



Najwa, 48, lives in Harasta. Her family survived the war, but she now struggles to even afford bread for her family as prices of basic food items have escalated. Photo: Dania Kareh/Oxfam

HARD LESSONS

Delivering assistance in government-held areas of Syria

Delivering a principled humanitarian response in Syria from Damascus is a continuous challenge. There are numerous barriers to engaging with and responding to the needs of conflict-affected Syrians.

This paper explores the lessons learned by the Norwegian Refugee Council and Oxfam in more than ten years of combined operational experience from Damascus which can inform and improve the overall aid response in Syria.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Syria is one of the most difficult contexts in the world in which to deliver principled humanitarian assistance. Oxfam and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) are among more than two dozen international non-government organizations (INGOs) registered in Damascus, since 2013 and 2015 respectively, navigating this context and responding to Syrians' humanitarian needs. During this time, several large-scale military offensives have led to substantial shifts in control of territory, which has in turn altered the nature of the humanitarian response.

While there remain several challenges in delivering aid in Syria, this paper explores how negotiation and dialogue can open up quality access for INGOs so that they can reach the people most in need of assistance.

Based on their experience in this context and drawing on 26 interviews with government, United Nations (UN) and non-government organization (NGO) officials involved in aid delivery from Damascus, Oxfam and NRC have identified five barriers to delivering quality aid:

- the need to navigate bureaucratic obstacles and impediments;
- the difficulties in negotiating certain types of programme activities which are more heavily scrutinized by the government;
- the limited opportunities for partnership with Syrian NGOs;
- the limits to engagement with affected communities; and
- difficulties in securing funds to quickly scale up aid delivery when access does open up.

It is also clear that securing humanitarian access within the areas that have come under government control in the past two years is particularly challenging. NRC and Oxfam have faced significant delays and restrictions in scaling up their programmes in communities including Dar'a, Eastern Ghouta, rural Homs, and Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa governorates.

In general, the approvals process is lengthy and cumbersome, taking around four weeks but in some instances up to 16 months. International NGOs, including NRC and Oxfam, have also experienced delays in securing visas for senior staff, which causes uncertainty and hinders programme implementation and oversight.

While gaining access remains time consuming and resource intensive, both Oxfam and NRC have been able to engage with communities and expand the scope and scale of assistance, implementing an approach which ensures that programmes do not inadvertently cause harm to communities.

Through these efforts, Oxfam and NRC have learned four key lessons that can help to strengthen the aid response from Damascus.

1. Government ministries (with which many NGOs have agreed a memorandum of understanding (MoU)) and technical ministry staff have regularly proved helpful in gaining access for humanitarian organizations.
2. Local governors and local government officials can convene a range of local stakeholders, enable community engagement, and advocate to central government in support of INGO programming.

3. Some government stakeholders also have an interest in supporting communities to recover from the conflict and want to see successful programmes delivered; this shared goal could be leveraged to increase monitoring, evaluation and learning, and to design effective successor programmes.
4. Sectors (the coordinating bodies that make up part of the UN-led aid response) could play a stronger role in advocating for quality access, but in order to do so, INGOs would need to commit to engaging in sector discussions and improving coordination of strategies and activities.

Learning these lessons has enabled Oxfam and NRC to expand the types of assistance provided – for example, by working with Syrian NGOs, introducing cash transfer programming, and conducting household needs assessments. It has also allowed both organizations to increase communication with communities and monitor implementation more effectively. These are all critical elements of an accountable aid response.

In sum, NRC and Oxfam’s research and programme experience show that it is possible to meet global humanitarian standards and respond to community-identified needs in Syria from the Damascus hub. The scale and scope of needs in government-held areas means that these efforts can be expanded, but doing so will require more support and engagement from international donors. However, it is not possible in all instances, and the access barriers cannot always be overcome. Where this is the case, and where there is the risk of doing harm by continuing to provide assistance, humanitarian organizations should consider reducing, restricting or suspending programmes.

Recommendations

- The Government of Syria should increase approvals for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities (uncoupled from specific projects), enabling humanitarian organizations to assess the impact of projects and generate evidence to ensure that effective interventions can be scaled up appropriately.
- International donors should diversify flexible and multi-year funding for the response from the Damascus hub, enabling organizations to scale up programming when access opens up.
- International donors with diplomatic representation in and/or visiting Syria should engage with government ministries delivering services in support of increasing access in line with Core Humanitarian Standards. Donors without this representation should support these efforts.
- INGOs should develop capacities in conflict sensitivity and humanitarian negotiation in order to improve access dialogue with Syrian counterparts. This includes in-depth training of field staff on humanitarian principles.
- The UN leadership in Damascus should ensure that sector leads maintain a proactive, regular dialogue with relevant line ministries, enabling them to support advocacy linked to broader access issues; they should relay issues into sector meetings and represent INGO advocacy messaging to government ministries.

1 BACKGROUND: THE STRUCTURE OF THE AID RESPONSE FROM DAMASCUS

The UN-led humanitarian response in Syria has been coordinated from multiple locations, including complementary cross-border assistance from Turkey, Jordan and Iraq, with the 'Damascus hub' serving people in need in government-held areas and providing some cross-line assistance, including inter-agency convoys into besieged and hard-to-reach areas. The UN-led Whole of Syria Approach,¹ which is co-led by the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) in Damascus as well as the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (RHC) based in Amman, has overseen relief operations across these multiple hubs since 2014. The Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), which covers the entirety of the country, sets the overall parameters of the humanitarian response in Syria.²

In Damascus, the RC/HC leads the Humanitarian Country Team, which convenes senior representatives from across the humanitarian community, from the UN, INGOs and national organizations. The Humanitarian Country Team is mandated to develop common policies and response strategies, provide guidance to sector lead agencies, advocate with the government on behalf of the response, and activate resource-mobilization mechanisms, among other activities. The RC/HC plays a crucial role in advocating with senior members of the Syrian government on strategic access issues. There are several Area Humanitarian Country Teams chaired by the UN, including in Aleppo, Homs, Qamishli and Tartous (which is responsible for Idlib), as well as one covering the southern governorates. NGO representation on these area teams varies, depending on operational capacity in different locations.

Oxfam's and NRC's programmes from the Damascus hub

Since its registration in Damascus in October 2015, the Norwegian Refugee Council has assisted more than half a million people in Syria with shelter, water and sanitation, non-food items (NFIs), livelihoods and capacity-building programmes. This includes rehabilitating more than 100 schools to make them safe and welcoming learning spaces. NRC's Syria Country Office maintains premises in Damascus and Aleppo, employing 160 staff.

Oxfam has been registered in Syria since 2013 and has reached more than 2 million people with humanitarian assistance. This includes providing access to: safe, clean water and to more nutritious food; toilets and sanitation; hygiene materials; cash; vocational training; and winter clothing. Oxfam has worked in 11 of Syria's 14 governorates, including programming across conflict lines from Damascus. It has offices in Damascus, Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor.

The government-led response is organized through the High Relief Committee, which is chaired by the Minister of Local Administration and the Environment. Its members include ministries and some national organizations, such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) (a member of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement) and the Syria Trust for Development (referred to hence as the Syria Trust). Neither the UN nor INGOs participate in this committee.

Sector-based coordination from the Damascus hub contributes to the Whole of Syria approach and is the key coordination mechanism that NGOs engage with.³ These structures are chaired exclusively by UN staff, as the Syrian government has prevented co-leadership of sector coordination structures by INGOs. Ministry involvement with the sectors is inconsistent. For example, in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector, staff from the Ministry of Water Resources do not participate due to concerns that the agenda can become political, preferring to meet the sector coordinator independently.⁴ The Ministry of Education is much more engaged in sector planning and coordination. Aside from SARC (see Box 1) and the Syria Trust, national organizations are also largely absent from senior-level UN-led coordination structures, though many are present at sector and Area Humanitarian Country Team meetings.

Box 1: Role of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent in the humanitarian response

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) maintains strategic leadership of the first-line emergency response in Syria as both a member of the government's High Relief Committee and as the lead implementing partner of the UN, with branches in every governorate and 75 sub-branches across the country.⁵ The vast majority of international organizations have been required to partner with SARC in order to be able to register in Damascus.

As the sponsor of many INGOs, SARC is often involved in the project approval process, as well as submission of visa requests to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and granting of travel requests, among other activities. Oxfam and NRC are required to coordinate with the High Relief Committee to conduct emergency response activities such as distributions of in-kind assistance. This is challenging, as neither agency has a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with SARC, which prioritizes working with international agencies with which they already have an MoU.⁶

2 REGISTRATION PROCESSES FOR INTERNATIONAL NGOS

There are more than two dozen INGOs formally registered in Damascus.⁷ Although all INGOs ultimately operate in Syria with the agreement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there is no standard way to obtain registration. Most agencies are authorized to work through a formal MoU with SARC. For these INGOs, SARC is involved in most aspects of programming, although its level of involvement in granting permissions to travel, procuring goods and services and hiring staff differs; INGOs have differing levels of resource with which to take forward these discussions, which mostly happen bilaterally rather than as a collective.⁸

There are also several international faith-based organizations that work under the auspices of religious institutions in Syria. Since 2019, they have been required to function in the same way as INGOs, following a decision from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.

NRC has an MoU with the Syria Trust,⁹ which sponsors its registration and supports coordination of NRC's work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Oxfam is registered directly with MoFA, having initially signed an MoU with the Ministry of Water Resources to deliver WASH programming. This means that all conversations pertaining to access are held directly with the ministry or with local water establishments (LWEs) and water boards. Many INGOs, including Oxfam and NRC, also hold MoUs (and sub-MoUs) with other line ministries.



Marwan* is a farmer in Sabka. He told Oxfam this distribution of vegetable seeds 'saved' him, as price increases meant he would have had to sell some of his farm land to buy more seeds. Photo: Dania Kareh/Oxfam
*Marwan's name has been changed at his request.

3 NEGOTIATING HUMANITARIAN ACCESS: BARRIERS AND OBSTACLES

Registration as an INGO in Syria is not sufficient to implement programme. NRC and Oxfam’s experience is that, having achieved registration, there are challenges in negotiating access to be able to deliver quality assistance. These challenges fall into five categories: navigating bureaucratic obstacles and impediments; heavier government scrutiny of certain types of programme activities; limited opportunities for partnership with Syrian NGOs; limits on direct engagement with affected communities; and difficulties in securing funds to quickly scale up aid delivery when access does open up.

3.1 Navigating bureaucratic obstacles and impediments

In the experience of Oxfam and NRC, specific approvals are required for the transport of goods and supplies, movement of staff between governorates, conduct of monitoring and assessment visits, and delivery of services. The processes and timelines for gaining approvals vary depending on the ministry involved, the nature of programming, and the geographic location of the proposed activity. In general, however, the approvals process is lengthy and cumbersome, typically taking around 4 weeks but in some instances up to 16 months – a significant hurdle where donor funding cycles are often only 12 months.

There are also regular challenges in communication between national government and local government departments. In one such incident, Oxfam had initiated a project that had been approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour requesting coordination with the local Department of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. However, the department did not recognize these directives, stating that they only accepted guidance from their own ministry. This meant Oxfam had to go through an additional procedure, delaying project implementation by a month while existing approvals were confirmed, and the additional approval sought.¹⁰

Box 2: Quality access and conflict sensitivity

For Oxfam and NRC, ‘access’ refers to both the ability to reach populations affected by crisis, as well as Syrians’ ability to attain relevant assistance. ‘Humanitarian access’ is a broad term, but the Core Humanitarian Standards on Quality and Accountability (CHS)¹¹ offer a framework for what access should achieve. This includes timely programming, the active participation of communities, doing no harm, and the provision of an appropriate response (as defined by communities themselves) in accordance with humanitarian principles.

Across the world, where communities are traumatized, under-served, depleted of human and physical capital, and their social structures shattered because of war, Oxfam and NRC apply a conflict sensitivity lens to try to ensure that aid does not inadvertently harm civilians or contribute to conflict dynamics. This involves a context analysis, informed by communities themselves, to design activities and programmes with careful consideration of political, social and economic factors to mitigate or eliminate negative unintended consequences. These global practices guide the Damascus hub’s approach to access.

With the exception of staff based out of field offices, travelling between governorates usually requires approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for Oxfam and NRC’s

national and international staff. These approvals can be granted in 24 hours, but sometimes take weeks, especially for international staff.

When moving goods, even via a contractor, the exact type and quantity of goods must be approved, and the Ministry of Local Administration and the Environment produces a monthly list for the movement of stock for approved distributions. The name of the driver must also be included, which means, for example, that if the named driver is ill on the day of the planned journey, the movement of stock may have to be cancelled or rearranged. This can be critical, especially if moving stock immediately ahead of planned assistance.¹²

However, for staff based in the field (for example, in an area office), local movements usually only require the governor's office to be notified. Should a staff member (including an international staff member) be granted permission to work from a hub office, that individual can often move in the same way as locally based staff, simply by notifying the governor. However, there is no standard approach, with local governor's offices operating different systems.

Oxfam's national staff receive monthly approvals to work in Eastern Ghouta to deliver WASH services and some associated programme activities, including engaging with community committees (see section 3.4). As these approvals are not linked to a specific donor grant, they allow Oxfam's teams more regular access to communities to engage with all interventions.

3.2 Dealing with heavier government scrutiny of certain programme activities

In Oxfam and NRC's experience, certain activities draw extra scrutiny from the government and require additional negotiation to gain approval, especially those linked to protection programming and mainstreaming, such as legal assistance or training materials on gender-based violence. This is also the case with activities that diverge from the national priorities of a particular ministry, such as housing, land, and property due diligence in owner-led shelter rehabilitation.

Limitations are also imposed during the project cycle, which often requires intense dialogue and negotiation to ensure that programmes can still be conducted in line with humanitarian principles. For instance, if a project requires the use of training materials (for example, teacher training, hygiene promotion sessions, professional training for health staff), then ministries will request to approve the proposed training materials.¹³ It is common for ministries to require that their staff are present during any training session and for non-core elements of training to be excluded – even when it is of relevance to the community (for example, modules on sexual and gender-based violence).¹⁴ These restrictions limit the scope and potential effectiveness of the activity and the wider humanitarian response. Ministry staff at the local department level often request to accompany INGO staff on field visits, and to evaluate the progress of a project.¹⁵ This also limits the INGO's opportunity for wider engagement with communities.

For example, training in schools requires the agreement of local education departments, partly to ensure that such activities do not interrupt other elements of the school year or that the curriculum does not overly vary from the government's priorities.¹⁶ Oxfam has had to delay projects for many months or even reschedule entire programme activities when approvals have not been granted in time to work in schools without clashing with scheduled exams, for example. Although these approaches can work reasonably smoothly when projects fall under the scope of a

single line ministry, which can then coordinate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there can be additional complications when projects fall between ministries or require the approval of more than one.

Box 3: Adopting a Syria response plan

NRC submits an annual response plan to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Syria Trust. Through this process, its proposed activities for the year are discussed and, after some back and forth, approved by the ministry. Discussion of benchmarks and principles is an integral component of these negotiations, and the final documents are endorsed at a senior government level.

Benchmarks such as approvals for technical scoping missions, timely renewal of existing MoUs and the conduct of specialized trainings are agreed in advance to allow greater accountability. As well as the UN-led Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Syria, NRC's plan allows for greater clarity when it comes to day-to-day implementation. For instance, NRC staff conducting activities in line with an agreed programme are not required to seek daily permission from Syrian counterparts to visit a community or conduct an activity, although they must still gain approvals for individual activities presented in the plan.

Both NRC and Oxfam have experienced difficulties reaching specific communities directly, which means that marginalized communities or more vulnerable people cannot be easily and effectively targeted with assistance. Oxfam, for example, has found that while some activities (such as repairing WASH facilities in schools) are welcomed, others (including conducting hygiene promotion sessions to support children, parents and staff to better understand how to maintain good hygiene practices with limited water availability) are not.

Box 4: Standards in shelter projects

In late 2019, Syria's Ministry of Local Administration and the Environment released a document setting out the approvals process to deliver shelter projects. This is the first time a ministry has detailed the process in such a clear and transparent manner. However, there are numerous clauses that give cause for concern, including one which stipulates that agencies will only be able to undertake technical assessments and that beneficiary selection shall be the responsibility of local government, SARC and the Syria Trust only.

NRC will end its planned work on owner-led rehabilitation of individual housing units, due to the substantial delays faced in seeking permissions and negotiating beneficiary selection in line with global standards. Permissions to implement programme activities with communities in rural Damascus have been pending for over 20 months (at the time of writing) and have faced heavy scrutiny from all parties, including the Syria Trust.

Oxfam and NRC are both aware that they could have different interpretations of the government's priorities when it comes to needs. NRC's year-long effort to gain permission to repair homes in some parts of rural Damascus (see Box 4) suggests that it is almost impossible to gain access for activities that are deemed of lesser strategic interest by its national partner, the Syria Trust. Similarly, Oxfam has found that approvals to repair water networks in areas of Aleppo city that are outside of government control take weeks longer to be approved than those in other areas of the city, although the approvals have, ultimately, always been granted thus far.¹⁷

3.3 Limited opportunities for partnership with Syrian NGOs

Any collaboration with a Syrian NGO also requires its own specific permissions from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (following the initial approval by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs); an approval is first required for the overall partnership, then a separate agreement is required for each project.¹⁸ Aside from faith-based organizations, Oxfam is the only INGO to have received permission to partner with Syrian organizations (other than SARC and the Syria Trust).¹⁹ At the time of writing, it had completed due diligence and headline partnership agreements with three Syrian NGOs.

However, the need to obtain individual project agreements at a ministerial level can constrain partnership prospects and reduce the timeliness of the response. This comes on top of the added time required for INGO due diligence and vetting procedures. Officials from the ministry state that they are supportive of an increased role for Syrian organizations and for capacity building of national NGOs. They also express frustration with INGO global due diligence requirements, which can delay partnerships being formed.

Box 5: Providing an emergency response in Deir ez-Zor



Seeham, 40, returned to Bugros in Deir ez-Zor and described the land as 'all but destroyed and scorched'. Irrigation pumps installed by Oxfam have helped her to begin farming again. Photo: Dania Kareh/Oxfam.

Many years of fighting have taken their toll on communities across Deir ez-Zor, one of the main food producing governorates in Syria, but remote from the other major conurbations in the west of the country. Many farming communities have been destroyed; vital irrigation infrastructure is no longer functioning; farmers had tools and livestock stolen, or had to sell them to survive. People were going hungry.

Oxfam had been negotiating with the Syrian government since 2016 for approval to work in partnership with Syrian NGOs as part of the response. In order to respond quickly in Deir ez-Zor as control of the area changed and access to communities began to open up, it became even more vital for Oxfam to find an organization with established roots in the area, to begin distributions of bread to thousands of families in need.

Dialogue with both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour led to Oxfam becoming the first non-faith-based INGO to work with a local partner and quickly access Deir ez-Zor south of the Euphrates River. It was only the second agency to do so, behind the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement).

However, despite having a partner and the funds to deliver the programme, implementation was delayed as all banks in Deir ez-Zor are operating under sanctions. While Oxfam was seeking a waiver, the local partner distributed bread using its own funds, taking all the financial risk of the project before Oxfam was finally able to transfer the funds as reimbursement.

This initial and timely intervention in Deir ez-Zor led to Oxfam developing strong relationships with local government, opening the way to an increased programmatic presence, working with community committees and conducting needs assessments. These relationships with ministries and local government enabled Oxfam to open an office in Deir ez-Zor in 2019, ensuring a more stable presence in the east of the country.

Working with Syrian NGOs has enabled Oxfam to begin programmes in Deir ez-Zor (see Box 5), northern Hama, and southern Idlib much earlier than would otherwise have been possible, and has helped Oxfam to build on the local knowledge of these organizations. Working in partnership is an important part of working towards our Grand Bargain²⁰ commitments. Until more INGOs are permitted to work in formal relationships with Syrian organizations, and independence of partnership selection is respected (and a necessary mapping of the national civil society landscape can be conducted), this approach is unlikely to result in greater access for INGOs in the immediate term. This is despite the obvious potential of working with local and national organizations for meeting humanitarian needs quickly and effectively, as evidenced by Oxfam's limited experience to date.

3.4 Limited scope for direct community engagement

Community participation in identifying needs and designing projects is crucial to delivering an effective response. However, the Government of Syria does not favour direct interaction between beneficiaries and INGOs. Programme teams indicate that it is easier to obtain access for infrastructure repair projects – for example, repairing irrigation canals or toilet facilities in schools – than programmes that involve direct engagement with the community.²¹ Given that several communities and groups in Syria, including persons with disabilities and women, have been under-represented, denied their rights, or are more likely to be excluded from discussions influencing the delivery of assistance, it is critical that humanitarians are able to hear directly from people in order to design effective interventions.

As community-level assessments are rare, it is not usually possible to design programmes that meet the needs of specific population groups. Nor is it possible to understand specific challenges in an area – for example, to assess the prevalence of cases of sexual and gender-based violence, of families lacking civil documentation, or child labour, or, more broadly, to understand how social norms may limit the extent to which assistance can be gender-transformative.²² Ministries state that assessments should only be undertaken as part of a specific project,²³ which in practice means that programmes must be designed using monitoring, evaluation and learning from previous programmes, secondary data analysis, or some interviews with local notables and community leaders only.

To adapt to this context, Oxfam has now established community committees as part of its project work.²⁴ Each committee brings together influential members of the community, such as head teachers, small business owners and those involved in parent associations. The committee then works with Oxfam project teams and maintains regular dialogue with the community, helping with targeting and selection of beneficiaries. Although not a substitute for direct community engagement, this approach can help to build agreement within the community over those in greatest need and can enhance community understanding and acceptance of the rationale of interventions.

In a different initiative, NRC has established a beneficiary feedback mechanism to encourage other means of hearing directly from communities, even in the face of physical barriers to interacting with them. Dedicated contacts (email and phone) are distributed to beneficiaries as an additional step during and after the project cycle, to ensure that communities can feedback to NRC at all times.

3.5 Difficulties securing funding to scale up programmes quickly

NRC and Oxfam have found that even when access to an area does open up and community assessments are undertaken – including in areas that had recently changed control – lack of available funds made it difficult to respond quickly to identified needs and to scale up programmes. Both organizations had only small budgets with which to respond initially in Eastern Ghouta after successfully negotiating access to communities, including those in Arbin, Harasta and Douma. This reduced the ability to meet community needs and advocate for greater access. Government ministries are also unlikely to approve a needs assessment unless it is specifically attached to a funded intervention, placing INGOs in a Catch-22 situation when proposing interventions to donors. Flexible funding has enabled INGOs to tailor programmes to the specific needs of the communities they are intended to serve. While funding does not guarantee access, the clear prospect of an intervention can be used as leverage with ministries and national organizations to agree the parameters and scope of a project, and all ministries have provided concessions when understanding that funding is at risk.

It is not just national constraints that INGOs face, both NRC and Oxfam have experienced delays in implementing programmes as a result of having to seek advice or licences to negotiate the overlapping and complex sanctions imposed on the Syrian government, businesses, individuals, and certain imports, adding an extra administrative burden and again slowing the response.

4 LOOKING AHEAD: LESSONS TO IMPROVE THE AID RESPONSE FROM DAMASCUS

NRC's and Oxfam's years of experience navigating the complex and challenging aid environment in Syria have shown that it is possible to overcome some of these obstacles (whether deliberate or incidental) and deliver assistance to those most in need. Based on this experience, the two organizations have identified four key lessons that can improve the effectiveness of the aid response moving forward.

Lesson #1: Dialogue with government ministries can improve access

Government ministries have a crucial role and have indicated that proactive and regular dialogue can ease access challenges. For instance, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour expressed a wish for 'greater harmony between national policy and INGO activities'.²⁵ The Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform commented that 'Ministries have a greater understanding of the situation on the ground, the needs of communities and the needs of farmers'.²⁶

With ministries often focusing on their own priorities, it is crucial that humanitarian organizations remain true to their mandate in these often-lengthy negotiations, or they risk compromising on operational independence. For instance, NRC specifies in all its engagements with the Ministry of Education that it will not initiate a project without several safeguards in place, including an independent identification of needs and non-interference in procurement processes (see Box 6). Oxfam has made clear to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour that potential Syrian NGO partners will have to pass through Oxfam's standard due diligence checks, and that cash transfer programming must take place following independent identification of beneficiaries. In both cases, these terms were respected by the relevant ministry.

Ministries welcome regular coordination with INGOs, often feeling that humanitarian agencies only come to the ministry when there is a challenge or a problem, making them less inclined to facilitate a solution. One ministry official commented that 'communication should not only be during programme implementation'²⁷ but should occur on an ongoing basis through formal UN-led coordination structures.

It is clear that many access delays stem from the overarching discrepancies between INGO plans and priorities and those of a particular ministry at the national level, often compounded by distrust of foreign organizations and a view that humanitarian best practice and global standards are actually political considerations applied only in Syria. For example, when NRC has tried to focus on 'soft' components of primary education (including teaching styles and the quality of the curriculum) or to incorporate elements of housing, land and property due diligence in home repairs, it has faced obstruction. Oxfam and NRC have both found that project implementation can be stalled due to extensive conversations on strategic issues, which prevent needed discussion on obtaining access for direct delivery of projects.

Box 6: Negotiating access and creating safe schools in Aleppo

NRC's shelter and education teams have worked collaboratively to support the creation of safe and welcoming environments in schools in Aleppo governorate, where children from the resident population, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees now come together to learn.



Nada teaches in a school in Aleppo refurbished by NRC. Photo: Tareq Manadili/NRC

NRC had to negotiate access with the Ministry of Education in Damascus, the Ministry of Education office in Aleppo, the Governor's office, and local law enforcement agencies in order to: (1) conduct assessments to identify communities without functioning schools; (2) gain approval to work in the schools, enabling the movement of staff and supplies; and (3) identify the nature of the intervention, particularly for heavily damaged schools. During the assessment phase, a number of schools were identified as still at risk due to the presence of unexploded ordnance, resulting in delays to the project while a request for clearing by the army unit responsible for mine clearance was communicated to through the Ministry of Education.

NRC supported the rehabilitation of classrooms, water and sanitation facilities and rebuilding of heavily damaged buildings. Education programmes have included specific summer activities for out-of-school children as well as ongoing support through teacher training, children-led activities and parent/teacher sessions. These activities have contributed to higher enrolment and retention rates as well as improved education outcomes.

Nada, a teacher, said: *'There was a remarkable engagement from the students after the summer school. The number has significantly increased. Many students who had previously dropped out are back to school and our joy was indescribable. In the first semester I've seen eagerness on the faces of the children. This area is densely populated, with many vulnerable families. Fortunately, the children are now willing to come to school and continue learning. Children are the ones who have suffered most from the war. I hope that this [work] will continue in other regions because Syrians are in need of such assistance. Listening to songs and activities is needed when the only voice they have heard was the sound of war and explosions.'*

Lesson #2: There is a shared interest between the government and NGOs in monitoring programme impact

NRC and Oxfam have both identified that, as in other contexts, a track record of delivery opens up new prospects – not only for working in new areas, but also for enhancing programming with improved community engagement and greater space to undertake more detailed needs analysis, such as applying a gender lens. Working with communities and responding to their expressed needs is a core humanitarian standard, yet in Syria, there is a clear reticence to allow foreign organizations to collect and hold data,²⁸ even though INGOs must maintain strong data protection practices.

The majority of monitoring activities therefore take place during project implementation – for example, a survey or helpdesk held during a distribution, or spot checks during the repair of a water network or school. Technical assessments of repair work (in the case of the rehabilitation of a school or a water pipeline, for instance) will take place with local authorities, which helps build confidence in the quality of work delivered. However, agencies have rarely been able to evaluate the full impact of an intervention with a community due to the lack of approval for specific monitoring visits.

Despite the reticence on data-gathering, ministries have displayed an interest in understanding the impact of a project up to 12 months after its implementation. This gives INGOs the opportunity to gather information to seek funding for scaled up programming and to potentially gain longer-term access to conduct post-implementation monitoring.²⁹

Ministries have a clear desire to assess programmes against their own priorities. For example, the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform welcomed Oxfam's installation of irrigation pumps in Deir ez-Zor because they 'responded to the vital needs of the people, created jobs, and brought forward a sustainable intervention'.³⁰ Understanding the impact (and any unintended consequences) of programmes is crucial for designing programmes elsewhere in Syria or subsequent programmes within the same community. Therefore, agreeing project objectives with ministries and involving them in monitoring activities could help develop more shared objectives for future assistance. Furthermore, the interest of ministries in these aspects could be leveraged to gain greater scope for M&E activities across the project cycle.

Lesson #3: Local governors can and do facilitate humanitarian programming

Throughout the humanitarian response in Syria, aid agencies have engaged with local government representatives and governors' offices across the country. Indeed, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs approvals for senior staff to visit governorates outside of Damascus often come with a stipulation that visits are coordinated with the governor's office. As more governorates have returned to Syrian government control, both NRC and Oxfam have seen the role of governors and their teams as increasingly central to access, particularly when working to identify humanitarian needs.

Governors can also play an important role through their interaction with the relevant authorities, ensuring that certain checkpoints can be passed with reduced delays or that specific activities can be undertaken without undue scrutiny.³¹ Also, while governors are political figures and can be divisive or contentious within some

communities, they are also closer to community needs, which often means that governors welcome the support of international organizations providing humanitarian assistance. In Deir ez-Zor, for example, as part of a project working to support small farmers, Oxfam was able to bring those farmers together with the local Department of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform to discuss their needs. Similarly, Aleppo's governor has proved crucial to NRC's opening an office in the governorate and granting the approvals needed to establish a more permanent presence there.

Governors are also able to convene the heads of all local departments, and this ability to work across local government is helpful in identifying multi-sectoral needs and priorities as well as gaining buy-in for community engagement early on. However, these meetings have generally taken place on an ad hoc basis, and there is a need for INGOs to work together with governors to make them more regular and strategic.

In addition, governors themselves can advocate with central government to approve projects. While requests are usually made by the humanitarian agency to the relevant ministry in Damascus and then sent for local validation, in many instances local government offices will initiate a dialogue with the central government about an intervention that they have already discussed with the humanitarian organization.³² An Oxfam bread distribution project in rural Deir ez-Zor was approved in this way. Governors' offices have, however, described the process of facilitating approvals as quite demanding,³³ relying often on very few staff working long hours to ensure that permissions are provided.

Due to having an MoU with the Ministry of Local Administration and the Environment, Oxfam and NRC are both permitted to contact governors' offices directly, with no additional approvals required. INGOs that have no such agreement are obliged to coordinate with national partners or ministries to agree on protocol. This can result in a lengthy process that is largely transactional in nature.

Lesson #4: Sectors have the potential to strengthen cooperation between agencies

In NRC's and Oxfam's experience, INGOs take idiosyncratic and often inconsistent approaches to negotiating access in Syria. This fractured approach undermines efforts to overcome certain hurdles, particularly those which run contrary to or are not included in ministry priorities – such as agreeing standards for housing, land, and property due diligence in shelter rehabilitation, or approaches to training with water authorities. Sector leadership could play a greater role in simultaneously coordinating the work of humanitarian actors and engaging with authorities on their behalf, thereby enhancing access to new areas and types of programmes.

Sector leads can act as mediators with ministries, represent the whole of the sector in HRP planning, address common challenges, and improve awareness and acceptance of humanitarian action. Ministries currently report differing levels of engagement with sector leads, with some saying they do not have regular meetings and would welcome a greater level of coordination within the sector.³⁴ Others, such as the WASH sector, do have regular interaction but there is still room for this dialogue to better represent INGOs' priorities.³⁵

Another issue is that many INGOs themselves do not consider sectors as allies in securing access, as they see little support or added value in problem solving.³⁶ However, sectors and Area Humanitarian Country Teams are able to provide

important information on needs and gaps, and both have been used by NRC and Oxfam as part of a targeting strategy.³⁷ This information is also communicated with local government, as part of a broader discussion on access. INGOs may not be making the most of the opportunities available, especially at a national level, in the absence of regular attendance at meetings and a failure to proactively drive the sector agenda. Greater engagement of sectors with ministries could be one way to devise common priorities, reduce duplication of activities, and push for permissions in a concerted manner.

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Pursuing access for humanitarian assistance from the Damascus hub is fraught with challenges, but is vital given the scale of needs among those affected by the conflict. While it is the responsibility of the Syrian government to reduce the burden of approvals for humanitarian agencies, the international community can contribute by engaging with national organizations. For their part, humanitarian actors need to remain committed to the global standards that are necessary to deliver a principled and impartial response, while engaging strategically with national and local government. They should be prepared to reduce, restrict or suspend programming where these conditions cannot be met.

The Government of Syria should:

- Increase approvals for M&E activities (uncoupled from specific projects), enabling humanitarian organizations to assess the impact of projects and generate evidence to ensure that effective interventions can be scaled up appropriately.
- Ensure that dialogue between ministries and INGOs can occur more frequently, without the need to have agreed an MoU.
- Enable unimpeded access for first-line emergency activities, including ensuring that agencies not registered under SARC are not disadvantaged in their response.
- Reduce the administrative burden associated with moving humanitarian consignments across the country – for example, by ensuring that the names of truck drivers and vehicle registrations can simply be notified rather than be subject to approval.
- Allow INGOs to meet national NGOs across Syria to discuss future programme collaboration and partnership agreements.
- Respond quickly to access requests through existing UN-led coordination structures including sectors and the HCT (rather than the United Nations Country Team) to enable a consistent INGO voice in high-level access negotiations, including through regular input and attendance at the High Relief Committee.
- Ensure that ministries are meeting regularly with sector leads.
- Allow INGO co-leadership of the sectors in the Damascus hub.

SARC and the Syria Trust for Development should:

- Facilitate INGOs to work in partnership with other Syrian NGOs.
- Approve requests for meetings between INGOs and line ministries and local

governments, enabling more direct dialogue.

- Support INGOs that do not have MoUs to contribute to first-line humanitarian response.

The UN leadership should:

- Ensure that sector leads maintain a proactive, regular dialogue with relevant line ministries, enabling them to support advocacy linked to broader access issues; relay issues into sector meetings; and represent INGO advocacy messaging to ministries.
- Champion increased space for M&E activities for all humanitarian partners with national authorities – by advocating directly with ministries or producing shared objectives for long-term M&E approaches within sectors.
- Develop and publish clear benchmarks and criteria related to humanitarian programming to provide a framework for implementing the HRP and to enhance accountability on key operational issues.
- Advocate for INGO co-leadership of the sectors in the Damascus hub.

International donors should:

- Diversify flexible and multi-year funding of the response from the Damascus hub, enabling organizations to finalize programme design following detailed assessments and community engagement, in line with all pillars of the HRP; and scale up programming as access opens up.
- Where they have diplomatic representation in Syria and/or visit Syria, engage with government service delivery ministries in support of increasing access in line with Core Humanitarian Standards (donors without this representation should support the efforts of those who do).
- Strengthen dialogue with INGO-sponsoring partners, including SARC and the Syria Trust, to increase understanding of good humanitarian donorship and support the negotiations of partners and the wider INGO community.
- Include in requested project reviews and reports updates regarding humanitarian principles and standards related to aid delivery in Syria.

INGOs should:

- Collectively set criteria for principled programming and make these a central part of discussions with their main partners, including the government and donors, and reduce or suspend programming where these risks cannot be managed.
- Develop capacities in conflict sensitivity and humanitarian negotiation in order to improve access dialogue with Syrian counterparts. This includes in-depth training of field staff on humanitarian principles.
- Invest in proactive, regular and coordinated dialogue with technical line ministries over programme priorities and humanitarian action, and exchange feedback and learning with peer INGOs.
- Generate regular advocacy points on access to be shared with the UN Country Team, and play a productive role in the Access Working Group in Damascus.
- Ensure regular advocacy on the importance of independent M&E visits, both directly with government and sponsoring partners, and also through the UN Humanitarian Country Team.

NOTES

- 1 A Whole of Syria coordination approach was established in 2015 to bring together humanitarian actors working in Syria and in neighbouring countries (cross-border operation as mandated by the UN Security Council) to increase the overall effectiveness of the response.
- 2 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview, March 2019. https://hno-syria.org/data/downloads/en/full_hno_2019.pdf
- 3 Early in the aid response, the Government of Syria objected to the activation of a cluster system for the response from Damascus, as clusters would exclude the government and include co-leadership by NGOs. Clusters are part of the Whole of Syria response, into which sectors contribute.
- 4 Interview with official from the Ministry of Water Resources, 29 December 2019
- 5 Syrian Arab Red Crescent website, <http://sarc.sy/about-us/> (accessed 18 June 2020)
- 6 Interview with NRC Syria staff, 12 December 2019.
- 7 The informal Damascus INGO platform currently consists of 29 organisations. Other INGOs are registered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and both the platform and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) have requested that the full list be made available.
- 8 Interview with INGO, Damascus. 10 December 2019.
- 9 The Syria Trust for Development was founded in 2006 by Asma al-Assad, the wife of President Bashar al-Assad, as a sustainable development organization.
- 10 Interview with Oxfam Northern Hub staff, Skype, 3 December 2019.
- 11 Core Humanitarian Standard, <https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard>
- 12 Interview with Oxfam head office staff, Damascus, 2 December 2019
- 13 Multiple interviews with staff from INGOs, Damascus, December 2019.
- 14 Interview with Oxfam head office staff, Damascus, 2 December 2019.
- 15 NRC and Oxfam work with line ministries and report back on programme achievements. Engagement with local government officials is important for advancing programmatic objectives. However, all visits with local government staff are agreed in advance to ensure the purpose of the visit is clear.
- 16 Interview with Oxfam head office staff, Damascus, 2 December 2019.
- 17 Interview with Oxfam northern hub staff, Skype, 3 December 2019
- 18 Interview with Oxfam head office staff, Damascus, 3 December 2019.
- 19 This excludes the registration arrangements INGOs have with SARC and the Syria Trust. The UN has conducted many of its interventions through local partners.
- 20 Inter-Agency Standing Committee, Grand Bargain (Official Website) <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>
- 21 Interview with Oxfam head office staff, Damascus, 2 December 2019.
- 22 Oxfam internal analysis on Women's Access to Aid in Syria. According to NRC's research, Syrian women's property rights are recognized in a variety of legal sources, including the Constitution and the Civil Code. However, as in many other countries in the Middle East, women's ability to realize their rights tends to be strongly linked to family laws (in particular those related to marriage, divorce and inheritance), which determine who has control over assets, who has the ability to make economic decisions in their own name, and who can own, administer, transfer or inherit property.
- 23 Interview with official from the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, Damascus, 23 December 2019.
- 24 Interview with Oxfam head office staff, 3 Damascus 2019.
- 25 Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 24 December 2019.
- 26 Interview with Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, 23 December 2019.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Interview with Oxfam head office staff, Damascus, 3 December 2019.
- 29 Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Damascus, 24 December 2019.
- 30 Interview with Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, Damascus, 23 December 2019.
- 31 Interview with staff from an INGO in Damascus, 11 December 2019.
- 32 Meeting with Governorate of Deir ez-Zor, 29 January 2020.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Meeting with Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, 23 Damascus, December 2019.
- 35 Meeting with Ministry of Water Resources, Damascus, 29 December 2019.
- 36 Meeting with staff from an INGO in Damascus, 10 December 2019.
- 37 Meeting with Oxfam Northern Hub staff, Skype, 3 December 2019.

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