HPG Working Paper

International and local/diaspora actors in the Syria response

A diverging set of systems?

Eva Svoboda and Sara Pantuliano

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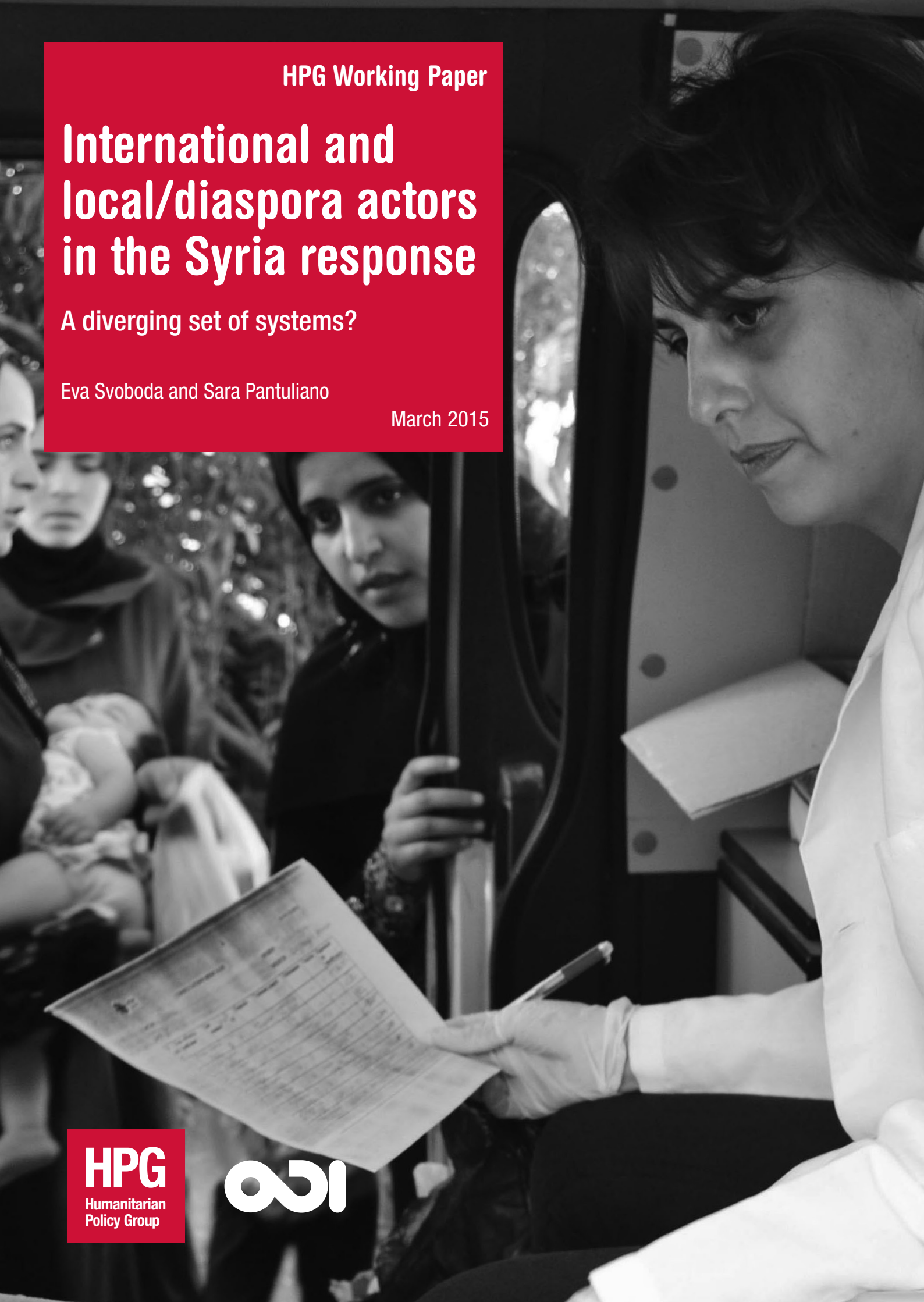

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Executive summary

The conflict in Syria – coming amid a slew of large-scale emergencies in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, alongside the Ebola crisis in West Africa – has posed particular challenges for humanitarian response in its scale and complexity. Five years since the first demonstrations against the government prospects for an end to the fighting seem as elusive as ever. As the Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, put it in December 2014: 'In many parts of Syria the level of violence has worsened, with civilians continuing to pay heavily with loss of life, serious injuries, psychological trauma, ongoing and recurring displacement and massive damage to property and infrastructure'.[1] At the end of 2014 the UN launched its largest appeal yet, asking for $8.4 billion to cover not only urgent humanitarian needs, but also funding for development projects. Securing that funding will be difficult: in 2014 the UN received only half of the amount it had requested from donors, and there is little to suggest that this latest appeal will fare much better.

The formal humanitarian system has struggled with issues of access and protection in a conflict marked by widespread and deliberate disregard for civilians. Violations include unlawful killings, arbitrary arrest and detention, hostage-taking, sexual and gender-based violence and sieges. While the responsibility to protect civilians rests primarily with the warring parties, the belligerents' only aim seems to be to win the war at any cost. Although humanitarian organisations have a responsibility to remind the parties of their obligations and address the consequences of violations, information on protection is difficult to obtain and is neither centralised nor sufficiently analysed. Protection agencies are geographically separated and dispersed in different countries, and communication and coordination between them is weak.

The lack of physical presence of international aid agencies has shone a spotlight onto what is commonly called the 'local response': groups and organisations that do not belong to the formal or traditional humanitarian sector of the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and international NGOs. This is a diverse category, comprising professional bodies (often medical groups) that existed prior to the conflict, charities, networks of anti-government and community activists, diaspora organisations, coordination networks and fighting groups that also provide relief. These groups have almost inadvertently filled the gap left by the limited international presence, providing both assistance and protection – even if the majority of these groups neither see themselves as protection actors nor use the term.

According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), around 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. Challenges in accessing populations in need by the formal humanitarian system have made partnerships an essential tool in the Syria response. However, the conflict has confirmed what others have shown before: that the formal humanitarian sector finds it extremely difficult to establish genuine, inclusive partnerships.[2] Instead, local/diaspora groups are often seen as mere service providers, rather than genuine counterparts. Making genuine partnerships work will require flexibility and adaptability from traditional donors and international aid agencies. This does not mean doing away with all procedures and standards, but rather adapting them as far as possible to the realities on the ground.

There is an assumption that the challenges faced by the formal humanitarian system are fundamentally different from those faced by local/diaspora groups. Yet access, insecurity, funding and the effects of counter-terrorism legislation are issues that all aid agencies are grappling with. Focusing on differences rather than recognising similarities encourages the

1 See https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/15%20December%202014%20USG%20SecCo%20statement%20on%20Syria.pdf.

2 See https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/WHS%20Concept%20Note.pdf.

belief that local and international aid agencies cannot work together, and discourages them from exploring how they could. As needs in Syria far outweigh what each individual organisation can do, it is time to explore how forces can be combined, while also recognising that there will be instances where international aid agencies and local/diaspora groups will operate separately.

1 Introduction

The conflict in Syria entered its fifth year early in 2015, and there is no end in sight. As the conflict has dragged on it has become more widespread and complex. What started as a popular uprising in 2011 has rapidly developed into a civil war between the government in Damascus and a constellation of proliferating armed groups, including Syrian armed forces, so-called moderates, Islamists and Kurds. Although no exact figures are available, it is likely that there are around 10–12 major groups, with a number of smaller sub-groups (HPG interviews). The Islamic Front Coalition, for example, comprises seven Islamist groups. Other groups operating outside the Coalition include the Yarmouk Martyrs' Brigade and the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigade, as well as Kurdish groups fighting predominantly in the Kurdish area of Syria.[3] Making an already complex situation even murkier are Iranian-trained militias loyal to the government but separate from the Syrian army, Hizbollah and the National Defence Force, a loyalist reserve force. The fragmentation within the opposition and the appearance of Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and more recently Islamic State (IS, formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or ISIS) has thrown the country into further disarray, as well as triggering airstrikes by the United States and others. Although the government has wrested some areas back from the opposition, IS has substantially gained in strength and territory and now controls one-third of Syria, as well as large areas of Iraq.

The conflict has also spilt over into Lebanon, adding a further layer of complexity to a situation that the International Crisis Group has called a 'metastasising conflict' (ICG, 2013). Meanwhile, the flight of millions of Syrians has created a massive and complex refugee crisis in neighbouring countries. Lebanon in particular is struggling as the influx puts a severe strain on a country dealing with its own political upheavals and historical grievances against Syria.

The civilian population has borne the brunt of the violence: OCHA estimates that over 12 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance, 7.6m are internally displaced and over 3m have fled to neighbouring countries.[4] By mid-2014, three years into the war, the death toll had reached 191,000.[5] In its 2015 Strategic Response Plan for Syria, the United Nations estimated that it would need $2.9 billion to cover humanitarian needs (UN, 2014e). As in other conflicts, children have been particularly hard-hit. According to a report published by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in September 2014, 'four years into the Syrian crisis, over half a million Syrian refugee children are out of school – and the numbers are rising. The education crisis is fuelling an epidemic of child labour and early marriage' (Watkins and Zyck, 2014).

Despite growing humanitarian needs access for humanitarian agencies has been hampered by conflict and bureaucratic obstacles. The lack of physical presence of international aid agencies has shone a spotlight onto what is commonly called the 'local response': groups and organisations that do not belong to the formal or traditional humanitarian sector of the UN, the Red Cross/Red Cresent Movement and international NGOs.

These groups have almost inadvertently filled the gap left by the limited international presence, providing both assistance and protection. International organisations with a protection focus have struggled to respond to the enormous scale of needs, and attempts to promote respect for international humanitarian and human rights law have largely failed. In their stead, Syrian and diaspora groups have engaged in a wide variety of work with a distinct protective function, even if the majority of these groups neither see themselves as protection actors nor use the term. It is clear that needs far outweigh what the formal humanitarian system or local/diaspora groups can address individually: both need to work together, but the challenge lies in how to do this. Most local/diaspora groups were

3 For a more detailed breakdown, see http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-the-epicenter-of-future-jihad

4 See http://syria.unocha.org.

5 See http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/HRDAGUpdatedReportAug2014.pdf.

set up only at the start of the conflict, and are to some extent unknown entities in the eyes of the established humanitarian system. Questions have been raised about their effectiveness and efficiency, their adherence to professional standards commonly accepted in the sector and whether they are neutral, independent and impartial. While these are important questions they also obscure the fact that international NGOs do not always consider themselves neutral, and many donors have been vocal about who they support in this conflict. It also ignores the fate of principled humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere.

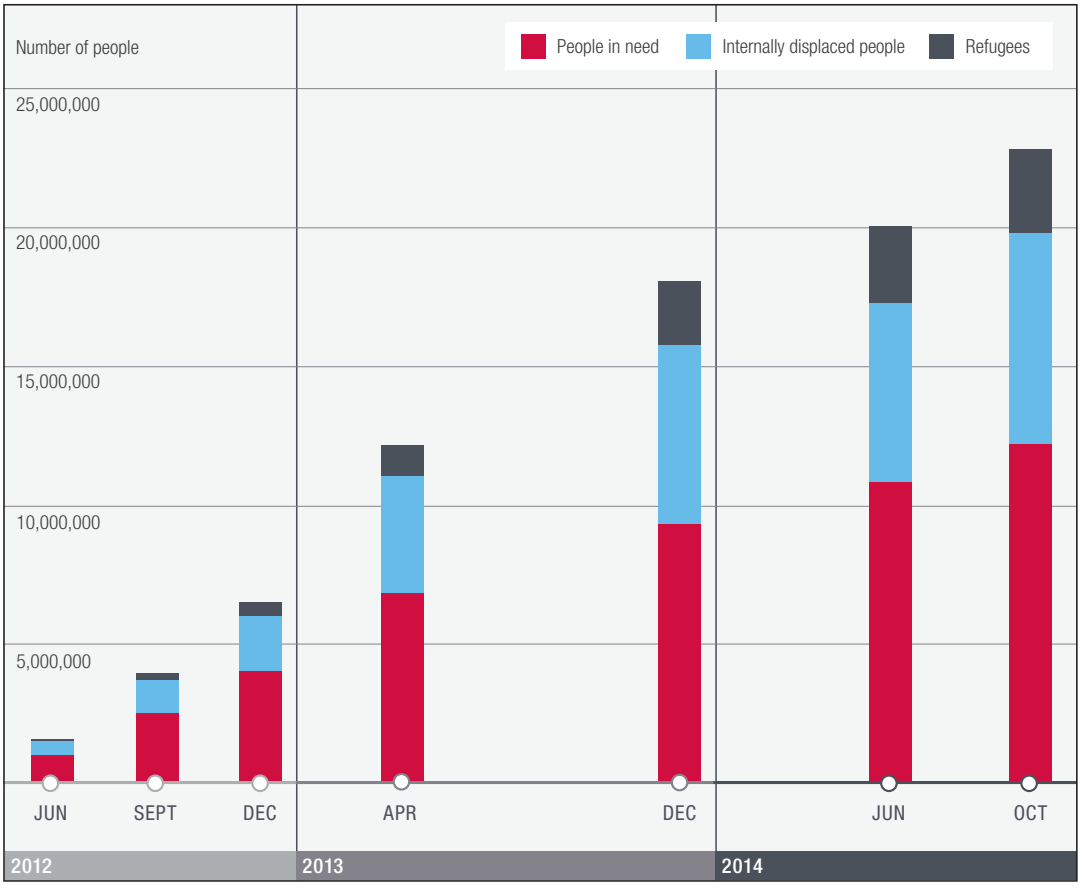
Although partnerships have eventually been formed, many are not partnerships in any genuine sense. Local/diaspora groups are often seen as mere service providers, rather than genuine counterparts. Local groups find the bureaucracy around funding cumbersome and unwieldy, staffing requirements impossible to meet, accountability arrangements unequal and registration processes confusing. Cultural and linguistic differences have hampered mutual understanding and meaningful coordination.

1.1 Scope and methodology

This HPG Working Paper on the crisis in Syria is part of a two-year research project entitled 'Approaches and Innovations Reshaping the Humanitarian Landscape: Opportunities and Challenges for Protection Work'. The first publication from the project (Svoboda, 2014) looked at the challenges involved in providing effective protection. During this initial research it quickly became clear that diaspora/local Syrian groups played a key role in the response in a context where access for international actors is severely circumscribed. Consequently, the paper provides a typology of the wide range of actors gathered under the 'local/diaspora' label, outlines their evolution and growth, sets out their key activities and explores the nature and extent of their interaction with the 'formal' humanitarian system.

While protection remains at the heart of the project, the paper also looks at the challenges diaspora/local groups face more broadly, for example when

Figure 1: A growing crisis



engaging with the 'formal' humanitarian sector. The study was conducted jointly with the UK-based charity Hand in Hand for Syria. The research involved a review of primary and secondary sources, including UN documents, grey literature and academic publications. Fieldwork in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon took place between January and August 2014, complemented by additional phone/skype interviews with individuals based in the Middle East, Europe and Australia. Interviewees included current and former staff and volunteers of Syrian diaspora groups, associations and NGOs, staff of international aid agencies and international non-governmental organisations, and current and former UN staff. Interviews were also conducted with donors, academics, independent consultants and Syrians living abroad. For security reasons field research was not carried out inside Syria itself. In order to allow for fuller discussions and for safety reasons the names of interviewees have been withheld.

The authors recognise that the perspective provided in this report is partial as it focuses primarily on organisations providing assistance from Turkey (through cross-border operations). It does not deal with assistance provided to refugees in neighbouring countries, although references to the specific circumstances in those contexts are made where appropriate. In addition, aid agencies based in Damascus and providing relief from there were not interviewed due to time and security constraints.

The report uses 'formal' or 'traditional' to refer to UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and international NGOs (INGOs). This label of course does not do justice to the diversity within the humanitarian sector. UN agencies, due to their origins and mandates, face different challenges from INGOs or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). While the authors recognise this diversity, it is beyond the scope of this report to make reference to it and its operational implications in any great detail. Similarly, the groups and organisations that make up what is commonly called the 'local response' are by no means monolithic, but rather a collection of groups with a wide range of views, affiliations and agendas. This report attempts to shed some light on this diversity.

The report uses the commonly agreed Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) definition for the term protection, namely:

> *all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of all individuals in accordance with international law, including international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law, regardless of their age, gender or social, ethnic, national, religious or other background.*

2 The 'formal' humanitarian system

When the demonstrations against Bashar al-Assad's government started early in 2011, most humanitarian organisations, some analysts and indeed many Syrians thought that the country would go the way of others in the region: the government would fall quickly and civil war would be avoided, even if no one expected the uprising to be entirely bloodless. Few suspected that what had started with popular demonstrations would escalate into full-scale war.

The international humanitarian system began its engagement in Syria in earnest in 2012 (Slim and Trombetta, 2014). While international NGOs such as MSF, UN agencies (UNRWA, UNHCR) and the ICRC had been present in Syria prior to the start of the uprising against the Assad government, primarily in relation to Palestinian and Iraqi refugees, an agreement between the Syrian government and the UN on access to populations in need was reached only in May 2012, under which eight UN agencies and nine international NGOs were initially permitted to provide humanitarian assistance from Damascus. The number of accredited international NGOs has gone up to 14 since then, though this marks a decline on the previous year (UN, 2014f). In 2014, 4.8m people were provided with food assistance and 16m received medical aid and treatment; another 5.4m were given non-food items and 16m received improved access to safe drinking water (UN, 2014f). Apart from providing food and restoring water supplies, the ICRC also assists Syrians to restore contacts with family members separated due to the conflict (ICRC, 2014).

From the start of the conflict there were two distinct modalities of operating: across frontlines by organisations based in Damascus and across international borders without the consent of the Syrian government by organisations based in Turkey, and to a lesser degree Lebanon and Jordan. In rare cases international agencies have operated both from Damascus and from outside the country. Mercy Corps, for instance, provided assistance both across the border and from Damascus until the Syrian government asked it to stop operating from Turkey in May 2014. Subsequently the agency decided to close its operations in Damascus.[6]

2.1 Access

Access issues have been a prominent feature of the conflict from the beginning. According to the Syria Integrated Needs Assessment (SINA), produced in December 2013: 'Rampant insecurity and violence across affected areas pose a constant – though unpredictable – challenge to ensuring humanitarian access to affected people. Beyond insecurity and violence, imposed movement restrictions and the denial of humanitarian needs pose the most significant access challenges' (SINA, 2013). In this context access has been understood largely as access for international aid organisations, with a principal focus on access across the Syrian border – to which the Syrian government remains staunchly opposed. This is not to say that calling for access is unnecessary, but both the Syrian government and armed non-state actors have consistently and intentionally hampered access by humanitarian organisations. Although there has been some progress on this issue, the process of obtaining visas is lengthy and by no means always successful, with visas often denied to particular nationalities or job descriptions (in particular protection officers).Obtaining permission to conduct field trips is a cumbersome process requiring a multitude of authorisations. Besieged areas have been particularly difficult to access, and many such areas regularly go without any assistance for months. Shifting frontlines, the volatility and unpredictability of the conflict and fragmentation among belligerents make it difficult to know who to negotiate access with, and whether any agreements reached will be honoured.

6 See http://www.mercycorps.org.uk/articles/syria/closure-mercy-corps-humanitarian-aid-operations-damascus.

Discussions of the legality of cross-border operations – an issue that affects the UN and its agencies more than it does international NGOs – and calls to disregard state consent became louder as the conflict dragged on, and various legal interpretations of situations that would justify ignoring state consent were published.[7] However, progress in the UN Security Council on forcing Damascus to allow free access for humanitarian organisations was slow. A Presidential Statement in October 2013 (UN, 2013) calling on all parties to allow unimpeded access to humanitarian organisations and condemning widespread violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) was considered by diplomats and aid agencies as a major step, even though it was non-binding. To consider a non-binding statement as an improvement was perhaps illustrative of the low expectations many humanitarian organisations and Syrians alike had of the Security Council, which has been divided on Syria from the outset.[8]

In February 2014 the Security Council itself remarked on the lack of progress following the Presidential Statement (UN, 2014d), but it would take until July 2014 for the Council to authorise cross-border operations under Resolution 2165 (UN, 2014c). Resolution 2165 authorises UN agencies and their implementing partners to provide assistance using four designated border crossings (Bab al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa, Al Yarubiyah and Al-Ramtha). However, unanimity within the Security Council was only achieved by omitting any automatic sanctions or consequences in the event the resolution's provisions were not implemented by the belligerents. Modest progress has been made since; Syrians who had previously been cut off from aid have received assistance, and the government in Damascus has removed or reduced some of the obstacles in the way of aid provision across frontlines, arguably as a way of demonstrating that cross-border operations – which Syria opposes – are unnecessary, and most people can be reached from Damascus. Even so, aid agencies continue to face significant operational constraints. In September 2014, Valerie Amos, then Emergency Relief Coordinator, stated that 'intense fighting and shifting conflict lines continue to make the delivery of aid difficult and dangerous. The parties to the conflict continue to put obstacles in the way of the sustained access that humanitarian organizations require'.[9]

While the Security Council remains deadlocked on finding a political solution for Syria, the same paralysis does not afflict UN mechanisms based in Geneva, even if their work has not jolted those in power into action either. In August 2011 the Human Rights Council passed Resolution S-17/1 establishing the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (OHCHR, 2011). The Commission has consistently documented violations perpetrated in Syria and has raised awareness of the plight of civilians and the need to hold perpetrators accountable. In its September 2014 statement, the Chair of the Commission is very clear:

> *We have charted the descent of the conflict into the madness where it now resides. We have implored the parties and influential states to forge a peaceful settlement. We have asked the Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court. But we have been faced with inaction. This inaction has allowed the warring parties to operate with impunity and nourished the violence that has consumed Syria. Its most recent beneficiary is ISIS.*[10]

2.2 Protection

There is widespread and deliberate disregard for the obligations imposed by IHL and IHRL on those fighting in Syria. Those who bear primary responsibility to protect civilians are the least likely

7 For an excellent discussion on the various legal interpretations, see Naz Modirzadeh's guest blog in *Opinio Juris*: http://opiniojuris.org/2014/05/12/guest-post-strong-words-weak-arguments-response-open-letter-un-humanitarian-access-syria-part-1.

8 Between October 2011 and July 2012 Russia and China vetoed three UN Security Council resolutions aimed at holding the Syrian government accountable for mass atrocity crimes. Since September 2013 the Security Council has passed four resolutions on Syria: Resolution 2118, regarding the destruction of chemical weapons; Resolutions 2139 (February 2014) and 2165 (July 2014), demanding increased humanitarian access and, in the case of Resolution 2165, also authorising cross-border access; and Resolution 2191 (December 2014), which re-authorised 2165. On 22 May 2014 Russia and China vetoed another resolution calling for Syria's referral to the ICC. There have also been resolutions specifically related to JN and ISIS.

9 See http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48957#.VEjcua1MvIU.

10 See http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15039&LangID=E.

to do so, and violations are perpetrated equally by government forces/militias and rebel groups. Reports by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Amnesty International and regular briefings to the Security Council by the Emergency Relief Coordinator are testament to that. Violations include unlawful killings, arbitrary arrest and unlawful detention, hostage-taking, sexual and gender-based violence and unlawful attacks and sieges. Mass, systematic violations of IHL and IHRL have triggered widespread forced displacement (internal as well as to Syria's neighbours), the break-up of families and communities and the collapse of social structures.

Humanitarian agencies can do little to physically protect civilians. Their mere presence can in some circumstances have a deterrent effect, but it would be unrealistic to expect this in a conflict on Syria's scale. Even so, humanitarian agencies have a responsibility to address the consequences of conflict and (a much more difficult task) to try to prevent violations from taking place. From the beginning of the conflict lack of access and bureaucratic constraints have meant that organisations with a protection focus, such as UNHCR, the ICRC and UNICEF, have struggled to respond to the enormous scale of needs. Attempts by agencies aiming to undertake activities which promote respect for IHL and IHRL have not been successful – or have been successful only to a very limited degree – in a country where violations and abuses are a matter of government policy, and where the unaccountable state apparatus has long relied on repressive practices.

Lack of access also means that protection information is difficult to obtain and verify, and what information is available is neither centralised nor analysed among those agencies working outside of Syria, as well as among these agencies and organisations based in Syria. Field staff are not regularly debriefed and there is limited protection monitoring (HPG interviews). All these activities require adequate resources in terms of protection skills and experience, but international protection actors struggle to recruit the necessary experts. Protection actors are geographically separated between those inside Syria and others dispersed in surrounding countries, and until recently communication and coordination between them was weak. Security concerns, lack of trust and disagreements over modalities (cross-line versus cross-border) have further impeded collective analysis and the development of a strategic approach to Syria's protection crisis. The absence of any coherent protection strategy has meant that humanitarian response has focused more on the provision of material assistance, and there has been insufficient emphasis and weight given to protection in cross-border operations.[11] A similar problem was evident in the closing phase of the conflict in Sri Lanka; indeed, one of the recommendations of the UN Secretary-General's Report on Sri Lanka (the 'Petrie Report') was to 'embed a United Nations human rights perspective into United Nations strategies' to ensure that protection is at the centre of every UN response. Syria shows yet again that progress on this aspiration remains dependent on political will within the Security Council.

11 UNHCR is present in Turkey in relation to refugees, and has participated in cross-border assistance since the passage of Resolution 2165 in July 2014.

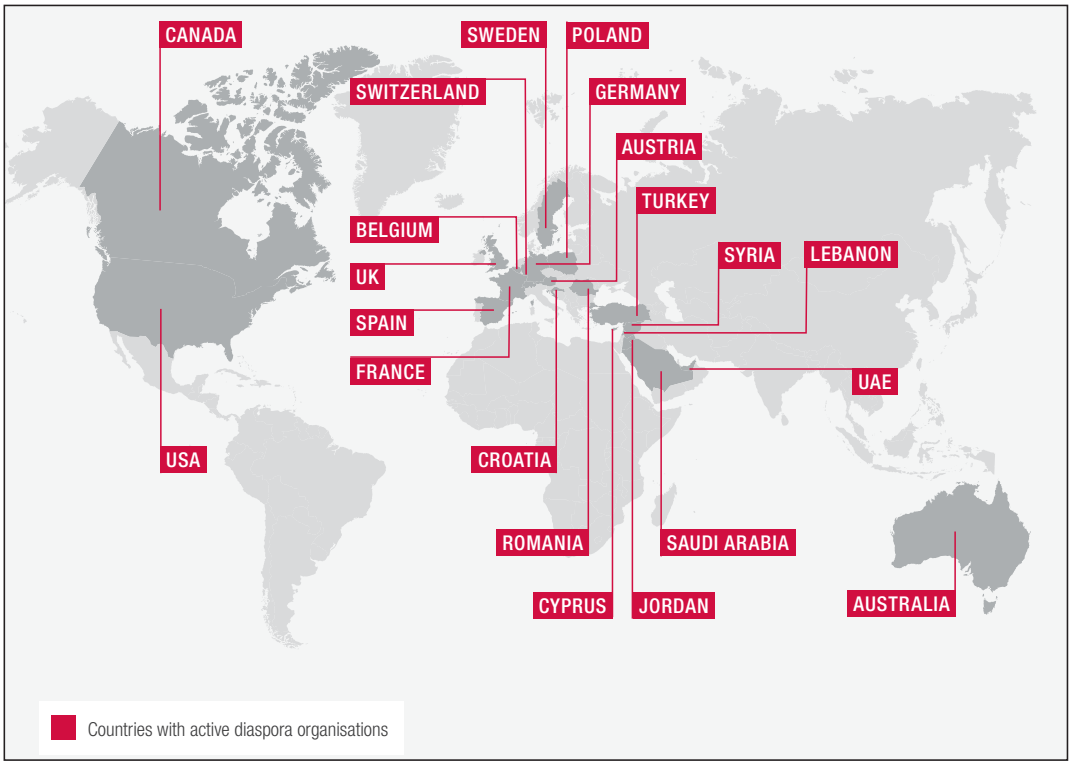
3 Humanitarian response: the Syrian perspective

International aid agencies' lack of any significant physical presence in Syria outside Damascus has highlighted the role of what is commonly called the 'local response'. Any group or organisation not belonging to the formal or traditional humanitarian sector (UN, ICRC, INGOs) is considered to be part of the local response. Almost inadvertently, these organisations have filled the void left by the absence of an international presence, providing assistance as well as protection, even if their definition of what constitutes protection is rarely the one commonly used by the traditional sector. Other groups focus on documenting violations of IHL and IHRL in the hope that these records will be needed to hold perpetrators to account. These local/diaspora groups might have filled a gap inadvertently, but by no means easily: negotiating with non-state armed actors can be challenging for local organisations just as it is for their international counterparts, and insecurity poses just as much of a danger.

3.1 Typology of local groups

The adjective 'local' covers a wide and diverse array of actors, some of them not really 'local' at all, and the distinction between local and diaspora groups is not easily made. The category can denote professional bodies that existed before the outbreak of the war, such as medical associations now providing emergency relief; charities; networks of anti-government and community activists, which have morphed from protest movements into relief providers; diaspora organisations; coordination networks; and fighting groups engaged in aid delivery. The Syrian British Medical Society (SBMS), for example, was established in 2007 by British medical professionals of Syrian descent and focused initially on fostering academic links, promoting standards among British-Syrian healthcare professionals and establishing contacts with other associations (SBMS, 2007) before it became active in providing medical training and relief in Syria.

Figure 2: Countries with active Syrian diaspora organisations



Groups range in size from half a dozen volunteers on a shoestring budget to organisations drawing on hundreds of staff and volunteers. They work across the humanitarian spectrum, some through the direct provision of assistance, others indirectly through counterparts on the ground in Syria, typically personal or family contacts; some have formal registered status and their relationship with each other and with the established humanitarian system varies enormously. With a growing number of organisations being established in reaction to the conflict, efforts have been made to join forces under umbrella organisations such as the Union of Syrian Medical Relief Organisations (Union des Organisations Syriennes de Secours Médicaux, or UOSSM), which was established in 2011 in Paris and has ten member organisations.[12]

What started as individual initiatives to alleviate some of the most pressing needs, primarily related to medical care, organically grew into something much more organised, structured and diverse in terms of activities. Many of the diaspora groups in Europe and elsewhere started with a sense that 'something needed to be done'. Getting together 'around the kitchen table' (HPG interviews), Syrians living abroad and moved by the suffering of their compatriots collected funds among the Syrian diaspora, which were then used to buy relief items and medicine. Many of those who got together were medical professionals who then decided to travel to Syria and provide their services there. Interviewees described how their operations at the beginning were improvised and somewhat amateurish; very few had previously been involved in humanitarian work and so had to learn on the job. Initially there was no need to establish more formal structures and many activities were driven by individuals. Many of those travelling to Syria did so in their spare time and without any payment, while continuing to hold down full-time jobs. Respondents admitted that, certainly in the early days, most thought the conflict would be over quickly (HPG interviews). None expected it to last as long as it has.

According to OCHA (n.d.), between 600 and 700 NGOs have been established since the conflict began in 2011, around a fifth of them active in Syria itself. Many are either unregistered or registered with the local authorities in opposition areas or in neighbouring countries such as Turkey and Lebanon. Between 20 and 30 diaspora organisations registered in the United States, Europe, Turkey or the Gulf States operate either independently or as implementing partners for international NGOs. Like grassroots organisations they tend to focus on opposition areas, and operate through personal or tribal connections. Other diaspora groups act as links and intermediaries between local Syrian organisations and networks and funding sources outside of the country, both individuals and donor governments (OCHA, n.d).

Although the vast majority of NGOs are extremely young – according to OCHA barely a dozen were active prior to 2011 – some diaspora groups in

Box 1: Hand in Hand for Syria

Hand in Hand for Syria is a UK-registered aid and development NGO. Founded soon after the humanitarian crisis started in Syria, it delivers humanitarian assistance to, and has projects in, hard-to-reach areas inaccessible to many international aid agencies, such as Daraa, Homs and Hama, working with Syrian and international partners. The organisation has offices in the United Kingdom, Turkey and Syria. It has a six-strong management team with an additional 15 operational staff working from Reyhanli in Turkey and around 190 field staff in Syria. Hand in Hand works across a range of sectors, including sanitation, water and hygiene, education, emergency shelter, food security, livelihoods and healthcare. It has established five hospitals in Northern Syria and supports over 25 medical centres.

Box 2: Syria Relief

Syria Relief was established shortly after the Syrian conflict began. Founded by a group of Syrian nationals living and working in the UK, it is now Britain's largest Syria-focused charity. It provides medical aid through field hospitals, primary health centres, prosthetic limb clinics, dental clinics and a maternity hospital. It also provides food assistance, runs schools, provides essential seasonal items such as winter clothing, blankets, heaters and fuel, generators and solar-powered lamps, and repairs and operates clean water systems.

12 See http://www.uossm.org/index.php/about-us/.

particular have seen very rapid growth, both in membership and in formal organisation: one group, for example, emerged out of 'haphazard initiatives by family networks' and now has almost 900 staff and volunteers in Syria and the UK and an office in Turkey. Its work in Syria covers Idlib, Aleppo, Deiraz-Zor, Homs and rural Damascus, and its activities range from medical assistance to water and sanitation, education, social programmes and food assistance (HPG interviews). Another, set up in 2011 in the UK, now has offices in Turkey, three warehouses and teams in Syria delivering emergency assistance – predominantly medical aid – across most of the country (HPG interviews). The organisation typifies how these groups have evolved in size, structure and logistics. Initially storing relief goods and drugs in basements in houses in Syria, it now keeps goods in warehouses in Turkey. Many organisations have over time gradually switched from being run by volunteers working during their own spare time to paid staff.

Several of the more established Syrian diaspora groups have 'matured' into what can almost be called 'established' organisations. This means that they can now assume a role similar to that played by international aid agencies that work with smaller and less experienced Syrian actors, mentoring smaller and more recently created local groups inside Syria and providing them with advice and capacity-building. Some of these local groups in turn act as implementing partners, though this is rare.

Charitable work has long played an important role in Syria despite severe limitations on freedom of expression and association. Although restrictions were eased in 2000 the government continues to exert control over civil society organisations, notably through the Syria Trust, a collection of high-profile organisations established by the president's wife, Asma al-Assad (Kraft, 2000; Bosman, 2008). Faith-based organisations (Islamic and Christian) were also active prior to the conflict, and unlike secular associations or organisations were generally exempt from having to register with the government. Many of their services were provided out of mosques and churches. With their strong community support, a wide network and the advantage of being monitored less closely by the government than Syrian NGOs, faith-based organisations continue to play an important role in the provision of assistance in areas inaccessible to other organisations.

Box 3: Local Coordination Committees

Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) play an important role inside opposition-held areas. LCCs – each governorate council has several – emerged from neighbourhood gatherings and served initially as information hubs for protesters. With time their structure and areas of engagement evolved, including the provision of relief. The LCCs do not normally work directly with international aid agencies, but with their local partners. Many focus on providing basic services such as electricity. Others focus on agricultural projects, although crops are regularly destroyed during fighting. Some LCC projects in the governorates are supported by the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU). LCCs are also involved in the distribution of exam papers and the transport of teachers to supervise exams so students can sit them while schools are closed.

Box 4: The Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society (SARC) is the largest humanitarian organisation in Syria. Founded in 1942 it was recognised by the ICRC in 1946 as a national society. International NGOs and donors have criticised the SARC for its lack of neutrality and impartiality, though this criticism is partly rooted in a misunderstanding of the SARC's role and legal status. The SARC, like every other National Red Cross/Red Crescent Society, is an auxiliary of the national authorities, a role that is generally enshrined in law. As such the SARC provides support to health and social services as well as disaster management when requested by the government. In the current conflict the SARC has been providing relief and assistance as part of the national response, and has been delivering assistance to all governorates, both government- and rebel-held. Certain branches have in fact become increasingly autonomous from headquarters in Damascus. By February 2015, 40 SARC volunteers had been killed, and many more subjected to arrest and harassment by the government as well as attacks by various armed groups opposing the government.

Several international faith-based organisations support projects run by Syrian religious groups. For example, Cafod supports networks of the Catholic Church in Syria providing medical aid and food parcels.[13] Similarly, the Mennonite Central Committee in the US supports partners inside Syria, for example through cash allowances to needy families in Damascus. The contacts and networks used inside Syria are long established and predated the start of the conflict.

In December 2012 the Syrian National Coalition established the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU).[14] The unit was set up to coordinate increasing volumes of aid in rebel-held areas, and to provide basic services and assist the LCCs in their work. The ACU has had mixed reviews from aid agencies and donors, though some of the criticism it has received might be attributable to the high expectations of foreign donors and aid agencies, who had hoped that a mechanism such as the ACU would at least help alleviate some of the problems around aid delivery. There have also been allegations of mismanagement of funds. While the effectiveness and impact of the ACU and its proximity to the Syrian National Coalition might be questioned, its Polio Task Force has been widely credited with raising the alarm on the polio outbreak in Syria in 2013 (Svoboda, 2014).

Lastly, armed groups and the government also provide assistance, including food and medicine. Jabhat al-Nusra was reportedly coordinating the distribution of flour in Aleppo (SNAP, 2013). Controlling key infrastructure such as electricity and water plants means that armed groups often manage the provision of services. The provision of assistance is not necessarily limited to the area the provider controls. Water supply is an interesting case in point as the government continues to provide water to areas under rebel control. There seems to be a certain degree of agreement that supplies such as water and electricity should not be cut even where the reservoir or power plant is in an area controlled by one warring group, and the people receiving services are in an area under another group's control.

13 For example http://www.cafod.org.uk/News/Emergencies-news/Syria-Q-A.

14 The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, commonly known as the Syrian National Coalition, is a coalition of opposition groups formed in November 2012 during opposition meetings in Doha, Qatar.

3.2 Access

Local associations and diaspora groups enjoy better access than international aid organisations, but reaching people in need is by no means easy, even for them. Respondents explained that members of Syrian NGOs are often from the same communities as armed actors and are therefore in a privileged position to negotiate access. Despite the negative public image of armed groups in Syria, several allow humanitarian aid into areas they control (HPG interview). The UN for example has acknowledged discussing the delivery of aid with Jabhat al-Nusra. Armed groups with a particular connection to the population will tend to be more receptive to suggestions not to harm their own community, for example by refraining from recruiting child soldiers and allowing aid distributions to go ahead. In contrast, armed groups with little or no connection to the population, i.e. groups predominantly made up of foreign fighters and groups with a particularly radical agenda, are more likely to prevent or obstruct assistance.

Even when access is granted the journey from the border to communities in need is perilous and can take several days. As an example, one trip in early 2014 from the Turkish border to Homs (a distance of around 300km) took 16 days, though it can often take longer due to the need to use tracks to avoid checkpoints on main roads. Different stretches of the road might be controlled by different armed groups, necessitating repeated negotiations. Nor are Syrians working with local NGOs and diaspora groups necessarily safer than staff of international agencies. Respondents spoke of numerous colleagues killed, abducted, injured or detained. Medical services and personnel have been a particular target; according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) the number of available health professionals in Syria is now a mere 45% of what it was before the conflict started.[15] Several diaspora organisations providing medical assistance have lost staff members. According to Physicians for Human Rights, as of 31 December 2014 '599 medical personnel had been killed since the conflict began, including 195 doctors, 117 nurses, 114 medics, and 56 pharmacists, among others. In 2014, a medical worker was killed every other day on average' (PHR, 2015). In 2014 WHO reported that, of 113 assessed

15 See http://www.emro.who.int/countries/syr/index.html.

public hospitals only 45% were fully functioning, 34% partially functioning and 21% not functioning at all (WHO, 2014).

3.3 Protection

Much like its English usage, the term protection in Arabic (*himaya*) has a variety of meanings, though care for orphans and the elderly in particular has a long tradition in Islam (Moussa, 2014). Most of the respondents from Syrian groups see themselves neither as protection actors nor as doing protection work in the sense of the IASC definition (with which most were unfamiliar). A minority of interviewees understood and used the term 'protection' in the same way international agencies would, but these were humanitarians who had previously worked for the UN or international NGOs. However, when probed further it becomes clear that much of what these groups do can be considered protective. For some protection is clearly equivalent to physical security (HPG interview), but most regarded protection as going beyond that, mentioning dignity and expressing the need to understand the link between violations of rights and protection. Generally these organisations do what could be considered 'protection mainstreaming',[16] rather than stand-alone protection activities.

So-called social programmes include support to families with orphans, female-headed households and the elderly. This support is provided through education and psycho-social work, which in themselves have a protective benefit. Some Syrian organisations focus on addressing child labour by supporting families with food or cash so that they do not need to send their children out to work. Others support female-headed households with food, medical help and psycho-social support in community centres. One international aid agency suggested that Syrian NGOs could make use of the media (radio in particular) to pass on protection messages, though for reasons that are unclear this communication tool has yet to be used. Some explained that they have moved away from providing material support, which they said made sense at the beginning of the conflict, and have now switched to projects involving education and psycho-social support, in part because of growing needs in these areas and because providing material assistance is more costly (HPG interviews). This is an indication of the trade-offs aid agencies face – both international and local – when deciding what assistance to provide, a decision that is as much dictated by available funds as it is by needs.

Generally, there is a good understanding of the legal framework for protection among Syrian groups, and some have made it the focus of their work to specifically document violations of IHL and IHRL. Human rights monitoring includes keeping track of those killed, tortured or detained, documenting shelling in a particular area or training armed groups in IHL. Organisations documenting incidents, casualties and the use of particular weapons such as barrel bombs use Arabic rather than English and tend not to get the same exposure as organisations publishing in English, such as the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR). Even so, there is a strong conviction among Syrians activists that documenting violations now will help in bringing perpetrators to justice once the conflict is over.

16 'Protection mainstreaming' is generally understood to mean incorporating into activities such as food distribution or water and sanitation projects principles such as dignity and access to services by all affected persons, and avoiding doing further harm with aid.

4 A diverging set of systems?

Although established only very recently, several of the organisations looked at in this study have with time adopted elements of the culture, principles, language and practices – including fundraising practices – of the existing humanitarian system. One organisation, for instance, claims to deliver aid regardless of politics and religion, and is 'humanitarian in the full sense of the word' (HPG interviews). In keeping with current aid thinking, the organisation states that it supports 'community empowerment' and sustainability, and its fundraising techniques are familiar from decades of NGO campaigning in the West. Interviewees in the study also spoke of the need for independence, neutrality and impartiality in aid provision, and claimed to refuse funds from politically or religiously motivated groups.

Several of the larger organisations interviewed for this study have developed links with established actors; some work with OCHA on aid planning, and several members of the Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA), a grouping of a dozen diaspora organisations, pressed for a seat on the Humanitarian Liaison Group (see below). According to one of the founders of the SNA, the Alliance 'has great potential to encourage group work within the Syrian community and give us a voice and a presence as a collective amongst the big actors' (HPG interviews). At the same time, however, most respondents from Syrian diaspora groups and NGOs admitted that they felt there were important differences, as well as similarities, in the way international and Syrian humanitarian organisations work, the language they use and the way they function. Some clearly do not want to 'belong' to the formal system, while others feel that, despite efforts to adapt, they are still seen as outsiders.

4.1 Principles

Syrian NGOs, not unlike local actors in other contexts, are at times seen by the formal system as lacking in neutrality, impartiality and independence, and some networks originating in diaspora groups have been regarded as 'amalgamated with the opposition, regardless of their stance' (HPG Roundtable 1, 2012). During a roundtable discussion as part of ODI's Syria conflict analysis in August 2012, for example, doubts were raised as to how the formal system could work through local networks, citing in particular their lack of adherence to humanitarian principles (HPG Roundtable 2, 2012). Some Syrian respondents acknowledged that there were groups that had a political agenda or were clearly affiliated or aligned with a political/military actor. For example, while some Syrian groups claim to focus on assistance to orphans a closer look reveals that these are the orphans of 'martyrs' rather than orphans in general, thus assisting families who had fought for the same political cause (HPG interviews). However, most respondents from Syrian groups interviewed emphasised that they strived for impartiality, even if perhaps their actions were guided by solidarity more than by neutrality. Some clearly distanced themselves from the opposition, including the ACU, or refused funds from political or military groups. While personal contacts facilitate access to certain communities, respondents claim that the aid they provide benefits all those in need.

Respondents from the 'formal' system explain that it is difficult to know immediately which Syrian organisations have humanitarian motivations and which do not. Most Syrian diaspora groups and NGOs were created in the first phases of the conflict and so had no previous history when the international humanitarian response began. Determining what motivates a particular group is a valid question when determining which partner to work with, but criticising Syrian groups for a lack of neutrality and impartiality is both simplistic and unhelpful. It is simplistic because the formal humanitarian system – made up as it is of a variety of organisations (UN agencies, international NGOs, the Red Cross/ Red Crescent) with differing mandates – is itself not immune from the same criticism. Numerous examples from other contexts show that international humanitarian agencies struggle profoundly with the question of principled humanitarian action.[16]

17 See for example Donini (2011); Collinson, Elhawary and Muggah (2010); Gordon (2010).

Afghanistan is one such example, where the neutrality of traditional humanitarian actors has come under close scrutiny. In Syria, many donor governments financing aid have at the same time been very vocal in declaring their support for 'moderate' opposition groups and insisting that Assad must go. They are also participating in air strikes against Islamic State. Given that humanitarian aid is acting as a substitute for sorely lacking political action to end the war, from the start questions of humanitarian access have been thrown in with wider political issues, conflating objectives that, in a truly principled approach to assistance, should remain separate.[18]

Criticism of Syrian groups has also been unhelpful because it has hampered constructive discussion between these groups and international humanitarian actors and donors, not only on highly relevant questions such as neutrality, impartiality and independence, but also on finding pragmatic ways to work together to provide effective assistance. In any conflict there is a risk that belligerents will divert aid and that aid agencies will inadvertently contribute to strengthening armed groups. Throughout the history of humanitarian action aid agencies have had to grapple with these difficult ethical, operational and legal dilemmas (Jackson and Davey, 2014). Notwithstanding the difficulties. aid agencies, donors and Syrian groups need to discuss these issues and assess the associated risks if they are to work effectively together as partners.

4.2 Partnerships

Like the term 'local', 'partnership' has become a key element of the humanitarian lexicon in recent years, though in many cases what agencies call 'partnerships' are in fact little more than contractual arrangements with service providers, rather than a full partnership of equals in which risk and reward is shared. Syria appears to be no exception despite the context, which makes working with or through Syrian organisations a necessity as issues of access and insecurity effectively make it very difficult if not at times impossible for 'traditional' humanitarian players to operate on the ground. The chain between the initial funder/provider of assistance (usually an international NGO/UN agency or Western donor) and recipient communities can have several links. Generally it is assumed that an international aid agency 'sub-contracts' a Syrian NGO in cases where it is unable to reach communities itself. Syrian NGOs or diaspora groups are also increasingly using other local groups as 'implementing partners', including on protection activities, though this is still rare.

One interviewee from a Syrian organisation called the word 'partnerships' a misnomer 'because these are not real partnerships'; another complained that they were 'more words than action' (HPG interviews). Respondents complained that training and capacity-building were being neglected, the bureaucracy around funding was cumbersome and unwieldy, staffing requirements were impossible to meet, accountability arrangements were unequal, registration processes were confusing and cultural and linguistic differences (and, for one interviewee, snobbery and condescension) impeded mutual understanding. The UN and international NGOs were 'working too slowly, doing too little and generally inflexible' (HPG interviews). 'Capacity-building' often meant holding a workshop with little depth or usefulness for highly educated Syrians. Many respondents acknowledged that they lacked capabilities in strategic planning and the management skills to run ever-larger organisations or write complex funding proposals, but these much-needed skills were not or only inadequately taught. In addition, by 2013 many better-educated Syrians had fled or been detained, leaving poorly-educated local activists to submit complex funding proposals (Slim and Trombetta, 2014). For their part, international aid agencies found that, when they did invest in teaching skills in smaller organisations, such as proposal writing, once trained the staff would often be offered better-paying jobs with other organisations.

Unsurprisingly, there is a certain hierarchy among local actors, in that staff who speak English and have connections outside Syria stand a better chance of attracting funding or projects with international agencies than local, less well-connected groups. Language was mentioned as a significant obstacle to better engagement between international and Syrian groups, both in terms of the language used – English predominantly – and the jargon that is so ingrained in the 'formal' humanitarian system. Most meetings are conducted in English, and while that is not a problem for many Syrians it does exclude those who speak

18 See, for instance, http://www.irinnews.org/report/96336/analysis-donors-not-walking-the-talk-on-humanitarian-aid-to-syria.

'only' Arabic. Similarly, the use of terms and concepts familiar to most international aid workers can be quite intimidating for others.

All of these criticisms are familiar from other contexts. However, the study also found a few positive examples of more meaningful and substantial partnerships. From the discussions it emerged that those international aid organisations that had been present in the region prior to the conflict and had worked with Syrian groups for a while were seen as having a closer relationship than international agencies that had not. However, from the interviews for this study this level of engagement and commitment to more genuine partnership seems to be the exception, rather than the rule.

4.3 Procedures, programmes and policies

Most Syrian NGOs and local groups agreed that needs assessments were important, and like international aid agencies Syrian organisations also use beneficiary criteria to identify the most needy. Families that have been displaced inside Syria are considered needier than the communities hosting them by virtue of their displacement. However, it is also recognised that there are needs within host communities and that supporting them will also help in maintaining good relations between the two groups. Needs within host communities are determined according to assets and income, single-headed households or families with more than one member dead or injured or with special needs. A family is also considered needy if it contains more than five children under the age of 18. The assessment also tries to determine if, for example, a child is at risk of having to seek employment due to a lack of financial assets. These criteria were developed through working with international NGOs and are applied within Syria as well as in refugee-hosting countries.

The Syrian conflict is a fast-evolving one, with constantly changing actors and shifting frontlines. As such, Syrian NGOs felt that rapid assessments are adequate, and that, by the time the lengthy assessments done by the UN and international NGOs are produced they are likely to be out of date as the situation will have changed in the meantime. In particular, respondents felt that the Syria Integrated Needs Assessment (SINA) was useful to a certain degree, but a little too 'academic' (HPG interview).

On protection the SINA provides detailed information on the main threats and the challenges in addressing them, though it also notes the lack of information on local communities' coping mechanisms. Syrian groups also noted the lack of coherence among international aid agencies and donors in relation to what they expected in terms of post-distribution processes such as monitoring and evaluation. This is potentially a source of confusion for those unfamiliar with the 'formal' humanitarian system. Efforts have been made to train staff of Syrian groups to do assessments to feed back into the SINA, but this seems to be ad hoc and related to a particular objective – such as the drafting of the SINA – rather than systematic.

When travelling to hard-to-reach areas Syrian NGOs prefer to do so with money rather than goods because material assistance is logistically more complicated and attracts more attention and hence risk (HPG interviews). Necessity also dictates the use of cash when groups try to access hard-to-reach areas which would be almost impossible to get to while transporting goods. However, international aid agencies and donors tend to prefer in-kind rather than cash assistance, presumably out of fear of diversion, however impractical or risky it may be. The research shows that Syrians are quite prepared to take risks, but would prefer to do so while transporting life-saving medicine that is unavailable rather than food that can be bought locally (HPG interviews). Local NGOs and diaspora groups struggle to convince international agencies and donors that in certain instances cash assistance is much more appropriate, not only for security reasons but also because some goods can be bought locally and do not necessarily need to be transported all the way from the border. Where international agencies do provide cash assistance to a Syrian NGO they do so under stringent conditions to prevent the money from being given to another organisation. The reluctance to fund cash programmes also means that aid is going where it can be most easily provided, not necessarily where it is most needed, though this is not a problem specific to cash programming.

It is also difficult to apply standard criteria to determine an organisation's eligibility for funding. At the beginning of the conflict, one criterion for receiving funding from traditional donors was that the organisation had to have been in existence for at least three years and undergone a number of audits. Most Syrian organisations were established at the outset of the conflict and so had not been in existence

long enough to meet this requirement, and groups based in Syria could not possibly have undergone an audit acceptable to Western donors. Donors and international aid agencies have recognised this problem and funding criteria have been adjusted or dropped altogether, but valuable time was lost when bolder decision-making could perhaps have seen the establishment of effective partnerships.

Syrian NGOs also felt that Western donors lacked the necessary flexibility to adapt to new situations as they arose. As an example, assistance might be provided based on a particular assessment, but by the time it reaches the NGO the situation on the ground has changed and needs might have become more urgent elsewhere, but rather than giving the Syrian NGO the latitude to disburse the assistance where needs are greatest donors insist on sticking to the original plan. In the experience of many Syrian NGOs donors from the Gulf States are more flexible, allowing Syrian NGOs to provide assistance where they see fit regardless of the original intention.

4.4 Coordination mechanisms

The coordination mechanisms set up in Syria – where a Level 3 (L3)[19] emergency was declared in January 2013 – and neighbouring countries are illustrative of the complexity of the response, both in terms of the number of countries involved and the scale of the crisis.[20] Humanitarian assistance is provided from within Syria to refugees in five countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt), while cross-border operations from Turkey and three other neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan) send assistance in the other direction. Achieving a coordinated and coherent approach was always going to be difficult due to the scale of the conflict, the number of humanitarian organisations involved and their geographical locations, and given the attitudes of political actors in the UN Security Council, regional players and the belligerents themselves.

The case of Turkey is in many ways emblematic. When it became clear that Damascus would permit only limited access and that assistance would essentially be channelled through the SARC a number of international NGOs established cross-border operations from southern Turkey. An NGO Forum was established in 2012, which set up sector working groups mirroring the cluster system. This included a working group on protection which was tasked with mainstreaming protection and putting protection on a strategic level among agencies operating cross-border. The following year OCHA set up offices in Antakya and Gaziantep. Although the absence of consent from the Syrian government meant that UN agencies were unable to operate from Turkey, international actors felt strongly that OCHA had a role to play in collecting and sharing information among humanitarian organisations based in Turkey to enable them to improve their understanding of the work of counterparts operating from Damascus.

OCHA also began convening coordination meetings in an attempt to formalise the structure put in place by the NGO Forum. As the number of actors grew so did the need for a more formal structure that would include all stakeholders, and in 2013 the Humanitarian Coordination Meeting (HCM) was created. The HCM, which meets once a month, was established as a way of sharing information among the wider humanitarian community. Later in the year the first Humanitarian Liaison Group (HLG) was convened, chaired by the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator based in Amman. The HLG also meets once a month, bringing together international NGOs, diaspora NGOs, local Syrian NGOs, Turkish NGOs, donors and Red Crescent Societies. With the passage of Resolution 2165 in 2014, UN agencies have begun to engage more formally with cross-border operations, as well as transforming existing coordination mechanisms into clusters.

As their numbers grew, Syrian NGOs based in Turkey decided to establish a separate mechanism within the HLG, the Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA). Respondents in the study felt that the creation of the SNA was a positive step. Syrian NGOs are now better organised and have become better at sharing information, when in the past they tended to work on their own. There is also a sense that they have better representation in the HLG, and their work is better acknowledged and taken into account in the overall response. However, it was also pointed out that, while Syrian NGOs are invited to coordination meetings, they choose at times not to participate. For some this is because meetings are conducted exclusively in English and use unfamiliar

19 A Level 3 emergency is the highest possible category. It describes a 'major sudden-onset humanitarian crises' requiring 'system-wide mobilization'. See IASC (2012).

20 For a thorough description of the various coordination mechanisms see Slim and Trombetta (2014).

jargon. For others it seems to be a deliberate choice not to be part of any coordination mechanism, rather than a response to linguistic or other obstacles.

Opinions were divided on the merits of having so many coordination mechanisms. Some respondents remarked that participation took up a lot of time that could be used more profitably given the limited human resources available. This objection is not unique to Syria, and the same point is often made in emergency contexts (Humphries, 2013). At the same time, most agreed that coordination was necessary given the high number of actors involved. Respondents felt that the Polio Task Force was a positive example of coordination.

Coordination has clearly become more formalised among international actors and between them and local/regional groups based in Turkey. Many of the agencies that came to Turkey in 2011, much like everybody else, hoped that the conflict would not last long, and that Damascus would eventually acquiesce and allow unhindered access across Syria. Neither happened, and coordination mechanisms were therefore adapted as the situation evolved in terms of the number/type of actors and to reflect the possibilities on the ground (for example following the passage of Resolution 2165 authorising cross-border operations). The coordination architecture today is as complex and dynamic as the conflict itself, and while the number of meetings can be overwhelming the information exchange, analysis and planning coordination structures have made possible have contributed to improving the overall humanitarian response. This includes better visibility for the work of local and regional organisations.

4.5 Funding

The top three donors for the Syria response are the US, the UK and Kuwait, which also hosted the first international pledging conference for Syria in January 2013.The two main funding streams for Syria are the Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Plan (SHARP), which covers Syria, and the Syria Regional Response Plan (RRP), for Syrian refugees in the region. Albeit belatedly, the RRP now combines humanitarian assistance and development in recognition that, as the conflict has dragged on, longer-term needs must be addressed at the same time as more immediate requirements. A new Emergency Response Fund (ERF) was established in 2012 to provide flexible funding and support local organisations. According to OCHA the target for the Syria ERF in 2015 is $30m; as of January 2015 over $6.3m had been received from Germany, India, Luxemburg, Spain and Sweden (OCHA, 2015). In 2014 the combined requirements for the RRP and the SHARP were $4.4bn, but needs had outstripped this as early as July (GHA, 2014). In December 2014 the UN requested $8.4bn to cover the needs of nearly 18m people within Syria and in the region.

The diaspora groups established at the start of the conflict initially relied largely on private donations from Syrians living abroad. With time individual donations started to dry up as donors felt unable to maintain payments as the conflict wore on, and diaspora groups began introducing more long-term planning, rather than focusing on short-term emergency relief. This requires more reliable funding from institutional donors, rather than individuals. Traditional donors still predominantly fund international aid agencies, though Syrian groups have succeeded in gradually increasing institutional donations from international NGOs, UN agencies and government donors to offset the decline in individual contributions.[21] Putting a figure on this funding is extremely difficult, in part due to the lack of data beyond first-level recipients, and in part because many donors are reluctant to disclose the names of recipient organisations for fear of endangering their staff.[22] In addition, increasingly stringent anti-money laundering and anti-terror laws have prompted banks to 'de-risk' their operations by avoiding doing business with groups, organisations or individuals that might make them liable to criminal prosecution (Keatinge, 2014).

4.6 The impact of counter-terrorism legislation

Counter-terrorism legislation is not a new phenomenon, but it has gained particular prominence since 9/11 as states and inter-governmental organisations have

21 Globally only 0.2% of international humanitarian funding went to local and national NGOs in the period 2009–13 (GHA, 2014).

22 See for example DFID's Factsheet dated 3 February 2015, which refers to 'undisclosed humanitarian agencies, not named for security reasons (operating outside of the UN led response)'.See https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/400781/DFID_Syria_Humanitarian_Programme_Summary_03.02.15.pdf.

sought to introduce robust measures to prevent acts of terrorism or punish those who perpetrate them or provide support for them. UN Security Council Resolution 1373, adopted on 28 September 2001, orders states to refrain from providing any form of support to terrorist groups and individuals. The Council has also imposed specific sanctions targeting certain groups in Afghanistan and Somalia. Similarly, Resolution 2170 (UN, 2014d) condemns the abuse committed by JN and IS in Syria and Iraq and places six individuals affiliated with these groups on the Security Council's Al-Qaeda sanctions list. Counter-terrorism measures also target the financial sector in an attempt to close loopholes and eliminate weaknesses in financial systems that allow the transfer of funds that could be used for acts of terror.

From a humanitarian perspective these regulations are extremely problematic. Counter-terrorism measures and International Humanitarian Law both seek to protect civilians, but tensions arise when the former are seen to prevent humanitarian organisations from negotiating with armed non-state actors that are considered 'terrorist' groups, but whose permission is crucial in gaining access. Humanitarian organisations are concerned that these and other activities, such as providing medical assistance to enemy combatants, can potentially be considered criminal acts (Pantuliano et al., 2011). Islamic charities in particular have felt the impact of the counter-terrorism laws introduced after 9/11, and have seen their funding decrease and bank transactions frozen (Metcalfe et al., 2015).

Respondents for this research agreed that Syrian NGOs are accountable to donors and financial institutions and authorities and need to be in a position to show where their funds are going. However, in the current climate there is a risk that public opinion in donor states will be influenced by simplistic assumptions or statements that all those going to Syria and claiming to do humanitarian work there are in fact jihadists. Much of the humanitarian assistance provided by diaspora groups is channelled through Turkey, some of it by road all the way from Europe. This is also the route favoured by those wishing to join armed Islamist groups such as IS. Some fighters claim to have gone to Syria to do 'humanitarian work', giving the impression that there is, if not collusion between diaspora organisations and armed groups, then certainly a lack of oversight and accountability about where relief actually ends up. According to one study, British international NGOs have suspended work in areas in Syria controlled by proscribed groups principally to avoid potential prosecution under counter-terror legislation (Metcalfe et al., 2015). Although incidents are rare, public opinion is such that Syrian diaspora groups in the UK have chosen to cancel fundraising events to avoid any possible confrontations with people accusing them of being fronts for terrorist organisations.

Much like their international counterparts, Syrian NGOs and diaspora groups will have to understand the potential ramifications of counter-terrorism laws on their activities. Although knowledge of the applicable legislation is not uniform, international aid agencies have had to deal with these measures for some time. Local/diaspora groups lack this experience and the skills and staff required to navigate complex and at times ambiguous legal texts. International aid agencies' experience of dealing with counter-terror legislation means that they are well-placed to support local groups in understanding and managing the risks such legislation can pose. Risk management and due diligence are key, in particular when operating in high-risk areas. International aid agencies should seek an open and frank dialogue with donors on the potential negative effects of counter-terrorism legislation and sanctions against governments and non-state armed actors. Such dialogue has a better chance of succeeding when done jointly with diaspora organisations. Having a coherent and where possible unified approach will help in raising awareness among donors that counter-terrorism measures can have significant negative effects on organisations operating in high-risk areas, regardless of whether they are international or local.

5 Conclusion

Humanitarian organisations have been struggling to respond to needs in Syria from the very beginning of the conflict. The reasons for this are manifold and certainly cannot be attributed solely to internal factors specific to the functioning of the various humanitarian organisations involved, or to the formal system more generally. That said, the conflict in Syria has brought out more visibly than other crises the shortcomings of the formal humanitarian system as currently in place. The policies and practices developed over decades in emergencies in Africa are ill-suited to 'middle-income contexts that are dominated by strong States, sophisticated weapons, urban populations and intense geopolitical interests' (Slim and Trombetta, 2014).

The formal system needs to develop creative ways of working. Donors and international aid agencies need to recognise that Syria is a messy, vicious and multi-sided conflict where rules and procedures drafted in donor capitals are not necessarily applicable. The question is not to blindly seek partnerships, but to find an approach that allows for due diligence while relaxing some requirements that may be ill-suited to the context. Donors and international agencies also must accept that other actors might not correspond entirely to the image the formal system might have of its 'ideal' partner. International aid agencies tend to prefer working with organisations that look, speak and act like them. That is unsurprising and, certainly in a context where time is of the essence, organisations will try to work with the tried and tested, rather than spending time getting to know organisations they are unfamiliar with. This does not pose a problem where there are enough organisations that indeed have been tried and tested, but in Syria that was not the case in the early stages of the conflict.

Working with 'unknown entities' is perhaps most challenging when it comes to protection, an area that is considered particularly sensitive and where sharing of information will be deliberately restricted for fear of further endangering victims of violations and aid workers. However, in the absence of traditional protection actors many local/diaspora groups are fulfilling an important protective role. Syria is a protection crisis and any attempt at enhancing the protection of civilians, no matter how small, should be supported. Support could be provided through training in monitoring and evaluation and in negotiations with armed non-state actors, in addition to exploring how a common analysis of protection threats can be achieved through collaboration with local/diaspora groups.

The impression seems to be that local/diaspora organisations struggle with entirely different challenges than those facing the formal system. Yet funding flows and donor requirements impact both sets of actors, albeit in different ways. Lack of integrity is a charge levelled by donors against both local and international organisations, and both must confront the adverse effects of counter-terrorism regulations. Here, international humanitarian agencies could consider providing advice and expertise on how to comply with these regulations, reducing the burden on over-stretched organisations that are delivering aid on the ground. For their part, donors should ensure that counter-terrorism legislation does not inadvertently hamper humanitarian aid. To that end, donors should strengthen their dialogue with humanitarian agencies, both international and, crucially, local and diaspora groups.

More often than not the differences are emphasised more strongly than the similarities, reinforcing the perception that local and international organisations cannot work together, rather than encouraging them to explore how they could. The question is not which of the two groups is better: both have their limitations, as well as capabilities and potential. The formal system has its place just as local actors do. The question is how they can work together where doing so will enhance the humanitarian response, while also recognising that at times they will choose to operate separately.

Making an effort to conduct some meetings in Arabic rather than English and avoiding the use of jargon might be a good starting point in enhancing interaction. Admittedly this will potentially increase costs, but it could also facilitate the participation of actors who have so far shied away from attending meetings held exclusively in English. Although doing away with jargon entirely will not be possible, one term that certainly needs clarifying is the easily

used but rarely defined 'capacity-building'. Both international and local/diaspora agencies need to clarify what they mean by capacity-building and how it can be provided. Greater honesty would also be helpful around what international agencies actually mean when they use the term 'partnership'. The formal system cannot respond to needs in Syria alone and must therefore seek partnerships. However, a genuine partnership means that the partner is seen as a respondent in its own right. All too often – and Syria is no exception – international aid agencies see local 'partners' merely as sub-contractors that enhance the international aid agency's work, but are not given the recognition they deserve. It would be naive to think that either of these changes will have a major impact on relations between international and local/diaspora organisations, but they would go a long way in bridging the communications divide.

Is Syria the new aid model, or is it merely 'a desperate response to a desperate situation' (HPG Roundtable 2, 2012)? It is probably a bit of both, but in any case it is clear that the formal humanitarian system needs to rethink how it responds to needs in Syria and potentially in similar conflicts elsewhere. The formal system has seen many changes over recent years; some have improved it, others have not, but none has been what one might call radical or fundamental. Even if radical change is unrealistic in the short term – and it probably is – the formal system should take Syria as an example of the challenges to come. It needs to explore creative ways of responding, and do so not in isolation but by involving new players, even unfamiliar ones. The urgency of the situation requires that the different organisations involved in providing humanitarian aid learn from and listen to each other and collaborate now if they are to improve the lives of Syrians.

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Cover photo: Syrian refugees visit a mobile health clinic in Taalabaya, 20 kilometres from the Syrian border.
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