

Conflict sensitive assistance in Syria – new considerations



Introduction

During 14 years of conflict in Syria, the international humanitarian aid community has had to navigate inter-communal tensions, flourishing war economies, a divided aid effort, risks of being instrumentalised by the Assad Regime, risks of lending legitimacy to a range of conflict actors, and an ever-shrinking civic space. Delivering assistance has been fraught with conflict sensitivity challenges and trade-offs. The fall of the Assad regime fundamentally alters the way in which international assistance can be delivered in Syria, yet conflict sensitivity must continue to be a cornerstone of all engagements moving forwards.

This short report outlines a number of ways in which international assistance risks doing harm and ways in which international assistance can contribute to peace in Syria. The report is based on discussions with Syrian colleagues and partners who have been working alongside international teams to support aid delivery over the past decade. Syrian colleagues identify four key needs in the new context that require consideration from a conflict sensitivity perspective:

- The need to engage in a conflict sensitive way with Syrian civil society that have emerged in different eco systems, without contributing to a closing of civic space.
- The need to support social cohesion, at a time of deep division.
- The need to engage with governance and institution building issues while navigating capacity and legitimacy issues.
- The need to prepare for truth-telling and reconciliation without raising tensions.

The report represents a living document intended to stimulate discussion of emerging conflict sensitivity considerations for international assistance in Syria.

About Peaceful Change initiative

Peaceful Change initiative is a peacebuilding organisation striving for a world free from violent conflict. To achieve this, we work with communities and their leaders to confront the drivers of violent conflict. Together, we build the conditions that make sustainable peace possible. We establish deep knowledge and strong partnerships where we work. This allows us to do both the long-term work of building sustainable peace and to respond rapidly and effectively to crises. We work only where we know we can make a real difference to people's lives. Many communities we work with have successfully managed high-risk conflicts and avoided violence, even when formal peace processes have failed.

About COAR

Launched in 2018 to support the delivery of more rapid, efficient, impactful, and accountable interventions in Syria, COAR Global (COAR) is a research consultancy purpose-built to operate sustainably in protracted crises and fragile environments. COAR comprises diverse and far-reaching teams of more than 125 researchers and analysts from over fifteen countries, who speak more than 25 languages, and are equipped with a wealth of experience across fields spanning academia, international development, and implementation. Teams support the design, implementation, and monitoring of peacebuilding, development, stabilization, and humanitarian programs and policy in complex and conflict-affected countries.

Reconciling civil society eco systems

Over the past 10 years, very rich civil society movements and eco-systems have developed in different parts of Syria and outside of Syria. Syrian civil society, therefore, is likely to be characterised by significant diversity, but also considerable fragmentation. It is critically important that space is maintained for pluralism and organic debate within civil society; the way in which assistance is delivered can contribute to expand, restrict or distort this space.

The risks for international donors and implementers of inadvertently doing harm are:

Contributing to increased division and fragmentation within Syrian civil society by dealing only with activists and organisations that share liberal values or language. Accusations that organisations that receive international (Western) funding are “Western leaning” and that the liberal values they are promoting, for example around gender equality and the role of religion in politics, are imposed by “foreign agents” may contribute to shrinking civil society space. This may, in turn, contribute to undermining the Syrian populations’ trust in those organisations and their work. It may also disincentivise organisations that do not identify with “Western” or “liberal” agendas to work with international partners.

Incentivising Syrian civil society organisations to work in ways that are convenient to international donors rather than reflective of Syrian priorities, perspectives and societal structures. This could include marginalising more informal civil society actors, curtailing efforts to collaborate across civil society ecosystems and thus contributing to a loss of civil society legitimacy in the eyes of their constituencies. This could also have a negative effect on gender and social diversity and inclusion within the civic space.

Undermining the development of sustainable government services and local civil society.

This can happen by rushing into new geographic areas without understanding existing civil society capacities and infrastructure, or by taking over service delivery instead of strengthening existing government and non-governmental capacities. This may negatively impact the development of a new social contract in Syria.

The opportunities for international donors and implementers to contribute to peace are:

Investing in mapping and analysis that helps us understand the inter-relationships between our partners and other parts of Syrian civil society and engage with diverse Syrian formal and informal civil society actors. Through dialogue with our Syrian partners and through strong coordination mechanisms between international NGOs and donors, we can identify ways of working that support Syrian efforts in building connections across different eco-systems, maintain a pluralistic civic space, and strengthen capacities for Syrian-led, localised approaches. This includes on approaches towards women’s empowerment and gender equality, where the leadership of Syrian organisations and activists will be key.

Social cohesion

After decades of dictatorship and almost 14 years of revolution and war, mass displacement, and deep individual and community trauma, the Syrian social fabric has been thoroughly torn. How aid is delivered, to whom and where, will play into the perceptions of strength/marginalisation of different communities. It is critically important to be aware of existing divisions and tensions, real or perceived inequalities and grievances, and perceptions of marginalisation between different communities. The way in which assistance is delivered can reinforce these divisions or promote social cohesion and reconciliation.

The risks for international donors and implementers of inadvertently doing harm are:

The benefits and pace of aid delivery are (or are perceived to be) distributed differently between groups with different social, religious or political identities in Syria – increasing tensions between them and making a cohesive political transition harder to achieve. For example, aid delivery that only targets women, without broader community buy-in, may lead to backlash from men and wider society. Understanding dynamics in granular detail, establishing effective information sharing and coordination mechanisms between international actors, and having very strong communication strategies and partnerships with local actors will be critical to help implementers mitigate this risk. A baseline conflict and social cohesion analysis, especially in high tension areas, should inform all humanitarian, reconstruction, development and peacebuilding operations. Clear and transparently communicated criteria for how distribution decisions are made will also help mitigate this risk.

Delivering poorly thought-out efforts to build bridges across divides that end up making things worse. If such efforts are conducted prematurely and without proper analysis and facilitation they will at best be largely ineffective, leaving communities cynical about peacebuilding efforts

and undermining the credibility of Syrian civil society partners. At worst projects can entrench existing inequalities and power imbalances, or backfire and worsen tensions.

Being seen to impose values that are contrary to Syrian cultural, religious or social norms. This is particularly a risk with initiatives that are seeking to address patterns of inequality, including gender and social inequalities, if these initiatives are based on external models or approaches rather than being locally designed. This can lead to backlash and present reputational and security risks for Syrian civil society and community members who are involved.

The opportunities for international donors and implementers to contribute to peace are:

Based on a thorough understanding of divisions and gender dynamics in different parts of Syria, we prioritise and plan locally-led assistance along Nexus principles, with social cohesion objectives built into the way in which humanitarian, development, and reconstruction support is delivered.

Model accountability and transparency towards Syrian partners to facilitate their accountability towards their constituencies. This will help build and restore trust both in the international community and, importantly, in Syrian organisations.

Design gender-focussed interventions using local cultural reference frames and consistently communicate and emphasise the locally led, Syrian-owned nature of gender work in as many ways as possible. Facilitate engagement with male powerholders and allies to mitigate the development of resistance and backlash.

Governance and institution-building

Syrians are waiting to see how governance will take shape at national, regional, and local levels. It is critically important that we, as an international assistance community, are aware that the way in which we engage in governance assistance in Syria may either contribute to building accountable, inclusive and responsive institutions and approaches, or to inadvertently developing fragmented and unaccountable governance that is not inclusive of all Syrians.

The risks for international donors and implementers of inadvertently doing harm are:

Undermining the emergence of accountability as a core element of the social contract at all levels in Syria, by failing to be transparent about aid prioritisation and expenditure, failing to place Syrians in decision making positions and having INGOs and UN agencies continue to hold resources and therefore power.

Inadvertently supporting the emergence of different governance approaches and service delivery methodologies in different parts of Syria to a degree that disrupts state consolidation.

Many Syrians see decentralisation as critical to sustainable peace in their country. In support of this aim and, potentially, due to concerns about engagement with the de-facto government in Damascus, agencies may focus all their governance support at the local level. Ultimately, international development agencies, and their donors, will need to strike a careful balance between supporting a decentralisation agenda and not leaving the national level with weak institutional capacities that will make it more difficult to forge a coherent state.

Providing unconditional de-facto government with recognition and legitimacy. International actors have a dilemma here: on the one hand there is an opportunity to work with de-facto government towards positive outcomes that are in line with international norms. On the other,

this is a risk if the de-facto government turns out to be non-representative, non-inclusive, violent and/or repressive. Not engaging at all may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the de-facto government sees little incentives to work towards inclusive and human-rights based approaches to governance. Providing the de-facto government with unconditional recognition and legitimacy is a risk; however, recognizing that we equally risk delegitimizing them by a refusal to engage based on the fears of future abuses, or based on an overemphasis on individual incidents. One approach to dealing with this dilemma is to adopt a “compliance mindset” to working in Syria. This may not only be linked to legal frameworks but speaks to building a broader understanding of how a particular partner acts within their community, what legitimacy they have, and how that is changing over time.

Inadvertently supporting inequitable and elite captured economic development. Syria’s economy is destroyed, large numbers of state services are essentially nonfunctional, and many of the previous regimes major economic stakeholders have fled the country or had their assets appropriated. Syria is also now transitioning from a state commanded pseudo-socialist economic model, to a more market based economy. There are incredible opportunities in this time to better the lives of ordinary Syrians. However, there are also major concerns that in supporting Syria’s market liberalization donors may reinforce equally harmful and inequitable economies, force an unhealthy privatization of the economy which ultimately forms Syria’s economy into an equally unhealthy elite dominated system (albeit for different elites). Conflict and context sensitive approaches to economic development must attempt to prioritize an economic transformation which prioritizes equitability, equal opportunity, and the betterment of the lives of Syria’s wider population.

The opportunities for international donors and implementers to contribute to peace are:

Strong coordination amongst donors and INGOs will support joined up approaches to working with government institutions across Syria. Approaches should incorporate elements that strengthen Syrian institutions' capacity to deliver services in a responsive and inclusive manner. Approaches should incorporate a gender analysis of governance structures, decision-making processes and service delivery.

Working with Syrian civil society and local activists as key partners in monitoring the performance of the new administration and reflecting people's perspectives and concerns. Building capacity and mechanisms for fact checking and fighting misinformation can help in both reflecting more accurate voices of people and also minimising the impact of misinformation.

Reconciliation, truth-telling and memorialisation

There is space for international assistance providers to support Syrians to implement reconciliation, truth-telling and memorialisation processes. However, it is critically important that we acknowledge that the way in which such processes are supported can either reinforce sustainable and locally driven reconciliation efforts, or inadvertently reinforce grievances, create backlash and/or entrench existing divisions.

The risks for international donors and implementers of inadvertently doing harm are:

Rushing into well-intentioned but poorly prepared reconciliation efforts without adequate analysis or strong enough community relationships. At best these efforts may be largely ineffective, leaving communities cynical and mistrustful and harming Syrian partners' relationships with communities. At worst they may backfire and exacerbate existing grievances. Particular protections need to be in place for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, recognising potential stigma and sensitivities around these issues. Reconciliation efforts that are seen as being 'imported' from other contexts rather than those that are locally grounded may also have limited effectiveness and undermine existing capacity.

Reconciliation efforts are seen as biased and unfair. De-facto authorities may see reconciliation efforts as an attempt to undermine their legitimacy and thus disengage. Reconciliation efforts that do not address violations committed by those affiliated with the de-facto authority or other opposition groups will be seen as biased and lack legitimacy.

The opportunities for international donors and implementers to contribute to peace are:

Work with Syrian colleagues to build an understanding of what outcomes Syrians want from a reconciliation and truth-telling process (or processes). This can include sharing learning from reconciliation efforts elsewhere to offer inspiration to the establishment of a Syrian-led process.

Be open to flexible pacing of reconciliation efforts and offer support to the processes that tackle the things that can be spoken about now.

Support Syrian partners in creating an enabling environment for truth-telling and reconciliation by supporting work that builds a culture of free speech, civic space, and difficult conversations about what justice and accountability can look like in a new Syrian state.

Conclusion

Syria may present an opportunity for best-practice roll-out of development practice and conflict-sensitive Triple Nexus programming. However, Syria remains a complex context in which to implement programming and strong commitment to minimising and mitigating the potential harmful impacts of assistance remains necessary. A key shift, since the fall of the Assad Regime, is that the international aid community now have a wider range of opportunities to support Syrian colleagues and partners to contribute to building and sustaining peace. This is an opportunity that we, in the international aid community, must seize.

Analysis is critical to conflict sensitive programming. In Syria, the international community could usefully collaborate to produce and share analysis on the following lines:

- Updated analysis of key geographies inside Syria where intra-community tensions can be expected to be most severe so that this can inform aid planning and delivery – to minimise conflict sensitivity risks around, for example, aid distribution and diversion.
- Mapping of Syrian civil society as it has developed inside Syria and in the diaspora in order to support international organisations and donors to understand the sector as a whole and to avoid reinforcing fragmentation.
- Gender analysis of civil society organisational structures, capacity, and distribution. This should support: 1) the contextualisation of gender work according to Syrian history and traditions, and cultural and religious references; 2) a proactive and early engagement with male powerholders and allies, including religious leaders, to mitigate resistance and backlash. This can lead to guidance on how to integrate gender-sensitive social cohesion into a range of different types of programming.
- Track Syrian reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts to ensure that international efforts support rather than replace these.