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# International Assistance for All in Syria: Choosing the Right Channels

## LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON AID DELIVERY IN SYRIA

### Introduction

Concerned by the vast manipulation, politicisation and diversion of international aid during the decade-long conflict in Syria – and the risk these pose for future recovery and reconstruction – the Syria Resource Group has advocated for international donor interventions to be guided by a human rights-based conditionality<sup>1</sup> rather than contingent on political transition. The Group’s discussion paper, [International Assistance for All in Syria](#) (2020), suggests that the international community tailor aid to Syria’s multi-faceted reality, avoid using compromised channels of assistance delivery, work on a small and local level, use trusted Syrian intermediaries, establish effective monitoring mechanisms and reactivate the role of the private sector.

Convinced by the feasibility of its approach, the Syria Resource Group has developed this follow-up paper, which showcases experiences of working with uncompromised actors and channels inside Syria to deliver international aid. It offers reflections and recommendations on how these could be scaled up to play a valuable role in the country’s future.

Like the prior paper, this new one draws upon consultations and discussions with local experts and groups in different parts of Syria. Acknowledging the great complexity of implementing donor activities in Syria, the aim is to offer innovative but realistic solutions for delivering international humanitarian, recovery and reconstruction aid in a principled and effective way.

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1. The Group uses the term “human rights-based conditionality” to refer to a proposed requirement that international aid in Syria promote and protect human rights and foster conditions for sustainable peace.

## Delivering principled aid in Syria – yes, it’s possible

The Syrian aid context is perplexing to say the least, with corruption and manipulation of aid carried out by different actors and in different ways and degrees from one region to the next. However, what is common in all the regions is the existence of uncompromised channels and/or structures for aid delivery and the opportunity to protect and scale them up for when Syria’s reconstruction is underway.

Although security challenges vary greatly from one region to another in Syria, the actors and organisations working to deliver humanitarian aid have managed to navigate restrictions, ensuring aid reaches its intended beneficiaries. They have supported livelihood projects, job creation opportunities and women’s empowerment and participation.

**In areas where regime control is dominant** and aid continues to suffer from corruption, manipulation and diversion, many local organisations have been creative in establishing structures enabling them to operate independently. Despite the risks involved, some groups in Sweida have chosen the path of operating fully under the radar, avoiding the obligatory registration that would subject them to regime control. Instead, they have sought legal protection from faith-based institutions. Others in Damascus have evaded registration by cooperating with intermediary organisations registered in Turkey or Lebanon, or have sought legal and technical support from international business enterprises operating in Damascus.

**In regions where a restrictive environment prevails due to de-facto powers** rather than regime control, organisations have managed to establish a full structure for aid delivery, capable of bypassing the authorities on the ground. In the northern countryside of Aleppo, under the umbrella of one organisation, a hybrid structure was established bringing together different local entities, whilst also working with a central office registered in Turkey to facilitate financial and technical operations (thus enabling legally independent local offices inside Syria to operate). In Turkish-controlled places such as Azaz, others have set up for-profit enterprises rather than non-profit or civil society organisations, allowing them to receive funds in the form of investment capital, rather than assistance. In turn, this has enabled them to evade the heavy restrictions that civil society organisations endure. In Idlib, where Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its Salvation Government continue their efforts to exert more power, directorates have relied on their technical niche and a bottom-up approach. In regions such as Raqqa, where a higher degree of autonomy exists, local actors have been able to secure direct funding from donors and engage in early recovery and small-scale reconstruction through the establishment of a semi-independent reconstruction committee.

All of these examples underscore the existence of functioning aid channels that are less vulnerable to the interference and manipulation of the regime and other de-facto powers in Syria. Leveraging these channels requires a willingness by donors to embrace innovative and context-responsive approaches, and an aid architecture that allows more flexibility and decision-making autonomy to uncompromised Syrian actors while ensuring sufficient accountability and transparency. Easing the rigid lines between humanitarian

and development assistance that currently prevail, and instead exploring the opportunities the humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach offers, would also be useful.

## Learning from experience

Analysing the structures and processes that have emerged in Syria to deliver assistance to the population, based on real needs and without political interference, several considerations were identified in this research regarding 1) who are credible and uncompromised channels; 2) how they can be identified, supported and scaled up; and 3) how to go about it without exposing or endangering them.

## What defines uncompromised channels?

Most interlocutors interviewed for this paper defined uncompromised channels according to two variables: 1) whose interests they represent, and 2) their ability to navigate technical and security restrictions to achieve their mission. In this regard, **actors accountable to their communities are the optimal choice**. These are less vulnerable to interference and manipulation by de-facto authorities, more immune to aid diversion, less likely to entrench conflict economies or exacerbate the country's geopolitical divisions, and more geared towards long-term sustainability and human rights principles and values.

## Which local actors can be leveraged in establishing uncompromised channels?

### LOCAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

in regime-held areas, local governance structures have always been heavily opposed by the regime; and those that exist operate with narrow margins of independence. In other parts of the country, local governance structures have, despite early promise, become largely co-opted by the different de facto powers. With rare exceptions, they have failed to grow as bodies with independent financial resources and decision-making authority.

While such structures do not represent a legitimate uncompromised channel for aid delivery at the moment, they could become so in future. Indeed, it is desirable to help build conditions to **reactivate the role of local structures as the core of uncompromised channels for the administration of basic services**. This has already been done in some areas (eg, certain directorates in Idlib, and certain councils in Aleppo's peripheries) and it can be done in other areas if influential actors, including donors, exercise their political and financial leverage.

### THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The private sector in Syria is a largely overlooked actor in the architecture of aid delivery, despite the fact that ethical and capable private sector actors exist in all areas. As demonstrated in the case of Idlib, private companies are left to operate in isolation, with

no strategic leveraging of their corporate social responsibility. The situation leaves them vulnerable to attempts at co-optation by de-facto powers.

Situations like the one in Azaz, however, demonstrate the potential that cooperation with the private sector holds. Not only has the involvement of the private sector there enabled the enterprise in question to fulfil its mandate and reach its intended beneficiaries, but it has also countered the restrictions attached to the procurement of international humanitarian assistance.

Ultimately, the private sector can become an important ally with influential negotiation power vis-à-vis de-facto authorities. The international community can help by easing certain aspects of the sanctions regime that impede ethical private sector investment (eg, financial transactions).

#### **FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS**

Faith-based organisations are among the oldest and most established aid providers in Syria, yet their role is marginalised within the aid architecture for Syria. Very few international donors have actively and constructively sought to collaborate with these organisations.

By contrast, the role of faith-based groups is not overlooked by local communities, which have sought to develop partnerships with them, as in the case of Sweida. Indeed, local communities are capable of identifying inclusive, non-discriminatory and uncompromised faith-based groups whose role can be leveraged by the international community to facilitate and protect the work of small and medium-sized civil society groups whose work, in turn, is critical to the delivery of principled aid on the ground.

#### **CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANISATIONS**

Local civic groups are the most critical actors in ensuring sustainable, capable and uncompromised structures of aid delivery in Syria. Yet, they are mostly placed at the bottom of the food chain, with limited financial resources to operate efficiently and insufficient decision-making authority. Worse, they have often been forced to meet unusually onerous donor requirements to qualify for funding, finding their agendas largely overridden by those of international actors.

Yet, local civil society and community-based organisations are the most grounded and connected to local communities and can best identify realistic channels for principled aid delivery. The challenge is in making them attractive partners for donors, especially for less mainstream groups. If the international community can grant Syrian organisations more recognition and flexibility – as in the case of Sweida and the creation of aid structures in Aleppo’s northern countryside – aid can be less vulnerable to diversion and more accountable to local priorities.

Ultimately, it is responsiveness and accountability to community needs and interests that truly distinguishes good from bad aid. They hold the power of local knowledge that needs to be respected and cultivated. They are the ones who have the capacity and legitimacy

to vet and validate decisions on the ground, and the ones who can identify when aid is being diverted, and to whose benefit. The role of local communities can, and needs to, be leveraged in a spirit of joint enterprise.

## How can international actors facilitate the establishment of uncompromised channels?

### THE NEED TO INNOVATIVE

An **aid architecture that allows more flexibility and gives more decision-making authority to uncompromised Syrian actors while ensuring sufficient levels of accountability** is crucial to overcome flaws and vulnerabilities in current practice. The architecture requires reducing the rigid lines between humanitarian and development assistance and exploring the opportunities that the humanitarian-development-peace nexus offers.

### THE NEED FOR A LEGITIMATE FINANCIAL CHANNEL

Most of the uncompromised structures of aid delivery identified in Syria suffer from extreme restrictions related to financial transfers. Working with uncompromised channels requires **creating a payment mechanism that is compliant with the restrictive measures in Syria**, yet enables actors to work legally despite sanctions. The Syria Resource Group is currently advancing thinking regarding the feasibility of a Syria-specific payment mechanism.

### THE NEED FOR AN INDEPENDENT AND EFFECTIVE MONITORING SYSTEM

Most current aid delivery channels suffer from a lack of transparent and effective monitoring mechanisms. This can be attributed to funding rules, aid distribution protocols, and the complex environment of a war economy, all of which have allowed corruption and diversion to grow. To counter this, an independent monitoring system is needed – one which prioritises the role of local communities in vetting, validating and evaluating the work of international and local actors as they plan, design and implement their programmes. Such a system could set out the monitoring criteria to be adopted by the aid architecture. Inter-organisational partnerships could be part of the solution.

## How can successful models be replicated or scaled up?

Although there are risks associated with scaling up successful models and drawing too much attention to them, there are operational aspects worth protecting and developing. In particular, it is important to **focus on technical expertise and building governance models that derive legitimacy from the ground, thus giving extra protection to uncompromised actors**. Investing in a targeted mapping of relevant local actors is another important way to facilitate the identification of actors who can play an innovative intermediary role or help identify others with the requisite technical skills, local legitimacy and effective infrastructure (eg, the health directorates in Idlib).

## Final recommendations

After a decade of conflict in Syria, no political solution to the conflict is in sight, despite the continued efforts of the international community (UN talks, Russia sponsored Astana talks, Turkish initiatives, Iran). The divergent views of influential actors (mainly USA and Russia) and the absence of a common vision have led the country to a situation of contained conflict – marked by occasional outbreaks of violence, evolving security arrangements, and growing efforts of the Assad regime to legitimise its rule and start a reconstruction process in cooperation with its foreign sponsors (Russia, Iran, China).

Against this backdrop, and recognising the importance of international aid that uses the right channels to help improve the lives of all Syrians, the following are some final recommendations:

- A wider and more flexible definition of civil society needs to be adopted – one that goes beyond NGOs with legal status but little local reach or legitimacy.
- Local entities need maximum ownership of aid decision-making processes. This implies greater independence, politically and financially, from de-facto authorities in their region. Independent trust funds offer a good way to achieve this.
- New policies are needed with an aim to easing some of the conditions of donor aid (eg, documentation rules) and limiting the expectation to rely on expensive international intermediaries.
- Working more often with uncompromised actors inside the country could help increase the legitimacy (and thus power) of such actors, thus contributing to a virtuous cycle that reinforces human rights.

The **Syria Resource Group** (SRG) is an independent, multidisciplinary and non-affiliated platform of leading Syrian experts based in the country, closely connected to it, or actively involved from abroad in creative, realistic and principled solutions to Syria's future reconstruction and the international financing of it. The SRG promotes a deliberately Syrian-led approach by providing local-level assessment, generating locally conceived proposals and solutions, and helping shape – rather than merely react to – international aid offerings. The group aims to promote inclusive assistance for the Syrian population, taking into account the diverse demographic, political, economic and security realities of the country. The Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT) backs the SRG with operational support and international expertise, helping ensure that the SRG's ideas and vision are effectively promoted and channelled.

Founded in 2012, the [Institute for Integrated Transitions](#) (IFIT) is an independent, international, non-governmental organisation offering comprehensive analysis and technical advice to national actors involved in negotiations and transitions in fragile and conflict-affected societies. IFIT has supported negotiations and transitions in countries including Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador, Gambia, Libya, Nigeria, Syria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.