Briefing

iied URBAN CRISES

Policy pointers

The protracted nature of the crisis in Syria calls for a humanitarian-development 'nexus' — a local system that delivers basic services to local governance bodies,[1] bridging a gap where humanitarian and development agencies are failing to reach.

Humanitarian and development agencies can support local governance bodies in Aleppo to form this nexus, making service delivery more sustainable and building the resilience of Syria's urban populations.

Building capacity of local bodies would require humanitarian actors to take the lead in support of basic service delivery while development actors focus on establishing local systems that are accountable to both Syrians and donors.

Development and humanitarian actors must work together to redefine an adapted working relationship between the international community and local governance bodies, which empowers the latter to accountably assist Syrians with the support of the former. To do so, a comprehensive area-based needs and capacity assessment is essential.

Strengthening local councils to bridge the aid gap in Aleppo

The nature of the Syrian crisis, and the response that has evolved, calls for a change in the way aid is delivered. A redefined engagement between development and humanitarian actors can empower those on the ground to accountably deliver services where international agencies cannot. This briefing recommends renewed engagement with local governance bodies to account for new realities of a) remote management and b) insider links and networks of local governance that work differently to international nongovernmental organisations. The approach focuses on developing tools and accountability mechanisms that reflect the complex environment in Syria where a number of organisations are implementing projects.

13.1 million Syrians are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. While the political situation within Syria remains in flux, the continuing armed conflict and attacks on civilians alongside large-scale displacement calls for an intense and ongoing humanitarian response. Suffering is immense and urgent needs are overwhelming. Priorities are to treat civilian casualties, to tend to the sick, and to provide food, water, sanitation and shelter.

But the protracted nature of the crisis, now in its seventh year, has pushed the needs of people in Syria far beyond a conflict-driven humanitarian response. Syria's cities are at the centre of the crisis, hosting a heterogeneous urban population: Syrians who have never left, Internally Displaced People (IDPs), and tens of thousands of IDPs and refugees increasingly returning to their homes. Within these groups is layer upon layer of broken families, vulnerable men, women and children of all ages — most having suffered immeasurable trauma since the conflict began.

Funding distribution is still heavily skewed towards emergency response and the burden remains with humanitarian agencies. But the needs of this disparate population are complex and will not be

met by the crisis-led, short-term efforts of humanitarian agencies. Service delivery is inadequate and often limited to the duration of individual projects. Some aid is slowly starting to shift towards development programmes, to support longer-term service provision in areas such as health and education, water, electricity and livelihoods.

But overall, the current situation is a confused mix of humanitarian and development programmes that lacks the coordinated plan needed for delivering a sustainable response for Syria's urban population. Such a plan would need to go beyond emergency humanitarian assistance, into early recovery, helping to build the resilience of individuals and communities (Figure 1).

Harnessing valuable skills at local level

Local governance bodies,[1] like local councils, comprising community members, were formed organically in opposition-held areas in Syria, primarily in the absence of top-down governance systems.

In Aleppo, these bodies have previously demonstrated their ability to deliver basic services

Local councils understand the local dynamics that they are working in

effectively if given adequate support. Building the capacity of local governance bodies can strengthen early recovery efforts and help build the resilience of urban populations to future external shocks.

The right support can also improve the transparency of these bodies, making them more accountable to local citizens, a key challenge facing humanitarian and development organisations alike.

The current aid architecture overlooks the potential for local government to help meet the complex, longer-term needs of Syria's host and displaced populations. When channelled effectively and with better coordination between humanitarian and development agencies, external aid can strengthen local resources, creating a 'nexus' that can support service delivery where these agencies are currently falling short. This nexus would bolster a more sustainable response to the ongoing crisis, and strengthen opportunities for Syria's displaced and host populations to become self-sufficient and sustainable.

The nexus, as advocated here, pursues a local system that has permanent access to people in need on the ground. This system remains unaffected by changes to the overarching regime and can form a natural institutional building block to recover governance and stabilisation once the conflict ends.

The challenges of getting aid to Syria's urban populations

Developing this nexus with local governance bodies mitigates five main challenges that prevent aid reaching Syria's urban areas. These challenges stem from the ongoing conflict and displacement:

Restricted access. Besieged towns and cities, often with tightly controlled borders, are regularly cut off from humanitarian and development aid. Humanitarian agencies do not have the capacity to reach these areas in a sustained manner and most already implement projects through local nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) based inside Syria.

Where agency mandates and politics conflict. The problems of restricted access deepen when the composition of the local population conflicts with the mandates of international aid agencies specialising in addressing the needs of a particular group — whether women, children, IDPs, refugees, youth and so on, with nascent cross-demographic programming.

Decimated infrastructure. The protracted conflict has destroyed infrastructure, systems and institutions (both at national and sub-national level), increasing the local population's dependency on aid and eroding prospects for self-sufficiency. A recent World Bank report stated that the conflict has inflicted significant damage to the Syrian Arab Republic's physical capital stock,[2] and led to large numbers of casualties and forced displacement,[3] while depressing economic activity. From 2011 until the end of 2016, the cumulative losses in GDP have been estimated at US$226 billion, about four times the Syrian GDP in 2010.[2] Furthermore, reporting from Aleppo at the time of the siege in 2016 highlighted electricity and clean water shortages. Residents were surviving on temporary water tankers, winter supplies, medical assistance and daily meals provided by aid organisations.[4]

Longer term, the absence of institutions further compromises the creation of new systems and infrastructure that support self-reliance and resilience of affected communities. The conflict has cast a wide swath of the population into poverty and reoriented several million toward livelihood sectors that will not be sustainable in a post-war economy. A whole generation of children has received inadequate education. This, coupled with a significant brain drain, has heavily impacted Syria's human capital.[2]

Humanitarian aid spread thinly. The size and severity of needs has stretched current humanitarian actors thinly, beyond their mandates into development projects such as infrastructure that supports basic services such as water and electricity supply, health and education. At the same time, political sensitivities can often compromise the work of development actors, while lack of local knowledge prevents them from responding to longer-term development needs in a context-appropriate manner.

A complex and heterogeneous demographic. Aleppo, and other cities across Syria, demonstrate the complex demographic dynamic of a city in conflict: IDPs, returning refugees, people who stayed behind and local hegemony in the absence of central governance systems. Local leadership structures do not typically factor in ethnicities, poverty and socioeconomic levels of those living in

Figure 1. Established stages of response: from humanitarian assistance at the onset of crises to development and growth

Humanitarian → Early recovery → Resilience → Stabilisation → Development → Growth

the city, being the purview of an elite few. The needs of the groups that require assistance are complex and often require tailored responses. Lack of coordination between specialist agencies, however, exacerbate some of these differences in the long run.

Why Syria's local councils are well placed to support service delivery — and their limitations

Local councils were formed in opposition-held areas of Syria when the federal government's influence was jettisoned. Council members were drawn from the local community, civil society organisations and NGO workers who were Syrian nationals.

Local councils have many advantages and can overcome the five challenges listed earlier — being local they have better access to information as well as populations on the ground; members being drawn from society gives them greater legitimacy; and they allow local communities to hold local governance to account for service delivery.

Humanitarian aid agencies have often employed local councils to deliver and distribute aid rather than using a local NGO partner. Evidence from this study suggests these local councils are often equipped enough to act as local partners for aid agencies in service delivery.[5] They understand the area and local dynamics that they are working in and have set networks that take time for an international NGO to build, especially with no physical access.

On the other hand, these local councils are often handicapped by lack of capacity and resource. Humanitarian response is time critical and these councils are not always up to the challenge due to inexperience in humanitarian principles and rapid engagement on delivery of services in a conflict environment. Moreover, members of these councils are often themselves affected by the conflict.

Tapping into potential aid sources is a further challenge. Local NGOs and local councils often compete for donor funding. This leaves the councils at a disadvantage because their links to donor networks are not as strong.

However, the biggest advantage to fostering local councils is their potential to support a sustainable response to the crisis in Aleppo in key areas such as helping communities and vulnerable groups recover from shocks and build resilience to future stresses, reaching out to agencies providing aid and equitable distribution of resources.

Structurally, local councils act as much-needed sub-national governance institutions that can carry out basic functions of aid distribution and infrastructure service delivery. Looking ahead, any future national governance structure could be laid over this sub-national framework, which would expedite the recovery process.

Literature on aid indicates that rebuilding such local governance facilities are the most challenging aspect of recovery, once conflict ends — there is opportunity in supporting them now where local councils are already structurally set up to do so.

Barriers to fostering the humanitarian and development nexus in Syria

The primary barrier to creating this nexus is that humanitarian agencies resist interacting with development agencies for fear of compromising their principles of impartiality and independence. Development aid can come with a 'politicisation' that is often unavoidable. For instance, with aid response closer to the spectrum of resilience building — in providing longer-term livelihood assistance, there are often restrictions on which local parties can implement the response and who the beneficiaries should be.

A knock-on effect is that humanitarian and development activities are split, as donors essentially seek to mitigate the risk of any conflict of interests associated with aid. However, in Syria, given the need for humanitarian and development assistance simultaneously, there may be merits in revisiting the routine architecture of aid, possibly along the lines of UNICEF, which carries out humanitarian and development projects simultaneously.

Educated and skilled members of local councils in Syria can play a pivotal role in mitigating risk for donors funding such nexus activities. They can also

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Box 1. Local actors driving the response: Tamkeen, a case study

The Conflict, Security and Safety Fund's (CSSF's) project Tamkeen in Aleppo is an example of an initiative that enables local actors to take ownership in mounting a response to the crisis. Tamkeen was designed to build the governance capacities of local communities through the participatory delivery of services in opposition-controlled Syria. It provided grants to communities and convened community committees to plan, budget, procure and implement basic services projects in education, health, livelihoods, food security and infrastructure, chosen by the communities themselves.

Tamkeen's interventions were designed not towards the delivery of services themselves, but the capacity development of the local communities to deliver such services. When it came to identifying prioritised intervention areas, the majority of the communities selected service delivery and development of infrastructure, rather than petitioning for humanitarian aid such as food, shelter or emergency health services.

Tamkeen is essentially a governance-development project but, in many respects, also caters to humanitarian needs on the ground, such as the provision of basic services. With the experience of aid response to conflict, local participation is invaluable in the long-term sustainability of the population.

support donor interests by making this funding more transparent and accountable to the local population.

Syria retains an educated class of citizens willing to stay back or return and participate in the response to the crisis in a transparent and accountable way. With adequate support towards capacity building, local actors and institutions are well placed to drive the response in Syria.

But while opportunities exist for a coordinated multi-sector response in the current aid environment, these are rarely taken up by either humanitarian or development actors, or even by donors. This is mostly due to the architecture of aid described above where both donors and international actors continue to act in silos.

Distilling solutions

Both humanitarian and development actors can bring their expertise to strengthen local governance institutions, especially in the context of a heterogeneous population composition. Humanitarian agencies can strengthen these bodies' capacity, for example in carrying out needs assessments and in service delivery, while development organisations can enhance their transparency and accountability to citizens (Box 1).

The following recommendations would address the shortfall in meeting short-term needs and delivering longer-term development in Syria by building a local system at the nexus between humanitarian and development aid:

1. Humanitarian and development agencies should **empower local governance bodies** by building their capacity to deliver emergency response services, early recovery and service delivery. This would involve mapping out a comprehensive plan for building local capacity while providing interim support.

2. **Accountability mechanisms should factor in the context and capacity of local bodies.** Ensuring that this local system is transparent and that local bodies are accountable would enhance the legitimacy of a local response. This would include setting up systems that allow local governance bodies to be technically sound, be able to fundraise and show accountability to people as well as donors. These accountability systems should be tailored accordingly — for Syria, this would mean factoring in the local context,

providing a timeframe for local governance bodies to adapt to this and be able to function properly, and to be rolled out to the rest of the governorate.

3. **Capacity building of local governance bodies.** As donors and international community engagement increases with time, accountability and monitoring standards should be adapted when working with local actors who a) invariably rely on networks and patronage to function (bringing with it a degree of corruption and opaqueness) and b) are in areas where international actors cannot reach (remote management). The responsibility for addressing these standards will fall on international NGOs and UN agencies to set up capacity building systems for local councils and governing bodies. Building the capacity of local governance bodies to be accountable to international standards should be a key objective of donors working in Syria as engagement with humanitarian and development actors increases with time.

4. **Aid funding is adapted to the reality of the crises.** Activities that bridge the gap between development and humanitarian action need to be more clearly articulated, accompanied by a coherent plan, setting out how collaboration can work. This would start at the top from donor level, down to those local bodies that hold legitimacy within their communities, and would demonstrate how the end goal — building the long-term resilience of local people and the systems that support them — is achieved.

5. **Humanitarian and development actors together should invest in coordination and information tracking** at the existing cluster level[6] using standards that have been set internationally, and joining resources to collect data to work off the same benchmark — the kind of coordination that envisions a common responsibility to have a comprehensive vision and plan for Aleppo and other cities in Syria. The most important aspect here is to identify a single organisation that is willing to take the lead in bringing humanitarian and development actors to the same table and undertaking a comprehensive stakeholder mapping exercise in Syria's urban areas.

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Notes

[1] Local governance bodies refer not to government bodies per se but local groups/communities/committees that have taken on the responsibility of governance of their communities in areas of instability. / [2] World Bank (2017) The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria. / [3] Between 400,000 and 470,000 estimated deaths and more than half of Syria's 2010 population forcibly displaced. / [4] Aziz, S (17 November 2017) 'Totally destroyed': East Aleppo a year after battle. *Al-Jazeera*. www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/destroyed-east-aleppo-year-battle-171117080601775.html / [5] Dadu-Brown, S, Dadu, A and Zaid, M (forthcoming) Exploring the nexus between humanitarian and development goals in Aleppo. IIED, London. / [6] UNHCR, Cluster Approach (IASC). UN Cluster Coordination System. https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/61190/cluster-approach-iasc

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