- **Consider designating staff as dedicated focal points for finding and forging partnerships**
  - *Ad-hoc approaches to partnering increase the undermine chances of finding the right partner, forging successful relationships and, ultimately, undertaking effective humanitarian work. Dedicating resources to develop thorough internal approaches to partnerships will result in better overall humanitarian assistance.*

- **Utilize existing mechanisms to understand and reach out to local NGOs**
  - *There exist several avenues through which contact can be made with local NGOs and through which their capacities can be examined. The OCHA's coordination mechanisms are tried and tested entry point for making contact and learning about local NGOs and there are several Syrian networks who are dedicated to facilitation and coordination. Finally, Geo Expertise and the research team, with their in-depth knowledge of the Syrian NGO landscape, remain at the disposal of organizations interested in forging local connections.*

- **Invest in developing good, equitable, and inclusive working practices with local NGOs**
  - *Once contact has been made, it is essential that a good working relationship is formed which utilizes the relative strengths of both the local and international partner. Ensuring a two-way flow of communication which seeks input at every possible stage of a project is key to this process.*

- **Actively seek to help local partners develop beyond a simple means to an end**
  - *Given its value to the affected society, supporting local NGOs should be seen as an end in itself, not only a means to an end. Working with local partners just to see the completion of a project, poaching staff and withholding the overheads necessary for local NGOs to develop, ultimately undermines the resilience of an affected society and its ability to recover from disaster.*

About the authors
The Research Team

Steven Dixon

A graduate of the University of Leeds and Hong Kong University, Steven is currently working with Geo Expertise on their Syrian Civil Society Support Program while concurrently finishing an MA in international affairs at the Graduate Institute in Geneva. Steven's academic experience is centred on humanitarian intervention, conflict and peacebuilding and humanitarian response. Most recently employed as a research assistant at the Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative (IPTI), Steven was responsible for analyzing the role of women in peace negotiations, co-authored the report, "Making Women Count - Not Just Counting Women" and was a credited contributor to the UNWomen Global study on resolution 1325 released in 2015. Passionate about the dynamics of humanitarian response, Steven's graduating thesis explores localization and political economy of humanitarian partnerships in the Syrian crisis.

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Elsa is a Master student in International Affairs at the Graduate Institute in Geneva. She is currently working with Geo Expertise on the Syrian Civil Society Support Program while writing her master thesis on humanitarian assistance and coordination in the context of the Syrian crisis. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from the University of Geneva and currently also works as both a tour guide at the Palais des Nations and as a volunteer at an asylum seeker centre in Lausanne where she offers French classes. She speaks French, Spanish and English, and is learning Arabic.

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Amal is pursuing a Master of International Affairs with a specialization in Conflict and Peacebuilding from the Graduate Institute of Geneva. Working with Geo Expertise on the Syrian Civil Society Support Program, she is also currently writing her Master's thesis on the role of Syrian civil society capacity building in remote humanitarian operations. She holds a Bachelor Honours degree in International Relations and History from the University of Toronto, Canada. She has recently completed a 3-month internship with the Qatar Red Crescent in Gaziantep, focusing on their remote humanitarian operations and partnerships with Syrian NGOs. She is a fluent speaker of English, Urdu and Pashto.