

The aid regime to: a failed localisation

Peter Harling, Alex Simon and Rosalie Berthier • Synaps

Shaped by their bureaucratic habits and destabilised by the unexpected complexity of the conflict, international organisations and NGOs alike neglected the local level. They thus deprived themselves of vital forces, capabilities and knowledge that the Syrian people and their civil society could mobilise to alleviate the suffering of the population. Six years on, whilst the conflict is far from reaching an end, it is about time for the international aid community to be helped by the Syrians themselves. This is a conclusion developed by three members of the nascent *Synaps* network and that is both well backed by facts and figures and quite instructive.

There will be years of soul-searching to do on the many aspects of our failure in Syria, but humanitarian aid is one area that warrants bold and immediate action. The issue is not so much our inability to address the sheer magnitude of suffering and disruption, which may well be beyond anyone's capacity to alleviate effectively. Rather, it relates to an unjustifiable paradox: although aid and development programs have increasingly been driven by a desire to keep Syrians in or around Syria, they have also tended to disempower Syrians who want to stay and help others do so. Indeed, the relationship between international donors and local partners has continuously malfunctioned, despite obvious and attainable avenues for improvement.

Another related paradox lies in the fact that Syria's is arguably the best-documented crisis in history, and yet the multibillion dollar humanitarian response has remained hopelessly out of step with realities and priorities on the ground. Despite constant media coverage, abundant material from Syrians in the field, and sophisticated efforts by the aid and development community to track events and generate data, the relief effort has consistently failed to keep pace with the conflict's escalation and evolution, with international priorities lagging months or even years behind developments in the field.

At the core of both paradoxes is the same challenge of linking a top-heavy international system with complex, fluid dynamics at the grassroots – a space where Syrians display the kind of agency that must be understood and harnessed if aid and development programs are to gain relevance and traction with the concerned.

The unique challenge of working in Syria

In fairness, the Syrian conflict presents a nightmarish environment to work in. The levels of violence are extreme, as are the needs. Direct access is virtually non-existent, and neighbouring countries offer an awkward staging ground at best. Donors, international NGOs (INGOs) and UN agencies must contend with a dizzying security environment, significant language barriers and information gaps, and a burgeoning but fragmented Syrian civil society that lacks professionalization, internal cohesion and understanding of international standards. The end result is a fragmented, cliquish, and generally overwhelming landscape, in which the rapid turnover of key Syrian players has further vexed efforts to develop stable relationships. Western

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

anxieties regarding who may or may not be too cosy with blacklisted Islamists adds a further layer of opacity.

Everyone is confused about how to make the money trickle down

Even the larger, more mature Syrian partners have been hindered by a host of obstacles, from ever-shifting dynamics on the ground to their limited capacity to shape the aid and development agenda through to their own taboos about individual leadership, making for cumbersome collective decision-making processes. Meanwhile, at the grassroots level – which Syrians in need arguably depend most upon – the maze-like proliferation of informal and fleeting initiatives has left virtually everyone confused about how exactly to make the money trickle down.

Amidst all this convolution, international players have yet to find an effective model for engaging the local actors who know the context best and have the most at stake. Even as Western actors drift toward the realization that effective relief work must have a strong local component, today's dominant trend is of INGOs and UN agencies funnelling the bulk of available funds, subcontracting to Syrian NGOs who get paid comparatively pitiful salaries, are often left to fend for themselves on overhead costs, and whose best employees may be siphoned off into the service of larger, better paying international players. Thus the massive expenditure of resources on middlemen, and significant resentment on the part of Syrians.

As purported peace negotiations sputter and Syria's war protracts, the need for more effective, egalitarian partnerships between Western organizations and their Syrian counterparts is becoming ever more urgent.

A relationship under growing stress

For now, however, things are heading in the opposite direction. If anything, available funds seem to be further concentrated within top-heavy organizations, rather than trickling down. The reasons are manifold: as the volume of aid increases, larger and longer grants appear as the only way to disburse within the allocated timeframe; as donors impose their own bureaucratic procedures on partners and subcontractors, larger sums demand greater sophistication on the part of the recipients; big projects increase the need for derivative services such as monitoring and evaluation, feeding a parallel industry that consumes considerable resources; and donor states are often keen to see the money they grant reinvested in their own national INGOs. The irony is that the legitimate quest for greater transparency and good governance is creating a system in which ever more layers are sandwiched between donors and Syrians, deepening the longstanding opacity, inefficiency and frustrations.

Funds are further concentrated within top-heavy organizations

A related problem is the shortage of mutual trust between the international community – viewed by many Syrians as profiteering and ineffectual – and Syrian NGOs, whose level of professionalism and reliability Western actors understandably question. The result of this uncertainty is a cycle in which international organizations establish onerous requirements that may be prohibitive for smaller organizations, particularly those lacking English skills and a basic understanding of the aid regime. At the best of times, these demands lead to new frustrations and still greater inefficiency.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

Communication problems run even deeper, particularly when it comes to Syrian actors attempting to push the international agenda into alignment with realities on the ground. A common refrain among Syrians (and, indeed, a number of Western practitioners) is that it takes a year or more for international priorities to catch up to local ones: although Syrians started pushing in 2013 for a shift from emergency relief to “livelihoods” programming that prioritizes bolstering local economies, the transition finally occurred in 2016, by which time realities had changed dramatically. Similarly illustrative is the gap between Western and Syrian interest in primary education inside Syria: despite its vital long-term importance and a groundswell of Syrian actors eager to pursue creative, cost-effective ways to put their children in school, it has somehow been neglected.

At the core of this weakness is a relatively rigid funding cycle within which at least three disparate layers of Western and Syrian actors must move in concert if any change is to occur. If the head of a Syrian NGO feels priorities need realignment, he must first persuade the INGO that is subcontracting him, which must in turn persuade its own donor(s). In the best case scenario, this process takes months; in the worst, this initiative is dead on arrival due to disagreements between actors or the simple fact that shifting priorities requires time, money and paperwork.

Meanwhile, the high standards of transparency and accountability imposed upon Western and Syrian implementing partners do not seem to apply to donors themselves, making for a hierarchical, asymmetric relationship that further entrenches distrust. Governance at the top of the chain has in many cases become exceedingly bureaucratic, making it rigid and opaque more than answerable and legitimate. Moreover, grant-makers, overwhelmed by their own red tape, have tended to pass it down to recipients, who spend much energy and resources on formatting their output to meet administrative requirements they justifiably view as obstructive.

High standards of transparency and accountability do not apply to donors

Part of the miscommunication is dangerously political too. Some donors remain wedded to notions long rendered obsolete by events on the ground, such as democracy promotion or reconstruction based on the premise of a genuine political transition. Worse, they often jump from one appealing but ill-defined catchphrase to the next: concepts like “stabilization” and “countering violent extremism” are incessantly repeated yet remain basically incoherent in their application. An insistence on “neutrality” – which connotes a non-Islamist bent and a willingness to divorce humanitarian work from the anti-government spirit of the Syrian uprising – can effectively sap Syrians’ ability to voice partisan opinions that must be addressed rather than suppressed if we are to see any progress toward resolution of the conflict. Generally speaking, for lack of a capacity to define and advocate their own priorities strategically, Syrian recipients have largely locked themselves into donor-driven programming they simultaneously resent.

That this remains the case almost six years into the conflict is an urgent sign of the need to evolve. Central to such evolution is an improved understanding of the complex, fluid dynamics shaping the Syrian context, which requires both sustained, systematic research and analysis – rooted in the knowledge and participation of Syrians in Syria – and a far more sensitive, adaptive and locally-driven approach to defining humanitarian and developmental priorities.

The quest for real partnerships

The Syrian conflict is replete with tragic ironies, two of which directly concern the relief effort. First, today’s top-heavy system is inimical to the cultivation of micro-level initiatives that have

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

been proliferating Syria-wide and which will be essential in making life even somewhat liveable for Syrians in what will remain, for the medium-term, a failed state. It is incongruous that donors would endlessly invest in “capacity building,” through which Syrians are expected to acquire skills, maturity and vision – in a word, agency – without undertaking their own structural reforms to empower those Syrians with material resources and genuine autonomy.

Donors have bypassed Syrian capacities that exist already

Second, these donors have largely bypassed what Syrian capacities don't need to be built, but exist already. Indeed, Syrian society retains a wealth of underexploited resources relevant to the conflict: an entrepreneurial spirit, impressive forms of solidarity within the confines of social networks, a fluid and multifaceted identity that can help overcome apparent fault lines, pride in independence, deep and resilient popular cultures, an inclination toward education, highly pragmatic strands of religious conservatism, and much more.

As explained elsewhere¹, Syrians by-and-large have been astonishingly hands-on and innovative in every aspect of this conflict. At a grassroots level, Syrian society remains engaged and vibrant. Its educated stratum has produced a host of NGOs and civil society initiatives (CSOs) that both interact constructively with field-based networks and initiatives – setting a rare precedent of cross-class solidarity and synergy – and serve as an indispensable interface with the outside world. This stratum has followed a steep learning curve and is now experimenting with financial mechanisms (subgranting, crowdfunding and microlending between Syrians) as well as project incubators and advocacy tools.

They offer precisely the kind of partners foreign players could do more to support, not just financially but by rolling back some of the donor-induced bureaucracy, by helping them acquire very specific skills (through trainings, perhaps, but also by seconding experts and mentors), and by assuming the risk of underwriting pioneering ideas that reflect Syrian priorities rather than global trends. In a sense, the start-up model applies. To scale up, Syrian ventures need more than funds: they require an environment (or an ecosystem, in geeky jargon) that provides guidance and accompanies them every step of the way, nurturing an entrepreneurial spirit without shackling it to conventional wisdom and red tape.

Syrian ventures need more than funds

A fresh approach is in order not least because, as Syrians struggle in their direst moment of need, the very notion of “helping” them has become toxic. All the supposed good-will expressed through political statements, diplomatic moves, institutional humanitarian aid and military support to one camp or the other has coexisted alongside literally unimaginable forms of violence and suffering experienced by millions of ordinary Syrians. Part of the aid community's concern should be to begin mending a broken relationship between Syrians and the outside world, which is perhaps as important as repairing the broken relationship between Syrians themselves.

End of a cycle, and a new outlook

It goes without saying that INGOs and UN agencies are undertaking multimillion-dollar programs for which they alone currently have the capacity, for better or worse. And many actors in the relief effort are fully aware of the shortcomings above. In a sense, these deficiencies are

¹ Peter Harling, “The Syrian Trauma”, *Synaps*, 28 September 2016, www.synaps.network/the-syrian-trauma

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

natural: no one was prepared for a challenge of the complexity and magnitude on display in Syria. It bears noting, moreover, that few (if any) of these shortcomings are unique to the Syrian context: on the contrary, the challenge of rooting a top-heavy international system in complex, fluid local dynamics is a decades-old feature of our entire framework for humanitarian and development work.

Where Syria sets itself apart, however, is in the scope and duration of the crisis, and in the chasmic disconnect between the vast resources mobilized and the relatively meagre impact on the ground. Six years on, there are no excuses for business as usual. Clinging to some hope that a corner will soon be turned and things will get better verges on delusion, and on moral abdication. Massifying aid in the hands of a few UN agencies and INGOs threatens to further diminish Syrian agency when it is most desperately needed. Even more disturbing are signs of kneejerk Western normalization with the Syrian regime – which likely will create a whole new set of problems before it generates solutions, and seems a particularly naive undertaking if seen as an alternative to engaging with the society that exists beneath it. The fall of Aleppo and the transition to a White House with an expressed distaste for the Syrian opposition will only accelerate this trend.

The scale of the Syrian tragedy has provided ample basis for cynicism, even fatalism: as the death toll climbs and negotiations fail, the world seems to drift toward capitulation rather than innovation. Yet the Syrian war is more than heart wrenching tragedy and systemic failure: it is the defining conflict of an era, a harrowing question posed to us and to which our answer is only partly written. We cannot afford to lament the past, or to wait for some day in the future to finally indulge in a lessons-learned exercise coming too late to be relevant. Not least because it is far from over.

In a mosaic of suffering, the micro-level is most relevant to making a difference

Unlike military doctrine, which evolves quickly to reflect fast-changing realities on the battlefield, the relief sector appears to be several wars behind: focused on implementing large manoeuvres, it has missed the dramatic shift toward violence that is as destructive as it is decentralised. Different dynamics shape different needs in a mosaic of suffering, where the micro-level is most relevant to making a difference at the macro-level.

This is a good time to start experimenting with a new paradigm, by developing deeper access and insights into a groundswell of organic Syrian initiatives, engaging with the informal networks that are critical to problem-solving, and leveraging the extraordinary asset of Syria's unique entrepreneurial spirit. In other words, and although it should go without saying, the aid regime must put Syrians back at the heart of any recovery process.

Some forward-looking donors and INGOs have already started doing so. A more impactful shift in this direction will entail reforms that make relief efforts nimbler and more responsive to Syrians, who actually know the needs and do the work. Implementing partners certainly must improve, but they will do so far faster in a healthier relationship with their sponsors. And the responsibility for change lies first with the dominant party to this dynamic – grant-makers who are relatively experienced and self-assured, and are spared the daily trauma of this conflict.

Donors who adapt in favour of a relationship based on genuine partnerships will soon discover that there is no shortage of local talent. To stay relevant, the aid regime needs help. And that help will come from Syrians.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

The title of this article is the choice of the review Humanitarian Alternatives. This text was first published on 2 January 2017 under the original title “The Syria help regime that needed help. Touching the ground” on the Synaps website: www.synaps.network/the-syria-aid-regime-that-needed-help

We publish it here with the kind permission of the founder and director of Synaps, Peter Harling.

Biographies

Peter Harling • The founder and director of *Synaps* (<http://synaps.world>). For the last two decades, Peter has worked in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as a researcher, journalist, consultant and project manager.

Alex Simon • Consultant for *Synaps* and Master’s candidate at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC. He previously lived in Amman, Jordan, where he worked with organizations including Syria Direct and the International Crisis Group. He leads *Synaps*’ work on local development in Tripoli, Lebanon.

Rosalie Berthier • Consultant for *Synaps*. She conducts research on humanitarian aid issues in Syria and is currently conducting research about the Lebanese economy. Rosalie has been working on Lebanon and the Middle East for several years, with international organizations or as part of her academic research. She has also worked in Egypt and Turkey.

Reproduction prohibited without the agreement of the review Humanitarian Alternatives.

To quote this article: Peter Harling, Alex Simon, Rosalie Berthier, “The aid regime: a failed localisation”, Humanitarian Alternatives, n°4, March 2017, p. 70-81, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2017/03/10/the-aid-regime-to-a-failed-localisation/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-183-1