



International  
Council of  
Voluntary  
Agencies

InterAction and ICVA

# Mission Report

An NGO Perspective on the Response to the Syria Crisis  
March 19-29, 2013



May 2013, revised

## I. Background

Two years since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, nearly 6.8 million people need humanitarian assistance,<sup>1</sup> representing over 20% of the Syrian population, and more than 70,000 people have been killed. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 2.5 million are internally displaced, while over 1 million have fled to Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and North Africa. The length, intensity and severity of the conflict has led to the structural disintegration of Syria's public and social services, including the collapse of the economy, spikes in food prices, shortages of medical supplies and personnel, and fuel shortages.

Traditional coping mechanisms have collapsed, and UNCHR reports that every day 5,000 people cross the Syrian border to neighboring countries. The complex and highly challenging operational environment, limited humanitarian access and heightening security risks further compound the crisis. As the crisis continues, UNHCR expects 3.5 million refugees and 7 million people to require assistance in Syria by the end of 2013.<sup>2</sup>

The extraordinary need both in and around Syria has overwhelmed the ability of national and international actors to respond to and meet the needs of the Syrian people. Based on the analysis of five criteria – scale, complexity, urgency, capacity and reputational risk – Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos declared a Level 3 (L3) Humanitarian System-Wide Emergency for Syria on January 15, 2013.

## II. Scope of Mission

In the context of the expanding refugee crisis in neighboring countries and the IASC declaration of the humanitarian crisis in Syria as an L3, InterAction and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) traveled to the region in March 2013. The purpose of the trip was to review humanitarian practice and policy issues, including the interlinkages between the refugee response overseen by the UNHCR regional refugee coordinator and the humanitarian response within Syria led by the regional humanitarian coordinator. Key components of this review included an examination of NGO coordination structures and the implementation of the accompanying measures related to the L3 declaration. Specifically to the latter, the mission attempted to get a sense of whether the NGO community was being engaged appropriately within the implementation of the transformative agenda.

Members of the mission traveled to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan from March 19-29, 2013. The team visited Antakya, Reyhanli and Gaziantep in southern Turkey; Beirut and the Bekaa valley in Lebanon; and Amman, Mafraq and Za'atari camp in Jordan.

Within this report, ICVA and InterAction provide observations, key findings and recommendations.

## III. Turkey

### A. Humanitarian Action in Support of Syria

#### NGO Forum and Humanitarian Coordination

Early in 2013, some NGOs in southern Turkey asked the global NGO consortia to look into ways of supporting an NGO coordination body there, but by the time of our mission the NGOs had themselves addressed the issue by creating the NGO Forum, based in Antakya. A seconded senior staff member from an operational NGO leads the secretariat, advised by a four-member Steering Committee. Supported by the Syria Needs Assessment Project (SNAP),<sup>3</sup> the Forum has been able to complete needs assessments and map data, a function that has enabled the NGO Forum to play a strong leadership role in information management. The Forum also has defined terms of reference for its secretariat and holds regular well-formatted meetings that, for the time being, have strong NGO support and buy-in (although the multiplication of meetings is starting to unsettle some members). The body continues to provide coordination services, as identified by the NGO community, including sectoral discussions and supporting the need for controlled

<sup>1</sup> OCHA, Syria Humanitarian Bulletin, Issue 23.

<sup>2</sup> OCHA, Syria Humanitarian Bulletin, Issue 23.

<sup>3</sup> SNAP was established by ACAPS and MapAction with the aim of supporting the humanitarian response in Syria and neighboring countries through the provision of independent analysis of the humanitarian situation of those affected by the Syrian crisis.

dialogues on security issues, and also acts as the security focal point in the absence of a designate.

Despite the successes of the NGO Forum, it is limited in scope and does not include all of the organizations' responding to the crisis. It also lacks direct relation to the humanitarian response led from Damascus. This expanded information management role, which normally falls upon the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), has not occurred within southern Turkey. While relations are cordial between OCHA and the NGO community, a lack of organizational trust was evident. The factors that contributed to this situation included mixed messaging from OCHA senior leadership, which at first unrealistically raised expectations on the role OCHA could play and then were dashed due to mandate issues regarding cross-border operations. Additionally, and most importantly, there was a fear that OCHA was unable or unwilling to safeguard information on cross-border NGO activities. This belief was potentially reinforced through the delays in securing a senior Head of Office and also as a result of NGOs in Turkey having no prior direct access to Radhouane Nouicer, the regional humanitarian coordinator for Syria. Both of these issues were rectified by OCHA during the team's visit. Finally, there was a perception among NGOs that OCHA Turkey felt less relevant as the "information needs" role had already been filled and it was "in competition with the ACU."

#### The Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU)

Adding to the complexity of coordination from Turkey is the unclear and potentially problematic role of the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. According to their literature, the ACU aims to "mobilize, coordinate, and influence humanitarian aid and development assistance for the Syrian people."<sup>4</sup> After our discussions with both the ACU and others, team members believe that there is a strong dual risk of instrumentalization of humanitarian assistance for Syria. The first risk is that Western donors, through their overwhelming support of an entity with little capacity, little humanitarian expertise and almost no legitimacy inside Syria, are engaged in an ill-judged attempt to win hearts and minds rather than focusing on the proper delivery of humanitarian assistance to people in need. The second risk is the implied intent of the ACU to be the conduit through which the international NGO community works inside Syria at the expense of partnerships with independent local organizations already developed.

### **B. Refugee Response**

The government of Turkey has done a commendable job of hosting a large refugee population in what are often referred to as "five-star camps." However, two issues have been ignored given the scope of the generosity of the Turks.

First, while the Syria-Turkey border is said to be open to all refugees, only a small number are actually allowed to cross every day, de facto creating a "holding camp" in Atma on the Syrian side. Furthermore, the criteria used to select people who are allowed to enter the Turkish camps remain opaque, thus creating suspicion.

Second, Turkey also hosts a large number of refugees not based in camps, a population that has far less access to the services and protection provided in the camps. This population is largely invisible, and there are constraints hindering their registration, as well as a lack of access to services. The resulting inequalities among the refugee populations are therefore an area of concern, as is the growing tension with the host community.

This situation presents a unique challenge to UNHCR as the organization has very little leverage given the fact that the government of Turkey has taken on the burden of managing and financing the assistance to the refugees. The long-term cost of sustaining the camps, especially with the admirable level of services provided, may prove to be a strain on Turkey's hospitality if the situation becomes further protracted, as feared by many.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MSg2LLzYgXGbnkCIQJQWLG3jxT2vz0SKEsOBnmlg9Pk/edit?pli=1>

## **C. Recommendations**

### *To the NGO Forum:*

- Build on what has been achieved by shifting toward a more strategic and representational role to better engage with outside actors on behalf of the NGO community.
- Develop a common vision, fundraising and organizational plan for the southern Turkey NGO forum with at least a one year timeframe.

### *To OCHA:*

- Identify and address the gaps in coordination and information management, serving the needs of all actors to the response. Special attention should be paid to local stakeholders, such as local councils, local NGOs, national Red Crescent Societies, as well as donors outside the “system”.
- Work with the NGOs to develop a mutually-acceptable system wherein the information needs for improved coordination are met, while also recognizing respective sensitivities as they relate to data.

### *To UNHCR:*

- Engage with NGOs doing cross-border work, advocating for further monitoring of criteria for crossing the border, etc.
- Engage further, and transparently, with the Turkish government on protection concerns regarding current camp and non-camp refugee populations, including those that cannot or are waiting to cross the border.

### *To all UN Agencies:*

- Build and strengthen relationships with NGOs and other actors providing cross-border assistance.

### *To Donor Governments:*

- Refrain from using humanitarian aid for perceived political gains within Syria.
- Do not allow bureaucratic impediments to hinder or influence the scale and recipients of funding.
- Advocate with and on behalf of Turkey for assistance that will allow them to continue their generous support to the refugee population.

### *To the Government of Turkey:*

- Support cross-border humanitarian activities through the development of an enabling regulatory environment for NGOs.
- Work with UNHCR to ensure that all who seek refuge in Turkey have similar access to services.

## **IV. Lebanon**

### **A. Humanitarian Action in Lebanon**

Lebanon is in an increasingly vulnerable situation. Everyone the team spoke to expressed concern regarding the escalating tensions within the country, which are exacerbated by increased fighting in Tripoli and the Bekaa valley as a result of the Syrian crisis. Not only is this extremely worrying for Lebanon, but also for the region as a whole.

There are a growing number of Syrians within Lebanon. While the latest figures from UNHCR suggest that almost 400,000 Syrians need assistance, some organizations estimate the number of people coming from Syria to Lebanon to seek refuge – including thousands of Palestinians, Lebanese returnees and those who do not wish to register with UNHCR – to be far higher. This rapid increase of Syrians has to be examined in relation the needs of a country with a population of 4.3 million.<sup>5</sup> The refugees are living in host communities as, at the time of the visit, the government’s policy was not to develop camps. This huge refugee influx is creating tension with the Lebanese population. The vulnerable Lebanese populations are finding it increasingly difficult to cope with rising living costs, especially for housing, and reduced wages due to pressure on both markets. The government of Lebanon is at a risk of running out of resources due to the rising number of people requiring health care and other services provided by state institutions.

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<sup>5</sup> Estimate according to the World Bank.

Despite this critical situation, the humanitarian community has been slow to respond. UNHCR and NGOs acknowledged the delays and challenges in scaling up to meet mounting demands. UNHCR has developed plans to catch up on the extreme backlog of refugee registrations. There was also recognition of a scaled-up response in recent months of UN agencies, particularly by WFP and UNICEF.

A number of people the team talked to commented on the poor interagency coordination for the refugee crisis. However, many also appreciated that the interagency coordination had improved since January 2013. Part of the improvement was due to the additional capacity that UNHCR has contributed for refugee coordination, including those with previous OCHA experience.

#### NGO Forum and Humanitarian Coordination

It is apparent that in-country needs outweigh capacity, and unless NGOs already there can rapidly scale up, more NGOs will be needed to provide support in Lebanon. This will require a strong coordination mechanism. A number of international NGOs operating in Lebanon have formed the Lebanese INGO Humanitarian Forum (LIHF). At the time of our visit, LIHF had nine members, with others being considered for membership in accordance with the group's criteria. It is from this group that three NGOs were elected to serve on the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). The group considers itself mainly as an advocacy body and is largely comprised of NGOs who have been there longer term. Some members suggested that they would prefer it to remain a "tight" group to enable them to maintain focus and not become an information hub for incoming NGOs.

While this group functions well for its constituents, broader NGO collaboration is required, especially in a situation as complex as the Lebanon crisis. It would also be useful to increase engagement between national and international NGOs as Lebanon has a large indigenous NGO community.

#### Humanitarian Country Team (HCT)

The resident coordinator in Lebanon was appointed as the humanitarian coordinator (HC) in March 2012, and the HCT was formed in May 2012. The purpose of the HCT in Lebanon was to maintain an overview of the various interagency coordination efforts including the UNHCR coordination mechanism for the refugee crisis; the Task Force managed by UNDP for host communities; UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for the Palestinian refugees; and work done by WFP and IOM on Lebanese returnees. The HCT has three NGO seats, which rotate every six months. These NGO seats are decided through the Lebanese INGO Humanitarian Forum. While there is a place reserved for a Lebanese NGO, there was not one identified at the time of the visit. Some respondents felt that this HCT could be strengthened to better lead the overall humanitarian response. Several people reported that the HCT has been too wary of "stepping on UNHCR's toes" and that a strong interagency forum was essential for the complexity of this crisis.

### **C. Recommendations**

#### *To the NGO Community:*

- Scale up of action and engagement by the NGO community in Lebanon.
- Establish a more inclusive NGO forum to provide support that will enable the response to be scaled up to address mounting needs. This should include and bring in the expertise of the local NGO community.

#### *To the RC/HC and OCHA:*

- Ensure a "Lebanon as a whole" perspective, including refugees, returnees, host populations, etc., when planning and coordinating the humanitarian response.
- Encourage development and humanitarian sectors to work more closely on addressing the needs, which will require an increase in development funding.
- Consider a broader representation of NGOs on the HCT, possibly following the Jordan example of having equal numbers of NGO and UN agencies, and ensure that some of these seats are taken by local NGOs.

#### *To UNHCR:*

- Work closely with OCHA on the coordination mechanisms and tools used, regardless of who has the lead role, to ensure the humanitarian response is more predictable, streamlined, systemized and simple.

While there has been good progress, different coordination systems and tools for collective response create confusion for the wider humanitarian community in a refugee response.

- Provide space for collaborative discussion around contingency planning. This situation can no longer be “business as usual.”

*To Donor Governments:*

- Advocate with and on behalf of Lebanon for assistance that will allow Lebanon to continue its generous support to the refugee population, and try and offset the increasing tensions within country.

*To the Government of Lebanon:*

- Work closely with development and humanitarian actors within Lebanon to ensure that the refugee crisis does not further affect the stability of the country.

## V. Jordan

### A. Humanitarian Action in Support of Syria

In Amman, a Syria Task Force, nearly solely comprised of UN agencies, has been established to support the response within Syria. This concept of a remote support mechanism, had potential to become a surge mechanism, with the added benefit of providing a buffer or conduit to channel sensitive information on the cross-border activities occurring throughout the region. It also could have served as a means to build relationships with humanitarian NGOs who are likely to enter Syria when access allows. Unfortunately, it is not apparent that the Syria Task Force and the United Nations teams in Amman have taken on either of these roles. As with Turkey, the understandable desire of the Damascus UN Country Team (UNCT) to stay at the center of the response has possibly disempowered, if not disenfranchised, the Syria Task Force. A lack of clarity on the role and relationship of the Syria Task Force and the OCHA office in support of the Damascus leadership also seemed a hindrance, as well as the apparent predominance of temporary reassigned HQ staff on the Syria Task Force.

While we acknowledge that OCHA has made efforts to engage with the wider NGO community, the team found that many on the Syria Task Force were unable to explain how their agencies were engaging with NGOs in either the response or in contingency planning.

There is an expectation that humanitarian cross-border or alternative delivery solutions will increase over the coming months from Jordan. As long as these efforts remain clandestine in nature and direct access is hampered by the security situation, it will constrain efforts to coordinate and monitor an all of Syria response.

### B. Refugee Response

The response to the refugee crisis in Jordan has been hindered by a lack of long-term planning, an abundance of staff turnover, and an inability on the part of UNHCR and the NGO community to respond according to known best practices. The overwhelming sentiment of most surveyed was that humanitarian actors were at least two months behind the curve, and that, given the constant deterioration of the situation, there was very little chance that they would be able to catch up.

As has been well documented, the tensions within the Za’atari camp are palatable and certain to get worse before they get better. The origins of current problems in Za’atari are well-known: services are co-located in one area, and ease of access varies for different populations; providing electricity and water in a remote location is expensive, which threatens sustainability of the effort; and the lack of community leaders has resulted in unusual power dynamics, as well as a lack of responsibility for services and staff safety. NGOs were unanimous in their view that UNHCR’s sectoral coordination had improved since January, when UNHCR, with the support of OCHA staff, focused attention on forming a comprehensive and inclusive coordination structure. NGOs strongly felt, however, that many of these meetings dealt with detailed issues instead of addressing the big picture.

### C. Humanitarian Action for Jordan

As a generous host of refugees, Jordan is under enormous strain to manage the populations both in and outside camps, as well as prepare for the possible influx of hundreds of thousands more. Within many

complex crises, the need for the connectivity of the humanitarian community with the development community is essential. However, within Jordan, one of the main ways to avoid creating a crisis is for the development actors to assess the impact of the refugee response on the systems and people of Jordan, and to aid the government in responding appropriately. For example, we heard from many about how the burgeoning refugee population was straining health services in towns such as Mafraq and Ramtha. The Ministry of Health is asking international NGOs working in the region and registered in Jordan to assist with supplies, staffing and medicines. While willing to assist, the NGOs have asked for a comprehensive assessment of the gaps in the National Health Service to ensure appropriate targeting of assistance. Lacking the capacity to complete this assessment, the Ministry of Health is under pressure to meet the increased demand that hosting a large non-camp refugee population has on a country's social safety net and development. While UNHCR stated that they were trying to engage with UNDP's Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Recovery (BCPR), a laudable initiative, far more is needed given the current scale of the crisis and perceived trajectory of the conflict.

In response to the risk of Jordan becoming a complex emergency in its own right, OCHA's Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) selected the UNHCR representative in 2012 to take on the Humanitarian Coordinator duties in an acting capacity. This arrangement requires one individual to have responsibility for two enormous jobs – not only to oversee a large-scale and ever deteriorating refugee response, but also to coordinate the humanitarian preparedness and response within Jordan.

#### NGO Forum and Humanitarian Coordination

As in the other locations, the structured collaboration of NGOs in Amman is in the early stages, with NGO coordination developing from informal connections among country directors to a formalized body with elected officers and representatives to the HCT.

#### Humanitarian Country Team

The HCT had met only once at the time of the team's visit. The NGO representatives on the HCT were elected by the nascent NGO forum. It was very positive to see that there were equal numbers of seats allotted to NGOs as to UN bodies. The NGOs want to engage, though the HC will need to ensure that the HCT has a clear strategic focus, with defined roles. OCHA will need to fully support the HC in order to ensure the HCT follows the guidance provided by the IASC.

### **D. Recommendations**

#### *To the NGO Forum:*

- Continue to actively engage the NGO community on strategic issues and ensure strong representational engagement on the HCT.

#### *To OCHA:*

- Separate the leadership of the existing refugee crisis and the broader humanitarian response, without prejudice to personalities or organizational preferences.

#### *To the RC and HC, ad interim:*

- All development actors need to assess the pre-existing arrangements they have with the Government of Jordan, and should seek to adapt their programs to mitigate the effects of the Syrian conflict on Jordan.

#### *To UNHCR:*

- Strengthen UNHCR's operational capacity through decreasing staff turnover and developing stronger relationships with partners.
- Share the burden of leadership within the response with those willing to take on the responsibilities.

#### *To Donor Governments:*

- Advocate with and on behalf of Jordan for assistance that will allow them to continue their generous support to the refugee population while also ensuring that Jordan itself remains stable and on course to reach its development goals.

*To the Government of Jordan:*

- Work with development and humanitarian actors within Jordan to ensure that the refugee crisis does not affect development gains made for the people of Jordan.
- Seek the guidance and advice of neighboring host countries and UNHCR on the management of the refugee crisis.

## VI. Syria-Wide Response

### A. General

While cognizant of the risks of running this operation from a “regional hub” based on lessons learned from other humanitarian crises, there is a need for a better understanding of the different responses inside Syria together with the multitude of refugee contexts to provide a more effective and targeted response. This is especially critical with the huge challenge of resourcing the humanitarian response. While we understand that a proper Humanitarian Country Team has not yet been stood up in Damascus because of opposition from the government of Syria, far more still could be done to engage the NGO community in an effective manner. For example, discussions in the Syria UNCT on matters such as the strategic statement still view engagement with the NGO community as a consultation rather than collaboration.

The international NGOs have decided to establish a regional, or Syria-wide, international NGO forum, which was in the process of being established during the mission and has the potential to become a critical body for key messaging on behalf of the NGO community.

### B. Overarching Recommendations

- Ensure strategic oversight of the needs and response through developing and fostering a regular transparent interagency dialogue among decision makers from all operational agencies. Special consideration must be given to those organizations operating cross-border.
- Target funds based on humanitarian needs.
- Bring the Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP) and Regional Response Plan (RRP) tools together, under one strategic document. Expand SHARP to include areas not under the control of the government of Syria.
- Engage Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) charities, diaspora and other actors within the coordination mechanisms, including tracking their activities to the extent possible within who, what, where matrices.

## VII. Concluding Remarks

The overarching focus of the mission was on examining NGO coordination structures, the implementation of the accompanying measures related to the L3 declaration<sup>6</sup> and whether the NGO community was being engaged appropriately, as well as how well the responses for Syrians, be they affected inside Syria or having fled as refugees, were complementary.

Despite the efforts of the Transformative Agenda to simplify, streamline and speed up humanitarian responses, the team unfortunately did not see much evidence of its impact. While fully acknowledging the constraints on humanitarian action in Syria, as well as the limits of implementing the Transformative Agenda’s protocols for a complex emergency, the team left the region with concerns that go beyond policy fixes. As noted within the partnership recommendations of The High Commissioner’s Structured Dialogue on NGO-IFRC-UNHCR Partnership in 2012, “it is critical that we strive to work together more effectively and efficiently to better assist, protect and contribute to lasting solutions [for the displaced]. We strive for mutual respect and trust, evidenced through open communications, transparency in decision-making and clear accountabilities.”<sup>7</sup>

We are overdue for practicing what we preach.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasec/pageloder.aspx?page=content-template-default&bd=87>

<sup>7</sup> The High Commissioner’s Structured Dialogue on NGO-IFRC-UNHCR Partnership, Partnership Recommendations, <http://www.interaction.org/document/unhcr-high-commissioners-structured-dialogue-report-december-2012-1>



## VIII. Annex

### A. List of Bilateral Meetings (most met in all 3 locations)

ACTED  
Assistance Coordination Unit  
AMEL  
CARE  
DFID Consultant  
DRC  
ECHO  
GOAL  
Handicap International  
IMC  
INGO Humanitarian Forums – Secretariats  
IOCC  
IRC  
Mercy Corps  
MERLIN  
MSF  
NRC  
OCHA  
OXFAM  
People in Need  
Relief International  
Save the Children Int'l  
Save the Children UK  
SNAPS  
Solidarités  
UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator/Syrian Arab Republic  
UNHCR, including Regional Representative  
WHO

### B. List of Multilateral Meetings

3/21 ACU (15 NGOs, 2 ACU)  
3/21 Regional SHARP/RRP Meeting – Lebanon  
3/22 NGO Forum in Turkey (18 NGOs, 2 UN/OCHA, 2 U.S. government/OFDA)  
3/22 Needs Assessment WG (15 NGOs, 2 UN/OCHA)  
3/22 NGO Forum Meeting in Lebanon (9 NGOs)  
3/23 Meeting with Radhouane Nouicer (6 UN/OCHA, WHO, UNHCR)  
3/23 NGO Forum Meeting with RHC Nouicer (15 NGOs, 6 OCHA, UNHCR, WHO, 4 RCRC Movement)  
3/26 Syria Task Force (2 OCHA, IOM, ICRC, WFP, UNOPS, UNDSS, UNHCR, UN HABITAT, other UN)  
3/28 NGO Forum Meeting in Jordan (approximately 20 NGOs)