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Syrian Civil Society and the Swiss Humanitarian Community

Challenge, Opportunity and the Future of Syria

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
CAFOD	Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
CPE	Complex political emergency
CSO	Civil society organization
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
ECHO	European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
INGO	International nongovernmental organization
IO	International organization (including both INGOs and UN agencies)
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PoP	Principles of Partnership
RRD	Relief, rehabilitation and development
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

Executive Summary

Complex political emergencies (CPEs) such as the humanitarian crisis raging in Syria pose significant challenges to the international humanitarian community. The ability to directly implement humanitarian projects is severely compromised in environments characterized by the breakdown of political order and extreme insecurity. Threats to the wellbeing of staff and the lack of a clear central political body with which to work, means that international humanitarian organizations face difficult decisions on how best to deliver assistance to vulnerable populations. Establishing partnerships with local actors is one such potential decision, utilizing their proximity and access to work in areas where international organizations (IOs) cannot.

Working with local organizations in CPEs is by no means a humanitarian panacea and there are indeed significant challenges that need to be overcome. There are very real concerns that providing funding, material, and assistance to local groups could have potentially serious ramifications for the humanitarian principles that underpin the work of IOs. In such complex situations, resources allocated to local actors could be employed discriminately, distributed or withheld to people on the basis of political, religious, or ethnic affiliation. The risk that such resources could also be siphoned off to provide support to warring parties is also ever-present.

Nonetheless, the benefits of working with local partners is well-documented in the literature and, done with care, presents numerous opportunities for effective, sustainable assistance in humanitarian crises – even, or especially, in CPEs. Numerous studies attest to the positive outcomes of taking a "localization" approach to humanitarian assistance, highlighting how local actors not only have access to vulnerable populations, but also possess contextual knowledge vital to assessing and understanding actual humanitarian needs. Proximity and contextual knowledge also ensure that local actors are important agents in the delivery and maintenance of sustainable humanitarian assistance.

Traditionally, it was the practice of the international humanitarian community to treat assistance in the manner of a continuum, with relief, rehabilitation, and development (RRD) programs to be delivered sequentially. Crises, however, necessarily require all three types of RRD program simultaneously – in the manner of a contiguum – in order to best address the needs of an affected country, something which is exceptionally onerous in a CPE. In this regard, local actors are well placed to deliver programming in this fashion. Evidence suggests that, while no easy feat, the formation of equal and inclusive partnerships between international and local actors can utilize the strengths of each, unlocking great potential.

This report examines the current work of a sub-section of the Swiss humanitarian community in relation to Syria, exploring attitudes and practices towards local partnerships in this setting. Likewise, the partnership experiences of Syrian humanitarian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are similarly examined. Building on this analysis, the report ultimately acts as a justified action plan on how to minimize the challenges and maximize the opportunities of partnerships for the delivery of humanitarian assistance in the future of Syria.

The research identified that in Syria, Swiss humanitarian organizations were conspicuous by their absence. Only 3 of the 9 interviewed were active within the country, with the rest working with

Syrian refugees in neighboring states. Their absence was primarily the result of the security situation and a lack of will or self-perceived ability to work with local actors. Some Swiss organizations were categorically unwilling to make what they saw as an unacceptable "trade-off" of gaining access inside Syria by relinquishing some degree of control and oversight of programming to local actors. Importantly however, with few exceptions, there was general acknowledgement among the Swiss organizations that working with local actors in Syria could in theory yield benefits and improve the Swiss humanitarian response, yet all these organizations claimed that they lacked the knowledge and capacity to identify the existence, trustworthiness and capability of potential partners. Additionally, a lack of will on the part of major donors to fund projects inside Syria was stated as a prohibitive factor in the formation of partnerships. In total, only one Swiss organization had opted to establish a partnership with a local Syrian humanitarian NGO, however in this instance the partnership predated the crisis. Unable to establish significant direct presence in Syria, the lack of partnerships shuts out a potential source of opportunity to deliver sustainable humanitarian assistance. Given that CPEs such as Syria are looked to be the norm of humanitarian crises in the future, a lack of attention paid to this avenue ought to be a cause for concern for Swiss organizations.

Fieldwork research conducted in the UN OCHA humanitarian response hub of Gaziantep, Turkey, further revealed how the current challenges to the formation of partnerships can be met. Examination of the perceptions, experiences and practices of partnering between IOs and Syrian NGOs yielded important information and lessons on how partnerships can be best formed and maintained. These lessons indicate how the full benefits of localization can be wrought when working in partnership. The research revealed 8 areas of interest where partnerships can either flourish or flounder. These areas are ownership, sustainability, capacity building, standards, coordination, communication, and trust and respect.

Swiss organizations would do well to invest in their internal capacity to identify Syrian partners as a means to improve the delivery of sustainable humanitarian assistance and overcome the challenges of working in Syria. Such an investment would also result in these organizations being prepared for future crises and CPEs. In forming these partnerships, several considerations must be made.

Top-down, subcontracting partnerships that limit the input of local actors to a solely implementing role run the risk of overlooking the contextual knowledge that they can bring to bear. Practices that demonstrate commitment to equitable, inclusive partnerships have far greater potential in delivering effective humanitarian aid.

Relatedly, sharing ownership of programming also has important, positive consequences for the sustainability of humanitarian assistance. Allowing space for local actors to have genuine input into programming helps to build their capacity and ability to sustain all types of humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, in order to achieve greater sustainability, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) should be aware of addressing not only relief when working with local partners, but also using these connections to identify possible areas where much needed rehabilitation and development can occur.

Special attention ought to be paid to capacity building. Investing in the capacity of the local organization as a whole, not just a means to an end in a particular project, will again not only ensure sustainability, but also improve the overall humanitarian response in Syria.

The usage of standards in partnerships is another area where lessons can be learned. Although vitally important in the prevention of abuse, there is nevertheless room for greater flexibility of standards tailored to the specific Syrian context. Working with local organizations to meet these

standards is a crucial part of improving humanitarian assistance. Likewise, efforts to "standardize standards" across organizations would reduce the considerable demands that numerous, heterogeneous standards place on local actors.

In order to best benefit from partnerships, Swiss organizations should also make effective use of the coordinating mechanisms available. Not only are there fruitful avenues of coordination within the UN OCHA system, there are networks of Syrian NGOs which can be tapped into to facilitate partnerships with capable and trustworthy local actors.

Consideration for proper communication within partnerships is also fundamental to their smooth operation. Miscommunication leads to misunderstandings, which in turn leads to ineffective programming and the breakdown of partnerships.

Finally, underpinning all aspects of partnerships, there should be sincere efforts to establish trust and respect on both sides.

Overall, as the attention and funding of the international community fades, a strong and experienced local humanitarian community is the best prospect for ensuring that the needs of vulnerable populations are met. Thus, the report delivers the following 9 recommendations:

1) Swiss and international organizations should not view partnerships with local organizations as a last resort resulting from the existence of a CPE, but should prioritize such partnerships and embrace the humanitarian shift towards localization.

2) Swiss and international organizations ought to invest in the creation of organizational mechanisms or practices in order to identify potential local partners in complex political emergencies.

3) Swiss and international organizations, where possible, ought to favor the creation of inclusive partnerships with local organizations.

4) Swiss and international organizations ought to invest in sustainable capacity building, with an emphasis on internal organizational capability.

5) Swiss and international organizations should consider flexibility in partnerships by having a context-specific use of standards.

6) Swiss and international organizations should invest in, and capitalize on coordination mechanisms and become primary actors in the creation of coordination hubs, such as those found in Turkey.

7) Swiss and international organizations should address issues of communication, trust and respect from the onset of the partnership with local organizations.

8) Swiss and international organizations should consider changing their mind-set on CPEs, and look beyond just the delivery of relief programs, especially those focused on distribution.

9) Swiss and international donors ought to be bolder in funding humanitarian organizations with projects inside Syria, prioritizing those that form inclusive partnerships with Syrian organizations.

Photo: Umayyad Mosque,
Damascus, Syria.
Courtesy of Jose Javier Martin Espartosa.

Introduction

The introduction is comprised of general overview of the report, an explanation of the context of the fieldwork conducted, a discussion on the preliminary assumptions underpinning the report and, finally, a presentation on the research questions and objectives.

Overview

Well into its fifth year, the crisis in Syria continues to exact a tragic and devastating human toll. It is estimated that over 220,000 people have been killed and that 12.2 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, approximately 7.6 million of which are internally displaced (UNHCR 2014, 2). As the crisis continues, the humanitarian situation is increasingly deteriorating in the face of uninterrupted violence from both government and opposition forces. Civilians routinely suffer from rape and sexual violence, enforced disappearances, forcible displacement, the recruitment of child soldiers, summary executions and deliberate shelling (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015, iii). In addition, civilian infrastructure throughout the country lies in ruins, with schools and hospitals destroyed and the provision of water and electricity heavily disrupted. All told, Syria represents the world's largest humanitarian crisis since World War II (ECHO 2015).

When countries suffer from destruction of this magnitude, it is assumed that any effective effort to protect the immediate and future wellbeing of the affected country and its people will require the support of the international community. This support is typically delivered through a multitude of international organizations and aid agencies providing humanitarian assistance through a set of practices deemed most suited to meet the needs of at-risk and vulnerable populations.

This study was conducted under the aegis of an Applied Research Seminar at T*he Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies* in Geneva in partnership with *Geo Expertise*, an NGO with offices in both Geneva and Reyhanli. It sets out to examine one such practice in particular, the

Photo: Internally displaced Syrian Boys. Camp for IDPs in Atmeh, Syria. Courtesy of Freedom House.

practice of partnerships between international and local actors. This reports build upon an extensive review of literature on humanitarian practices, both in general and specifically in the Syrian crisis, with data collected from 46 interviews with Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs), INGOs, UN agencies and Swiss aid agencies and NGOs.

For the purpose of this report, civil society refers to a group of NGOs, networks and grassroot movements forming organizations, working in Syria and with or without representation and registration in Turkey, with the purpose of providing humanitarian services, ranging from emergency relief to more longer term sustainable projects. It is important to note that this definition is limited to our findings and experiences with a number of Syrian organizations, an overwhelming majority of which have a presence in the city of Gaziantep, Turkey. These organizations, are mainly operating outside of the regime controlled areas, and most of them have been created as a response to the crisis. Their impact lies both inside Syria and outside through their work in neighboring countries and diaspora representations.

The findings from this examination inform the presentation of recommendations aimed at improving the delivery of effective and sustainable humanitarian assistance to those in need. The report was motivated by a desire to understand the apparent lack of partnerships between Swiss humanitarian and Syrian CSOs. Hence, it examines current partnership practices as experienced by Syrian CSOs and Swiss organizations, identifying challenges and opportunities. Combining findings on these experiences with the broader literature, the report makes a series of recommendations on how partnerships can best be conducted in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Though tailored to Swiss organizations, both the findings and recommendations contain information likely to have value to the broader international humanitarian community.

This report is grounded in two key, ongoing debates present in the field of humanitarian action, specifically on the issues of sustainability and the role of local actors.

Sustainability has long been recognized as a vital consideration among the international humanitarian community. Following the emergence of the so-called “developmentalist critique”, it wasfound that simply focusing on the distribution of supplies left local populations dependent on

humanitarian organizations in the medium to long-term, even after critical short term needs have been met. This ultimately undermines the capacity of local communities and does little to reduce overall vulnerability (Curtis 2001, 6). In response to this critique, key actors in the international humanitarian community began to place greater emphasis on sustainability and development. Thus, from the early 1990s onwards, a philosophy of linking humanitarian relief to longer term development permeated thinking on humanitarian assistance (White and Cliffe 2000, 316-319).

Originally the international humanitarian community incorporated the idea of sustainability by approaching crises as a continuum-like spectrum, employing RRD programs in a linear, sequential fashion. This paradigm shifted, however, following a growing body of evidence identifying the need for simultaneous, contiguum-like deployment of RRD programs throughout the course of a crisis. The evidence suggests that an effective contiguum approach can best meet the needs of vulnerable people in a sustainable manner (White and Cliffe 2000). Yet, despite this paradigm shift the international humanitarian community continues to struggle in overcoming the challenges related to simultaneous RRD implementation.

Local actors are increasingly being identified as possessing the actual and potential ability to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of humanitarian assistance. Although international organizations have long worked with local actors - to date, virtually all current major humanitarian providers have engaged with local organizations to implement humanitarian programs - these arrangements have predominantly employed local actors as subcontractors, whose input in the partnership was limited to implementing projects at the will of the international actor. Both in theory and in practice, relationships between international humanitarian organizations and local actors have generally been perceived through a negative lens of "remote management", defined as a practice of last-resort when security conditions make direct action by the staff of international organizations unviable. However, recent developments within the international humanitarian system have seen the emergence of a "localization" trend reappraising international-local relationships in a more positive light (Nightingale 2013; IFRC 2015; Gingerich and Cohen 2015). This trend, reflected in a growing body of reports and studies, extols the benefits from the formation of inclusive partnerships between local and international actors. A partnership which is able to capitalize on context-specific capacity and knowledge to deliver better and more sustainable humanitarian assistance.

In the case of Syria, the issues of sustainability and local actors are particularly challenging as Syria represents a CPE. CPEs are crises characterized by a political context in which the state itself has either collapsed, been contested or been seriously weakened (Cliffe and Luckham 1999). The immediate practical consequence of CPEs is an absent or contested state - the main institution which international humanitarian organizations have seen as central for humanitarian assistance and sustained relief and development (Cliffe and Luckham 1999). Thus Syria, and CPEs in general, represent a paradox to the international humanitarian community. With Syria being a CPE, working with local actors proves difficult, yet it is precisely the security environment of the CPE that makes working with local partners a necessity, as it becomes too dangerous for international organizations to work directly.

Yet, this paradoxical situation contains opportunities as well as challenges: if one can overcome the

challenge of identifying and working with local actors, their proximity, access, and contextual knowledge present opportunities to improve the overall humanitarian response and the prospects for sustainable relief and development.

Fieldwork Context

Any conclusions drawn from this report must be considered in relation to the nature of the fieldwork that provided much of the research data. The majority of the interviews were conducted with Syrian organizations with an organizational presence in the Gaziantep region of Turkey. Accordingly, the experiences recorded pertain to a specific context for Syrian organizations operating out of Gaziantep and Turkey.

Looking at the wider context of humanitarian response, Turkey is one of three hubs from which humanitarian action on Syria is directed, with the other two being Jordan and Syria. Each hub acts as a platform of coordination between humanitarian actors designed to improve efficiency of action. As of Security Council Resolution 2165 in September 2014, the three hubs have been subsumed under the wider coordinating framework Whole of Syria Response (Humanitarian Response 2015a). Syrian organizations operating from the Turkish hub are situated in a particular practical, legal and political environment. Unlike in other neighboring countries and hubs, Syrians in Turkey are able to register as NGOs and work legally in such capacity. Accordingly, many of the suggested practices and recommendations in this report may, as of this time, have limited applicability to organizations operating in other neighboring countries.

Gaziantep based organizations possess varying degrees of physical presence within Syrian territory. Thus, although they had offices in Turkey, most Syrian NGOs also had offices and staff inside Syria, as well as established networks of contacts. Indeed, most organizations interviewed were capitalizing on the ability to be registered in Turkey, primarily because legal registration with the regime in Syria is currently effectively impossible. Registration in Turkey afforded a legal presence that allowed for greater visibility and integration into the international system, facilitating their ability to work with INGOs and receive external funding.

The Humanitarian Paradox of CPEs

Complex political emergencies, with their associated security and political difficulties, present huge challenges to international humanitarian organizations and discourage the formation of partnerships. However, because CPEs often have security situations that make direct implementation impossible, working with local partners can be the only way for INGOs to deliver humanitarian aid.

Assumptions

This study was underpinned by two main assumptions.

First, given that Syria represents a complex political emergency, access and security issues present in the Syrian crisis would make the act of working within the country difficult and potentially unviable for many Swiss aid organizations. Subsequently, partnering with Syrian local organizations presents an opportunity for Swiss organizations to deliver effective humanitarian assistance inside Syria. Second, although this opportunity exists, its potential may be unrealized due to a lack of adequate information, established networks, and current practices between Swiss aid agencies and Syrian CSOs.

These two assumptions informed the initial raison d'être of this research; equipped with sufficient information and connections, Swiss organizations would be able to support local Syrian initiatives that are long-term and beneficial for the deliverance of humanitarian assistance.

Research Questions and Objectives

This study was structured around answering the following main research question:

What are the opportunities and challenges for partnerships between Swiss aid organizations and Syrian CSOs in delivering humanitarian assistance in the context of the current Syrian crisis?

The following questions were also taken into consideration for carrying out the present research:

- *What opportunities and challenges are Swiss NGOs facing when aiming to launch or implement humanitarian aid programs in Syria?*
- *What role do Syrian CSOs play in delivering humanitarian assistance?*
- *Could collaboration between Syrian organizations and Swiss NGOs facilitate the implementation of humanitarian aid programs and contribute to strengthen the capacities of Syrian civil society organizations?*

In the pursuit of answering the research question, a number of objectives were established:

Objective One: Better understand how the current Syrian civil society organizations are set up, the nature of their work, and how they operate.

Objective Two: Identify the ability of Syrian CSOs to form partnerships with INGOs.

Objective Three: Uncover the factors prohibiting and/or limiting Syrian CSOs from receiving international support from INGOs.

Objective Four: Identify Swiss NGOs with the will and capacity to work with Syrian CSOs and understand prohibitive factors to this end.

Objective Five: Gauge the interest of Swiss NGOs and Syrian CSOs in working together to improve the efficiency of humanitarian programs in Syria.

Report Roadmap

In order to address these research question and objectives, this report continues with a literature review of the discussions on the contiguum of humanitarian assistance; the role of civil society as an agent of RRD; partnerships dynamics in humanitarian assistance; challenges and opportunities with remote management and localization; and the role of standards. After outlining the followed methodology used for data collection and analysis, the report presents its main findings. Placed in their respective contexts, findings drawn from interviews conducted in Switzerland with Swiss aid agencies and organizations are displayed first, preceding the presentation of key areas of interest highlighted by the fieldwork research in Gaziantep. Finally, the report sets out its main conclusions and recommendations.

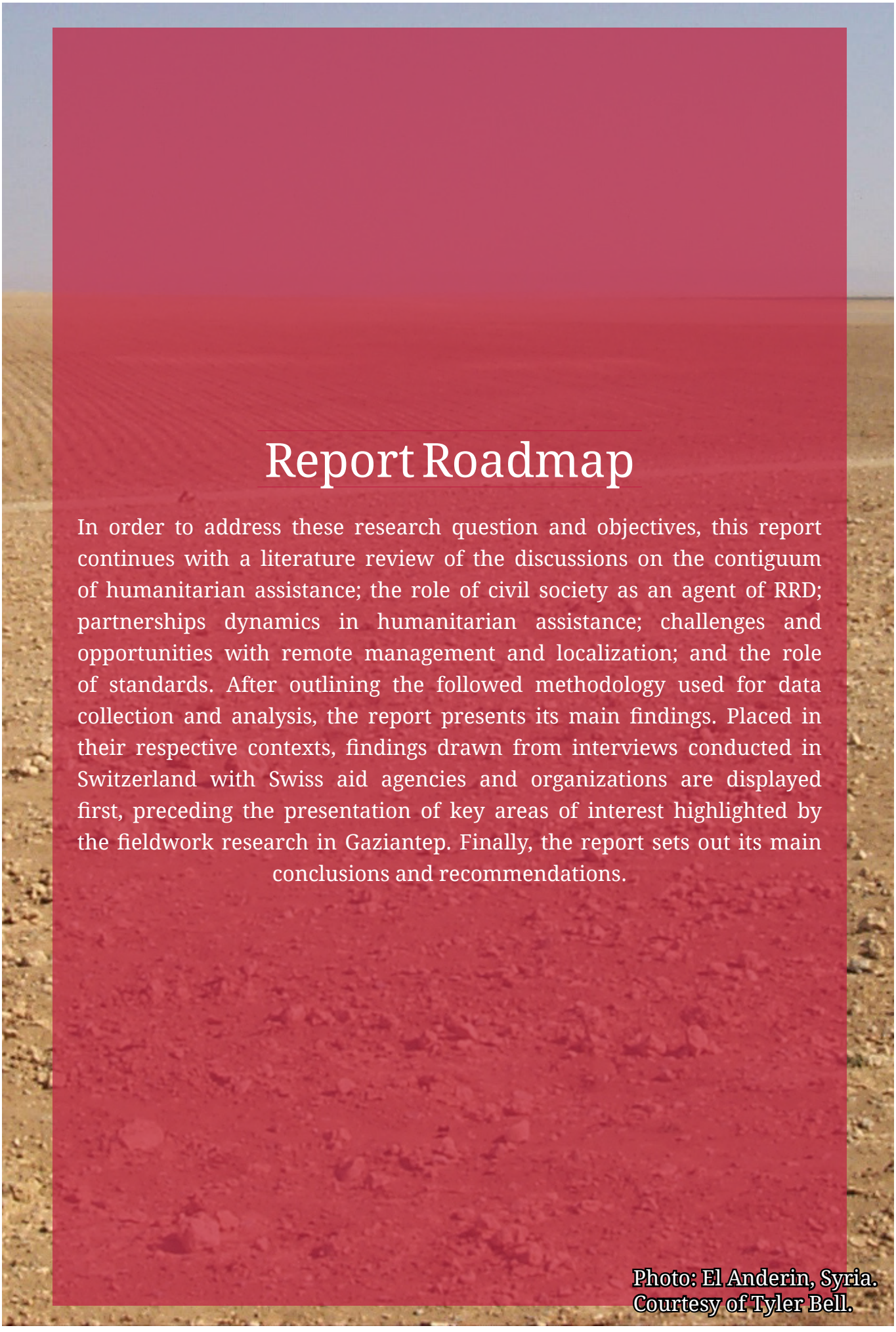


Photo: El Anderin, Syria. Courtesy of Tyler Bell.

Photo: Aleppo, Syria. Pre-Crisis. Courtesy of Tyler Bell.

Literature Review

The literature review outlines the key, relevant issues in the field of humanitarian action. These issues are: the contiguum of humanitarian assistance; the role of civil society as an agent of relief, rehabilitation and development; partnership dynamics in humanitarian assistance; the challenges and opportunities with remote management and localization; and the role of standards.

The Contiguum of Humanitarian Assistance

As mentioned in the introduction, a key and ongoing debate in the field of humanitarian action focuses on the purpose and desired outcomes of humanitarian assistance. In general, humanitarian assistance represents a commitment to the goal of supporting vulnerable populations that have experienced a sudden and overwhelming emergency, one that requires ongoing assistance in order to maintain or improve the wellbeing of affected populations. In meeting this general goal, different strategies can be pursued. Traditionally, there was a clear notion that humanitarian assistance was comprised of two distinct types of action - "relief" and "development" (White and Cliffe 2000, 314-315). Historically, the dominant strategy for the international humanitarian community was that of relief - an immediate response to a serious and unexpected natural or manmade emergency to reduce suffering and loss of life in the short term. During the 1990s, however, aid actors became increasingly concerned with engaging with development - actions representing a multi-dimensional and proactive approach to assistance with broad, complex parameters focusing on the rehabilitation and development of a vulnerable population through addressing bio-psycho-socio-economic factors within the cultural milieu (Kopinak 2013).

In large part, this shift arose from a so-called "developmentalist" critique of what was seen as an overemphasis by the international humanitarian community on straightforward relief. This approach, it is argued, creates long-term dependency issues and limits the recovery of affected populations (Curtis 2001, 6). In regards toman-made humanitarian crises, greater attention

Photo: Aleppo, Syria. Post Crisis. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

to development sprung from two further premises. First, from the idea that the origins of conflict could be located, in part, in underdevelopment (Harmer and Macrae 2004, 2). Bringing in development as an integral form of humanitarian assistance could allow for the prevention of conflict by addressing grievances and reducing economic instability. Second, from the (albeit contested) idea that humanitarian crises, especially conflict-related ones, were essentially, short interruptions to an otherwise progressive, state-led process of development (Harmer and Macrae 2004, 2). Thus, developmental assistance that would regenerate the economy and rebuild public institutions was seen as a way to enable war-affected countries to restore their capacities to function as states.

However, although development was increasingly being brought into humanitarian discourse and policy, it was constructed as a linear, final temporal sequence in a continuum of humanitarian assistance, with relief occupying the other, initial, side of the continuum. Humanitarian organizations specialized in a particular field of work existing along this continuum, would take responsibility for the appropriate humanitarian programs before "handing over" to the next organization (Smillie 1998). Essentially the concept was, "better 'development' can reduce the need for emergency relief; better 'relief' can contribute to development; and better 'rehabilitation' can ease the transition between the two" (Buchanan-Smith and Maxwell 1994, 1). Thus, the construction of a continuum was seen as a way to avoid dependency and implement humanitarian assistance in a manner that would not only protect people's livelihoods, but revitalize them too (Harmer and Macrae 2004, 4).

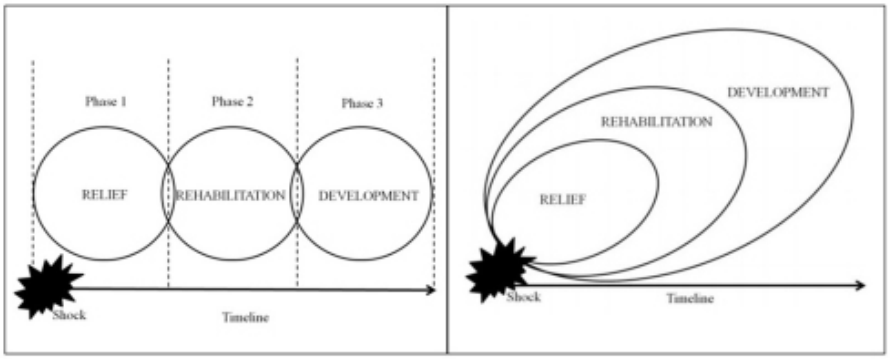
This continuum approach was quickly found to be unworkable, however, with the experiences of many INGOs showing that, in many cases, relief and development belonged together and that the linear model was unpractical, particularly in CPEs (VENRO 2006, 4). Concern emerged that division of programs into linear stages was artificially constricting and prevented potentially beneficial development programs in the "relief stage" and vice versa (White and Cliffe 2000, 316). Additionally, applying this model proved difficult, since its presumption of a smooth return to 'normal' development in CPEs was frequently unrealistic, as CPEs profoundly undermined the social and political systems and networks on which development depends (White and Cliffe 2000, 316).

Yet, despite the emergence of the contiguum concept, it has been noted that the move from continuum to contiguum has largely been one of "semantics not practice", as "institutional changes have not kept pace with conceptual ones" (Smillie 1998, 81). A more comprehensive contiguum approach presents greater challenges and risks to humanitarian organizations and for their donors, than the straightforward continuum approach. In essence, if humanitarian agencies involve themselves in developmental work during the height of a CPE, then it is a political and technical inevitability that they will have to deal with political bodies, be they state or rebel, in a way which could directly compromise core humanitarian principles such as "do no harm" (White and Cliffe 2000, 336). There have been cases of aid programs indirectly resulting in warring actors receiving funding and supplies, apparently as a result of contiguum style programming. The case of Sudan provides an illustration of such difficulties. In the north, aid for rehabilitation has been found to further the illegitimate war aims of the state, whereas that same aid has not been deemed to further the rebels in southern areas (White and Cliffe 2000, 336). Thus, there has been resistance to engaging in developmental work in any CPE context until the CPE is "over".

Furthermore, there are important additional practical and political reasons for the reluctance of humanitarian organizations to engage in what is considered as necessary rehabilitation and development programming. Politically, donors tie their aid to domestic economics and politics in ways that override humanitarian concerns, which in turn affects the multilateral organizations whom they fund and who must respect their wishes (Moore 1999, 104). Similarly for donors, rehabilitation and development assistance does not have the same saliency as the simple striking and gratifying act of releasing funds for easily quantifiable and "marketable" relief aid (Moore 1999, 105). Consequently, there is still an overwhelming tendency for international humanitarian organizations to focus on relief work, ignoring the very real demands for rehabilitation and development work present in CPEs. Ultimately, in order for the international humanitarian community to implement contiguumprogramming and most effectively address the vulnerabilities of populations in crisis, they need to overcome particular issues of "funding, timing, and understanding" (Smillie 1998, 22).

Humanitarian Assistance

Continuum ¦ Contiguum



(Source: Estermann 2014, 4)

Cliffe and White (2000, 326) identify the need for greater contextual understanding in order to achieve effective contiguum programming as follows:

> *"Key concerns for aid agencies in a CPE are assessing, understanding and monitoring the situation, securing funding for interventions, matching types of intervention to the various priorities of affected populations, gaining timely access to those populations with the chosen mix of goods and services, minimising the risk of benefits being swept away by renewed violence or manipulated in favour of belligerents, ensuring the safety of staff and so on. Sometimes they get it wrong, and when they do it is often because they fail to grasp the political complexities of the context in which they are working."*

Thus, the current literature, based both on academic analyses and the experiences of humanitarian practitioners, underlines the potential for humanitarian programming in a non-temporal, contiguum. A model whereby relief, rehabilitation and development can be employed together, albeit in a cautious and context sensitive manner, in order to best deliver on the overall goal of humanitarian assistance of supporting vulnerable populations. However, despite this potential, international humanitarian organizations and donors are still unable or unwilling to engage in such work in most cases.

This study now turns to a review of the literature on civil society as an agent of relief, rehabilitation and development, an agent which has the potential to improve the contiguum approach.

Civil Society as an Agent of Relief, Rehabilitation, and Development

The role of civil society has been given much attention within the context of humanitarian crises and assistance. The term civil society has been open to different interpretations and lacks any one definition (Crawford 2015, 3). Linked to notions of good governance, human rights, and state stability, strengthening civil society has been highlighted as playing an important role in reducing conflict and achieving stability in post-conflict contexts (Smillie 2001, 13). In the context of CPEs, civil society can be seen as both emerging and being contested at the same time (Harvey 1998, 208). In the presence of a governance gap created by these circumstances, the "governance capacity needs to be rebuilt from the bottom up, together with civil society and social capital" (Smillie 2001, 14).

Additionally, the role of civil society has been associated with the development discourse which emphasizes the importance of civil society to development and focuses on aspects of capacity building, conflict resolution and linking relief and development (Harvey 1998, 201). As emphasized by Harvey (1998, 201), "it is argued that, by working with local partners, international agencies can engage in more developmental forms of relief and move assistance towards rehabilitation and development". Thus, overtime, strengthening the capacity of civil society has become an important focus of humanitarian aid (Smillie 2001, 13). The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) emphasizes that civil society serves as one of the most crucial sources of humanitarian assistance in the context of humanitarian emergencies (Reliefweb

2008, 15). Moreover, partnerships between international and local actors have demonstrated deeper benefits. As stated by Grisgraber and Reynolds (2015, 4) in their field report *Aid in Syria*, working with local partners provides agency to the local actors, builds their capacity and makes use of their linguistic, professional and cultural skills, while enabling a useful exchange of information. This finding has been further corroborated in the report *Engaging with Syrian CSOs*, with Crawford (2015, 2) highlighting that in circumstances of CPEs, INGOs face difficulties in delivering relief and recovery assistance which could be met through the help of civil society organizations. Crawford (2015, 2) states that in Syria "a governance gap has emerged across the country that should be filled by local actors, rather than INGOs and IGOs, in order to ensure the best prospects for sustainable recovery and development."

The following section elaborates on the role of partnerships as a practice of engendering effective relief, rehabilitation and development.

Partnership Dynamics in Humanitarian Assistance

Strongly linked to this focus on civil society is the role of partnerships. The expansion of the humanitarian sector has resulted in a simultaneous emphasis on the role of partnerships in both academia and practice. Since the 1980s, there has been a push towards working with local partners in the humanitarian sector (Howe et al. 2015, 18). Although partnerships providing humanitarian assistance can take various forms, the majority of these relationships consist of donor governments or private donors providing funds to UN agencies or other partner organizations. In turn, these organizations either implement their activities directly or through partnerships with other organizations (Grisgraber and Reynolds 2015, 4). As argued by Grisgraber and Reynolds (2015, 4), in most of these scenarios "the organizations at the 'bottom' of the funding flow tend to be the local groups – both formalized and not – that are based inside the country and have national staff that know the language, the culture, and the dynamics of the region they serve". However, despite a long existing focus on the role of such local partners, as argued by Howe et al. (2015, 18), "it has only been in the last 10 to 15 years that any meaningful or concrete steps have been taken, particularly at the headquarters level, to make local partners fully engaged actors in operations."

This was highlighted in 2007 when the Global Humanitarian Platform established the Principles of Partnership (PoP) that focused on the principles of complementarity, transparency, equality with responsibility and a result-oriented approach, emphasizing a commitment to support a greater and more equitable role for local partners in the international humanitarian sector (Howe et al. 2015, 18). After being endorsed by a number of organizations, both UN and non-UN, the PoP have come to be recognized as "a common point of reference" for effective partnerships in the humanitarian community (Knudsen 2011). However, as argued by Svoboda and Pantuliano (2015, 16), in a majority of scenarios, what is classified by organizations as "partnerships" refers to agreements where the local partner is engaged as a subcontractor, rather than as a member of an inclusive partnership between equals based on shared risks and rewards. Such a relationship can therefore be classified as "more often one of patronage than partnership", where local

organizations are expected to merely implement given instructions instead of following their own goals and objectives (Smillie 2001, 1).

Subcontractual relationships have been critiqued as myopic, ignoring important context and under-utilizing local knowledge. Critics posit that inclusive partnerships, when implemented correctly, can address these issues, consequently emphasizing the need to view local actors as first resort responders and to build partnerships that are not just project-based but instead focus on building the capacity of local organizations and provide them with access to funding (Street 2011). Encouraging the formation of inclusive partnerships will avoid the "practical, businesslike, and temporary aspect" (Howe et al. 2015, 25) of the subcontracting modality that does little to provide sustainable support and capacity building of local organizations. Yet, in the case of Syria, existing literature illustrates that subcontractual relationships of this kind are the prevalent method to be found. As Svoboda and Pantuliano (2015, iii) explain, "the conflict has confirmed what others have shown before: that the formal humanitarian sector finds it extremely difficult to establish genuine, inclusive partnerships". The relative benefits of inclusive and subcontractual partnerships play out in the wider debate in the humanitarian field between remote management and localization, the subject of the following section.

Challenges and Opportunities in Remote Management and Localization

As mentioned in the preceding sections, there is a perception that relationships between international humanitarian actors and local organizations can prove beneficial to the provision of aid and, importantly, to the long-term development prospects of countries beset by humanitarian crisis.

Yet, despite widespread acknowledgement of civil society's capacity and potential, until recently this was poorly reflected in the humanitarian sphere in practice. Historically, relationships between humanitarian actors and local organizations have been limited, with humanitarian organizations primarily directing their own staff in humanitarian programming with little assistance from local, external actors. However, examination of more recent developments and literature identifies the emergence of two clear trends pertaining to partnerships between international and local civil society actors in a humanitarian context.

Trend One: Remote Management

The first trend is a direct response to the increasing complexity of security environments in humanitarian crises. For humanitarian organizations, experiences in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq and other dangerous locales demonstrated that it was becoming progressively more difficult to ensure the security of operational staff in-country. Subsequently, humanitarian organizations have increasingly employed forms of what is termed remote management, defined as the practice of reducing the number of direct personnel in the field, instead

transferring greater program responsibility to local staff and organizations and administering and/or evaluating programs from a distance (Collinson and Duffield 2013, iii; Stoddard et al. 2010, 7). Thus, international humanitarian organizations forge relationships with local actors, but generally only to the extent that local actors directly implement programs in lieu of the international organizations themselves. Tellingly, this form of arrangement was previously termed "remote control."

Literature on remote management is not extensive and what does exist has a practitioner focus, with relatively little published in academic journals. Moreover, as highlighted by Donini and Maxwell (2013, 388), very few organizations have clearly developed guidelines for the design and use of remote management operations. However, it is typically viewed by both the literature and by humanitarian organizations as the "lesser of two evils" when the only alternative is total withdrawal and absence of programming. It is largely considered a reactive, sub-optimal modus operandi to be resorted to in cases where the security environment prevents organizations from guaranteeing the protection of their staff and only in such cases (Howe et al. 2015, 15). Much of the literature highlights "the necessary evil" of undertaking remote management emphasizing that, in the absence of international humanitarian organizational presence, the very nature of the humanitarian relationship changes from one of proximity to one of distance, with greater risks of negative outcomes such as: lower-quality service delivery; losing of policy direction; corruption or other abuses; loss of humanitarian principles; discriminatory practices; manipulation by power-holders; and finally risk transfer to local personnel (Donini and Maxwell 2013, 385). Accordingly, much of the literature attempts to address these shortcomings, for example Collinson and Duffield (2015) who in *Paradoxes of Presence* analyze remote management through the lens of a trade-off between security and effectiveness, highlighting ways in which practices can be improved for efficiency.

However, while still maintaining a similar perspective, other reports shift focus and explore not only how to manage the downsides of remote management, but also raise the potential for beneficial consequences. Such reports attempt to frame remote management in terms other than just a "necessary evil". In *Once Removed*, Stoddard et al. (2010) approach remote management from the point of view of mitigating the associated challenges, yet they also identify "promising" examples of remote management relationships that "exhibited the potential for further, self-generated development in localized humanitarian action". Similarly, *Breaking the Hourglass* by Howe et al. (2015) places greater emphasis on viewing remote management from a perspective of local actors exploring the potentially positive humanitarian returns gained from investing in local partner capacity and granting local partners greater autonomy and decision-making power. This is highlighted even more so in the context of recent conflicts and crises where remote management practices have been changing from short-term to more long-term and permanent modalities as seen in the case of Syria, where "remote management has been the predominant form of operation since early in the crisis and is likely to continue for the duration of the conflict" (Howe et al. 2015, 6). Thus, the prevailing view on remote management presents partnerships as a measure of last resort that has many associated drawbacks, however there are ways of managing this practice to mitigate these drawbacks and there are even, potentially, opportunities to improve development prospects.

Trend Two: Localization

The second clearly identifiable trend in humanitarian partnerships between international and local actors can be termed localization. Unlike remote management, this trend considers partnerships not simply as a sub-optimal necessity, rather it explores the partnerships with local actors as a means to improve the delivery of aid and development programming in humanitarian crises. A growing number of humanitarian organizations have advocated for localization, pressing for more direct funding to local organizations, greater capacity building and programming that actively works with local actors during all phases of humanitarian action.

Several reports have emerged criticizing the prevailing remote management model, pushing instead for a greater adoption of a localization model within the humanitarian assistance system. ALNAP's 2012 report, *State of the Humanitarian System* (Taylor et al. 2012, 71) found that international actor funding to local partners was limited, rarely supporting sustained capacity building. This study raised particular concerns over the long term effects of such partnership arrangements, stating:

> *"[F]unding for national NGOs via international agencies rarely provides the necessary longer-term support for building up office infrastructure, administrative and financial capacity, including hiring permanent staff, as well as covering operational and running costs."*

The 2013 joint Caritas and CAFOD report *Funding at the Sharp End* (2014, 4) found that the current approach to funding local actors "was not fit for purpose", recommending that:

> *"Organisations working in "partnership" with national actors must shift their thinking and their money towards investing in national civil society actors as an end in itself, and not just as a means to an end [...] [A]t a more formative level, international actors must urgently revisit their commitments to build local disaster response capacities and work in partnership in a principled way which makes equality of local actors in dialogue and response a reality, not just a paper commitment."*

Building the Future of Humanitarian Aid, a report from Christian Aid (Nightingale 2013, 2) reached an almost identical conclusion:

> *"Learning from recent humanitarian responses suggests that partnerships between international aid agencies and southern organisations can often fall short of genuine supportive collaboration. Partnerships can be in name only and southern organisations can be treated simply as a pipeline for delivery, with little say in their work and little sense of sustainability or of shared learning and mutual accountability. Where investment in supporting local partners is not sufficient, then their ability to deliver responses to time and to the desired standard can be impaired."*

Further support for a shift to a more permanent, localized approach to partnerships in humanitarian assistance can be found in several key reports. The world's largest humanitarian network, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) dedicated its latest *World Disasters Report* entirely to the role of local actors in humanitarianism. Drawing on experiences and knowledge from across the IFRC, the report finds that local actors play a "critical role", acting as "the key to humanitarian effectiveness" (IFRC 2015, 8). The report argues that local actors are uniquely placed to find solutions because of their access and their unique understanding of local contexts. Similarly, *Missed Opportunities* (Ramalingam et al. 2013), a report commissioned by a consortium of UK-based INGOs, explicitly makes the case for strengthening national and local partnership-based humanitarian assistance. The report identified that inclusive partnerships helped to: first, enhance the relevance and appropriateness of responses due to local actors' understanding of context and internal dynamics; second, enhance the effectiveness of assistance, by ensuring accountability to disaster-

affected populations; and third, smooth the transition between the different elements of the disaster cycle as local actors work across the areas of resilience, response and recovery, rather than just one, as most international actors do (Ramalingam et al. 2013). Oxfam's report T*urning the Humanitarian System on its Head* (Gingerich and Cohen 2015, 20), as well as echoing the aforementioned points, also argues for the cost efficiencies to be gained from the reduced overheads in directly funding local NGOs.

Notably, despite the zeitgeist for localization, direct funding from states to local actors remains negligible. Through funding from states may contribute to practices of localization through intermediary INGOs, only 2% of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member-state funding goes directly to local actors.[1]

Localization: A Panacea?

Put simply, remote management argues partnerships with local actors are necessary deviations from the status quo because of circumstance, yet are suboptimal with pathologies that need to be addressed. Localization, on the other hand, sees pathologies in the status quo and argues partnerships are a necessary tool in addressing them. Remote management approaches to partnerships continue to face criticisms yet, while localization is definitely gaining momentum as a reformative shift in the humanitarian system,[2] it is necessary to be aware of the potential pitfalls presented by a shift in the status quo. Reviewing a number of sources and reports, the Oxfam report, *Turning the Humanitarian System on its Head* (Gingerich and Cohen 2015, 21), identifies three main concerns regarding a move towards localization. First, there may not be the level of needed technical capacity among local actors in many countries. Second, locally led responses are significantly more corrupt. Third, local NGOs may not have sufficient absorptive capacity and are not sustainable. However, while the report concludes these are areas for further research, it provides strong counterpoints contesting these claims. Indeed, research conducted suggests that local actors may have considerably greater capacity and coverage than most INGOs in some settings (Ramalingam et al. 2013, 20). There is also evidence to suggest that anti-corruption efforts are more likely to succeed when they are locally driven (Transparency International 2010). Finally, Oxfam's report highlights how limited absorptive capacity can be easily remedied by practices of localization that provide predictable direct funding flows to local actors (Gingerich and Cohen 2015, 21). Nonetheless, the potential that local actors may abuse the resources allocated to them by the international humanitarian community is ever-present. Discrimination of aid work on the basis of religious, political, or ethnic affiliation, or the redirection of aid into the hands of warring parties are dangers that should always be considered. Standards are put in place by INGOs when dealing with local partners and are the manifestation of their attempts to mitigate such concerns. The following section specifically addresses these standards and the important role they are currently playing in relationship dynamics between international and local actors.

1 DAC is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee, comprised of developed states and represents one of the major blocs of funding for humanitarian assistance (OECD, 2015).
2 See Charter for Change (Reliefweb, 2015a).

The Role of Standards

Over the last two decades, the humanitarian field has expanded globally and undergone increasing professionalization and institutionalization. As part of this process, there has been a recognition within the humanitarian community for more stringent standards of operations (Sphere Project 2015). Calls for greater accountability and enhanced effectiveness in humanitarian work in the 1990s led to the initial widespread adoption of standards across the entire field. From project planning, to project monitoring & evaluation, and from staff competency to financial transparency, all aspects of humanitarian organizations began to be subject to standardization. At the international level, one can find an exhaustive range of standards, such as the Red Cross/NGO code of conduct, People in Aid initiative, the Sphere Project, the Active Learning Network of Accountability and Performance, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Force on Accountability to Affected People, the 2010 Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) Standard in Humanitarian Accountability, Global Humanitarian Platform's Principles of Partnership, and Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles (World Humanitarian Summit 2014; INEE 2015).

Such internationally recognized standards are expected to be followed by a majority of actors in the humanitarian field. They are often a requisite to receive funding as, while aiming to improve and ensure the quality of assistance, standards and principles also play an important role in how organizations are perceived by different stakeholders, including donors, partner organizations, local authorities and beneficiaries (Fast and O'Neill 2010, 6). Moreover, both donors and partner organizations can have specific requirements and standards, covering a wide range of operational aspects such as proposal appraisals, monitoring & evaluation, and financial reporting (Kreidler 2011, 22). Local actors partnering with international humanitarian organizations are, more often than not, required to adhere to such standards. Frequently these standards are specific to each international organization, meaning that local organizations have to adapt to new requirements each time they work with a different partner.

Despite an increasing volume and recognition of their importance to humanitarian work, concerns have been raised over the sheer proliferation and duplication of standards (Sphere Project 2015). Unlike in the early 1990s when the humanitarian sector was criticized for lacking necessary criteria regulating its work, it is now claimed that to some extent the pendulum has swung too far the other way. Expected to follow a large number and variety of standards, humanitarian organizations at every level face difficulties effectively integrating these standards into their standard operating procedures, and ensuring consistency (Sphere Project 2015). In an attempt to address this concern, Sphere, People in Aid and HAP have come together to launch initiatives such as the Joint Standard Initiative's Common Humanitarian Standards and the Common Humanitarian Standard Alliance, with an aim to create greater coherence and harmonization amongst their standards (HAP International 2015).

The increasing complexity of humanitarian crises has added to the challenges of following requirements and standards in insecure and unstable environments. This holds particularly true in the context of conflict-affected environments where partnerships between INGOs and local organizations most frequently materialize. In such situations, one of the main challenges of working with local actors is compromised accountability

because "difficulties with logistics, communications, monitoring, and interagency coordination are all heightened" (Stoddard et al. 2010, 9). Further challenges include the withdrawal of key trained decision-makers from the area of implementation; lack of access, monitoring & evaluation; and shifting important responsibilities to partners that might be lacking in capacity.

On the other hand, partnerships with international organizations have resulted in local organizations learning from and incorporating these standards. In the context of the Syrian crisis, as stated by an OCHA workshop report (Hallaq 2015, 2), "there is a clear shift towards the professionalization of Syrian civil society organizations and integration of international standards and coordination mechanisms". In response to such a shift, efforts have been made by organizations like OCHA to customize the Sphere standards to the Syrian context (Hallaq 2015). Moreover, in its field report *Aid in Syria*, Refugees International states that by understanding the difficulties in the given context, donors have become more flexible in their reporting procedure (Grisgraber and Reynolds 2015, 6). However, as highlighted by the *Breaking the Hourglass* report, donor requirements often continue to strain local organizations that may be lacking organizational capacity to meet these standards (Howe et al. 2015, 37). Having multiple international organizations as partners places considerable demand on local organizations, forcing them to manage a large number of different donor requirements (Howe et al. 2015, 37). Therefore, a majority of reports, like *International and Local/Diaspora Actors in the Syria Response* (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015, 3), have underlined that "making genuine partnerships work will require flexibility and adaptability from traditional donors and international aid agencies". Thus, alongside the need for increased harmonization of humanitarian standards, current complex crises have emphasized the need for donors and international organizations to somewhat adapt their standards and requirements to the realities on the ground.

Photo: Aleppo, Syria. Post Crisis.
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Literature Review: Concluding Remarks

There is an inherent tension within the field of humanitarian action between what is widely considered to be best practice in theory, and what is actually occurring on the ground. The need for simultaneous relief, rehabilitation and development operations in humanitarian crises is apparent, yet carries with it significant risk. As things stand, the majority of international humanitarian organizations are unable, or unwilling to take these risks and remain conservative in the nature of their programs, opting to focus on relief operations.

Relatedly, there is concurrent debate in the field regarding the nature of partnerships between international humanitarian organizations and local actors. There is a growing body of work highlighting the actual and potential benefits of localization. Working with local organizations when delivering assistance and forming inclusive, collaborative partnerships can help facilitate local civil society and NGOs to play an important role in delivering needed and comprehensive assistance across the RRD contiguum.

In Syria, as in other CPEs, INGOs have to consider, more than usual, working with local partners in order to have presence in the crisis. Contextualized within these two debates, this presents challenges to international humanitarian organizations, but also tremendous opportunity. Engaging with localization and forming inclusive partnerships with local actors can offer international humanitarian organizations a way of improving the delivery of humanitarian assistance in difficult situations. To date however, this opportunity appears to remain largely unrealized in Syria and the challenges untackled. Remote management and subcontracting relationships are the prevailing form of partnership, with stringent and inflexible standards the status quo.

Moving forward, this report offers its contribution to these issues by presenting findings from original research conducted. The findings contained in the report inform a number of recommendations for international humanitarian organizations, specifically Swiss organizations, to overcome the challenges and realize the full benefits of partnering with local organizations.

Photo: Gaziantep, Turkey.
Courtesy of Elsa Romera Moreno.

Methodology

This section explains the research methods employed, detailing the specificities and limitations encountered in collecting the data for this study.

This study employed qualitative research methods to gather the data necessary to understand the opportunities and challenges for potential partnerships between Swiss and Syrian organizations in delivering humanitarian assistance. Underpinned by a preliminary literature review of secondary sources, the majority of the data gathered by this study came from a series of interviews held with representatives from Syrian NGOs, INGOs, UN agencies, and Swiss organizations over a 7 month period between June and December of 2015. Overall, data from 46 interviews was analyzed to form the basis of this study.

From the outset, the research design for the study placed an emphasis on collecting primary data, through interviews, from a wide range of sources. The use of interviews ensured that up-to-date data was captured and the specific nature of the research questions addressed. The use of semi-structured interviews was decided upon in order to allow those interviewed to fully express their experiences. Thus, we were not only able to elicit first-hand answers to our questions, but were also able to develop a greater understanding of the issues at stake, generating further avenues of questioning and research. Conducting fieldwork and meeting face-to-face with the representatives of Syrian organizations allowed the research team to better create an environment of trust and understanding than would be the case with remote interview techniques. Such an environment allowed the researchers to witness expressions of body language and emotions which helped provide a better understanding of the significance each issue discussed had to the interviewee. Moreover, the decision was made to interview Swiss organizations after Syrian ones as, in accordance with our primary assumptions, it was believed that Swiss organizations would be lacking precise knowledge of the Syrian CSOs landscape. Possessing prior

Photo: Gaziantep, Turkey.
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

knowledge of this landscape, it was believed, would facilitate a more productive and enlightening exchange on the salient issue.

Consequently, with assistance from Geo Expertise, the research team undertook 3 weeks of fieldwork in the Gaziantep region of Turkey during July 2015. One of the hubs of humanitarian action for the Syria crisis, the Gaziantep region of Turkey was seen as an appropriate site for conducting interviews and observations due to the high density of international, regional and Syrian humanitarian organizations and UN agencies. In sum, the fieldwork in Gaziantep was comprised of 26 interviews with Syrian organizations, 4 Syrian networks, 2 UN agencies and 5 INGOs.

This first round of semi-structured interviews was secured through the contacts of our partner organization Geo Expertise. From here onwards snowballing was used to secure more contacts. Using the method of snowballing rather than choosing a random sample was more effective for the purpose of this research as time was limited and we were not sure of the response we would receive from Syrian organizations, which turned out to be extremely positive. In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics in place when forming partnerships, it was decided once there, to also interview INGOs and UN agencies based in Gaziantep. This allowed a more balanced picture of the benefits and challenges of existing partnerships and to "crosscheck" the information collected from the interviews with Syrian NGOs. The original research design for this report included gathering interview data from interviews with grassroot Syrian organizations not having a permanent presence in Turkey. Unfortunately these interviews could not be conducted as, at the time of research, the security situation deteriorated to the extent that travel to Reyhanli, on the Turkish-Syrian border where these organizations were attending a workshop, was rendered impossible.

Interviews in Gaziantep were conducted in a range of settings, from the organizational headquarters to more public places such as cafés. The majority of interviews were conducted in English and, when this was not possible, an interpreter was employed to communicate between Arabic and either French or English. The use of Arabic had at times proved methodologically challenging, as interpreters were friends or colleagues of the interviewees and might have not always strictly interpreted, but instead participated in the discussion by sharing their own

Interview Breakdown

Organization	Type	Number
Syrian Organizations	Range of organizations of varying size, operational mandate and reach inside Syria. Most, but not all, legally registered with the Turkish authorities. Nearly all engaged in cross-border activities.	26
Syrian Networks	Umbrella bodies coordinating humanitarian action, acting as repositories of information and providing capacity building.	4
INGOs	Range of organizations of varying mandate and reach inside Syria. Active in health, agriculture, WASH, distribution of emergency kits.	5
UN Agencies	UN agencies with an office in Gaziantep	2
Swiss NGOs and Aid Agencies	1 solely active in Switzerland working with Syrian refugees. 1 aid agency working as a donor for Swiss NGO-led projects in and around Syria. 7 Swiss NGOs with projects pertaining to the Syrian crisis.	9
		Total: 46

views on the interview questions.

Fitting with the semi-structured method, interview length varied substantially, with some lasting only 35 minutes and many others lasting as much as 100 minutes or more. With few exceptions, most organizations agreed to have interviews recorded. The first part of the interview questions was designed to capture the basic profile of the organization (year of creation, structure and size, geographic areas, sectors, funding, obstacles). The second part of the interview focused on the role of partnerships between Syrian organizations, UN agencies and INGOs and their benefits and challenges.

In Switzerland, a total 9 interviews were conducted with Swiss NGOs and aid agencies either in French or English. These organizations ranged in size and operational capacity and had headquarters in Geneva, Lausanne or Zurich. These interviews generally lasted less than those conducted in Turkey, falling mainly in the 50 to 80 minute range. Only three Swiss organizations refused to have the interview recorded. Securing interviews in Switzerland proved more difficult than in Turkey, as Swiss organizations showed initial reluctance to meet, asking for further details, sometimes including the interview questions. Indeed, several Swiss organizations expressed the viewpoint that, because they focused solely on emergency relief, the issue of partnerships was of little relevance to them and they doubted the validity of beingincluded in our sample. Furthermore, the decision was made to also contact Swiss aid organization currently without operations related to the Syrian context, with the aim to understand the motivations and reasons for their non-intervention. However, all the Swiss organizations not currently engaged in the Syrian context refused to be interviewed. The interviews with Swiss organizations were

designed in order to better understand their activities (geographic areas, sectors, size and structure, funding, obstacles). More specifically, the interviews aimed to assess to what extent these organizations were partnering with Syrian organizations and, if they were not, what was preventing them from doing so. Another key question was whether they would consider supporting Syrian organizations directly.

The data collected helped answer the research questions in three main ways. First, it allowed for the creation of organizational profiles of Syrian NGOs and a presentation of the different Swiss organizations. Second, it provided information on their current activities and partnerships. Lastly, it contributed to a better understanding of the current challenges and opportunities of supporting Syrian organizations, as well as the possible links that could be created between Swiss and Syrian organizations.

However, one of the main limitations of presenting our findings relates to the request of some Syrian, Swiss and international organizations to remain anonymous due to security concerns, given the sensitivity of the context in which they operate. Taking this into consideration, the decision was made to omit even placeholder names for organizations in the report, as the research team felt there was a risk that, coupled with the inclusion of information tables, it would be possible to deduce the real identities of the interviewed organizations.

In order to analyze data from the interviews and draw findings from them, each interview was coded contextually. Issues raised by the organizational representatives were grouped together by theme and given a weighting of significance based on frequency with which they occurred and the importance given to each issue by the interviewees. Importance was ascertained from the language employed and from the observations of the research team.

Pertaining to the research question and objectives, the interviews revealed 4 key areas of interest shedding light on the factors behind the presence (or absence) of Swiss NGOs in Syria, the current state of their humanitarian work, their attitudes and experiences with local partners, and their capacity and willingness to work with local partners. These areas of interest are: **operational challenges**, **absence of partnerships**, **attitudes to RRD**, and **funding**. Similarly, the interviews from Syrian organizations and IOs working in the field uncovered 8 themes. Covering their current humanitarian work, their experiences with international partnerships, and the related challenges and opportunities, these themes are: **ownership, sustainability, funding, capacity building, standards, coordination, communication,** and **trust and respect.**

The findings from both the Swiss and Syrian organizations revealed several challenges currently facing Swiss organizations in delivering sustainable humanitarian assistance. Taken with the literature review, the findings also suggest that working with local partners presents opportunities to address some of these challenges. Though such partnerships can also carry risks, our findings shed light on how to minimize these risks and maximize the opportunities. It is from these findings that our ultimate conclusions and recommendations are drawn.

Photo: Zeugma Museum, Gaziantep.
Courtesy of Elsa Romera Moreno.

Findings

Analysis of the data revealed findings on several key areas of concern for international, Swiss and Syrian organizations alike. This section sets out these findings, discussing the challenges and opportunities for better partnerships and better humanitarian assistance, contextualized within the literature review. This section is split into two parts, discussing separately the findings from the Swiss interviews and the interviews from the field. Each section is accompanied by an information table of those organizations interviewed and a brief overview of the context in which they work.

Findings from Switzerland

Swiss Humanitarian Context

Famed for its humanitarian tradition, Switzerland is the depositary state for the Geneva Conventions, home to the UN Office in Geneva, as well as to hundreds of international governmental and nongovernmental organizations (OECD 2013, 22). Switzerland's neutrality has made the country an active contributor to international discussions on how to improve humanitarian assistance (OECD 2013, 16).

Switzerland's foreign aid strategy appears to be in line with the discussion on the contiguum presented in the literature review. The OECD conducts peer reviews on the development co-operation efforts of its members through its DAC. In the latest review of Switzerland in 2013, the DAC acknowledged the efforts taken to strengthen the links between humanitarian aid and development. Indeed, since its previous peer review in 2009, Switzerland has taken the decision to combine humanitarian assistance and development strategies under one strategic framework for the first time. This common strategy directs Switzerland to focus its humanitarian program on emergency response; rehabilitation and recovery; prevention and resilience to crises; advocacy and protection of victims; and maintaining a focus on gender issues" (OECD 2013, 91). Furthermore, Switzerland, a medium-sized donor in the international community, is generally considered as a predictable donor, with consistent yearly humanitarian budget proposals and additional reserves earmarked for unforeseen emergencies (OECD 2013, 18; 22; 91) Thus, Switzerland's humanitarian policies makeit widely considered a valued and strategic partner

Photo: Gaziantep, Turkey.
Courtesy of Elsa Romera Moreno.

to NGOs and multilateral agencies (OECD 2013, 22). The 2013 DAC review paid special attention to the modality of partnerships between the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) - the government's main actor in humanitarian assistance - and Swiss NGOs, welcoming SDC's adoption of "a more strategic, transparent and standardised approach to partnering with Swiss NGOs" (OECD 2013, 20). Indeed, one third of SDC's bilateral aid is implemented through partner NGOs, research institutes and public private-partnerships.

Interestingly, the DAC's review mentioned that Switzerland's use of "local expertise to build capacity is particularly strong, as seen in Burkina Faso" (OECD 2013, 20). Switzerland's approach is to openly engage in "broad and inclusive consultation with line ministries, local governments, civil society and other donor partners when preparing country strategies" (OECD 2013, 20). Also, in a complementary fashion, Switzerland's aid is characterized by a strong field presence and an increasing focus in "cash-based programming help" (OECD 2013, 22). Thus, Switzerland has shown a willingness in its humanitarian assistance to build on local expertise and capacities, taking a long-term and sustainable perspective on the projects it funds. Nonetheless, this type of humanitarian response is less evident in reaction to the "Arab Spring", where Switzerland's major contribution has been focused on refugees, with the share of aid allocated to refugees increasing from 12% in 2007 to 22% in 2011 (OECD 2013, 18).

There thus exists an opportunity for increased Swiss aid organizations' support to Syrian CSOs on the ground as this does not seem to be the dominant trend at the moment. Swiss Solidarity, one of the largest donors in Switzerland, started raising funds for the Syrian cause in March 2012 and also launched in 2015 a joint campaign, called "#TogetherForSyria", with 8 Swiss aid partner organizations (Swiss Solidarity 2015a). Yet, an overwhelming majority of the strictly humanitarian relief projects being funded through this channel (40 out of 42 according to Swiss Solidarity's online list of projects) are conducted in neighboring countries in order to assist Syrian refugees and not implemented inside Syria (Swiss Solidarity 2015b).

Out of 9 Swiss aid agencies and organizations interviewed, 1 had operations solely in Switzerland assisting asylum seekers and refugees. Additionally, 1 was a Swiss aid agency funding Swiss NGO-led projects in and around Syria.

Operational Challenges

When looking at the reasons explaining the large absence of Swiss organizations conducting operations within Syria, all organizations interviewed named security as the primary factor. As Syria constitutes an ongoing armed conflict, with military operations and moving frontlines, it is difficult for Swiss organizations - medium and small-sized organizations at the international level – to have an organizational presence in the country. As one of the medium-size Swiss organizations explained, "[we are not operational in Syria] because of security concerns, we are not MSF, it is a different league of players. We don't have the expertise to work in outright war situations." Among the Swiss organizations interviewed, those four choosing not to have activities in Syria explained that the security environment would have to change and become safer for them to eventually conduct in-country operations. Speaking of delivering aid in Syria, one representative said "no, at least not until the situation gets more peaceful. We don't have the institutional readiness to really work in outright conflict situations."

Hence, for the organizations not engaged inside Syria, it was not only their mandate, but also their operational capacity, which were cited as prohibitive to enabling their work in war context. Indeed, for Swiss organizations not specialized in delivering humanitarian aid in times of conflict, the

Swiss Organization Information

Organization	Swiss Org. 1	Swiss Org. 2	Swiss Org. 3	Swiss Org. 4	Swiss Org. 5	Swiss Org. 6	Swiss Org. 7
Size (Relative to Switzerland)	Medium	Medium	Medium	Large	Small	Large	Large
Working Inside Syria	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Pending
Partnerships w/ Syrian Org	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Pre-Crisis Experiance / Contacts	No	Has a chapter working in-country	No	No	Yes (subsumed previous contact)	Yes	No
Working in Neighboring Countries (in relation to Syrian Crisis)	Lebanon	Lebanon	Lebanon	Iraq	No	Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt	Jordan
Sector of Work	Refugee Relief (WASH, livelihoods, financial support)	Refugee Relief	Refugee Relief (Shelter, livelihoods financial support	Health	Legal Assistance	Refugee Relief (Child Protection financial support)	Refugee Relief (WASH, Health & Nutrition)

predominant feeling expressed was that their lack of expertise in this area would put their staff at risk without suitably addressing the needs in an effective manner. One of the organizations explained this in the following terms, "if you are getting active in a setting, you should know what you are doing, and we don't have the expertise for that."

When asked about considering remote management as a means to deliver aid inside Syria, these Swiss organizations highlighted that, in addition to the security concerns, both their mandate and their donors weighed heavily in their decision to refrain. As one of the organizations explained, "we have considered it [remote management] but always dismissed it pretty quickly. Usually for security reasons, and because we identified enough needs in Lebanon." Additionally, as another Swiss organization, similar in size and mandate explained, their donors "were much more interested in working with neighbouring countries because they thought it would be too dangerous [otherwise]." Yet, a reluctance to engage in remote management was also shared by those interviewed Swiss organizations favouring direct implementation which have, or are about to have, activities inside Syria.

Consequently, in reaction to the magnitude of the needs created by the Syrian crisis, Swiss humanitarian organizations operating at the international level, including the ones that officially describe themselves as humanitarian development organizations, unanimously decided to get involved and engage in relief operations. Therefore, these Swiss organizations all opted to conduct activities in countries neighboring Syria, *de facto* focusing on the needs of refugees.

Absence of Partnership

What emerged from the interviews was that Swiss organizations preferred to implement their humanitarian programs directly. Nonetheless, most organizations had at least some prior experience with local partnerships, though these were typically developed over many years in more stable, less CPE-like situations.

For the interviewed organizations, Syria was a clear example of the humanitarian paradox of CPEs identified earlier in the report. Their modus operandi of direct implementation is heavily affected by the security situation, to the extent that only 3 organizations were able to have a direct presence in Syria. In such situations, working with partners can overcome these difficulties, yet it is precisely the complexity of the CPE that makes working with partners difficult. The complexities of the situation are cited by all organizations as a barrier to engaging with local partners - of the 3 organizations working in Syria, only 1 had a local partner, though in that instance the partnership pre-dated the crisis. Reflecting the literature review on localization, Swiss organizations indeed expressed a preference for working with organizations they already know, as their capacities are therefore assessed and trusted.

The sum result of this paradox was a conspicuous lack of Swiss involvement in providing assistance for populations within Syria. Consequently, out of 9 Swiss organizations interviewed for this research, the programming of 8 was either exclusively or primarily directed towards Syrian refugees in neighboring countries, with the remaining one solely assisting refugees in Geneva, Switzerland. It must be noted, however, 1 of the Swiss NGOs interviewed was in the process of opening an office inside Syria, yet this organization had no intention

of working with local actors, instead opting to work directly in regime controlled areas through government ministries.

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. Additionally, there were fears over the difficulties of accountability to donors when working with local partners. Thus, the viewpoint of Swiss organizations was characteristically presented in the vein of remote management, with representatives describing a "trade-off", ultimately unacceptable, between having presence via partners and losing humanitarian efficacy. This was particularly the case for Swiss organizations specializing in medical aid. As the representative of one Swiss organization explained:

"Direct care to patients is not only to make nice pictures of the Swedish blonde nurse with the African kid, it is based on a question of principles […] We don't know how to ensure that other groups will be neutral or impartial. There needs to be some organization that is able to keep those principles and guarantee access to humanitarian aid to all populations. For me, we should always fight for direct access and direct implementation, for me to not do so is a matter of last resort."

Interestingly, however, it was admitted that in this particular organization there was some internal tension over the steadfastness of this standpoint. There were voices within the organization arguing that, given the changing nature of humanitarian crises, such a strict approach to humanitarian aid could be unacceptable, leaving too many vulnerable populations without assistance.

What became overwhelmingly clear from the interviews was that Swiss organizations, regardless of their attitude to partnerships, were lacking knowledge of the Syrian context and information about the existence, trustworthiness and capability of potential partners. Three Swiss organizations were generally dismissive of the very idea that there could be local partners with the competency and capacity to be a viable option. In the words of a representative from a large Swiss NGO, "for us the landscape of NGOs in that part of Syria, as far as I know, is not really existing. I might be wrong, of course, but in this part of the world, civil society and NGOs are not very active [so] probably there is a gap."

On the other hand, 6 of the organizations interviewed voiced the opinion that working with local partners could yield benefits in theory. Describing almost exactly a localization approach, one medium-size Swiss NGO explained its desire to take a more regional approach, working with local actors to deliver more sustainable humanitarian assistance. This particular organization also stated that they had prior experience working in such a manner with grassroots organizations in more stable humanitarian situations. As their representative explained and repeatedly emphasized:

"[Local organizations] have the know-how and local knowledge. They know better what's possible or not in terms of sustainability and also acceptance of the population [...] They are really good at implementing the project and we would like to work together with the partner to develop joint projects, it's a joint effort."

Again, however, all these organizations cited a knowledge gap on identifying potential partners and their capabilities in the Syrian crisis as a CPE. Importantly, not only did these organizations mention this knowledge gap, they felt they lacked the resources and technical capacity to overcome this gap. This sentiment was expressed succinctly by a regional desk officer at a medium-size Swiss NGO, "to find partners we would have to do institutional assessment and even the good [local] organizations would need support from us. It's time consuming and we don't have the means to do it." Indeed,

searching and working with local partners was often framed in terms of time and effort costs - an additional process in reaction to the complexity of the Syrian crisis. Echoing the sentiments of several Swiss NGOs, one representative encapsulated this viewpoint, stating "we have enough on our hands with what we do already."

The lack of knowledge on Syrian NGOs on the part of the Swiss organizations was in stark contrast with the research, which in itself identified 26 Syrian NGOs covering the entire spectrum of RRD work and active in all types of humanitarian assistance. Thus, Swiss NGOs lacked the capacity to identify partners. Overall, the Swiss exhibited a reactive, rather than a proactive attitude to the Syrian crisis. Although palpably frustrated at their own inability to do greater programming within the country, there was nonetheless an overall resignation that there was little alternative. By lacking the will, or more commonly, the institutional capacity to find and work with Syrian partners, the Swiss organizations were thus shutting out a potential source of opportunity to deliver sustainable humanitarian assistance.

Attitudes to RRD

The continuum and contiguum debate presented in the literature was reflected in the interviews with the Swiss organizations, informing how they categorized the Syrian crisis and how they chose to implement their activities. When talking about the general delivery of humanitarian assistance, most Swiss organizations emphasized what one NGO described as a "grey area" between relief and development. These organizations mentioned a difficulty in determining when and how to precisely outline different phases of humanitarian assistance, and even more so in protracted and complex crisis like Syria. One of the organizations interviewed stated, "the space in-between is difficult, it's very hard to say at what stage and type of programs we are at; what is emergency, what is early recovery, what is rehabilitation, what is development."

While Swiss organizations acknowledged the need for a comprehensive contiguum approach to humanitarian response, a majority of these organizations still view the Syrian crisis as a humanitarian emergency, with a strong focus on humanitarian relief. More so, Swiss organizations' categorization of the Syrian crisis was consistent with that of a CPE, as discussed in the literature review. Emphasizing the complexity and insecurity of the environment, these organizations also stressed the protracted nature of the crisis which is creating a large number of humanitarian needs. The mandate of the interviewed Swiss organizations consisted of both emergency relief and recovery, and development.

Notably, the organizations with a greater developmental agenda still categorized their activities related to the Syrian crisis as being more of humanitarian relief rather than development. One of these Swiss organizations working with Syrian refugees from one of the neighboring countries, talked about its work stating, "now we are in this continuum, [yet the] humanitarian rehabilitation of houses, I would put it under the humanitarian aspect, it's not development, even though it has a long-term effect."

Although reasons of contextual insecurity and a lack of resources and capacity were emphasized by Swiss organizations for their limited nature of implementation, some Swiss organizations also highlighted the difficulties of addressing the RRD. In such protracted crisis, these difficulties were stated as reasons for why more sustainable and developmental projects were not being implemented inside Syria.

Additionally, the knowledge gap on part of the Swiss organizations concerning the activities of Syrian NGOs resulted in informing this approach. A majority of these organizations were not aware that a large number of Syrian organizations were registered and officially operating from the Turkish hub in Gaziantep. When informed that some of the international and Syrian NGOs were engaged in more sustainable projects such as those of agriculture and education, a majority of Swiss organizations were surprised to hear this. One of the reasons for this was the idea that sustainable and developmental projects need to be implemented with the presence of proper governance structures in order to be maintained. In the case of Syria, these structures were expected to be largely absent in non-regime controlled areas. This was also indicated by the decision of one the organizations interviewed that decided to implement its future activities inside Syria through working in the regime controlled areas through the governance structures of ministries.

These findings also highlighted that most Swiss organizations interviewed were not fully familiar with the emergence of a vibrant Syrian NGO movement engaging with the international humanitarian community and delivering humanitarian assistance in non-regime controlled areas. When this information was shared with Swiss organizations in detail, most organizations had a positive response and showed interested in learning more about the activities and capacities of these organizations. Even when made aware of such activities however - and pointing to a phenomenon of "low-hanging fruit" - Swiss organizations continued to stress their prioritization of relief needs as emergency relief operations are more easily measured and assessed.

Funding

The role of funding was emphasized as one of the crucial determinants affecting the current activities of Swiss organizations, in regards to the Syrian crisis. All Swiss organizations recognized that international funding for addressing the needs for Syria is insufficient. A Swiss aid agency funding Swiss NGO-led projects also expressed the relative difficulty of raising funds for a CPE like Syria:

"In terms of funding, the needs are so big we will never be completely satisfied with the fundraising campaign. One factor is that it is much easier for us to raise funds for natural catastrophes. [For a previous natural disaster] in 2 or 3 weeks we had raised more money than we could for the Syrian crisis in 4 years."

Additionally, Swiss organizations highlighted that their activities were largely dependent on the type of funding provided by donors. Such donor-driven funding for the Syrian crisis was mostly directed to relief and recovery assistance instead of development related activities. One of the main reasons emphasized for this was the complex and protracted nature of the Syrian crisis. A Swiss aid agency interviewed described:

"We mostly raise funds after natural catastrophes which means there is a kind of standard development of a situation. [When there is a crisis,] a first phase of relief is absolutely necessary, and then a big part of the money, [...] is for the reconstruction, rehabilitation phase, which goes a little bit into development or in this grey area between rehabilitation, reconstruction and development. [However,] now in the Syrian crisis, it is totally different because 4 years after the conflict, there is still humanitarian relief needs so yes most of our projects funded until now are relief projects, but not all."

Concerns of risks and insecurity make securing funding for the Syrian crisis difficult. This was mentioned by the majority of Swiss organizations interviewed as well as by a Swiss aid agency currently providing funds for Swiss projects inside Syria. The aid agency explained that the only real problem it had faced with projects implemented inside Syria so

far was that of security, due to which some projects had to be interrupted or all together cancelled. Such concerns of risks were also reflected by donors providing reduced funding for these projects. A Swiss organization interviewed emphasized, "from a NGO perspective, what is an issue is that if donors only fund you 50% and you have to find the other 50%, this can be really difficult." This was also demonstrated by the Swiss aid agency stating that one of the precautions taken for providing funds for projects inside Syria was to limit the funding for such projects with smaller contributions. Moreover, expecting Swiss NGOs to raise a certain percentage of the funds themselves and consequently take on part of the risk, was also a way to ensure that the partners had the capacity to implement these projects in a complex and dangerous environment.

Furthermore, Swiss organizations stated that specific donor requirements and standards also played an important role in how their activities were implemented. Almost all Swiss organizations emphasized that donors did not support remote management operations. One of the reasons for this was the political complexities of providing cross-border aid for some donors. Although the Swiss aid agency interviewed mentioned that it did not have the same problem with remote management, it still stated the following:

"Whether to do cross-line funds and projects or cross-border project was a big issue for many governments two years ago even for the Swiss government, because it was linked to political factors as well, [such as] boycott of the Syrian official government, and establishment to fund organizations that work through Turkey without having any official approval of the Syrian authority."

The role of standards for Swiss organizations was in line with discussion presented in the literature review. Swiss organizations adhered to international standards like those of HAP and Sphere Project's standards, standards set by donors, and in-house standards set by the organizations themselves that ranged from standards of financial management, procurement, implementation, and monitoring & evaluation. Challenges of maintaining upward and downward accountability in the context of remote management practices was mentioned as an important concern for donors. Such concerns include fears of compromised financial accountability including corruption and aid diversion. A Swiss organization working with refugees from one of the neighboring countries stated:

"To be honest, I think the problem is that donors have regulations, standards that are operating procedures, procurement policies that you have to make sure you deliver. But usually our own regulations are standardized to an extent that they correspond to what the major donors in Switzerland want. So that we can tell [the donors], no problem we meet your minimum criteria, but then local partners have issue that they don't meet this or that they have to develop first."

Although maintaining such standards was seen as necessary, there was an acknowledgment among some Swiss organizations and the Swiss aid agency of the need for greater flexibility and adaptation to the reality on the ground. When asked whether they need to make certain exceptions and compromises with their standards and requirements for the projects implemented inside Syria, the Swiss aid agency interviewed answered:

"It is inevitable, we cannot ask for the same monitoring in Syria as we do in Lebanon, because a lot of times they do not have access to where projects are implemented. So the basic decision many donors had to make was either to compromise on the requirements and to do something, or to work exclusively in neighboring countries. We chose the first option but with a few precautions."

Swiss organizations and donors also outlined the lack of familiarity of Swiss donors with the local context and Syrian CSOs inside Syria. Due to a formerly oppressed and limited civil society, the majority of the Swiss donors did not have

experience providing aid to Syria or engaging with Syrian organizations. The Swiss aid agency interviewed therefore emphasized the added value of having Swiss partner NGOs to ensure that local partners were meeting the minimum standards.

However, while such lack of familiarity existed, there was a also recognition of a recent trend amongst donors that acknowledged the need for more sustainable responses, while also understanding its challenges. This was expressed by a Swiss organization that mentioned the current discussion around "resilience" by Swiss donors, highlighting the support given to their decision to start implementing their projects focused on relief and recovery inside Syria. Lastly, this was also emphasized by the Swiss aid agency that stated:

"There is this development in the international community about what are more permanent solutions that we can find. I have to say that of course if they were ready-made solutions and good projects to fund in that sector, we would be ready to do it, but there are a lot of questions about what can be done and a lot of obstacles for implementation of these kinds of projects."

Findings from the Field

This section presents findings from analysis of the data collected from the Gaziantep region of Turkey, a hub of humanitarian operations into Syria. Interviews with international and Syrian organizations based in this region and working in Syria highlighted 8 key areas of interest related to partnerships and humanitarian operations. These themes are ownership, sustainability, capacity building, coordination, funding, standards, communication, and trust and respect.

One of the key issues for humanitarian work in complex political emergencies is a dearth of information surrounding local humanitarian actors. A table can be found in the annex, providing information on 22 of the Syrian organizations interviewed. The information includes: the year of establishment, their official registration status, their areas of operation, the number of their offices; their organizational size, their sectors of activity, whether they received capacity building or not, whether they have international partnerships, and their main challenges. For reasons of security, some information has been anonymized to varying degrees. Organizations listed here only represent a small sub-section of the total number working in and around Syria. Nonetheless, this information serves as an indicator to the international humanitarian community on the range of partnership opportunities.

Syrian Context

Any study on the humanitarian sector in Syria needs to be sensitive to the particular context of the current crisis. Understanding the specificities of

the local environment is essential when discussing the practices of humanitarian actors and requires an examination of the different political and social contexts that have informed the Syrian crisis.

Prior to the crisis that started with civil anti-government protests in 2011, the political and economic environment of Syria was already vulnerable due to mounting internal pressures caused by economic decline and authoritarian governance (Slim and Trombetta 2014, 1). Although Syria was comprised of a mainly middle-income society, it had been experiencing socioeconomic problems and increasing inequality (Slim and Trombetta 2014, 13). Additionally, Syria's politics had been a product of the deep-rooted localism of its various sub-national groupings and the strategic interests of different great powers (Slim and Trombetta 2014, 2). Thus, the different sectarian and local allegiances, coupled with competing international and regional powers, created a context that led the Syrian conflict to rapidly become international and protracted (Slim and Trombetta 2014, 1).

The highly concentrated and totalitarian structure of the Syrıan government revolving around the power of the President dates back to Hafez al-Assad's seizure of power wıth the Ba'ath party in 1970. The authoritarian rule of the government resulted in the regime taking leadership and control of the expansion of civil society initiatives, allowing solely the existence of a few charities (Slim and Trombetta, 2014 18; Ruiz de Elvira 2013, 2). Yet, with Bashar al-Assad's arrival to power in 2000, a period of relative openness, later called "Damascus Spring", allowed the development of civil society through the formation of discussion forums (Kawakibi 2007, 11-17). Nonetheless, these were soon dismantled as they were perceived by the regime as a threat. Civil society was therefore extensively repressed until 2004, when a second period of openness was tolerated until 2007 (Peltier and Borgomano 2013, 2).

After 2007, Syria experienced a period of economic decline, as well as decreased influence in the regional and international arena. Accordingly, the Bashar government was pushed to re-evaluate the position of civil society in the country and decided to incorporate it as a "third pillar of the Syrian society" (Ruiz de Elvira 2013, 2-3). The government thus allowed the registration of associations which subsequently started diversifying their activities. Despite this, the regime kept a strict governmental top-down control of the emerging and fragile civil society during the rest of the decade as periods of repression were largely predominant (Ruiz de Elvira 2012, 3). In such challenging conditions, civil society organizations and networks of resistance took on the form of cultural associations or were forced to operate underground (Peltier and Borgomano 2013, 3).

At the outbreak of the crisis in 2011, and for the first time in Syria's contemporary history, "people demanded real and concrete political and economic reforms" (Slim and Trombetta 2014, 16). Yet, Syrian civil society was predominantly underdeveloped, fragile and highly controlled. Nonetheless, within this context, there existed a fragmented yet active local charity tradition (Slim and Trombetta 2014, 21). Spontaneously mobilized groups, composed of activists or young people without any associative experience, organized themselves mainly to report the crisis, coordinate the opposition, or fill the governance gap created by the regime's lack of control of certain regions (Ruiz de Elvira 2013, 4). As the conflict became protracted and created an overwhelming amount of needs, a majority of emerging NGOs had to largely focus on humanitarian relief activities, impacting the

way in which large-scale humanitarian aid would be received and allocated (Ruiz de Elvira 2013, 5). There has been, therefore, a traceable evolution of Syrian civil society. From being largely oppressed, controlled and fragile, recently formed Syrian NGOs have become important actors in the current crisis. Indeed, according to OCHA, as quoted in Svoboda and Pantuliano (2015, iii):

> *"[A]round 600 to 700 'local' groups have been created since the start of the conflict. Much of their work is not necessarily captured by any coordination mechanism within the formal humanitarian sector, and yet they are playing a vital role in responding to needs that would only be met inadequately or not all."*

Yet, despite their emerging crucial role, Syrian organizations work with little or no support from the international community. This lack of aid and assistance from the international humanitarian sector has been criticized as insufficient (Slim and Trombetta 2014, 44). Support from the international community is becoming increasingly important for the continuation of the humanitarian activities by Syrian organizations. The donations and support from diaspora, which a large number of these organizations have previously relied upon, has rapidly shrunk. Subsequently, many of these organizations have established a presence in Turkey. There, they were able to register officially, facilitating the formation of partnerships with international organizations that would allow the continuation of their work inside Syria (Khalaf et al. 2014, 3).

The history of Syrian civil society explains the challenges faced by Syrian NGOs to secure funds from the international community due to being perceived as lacking in experience, skills, capacity, operational standards and independence. Yet, supporting Syrian NGOs has become crucial as they are not only expected to play an important role in the current crisis but are also strongly positioned to become key actors contributing to the reconciliation, relief, rehabilitation and development of the Syrian society, once INGOs and donors will progressively withdraw after the end of the conflict (Crawford 2015, iii).

Informed by this context, the study now presents the 8 areas of interest arising from the data.

Ownership

Project ownership is an unavoidable issue when discussing the work of Syrian organizations and their relationship with international actors. As discussed in the literature review, there is a tendency for humanitarian partnerships between international and local organizations to be structured in a manner whereby international actors retain ownership over projects. Partnerships are usually arranged in a manner where international actors have primary responsibility for the design, monitoring, and evaluation of humanitarian programming, generally leaving local actors with the sole responsibility of implementing programs to the specifications of the international partner. The prevalence of such partnerships is reflective of international organizations approaching partnerships as a form of remote management and as atypical, temporary and largely ad-hoc arrangements to be resorted to when they cannot implement programs with their own staff in-country.

Our findings confirm that ownership of humanitarian programming between international and local actors in Syria typically reduces local actors to the role of subcontractors with a purely implementing capacity. Both international and local organizations stressed that these arrangements rarely solicited the input of the Syrian partner in the

design, monitoring, or evaluation of humanitarian programs. The interviews further highlighted a prevailing attitude among many international humanitarian organizations that, in the first instance at least, working with local groups was atypical and frequently suboptimal, a decision undertaken out of necessity due to the difficult security conditions present in Syria. Not surprisingly, those INGOs that expressed this attitude were far less likely to be working in inclusive partnerships.

Though the opportunity to provide significant input into projects remains limited for Syrian organizations, subcontracting roles were still widely acknowledged by local groups as valuable, both in terms of providing assistance to populations and in terms of building experience and capacity for Syrian organizations. Nonetheless, the majority of Syrian NGOs lamented the lack of opportunities to provide greater input into the design, monitoring & evaluation of projects. It was common for Syrian organizations to recount experiences where they had found themselves questioning the appropriateness of some of the programs designed by international organizations. As highlighted in the literature review, there has been significant research into the "localization" of humanitarian assistance which, contra to remote management, presents a range of benefits to be gained from entrusting local organizations, which possess contextual knowledge and access, with greater input and ownership into programming. The interviews revealed that a number of Syrian organizations echoed the localization viewpoint, arguing that local groups were in a position to deliver humanitarian assistance from "A to Z", suggesting that their regional expertise, proximity and familiarity would allow them to design and deliver quality humanitarian assistance that is better adapted to the reality on the ground. Indeed, a common concern stated by Syrian organizations was that international organizations, by limiting local input, were overlooking the potential to adopt a better, more context specific approach. Instead, it was felt that INGOs were "copying" approaches from prior humanitarian crises and simply "pasting" them in Syria. However, the ability of Syrian organizations to conceive innovative ideas in the delivery of humanitarian assistance in complex situations was recognized by several members of INGO staff in the field. As a senior humanitarian officer of a key health organization present in Gaziantep stated, "a Syrian organization created a system ad hoc for Syria. They did not try to apply one preexistent. It's not copy paste here."

Though most common, the remote management model was by no means the sole form of partnership encountered in the study. There were several notable examples of inclusive partnerships with varying degrees of collaboration and input from both international and local actors in the design, monitoring & evaluation of humanitarian programming. In such arrangements, international

Copy/Paste Programming

Underlining the perception that international organizations were failing to take an adequately contextual approach to the Syrian Crisis, several interviewed NGOs specifically used the critical term "copy/paste" programming when relaying their experiences. As one network representative summed up:

"You know the problem with INGOs, they think that they have a manual of experience, they think that in Syria to solve the problem they can take the manual of Liberia or Cambodia and apply it to Syria but they are mistaken."

partner solicited the experience and input of local actors in attempts to forge deep, trusting relationships which capitalized on the respective capacities of each actor.

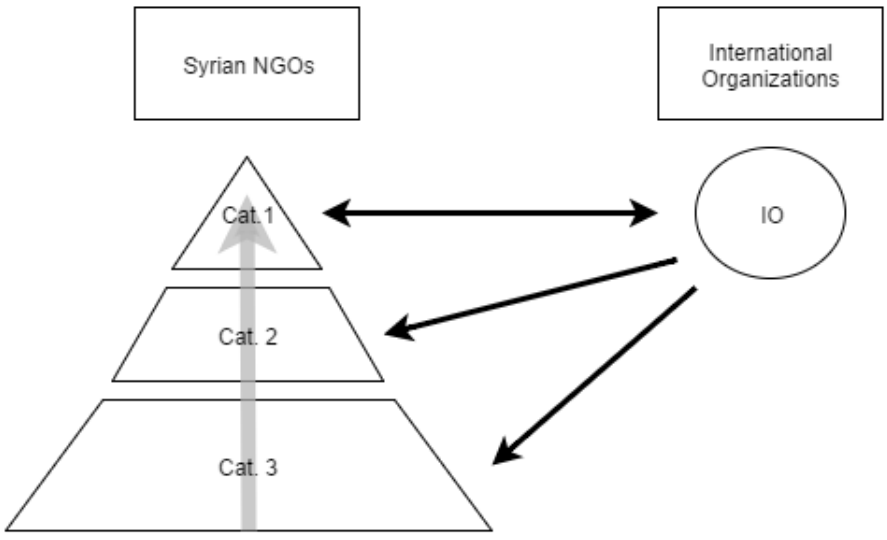
The reaction of Syrian NGOs to international organizations' propensity for subcontracting partnerships was varied and illuminating. It was possible to roughly sort these reactions into three categories. The first category consisted of a small number of large, established Syrian NGOs possessing considerable operational and organizational capacity. Often these NGOs had a strong diasporic connection. Rarely entering into partnerships that were not inclusive, these NGOs adopted a policy of refusing to partner with international organizations unless they had the opportunity to collaborate and provide substantial input into humanitarian programming. This position was summed up by a senior member of one such organization:

"As Syrian NGOs, we were kind of told what to do. This is the money we have and you need to implement. You're obviously still helping people but now we've been able to create partnerships and we can sustain ourselves and now we can be a bit more picky and choosy about the projects we really believe in. [...] We really want a partner that is going to treat us like a partner. Usually we test out a partner with a pilot project, same as they test us out. If it doesn't benefit the Syrian people but their organisation then it's difficult to work with them."

Many more Syrian organizations could be found in the second category. Such organizations would agree to enter into subcontracting partnerships only on condition that the projects they were implementing accorded to their own assessments of what programming was needed. One organization highlighted this position clearly, "if it is a good project and focusing on the needs, we would be ready to implement it for the international organization."

More nuanced was the third category, comprised of numerous smaller Syrian organizations that were willing to unconditionally accept subcontracting roles in partnerships. It was not uncommon for these organizations to have reservations on the projects they were tasked to implement, yet it was frequently expressed that these partnerships were entered into to some extent on a calculation

Partnership Dynamics: Ownership and Input



of self-interest. Organizations in the third category often accepted such partnerships with the hope that working with international partners, in any capacity, would secure funding, capacity building, and visibility that would allow them to move up into categories 2 and 1.

What emerged clearly from the research was that Syrian organizations were keen to "climb the ladder" of these categories. The ideal relationship type for all Syrian organizations interviewed corresponded to that as outlined by the proponents of localization; a mutually beneficial one where local NGOs with operational and organizational capacity act in harmony with international actors providing their own resources and expertise.

The Humanitarian Pooled Fund

In July 2014, the HPF was established in order to support humanitarian assistance in Syria. The aim of the HPF is to provide "flexible and timely resources to partners thereby expanding the delivery of humanitarian assistance, increasing humanitarian access, and strengthening partnerships with local and international non-governmental organizations" (Humanitarian Response 2015b). This aim is achieved through an inclusive approach that strengthens Syrian NGO capacity in three different ways: first, "by providing direct funding for projects of Syrian NGOs"; second, by "applying participatory capacity assessment methodologies to identify and address capacity needs of partners"; third by "funding projects of UN agencies and international NGOs targeting Syrian NGO's with distinct capacity building components" (Humanitarian Response 2015c). Although UN agencies and INGOs are eligible to receive funding, the HPF prioritizes the funding of Syrian NGOs "while developing their institutional, operational, and logistic capacity in a sustainable manner" (Humanitarian Response 2015c, 10). Although Syrian NGOs have to go through a strict "risk assessment" to access the HPF, as a source of direct funding it allows Syrian NGOs control over project design as well as implementation, allowing them to utilize the full extent of their contextual expertise.

As of May 2015, 70% (49 out of 70) of the projects funded by the HPF were of national NGOs, representing 21 Syrian organizations out of a total of 36 partners eligible to receive funding, and managing 61% of the disbursed funds at the time (Humanitarian Response 2015d).

Sustainability

As discussed in the literature review, sustainability across the entire range of RRD is of paramount importance. Nearly all Syrian organizations expressed a general concern over the sustainability of humanitarian operations in Syria. Based on their own interactions with international organizations, they felt there was an over-emphasis on relief assistance and that this relief assistance was in itself often carried out in an unsustainable manner.

> *"We know we can't talk about recovery on a very large scale because the security situation in Syria is still very serious [...] but we used to do a lot of distribution for life-saving materials, but now this work is really damaging Syria. It is making Syrians dependent people. Now we stop focusing on distribution and just focus on livelihood and sustainable projects [...] Syrian people are independent and hardworking [...] We know that this type of distribution will really damage the culture of the Syrian people. We know that in the future the international agencies will leave and go to another crisis in the world."*
>
> *- Representative from large Syrian NGO*

Overall, concerns over dependency and the sustainability of current humanitarian projects was compounded by fears over the withdrawal of the international community. Syrian organizations were acutely aware that the presence of international organizations would be temporary. Often citing prior humanitarian crises as examples, Syrian organizations knew that international interest and funding would steadily reduce and that humanitarian agencies would consequently scale back all types of humanitarian assistance operations.

On the other hand, from the perspective of international organizations, there was a strong belief that it was futile to focus on projects other than immediate emergency relief. The argument was frequently raised that, given Syria is still a war-zone, projects with a longer term focus were of little value. In general this argument was acknowledged by Syrian NGOs, but was considered to be overly reductionist and lacking in nuance. While Syrian organizations agreed that large-scale developmental programs were most likely unrealistic at the current time, it was frequently expressed that there still remains unrealized potential for a greater number of sustainable programs across the RRD contiguum. Indeed, this argument was supported with several clear examples of sustainable programs given by a number of Syrian NGOs.

Sustainable Project Examples

- A Syrian organization interviewed explained one of their sustainable agriculture projects. The project entailed growing fields of wheat, a percentage of which was sold to organizations for their food baskets and to those people that could buy the crop. The rest of the crops were used for their own food distribution program providing bread in the besieged area. The money made from this project was used to cover the cost of the project and to support a research center in the besieged area by supporting a biogas dig providing electricity. This research center was successful in planting fields of mushrooms. It was also successful in innovating with a new biogas dig that can be used in both summers and winters.

- An international organization introduced an agriculture project to its Syrian partners. The project consisted of a multiplication of seed potatoes. Potato sprouts were re-planted to yield more harvest of potatoes which could be carried out for a few years. The multiplication of seeds technique could allow for the planting cycle to be prolonged. The aim of the project was to work in areas where the farmers could produce their own potatoes. The projects was categorized as being successful by the organizations as it resulted in a reduced price of potatoes making them affordable to more people. The project also resulted in a revolving fund for the Syrian organizations which supported the project and provided money for net houses and irrigation networks.

The following example was given on numerous occasions, highlighting the type of problems encountered by an over-reliance on unsustainable

relief projects. Securing food is a vital priority in crisis situations and the distribution of emergency food aid, or "food baskets", is a necessary and life saving humanitarian operation. However, there are concerns that, on their own, such programs could lead to fragile dependency. In the words of a Syrian NGO network representative:

"Our priority is to find a job for the man, for the woman and their families, so they start to work again and restart a normal life. You cannot just be giving and giving and giving, the sources will vanish eventually! INGOs strategy has been to push for food baskets, but if they are just giving me food, why should I work?"

Several Syrian NGOs recounted how efforts to develop or supplement food distribution programs with more sustainable projects focusing on Syrian livelihoods were scarce, and were often rejected when proposed by local NGOs. Projects were put forward to build bakeries and support their employees and, though some of these projects were realized, the majority were not. Time and time again, Syrian NGOs expressed frustration that international agencies would baulk at sustainable projects despite evidence of existing positive examples and results. One Syrian organization designed and deployed a project which secured farming implements and loans to support agriculture for local food production, a fact which visibly surprised several international aid agencies who thought such projects unviable.

The reluctance to engage in sustainable projects was frequently attributed to a systemic problem of targeting "low-hanging fruit". This phenomenon, prevalent in the literature review, occurs when humanitarian agencies favor simpler programs that are straightforward to monitor and allow for easy results reporting. Food baskets, for example, can be tracked easily and are palatable to donors; when 100 nutritionally designed baskets are distributed, it is easy to report back up the chain that 100 families were fed, staving off hunger and malnutrition. Such monitoring and reporting is far less straightforward when implementing the more complex programs necessary to support sustainability. Programs supporting agriculture or bakeries have more "moving parts" and are much more difficult to reduce to metrics in terms of impact. The pressure of targeting low-hanging fruit was admitted to us by representatives of international agencies themselves but it is essential to understand, as they put it, the importance of having effective monitoring & evaluation of programs, especially in environments where funding or supplies could end up in the hands of conflict parties. However. it must be noted that, although uncommon, there were INGOs actively seeking inclusive partnerships and working with local actors to ensure sustainable programming. One interviewed INGO in particular

The "Lost Generation"

The most common fear of the Syrians interviewed was over the extreme deterioration of Syria's schools and the lack of access to education for for the country's youth. Pre-crisis Syria was renowned for its high education levels, yet currently Syrian NGO representatives are concerned about the emergence of a "lost generation". Those interviewed expressed real concern that, if unaddressed, a generation without schooling and prospects would easily turn to violent and extremist options. It was with real frustration that the majority of interviewed Syrian NGOs questioned the apparent lack of concern by the international community on this matter. In the words of one representative, "education is the most important for us [but] every time we ask for support for educational projects IOs say the Syrian crisis is an emergency crisis so we cannot support the education projects."

appeared to demonstrate a real desire to reflect the needs of a contiguum approach. Investing significant time and effort in understanding the local context, this INGO worked only with local NGOs and identified those areas where rehabilitation and development was possible. As one representative of this INGO explained:

"We are not a frontline organization, rather we work in areas that are more peaceful and where we can do more long term activities. Our work is not to identify beneficiaries but how we can support structures benefitting the populations as well. The way it should be is this: where they [local NGOs] come up with the idea and we see whether or not we can support it."

Thus, again reflecting the broader literature, our findings suggest that given specific contextual knowledge there is room for the deployment of relief, rehabilitation, and development as necessary to address the needs of vulnerable populations, even in the CPE scenario of Syria and its ongoing conflict. As a Syrian NGO representative stated, when it comes to humanitarian programming, "it is about doing the right thing, not just the easy thing."

Funding

Three main ways are available to Syrian organizations to receive financial support: from the diaspora; from private donors, mainly Arab countries; and from creating international partnerships. The research highlighted a trend of Syrian NGOs increasingly looking to international partnerships as a source of sustainable funding due to a rapid decline in funding from diaspora and private donors, their previous main source of funds. Indeed, at the beginning of the crisis, many newly-founded Syrian humanitarian organizations could rely on the solidarity of a large Syrian diaspora. This type of financial support allowed the organizations to work with a high degree of flexibility and independence, without having to conform to strict international standard and making decisions as to where and how the donations would be allocated based on their local knowledge. Those organizations that benefitted from the financial support of the diaspora, or had diasporic board members, were able to develop at a faster pace and demonstrated high levels of organizational capacity from early on. This was in contrast to other Syrian organizations that lacked the same external connections. However, as the conflict became protracted, many Syrians living outside the country exhausted their ability to support these organizations. As a Syrian-American NGO worker explains, "diaspora people used to give millions and now at a fundraising if you can get 20,000 you're lucky… it's really bad."

"The demand is huge and the resources are little. So we have to find a way to be a magician, to make, out of small money, big effects. This is what we have been trying to do so far."

- Syrian Network Representative

In response to diminishing regional and diasporic financial support, Syrian organizations of all kinds turned to the wider international community in order to diversify and stabilize their funding. To this effect, there has been an explosion of Syrian organizations investing time and resources to register in Turkey. Registration has indeed become a priority for Syrian organizations as it usually is a requirement to partner with IOs, hindering the organizations which do not have the financial means to engage in this process. Having an organizational presence in Turkey, an international hub for humanitarian operations into Syria, presents greater opportunities to interact and secure funding from international humanitarian actors and UN agencies. Nonetheless, while international partnerships are widely considered by

Syrian organizations as providing more sustainable funding, IOs themselves are facing donor-fatigue as the Syrian conflict drags on and other humanitarian crises emerge around the globe. As the funding of IOs diminishes, they themselves lose the ability to exercise discretion in directing funding towards local NGOs, instead becoming increasingly tied to programming as dictated by the donors themselves - so called "donor driven" funding. For these reasons, Syrian organizations reliant on IOs are pushing for the implementation of projects that are self-sustaining, in order to combat the effects of donor-driven funding and donor-withdrawal.

"The difference between a project and partnership is that you receive continuous support from your partners based on certain conditions, they support your organization as a whole in all the programs and campaigns implemented. It is important for us to receive continuous support as our team is now 60 employees and 40 volunteers, we have very big admin expenses, if we do not have continuous projects we can not cover these expenses and we can not continue in our projects."

- Syrian NGO Representative

The vast majority of Syrian organizations interviewed for this research expressed that their aim was to reach the organizational development point that would enable them to receive direct funding from international donors. Indeed, again reflecting findings on the wider literature on localization, a small number of Syrian organizations expressed concern over overheads and loss of donor funding as it filtered through the "middle-men" of international organizations. As one Syrian organization put it:

"Normally INGOs sub-award projects. They take the money from the donors and then divide it to us Syrian organizations. When they do this, there is great expense; when it gets to Syria, there is sometimes just 30% of the donor money being spent on projects. When we Syrians have direct funding, we have less expenses, so 90% percent is spent on projects inside Syria."

However, the majority of Syrian organizations wish to benefit from both types of funding, as partnerships with international organizations remain currently the best way for them to work on their organization skills and to keep building capacity.

In this regard, the establishment of the HPF has played an important role in supporting and developing

Project-based funding, Sustainability and Capacity building

Given that the majority of partnerships place local actors in a subcontracting role, financial support from international organizations is largely project-based and designed for short funding cycles (from 6 months up to a maximum of 24 months). Reflecting the literature review, these funding cycles prevent long-term planning, instead keeping Syrian organizations in a "project-by-project" mindset dependent on the renewal of projects or creations of new ones, uncertain as to whether they would be operational in the following year. Furthermore, because international organizations fund the project and not the organization itself, Syrian organizations are still under significant pressure to cover their support cost upon project completion, preventing them from developing internally and addressing the high cost of incorporating standards. This has a profound effect on both sustainability and capacity building. When projects come to an end, local staff who have benefitted from the experience and capacity building workshops provided by the INGO are frequently unable to be retained. Thus, Syrian NGOs are often unable to grow or sustainably increase their operational and organizational capacity in the medium to long term. Consequently, many active members of Syrian organizations, including board members, keep working as volunteers. This is despite the acknowledgement that contributing to support costs is an important consideration when working with local partners. As UNHCR's internal policy demonstrates, "the more an NGO contributes to the particular partnership, the greater will be UNHCR's flexibility in covering such [support] costs" (UNHCR 1998).

Syrian organizations. As a direct sourceof funding, larger Syrian NGOs have used HPF funds. However, an additional and unintentional consequence of the HPF is that bigger Syrian organizations have themselves utilized this additional funding to themselves subcontract smaller Syrian NGOs, which are capable of implement projects. In this manner, smaller Syrian NGOs benefit from this working relationship, gaining capacity and know-how, allowing them to climb the ladder.

"We went through the process of building our own organization, our own reputation. Smaller organizations call us and ask us about how to apply for the HPF. There is competition but at the end of the day you want everybody to do good work for Syria. It's kind of like an obligation to help them. There are so many very local Syrian organizations that had private donors, but now it's gone. What we also do with these smaller organizations, is that we understand the game more, the stakeholders, the donors, the INGOs, so we have each others' back."

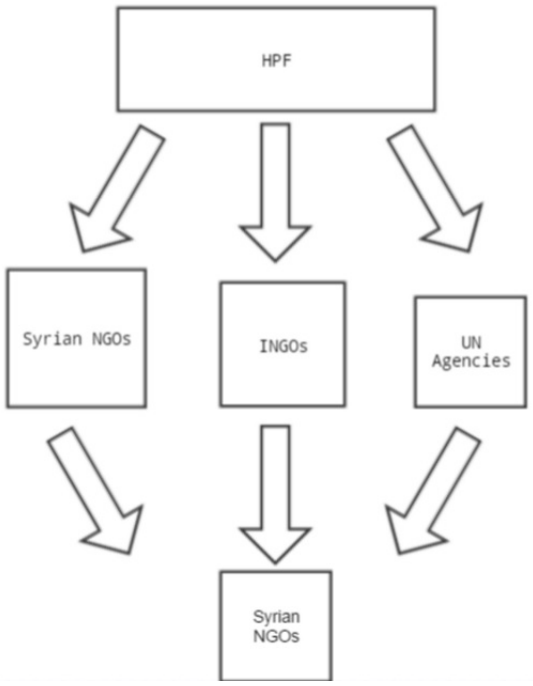
- Syrian NGO With Highest HPF Rating

This process helps break a Catch-22 situation present for Syrian NGOs. INGOs are largely only willing to entrust funding and support to those Syrian NGOs who most easily met their standards, with high visibility, organizational and operational capacity, and a proven track record. However, it is very difficult for Syrian NGOs present in the third category (depicted by the red line in the diagram on p. 48) to develop and demonstrate these qualities to international standards without funding from IOs in the first place. Thus, there is a somewhat "locked-in" situation, where those Syrian NGOs that benefitted from initial diasporic involvement and early growth are the ones that attract the majority of funding from INGOs. By contracting smaller NGOs, the larger Syrian organizations can overcome this dilemma.

As one small Syrian organization explained:

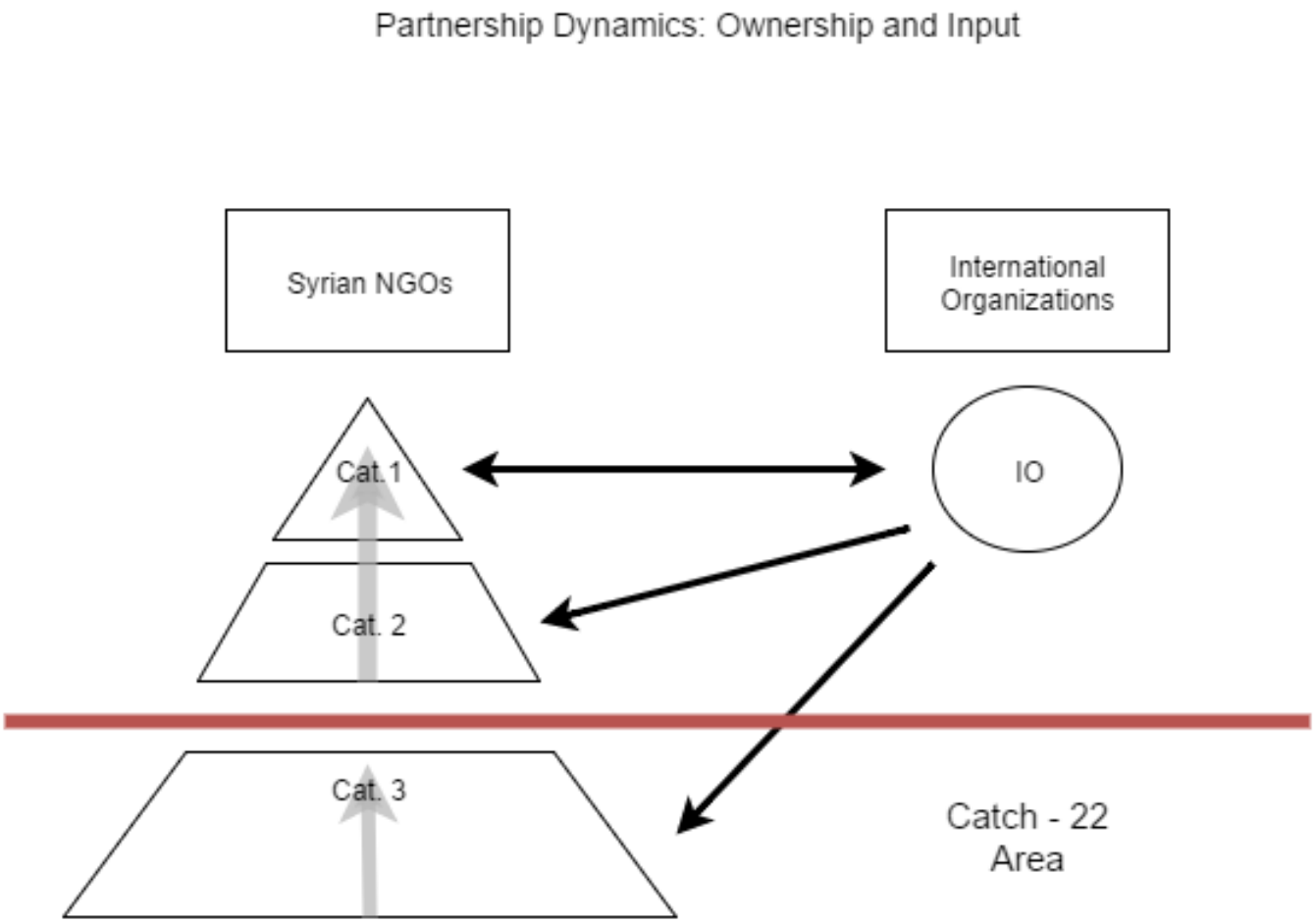
"We have to let go some of our staff because of lack of funding, but to receive funding we should actually be hiring people like a financial manager, a project manager, an HR manager. INGOs and donors want Syrian organizations to have a strong staff structure but who is paying for that? So we decided to actually reduce the salaries in order to avoid firing people."

Funding / Support Flows From the HPF and Donors



"We are weak and we will be weak in the future if we don't receive support."

- Syrian Human Rights Documentation NGO



Capacity Building

As discussed in the literature review, civil society is widely acknowledged as being one of the key sources of humanitarian assistance globally, accordingly the strengthening of civil society capacity has emerged as an important practice in partnerships between international and local actors. This practice was confirmed by the data collected from our interviews revealing that IOs placed emphasis on assessing and building the capacity of Syrian NGOs. Indeed, this was marked as one of the first steps in identifying and choosing Syrian partners. Such capacity building was mainly provided through training, workshops, and less often mentoring or coaching, either by the IO partners, Syrian networks, or well-established Syrian organizations. One of the main reasons cited by IOs in providing these trainings was to help Syrian NGOs to meet the standards and requirements set by IOs and their donors. When talking about capacity building, an INGO stated:

"We are talking two different languages, and I do not mean Arabic and English [...] these are primarily grassroot organizations that have not necessarily dealt with a lot of donors before or are not necessarily aware what the requirements are, so we have to translate or bridge the gap somehow."

There was thus a focus on providing trainings on writing budget proposals, reporting, and creating invoices as necessary skills by INGOs. The importance of capacity building was also reflected in the HPF, which prioritizes funding projects of Syrian NGOs and of those INGOs and UN agencies that have a specific capacity building component for Syrian NGOs. This was also seen through the

Partnership Initiative, which helps build the capacity of Syrian NGOs in order to adhere to international standards and provide more effective humanitarian assistance.

Additionally, Syrian NGOs also understood their need to build capacity in these areas and looked at partnerships with IOs as an opportunity to gain experience, learn from, and be trained by, their partner organization. A large majority of Syrian NGOs highlighted that, in the words of one organization, "when we have a partnership with any INGO they have to train our employees, which is very important for us because most of our employees are not trained in their new positions."

Overall, the type of capacity building provided and its perceived usefulness by the Syrian NGOs reflected attitudes of INGOs that were consistent with the literature on inclusive and subcontracting partnerships. The type of capacity building provided by INGOs in subcontracting partnerships was criticized by Syrian NGOs as being unsystematic and not addressing key needs over organizational sustainability, instead focusing on limited, project specific aspects. This created a concern of long-term dependence, of an inability to grow as an organization, as well as to sustain long-term partnerships, and take more ownership of their own projects. A network of Syrian organizations stated:

"Now we think more of blaming them as we now understand the game and the required capacities to the job. We are getting into the 5th year and they did not guide us and now we are asking for systematic capacity building and now we do wonder why they did not start doing this from the very beginning. It is either that they want to keep us in this partnership situation where we always need guidance, or you do not really care about capacity building. It is not all bad intentions, but we are not satisfied with the process."

Indeed, the converse was also true, those Syrian NGOs engaged in what they considered as inclusive partnerships, reported greater satisfaction on the capacity building they were receiving which was more focused on organizational and sustainable capacity building. An important aspect of these partnerships was to have a more productive dialogue between both partners that allowed for Syrian input on the type of capacity building provided. For Syrian NGOs, one of the more preferred methods of receiving such capacity-building training was in the form of coaching and mentoring, where INGOs had a genuine interest in building capacity in a sustainable manner. The benefits of such capacity building, although less often provided, was also highlighted by some INGOs, as one stated:

"What we find more meaningful is not formal training but more coaching where we say we have worked together for a year, we trust each other and on administrative and financial matters, we sit together and tell them this is how performance fits in and this what information is important."

The Partnership Initiative

The Partnership Initiative (PI) was created in 2014, addressing issues of partnerships and capacity development for Syrian NGOs engaged in providing humanitarian assistance inside Syria. The PI answers to the PI Steering Committee consisting of 2 Syrian local NGOs, 2 Syrian Diaspora NGOs, and 3 INGOs. The overall objective of the PI is to build capacity of Syrian NGOs to meet international standards thus allowing for them to provide effective humanitarian relief and development assistance. The PI aims to reach this goal by focusing on three main points: "coordination and support of trainings and capacity building activities; engagement and good partnerships for all humanitarian stakeholders and; development of learning resources, best practices and standardization of common tools and processes" (Humanitarian Response 2015b).

Additionally, the data collected highlighted the necessity for capacity building to reflect the needs on the ground. As stated by a Syrian NGO, "donors first gave us disarmament training, we do not need that now, and then transitional justice, almost every Syrian was trained on transitional justice and there is no transition in Syria."

Linked to this was a concern that some IOs did not recognize the capacity of Syrian NGOs. When speaking of their own capacity, Syrian NGOs emphasized their knowledge of and access to the local environment, their technical knowledge of implementing projects on the ground, and the presence of skilled professionals inside Syria. These skilled professionals, usually included doctors, engineers, higher up business professionals such CEOs and managers, agronomists, professors, lawyers and scientists. A Syrian NGO emphasized the capacity and presence of experts stating, "there are experts inside this area, they are doctors and engineers, they just need a little support."

A majority of Syrian NGOs referred to a steep learning curve, and argued that since the beginning of their operations, they had managed to learn a lot from their partnerships and build their capacity in important areas such as writing budget proposals, creating invoices and reporting back to the IO partner. This was measured by being successful in securing new partnerships, expanding their teams and projects, and being approved by the HPF mechanism for funding.

Thus, overall, capacity-building training was marked as vital by both INGOs and Syrian NGOs. In most cases, such training provided more long-lasting and positive results in the framework of inclusive partnerships that were aimed at building local capacity, providing sustainable and organizational trainings, and allowed for a productive dialogue where Syrian organizations had a say.

Standards

When being considered for funding and when creating partnerships with INGOs, Syrian NGOs were expected to adhere to certain standards. As found in the literature review, these standards included common international standards such as HAP and Sphere Standards, standards required by donors, and in-house standards set by the international organizations themselves. Such standards were mainly aimed at maintaining a certain accountability, transparency and quality of the humanitarian assistance provide by donors, INGOs and their partner Syrian NGOs. These standards address project design, financial and project management, delivery of assistance and monitoring & evaluation.

One of the main involvement of INGOs with their Syrian NGO partners was to ensure that Syrian NGOs can better understand and adhere to the necessary standards required by both the donor and the international organization itself. This was mainly carried out through different forms of training and workshops, and came under the greater capacity building. Moreover, as a majority of these Syrian NGOs had recently been created, it was the first time that many of them were engaging with donor and IO standards.

In general, Syrian NGOs understood the importance of standards to maintain accountability and quality of the humanitarian assistance provided. When asked whether the Syrian NGOs felt that these standards had improved their operations, most INGOs stated that although gradual, the Syrian NGOs were becoming more familiar with, and understanding of, standards. An INGO stated:

"They are still checking the boxes but we are getting them around to understand it a bit and we are seeing that they are receptive. [Their first reaction to it] was 'these big bad people are bullying us, what are they doing?' And now it is around to 'oh this actually makes sense.'"

Meeting certain standards also affected the approval for HPF funding. Since the beginning of the crisis, the HPF has engaged with many organization for funding. Yet, the response of Syrian NGOs was mixed. A majority of Syrian NGOs felt that incorporating certain standards had helped in improving the quality of their operations. They also highlighted the importance of following humanitarian principles and being considered as a humanitarian organization. As a Syrian organization stated: "[working with an IO] has improved our standards by improving the way we are documenting, because they have external auditing, so it is good for us to have report of this."

While this view existed, a few concerns were also outlined in interviews with Syrian organizations. First, as consistent with the literature review, a majority of Syrian NGOs emphasized the difficulties of having to meet an excess amount of standards. Furthermore, the additional lack of harmonized standards amongst the different international organizations added extra pressure on the Syrian NGOs that were limited in resources and capacity. As an IO accordingly stated, "we need to make sure [funds] are administered in a fair and transparent way, so having said that, we do need certain standards but of course it might add additional pressure." While the necessity of having standards to a certain extent was recognized by both INGOsand Syrian NGOs, the lack of harmonization was also acknowledged as an important concern by some IOs. This was reflected in the work of the Partnership Initiative that has recently started to work towards standardizing certain tools and processes of operations.

Secondly, Syrian NGOs felt as though some of the standards imposed by INGOs were not always realistic and did not fully account for the complex and insecure context on the ground. A Syrian NGO interviewed recalled one of the accountability standards expected by an INGO stating that:

"They were teaching us how to make distribution procedures, they said you have to collect people in public squares and have list of names and everyone has to sign his real name and ID number which is impossible for us [...] how can I collect people in public place and ask for the real name and ID? [...] because if anything happens to him you are seen as the reason why."

This was linked to a perception of INGO and donor inflexibility by Syrian NGOs to better adapt standards to the local context. A number of Syrian NGOs also felt like some of the standards were mostly imposed based on the interest of the donors and INGOs. This was addressed by a number of Syrian NGOs that referred to the trending social media hashtag, #ThatsWhatTheDonorWants. Moreover, a Syrian working for an INGO stated that:

"Sometimes the donors think in one way because they have received information and also because they have their interests. NGOs that are implementing for donors, they also have received information that is not necessarily the same information. And then we have the community who have their own information and interest. Sometimes donor insist on their interests rather than on being more accountable to the population."

Coordination

The creation of a Turkish hub as part of the *Whole of Syria* approach has allowed for greater coordination of Syrian organizations having a presence in Turkey. The UN humanitarian affairs coordinating body, OCHA, is leading this Turkish hub. Since 2013, OCHA is a key interlocutor for Syrian organizations willing to be part of the coordinated humanitarian response. Indeed, "OCHA has mapped and profiled around 110 Syrian NGOs and civil society organizations out of the 600-700 existing, to support their integration into the coordination system and to enable them to receive project grants from the Humanitarian Pooled Fund" (Reliefweb, 2015b, 7). The importance of mapping potential local partners and of coordination is well acknowledged, a fortiori in a context of cross-border operations. Thus, OCHA has recently decided to engage in the same process from Jordan, in order to map, assess and build the capacities of local organizations in South of Syria with the idea of "promoting stronger partnerships between cross-border actors and N[ational]NGOs" (Reliefweb, 2015b, 7).

The interviews revealed Syrian organizations have mixed perceptions towards OCHA's role and the recent establishment of the cluster system. A majority of the organizations interviewed highlighted the usefulness of cluster meetings as a platform for networking with international organizations. Indeed, attendance to cluster meetings led by UN agencies and INGOs facilitates interactions and opportunities for potential partnerships, and becomes essential to the Syrian organizations which cannot rely on personal contacts.

Yet, Syrian organizations which do not have English-speakers in their employ had a more reserved response on this, as communication with international staff without any knowledge of Arabic would become more difficult.

> *"The relationships with INGOs began really with the attendance at the cluster meetings (the OCHA ones). Previously, they were the working groups. It's networking. And it is important that INGOs see that Syrian NGOs are interested in coordination. We would go for networking and through time we would understand the value of coordination. It has an added value for us. Most of our partnerships have been through these."*
>
> *- Spokesperson from Large Syrian NGO*

Additionally, the overall initial reaction by Syrian organizations to the cluster meeting approach was that UN agencies and INGOs were looking for a way to gather as much information as they could from them without automatically supporting them in return. Several Syrian organizations were also concerned over how the data they shared was being used, expressing how frequently the purpose and effect of which was not always explained clearly. Thus, for the local organizations struggling to find financial and organizational support, this situation would easily lead to a feeling of frustration. One representative of a Syrian organization that had recently opened an office in Gaziantep shared the following view on OCHA's coordination mechanism: "they are trying to coordinate the organizations [but] they are just getting the information. All the international world sends people to get information and then they are gone." However, these organizations would still stress the importance of informing the international community about the situation on the ground, as well as their capacity to implement projects inside Syria, pointing out the need for stronger advocacy. INGOs and UN agencies on the other hand emphasized the need of sharing information on who is, or able to do, what, when and where, with the aim to avoid

overlap and also fill the gaps. Furthermore, both Syrian and international organizations insisted on the significance of efficient meetings, as they can be numerous and time consuming, imposing significant effort on all participants.

UN OCHA Clusters - Turkish Hub

- *Camp Coordination/Management*
- *Education*
- *Emergency Shelter and NFI*
- *Food Security and Livelihoods*
- *Health*
- *Logistics*
- *Nutrition*
- *Protection*
- *Water Sanitation Hygiene*

The clusters mechanism has interestingly become an arena for discussing the ownership of the humanitarian response by Syrianorganizations. Indeed, each cluster has a cluster lead - usually a UN agency - and a NGO Cluster Co-coordinator (Humanitarian Response 2015a). Syrian organizations have, however, advocated to takeover these leading positions, citing their current roles as the primary implementers of programs on the ground, as well as their significant context-specific knowledge. However, Syrian ownership of coordination remains generally overlooked by the international humanitarian community. The situation was summarized by the head of mission at a large, international humanitarian organization thusly:

"From the start of the Syrian crisis, it is the same people leading the clusters and coordination, and they are internationals. They are not giving the ownership of the coordination to the national NGOs but at the end of the day the internationals are leaving! The Syrian NGOs are staying in the country. There should be a plan, there should be an agenda to give the ownership of the coordination to the national NGOs. But you can't really say this in the meetings."

Thus, the election of the Syrian American Medical Society Foundation (SAMS), a Syrian Diaspora organization, as the co-lead of the health cluster was welcomed by Syrian organizations as well as several international organizations. As a representative of a large, key health international organization which is part of the cluster, said of the issue, "they want it and they asked for it as a possibility to learn. I think it is important because it also allows them to participate in coordination processes [...]. It represents a good learning lesson."

It must be noted, however, that the OCHA coordination platform are not the sole channel of coordination and partnership creation between international and more local actors. Several interviewed organizations explained alternative methods. For example, a large Syrian organization, acting both as a network and as a project implementer, explained how it bypassed the OCHA system entirely. Affiliated with an armed group and consequently unable to register with OCHA, this organization nevertheless secured significant partnerships and funding from international organizations through other means. This organization stated that it had delivered more than 200 million dollars of aid inside Syria in 2014, through a large-scale vaccination program and several other projects.

Notable efforts in coordination are also present among Syrian organizations themselves. Indeed, several Syrian networks were created and based in Gaziantep. Included in OCHA's coordination system, these initiatives are largely welcomed by UN agencies and INGOs as a single common Syrian voice, reducing the number of interlocutors and simplifying interactions in the Turkish hub.

Interestingly, an overwhelming majority of Syrian organizations interviewed were part of a Syrian

network, demonstrating its perceived usefulness to the Syrian humanitarian community. This high level of participation can be explained in two different ways. First, Syrian organizations viewed being part of a network as important for assisting them with capacity building, communication and overall efficacy. For smaller organizations unable to create partnerships with INGOs or not yet registered with OCHA, networks usually represent the only opportunity to receive capacity-building training. Second, Syrian NGOs repeatedly emphasized the need to build a strong Syrian community in order to maximise networks and advocacy potential. For example, Syrian networks interviewed explained how their advocacy played in important role in securing the central role of Syrian NGOs in the design of the HPF.

As networks are considered key to Syrian organizations for solidarity, advocacy and representation, their efficiency as a body to improve humanitarian programming is disputed by INGOs that witness the power dynamics at play. Indeed, the possibility for INGOs to interact primarily with a network that would consequently dispatch the international financial support according to each Syrian organization's needs, demonstrates significant promise. Yet, internal disputes and fragmentation among the Syrian humanitarian community, with competing networks and financial dilution, fuel suspicions of inefficiency among INGOs.

Communication

A key factor for all interactions between Syrian NGOs and INGOs, as well as UN agencies is that of communication. Under the umbrella of communication and miscommunication lie varying perceptions, understandings and expectations that have an equally important impact on the relationships between Syrian NGOs and IOs. Issues of communication can undermine the entire process of creating partnerships and as such must be addressed from the outset and at every subsequent stage.

As discussed in the literature, there is an important difference in the type of partnerships that can be formed. The responsibilities of Syrian organizations will differ depending if they are in a one-time implementation subcontract or an inclusive partnership. Yet, the data gathered from the field shows there is still a variable understanding of the notion of partnership and of the expectations that are associated with it. In the context of remote management activities, many INGOs look for local subcontracting partners to implement their projects on the ground. In this manner, the establishment of a top-down relationship, where the Syrian organization is the implementing arm of the INGO is still commonly referred to as a "partnership" by international humanitarian organizations. However, invoking the language of partnership in such top-down relationships is vehemently opposed by other INGOs, among them a well-known medical organization. For these organizations, the language of partnership requires two sides with equal structure, resources and capacities. The aforementioned health organization therefore did not consider creating "partnerships" with Syrian organizations, instead opting to label its activities with Syrian health structures as "supporting" activties. The lexicon employed in this context is not innocent in the sense that it reveals the type of relationships that are created and defines the respective roles of the organizations. On the other hand, when Syrian organizations are asked about their need to create partnerships with IOs to continue providing assistance to their populations,

they aspire to an "inclusive partnership", where they would be treated as equals partners and be involved at all different levels of the process. Also, for several Syrian NGOs interviewed, it was assumed that the establishment of a partnership would mean larger support for the Syrian organization, for example in the form of capacity-building trainings.

The humanitarian community has its own jargon that is completely new to Syrian NGOs, lacking organizational experience and exposure to the international humanitarian system. What was therefore evident was a clear dissonance between, and across, Syrian NGOs and INGOs in the usage of key terminology. Frequently there was a "failure to speak the same language" with misunderstandings and differences in expectations that caused frustrations on both sides and threatened to endanger the working relationship. Yet, by attending cluster meetings and having more systematic contact with INGOs as they try to create partnerships with them, Syrian NGOs have quickly become familiarized with the system and demonstrated their willingness to be part of it. Thus, being able to use a fixed, determined and common terminology eases the communication and a fortiori the working relationship.

For this reason, geographic proximity with IOs provided by an international presence in Turkey is key for many Syrian organizations to actually engage face-to-face with potential partners. Regular exchange helps break an initial cultural barrier - as witnessed between well-established INGOs and young, less experienced Syrian organizations that are working together in a complicated setting.

Issues of communication and lack of dialogue were largely mentioned regarding the use of Arabic and English. Indeed, the technical vocabulary, but also the cluster meetings as well as the trainings are mainly in English, creating a disadvantage for Syrian organizations that do not have English-speaking employees. As a member of a big Syrian organization, who moved to Gaziantep from the United States, confessed, "they would see that I speak English. I am Syrian-American so I am a lot more approachable." Many Syrian organizations have complained about the lack of consideration for their native language or have missed opportunities to start a working relationship with IOs because of the language barrier. Belatedly, OCHA office in Gaziantep has introduced simultaneous English-Arabic interpretation.

> *"I was shocked when I found out all the meetings were in English. I think the meetings should be in Arabic. We brought this up a lot. With the HPF, it was an issue with proposal writing. During a budget workshop, they would do an example of a good proposal and a bad one, and I swear this happened in front of me, they would show that for the budget [a Syrian NGO] used google translate. Everybody laughed and it was bad, very undignifying. And the answer is pretty much clear: develop and find funding for a translator. It was a slap in the face for me, really unappropriate response."*
>
> *- Syrian NGO Representative*

The Syrian perspective was clear in stating a need for a comprehensive and sustainable dialogue with INGOs. Top-down working relationships are discouraging for Syrian organizations as they close the door to dialogue, giving the impression that INGOs are not willing to listen to what Syrians consider needed on the ground. Yet, as one Syrian organization said, "sometimes we adapt ourselves to OCHA and sometimes they adapt to us. Sometimes we try to understand their mentality of thinking and sometime they try to understand ours."

Overall, both Syrian and international organizations expressed a desire to achieve a level of

communication that was honest, clear and explicit about both the capacities and intentions of each actor in delivering humanitarian programming. Additionally all those interviewed acknowledged the value of investing time in communication and constructive debriefings with partners. This was seen as the only way to prevent serious miscommunications and misexpectations. Yet despite this acknowledgement, there remains frustration that such a level of communication is far from a reality. Indeed, Syrian organizations have repeatedly shared their frustration with the UN and associated agencies active in the Syrian conflict, though many of their complaints stemmed from misunderstandings of roles, rather than actual failures in these roles. Thus, an increased effort to clearly present the mandate, actual capacities, and expectations of each actor from the outset would prove beneficial in partnership dynamics and facilitate effective humanitarian response. Specifically it would help address the prevalent "why is the UN not helping us" feeling among the Syrian humanitarian community.

Trust and Respect

The preceding themes all have underlying concerns for trust and respect dynamics between IOs and Syrian NGOs. These themes were either precipitated by, or resulted in, problems of trust and respect. For IOs, issues of trust were linked to concerns of the lacking organizational and operational capacity of Syrian NGOs in meeting the required standards, in the appropriate use of funds, and in the effective implementation of projects. A small number of IOs emphasized how their trust had at times been tested by negative experiences with local partners.

Although issues of trust existed on both sides, they were more strongly emphasized by Syrian NGOs. For many, the predominance of non-inclusive partnerships and subcontracting roles was a clear manifestation of mistrust. Although Syrian NGOs were attuned to the need for standards and minimum capacity as demanded by INGOs, they expressed frustration that their actual capacity in this regard was being unduly overlooked and their potential to be trusted partners unfairly disregarded. Syrian NGOs felt that some INGOs were demonstrating a lack of will and engagement in even attempting to recognize the value of their input, consequently proliferating a feeling of disrespect among Syrian NGOs. When asked what they were looking for in a partnership a Syrian NGO answered saying "respect, we need to be trusted because we deserve that." The reluctance demonstrated by IOs to give greater ownership to local actors was interpreted as mistrustful and disrespectful, which in turn led Syrians to doubt the intentions and capabilities of INGOs. Indeed, the preference of INGOs to subcontract was interpreted by some Syrian NGOs as an almost deliberate power play, with one even expressing the sentiment that "some Syrians think INGOs really did not want to build our capacity because they wanted to be more dominant."

Additionally, several Syrian organizations clearly expressed a feeling of being used. Syrian NGOs felt as though they were being exploited as a free source of information by INGOs on the promise of a later partnership that often never materialized. Having to invest time and effort into sharing this information, with little feedback or support, was poorly perceived by the Syrian humanitarian community. For example, an important international agricultural organization asked a Syrian NGO to collect data for them, yet refused to even give any support for the endeavour.

"We had been exchanging, sharing information and working on a project for an international organization that, after 10 months, decided to drop everything for apparently a lack of funding from its donor. We had started assessing the needs and felt like it made us lose our credibility towards the population."

- Small Syrian NGO Representative

This feeling of exploitation was compounded by the fact that Syrian NGOs would offer assistance without recompense, caring as they did for the wellbeing of Syrians, something which they felt was known by INGOs, and leveraged against them. A Syrian representative clearly said, "we support, and will support, any organization that asks for information. Even if we don't receive anything because we have a message to deliver to the world." Another organization vigorously stated, "we are abused more than being used! It is pure hypocrisy."

Furthermore, linked to respect, some NGOs explained how they felt there was a lack of consideration in some elements of INGOs reporting requirements. For example, one INGO required of its Syrian implementing partner photo documentation of each recipient in an distribution program to fulfill monitoring & evaluation. For the Syrian NGO this was unacceptable not only because the sensitive security environment made photo documentation of recipients sensitive, but the very act of photographing aid recipients was in itself undignifying.

However, despite these problems of trust and respect, Syrian NGOs highlighted that such issues were not to be generalized to all international partnerships as they did have good experiences with partnerships that were based on mutual trust and respect. Furthermore, although issues of trust and respect were still present, both IOs and Syrian NGOs did mention an improvement of relationships of trust overtime. In such cases, both IOs and Syrian NGOs emphasized the importance of time and effort in building relationships of trust through improved communication and coordination. Moreover, this required Syrian NGOs to invest in and recognize the importance of meeting IO standards, and for IOs to be genuine in wanting to build a working and inclusive partnership. Overall, the importance of trust and respect was seen as being vital to building long-term sustainable relationships.

"Monitoring rules are against our dignity, you have to take photos and video [...] there were wealthy people who had dignity maybe very rich, from very good family [receiving emergency aid]. I saw my friend's' child and my heart was broken when I see her getting assessed and getting funding [...] this is a difficult thing and we can not fill this gap between their rules and our dignity."

- Syrian NGO Representative

Conclusions

This report aims at better understanding the current challenges and opportunities for Swiss organizations to create effective partnerships with Syrian NGOs in order to provide humanitarian assistance for the Syrian crisis. The following conclusions to this end must be tempered by limitations in the research. Due to security reasons, interviews could only be conducted with Syrian NGOs with a presence in Gaziantep. The possibility of interviewing more grassroot organizations inside Syria could have highlighted further needs and challenges. However, the current sample interviewed is actively engaged in partnerships with IOs and in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Thus, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

Framed within the context of the localization approach, discussed at length in the literature review, this report adds to the body of work highlighting the need to engage in inclusive partnerships with local actors, especially in the context of CPEs like Syria. Yet, the research found that there exists a knowledge gap on the part of Swiss organizations in identifying the existence of capable and trustworthy humanitarian partners in Syria. Although nearly all interviewed Swiss organizations acknowledged the benefits of working with local actors in theory and stated an interest in overcoming the knowledge gap, importantly they expressed the sentiment that they lacked the resources and capacity to do so.

With Syria being a CPE, containing the associated security risks, the majority of interviewed Swiss organizations opted to refrain from directly conducting activities inside Syria. The alternative of working through partners was seen as entailing an unacceptable loss of control and risks to accountability and humanitarian principles. Thus, the research found that Swiss organizations view partnerships more in the realm of challenge (i.e remote management) than in the realm of opportunity (i.e localization). Indeed, this mindset diverted Swiss organizations away from the very real opportunities presented by the actual existence of Syrian NGOs, their work and capacity. Consequently, Swiss organizations placed greater focus on the needs of the more accessible refugee population present in the neighboring countries.

Additionally, the difficulty in securing funding from donors for projects conducted inside Syria and the priority given to emergency relief projects, discouraged the creation of inclusive partnerships. Swiss organizations relayed that donors expressed reluctance to provide funding for projects inside Syria, a reluctance informed by concerns of compromised accountability, risks of security and a lack of familiarity with the Syrian context.

Confirming the broader discussion on localization, the research from the fieldwork in Gaziantep, Turkey, yielded findings useful in addressing the knowledge gap expressed by Swiss organizations. Exploration of the challenges and opportunities facing IOs and Syrian NGOs operating in Syria out of Gaziantep revealed 8 key themes pertaining to how partnerships can best be formed and maintained to deliver effective and sustainable humanitarian assistance. These themes are ownership, sustainability, capacity building, standards, funding, coordination, communication, and trust and respect.

Ownership dynamics of partnerships discovered by the research highlighted a lack of opportunity for Syrian NGOs to provide genuine input into the humanitarian programs they were tasked to

implement. While subcontracting relationships are by no means a purely negative phenomenon, allowing local actors to provide input into the design, implementation, monitoring & evaluation of projects can unlock great opportunity for sustainable and effective humanitarian assistance, better suited to the reality on the ground and the most pressing needs of vulnerable populations. The establishment of the HPF, which prioritizes direct funding, for Syrian organizations is an interesting example displaying the positive outcomes that can be gained from allowing greater ownership of programming by local actors.

The prevalence of relief programming in Syria, particularly the distribution of food baskets and other materials, highlighted limitations in the sustainability of the current humanitarian response and raised fears of dependency. Rehabilitation and development projects, although also required in order to meet Syrian needs, are comparatively lacking in the programming of Swiss and international organizations. Thus, contra to the rationale of both concepts of the humanitarian contiguum and the localization, IOs appear to be applying more of a copy-paste approach to current humanitarian relief then a contextually specific one. The research suggested that, at least in part, the focus on relief is driven by donor preference to support projects that are easily measurable - a preference for so called "low hanging fruit". Interestingly, the interviewed Swiss organizations acknowledged the need for complementary and simultaneous programming across the RRD range, yet expressed difficulties in understanding how this could be done in the complex Syrian context. In this regard, the formation of inclusive partnerships that capitalize on local access and knowledge present an important opportunity. The competency of local actors can be key in identify which types of programming are required and in what areas they are feasible.

While Swiss organizations expressed a concern for the lack of capacity of Syrian organizations, when informed of their capacity, a majority of Swiss organizations were interested in knowing the extent to which these organizations can operate and absorb funding. Many interviewed Syrian organizations receive capacity building in the context of their partnerships with IOs. However, in subcontractual partnerships, capacity building is mostly aimed towards skills primarily suited to the the completion of the specific project they are subcontracted to implement. On the other hand, conducted in the framework of inclusive partnerships, capacity building that focused on internal organizational trainings leads to more sustainable results, by strengthening local organizations that will remain in place once the international community withdraws. Furthermore, this contributes to a productive dialogue between partners, where capacity building is tailored to the broader needs of both Syrian and international organizations. The need to provide such sustainable training is recognized by the international community, as reflected by both the Partnership Initiative and HPF.

In addition to being essential to the delivery of humanitarian assistance in general, the provision of direct and sustainable funding is key to the organizational development of Syrian NGOs. This not only contributes to building the capacity of Syrian organizations, but also allows them to take more ownership of the humanitarian programs. Despite this, securing funding for relief projects still proves easier for Syrian organizations, as sustainable longer-term programs within Syria struggle to receive sustainable financial support. Maintaining a vision of the Syrian crisis as a strict relief emergency overlooks the importance of addressing the need for sustainable funding in protracted CPEs.

Additionally, the research found that there was room for greater flexibility in the standards governing partnerships. Although standards are vitally important to ensure quality and accountable humanitarian assistance - something recognized by all interviewed Syrian NGOs -

the proliferation of heterogeneous standards are, to some degree, unduly taxing on local actors. Moreover, standards are often both overly complex and lacking in sensitivity to the realities of the Syrian CPE context. Some progress is being made on this front by the work of the Partnership Initiative, which is active in Turkey attempting to streamline the partnership standards process.

Increased attention placed on coordination allows for greater knowledge sharing and networking in order to create inclusive partnerships. Mechanisms such as OCHA cluster meetings as seen in Turkey indeed present a platform for Syrian NGOs and international partners to interact and are often the only way for small local organizations to be integrated in the international humanitarian response. Yet, current opportunities for coordination to facilitate partnerships and humanitarian assistance are mixed, as there are often costs associated to attending OCHA cluster meetings which can be especially prohibitive to smaller organizations lacking appropriate funds or English speaking staff. Likewise, the existence of Syrian networks can have an important role to play as coordinating entities and repositories of useful information on Syrian partner capacity. However, these networks are still at a juvenile stage and somewhat marked by power politics. Although Swiss NGOs are not currently present within the Turkish hub coordination mechanism, making use of such a mechanism points to an opportunity for filling the knowledge gap.

Lastly, the need for effective communication and considerations on trust and respect were evident from the research. Efforts to this end facilitate better partnerships and avoid situations of misunderstanding and misexpectation. Interviews from the field showed that regular and clear communication are exceptionally important in the efficient management of partnerships, yet it was often lacking, undermining both individual projects and the long-term working relationship. Similarly, the distinct lack of exchange in Arabic is not only an issue for communication but can lead to feelings of disrespect. Indeed, issues of trust and respect underline all aspects of partnering. Therefore, while partnerships based on mutual trust and respect do exist, the prevalence of subcontractual partnership where Syrian NGOs are expected to act solely as implementers fuels mistrust and disrespect. Being limited to subcontracting roles is seen by some in the Syrian humanitarian community as enforcing a subordinate and somewhat patronizing relationship. Mutual trust and respect are therefore essential to the creation of effective and inclusive partnerships between Syrian NGOs and IOs.

Overall, there is significant challenge in providing humanitarian assistance in Syria, as in all CPEs. This challenge extends to the formation and maintenance of partnerships. The Swiss and international community, however, should not shy away, for doing so has profoundly adverse effects for countless vulnerable Syrians. Indeed, overcoming these challenges promises to unlock great opportunity for the the long-term humanitarian response and the future of Syria. The information contained in this report can hopefully inform humanitarian organizations on how to minimize the challenges and maximize the opportunities.

Photo: Latakia, Syria.
Courtesy of Taras Kalapun.

Recommendations

1) Swiss and international organizations should not view partnerships with local organizations as a last resort resulting from the existence of a CPE, but should prioritize such partnerships and embrace the humanitarian shift towards localization.

The need for direct implementation is acknowledged but there needs to be an understanding of the benefits that working with local partners can bring. Direct implementation and the creation of partnerships with local organizations which benefit from knowledge of the ground and operational capacity should not be mutually exclusive.

2) Swiss and international organizations ought to invest in the creation of organizational mechanisms or practices in order to identify potential local partners in complex political emergencies.

The benefits of working with local organizations ought to be recognized, and Swiss and international organizations should invest in the capacity to minimize the downsides of partnering with them. Efforts must be placed in creating institutional mechanisms and practices to overcome the knowledge gap. The identification of trustworthy and capable local partners should be a priority for all humanitarian organizations as CPEs are here to stay.

3) Swiss and international organizations, where possible, ought to favor the creation of inclusive partnerships with local organizations.

They should facilitate the agency and actively seek the input of local organizations in order to benefit from their proximity and contextual knowledge of the Syrian crisis. This approach not only allows for better suited humanitarian assistance, it also ensures sustainability.

4) Swiss and international organizations ought to invest in sustainable capacity building, with an emphasis on internal organizational capability.

Building the capacity of local partners has a value beyond the immediate realization of a singular project. When the international community withdraws, it will be the local NGOs that will bear the primary responsibility and burden of meeting the long-term humanitarian needs of the country. A genuine contribution to Syrian civil society, this would help create a stronger social fabric, more capable of resisting and addressing future shocks.

5) Swiss and international organizations should consider flexibility in partnerships by having a context-specific use of standards.

The benefits of localization can be overly constrained by stringent, copy pasted standards, which ignore the sensitivities of the local context. Furthermore, efforts to harmonize standards across organizations would go a long way in reducing the burden put on local organizations that incur unnecessary costs due to their current heterogeneity.

6) Swiss and international organizations should invest in, and capitalize on coordination mechanisms and become primary actors in the creation of coordination hubs.

Effective coordination between relevant humanitarian actors, at both the international and Syrian level, improves the overall delivery of humanitarian assistance. Coordination mechanisms assist in filling the knowledge gap, acting as information repositories and providing feedback on the existence, competency and trustworthiness of actors. Existing Syrian NGO networks should be considered as potential resources. Additionally, Swiss and international organizations should welcome and contribute to OCHA's impending cluster mechanism in Jordan to support local partners in southern Syria.

7) Swiss and international organizations should address issues of communication, trust and respect from the onset of the partnership with local organizations.

It is key to spell out what the partnership would entail, as otherwise, misexpectations can endanger the working relationship and frustration on both sides can take over. Taking simple measures such as having Arabic speakers on staff and investing in more regular liaison contributes to mutual feelings of trust and respect, building inclusive, strong, and effective partnerships.

8) Swiss and international organizations should consider changing their mindset on CPEs, and look beyond just the delivery of relief programs, especially those focused on distribution.

It is widely acknowledged that in order to meet the ongoing needs of vulnerable populations in a protracted crisis, relief operations must be simultaneously complemented with rehabilitation and development. Partnering with local actors will naturally aid in this. Their knowledge indicates where the whole range of RRD is possible.

9) Swiss and international donors ought to be bolder in funding humanitarian organizations with projects inside Syria, prioritizing those that form inclusive partnerships with Syrian organizations.

There are opportunities for greater humanitarian response within Syria, particularly with inclusive partnerships that promote capacity building and sustainability. At the start of the chain, donors have the influence to dictate the form that the overall humanitarian response takes. The SDC and major Swiss donors like Swiss Solidarity can encourage the creation of inclusive partnerships with local organizations by designating funding for Swiss humanitarian organizations focusing on creating such partnerships.

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Annex : Syrian NGO Information Tables

Organization	Year of Establishment	Official Registration	Areas of Operation	Offices	Size	Sectors	Received Capacity Building	Main Challenges	International partnerships
Syrian organization 1	2014	NO	Non-regime controlled areas	Operational presence inside Syria and two offices in Turkey	N/A	Coordination of Local Councils, textiles and agricultural projects	YES	Shortage of funding	YES
Syrian organization 2	2014	YES (Turkey)	Regime and non-regime controlled areas	H.Q. in Gaziantep. Operational presence and three offices inside Syria	24 employees	WASH, shelter, rehabilitation, agriculture, and food security and livelihoods	YES	Security, border crossing and lack of funding	YES
Syrian organization 3	2011	YES (Turkey)	Non-regime controlled areas	Office in Gaziantep. Operational presence and offices inside Syria	50-65 employees	Health, food security and livelihoods, WASH, protection, and education	YES	Security, border crossing, lack of funding and capacity building, number of standards	YES
Syrian organization 4	2013	NO	Non-regime controlled areas	Operational presence and two offices inside Syria	120 members inside Syria	Agriculture, veterinary, and livestock projects	Yes	Security, border crossing, lack of funds and capacity building	NO

Organization	Year of Establishment	Official Registration	Areas of Operation	Offices	Size	Sectors	Received Capacity Building	Main Challenges	International partnerships
Syrian organization 5	2013	YES	Non-regime controlled areas	H.Q. in Gaziantep	30 employees	Education and social development projects, edition of children magazines	YES	Lack of funding	YES
Syrian organization 6	2013	YES (Turkey)	Non-regime controlled areas	H.Q. in Gaziantep. Operational presence inside Syria	4 employees 2 freelancers	Relief, psychological support for children, political support for women	YES	Lack of funding, support for smaller NGOs	In process
Syrian organization 7	2012	YES (Turkey)	Non-regime controlled areas	Office in Gaziantep. Operational presence and offices inside Syria	N/A	Relief for refugees, WASH, and political research	N/A	Shortage of funds	YES
Syrian organization 8	2015	YES (Turkey)	Turkey	H.Q. in Gaziantep. No operational presence inside Syria	26 employees	Education and development for orphans	N/A	N/A	NO
Syrian organization 9	2013	YES (Turkey)	N/A	Office in Gaziantep. Operational presence and offices inside Syria	45 employees	Relief, protection, psychological support, rehabilitation, and documentation of violations	YES	N/A	YES
Syrian organization 10	2011	YES (Turkey and Sweden)	Regime and non-regime controlled areas, Lebanon (camps)	Office in Gaziantep. Operational presence and offices inside Syria	40 employees	Health, shelter, food security and livelihoods, WASH, education, protection capacity building	YES	N/A	Under discussion

Organization	Year of Establishment	Official Registration	Areas of Operation	Offices	Size	Sectors	Received Capacity Building	Main Challenges	International partnerships
Syrian organization 11	2011	NO	N/A	Office and operational presence inside Syria	300 members	Assisting women inside and in camps, offering courses for women	YES	N/A	NO
Syrian organization 12	2012	NO	Non-regime controlled areas	N/A	20 employees	Relief, education, capacity building for local councils, raising awareness concerning vulnerable groups	YES	N/A	YES
Syrian organization 13	2011	YES (Turkey)	Non-regime controlled areas	H.Q. in Gaziantep. Operational presence and offices inside Syria	150 employees	Relief, non-food items, health, capacity building, psychological support, family planning, polio vaccination, micro-gardening projects	YES	N/A	YES
Syrian organization 14	2014	YES (Turkey)	Non-regime controlled areas	H.Q. in Gaziantep. Operational presence and offices inside Syria	N/A	Relief, recovery, non-food items, food security and livelihoods, shelter, protection	YES	Security, lack of respect for Syrian NGOs	YES
Syrian organization 15	Previous to crisis	YES (Turkey)	Besieged and non-regime controlled areas	Office in Gaziantep. Operational presence and offices inside Syria	N/A	Relief, health, WASH, food security and livelihoods, nutrition, education, and child centred programs	N/A	N/A	YES
Syrian organization 16	Previous to crisis	YES (Turkey)	Non-regime controlled areas	Office in Gaziantep. Operational presence and offices inside Syria	N/A	Cancer treatment	N/A	N/A	YES

Organization	Year of Establishment	Official Registration	Areas of Operation	Offices	Size	Sectors	Received Capacity Building	Main Challenges	Interna-tional
Syrian organization 17	2011	YES (Turkey)	Regime and non-regime controlled areas	Offices in several countries. Operational presence and offices inside Syria	60 employees	Food security and livelihoods, shelter, non-food items, protection, education, scientific research, seasonal campaigns	YES	Security, border and frontlines crossing	YES
Syrian organization 18	2014	YES (United States)	Non-regime controlled areas	H.Q. in the United State.s Operational presence inside Syria	25 employees	Protection (child, women and orphans)	N/A	Security, borders and frontlines crossing	YES
Syrian organization 19	2011	YES (Australia)	N/A	Office in Gaziantep. Operational presence inside Syria	7 board members	Documenting detentions, massacres and forced disappearances, monthly reporting, creation of a database	N/A	Lack of funding for their specific activities	NO
Syrian organization 20	2012	YES (Turkey and France)	Non-regime controlled areas	Offices in several countries. Operational presence and offices inside Syria	600 members	Health and health related capacity building, psycho-social support	N/A	Lack of trust and respect, capacity building	YES
Syrian organization 21	2012	YES (Turkey)	Non-regime controlled areas	Office in Gaziantep. Operational presence and offices inside Syria	60 employees	Food security and livelihood shelter, non-food items, protection, education, scientific research, seasonal campaigns	YES	Security, lack of trust and respect	YES
Syrian organization 22	Prior to crisis	YES (Turkey)	Non-regime controlled areas	One office in Turkey. Operational presence and three offices inside Syria	450 employees	Education, food security and livelihoods, protection, WASH, capacity building	YES	Lack of trust	YES

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