

ADVOCATING FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND ACCESS



Coverage/
sufficiency



Effectiveness and
relevance/
appropriateness



Efficiency,
Coordination and
connectedness



Coherence/
Principles





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Summary

As described in the introduction to this section, humanitarian actors engage in advocacy with a broad range of objectives – from enabling and increasing humanitarian assistance, to encouraging actors to uphold international humanitarian law, to seeking broader solutions to crises. When civilian populations are suffering as a result of war and the humanitarian action designed to help them is severely constrained by political and/or security impediments, as in Syria, the role of advocacy can take on added importance. It can become both a moral imperative and a function of last resort for humanitarian actors.

Advocacy can take place in the public realm or through private dialogue. Its objectives can be small-scale and local, as when pushing for armed actors to allow humanitarian aid to proceed through certain routes, or large-scale and global, for instance lobbying the UN Security Council to call for respect for international humanitarian law. Different aid organisations have very different stances on the types of advocacy they are willing to engage in, and at what level of investment. Advocacy is not only the most variable but also the least tangible humanitarian activity, and perhaps one of the most difficult to measure, and limited documentation is available on its evaluation. Applying the evaluation criteria used in the rest of this study to the advocacy function is thus more difficult.

This study's assessment of humanitarian advocacy draws mainly on findings related to the civil war in Syria but also on material from CAR, South Sudan, and other contexts. It looks at what humanitarian actors seek to accomplish through advocacy and analyses the difficulties and prospects for future efforts. Overall, while some organisations have invested considerably, global humanitarian advocacy efforts are still limited in scope and coordination, and their effectiveness has been hampered by the lack of clear targets and a coherent strategy. Advocacy on behalf of CAR and South Sudan did not succeed in mobilising sufficient international response to the unfolding crises there. In the case of Syria, although advocacy contributed to the passing of UN Security Council resolutions endorsing cross-border relief operations, these have had little meaningful effect on the protection of Syrian civilians or their access to humanitarian aid, which raises important questions about the meaning and role of advocacy.

Coverage/sufficiency

Sufficiency cannot be measured for advocacy in the same way as for other humanitarian functions, since advocacy objectives are not costed or included in response appeals, and only a few organisations budget specifically for them. However, it is possible to identify certain capacity and coverage issues. While regional advocacy positions have grown over the course of the Syrian conflict, the SOHS study found, only a small number of humanitarian organisations have dedicated policy and advocacy staff positions, much less fully resourced advocacy units or offices.

Global-level humanitarian advocacy initiatives on Syria undertaken by Western international humanitarian organisations have focused on

primarily Western entities, such as the US and UK governments and the European Union, with which they have a means of dialogue. Weak links to critical non-Western stakeholders in the region, including the Syrian government, prevented organisations from targeting the key objects of influence. In interviews, agency representatives commented on this fact, citing missed opportunities to influence critical moments in the crisis. In addition, humanitarian advocacy efforts in a sense have an in-built scale problem owing to the relatively small size of many of the independently operating agencies and the ethos held by many of them, MSF in particular, not to advocate on issues beyond the scope of their own operational area or what they have witnessed first-hand. The UN can act more readily on broader national and international political levels, but its humanitarian advocacy role is often compromised by its simultaneous political role, which in most contexts has it firmly positioned on one side of the conflict (Egeland, Harmer, and Stoddard, 2011). The ICRC is the most influential and active advocate for international humanitarian law and civilian protection, in accordance with its mandated role, but this mandate also limits its advocacy agenda and the type of action it can take.

Effectiveness and relevance/appropriateness

As the saying goes, 'there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems.' To assess success in advocacy may be inherently unfair, since it often depends on political decisions that are outside humanitarians' control. Advocacy requires communication with actors outside the humanitarian arena, whose agenda humanitarians may not fully understand, on a range of issues, some more controversial than others. Advocacy on relatively non-controversial issues such as disaster risk reduction, for example, is not as difficult as advocacy in conflict situations, such as Syria, where access is limited and speaking out must be weighed against potential risks to staff and loss of access to the affected population. Advocacy can be critical in emergencies such as the violence in CAR or the Ebola outbreak, where an immediate response is needed to rapidly deteriorating conditions of vulnerable populations.

When agencies restrict their advocacy to back-channel approaches for fear of losing access to an affected population, it can create the public perception that they are acquiescing. This approach can also foster uncoordinated and unaccountable humanitarian action, as agencies become reluctant to communicate their plans and actions even to each other. When advocacy lacks stated goals or plans, its success is inherently difficult to measure. And, particularly when the goals of advocacy include respect for international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles, its measurable results compared to time spent can be particularly challenging to gauge.

Effectiveness in humanitarian advocacy is also linked to timeliness. Serious advocacy efforts for Syria, for example, did not start until late 2013,



nearly three years after the crisis began. In CAR, MSF alone advocated for a stronger response (Healy and Tiller, 2014), while Crisis Action and other human rights entities played a similar role in relation to South Sudan.

A significant challenge to effective advocacy is the lack of a shared understanding of protection threats. In CAR and Syria, no comprehensive protection needs assessment had been done over the period of review, and information available to a single agency was not widely shared or systematically accessed by local and diaspora NGOs, at least in the case of Syria (Svoboda and Pantuliano, 2015). In such situations, developing informed protection approaches, including for advocacy on protection issues, is almost impossible.



Coordinating advocacy

Creation of a solid, coordinated advocacy message can be difficult to achieve, largely because of the conflicting needs to secure a wide base of support while ensuring a sufficiently robust message. In addition, in many politicised contexts, information sharing is highly constrained and advocacy must be done in secret. Although non-public negotiations are a valid and often useful form of humanitarian advocacy, they run counter to the goals of building a common, unified position across humanitarian actors.

In CAR, there appears to have been no coordinated approach to advocacy or plan for acquiring adequate information about the deteriorating conditions and corresponding needs of the population (ACAPS and FAO, 2012). On the other hand, in CAR and South Sudan, NGO groups had effectively coordinated their advocacy to government on administrative issues related to framework agreements, tax exemptions, staffing requirements and other issues.

In Syria, coordination on advocacy has been hampered by the complexity of the operation over six affected countries, and the secrecy and lack of transparency of the response meant a lack of information with which to generate common positions. As a result, most humanitarian advocacy on Syria has been private and bilateral, or undertaken by a few like-minded organisations.

Advocacy with the government of Syria, and global advocacy by Damascus-based agencies, have been limited and conducted with very low visibility, primarily due to the risk of expulsion or other harm to programme priorities. This has been the major trade-off to operating from inside Syria. The UN reportedly worked behind the scenes to advance cross-line operations, but took considerable time to publicly release this information or measure the success of those efforts (Reuters, 2015).

The advocacy efforts to increase cross-border aid delivery through UN Security Council resolutions, particularly UN Resolution 2165, was a significant achievement during the period covered by this review, involving private and public lobbying on the part of the UN emergency relief coordinator, OCHA and a group of INGOs at headquarters and in Syria, reaching out to a vast range of political, legal and operational actors. It also had a number of positive indirect effects: It offered the potential for a significant increase in assistance going into Syria, somewhat lessened the

secrecy of the response and made it possible to consider a ‘whole of Syria’ approach, and helped draw attention to the schism between Damascus and the cross-border operators, and offered the opportunity to advocate for scaling up to address unmet needs.

While the potential increase in cross-border activities looked like progress on paper, in practice it is not being sufficiently utilised by the UN. For its part, the government of Syria has played a careful and coordinated line in relation to advocacy efforts. Many interviewees for this study noted that the authorities continue to be two steps ahead in seeing the way differing advocacy positions will play out, as well as in setting the terms for the way in which relief efforts will take place.

Coherence around principles and protection

A broader question is whether humanitarian advocacy efforts have resulted in any changes in adherence to international humanitarian law or humanitarian principles or in the protection of civilians.

In Syria, despite the acuteness of the crisis and the known levels of violence against civilians, the international community has failed to offer any semblance of protection to Syrian civilians who did not manage to flee their country. The obligations of parties to the conflict have been ‘flagrantly ignored’; UN member states, including members of the Security Council, have failed to ensure respect for international humanitarian law; and the protection of civilians seems to be an ‘empty concept’ in Syria (Svoboda, 2014 p2).

Humanitarian agencies, while they do not have primary responsibility for protection, nevertheless bear some responsibility for responding to the consequences of violations. The broad findings from this study, including the interviews and survey responses, are that advocacy and other responses to protection threats have been limited. Survey respondents cited protection the most frequently as a sector showing gaps: 34% of all respondents, from headquarters to regional offices to the field, felt that protection was deficient.

The ‘Rights up Front’ advocacy efforts within the UN (an initiative by the secretary-general to improve UN action to safeguard human rights around the world), combined with the L3 designation, went some way to focus attention on protection and rights issues in CAR. The decentralized and inter-communal nature of the violence undoubtedly also made it politically safer to tackle protection than in contexts, such as Syria, where the government is an active party to the conflict.

In Syria, a protection strategy was not established until June 2014, three years after the start of the conflict. This extraordinary delay reflected the humanitarian community’s fear of addressing the issue with the Syrian government. Interviewees commented that the word ‘protection’ could not even be used. Even when, in 2014, protection was formally incorporated in the SRP and named as its first strategic objective, it was expressed



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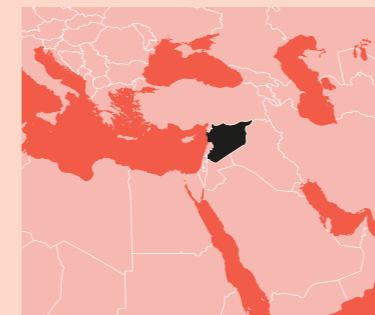
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as ‘advocat[ing] for the protection of civilians’ rather than undertaking protection activities.

Advocacy is clearly a role that many humanitarians feel the need to play, both for moral reasons and for practical ones – to allow them to do their work unimpeded. The seriousness with which they embrace this responsibility in principle, however, is not matched by efforts to identify and pursue advocacy objectives – including establishing the right networks to reach the most influential actors – let alone measure whether those objectives have been met. The Syrian experience illustrates that, as a humanitarian function, advocacy continues to carry the same sense that prevailed before the coordination reforms of the past decade.



SYRIA

Since late 2011, the conflict in Syria has resulted in a quarter of a million deaths, over 7 million people displaced, and more than 12 million people in need of humanitarian aid. The extraordinarily difficult operating environment involves an obstructive government (itself a violator of international humanitarian law) as one of the conflict parties, a fractured opposition that includes actors with no compunction against targeting aid workers for violence, as well as a divided aid community. Active combat and high levels of insecurity, alongside the constraints imposed by the government, have severely limited access for humanitarian actors. UN agencies and a few NGOs have provided aid from Damascus, mainly through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, while other NGOs and diaspora groups deliver cross-border aid from the neighbouring countries of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

Overview of performance

Coverage/sufficiency: With \$5.5 billion raised through the Syria SRP over three years, the crisis has brought in a historic volume of financial contributions. Additional contributions come through untracked channels, including from the Middle East and Syrian diaspora organisations. However, with humanitarian access severely constrained, funding has not translated into physical and material coverage of needs, particularly in some of the worst-affected areas inside Syria. As acknowledged in the most recent SRP, ‘recognising that all needs cannot be covered, critical humanitarian gaps remain both in terms of geographical coverage and the scale of activities.’

Relevance/appropriateness:

Getting solid information on the aid picture for the whole of Syria has been extremely difficult, and as a result the humanitarian community is unable to determine if the aid getting through is the most relevant and appropriate to people’s needs. Until 2014 there was no information on needs for Syria as a whole. Although a consolidated assessment was finally accomplished in the Humanitarian

Needs Overview produced at the end of 2014, it remains limited due to the small number of primary information sources available. The consensus among humanitarians, however, is that the biggest gaps are in protection, health and shelter, recognising the limited extent to which humanitarian actors can influence protection in the absence of a political solution.

Effectiveness: As a measure of timely relief delivered on a prioritised basis to those most in need, it would be impossible to call the Syria response a success. Less than half of the estimated 12.2 million people in need have been reached by humanitarian assistance. The insurgent-held and heavily contested districts in the north, as well as besieged areas, have the highest numbers of people in need, and many people have been relying on cross-border aid operations that were secretive until the UN Security Council endorsed them in 2014. Only a small proportion of the aid, whether from Damascus or cross-border, can be monitored, making it extremely challenging to determine whether it has reached the target population or met its objectives.

Efficiency, coordination and connectedness: Coordination among and between the UN agencies and NGOs has been severely hindered. Organisations have been highly reluctant to share information, both for security reasons and in some cases for the reputational risk in not being able to state confidently where their aid was ending up. Tensions have also run high between the UN-led response coordinated from Damascus and the NGOs, working largely cross-border, preventing a unified humanitarian operational response to the crisis. Western humanitarians have also been criticised for missing opportunities to build more effective partnerships for delivery through local and diaspora Syrian actors.

Coherence/principles:

Much of the aid delivered within Syria has been neither impartial nor independent, primarily due to restrictions imposed by the government and other armed actors, general insecurity, and the difficulties of operating at scale from cross-border locations. ●