

Humanitarian Access, Continuity of Services and Protection of Humanitarian Workers

Continued presence on the ground is the most effective and efficient **response to humanitarian needs**, despite changing areas of control. Ensuring **continuity of services** in Syria is integral to humanitarian work and will not be possible if urgent humanitarian access issues, such as the **protection of civilians and humanitarian workers**, are not addressed.

Humanitarian organisations responding to the Syrian crisis work with thousands of humanitarian workers, who are skilled, trained professional staff and volunteers. Humanitarian workers must be able to deliver services and maintain a regular/permanent presence within communities, particularly for complex programming.

Urgent Concerns

Access and Continuity of Services

- The physical access of convoys of trucks delivering humanitarian goods to an area where urgent needs have been identified is absolutely crucial. But **humanitarian access is not only for trucks, it is for people**.
- For the past seven years, independently and in partnership with international humanitarian actors, Syrian humanitarian organisations and their workers have been **the backbone of the humanitarian response** across Syria and are best poised to continue supporting their communities' immediate and future needs.
- **Access needs to be granted and humanitarian actors protected to ensure the continuity of services.** All humanitarian actors – United Nations (UN), non-governmental organisations (NGO) and civil society organisations (CSO), local and international, registered and unregistered – must be able to access populations in need through the most direct route – through all modalities of intervention.
- **Continuity of services by humanitarian actors needs to be maintained across Syria.** Vast numbers of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and returnees are in areas that have changed control, and are highly vulnerable. Yet public services and infrastructure are not sufficient to sustain services to them as well as the resident populations.
- **Allowing humanitarian workers to continue to provide aid in its current form** is an essential dimension of humanitarian access: it is vital to providing effective and efficient assistance to the most vulnerable, especially when they have been living in besieged and hard to reach areas.

Facts & Figures

- According to the 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview, over 220 Syrian NGOs are authorised to provide assistance in government-controlled areas and over 190 Syrian NGOs and 10 Syrian networks are operating cross-border from Turkey.⁽¹⁾
- In March 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported an alarming spike in attacks against health workers, and facilities in Syria, announcing it had verified 67 attacks on health facilities and workers in Syria during the first two months of the year (a number which represents more than 50 percent of verified attacks in all of 2017).
- According to WHO, these attacks resulted in the deaths of 19 people in March 2018 alone, among them four health workers, left 28 people injured, seven of them medical staff. In the month of February 2018, WHO reported that violent incidents disrupted 15,000 medical consultations and nearly 1,500 surgeries, many life-saving.⁽²⁾

1. Humanitarian Needs Overview (2018), Syrian Arab Republic. Available at: <https://hno-syria.org/>

2. WHO, Seven years of Syria's health tragedy, News release, 14 March 2018.

Humanitarian Workers are essential to respond to increasing needs

- Humanitarian workers have unrivalled knowledge of the local context, their communities' needs and local structures. Each of them – national and international staff – is an integral part of a **broad network that comprises dozens of professions and distinct skills and stretches across multiple geographical locations**.
- Their skills go beyond the narrow description of 'aid workers': they provide life-saving assistance but are also the teachers, nurses and civil servants who maintain **services essential to a robust and functioning society**. Their individual and collective capacities extend into a post-conflict setting and are crucial for helping communities transition into a new stage where conflict intensity might decrease, but the severity of population vulnerability remains high.

■ In the case of HI, these workers include, for example, physiotherapists, nurses, doctors, teachers, Risk Education trainers, administrators, logisticians and many other professions. Throughout the crisis they have acquired or developed **unique technical skills essential to the delivery of services** central to HI mission.

■ They also have had to navigate the complex reality of **increasing humanitarian needs, an unrelenting escalation in violence, besiegement, shifting lines of control, truce agreements and evacuations.**

■ In a constantly changing context, the resilient networks built by these skilled professionals to deliver their services to populations in need, supported by international NGOs, and eager to **maintain the standards of principled humanitarian action**, are more needed than ever.

Protection, Personal Safety and Security of humanitarian workers

■ The most pressing question for humanitarian workers, as lines of conflicts and areas of control shift, is how to **ensure their personal safety and security.** At the same time, there is a need to enable them to maintain the continuity of services they have been providing to people in need in the future.

■ In their humanitarian activities, they have **filled a gap in the provision of public services to the population**, and if they are unable to continue their role as areas of control change, this will seriously impact services to all Syrians.

■ If and when control of areas shift, it is therefore vital to ensure that these skilled professionals remain an intrinsic part of the social fabric of the Syrian society. When circumstances change, **humanitarian workers must be allowed to stay and continue their work in all its forms**, if this is their choice. With their continued presence, and protection, populations in need can be assured that essential services will be maintained.

Excerpts from statements released by HI in 2018 that demonstrate the threats humanitarian workers face daily and their crucial role in Syria:

“A staff member from a Syrian organisation that Humanity & Inclusion (HI) partners with was killed yesterday. Mustafa, his wife, and their two children – both under the age of 8 years old – were all killed by shelling. (...) Mustafa worked as a risk education team leader for over two years. His role was pivotal to informing and protecting his community from the risks associated with explosive hazards and explosive remnants of war. He managed a mobile team which conducted outreach activities across different communities, focusing particularly on schools, teaching young Syrians about these hazards. Children are often injured or killed while playing with the remains of explosive hazards.”
15 March 2018.

“A physical rehabilitation centre from a partner organisation of Humanity & Inclusion was destroyed after two separate bombardments. Families seeking safety in the centre’s basement two floors below ground level had to be dug out – all alive – from the rubble where they were trapped for hours. Services from the centre have been suspended. Up to 100 civilians were taking shelter in the rehabilitation centre as it was believed to be safer than staying in their own homes. Owing to the intense bombardment, humanitarian workers from other areas of the enclave remain unable to access the centre for work, or for refuge, as the risk of being hit while en route is too high. The centre normally serves on average 90 rehabilitation patients a month, but in recent weeks this number has dropped as it has become too dangerous to access.”
22 February 2018.

Immediate Recommendations

Donors, UN agencies, concerned states, and parties to the conflict should:

■ **Prioritise the protection of civilians, including humanitarian actors and the continuity of the services** they are delivering, as an essential component of humanitarian access.

■ Ensure that humanitarian workers are not subject to arrest or detention for performing humanitarian services in accordance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL), with related guarantees and appropriate monitoring.

■ Facilitate and support the inclusion of **strong provisions towards protecting civilians, including humanitarian workers**, as part of any local truce or reconciliation agreements.

■ Ensure that adequate support is given to humanitarian actors who are operational and have the capacity to reach those in need in areas where control has changed.

■ **Emphasise that funds linked to continuity of services are connected to the preservation and protection of humanitarian workers.**

■ Facilitate passage of humanitarian staff to and from neighbouring countries for training and monitoring of humanitarian activities.

Mid-to-long term Recommendations

The UN Special Envoy for Syria should:

■ Ensure that **preservation and protection of civilians, including humanitarian workers is an integral component of the UN-led Geneva Peace process**, in order to achieve a sustainable and meaningful peace in Syria that includes all sectors of society.

The members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and UN Members States should:

■ Take action so that all resolutions related to access and protections of civilians, including humanitarian workers, are effectively implemented in Syria.