



## AID INSIDE SYRIA: TIME TO GO SMALL IN A BIGGER WAY

## Introduction

Many of the Syrian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in Turkey that provide humanitarian aid inside Syria have reached a high level of organizational and operational capacity that was previously absent. The capacity-building initiatives of multiple donors, United Nations agencies, and international non-governmental organization (INGO) partners have helped a number of these groups develop their ability to provide humanitarian response in accordance with international standards and to be effectively involved in the international coordination structure that was previously out of reach to them. In addition, as the Syrian conflict marks its sixth anniversary, some of these Syrian aid groups now have up to six years of experience in aid delivery and on-the-ground operations. These groups are staffed primarily by Syrians, many of whom are in the field on a daily basis, risking their lives to serve their own communities. They are the people who are most familiar with what is happening on the ground at any given moment, and who best understand the changing humanitarian needs and how to adapt their work accordingly. With this significant new talent pool available, the moment is right for donors and operational agencies to take next steps toward supporting humanitarian response in Syria that is “as local as possible,”<sup>1</sup> in keeping with best practice and the stated commitments that donors and INGOs have voiced over the past decade.

**“In Aleppo, the people inside coordinated in one month what groups couldn’t do outside in three years.”**

**—Employee of a Syrian NGO  
that supports operational  
local groups inside Syria**

## Recommendations

- ❑ As part of its commitment to contribute on a trial basis to at least three pooled funds in 2017 (see below), the U.S. government should make the Turkey Humanitarian Fund (HF) its next pilot for pooled fund support.
- ❑ The U.S. government should make ongoing contributions to the Turkey Humanitarian Fund as support for the work of Syrian NGOs inside Syria.
- ❑ The U.S. government should create and implement a plan to begin directly funding eligible Syrian groups on a pilot basis, with an eye toward providing regular support to these grounds as Syrian implementing partners.
- ❑ Other parties to the Grand Bargain (see below) that are major donors to the humanitarian response inside Syria should review how they use the pooled fund in support of Syrian aid groups and adjust their contributions to achieve the greatest impact in both operations and capacity-building.
- ❑ UN agencies and INGOs partnering with Syrian groups should invest in longer term “second level” capacity-building and mentoring for their partners with the goal of pushing Syrian organizations’ capacity beyond the ability to interact with specific donors and partners and into broader mentoring that improves operations.
- ❑ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) should expedite the auditing and review processes for completed projects financed by the Humanitarian Fund in order to facilitate independent application to the Fund by smaller groups.
- ❑ OCHA should make information about donations, allocations, and administrative procedures of the Turkey Humanitarian Fund more accessible to recipients and potential applicants.

## Background

Six years ago, when the Syrian conflict started in earnest, a number of Syrian NGOs emerged with the aim of providing humanitarian aid inside the country. In general, these groups fell into one of two categories: diaspora-based and -created NGOs staffed by educated (usually Syrian) professionals from a range of fields; and small, locally-active Syrian NGOs (also called community-based organizations, or CBOs) that were sometimes inexperienced, but had tremendous access inside Syria to areas the UN agencies and INGOs could not reach.

As a result of their ability to enter places that were off-limits to non-Syrian organizations—including besieged and hard-to-reach areas—these Syrian groups were often taken on by the UN agencies and INGOs as partners that would do the actual delivery of goods and services and implementation of programs. With very few exceptions, these groups could not receive funding directly from international donors or the United Nations because they did not have the organizational and operational history that would make them eligible. In fact, for the first several years of the conflict, many of these groups survived primarily on private donations from their own networks, which allowed them to deliver aid to locations that the bigger groups could not reach.

**“If it was difficult before, it’s even more difficult now.”**

**—UN employee describing cross-border access from Turkey into Syria**

These operational Syrian groups were—and still are—taking on risks to life and limb in order to provide assistance to their own communities. They are daily witnesses to events inside Syria and to the humanitarian needs of the people they serve. But for several years, few international partners engaged with these groups as a way to learn about what was happening on the ground within Syria on a daily basis. Instead, INGOs often demanded the implementation of projects that donors insisted upon but that were not always useful to the population they purported to help.

This situation, along with the recognition that local groups have wide access inside Syria, led to increased awareness of the need to provide capacity-building support for Syrian NGOs and to examine more deeply what *partnership* means in the context of humanitarian aid and local

actors.<sup>2</sup> Significant progress has been achieved in both of these areas, so much so that today, the local Syrian groups Refugees International (RI) met with almost all confirm that they have had capacity-building of one sort or another on issues ranging from humanitarian standards to implementing clean water projects to documenting delivery of aid. In general, they agree that this work has been useful, and after six years, many of them are indeed eligible for direct funding from donors.

However, for the U.S. government specifically, the inclination to work with the usual partners has prevented it from forming productive partnerships with the very organizations its own partners are giving its money to: the same ones that are doing the bulk of the aid provision inside Syria.

## The United States and the Grand Bargain

Last year at the World Humanitarian Summit—an international gathering of humanitarian actors and donors held in Istanbul in May—the U.S. government and other donors made a commitment to invest in local groups’ capacities<sup>3</sup> as a part of the Grand Bargain.

The Grand Bargain is an agreement among more than 30 of the biggest donors and aid providers in humanitarian response, including the U.S., which aims to effect a series of changes in the practices of donors and aid organizations. One of the primary goals of the Grand Bargain is to have 25 percent of global humanitarian funding go to national and local humanitarian responders by 2020.

**“We need to use the knowledge of the local, on-the-ground implementers [in planning].”**

**—Major donor to the Syria response**

The specifics of the U.S. commitment involve financial contributions to at least three *country-based pooled funds* (see below), a humanitarian funding mechanism which the U.S. government has not contributed to in over a decade. The pooled funds are administered through the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and, in the case of the Turkey fund for cross-border work into Syria, it is meant, among other things, to “strengthen the capacity of Syrian national NGOs” through funding and capacity-building.<sup>4</sup>

The U.S. has not contributed to country-based pooled funds in more than a decade. A combination of perceived reasons for this exists, including the inability to tightly control the use of the money and the lack of clear association (for beneficiaries) between the donor and the aid given. While these concerns are understandable, they prevent the U.S. from participating in a funding mechanism—at the moment, one of the only ones—that truly upholds its stated commitment to supporting local aid groups as a best humanitarian practice and that would be cost-effective and comparatively low-maintenance for the U.S. government.

As part of its commitment to contribute on a trial basis to at least three pooled funds in 2017, the U.S. government should make the Turkey Humanitarian Fund its next pilot for pooled fund support. This would include the opportunity to join the Fund’s advisory board, which would allow for U.S. input into the Fund’s priorities.

## The Turkey Humanitarian Fund

Country-based pooled funds (CBPFs) are an instrument for quick response to changing humanitarian needs. Donor contributions to the funds are not earmarked, and the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (DRHC)—the UN authority who oversees the fund—determines the allocation of the money for each distribution cycle. Not every country or emergency has a pooled fund associated with it. Rather, such a fund is established when the humanitarian community agrees that there is a need for the “predictable, timely and consistent resources towards principled humanitarian action” that a pooled fund is meant to provide.<sup>5</sup>

The Turkey Humanitarian Fund (HF) is the pooled fund that supports cross-border work from Turkey into Syria. It provides timely and flexible resources to expand the delivery of humanitarian assistance and increase humanitarian access.<sup>6</sup> One of its main objectives is to strengthen the capacity of Syrian national NGOs. While UN agencies, Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies, and INGOs are all eligible to apply for the money, well over half of the funding—60 percent—goes to local groups. It is natural that the HF would be closely involved with local Syrian groups, both because of its objective of supporting them, as well as the fact that they have regular access inside Syria.

Established in 2014, the Turkey HF over three years has expanded to include more and more local Syrian partners that provide aid across Syria. At the outset, many of these

local groups were not well-informed about the fund’s existence or how to apply to it, but consistent efforts by OCHA and several local coordination structures have greatly increased the visibility of the fund along with the efficiency of the application process. The guidelines for fund eligibility include a capacity assessment of the individual organization, an obligation to submit proper operational and financial documentation, and a requirement that the group be an active member of a humanitarian cluster,<sup>7</sup> which approves its application. In this way, the groups applying to the fund are known quantities to the international system, and are verified as having a minimum level of capacity to get the work done. There are also limits on how much funding a group can apply for and receive until it has passed various levels of verification.

**“It’s not just the money. It’s about the effect of supporting the NGOs themselves, not just the response.”**

**—Employee of Syrian NGO**

The U.S. government should make ongoing contributions to the Turkey HF as support for the work of Syrian NGOs inside Syria. This will also allow for a U.S. presence on the Fund’s advisory board, through which the U.S. can give input to the strategic planning for the Fund. Supporting the Turkey HF in turn supports predictability and sustainability in humanitarian response inside Syria, as a significant portion of the funds go to local groups with reliable access inside the country.

## Cost Effectiveness

In any humanitarian response, much of the donor funding goes to the UN and large INGOs, and, according to best practice, is meant to reach beneficiaries by trickling down to local partners directly serving people in need. Along the way, each recipient organization takes a percentage of the money for its overhead and administrative fees, along with whatever it uses for programming. Where original donations are made directly to Syrian groups, far less of the money is used for such costs, and more ends up with the beneficiaries served by the local partner doing the day-to-day work on the ground.

For local Syrian groups, this model is especially relevant because they are often not allowed to use the money the UN or INGOs give them for overhead or administrative costs.

As a result, many of the groups receive just enough money to cover the operational costs of an individual project and nothing that would help sustain the organization over time. Initially, many groups make do with private contributions to pay their staff members and keep the lights on in their offices, but as the crisis wears on, those sources of support are increasingly overburdened and fatigued.

Numerous local groups told RI that the HF has been a welcome change in this system because it allows the Syrian groups to use a small percentage of the allocation for overhead—a first for many of them. Because their budgets tend to be comparatively small and their procurement of materials and supplies is often local and therefore less expensive, more of the original donation directly benefits vulnerable people. Another advantage of the pooled fund is that OCHA does the administration of contributions to the HF and their subsequent disbursement to recipients, thereby sparing donors the task of managing a larger number of smaller grants.

**“While the impact of core unearmarked contributions to the UN system can be debated, the impact of pooled funds, whether CBPF or the CERF, has been proven beyond doubt.”**

**—Humanitarian funding researcher**

More importantly, this flexibility in pooled funding means the Syrian groups are able to have more predictability in their work, which tends to take place under unpredictable circumstances. They can plan longer-term projects that they implement on their own and not be so dependent on a larger partner deciding to fund a project in the area they cover. This is in marked contrast to years past. Before the pooled fund was established, many local Syrian groups told RI that their “partnership” with an INGO basically consisted of, for example, a three-month agreement to deliver food baskets in places the INGO couldn’t reach. Once the short-term collaboration ended, the INGO may not be heard from again, and the local group would have no funding left to carry on the work on its own.

As above, it is important to note that the projects funded by the HF are in line with those set forth in the humanitarian response plan (HRP) that the UN, INGOs and other partners put together on a (usually) annual basis. Local Syrian groups applying to the Turkey HF are being funded for projects and programs that have been approved as part

of the HRP because they directly address the needs—such as medical care, food, shelter—identified in its assessment.

## **Building the Capacity of Capacity-Builders**

In keeping with its mission through the Turkey HF to build the capacity of local Syrian groups, OCHA offers a variety of trainings as part of the HF application and award processes. Additional capacity-building sometimes comes from INGOs to their local Syrian partners, and overall, local groups feel that this training has been worthwhile. However, one repeated comment was that these trainings tend to be specific to the funder. For example, an INGO may train a local Syrian group on how to write a proposal for its own application system, or how to do financial recordkeeping for the reports that it will receive. Some of this training is applicable to other partners and funding streams and has been useful in professionalizing the local organizations, but many Syrian groups expressed a desire for more program-specific input—such as how to make information management as efficient as possible or how to do effective advocacy in the current context—that includes a period of mentoring and a longer-term investment than just a workshop or two.

One of the noteworthy findings of the RI mission was the genuine commitment of larger, longer-established Syrian NGOs to building the capacity of smaller, less-experienced local Syrian groups. Many of the former felt that capacity-building activities by their international partners had been effective, but had reached a sort of plateau. As one staff member of a Syrian group told us, there needs to be a sort of “second level” of capacity-building for groups that are now well-versed in writing grant proposals, managing finances, and maintaining humanitarian standards in their work. They are now looking for more technical capacity-building and mentoring.

**“Capacity-building has been going well, but it’s not finished.”**

**—Employee of Syrian NGO**

UN agencies and INGOs partnering with Syrian groups should invest in longer-term “second level” capacity-building and mentoring for their partners. The goal of this is to push Syrian organizations’ capacity beyond the ability to interact with specific donors and partners and into broader enhancement of their operations.

A handful of INGOs have indeed formalized their work in partnering and nurturing Syrian groups, and their local partners expressed both gratitude and enthusiasm for the investments these INGOs have made in the Syrian partners' capacity. However, this type of relationship seems to be the exception rather than the rule right now. In light of the fact that so much of the humanitarian assistance that happens inside Syria can only happen with the involvement of these local groups, it is in everyone's interest—donors', UN's and INGOs' alike—to take the next step and systematically invest in this more advanced capacity building for the groups that are ready for it. This will increase the types, amounts and quality of assistance local groups can offer, even as others cannot gain access inside the country.

## As Local As Possible, As International As Necessary

As the seventh year of the Syrian conflict begins, it is widely acknowledged that Syrian groups of the type mentioned in this report are doing the lion's share of delivery and implementation of humanitarian aid inside Syria. They sometimes have partnerships with INGOs (an increasing phenomenon) or the UN (far less common), and have succeeded in creating a significant presence for themselves in the international coordination mechanisms like the cluster system and the NGO Forum, a coordination body for groups working cross-border into Syria that was initially very difficult for local groups to access for lack of information, language barriers, and the inability to spare operational staff and get them into Turkey for the meetings.

The U.S. government should create and implement a plan to begin directly funding eligible Syrian groups on a pilot basis, with an eye toward regularly supporting these groups as Syrian implementing partners. A number of the groups benefiting from the pooled fund appear ready to handle direct funding from bigger donors—some of them already do. By increasing the amount of funding that goes directly to Syrian groups operating inside Syria, the U.S. government will ensure that more of its funds are being used for operations and will also contribute significantly to the development of a more local humanitarian response and a future civil society in Syria.

Other parties to the Grand Bargain that are major donors to the humanitarian response inside Syria should review how they use the pooled fund in support of Syrian groups and adjust their contributions to achieve the greatest impact in both operations and capacity-building.

While OCHA has made a tremendous amount of progress in recent years in publicizing the pooled fund and working with local groups to increase the number of partners it funds in different sectors, there are still some practical steps that could improve the fund's function as a method of localizing humanitarian aid. A number of international and local groups RI spoke with confirmed that the HF is a good funding tool and should be maintained and enlarged. However, a certain amount of misunderstanding remains among local Syrian groups about the fund's administrative processes.

One challenge that Syrian NGOs repeatedly cited in discussions with RI was the long delay between the end of an HF-funded project and the audit and review of that project. Each group that receives an HF allocation also has a funding ceiling that determines how much money it can be working with at any given time. Once a group has reached that ceiling, it cannot apply for more funding until a project has been fully closed down, which includes a review and formal audit. The audit must be performed by a properly accredited international auditor, but the process for engaging the auditors is quite slow. As a result, a significant number of local groups are now on hold with the pooled fund until their completed projects are reviewed, and until that review is completed, they cannot apply for more funding. This not only leaves many of the Syrian organizations at times without funding; it also prevents necessary humanitarian work from happening, as these groups do not always have other predictable sources of funding. OCHA should expedite the auditing and review processes for completed projects in order to facilitate independent application to the HF by smaller groups.

Related to this issue is another important aspect of the application process for local groups: if a local group is working in partnership with an INGO or a UN agency, that larger group can apply for pooled funding and channel it into the work of the local NGO, even if the latter has reached its pooled fund ceiling. However, many local Syrian groups were not aware that this option existed and so were not actively looking for partnerships that could keep their operations running with fewer interruptions.

**“There needs to be more work with local Syrian NGOs, because INGOs will have a harder time [in 2017].”**

**—Employee of group working to coordinate Syrian NGOs**

In addition, a number of groups did not know that donors make contributions directly to the Turkey HF. They thought that all the pooled funds for Syria (in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq) were one large source of funding, and they were not confident that an appropriate amount was allotted to the Turkey HF based on the number of beneficiaries served and the number of sectors supported. As a result, there was confusion about who received funding and why. As Syrian civil society is rather fragmented to begin with, in the interest of creating mutual support and better coordination among local groups OCHA, should make information about donations, allocations, and administrative procedures of the Turkey HF more accessible for recipients and potential applicants.

OCHA could do this directly through its Syrian community liaisons and the several levels of engagement they make available to the local groups as they move toward being eligible for pooled fund allocations. There are also a number of coordination networks set up specifically to bring Syrian groups into the larger coordination structure, and they could be an important resource for sharing information with local groups. Some Syrian groups belong to more than one network, but a fair number are members of only one, and educating all of them on how the pooled fund works could be an effective educational tool.

## Conclusion

The idea of supporting local groups as much as possible to provide humanitarian assistance is not a new one. Humanitarians have been talking about it, some donors have committed to it, and local groups have been demonstrating its results—albeit on a limited basis—for a decade. Just as it took some time for aid groups to fully recognize that consulting with affected populations is the most effective way of learning what they need, it will take some time to put the concept of localization of response into practice. It has already begun, with some donors and INGOs doing more than just talking about it. But it is not yet a widespread norm in humanitarian practice, in spite of how much it is discussed.

In 2015 the “Turkey HF targeted 4,278,350 beneficiaries across 11 of the 15 Syrian governorates.”<sup>8</sup> Sixty-three percent of the funds distributed went to Syrian groups. The Turkey HF has proved itself to be valuable to humanitarian aid inside Syria in just a few short years. It has allowed Syrian groups to save lives in places where international organizations cannot go, and that practice continues to this day. Think of the siege of Aleppo: the aid that did reach the besieged city and the eventual evacuation of

so many innocent civilians may not have happened at all without the local Syrian groups.

The Turkey HF has also developed into a useful tool for creating support for local Syrian groups working inside the country. Significantly, the Syrian community is well-equipped to take on this task. On the whole they are well-educated, professionally-oriented, and generally familiar with international standards. If the international community is going to make a success story of localizing humanitarian response, now is the time and Syria is the place.

*Daryl Grisgraber and Hans Hogrefe traveled to Turkey in February 2017.*

## Endnotes:

1. “As local as possible, as international [or global] as necessary” has become the catchphrase describing the ideal combination of actors in humanitarian response, usually intended as an expression of support for the under-recognized work of local groups.
2. See Refugees International, *Aid Inside Syria: Too Little But Not Too Late*, April 2013 at: [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8e1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/56ab8cc205caa79939ac736c/1454083267661/042513\\_Aid\\_Syria+letterhead.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8e1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/56ab8cc205caa79939ac736c/1454083267661/042513_Aid_Syria+letterhead.pdf)
3. Agenda for Humanity, *Commitment Description ID# 286030*, United States of America, 2016 at: <http://www.agendaforhumanity.org/commitment/3312>
4. UN OCHA, *Turkey Humanitarian Fund, Basic Facts (January – December 2016)*, 10 January 2017 at: [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/20161231\\_xb-turkey\\_hpf\\_factsheet\\_2pager.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/20161231_xb-turkey_hpf_factsheet_2pager.pdf)
5. UN OCHA, *Operational Handbook for Country-based Pooled Funds*, February 2015 at: <https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/documents/operationalhandbook.pdf>
6. UN OCHA, *Turkey Humanitarian Fund: Annual Report 2015*, December 2015 at: [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/hf\\_annual\\_report\\_2015\\_o.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/hf_annual_report_2015_o.pdf)
7. *Clusters* are “groups of humanitarian organizations, both UN and non-UN, in each of the main sectors of humanitarian action, e.g. water, health and logistics. They are designated by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and have clear responsibilities for coordination.” At: <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/clusters>
8. See note 6.

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