

Continuity of Services, Humanitarian Access and Protection of Humanitarian Workers

Humanitarian organisations responding to the Syrian crisis work with thousands of skilled, trained professional and volunteer **humanitarian workers**. Their **continued presence on the ground is the most effective and efficient response to humanitarian needs**.

In 2018, **extensive shifts in the areas under control of different Parties to the conflict and specific incidents against humanitarian workers**, left humanitarian workers fearful for their safety. Especially when they could be **punished for association with humanitarian activities** undertaken by organisations not recognized as legitimate by parties to the conflict in control of their intervention areas.

Several million people in need are not receiving adequate levels of assistance due to access impediments. The only way to sustainably restore people's access is the **immediate cessation of hostilities** and, barring that, **respect for International Humanitarian Law**. At the very least, urgent humanitarian access issues, such as the **protection of civilians and humanitarian workers** and the **lifting of bureaucratic restrictions**, need to be addressed to ensure **continuity of services**. 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

■ Humanitarian access is not only access for humanitarian convoys. **Humanitarian aid** is not only trucks delivering humanitarian aid; it is also **people delivering services, and professional staff working in and with the communities implementing complex programming**. 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 people, including in hard to reach areas.

■ For the past eight years, independently and in partnership with international humanitarian actors, **Syrian humanitarian NGOs and workers have been the backbone of the humanitarian response** across Syria and they are best poised to continue supporting their communities' immediate and future needs.

■ **Continuity of services by humanitarian actors needs to**

Facts & Figures

■ According to the Humanitarian Needs Overview published in 2018, **over 220 Syrian NGOs are authorized to provide assistance in government-controlled areas and over 190 Syrian NGOs and 10 Syrian networks are operating cross-border from Turkey**.

■ The data that the Aid Worker Security Database was able to collect shows the vulnerability of Syrian humanitarian aid workers: in 2018, 50 Syrian aid workers were killed, wounded or kidnapped, compared to 1 international aid worker; **since the crisis started more than 280 national aid workers were killed, wounded or kidnapped compared to 22 international aid workers⁽¹⁾**.

■ According to the World Health Organization (WHO), **targeted attacks on health care facilities** between January-July 2018, have resulted in the **damage and/or destruction of 124 health facilities, the deaths of 97 health workers in the line of duty, and the injury of 165 health workers**. During 2017, there were 122 verified incidents on 73 health facilities and 69 ambulances. These incidents resulted in the deaths of at least 73 people, including 28 health workers and 10 patients, and wounding at least 149 people including 46 health workers and 4 patients⁽²⁾.

1. Available online at: <https://aidworkersecurity.org/incidents/search?detail=1&country=SY> [Accessed 7/2/2019]

2. World Health Organization [WHO], 19 August 2018, available online at: <http://www.emro.who.int/syr/syria-news/attacks-on-health-care-on-the-rise-throughout-syria-in-first-half-of-2018-says-who.html> [Accessed 7/2/2019]

be maintained across Syria. In areas that have changed control IDPs and returnees are among the most vulnerable, yet public services and infrastructure are not sufficient to sustain service delivery to them or to residents.

Humanitarian Workers

■ **Humanitarian workers** have unrivalled knowledge of the local context, their communities' needs and local structures. Throughout the crisis they have **acquired or developed unique technical skills essential to the delivery of services** central to the humanitarian mission.

- These workers include, for example, **physiotherapists, doctors and risk education trainers**. As such, they have **had to navigate the complex reality of shifting lines of control, increasing humanitarian needs**, an unrelenting escalation in violence, besiegement, truce agreements and evacuations.

- In a constantly changing context, **these skilled professionals have maintained nationwide networks**. This speaks to the **resilience** of those networks and the **flexibility** they have had to employ to continue to deliver their services to populations in need.

- The skills that **humanitarian workers** possess go beyond the narrow description of “aid workers”: they provide life-saving assistance, but **are also teachers, nurses and other civil servants** who have maintained services that are essential to a robust and functioning society. Their capacities, on an individual level as well as collectively, extend to a post-crisis setting and are valuable for helping communities transition in an early recovery stage where crisis intensity might be lower, but population vulnerability remains high.

- The most pressing question for humanitarian workers 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 in the future.

- The international community must **recognise humanitarian workers for the skilled professionals that they are**, and step up to ensure that they are protected, so that they can be part of the social fabric of the Syrian society in the future.

- **If and when areas of control shift, 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.

Access and Whole of Syria architecture

- Humanitarian organizations work across Syria in a **principled and impartial manner** to ensure that civilians receive the necessary services regardless of who is in control of the territory. Increasingly, **NGOs have experienced increased scrutiny and suspension of programs** from specific donors, despite their well established, extensive due diligence procedures to ensure donor funding is safeguarded from diversion by sanctioned entities.

- Syrians in need are currently assisted through **different access modalities, including direct work from Damascus, cross-border work from neighbouring countries, and different forms of partnerships with local actors**. The different modalities are complementary and no single one is enough to reach all the people in need.

- The **Whole of Syria coordination architecture should be maintained** and consensually adapted by the humanitarian community to the new realities, at least until end of 2019, and possibly beyond in case of further renewal of UNSC resolution 2165 on cross-border aid.

Recommendations

All stakeholders: donors, international actors (including UN agencies) and involved parties should:

- Support **full and unfettered humanitarian access** for all INGOs and SNGOs, regardless of their current modalities of operation.

- Facilitate **passage of humanitarian staff to and from neighbouring countries** for training and monitoring of humanitarian activities;

- Prioritise and reaffirm, as an essential component of humanitarian access, the **protection of civilians, including humanitarian actors, to ensure the continuity of the services** they are delivering;

- **Support the creation of a monitoring mechanism** to track incidents related to the protection of humanitarian workers;

- **Show strong political commitment to ensuring 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;

- Ensure that adequate support is given to **facilitate the interventions of 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;

- **Require and fully fund staff and partner duty of care policies** in all humanitarian grants to ensure adequate and consistent policies exist across all humanitarian actors;

- Recognize NGOs' common commitment to mitigate the risk of aid diversion and **refrain from imposing unnecessary restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian aid**.