



SUPPORTING PRINCIPLED NATIONAL AND LOCAL¹ NGOS IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Working with and investing in local actors as equal and strategic partners is a priority for the humanitarian response and the leadership of humanitarian operations. Localisation is a vital element for strengthening the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian assistance and became firmly established in the humanitarian lexicon in the build-up to the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. In the context of this paper, localisation is about recognizing and strengthening the role of local and national NGOs in humanitarian response strategically, institutionally and operationally.

The Peer-2-Peer Project visited Gaziantep, Turkey, to assess the integration of Syrian NGOs into the humanitarian response system with the overall goal of involving them in strategic decision-making and strengthening their engagement in a coordinated and principled humanitarian operation. Syrian NGOs in this area work as part of the cross-border response in Syria. The Peer-2-Peer mission was carried out with the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC), and on the invitation of the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (DRHC) in Gaziantep.

COMMON CHALLENGES FOR INTEGRATING NATIONAL AND LOCAL NGOS INTO HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Local actors often have distinct advantages compared to their international counter-parts in responding to a crisis as they have a nuanced knowledge of the context in which the humanitarian operation is being implemented, are geographically close to crisis affected communities, and can respond rapidly to meet the needs of people. Yet, their physical and socio-cultural proximity to communities can raise questions concerning their independence, impartiality, and neutrality. There are also concerns about the institutional and operational capacities of newly-established national NGOs to deliver assistance effectively on limited budgets in a high-risk environment, and to manage operations in line with donors and/or other international partners' requirements.

Finally, localisation is a long-term process that requires dedicated human resources and financial investment to ensure sustainability.

BROAD CHALLENGES

- **Dedicating human resources and financial investment** to ensure a sequenced and sustainable localisation process. This implies the development of partnerships that do not turn national and local NGOs into sub-contractors and do ensure that they do not carry the **brunt of the risks involved** in delivering assistance.
- **Building local and national NGO institutional and operational capacity** to ensure they are well-governed, adhere to the highest standards of professionalism and transparency and are empowered to deliver on a principled and effective humanitarian response. This includes building **trust and confidence** with donors so that local and national NGOs can receive **direct funding**.
- **Integrating local and national NGOs into the strategic decision-making** bodies and coordination groups to ensure they have a voice in the strategic direction of the response and are engaged in a coordinated effort.
- **Coordination among local and national NGOs** to ensure their representation in humanitarian fora is **based on a transparent and inclusive process** led by the local and national NGO constituency. This mitigates the potential for a few NNGOs to dominate and influence the humanitarian narrative at the expense of less prominent NGOs.

¹ The difference between a local and national NGO relies on the geographical scale of activities: a local NGO is active at local level (one sub area of a given country) while a national NGO is active in various sub-areas of a given country.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HCs AND HCTs TO STRENGTHEN LOCALISATION

BUILD THE INSTITUTIONAL AND OPERATIONAL / STAFF CAPACITIES OF LOCAL AND NATIONAL NGOS

- Develop a comprehensive and contextualized programme in the country language to build national and local NGOs' institutional and operational capacities that relate to the 'business' side of an NGO such as governance structures, financial management, reporting on funding and project implementation; and operationally to deliver assistance effectively, transparently, based on need, and in accordance with humanitarian principles.
- Coordinate training between organisations and clusters through a common platform to minimise duplication and gaps.

DEDICATE RESOURCES AND CAPACITIES WITHIN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO SUPPORT LOCALISATION

- Dedicate human resources within UN Agencies and international NGOs to support partnership approaches and localisation processes.
- Recruit dedicated National NGO coordination officers within OCHA.
- Cluster Lead Agencies to engage with national and local NGOs and ensure dialogue with the humanitarian leadership and coordination structures (Humanitarian Liaison Group (HLG)² and cluster system).
- Fully use interpretation, translation and other mechanisms to overcome language challenges to ensure full participation of national and local NGOs in coordination fora.
- Use country based pool funds as a possible inception source of funding.

INTEGRATE NATIONAL AND LOCAL NGOS IN THE LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION OF THE RESPONSE

- Include national/local NGOs in the Humanitarian Country Team (or equivalent leadership body) and ensure their representation is based on a transparent and inclusive election process led by the national/local NGO constituency.
- Encourage and incentivise cluster participation for national NGOs to better integrate into the cluster system.
 - Establish national NGO co-coordinators alongside international coordinators.
 - Hold cluster meetings in the local language to encourage participation.
 - Utilise simultaneous translation technology.
 - Condition access to pooled funds with cluster participation.
- Support national platforms or networks to facilitate national NGO coordination, information sharing, and engagement with the international humanitarian system.

CONTEXTUALISE THE HUMANITARIAN APPROACH TO THE LOCAL CONTEXT

- Develop (in close consultation with the humanitarian community – and especially national and local NGOs), circulate and make humanitarian and non-humanitarian stakeholders aware of context-specific guidelines and principles of conduct that support NGO delivery of aid.
- Provide specific trainings and awareness-raising sessions on the contextualized humanitarian guidelines.

² The Humanitarian Liaison Group (HLG) is the senior leadership body of the cross-border response in Gaziantep. It is the equivalent of a Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) in other countries.

BACKGROUND: CROSS-BORDER OPERATIONS FROM TURKEY INTO SYRIA

Since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, cross-border operations have been used to deliver assistance to parts of Syria that cannot be reached from the operational hub in Damascus, Syria. National and local NGOs have been at the forefront of these operations and play an essential role in delivering assistance to people affected by the crisis.

Localisation has been a priority of the Turkey cross-border humanitarian leadership, and they have had to overcome a number of acute challenges. There was a limited 'NGO culture' in Syria before the conflict, and there was a substantial and rapid growth in the sector which has given birth to a high number of national and local NGOs which were initially operating in a rather fragmented approach to the response. Significant efforts have been required to build national and local NGO capacities, institutionally and operationally, and to bring them together in a more coherent way to support a large-scale operation.

This case study examines how the Gaziantep cross-border operation strengthened the role of national and local NGOs in the humanitarian response to parts of Syria. The team's efforts have helped strengthen engagement between international humanitarian organisations and Syrian NGOs; improved coordination between Syrian NGOs; and integrated Syrian NGOs more substantially in strategic decision-making, planning and operational elements of the cross-border operation.

1. DEDICATING RESOURCES AND CAPACITIES WITHIN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO SUPPORT NATIONAL AND LOCAL NGOS

a. Dedicated capacity makes all the difference

- OCHA recruited two full-time Arabic-speaking Humanitarian Affairs Officers (one international, one national) to support outreach and partnership between the international humanitarian community and national NGOs, and to strengthen Syrian NGOs engagement with the international humanitarian system.
- OCHA leads the Syrian Civil Society Organisations' Platform (Syrian CSO platform) which provides support to 137 Syrian NGOs (as of June 2018). Members of the platform must commit to a range of principles and standards to demonstrate their independence and neutrality as principled humanitarian actors. OCHA screens applications to the platform (over 700 applications have been received up to date) and uses the platform to encourage Syrian NGOs to engage in the humanitarian coordination mechanisms, participate in inter-agency and humanitarian advocacy activities, network with INGOs, UN agencies, donors, and other international organizations/bodies, receive information on funding opportunities, calls for proposals, meetings with decision makers, and to benefit from capacity building opportunities³.

b. Overcoming language barriers for national and local participation

Clusters recognize the importance of allowing participant to speak in Arabic to ensure full participation in coordination meetings. This includes holding meetings purely in Arabic, using simultaneous translation, and allowing documents to be submitted in Arabic as well as in English.

- OCHA has invested substantially in simultaneous translation equipment and Arabic staff translators. The equipment and interpreters are available to the humanitarian community as part of a common service and are used extensively by UN agencies, international NGOs, and Syrian NGOs.
- Cluster Lead Agencies have recruited Arabic speaking cluster coordinators who can conduct meetings and circulate information in Arabic.
- OCHA facilitates a monthly Humanitarian Information Sharing Meeting in Arabic (HISMA) to facilitate information exchange with Arabic speakers from humanitarian organizations. The meetings attract around 160 humanitarians.

2. BUILDING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITIES OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL NGOS.

a. Training and funding for institutional and operational capacities

The leadership of Gaziantep's cross-border operation has taken several steps to build the institutional and operational (including staffing) capacities of national and local NGOs to help them navigate the intricacies of the international humanitarian system and manage projects and administrative and financial functions.

³ The FAQs on the Syrian CSO Platform provides further details and is available on https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/2018/12/Syrian-CSO-Platform-FAQs_July-2018.pdf.

- Donors actively support international organizations with funds that are dedicated to national and local NGO capacity building projects. This has included mentoring and secondment approaches, as well as more traditional trainings focused on (1) the ‘business’ aspect of running and managing a humanitarian organization, and (2) supporting effective, principled and transparent delivery of cross-border assistance.
- Cluster Lead Agencies and a number of international NGOs invested in technical and managerial training for national and local NGOs that helped strengthen programme management (reporting, finances, transparency and accountancy, administration etc.) and to build technical capacities. One cluster hired a full-time Arabic-speaking trainer.
- OCHA invested in contextualized trainings on humanitarian principles, SPHERE standards, international legal frameworks, and the humanitarian programme cycle that supported Syrian NGOs in delivering more effectively and in an independent, impartial and neutral manner. OCHA has also supported the establishment of pools of Syrian trainers who deliver trainings on the above-mentioned subjects inside Syria.
- International organizations have used remote training modalities and technology such as WhatsApp and Skype to overcome logistical, administrative, and access issues that prevented international staff from travelling into Syria and made it difficult for Syrian staff to cross the border into Turkey, for face-to-face training.
- Recently, the cross-border humanitarian community in Turkey has increasingly focused on the key humanitarian issues such as PSEA, Duty of Care, and Security and Safety. More needs to be done to respond to challenges associated with the extremely dangerous and unpredictable environment in which humanitarian organizations operate.
- A working group composed of Syrian NGOs, INGOs and UN agencies is promoting the Principles of Partnership (as adopted by the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2007) and is advocating for training providers to coordinate efforts and minimize duplication capacity building programs for national and local NGOs.

b. Direct funding to national and local NGOs

- The Turkey Humanitarian Fund (THF) provides direct funding to national and local NGOs. From 2014 to 2018, the THF directly allocated 37 per cent of its funds (more than 80 million USD) to national and local NGOs to empower them to operate as an integral part of the humanitarian response and not as sub-contractors of international organisations. The THF requires that national and local NGOs establish a robust and transparent risk management system to provide a degree of confidence to permit them to receive direct funding.
- The THF allows Syrian NGOs to include a 7 per cent overhead within their project budgets (a provision not usually included in grants from donors and international humanitarian organisations).
- Some donors allocate direct funding to national NGOs that have demonstrably built their operational capacity.

3. INTEGRATING NATIONAL AND LOCAL NGOs IN THE LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATION OF THE RESPONSE

The large number of organisations involved in the cross-border Syria operation presented a serious coordination challenge to the cross-border operation. While the breadth of knowledge from a diverse number of organisations can be an advantage in many ways, decision-making bodies should be small, flexible, and sufficiently agile to facilitate decision-making. The leadership of the Gaziantep operation has taken steps to broaden representation to include Syrian NGOs into the leadership and coordination structures of the response without compromising an effective decision-making process.

a. National and local NGOs participation in clusters

Cluster coordinators in Gaziantep actively reach out to Syrian NGOs to ensure their inclusion in the coordination of the response, ensuring that information is shared between international and national / local actors, and that there is effective collaboration between international and national / local actors in a spirit of equal partnership.

- Cluster coordinators have developed membership criteria and incentivized national / local participation in the cluster structure by holding meetings in Arabic and tying pooled fund access to cluster membership. This has increased Syrian NGOs engagement and participation in discussions and decision-making. Hundreds of Syrian NGOs are participating in the cluster meetings in Gaziantep. The Health Cluster has a membership that includes 40 Syrian NGOs and the Education Cluster has 90 Syrian NGO members (as of June 2018).
- Several Cluster Lead Agencies have brought Syrian NGOs into a co-coordination role alongside their international counterparts, which facilitates the enablement of Syrian NGO staff to learn about cluster coordination.

b. National and local NGOs involvement in operational and strategic decision making

- Syrian NGOs were allocated a number of seats at the Inter Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG), the Humanitarian Liaison Group (HLG), the Inter-Sector Group (ISG) and the Strategic Steering Group (SSG) to ensure their active participation in strategic decision-making bodies for both the cross-border operation (ICCG, HLG) and the Whole of Syria response (ISG, SSG). The League of Syrian Networks (see below) provides the platform to support Syrian NGOs to organize their representation in these fora.

c. Supporting internal coordination among national and local NGOs

The Syrian NGO community is fragmented and there are a number of separate Syrian NGO networks to which the different NGOs belong. This fragmentation challenges at times cohesion of a unified national / local NGO position on key strategic decisions.

- Donors have directly and indirectly supported several Syrian NGO networks through technical capacity initiatives and direct funding to empower Syrian NGOs to be more cohesive and better coordinated.
- OCHA helped establish the League of Syrian Networks that is currently composed of six networks and over 300 organisations. While OCHA supported the establishment of the League, it is an entirely Syrian construct and has effectively strengthened coordination among the different Syrian networks, and enhanced Syrian NGO participation and representation in humanitarian mechanisms and fora. The League is the mechanism used by Syrian NGOs to select their representatives in Gaziantep's ICCG and HLG, and the SSG and ISG at the Whole of Syria level. Furthermore, the League of Syrian Networks has an observer seat at the HLG.

4. CONTEXTUALIZING THE HUMANITARIAN APPROACH TO THE SYRIA RESPONSE

National and local NGOs in particular are subject to political and military pressures given their strong ties with the communities they serve and the volatility and complexity of the Syrian conflict. In close consultation with the humanitarian community (and especially Syrian NGOs), the HLG has designed and endorsed contextualized guidelines to support NGOs in the delivery of assistance in a principled manner.

- The HLG established Joint Operating Procedures (JOPs) that operationalize International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in the Syrian context and outlines requirements to ensure that humanitarian organisations deliver assistance in a principled manner while engaging with parties to the conflict.
- The HLG endorsed in October 2017 the *Principles of engagement of humanitarian organizations with Civilian Administration Entities*⁴ in the cross-border humanitarian response which outlines a clear approach to principled humanitarian engagement in complex environments where linkages to civilian administration entities and stabilization actors can facilitate delivery but can also blur the lines in regard to humanitarian principles. UN agencies and international NGOs conduct extensive training with Syrian NGOs on IHL, humanitarian principles, the JOPs, the Principles of engagement with Civilian Administration Entities and other areas. These trainings are conducted in Arabic and have been adapted to the Syrian context. They are delivered both in Turkey and in Syria through a pool of Syrian trainers.

The Peer-2-Peer Support Project

The Peer 2 Peer Support team (formerly known as the Senior Transformative Agenda Implementation Team - STAIT) was created by, and reports to, the Emergency Directors' Group (EDG). It provides direct peer support to Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams to deliver effective, principled, quality, timely, and predictable collective humanitarian response in field operations. For more information, please visit: <http://www.deliveraidbetter.org/>

⁴ The guidelines are composed of two main documents ("Principles of engagement of humanitarian organizations with Civilian Administration Entities" and "Operationalization of the Principles of Engagement throughout the Project Cycle Management phases") and two annexes ("Humanitarian Principles" and "Phases of the Project Cycle Management"). All documents are available in English and Arabic on <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/stima/document/principles-engagement-humanitarian-organizations-civilian-administration>.