

# **Balancing Lethal Perceptions**

Understanding Disparities in the Co-Governance of Risk  
for Local Humanitarian Partners in Syria

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Case Study Summary and Findings on Remote Partnering Practices  
and Risk Management

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The views and recommendations expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of Remote Partnering or the Partnership Brokers Association.

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## Executive Summary

The conflict in Syria is only one among many other large-scale humanitarian crises –including Yemen, South Sudan and Afghanistan - that have rendered the formal humanitarian system obsolete in gaining access and delivering life-saving assistance to vulnerable populations in armed conflict. It is estimated that over 80 percent of global humanitarian need stems directly from protracted armed conflicts but as acute needs continue to grow, today’s humanitarian action remains defined by the traditional system’s struggle to overcome operational paralysis in the face of rising insecurity. To cope, traditional humanitarian actors have turned to remote approaches that rely on local partners to establish a humanitarian presence, drastically changing the humanitarian landscape and bringing a needed focus to the local response. Considering the growing prevalence of remote partnerships in armed conflict settings, this study identified the need for context-specific knowledge of how risks are considered and evaluated by local humanitarian partners in insecure environments. More specifically, this study sought to fill the knowledge gap of how risk materializes for local aid workers on-the-ground and how that differs from institutional prescriptions of risk made by remote international humanitarian actors.

Through this inquiry, the study’s scope focused on understanding how risk is co-governed between INGOs and local organizations, where INGOs hold the majority of the resources to dictate aid projects, but where local organizations hold all of the access to carry them out. The scope of co-governance was used to explore the norms and values through which security-decisions are made in humanitarian partnerships and to evaluate the extent to which decisions are participatory and transparent. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to study INGO documents and the responses of twelve semi-structured interviews that were carried out with local Syrian partners, INGO representatives and a partnership expert. In doing so, the research used Syria as the environment for an exploratory case study to serve as a springboard in understanding risk management challenges in remote humanitarian partnerships.

The study found that the co-governance of risk has been harmfully unbalanced, focusing too much on INGO institutional risks and thus, disregarding local experience, underestimating local knowledge and often steering aid away from locations deemed acceptable by local partners themselves. The study argues that international humanitarian actors may inadvertently be disregarding the voices and abilities of local actors to choose to take on risk by not including them in strategic risk management decisions or building their operational capacities. Additionally, it argues that understanding differences in risk perceptions is crucial to not only safeguard humanitarian lives, but also to improve the reach of aid in insecure contexts.

Although, the limited scope of this study focuses on differences, its aim is not to reinforce divides but to shed light on underlying norms that help to establish common ground and motivate meaningful discussions to work towards more equitable partnerships. To help bridge these differing points of understanding, the final section of this paper offers tangible recommendations to both local partners and their international counterparts on improving risk management practices within partnerships.

## I. What is the Co-Governance of Risk?

The use of governance borrows from definitions set by UNESCO, referring to “how power is distributed and shared, how policies are formulated, priorities set and stakeholders made accountable” (UNESCO, 2017). While there are many contextual, institutional and fiscal risks associated with humanitarian action, this paper focuses on security risks inherent in armed conflict; where the concept of security risk is understood as the probability of exposure to physical and life-threatening danger.

When these separate concepts are joined together, **the co-governance of risk can be recognized as how power is distributed to set norms, strategic vision and high-level policies for risk management within humanitarian partnerships.** Additionally, the co-governance of risk refers to the dichotomy of power inadvertently created to gain humanitarian access in conflict zones- where international agencies hold the majority of resources to dictate aid operations, but local actors hold the majority of physical presence and access to carry them out. These separate points of oversight create differing perspectives for decision-making regarding acceptable levels of risk for humanitarian operations, which are not easily observable without empirical analysis.

In essence, the co-governance of risk represents the norms and values through which decisions are made and the degree to which decisions are participatory and transparent. Understanding the complex dimensions involved in the co-governance of risk is crucial to improve current partnership practices and to increase the reach of aid in insecure contexts.

## II. Case Study Objectives

The study summarized here chiefly addresses the following research question: *What disparities exist in the co-governance of risk for local humanitarian partners in Syria and how can these disparities be addressed?* In a preliminary literature review, the study found that discussions of humanitarian risk management and risk-transfer were limited to INGO perspectives and did not include perspectives from implementing local staff and organizations.

To fill this gap in understanding, the research also aimed to answer the following sub-questions:

- 1) What are the differences in how “acceptable” risk is perceived by local humanitarian actors and their international partners?
- 2) How do local actors perceive or use the term “risk-transfer”?

## III. Knowledge Gaps

### 1. Risk- Transfer

As remote partnerships become the default mode of humanitarian programming, outsourcing security risks to local partners has become the norm for sustaining relief projects in dangerous contexts (Howe, Stites, & Chudacoff, 2015). By holding most of the humanitarian access in armed conflict, local partners also face the majority of risks; for instance, it is estimated that local actors account for over 87 percent of total attacks against aid workers in conflict zones (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2017). While the higher burden of risk for local humanitarian responders is intuitive -given the lack of international presence in insecure settings- context-specific research is needed to understand how risk-transfer has occurred and how these risks are considered by local humanitarian partners themselves.

Although the use of local partners as primarily a risk mitigation strategy (rather than a strategy to create relevant interventions) has been highlighted as a problem by many actors in the formal humanitarian system, there have not been any focused studies on risk-transfer or local security risks. Furthermore, many high-level arguments against the use of local partners are in fact centered around the questionable ethics of risk-transfer but do not include the opinions of frontline workers themselves. These debates

often state that formal actors are “pushing” risks onto local partners that they are ill-prepared to take on. Existing research has only confirmed the prevalence of these approaches but has failed to closely consider how they are implemented in consideration to the capacities, needs and safety of local actors.

## **2. Localization Debates around the World Humanitarian Summit**

Current international humanitarian policy debates have revolved around developments following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, where new funding commitments were created to change the architecture of the humanitarian system by striving to increase direct funding to local actors themselves. While these new commitments to localize humanitarian aid can bolster emergency relief in many settings, these policy debates were held in general terms, without differentiating between natural disasters and armed conflicts. Without this contextual nuance, these debates suffer from the recognition of ongoing humanitarian partnership practices that have already placed many local humanitarian actors at the helm of aid operations in conflict zones. Additionally, these debates have only focused on the future allocation of resources and thus, the long-winded reform of the broader humanitarian system rather than focusing on short-term improvements of current humanitarian action including partnership practices.

By keeping localization discussions on broad terms, these debates have failed to adequately incorporate local perspectives on subjects beyond humanitarian financing. This means that ultimately, localization discourse has failed to consider the many other ways in which aid is co-governed in practice and the ways in which local partners consider and negotiate the conditions of their involvement in relief operations.

## **3. Dominance of Headquarter Perspectives**

Lastly, by failing to recognize the ubiquity of remote approaches in insecure settings, humanitarian policy debates overwhelmingly represent the views of international headquarters and thus only include one-side of the equation in decisions about humanitarian risk, ultimately dictating where aid is seen fit to be delivered. The limited discussion about the governance of risk has thus harmfully failed to account for the many ways and settings in which international actors and local aid providers negotiate and manage the conditions to provide aid to affected communities. Consequently, this indicates a large knowledge gap between the institutional prescription of risk and how risk materializes in reality for aid implementers on the ground.

## **IV. Syria Case Study Selection**

Although the Syrian conflict presents the most challenging political and security environment for humanitarian response ever-recorded, it is not deviant to other humanitarian crises but offers the most influential environment for analysis because local actors were integral parts of the humanitarian response since the inception of the crisis (Stoddard, Jilliani, & et al., 2016). Like other countries in armed conflict, Syria had not experienced a nationwide humanitarian crisis prior to the onset of its civil war. Consequently, local groups had limited experience with humanitarian action as the country fell into a cycle of violence without foreseeable solutions.

Like Syria, other protracted armed conflicts are also characterized by a complex web of fragmented armed groups and hostile state governments that do not abide by IHL standards. Numerous sieges and blockades prevent civilian movement and the divided control of different regions hampers the transportation of goods and assistance. These challenges gave birth to local approaches in aid delivery as a means of managing high levels of insecurity. As a result of these factors, local Syrian actors are responsible for delivering over 75% of direct humanitarian assistance to an estimated 13.5 million people in need within Syria (Els, Mansour, & Carstensen, 2016 & UNOCHA, 2018). The large presence of local humanitarian actors in Syria makes it an ideal setting to analyze issues surrounding the co-governance of risk.

## V. Method of Inquiry

An exploratory case study was designed based on qualitative methods. The first step was a thematic analysis of primary statements and documents from INGOs, which used an inductive approach to create preliminary themes for understanding risk perceptions. Next, twelve interviews were conducted to fill knowledge gaps identified by a literature review and to continue the initial thematic analysis of INGO documents. The twelve respondents were selected from three identified target groups, (1) Syrian local partners operating inside of Syria or managing cross-border operations, (2) representatives from INGOs working through remote partners in Syria and (3) an independent partnership expert. As the research depended on a desk review and a limited number of semi-structured interviews, the perspectives used and provided in this report cannot be assumed to be representative of all stakeholders.

Additionally, in terms of scope, it is important to note that throughout this study, the use of ‘formal’ or ‘traditional’ actors is meant to refer to INGOs, UN agencies and the Red Cross/ Red Crescent Movement. This study recognizes that these labels do not account for the vast diversity within the humanitarian system or distinguish between the different mandates and challenges each individual organization faces, however, it is beyond the scope of this research to reference these particularities. In a similar vein, this report uses “local” to describe a diverse range of organizations that do not belong to the traditional humanitarian sector but instead were born out of necessity following a conflict or crisis. These organizations were created to operate within a limited area or across a crisis-affected country, unlike INGOs which were designed to operate in many countries and are generally headquartered in the West.

Additionally, the design of this study focuses on co-governance of risk or the way in which decisions are made on what is considered to be acceptable risk thresholds in humanitarian partnerships. This means that the study only focused on operational decision-making between INGOs and LNGOs. This limited the study by not including donors who are a third stakeholder within the general governance of aid. While the study acknowledges the unmeasurable importance of donors, its focus is on operational decision-making from the project planning and implementing level.

## VI. Key Findings

Before considering the impact of risk perceptions on decision making within humanitarian partnerships, it is important to recognize first and foremost, that risks are not objective or neutral constructs. Instead, risks present subjective ideas because they are non-existent, invented constructs used to make sense of current experience (Beck, 1992). Consequently, risk perceptions form intangible realities that are based on lived experiences and social interactions. With this understanding, truly objective risk analyses and perceptions are impossible to create because they can only be understood in relation to their physical, institutional and social environments that inform them into reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In the context of remote partnerships, where lived realities are unimaginably disconnected, achieving a balance of multiple perceptions and accepting their respective realities becomes the ultimate challenge to effectively governing risk, mitigating danger and meeting humanitarian objectives. Moreover, this implies that discussions about risk should not focus on assessing the validity of each stakeholder’s reality, but on striving to construct a collective understanding of perceptions to balance disparities in influence and decision-making power.

As shown in Figure 1, the study identified two overarching and six disparate themes in risk perceptions that underlie how security risks are managed in Syrian remote partnerships. The themes presented in this graphic are by no means meant to be exhaustive of all the specific operational complexities within individual risk decision-making; however, they serve to be simplified portrayals of dominant patterns that came forward within the limited scope of the study.

Respondents working within LNGOs and on the ground in Syria emphasized how the humanitarian imperative of responding to visible needs inform how they make decisions to mitigate danger and consider risks. On the other side of the scales, INGOs focused on the institutional risks they are faced with when security is perceived to be threatened, highlighting fears of reputational loss or financial cuts through fiduciary failures of aid not being delivered to targeted communities. As can be seen from the diagram, these perceptions create disparities in how physical risk is operationally managed, determined and governed between INGOs and LNGOs.



**Figure 1.** The balance of predominant themes in risk perceptions between INGOs and LNGOs in Syria

This study found that these disparate perspectives harmfully unbalance the co-governance of risk, as INGOs dictate humanitarian operations grounded on their own risk perceptions that do not fully integrate LNGO imperatives and considerations. This means that although the intended purpose of partnerships is to strike a balance towards risk tolerance, INGOs remain risk averse skewing the risk governance within partnerships by disregarding the voices and abilities of local actors to choose acceptable security risks on their own terms. The chosen imagery of scales shows the need for equal parity in weighing and legitimizing each side’s realities for successful partnerships and effective humanitarian programming. The following subsections describe the interaction of the underlying themes that characterize the overarching priorities and their imbalance.

**1. Potential of Aid Diversion Vs. Potential to Alleviate Suffering**

Aid diversion is not a new problem to humanitarian action, but in Syria, where international humanitarian access is critically obstructed, partner LNGOs with the most access, by default, also experience the most security risks and therefore present the most institutional risks for partner organizations, linking security and institutional consequences together and informing decisions on the latter. By expanding humanitarian access through LNGOs, INGOs risk aid diversion that ultimately not only curtail their intended humanitarian impact, but also put them at risk of being prosecuted under international counter-terrorist legislation if aid is thought to fall into the wrong hands. During interviews with INGO representatives, each discussion focused on how organizations manage potential aid diversion risks as the focus of their security assessments and risk management strategies. To mirror this observation, the two Syrian LNGO executive managers (working from Turkey), who have direct exposure to INGO negotiations first asked if risk management questions meant to gauge financial risk mitigation or security risk

mitigation. Furthermore, on the other side of the scale, the six aid workers inside of Syria each answered the same question by unprompted descriptions of how their teams mitigate the physical security risks they face on-the-ground. Just this disparity in understanding what constitutes a priority for risk management has implications that reinforce the divide between INGOs and LNGOs. INGO interviewees would not acknowledge the security risks faced by partners until specifically prompted to do so, and when done had limited knowledge of the duty of care afforded to their partners. *This divide implies that joint responsibility for the physical risks of local staff fall unevenly between the balance of co-governance.* Since INGOs depend on their local partners for access, there is a need to jointly discuss and acknowledge the security risks faced by local partners equally to institutional risks implied in aid delivery.

By contrast, LNGO interviewees acknowledged both the physical risks they face and the risks the aid carries itself, including impartial delivery to one community over another, pervasive corruption and aid diversion to armed groups. However, differently than their INGO counterparts, locals contextualized these risks in regards to fears of not meeting their goals to alleviate suffering rather than fears of facing organizational repercussions. One respondent said, “We accept more risk than any other international teams because we see what needs to be done and we have to save as many lives as we can.” Another respondent said “the international partner cares about everything going smoothly but the goal of their projects does not go beyond a randomly assigned percentage of what they think is acceptable risk.” This perspective, while intuitive, cannot be understated. For local actors, decisions on risk are not arbitrary or based on a simple cost-benefit analysis, but instead based on shared desires to alleviate suffering.

## **2. Local Acceptance Vs. Risk-Transfer**

Pronounced disparities on risk-transfer perceptions also unbalance the co-governance of security management and decision-making within partnerships. As previously stated, risk-transfer is a term used to describe the transfer of physical risks from international actors to local actors. The overwhelming attitude towards risk-transfer among the INGO community is characterized by two traits; firstly, by a feeling of shame for a failure to be present and secondly, by the desire to protect local actors from taking on risks that INGOs believe they are not prepared to take.

Although the idea of risk-transfer is well-intentioned and poised to advocate for protecting partners and local staff, analysis of INGO documents, statements and interviews showed that the idea and its resulting rhetoric was limited to perspectives of formal international actors, rather than also including the perspectives of local partners and implementers themselves. Through interviews with LNGO representatives and aid workers inside of Syria, it became clear that *the idea of risk-transfer as a negative feature of partnership is isolated only to international perspective, as Syrian aid workers overwhelmingly expressed an informed acceptance of risks and many found the term risk-transfer to be nonsensical.* For instance, the aid workers inside of Syria who participated in this study had each never heard of the term risk-transfer until the interview. One respondent said “Risk is not transferred to us from outside of Syria, we were already here. Every mission is dangerous-you are entering an area that is targeted... We know this and we very much appreciate and like the advice we get from international partners, even though they are not always right.”

## **3. Field-based Risk Management Vs. Remote Prescription of Risk**

Lastly, underlying disparities in risk perceptions are differences in what INGOs and LNGOs consider to be trustworthy security assessments and determination practices. More specifically, it is the difference between INGO remote prescription of risk and LNGO on-the-ground risk assessments. In general, INGOs rely on expert security risk matrices to establish acceptable security levels, which are determined by specialized security teams that are not fully embedded into humanitarian program teams. By contrast, although the large amount of local and community-based organizations in Syria vary in formalization and expertise, well-established LNGO partners also use formal risk matrices, but make decisions according to operational managers and teams on the ground instead.



Local Syrian partners expressed that INGOs often imagine risks with much more intensity to how local aid workers themselves perceive them. One respondent in southern Syria said, “Actually, for a lot of NGOs the situation here is good. It is only scary if you do not know the region, but if you are familiar there are no problems.” Syrian aid workers all expressed awareness of security conditions and trust in local knowledge to mitigate possible risks that may arise. This theme, however, stands opposite to international prescription of risk, where INGOs have been noted to express that “local organizations do not take security concerns seriously enough” (Howe, Stites, & Chudacoff, 2015). *The disparate INGO sentiment shows a lack of trust in local knowledge that may unfairly characterize local actors as being negatively “risk-encouraging” rather than positively “risk tolerant.”*

While it is true that many Syrian CBOs and LNGOs lack essential risk assessment and security analysis capacities, it is equally true that, through the progression of the conflict, many Syrian organizations have become increasingly sophisticated in managing risks. Consequently, it is necessary to account for the diversity of capacity among local actors and judge the effectiveness of risk mitigation strategies on more than whether they are internationally-accepted methods.

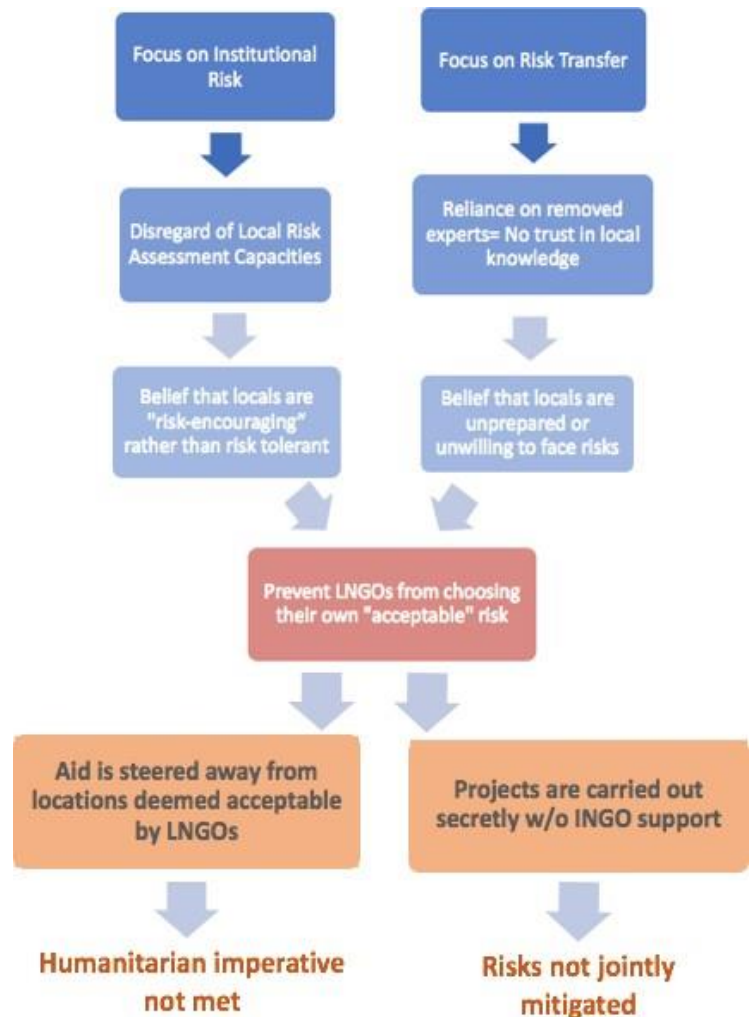
## VII. Consequences of these Disparities

Despite the aforementioned opposing themes, it is important to note that all LNGO and INGO respondents interviewed, saw their partnerships in positive light and as essential to address the overwhelming level of need in Syria. However, interviews also uncovered problems caused by these disparities, which erode trust in partnerships and have serious impacts on humanitarian programming. These impacts can be seen from Figure 2.

The INGO focus on institutional risk and risk-transfer have led to risk aversion in partnerships where local actors are prevented from enacting humanitarian interventions and choosing their own acceptable levels of risk.

Many Syrian aid workers interviewed shared stories of international partners steering aid away from locations where LNGOs saw it was needed and where they felt comfortable entering.

Moreover, because of disparities in INGO perspectives, local actors interviewed admitted to not sharing the true nature of their experiences with international partners and having to take more risks to carry out projects without their support. For example, in light of a sudden rise in violence at the time of this research, one Syrian respondent detailed having to shut down operations in Eastern Ghouta but moving to setup another operation in secret to respond to growing need. When asked if their international partners knew about their new operation they said, “We didn’t discuss this issue with any INGO, because we are focused on their intervention and their focus is on protecting the money, I can understand that its



**Figure 2.** The Consequences of Risk Perception Disparities on the Co-governance of Risk

public money so they also focus on our security as their partner, but in the end we still need to support them [the people in need]". This statement shows the need to integrate local partners at a strategic level to govern risk more effectively and have transparent conversations for decision making. The lack of participatory security discussions leaves local actors to address critical needs without partner support, decreasing the likelihood of effective risk mitigation. *In essence, failing to balance risk perceptions in humanitarian partnerships leads to a breakdown in communication that erodes trust, creating more risks and deadly consequences by failing to meet acute humanitarian needs and jointly working to mitigate physical risks for workers on-the-ground.*

#### 4. Failures in Capacity Strengthening and Duty of Care for Partners

The lack of joint responsibility for security risks experienced by local partners also starkly extends to failures in capacity strengthening and duty of care from INGOs. The aid workers inside of Syria interviewed cited disappointment at having a complete lack of security training or capacity-building activities offered to them by international partners. Since INGOs place a greater focus on institutional risks in partnerships, trainings focused only on organizational capacity strengthening, rather than also placing a focus on operational skills building to improve risk mitigation strategies. While Syrian LNGOs have needs for organizational capacity-strengthening, most interviewees expressed that trainings were often useless, repetitive and not worth being short-staffed over. Moreover, many LNGOs have over a dozen international partners that require participation in their own chosen trainings but that thematically cross-over to trainings offered by other international organizations, meaning that local partners (who are often already understaffed) are stretched to participate in repetitive trainings not geared to their needs. For instance, one respondent said, "there isn't a lot of focus on this side by our partners, our team needs a lot of training on evacuation, how to do first aid, and to be honest as a Syrian NGO we don't have all the capacity to do all of these things and we have about 1000 team members on the ground right now and of course they are under a lot of risk of explosions or airstrikes."

### Research Implications



#### Need for Balancing Perceptions

Failing to balance risk perceptions in humanitarian partnerships leads to a breakdown in communication that erodes trust in partnerships, creating more risks and deadly consequences for partners. Creating policies that use adaptive management to make joint risk assessments would help this imbalance and help legitimize the risk that each side faces.



#### Rethinking Risk-Transfer

The idea of risk-transfer was rejected by local aid workers who found the idea to be nonsensical, as they collectively accept the risks they take and were already inside of Syria prior to INGO involvement. Regardless, INGOs should jointly create capacity-strengthening programs that coordinate and prioritize the operational needs of local partners to mitigate risks.



#### Towards Risk Tolerance

Although the intended purpose of partnerships is to strike a balance towards risk tolerance, INGOs remain risk averse, skewing the risk governance within partnerships by disregarding the abilities of local actors to choose acceptable security risks on their own terms. LNGOs should take the time to negotiate partnership agreements in consideration with risk management needs and expectations.



#### Partnerships are Indispensable

Despite differences, partnerships are necessary tools to address the immense scale of needs in Syria, requiring the collective expertise of both INGOs and LNGOs, meaning that all risk perceptions are legitimate but require shared understanding. INGOs should use the word "partnership" honestly, rather than using them to describe sub-contractual relationships.

## Final Recommendations

### **Specific Recommendations for INGOs:**

- Use joint risk assessments and joint needs assessments with local partners to establish common criteria for humanitarian interventions and include local partners at a strategic decision-making level.
- Ensure that assessments and contracts are in English and Arabic, rather than leaving local partners to pay for translation services themselves
- Create capacity-strengthening programs through local partner selection to ensure that trainings equally emphasize the operational needs of aid workers on the ground and the organizational needs of their headquarters outside of Syria.
- Specifically, ensure that capacity-strengthening programs prioritize security for local aid workers and focus on developing risk mitigation and analysis capacities
- Ensure that capacity-strengthening programs are not limited to one-off trainings but instead incorporate regular coaching and peer meetings to facilitate collaborative relationships and co-learning
- Seek to consolidate and coordinate existing organizational capacity-strengthening programs with other INGOs to prevent unnecessary repetition for local partners.
- Consolidate INGO trainings for on-the-ground aid workers on electronic platforms with the ability to seek experts when needed
- Use adaptive management approaches for partnership building to provide some autonomy to local partners and create space for experimentation and mistakes to build trust in relationships
- Shift from reactive approaches to anticipatory programming, in order to facilitate partner-led approaches in humanitarian operations
- Slowly develop internal partnership capacity by encouraging informal discussions to facilitate transparent communication on risks and build trust
- Honest and thoughtful use of the term partnership in describing relationships to local organizations. There is nothing wrong with sub-contractual relationships with local organizations, however, calling them partnerships without a clear discussion of what this entails or an intent to foster the equity implicit in the term, leads to irreparable miscommunications and harm.
- Seek to create long-run exit-strategies with local partners to anticipate capacity-strengthening needs with the goal of preparing local partners for INGO or donor withdrawal

### **Specific Recommendations for LNGOs:**

- Take time to develop and read partnership agreements in order to negotiate terms based on LNGO needs
- Encourage explicit discussions about partnership expectations and risk considerations in order to be transparent about security concerns or other challenges
- Set and negotiate a jointly agreed upon capacity-strengthening agenda. Many interviewees in this study indicated that partners were receptive once issues and needs were clearly stated, and emphasized the need to build negotiation capacities in local organizations.
- Acknowledge the legitimacy of INGO risks and recognize the limitations on INGOs themselves to remove possible animosity from relationships

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