

Syria crisis: the humanitarian response

15th June 2012 – Roundtable, London

Introduction

On 15 June 2012, the Humanitarian Policy Group of the Overseas Development Institute (HPG/ODI) held a closed-door roundtable on the Syria crisis. The aim of the roundtable was to provide a forum for humanitarian partners to share information and discuss how best to respond to the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian needs and security situation in Syria. Bringing representatives of the leading aid agencies together with senior figures with direct experience of humanitarian work in Syria, it encouraged reflection on the current response of the international community and what impact the humanitarian response will have on the civilian population. The roundtable also considered the ability of humanitarian actors to assess and respond to needs on the ground and what options are available in efforts to reach people in need.

Situation update

Participants in the roundtable described **a situation of intensifying uncertainty and vulnerability** for affected populations in Syria. Hundreds of thousands of people are internally displaced, many displaced families no longer have resources upon which to draw, and they are faced with skyrocketing prices and mounting unemployment. The number of affected civilians continues to increase daily. While the situation across the country is not considered to meet the standards of the legal definition of civil war, certain zones of conflict do reach the criteria and in general the fighting and violence has spread to affect more parts of the country than ever before.

On 29 May **an agreement was struck between the Syrian Government and representatives of United Nations (UN) agencies** for humanitarian access to affected populations. This agreement recognises the types and amounts of needs currently requiring attention, four key locations for the delivery of aid, and sectors. The agreement, which allows operations by eight UN agencies and potentially nine international NGOs, was the result of lengthy negotiations particularly with regards to the presence of international actors in the field. It made important progress in acknowledging the principles of impartiality and neutrality of aid but the implementation of the agreement is yet to truly begin.

Participants were at pains to emphasise **the fundamentally important and very delicate role that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC)** is currently playing. In the past week it has signalled its wish to increase the number of beneficiaries to whom it provides food supplies to 850,000. As the interface between the Government and international organisations active in Syria, SARC's role is crucial to all efforts to provide humanitarian relief to affected populations within the country. However, in insisting upon the principles of impartiality and neutrality, SARC has been criticised from both Government and opposition quarters. Its capacity is currently overstretched due to the extent of its role. Some discussants stressed the need to approach the question of expanding SARC's capacity sensitively given the highly contentious political environment in which aid operations take place. All who mentioned SARC indicated their support for the organisation's work and commended SARC's efforts to alleviate the suffering of civilians while managing the competing pressures upon them.

International humanitarian actors have faced considerable challenges with some positive results. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has been instrumental in assisting with the planning and implementation of other humanitarian actors.

Operating independently, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), with a history of humanitarian assistance in Syria that dates back to 1967, scaled up its operations significantly since March 2011. The World Food Programme (WFP) has been able to increase the number of its beneficiaries from 100,000 in March to 500,000 in June. However, an upward shift in the items requested for inclusion in the food basket reflects the escalating prices of commodities and provides more evidence of the intensifying economic pressure upon Syrian people. It is hoped that the arrival last week of a new country director for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) will allow for the scaling up of UNICEF's contribution to relief efforts in the country. International agencies have endeavoured to provide medical supplies and equipment to public and private health services to facilitate the treatment of the wounded as well as other health needs. However, along with access to food, health services remain seriously inadequate in the context of escalated fighting and Government repression.

Access versus advocacy

Discussions highlighted **the need to nuance the understanding of what 'humanitarian access' entails in a situation such as in Syria**. Freedom of movement is problematic but even more is freedom from surveillance, control, and intimidation. For instance, plans for deliveries of relief supplies accompanied by UN agency staff must allow for notification in Arabic of the vehicle number plate and the names and nationalities of personnel involved 48 hours in advance, for official approval. The powerful, centralised State authority thus brings its weight to bear upon humanitarian activities in the country.

It was noted that some advances in this field have been made. An assessment mission in mid-March was able to move around the country, both in Government-held and opposition-held areas. At the time, this was a significant breakthrough. Since then, the same momentum has not been maintained in programming and implementation. One of the reasons for this is **the lengthy approval process that organisations are subjected to prior to being able to offer assistance within Syria**. Registration of humanitarian agencies and organisations is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This approval process also applies to each additional project established by **organisations already registered to work in the country**. For instance, an NGO seeking to begin working in a different region or amongst different populations must first receive Government approval for this new mandate and must also obtain new, specific permits for each individual staff member. This is another way in which 'humanitarian access' in Syria is not only a question of entry and operationality but a function of bureaucratic restrictions upon the form that operations can take.

A significant obstacle to greater international involvement in relieving the suffering of Syrian people is thus **the Government's attitude to aid organisations**. It was suggested that the Syrian authorities view NGOs as a 'Trojan horse' for the political objectives of Western powers. This attitude structures the way that humanitarian actors are viewed in Syria and when strong statements are issued by governments this has an impact upon the negotiations of NGOs. Moreover, some participants challenged the tendency of international NGOs to use opposition channels to try to deliver assistance from outside Syria, as this approach also affects the way foreign humanitarian actors are perceived by the Syrian authorities. The Government tends to consider NGOs as having links with the opposition and view them as potential spies.

As a result, some participants in the roundtable expressed **doubt about the effectiveness or advisability of public advocacy**. They cautioned that the Syrian Government pays close attention to the comments and actions of international partners and that advocacy attempts by international NGOs would likely work against their efforts to increase their operations in the country. Furthermore, valuable time is spent re-phrasing language in external reports that the Government

does not find acceptable e.g. emergency, displaced, crisis etc... Finally, speakers suggested that there is enough citizen journalism available to mean that public advocacy from NGOs is neither necessary nor helpful. Instead, they have chosen more discreet and person-to-person diplomacy.

This position was, however, tempered by recognition that a total absence of public statements from the international humanitarian community might ultimately work against their goals. Some participants felt that if it can be demonstrated that a quiet diplomacy strategy based on humanitarian principles is making progress in reaching vulnerable people then it will continue to receive support, but if standing on principles results in manipulation or stalling, then alternative strategies may need to be considered. One possibility discussed was for **international actors to adopt a range of positions regarding advocacy**, with those who do not wish to be operational within Syria perhaps able to consider alternatives to quiet diplomacy.

Donor government representatives stressed the separation of political and humanitarian objectives regarding the situation in Syria. They commended OCHA's humanitarian work but also emphasised the importance of having a political forum that brings the Syrian Government into discussions with other governments. Discussions are proceeding on the basis that the Syrian Government is sovereign and holds the key to access; yet there are expectations that the Government will uphold its commitments in the 29 May agreement.

The role and position of local and diaspora actors

The position of local NGOs was seen to be extremely difficult. Government suspicion towards local NGOs is growing and is possibly even greater than suspicion of international NGOs. Local NGOs therefore face challenges similar to those confronting international actors. The Government sees many of them as acting at the behest of foreign powers, hostile to the regime, and as not adhering to humanitarian principles. There was a sense that only those national NGOs with strong ties with the ruling elite would be able to gain enough acceptance to act.

This dynamic makes **a strategy for cooperation with local or regional partners** very difficult. While some international NGOs awaiting permission to operate within Syria have been reaching out to regional organisations as potential partners, the Government has recently rescinded permission for some international agencies already active in the country to work with local NGOs. It was pointed out that, ironically, international attention on humanitarian affairs has already closed some loopholes through which the international community had been able to engage with Syrian NGOs. There is concern that attempts to cooperate with local NGOs or even loosely arranged citizens' groups may bring unwanted scrutiny to these groups.

Participants indicated that **the Syrian diaspora has played a role in providing relief supplies** to groups of affected populations within the country. The efficiency and professionalism of diaspora networks has increased with experience, such that international NGOs that initially supplemented their supplies have been able to shift some of their focus elsewhere in light of the quantity of aid successfully imported through the networks. The purchase and supply of equipment and supplies has been rationalised yet has also been confronted with sometimes adverse situations in regional markets. However, support networks originating in diaspora groups have also had to face the challenge of increasingly being seen as amalgamated with the opposition, regardless of their stance.

In a related point, representatives of international NGOs warned against making assumptions about **the role of health professionals in the conflict**. Despite reports of government persecution of medical staff, sources suggest that some doctors are actively participating in repression. Conversely, any solidarity with doctors supporting the opposition movement was seen to be problematic

because of the political position such a stance entails. The neutrality of hospitals and other medical sites is brought into question in such an environment.

The importance of accurate information

Various methods have been adopted in an attempt to overcome **difficulties in gathering information about the humanitarian situation in Syria**. Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) have taken testimonies from Syrian refugees treated at their hospital in Amman. Their statements point to a deliberate pattern of persecution against medics, attacks upon medical personnel and facilities, and the targeting of individuals based on the position of medical equipment. After internal debate on this issue, MSF spoke out about this situation in mid-May 2012. Other organisations have attempted to gather information within Syria using low-profile methods that are less likely to attract controlling measures on the part of authorities. OCHA has begun publishing a *Humanitarian Bulletin on Syria*, the first issue of which was released on 5 June 2012.

Protection work is understood to be particularly difficult in Syria. The ICRC collects information about allegations of arrests and disappearances and has undertaken two prison visits, in Damascus and Aleppo, with the permission of the Syrian Government.

The lack of a comprehensive understanding of needs within Syria currently constrains the preparation of agencies and NGOs not yet granted permission to provide assistance in the country. However, committed to the process of gaining official approval, NGOs have prepared contingency plans featuring both materials and staffing provisions. Some steps have been taken towards gathering information from Syrians currently living in refugee-hosting countries in order to maximise the utility of these preparations.

Funding has been insufficient because of the lack of accurate information and speakers suggested that donors may remain reluctant to commit funds without signs of progress on the issue of information-gathering. The possibility of **collecting information through alternative avenues** to those usually pursued was acknowledged. Participants also flagged the possibility that actors in direct negotiations with the Syrian Government might not be the best placed to collect or disseminate information but that, this concern notwithstanding, it was important to share and reflect upon information.

How to move forward

Representatives of various organisations and agencies were interested in **sharing tactics and strategies for improving 'humanitarian access'** in the sense of freedom from bureaucracy and surveillance. They raised the question of whether increased cooperation was likely to yield greater results. Some speakers advocated the convening of high-level meetings for the joint planning of NGOs and raised the possibility of establishing a team of representatives for this purpose in a neighbouring country. Others drew attention to the opportunity for a more concerted and coherent strategy that is presented by the small number of humanitarian actors operating in Syria.

Participants were largely critical of **proposals for humanitarian corridors in Syria**. Objections raised included the complexity of the situation – which relief corridors, it was argued, would only exacerbate. Concerns were raised about the risk of militarisation of humanitarian assistance due to the logistical requirements of these corridors. There is no clear basis for thinking that humanitarian corridors would further the objective of treating people in need.

In contrast, **the continuation of relationship-building and the intelligent support of current operational actors**, especially SARC, were seen as essential. Participants felt that there was a

noticeable improvement in levels of acceptance of humanitarian actors around the country: the ICRC, SARC and other partners have been able to go to previously unreachable areas and have been operating in areas that require the crossing of 'front lines.' They attributed these achievements to the adherence to principles but also expressed concern that the desire to actively increase capacity might unintentionally undermine some of this hard-won acceptance.

Despite hopes that the 29 May agreement will help facilitate the work of humanitarian actors in the immediate future, concerns were raised about other issues that were not provided for by the agreement. **Three concerns for medium-to long-term action were highlighted during discussions.** The first was the elevated degree of destruction of public facilities and infrastructure in many areas. The second point emphasised the fate of large numbers of children who have been unable to attend school – some, for the second consecutive year – and who have been traumatised by the events and experiences to which they have been exposed. There is an awareness that these children will need assistance to return to education as well as psychological support. The final issue that was highlighted was the deep divides that conflict has created within Syrian societies. Like other conflict-affected countries, Syria faces the problem of the dislocation of social relationships and a disruption of the social fabric of the country. Today's humanitarian crisis will therefore have long-term effects upon the country that should not be forgotten if and when the acute situation subsides. Nothing short of a collective effort over a considerable period will heal the individual and shared trauma that the Syrian people are confronted with.

The roundtable concluded with a reflection that, in the face of intense and accelerating needs, the humanitarian community within Syria must persevere, remain patient, and continue its dialogue to ensure that the best avenues to alleviate suffering are pursued.