



# FIRST AND LAST RESPONDERS

**CIVIL SOCIETY STRENGTHENING  
IN THE SYRIA CRISIS**



**Save the Children**

**IKEA Foundation**





Save the Children's approach to working with partners in Syria is rooted in the agency's theory of change, where partnership is central to our mission to inspire breakthroughs for children. In the context of Syria, we look beyond partnership merely as a modality to access areas inaccessible to Save the Children or a means to fulfil our own programme objectives. We work in partnership in Syria because we acknowledge that what we strive to achieve for children cannot be achieved by us alone. We form partnerships because our objective in Syria is to build the resilience of children affected by the conflict through quality, integrated and sustainable programme approaches that meet their interrelated and multifaceted needs. This requires collaborating with national service providers and partners to strengthen their capacity to respond, stand alone, and to initiate the foundations of a civil society that can hold duty bearers to account... our partnership approach in Syria has a concerted focus and firm commitment to invest in holistic capacity strengthening support for partner organisations in order to achieve the above."

Vassiliki Lembesis, RISE Programme Director, Save the Children

# CONTENTS

- 4 **Summary**
- 8 **Introduction**
- Lessons learned**
- 10 Lesson 1: Nurturing diversity
- 14 Lesson 2: Sustained commitment
- 16 Lesson 3: Complementary approaches
- 20 Lesson 4: Remote methodologies
- 24 Lesson 5: Responsible partnering

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# SUMMARY

This paper documents learnings from Save the Children's RISE programme as a contribution to the discourse on localisation.

The RISE programme, supported by the IKEA Foundation, was implemented between December 2015 and August 2019. It provided a combination of organisational capacity development and child protection capacity strengthening to 31 Syrian and Syrian diaspora civil society organisations (CSOs) and provided humanitarian assistance to crisis-affected communities inside Syria. 1,254 staff received capacity-strengthening support and 20,833 children received child protection services through projects funded by the programme and implemented by the CSOs.

RISE represented an exception to traditional ways of working, such as:

- Opening of the scope of potential partner organisations to a broad range of CSOs
- Focusing on capacity strengthening both for Child Protection and Organisational Development
- Allowing for a longer-term perspective and investment in capacity strengthening and learning through an extended three-year timeframe
- Offering an extended range of methods as opposed to standard training, such as coaching/mentoring, capacity strengthening grants, and learning grants
- Being flexible, so that there is a larger possibility for partner organisations to identify, prioritize and suggest methods for filling capacity gaps on their own.

Supporting the organisational and programmatic development of local civil society organisations is a contribution that international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) can make to the localisation agenda. Key findings and lessons from RISE include:

- **Diversity** among CSOs strengthens humanitarian outcomes by capitalising on their different identities, strategies and approaches, and should be preserved. A diverse civil society representing different agendas and constituencies is equally important in contributing to an inclusive, peaceful society after a crisis. Diversity can be preserved and nurtured by including a broad spectrum of CSO's and, when

it comes to capacity strengthening interventions, giving CSOs autonomy to define their developmental priorities.

- **Sustained commitment** to local partners should be provided and challenges and setbacks should be viewed as learning and developmental opportunities. Whether international or local, an organisation's development is non-linear experiencing unexpected challenges and setbacks. External support is often most needed during difficult times. INGOs going through organisational and staff changes should plan for continuity in their partner relations and maintain open communication.
- A **mix of complementary approaches** to capacity strengthening can be adopted to achieve better results. This includes combining organisational development with strengthening programmatic capacity. Effective approaches are based on dialogue between an INGO and its partner ensuring that support is contextualised and tailored to the partner's existing capacities and where the partner has autonomy in deciding its priorities and service providers.
- **Remote modalities** are often required examples of which include online training and coaching, e-learning, and third-party service providers. Frontline staff of CSOs gain to benefit from capacity strengthening support but are often the most difficult to reach. Issues of poor connectivity need careful planning and prior preparation to maximise the effectiveness of online support.
- Capacity strengthening, either through standalone programmes such as RISE or integrated into partner agreements, can support CSOs to better manage their risks and assist INGOs in **responsible partnering**. INGO's local partners are frequently exposed to high levels of risk with limited resources and small margins that leave them vulnerable and exposed when things go wrong.



# INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to document the learning from Save the Children's RISE programme in Syria as a contribution to the discourse on localisation. The RISE programme provides one example of the type of role that international organisations can play in advancing localisation through capacity strengthening interventions as well as provides some lessons in good practice.

The majority of Syria's civil society organisations were born of the crisis as women and men in Syria and the diaspora sought to respond to the needs of their affected communities. With limited international presence, these mostly young organisations are the primary responders challenged with meeting the needs of people caught in one of the most complex humanitarian crises today and challenged with managing often sizeable funding from international organisations (INGOs, agencies and donors) and their accompanying requirements.

The 3-year RISE programme funded by the IKEA Foundation supported a broad range of these civil society organisations to be better able to deliver vital support to children and their communities during the current humanitarian emergency. The RISE programme had a longer-term ambition of fostering a strong civil society for children's rights. The programme had three specific objectives:

1. Build technical, programmatic, management and operational skills of Syrian organisations, through a holistic capacity strengthening approach tailored to address the specific needs of partners, including through remote capacity strengthening methodologies.
2. Support local organisations with access to grants as part of the capacity strengthening approach and for Syrian organisations to be able to respond to the protection needs of crisis-affected children.
3. Enhance child protection programmatic technical capacities of Syrian organisations through the development and roll-out of child protection capacity strengthening resources contextualised for Syria.





The programme combined programmatic and organisational capacity strengthening. It employed a wide variety of complementary approaches including grants, training and coaching. It utilised different methodologies such as face-to-face and online training and coaching, e-learning, and third-party service providers to reach the staff of 31 Syrian organisations, including their frontline staff inside Syria.

This support has assisted organisations in enhancing their independence by defining their priorities, their direction of travel, and enhancing their ability to raise funds. It has assisted organisations in developing their programmatic and operational capacity (in a range of areas including HR, finance, fundraising, procurement and logistics, safety and security, child safeguarding) to deliver contextually appropriate child protection interventions in line with international standards. Through the grants provided under the programme, organisations have addressed issues such as family tracing and reunification, psychosocial support, children living with disabilities resulting from conflict inflicted injuries, and child labour in places like Aleppo, Idlib, Al Hassakeh and Damascus. A total of 20,883 children received assistance through the intervention.

The following pages document five broad categories within which lessons and best practice from the programme are grouped. The first category deals with diversity within civil society, why it is important for humanitarian response and beyond, and how it can be preserved and nurtured even during a crisis. The second concerns the need for sustained commitment to local organisations over time, particularly when they experience hard times. The third concerns different approaches to capacity strengthening in complex emergencies, including the need for a flexible mix of complementary approaches. The fourth, particularly pertinent to the many contexts where humanitarian access is restricted, provides lessons in remote methodologies. The fifth and final, examines responsible partnership, the moral duty of care that international organisations owe local implementers and ways capacity strengthening can advance this.



## LESSON ONE

# NURTURING A DIVERSITY

As a response to the crisis, groups of activists and professionals in Syria and the diaspora have come together to form new organisations to respond to the needs of their communities. A diverse set of local civil society actors has emerged each with its particular community ties, affiliations and aspirations ranging from small informal networks to large organisations with hundreds of staff. These ties, affiliations and organisational differences have enabled their access to affected communities in a fractured society with limited civic space. In addition, the role these CSOs serve in representing the peaceful agendas of their different constituencies at both community and national levels will be a determining factor in moving towards lasting and inclusive peace in Syria.

However, INGOs risk undermining the priorities of CSOs and the relationships these organisations have to their constituencies by coming with priorities and requirements tied to funding (a process described by local organisations as ‘ngo-isation’<sup>1</sup>). In so doing INGOs risk weakening a civil society already threatened on many fronts.

In providing support to a broad spectrum of CSOs, from an informal network of youth activists to large Syrian diaspora organisations, and by giving autonomy to CSOs to define their own development priorities, RISE has set out to preserve and nurture the diversity within Syrian civil society. In practical terms, this has involved Save the Children and its partners conducting joint organisational capacity assessments to assist them in identifying their development priorities. These priorities could then be used in capacity development plans as a basis for determining which approaches to use and where support from Save the Children or other providers is needed. Flexible financing through capacity strengthening grants have allowed partners to invest in areas that they would otherwise not have the means to do.

1 M. Collins. (2019) ‘Syrian Civil Society: A Closing Door’, Christian Aid p.23.

In implementing the RISE programme, several lessons in nurturing diversity have emerged:

1. Support to a broad range of local actors, including women and youth organisations, is important and not only those which conform to an ‘NGO norm’.
2. Capacity strengthening interventions nurturing CSO identities means allowing CSOs to be at the centre of their learning journeys, setting their own development priorities.
3. The ability of organisations to preserve their independent identities is closely linked to their financial stability. INGOs can play an important role in strengthening CSOs’ abilities to raise and manage funds.
4. Organisational Capacity Assessments and Organisational Capacity Development Plans are useful tools around which to structure the conversation between an INGO and its CSO partner.
5. More needs to be done to identify innovative solutions for supporting informal organisations whose very informality often confers advantages, for example, being able to work under the radar of repressive authorities. In many contexts, formal registration is difficult or poses substantial risks to the organisation. In these cases, a decision not to register can be an active choice.

## VIOLET SET UP THEIR OWN FUNDING STREAM

Violet is a Syrian organisation, started in 2011 by a network of young volunteers who felt they had to do something for their communities that were suffering as a result of the conflict in Syria. Today, Violet provides humanitarian aid and implements projects in six provinces.

One of the challenges for Violet was how to channel private donations. They knew there was an interest, but lacked experience, funds and structure to set up a mechanism for donations. Staff at Violet also knew that private donations would give them the freedom to start projects for which they saw a need on the ground and, due to lack of funds, were unable to start. All funding was coming from international NGOs and UN agencies that had their own priorities and plans for projects.

A Save the Children project, supported by the IKEA Foundation, allowed Violet an opportunity to take control of their programme activities. The project grants aimed to build the capacity of partner organisations, Violet included, and help them achieve their goals more efficiently. Unique to this grant was the opportunity for organisations to assess their own areas of weakness, identify gaps and propose how best to use the funding provided accordingly.

“The capacity strengthening grant was flexible, and we could choose what we wanted to use it for,” Omar Shami, the Programs Coordinator says. “We decided to use it to get a professional on board to advise on how to set up the webpage and create a successful advocacy campaign to encourage as many donations as possible.”

The new donation-oriented web site, together with targeted campaigns throughout the Middle East, channelled large amounts of money to projects prioritised by Violet. The unrestricted funds allowed Violet to set their own goals for their programming.





## LESSON TWO

# SUSTAINED COMMITMENT

The development process of CSOs within RISE was often non-linear. CSOs experienced normal setbacks such as the loss of key staff, restructuring, and funding shortfalls as well as dramatic setbacks resulting from sudden changes in the context requiring them to suspend or close operations or scale up their response. The sustained commitment of Save the Children, particularly during times of difficulty, was highly appreciated by its CSO partners. For some, this was mainly about providing resources at moments when support from other INGOs was minimal and, for others, it was about waiting patiently until the CSO was able to reengage again. For others still, it was about support in navigating the challenges.

Over the same period, the experience of Save the Children was very similar to that of its partners as it sought to improve effectiveness and relevance and respond to contextual changes. The change processes within Save the Children sometimes resulted in periods of disengagement and loss of communication with its partners, delaying planned activities and eroding the trust.

Several general lessons regarding sustained commitment emerged from the RISE experience, including:

1. Capacity development requires sustained commitment to local organisations in order to build trust and create space for setbacks, failures, changes of plan and learning. This, in turn, requires multi-year funding.
2. Setbacks, failures and challenges are a part of the learning process. INGOs should stay committed and view setbacks as opportunities for organisations to learn and develop.
3. INGOs can reduce the impact of their change processes on partners by including partnership continuity as a standard item in their change management plans and by prioritising communication before and during change processes.
4. INGO staff continuity is important, as is the seniority and experience of the staff engaging with CSOs. The impact of INGO staff turnover on CSO partners can be mitigated through handover plans.





## LESSON THREE

# COMPLEMENTARY APPROACHES

“If we do not overcome the gaps the organization is facing as a whole, then we cannot implement the projects properly and to their fullest potential.” —RISE partner.

RISE employed a holistic capacity strengthening approach considering organisational needs as a whole, including leadership and direction, operations and programmes. Complementary methods included:

- Both standardised and tailored training. Training was conducted face-to-face, online, through webinars, e-learning for individual staff (hosted on DisasterReady), and through third-party service providers inside Syria.
- Learning grants. Grant facilities for child protection projects enabled partners to learn by doing. The scope and level of funding was tied to the partner’s prior experience and assessed capacity in child protection programming.
- Organisational capacity strengthening grants provided funding to partners to procure services or technology that could contribute to a step-change in their development.
- Accompaniment in the form of technical assistance, coaching and mentoring.

Overall outcomes included a stronger independent identity among some organisations coupled with progress towards greater financial autonomy; improved operational effectiveness in a range of areas; and improved capacity and confidence to deliver child protection services in accordance with international standards contextualised to the Syria.

Experience from RISE points to the following lessons:

- Both organisational capacity and programmatic capacity are required to deliver effective programmes. Having a holistic approach to capacity strengthening that includes the two elements delivers better results.
- A mix of mutually reinforcing methods can be more effective. For example, learning grants accompanied by training and coaching allowed organisations to apply lessons from training in real contexts and receive continuous feedback while doing so.

- Accompaniment in the form of technical support, coaching and mentoring is important. RISE partners appreciated the ability to call Save the Children staff to bounce off ideas, get answers to questions or get ideas for tools that could be useful to the issues with which they were grappling.
- Involving organisations in the design of training helps to ensure that it is relevant both to the context in which they are operating and the level of their existing capacity. RISE partners frequently expressed fatigue with overly generic training.
- Developing action plans as part of a training session better ensures that learning is carried forward and incorporated into practice.
- Flexible financing tools like organisational capacity strengthening grants can have a significant impact with relatively small investments, giving greater autonomy to partners to target specific organisational needs for which resources are not available elsewhere. Funds must be sufficiently large to procure high-quality services, either locally or internationally.
- Partners engaged in peer-to-peer towards the end of the programme but with positive feedback. This method could be explored further.
- INGOs working with the same CSO partner can coordinate their capacity strengthening intervention alleviating some of the burdens on the partner and broadening the scope of expertise available. This was successfully piloted in northwest Syria, where INGOs used common Organisational Capacity Assessments and Organisational Capacity Development Plans to support different elements of CSO development according to their areas of expertise.

## NEW STRATEGY HELPED SHAFAK FIND THEIR OWN VOICE

Shafak is a Syrian-based organisation with high visibility and acceptance inside Syria. It works with several international donors and was one of the main partners in RISE. Although Shafak has a big presence in Syria, it is not very well known internationally. It experienced great challenges with its internal structure, which needed rework and rebuilding.

Dr. Omar Atik is the Head of Programmes at Shafak. He points to how RISE helped his organisation.

“[The] grant was unique, as it focused on institutional capacity building, which is exactly what we needed. Shafak is great in terms of implementation and the procedures we follow, as we have the capacity for them, but the main gap identified was the absence of a proper strategy.”

The grants and the support that came with them enabled Shafak to define their capacity, programme approach and end goals in a realistic manner. The created strategy became an important tool for Shafak.

“It enabled us to figure out how far we can go with accepting donor requests and how to negotiate with them,” Omar says. “Shafak is now trying to build its own profile rather than remain donor-driven.”

The work with RISE opened opportunities for Shafak since Save the Children also encouraged other international organisations to consider capacity building grants.

“We had never previously experienced this,” Omar says. “These grants are very unique and we are grateful to Save the Children, as Shafak would not have been able to achieve such outcomes without such grants.”





## LESSON FOUR

# REMOTE MODALITIES

Closed borders and access restrictions in Syria pose a significant challenge in reaching CSO frontline staff with capacity strengthening support. To do so, RISE used a variety of methods including:

- Online training, technical assistance and coaching using platforms such as Zoom, Skype and WhatsApp. Zoom proved to be the most reliable platform for reaching staff in Syria.
- Contextualised e-learning courses in various aspects of child protection were developed for the programme and posted on the training platform DisasterReady. Individual CSO staff in Syria could access the training and learn at their own pace.
- A core team of trainers on child protection was established within two partners in the programme. The trainers then provided capacity-strengthening support on child protection to other CSOs.
- Third-party service providers with a pre-existing presence inside Syria were used.

RISE provides the following lessons in remote capacity strengthening modalities:

- Using third-party trainers inside the country through either establishing a core team of trainers or working with pre-existing service providers strengthens expertise within the affected country, thereby contributing to a stronger civil society. Training by third parties needs to be monitored with resources allocated to capacity strengthening in order to ensure and maintain quality.
- Online training is a necessary approach where access is restricted. Internet connectivity, often poor in crisis contexts, is a determinant in its effectiveness. The following have been identified as practical ways to mitigate the effects of poor connectivity and maximise the effectiveness of online training:
  - Limit group size (e.g. no more than 15 participants) and the number of locations connected online.
  - Use an external camera and speaker so trainer and participants can move around the room.
  - Consider training when the internet connection is most reliable, which may not be during regular business hours.
  - Limit the duration of the training day (e.g. 4 hours/day) as it is much harder for participants to concentrate during remote training. Depending on connectivity and timing, only one hour a day may be realistic.

- Have a co-facilitator present with the participants. They can help with explanations, support the facilitation of participatory activities, answer questions, ensure everyone has all the materials and has done any required preparation, and help with logistics. The co-facilitator needs to have some knowledge of the topic and should be briefed by the main facilitator online beforehand on the co-facilitation role and the training content. The co-facilitator should also have a de-brief and planning session with the main facilitator at the end of each training day (and possibly during breaks if there are issues that need to be resolved).
- It can take a whole day for trainer and participants to get to know each other and develop trust – allow for this.
- Invest in the use of participatory methods, and ensure the trainer is engaging and friendly (which can be hard if they cannot see participants).
- Plan for bad sound connections. Ask people to input and work via typing if their sound connection does not work. Have someone available to provide typed summaries of what is going on for anyone whose sound is cutting out. Ensure everyone mutes microphones when not speaking.
- Have at least one additional staff member attending the training with the trainer/facilitator, to manage the internet connection, contact with participants, as well as adjust plans if the connection goes down.

## REACHING THE HARDEST TO REACH CHILDREN

Muna Sarsak is an education advisor with Save the Children in Jordan. She is training teachers and facilitators in Southern Syria – helping them continue to educate children despite the ongoing war. However, she has never met any of the teachers she is supporting. Because of the war, the border between Jordan and Syria is closed, so all the training is done remotely.

“I’m in touch with them through video, photos and WhatsApp groups,” Muna says. “We can interact, and we can discuss.”

The training is part of RISE and uses modern technology to help some of the world’s hardest-to-reach children. Working remotely was difficult, but was the only way to reach the staff of partner organisations, teachers and children.

“My first day I felt like I was a crazy woman,” Muna says. “Because I was going to train staff remotely.”

Ibrahim, an operations team leader for a Save the Children partner in Syria says: “There were lots of doubts and fears in the beginning but after 2-3 days, we were able to break the ice. It moved from a formal relationship to partnership and brotherhood. I can communicate with Ms. Muna anytime, for work purposes or otherwise. This communication has helped us through many problems and burdens.”

The project reached thousands of children, giving partners, teachers and school staff a chance to teach better and include more children in schools.







## LESSON FIVE

# RESPONSIBLE PARTNERSHIP

INGOs' risk management, with regard to partnerships, is frequently characterised by managing 'the risks of their local partners as opposed to the risks to them'<sup>2</sup>. CSOs typically have to contend with navigating a high-risk environment with few resources and narrow margins, leaving them vulnerable and exposed when things go wrong. By investing in strengthening partner capacity on issues like staff safety and security, HR practices, fundraising, procurement and logistics, financial management, child safeguarding, data security and programme quality, the RISE programme has enabled partners to better manage the diverse risks that they face. It has enabled smaller CSOs, which would otherwise be considered too risky, to receive international support to address humanitarian needs in their communities.

Support provided to staff wellbeing was particularly appreciated by RISE partners. This included training in stress management, reserving time for psychosocial support in other training, and providing opportunities for individual, confidential support to partner staff members. For one partner, the support helped them realise how stressed the organisation was as a whole. As a result, they sought further training for additional frontline staff.

The lessons generated from the RISE experience in regard to responsible partnership are:

- Capacity strengthening programmes make an important contribution to responsible partnership by supporting CSOs to manage the diverse set of risks that they face and by supporting smaller CSOs to access international support. Possible alternatives include having a capacity strengthening programme as part of an INGO's portfolio of programmes or including a capacity strengthening component in each partnership agreement.
- The safety and security of partner staff and affected communities must take precedent over project objectives and compliance requirements.
- To avoid putting partner staff and affected communities at risk, establishing routines for confidentiality, communication and data management is necessary, for instance, setting routines around when it is and is not permissible to share the names of partners.

<sup>1</sup> A. Stoddard, M. Czarwno, L. Hamsik. (2019) 'INGOs and Risk: Managing Uncertainty in local-international partnerships', InterAction and Humanitarian Outcomes p.4

- In high-pressure contexts with high workloads and severe safety and security risks, INGOs should consider including resources for stress management and staff wellbeing as standard in their partnership agreements and in addition to resources for staff safety and security.
- Partners should be encouraged to include budgets related to responsible partnership in their funding applications that include indirect costs, capacity building, staff wellbeing, safety and security, and internal staff insurance mechanisms (where private and state insurance schemes are not available).



This paper documents the learning from Save the Children's RISE programme in Syria, as a contribution to the discourse on localisation.

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