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Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings— The Cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan

Kimberly Howe, Elizabeth Stites, and Danya Chudacoff



Tufts
UNIVERSITY

Gerald J. and Dorothy R.
Friedman School of
Nutrition Science and Policy

Cover image: Many civilians left their homes in rebel-held areas of Aleppo out of fear of the bombs [Reuters]

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Feinstein International Center
Tufts University
114 Curtis Street
Somerville, MA 02144
USA
tel: +1 617.627.3423
fax: +1 617.627.3428
fic.tufts.edu

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

This study set out to examine partnerships between international and local organizations engaging in humanitarian action in remote management and insecure settings. The study was motivated by the lack of systematic research in areas where international organizations have limited access due to insecurity or lack of permission from host governments. While most large international organizations have developed guidelines around partnerships, these partnership approaches tend to be designed for development contexts or when humanitarian space is accessible to outsiders.

We used the case of northern Syria, specifically focusing on cross-border assistance from Turkey, and complemented this study with a historical review of Iraqi Kurdistan during and after the US-led Operation Provide Comfort in the early 1990s. The objective of this research was to improve the evidence base on how international organizations could most effectively partner with local organizations in remote management settings. We pursued four specific areas of inquiry in order to fulfill this objective: i) How do international organizations identify local partners? ii) How do international organizations assess and build the capacity of these partners? iii) How are monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) conducted in these settings? iv) How do local partners prepare for eventual donor withdrawal? The findings from this research aim to inform and improve the ways in which international and local organizations work together in settings of remote management or insecurity, with lessons for country donors, United Nations agencies, international organizations, and local partners. This work was funded by the US Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM).

Methods

This study used qualitative methods to gather longitudinal data over nine months on partnerships between international and local organizations providing cross-border humanitarian action from Turkey into northern Syria. We used selective sampling to identify five Syrian organizations and their international partners who were willing to participate in monthly interviews. We also interviewed 27 additional international and local organizations responding to the Syrian conflict in order to gather a range of perspectives. In Iraqi Kurdistan, we collected data from key informants and representatives of current or defunct organizations that had provided assistance in the early 1990s. The data from Kurdistan were particularly important to understanding the process and repercussions of donor withdrawal.

We transcribed, coded, and analyzed a total of 123 interviews. In late September 2014, we presented the preliminary findings from this analysis to a group of more than 60 representatives from Syrian, Turkish, and international organizations in Gaziantep, Turkey. This facilitated workshop allowed for “ground-truthing” of the initial findings and provided an opportunity for study participants and broader stakeholders to comment, correct, and contribute to the findings. The data from this workshop are incorporated into the final report.

A literature review on operations in remote management and humanitarian and development partnerships complemented the field work. In addition, we benefitted from analysis by colleagues from the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University who provided insight on remote management in insecure settings, with specific examples from Afghanistan and Somalia.

Our methods adhered to principles of confidentiality, and thus no information was shared between partner organizations working on Syria. We also do not identify any of the organizations or individuals who participated in this study.

Findings

The findings from this study are meant to be broadly applicable to settings of remote management or extreme insecurity.

The first finding points to important tensions inherent within situations of **remote management**. Remote management is defined by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as the withdrawal for security reasons of international staff and the transfer of program responsibilities to local staff or partner organizations. The increase in remote management contexts is a result of several trends in Western aid practice: i) involvement in areas that were previously off-limits due to insecurity, sovereignty, or lack of national interest; ii) a growth of partnership approaches in the humanitarian sector; and iii) increased reluctance on the part of international organizations or their donors to take security risks.

While remote management has been used on a temporary basis for humanitarian operations in a number of contexts, including Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia, the case of Syria is unique in that remote management has been the predominant form of operation since early in the crisis and is likely to continue for the duration of the conflict.

Our study demonstrates that remote management involves a series of trade-offs and compromises, both for local and international organizations and between the international organizations and their donors. These trade-offs and compromises result in tensions in the partners' relationship and affect the ability of the partnership to provide assistance. These tensions occur primarily around issues of access and include questions of security, risk, and reporting requirements, including monitoring and evaluation.

The Syria case study brings into stark clarity the contentiousness and complexity around access. The study found that access (like beneficiary needs) is constantly shifting. Access is highly relational and depends on local networks and reputations. Access is arbitrary, and control of

access by armed groups is a form of power. Access relates closely to risk, and the ways in which different actors view access correlates to their tolerance for risk. For example, those local organizations with the best access to populations in need are those that also represent the greatest risk to international actors, as access requires moving through highly insecure areas and interfacing with armed groups. For the most part, the international organizations we interviewed were aware of these trade-offs and the underlying tensions, and were willing to take the associated risks in order to provide assistance to beneficiaries. There is less evidence that the donors who fund the international organizations share this approach and are willing or able to take on this same level of risk.

Our findings on **partnerships** in remote management settings illustrate some of the unique challenges and considerations for international organizations seeking to operate in these environments. Options for local partners are generally more limited, and many candidates may be unregistered in their home or host country, be extremely new, and have little organizational or operational experience. Diaspora organizations may also exist as potential partners; these organizations are more likely to have a proven track record and characteristics appealing to international organizations (such as financial systems, language skills, and personnel systems). On the other hand, diaspora organizations are likely to have significantly less credibility with or access to the affected communities.

Partnership models between international and local organizations vary in motivation, contract type, type of assistance, the value of the contract, as well as which organization drives the agenda. In addition to these dimensions, this study identified a set of additional variables that held strong influence over partnerships in the Syrian context. These include: how the international organization defines its end goals, the international organization's capacity to partner with local organizations, the stability of the international organization within the local context, and the country donor's level of comfort with risk.

This study found that remote management contexts require a partnership strategy in which international organizations consider that: partnerships take time; there is no checklist for finding a good partner; and partnerships are enhanced when the operational environment is collaborative and trusting, and there is an understanding that the context is constantly changing.

There are a number of ways to **identify potential partners** in remote management settings. The most common methods in the case study were through contacts with other international organizations, participation in coordination meetings that included local organizations, and contact initiated by the local organizations. These methods are relatively passive and prioritize those local organizations with the skills and connections that enable them to make contact with international actors. More active methods for partner identification reduce bias and may improve results. These methods include stakeholder mapping, use of pre-conflict connections, networking through existing contacts or social media, participating in regional and local events, and interviewing local actors. All of these methods require time, outreach, and the existence of specific skills or experience within the international organization. Collective means of partner identification on the part of the international organizations could offset some of the required resources and also decrease counterproductive competition among agencies.

Our study examined the question of **capacity** in depth and found discrepancies regarding the meaning of capacity, the elements of capacity considered to be the most important, and the best approaches for building capacity. The case studies for this research highlighted two types of capacity that were most prevalent and important: organizational capacity and operational capacity. Organizational capacity refers to management, governance, and decision-making structures. Operational capacity refers to delivery of programs and projects. International organizations were found to be much stronger in organizational capacity, while the strength of local organizations was in operational capacity. This difference at times leads to

misunderstandings, misalignment in priorities for capacity building, and poorly targeted resources.

Techniques for **capacity building** identified in this study include trainings, workshops, partnership focal points, staff secondments, and pilot projects. Trainings are the most common mode of capacity development, and are largely driven by the priorities and needs of the international organizations. Local organizations often object to this top-down approach and complain that the trainings are time-consuming and not always relevant to their needs. From the perspective of local organizations in the Syria case study, having a dedicated partnership focus point person within the international partner organization was by far the most effective means of building capacity. These individuals served as resources for the partner organization and helped them to navigate the complex terrain of international funding and requirements.

The study demonstrated how **monitoring and evaluation** (M&E) takes on heightened and perhaps disproportionate importance in remote management settings. This is due both to the logistical difficulties of conducting M&E in a conflict zone, and to the awareness by all parties that the continuation of the partner relationship depends heavily on the quality of more general reporting, including M&E. A range of innovative M&E approaches has been developed around the world for settings in which access is limited or simply irregular. These include INGO-based methods such as call centers, GPS shipment tracking, and regular debriefing meetings with local partners. Community-based methods include crowd sourcing, broadcasts, complaints boxes, and consulting local communities. Local partner methods include photos and videos of distributions, web-based remote project monitoring, daily verbal reports, and peer observations. Over the course of the study, third-party monitoring was increasingly viewed as the gold standard for remote monitoring and evaluation. Each of these approaches has its benefits and drawbacks, and none can fully address the difficulty of monitoring operations in a contested and rapidly changing conflict environment.

The challenges of MEAL were clear in the Syria case study, and our recommendations arise from these. Local organizations felt that the MEAL agenda was pushed by their international partners, with little attention to the quality of the assistance being delivered. There is a perceived asymmetry in the emphasis of accountability to the donors versus accountability to the local beneficiaries. Different donors have different reporting requirements that must be juggled. These demands create heavy time burdens on local partners with little organizational capacity, volunteers as staff, and dangerous working environments. In addition, third-party monitors were at times insensitive to the culture or the conflict dynamic. However, this study found that local organizations increasingly streamlined MEAL into their own programming, as the merits of MEAL were appreciated in their own right, apart from donor requirements.

Aside from requirements specific to MEAL, donor requirements were found to strain local organizations where they have the least amount of capacity, specifically, in organizational capacity. As well, international organizations often do not factor security into their requirements. Often local organizations said that they are faced with the dilemma of receiving international support or putting their staff, vendors, and beneficiaries at security risks to comply with donor requirements. At the same time, this study highlighted that international organizations—including country donors—are receptive to receiving feedback from local organizations about the problems they encounter with requirements. Communication and trust between partners was highlighted as a cornerstone to effective partnerships.

The study examined **donor withdrawal** primarily through the case of Iraqi Kurdistan. Organizations employed a variety of coping mechanisms in response to the sudden or gradual withdrawal of their major donors. These approaches ranged from complete closure to diversification of funding sources to the adaptation of the organization's mission and goals. The likelihood of any one of these

outcomes depended on a number of factors, including the extent of core funding held by an organization prior to withdrawal. Many organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan coped with the cessation of donor funds by scaling back their operations or costs, including laying off staff or shifting to a volunteer model. Others became dormant but did not close altogether; some of these have reemerged in response to the influx of Syrian refugees and Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs) in recent months.

Donors can mitigate the negative impacts of eventual withdrawal by prioritizing the longer-term sustainability of their local partners. This can be done through attention to both organizational and operational capacity building, a focus on the capacity of the institution as opposed to simply that of individuals within the organization, support to longer-term projects, provision of core funds, and efforts to support alliances among local groups to contribute to a robust civil society.

One of the most important lessons from the Syria case study has to do with the role of **trust** in partnerships. The study showed that trust was an absolutely essential element of the partnering relationship, but trust served different functions for international and local organizations. In addition, international actors often placed less emphasis on trust than did their national counterparts. International organizations have multiple levels of safeguards and systems in place to ensure minimal losses and smooth operations. In contrast, for local organizations, trust is the primary and most important system for maintaining both organizational and operational success. While trust is helpful to international organizations, it is ultimately replaceable, because they are more invested in and reliant upon a system of checks and balances. This difference in perspectives means that the international organization does not fully appreciate the extent to which trust and trust-building matter to the local organization.

Conclusions

The true equity of partnerships between local and international actors can be questioned when one side has all the money and holds most of the decision-making power. This dynamic is more nuanced in a remote management setting because while the international players continue to hold all the money, the local players hold *all* of the access. The international actors have no choice except to partner if they wish to be involved in humanitarian response.

By its very nature, remote management places into stark contrast the roles and priorities of the international and local actors. The primary role of international organizations in remote management settings is to manage their local partners. The primary role of local partners is to deliver goods and provide services to people. It is *personal* for local actors because the conflict is affecting *their* friends, families, neighbors, and countrymen. They are concerned with saving lives, securing livelihoods, and preparing for a better future. With these tensions and differences in mind, the study concludes with recommendations on creating and maintaining successful partnerships in remote management settings.

Specific Recommendations

Bilateral and multi-lateral donors should:

- Recognize that partnerships in remote management contexts are fundamentally different from other settings. Donors should take this uniqueness into account before supporting international organizations that work with local partners.
- Evaluate their tolerance for risk (including the potential that organizations will interface with armed groups and also that flexibility may be needed regarding standardized requirements) before supporting partnership initiatives or operating in remote management settings.¹

- Design their requirements to prioritize security for both national and international actors over other reporting considerations, by emphasizing that security is the top priority for all actors, having clear contingency plans in place to take into account the shifting security conditions, ensuring that security costs at the local level (including guards, adequate offices, trainings, insurance, etc.) are included in project grants for local organizations, and encouraging open feedback about emerging conditions.
- Solicit information from both international and local fund recipients in order to fully understand the potential difficulties with meeting reporting requirements.
- Be clear about the conditions under which they would consider withdrawing funding, in order to build trust and open channels of communication along the partnership chain.
- Work with international partners to streamline and simplify requirements to the extent possible in order to reduce the burden on local partners.

International organizations should:

- Assess their motivations for choosing to be present and active in response to a given emergency. Involvement should be based on having a comparative advantage such as an established presence or history in the region, strong regional networks, staff with advanced language skills, or expertise and demonstrated success in remote management settings.
- Assess their motivations for partnering and their capacity to partner before initiating the partnership processes.
- Encourage cooperative approaches with other international actors in order to decrease the time and energy required to manage partnerships with local organizations. These approaches could include identification of local actors, joint capacity assessments, and opportunities for shared learning. In addition, cooperative

¹ For assistance on evaluating risk, see OECD, 2011, “Managing Risks in Fragile and Transitional Contexts: The Price of Success?” <http://www.oecd.org/dac/incaf/48634348.pdf>; and M. Jacquand and S. Rannii, 2014, “UN Development System Risk Management in Fragile States,” Center on International Cooperation, New York University, New York, cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/un_dev_risk_mgmt_rannii_jacquand_1.pdf.

efforts could focus on harmonizing reporting formats, MEAL systems, and financial management systems.

- Hire dedicated partnership staff as focal point persons who can serve as mentors to local organizations.
- Use active methods to identify local partners, including mapping, research through social media outlets, reliance on local experts, interviews with community members, and contact with pre-conflict networks. Collective approaches across international organizations can greatly improve this process. Avoid passive methods for partner identification that can lead to bias and less effective partnerships.
- Assess and build both the organizational and operational capacity of local partners. This holistic approach will help local organizations prepare for eventual donor withdrawal.
- Design their requirements to prioritize security for local organizations over other reporting considerations. This can be done by emphasizing that security is the top priority for all actors, having clear contingency plans in place to take into account the shifting security conditions, ensuring that security costs at the local level (including guards, adequate offices, trainings, insurance, etc.) are included in project grants for local organizations, and encouraging open feedback about emerging conditions.
- Recognize that trust is a central component to successful partnerships and that trust can serve different functions. International organizations should engage in active measures to build trust with their local partners, such as holding regular in-person meetings to exchange information and ideas, ensuring transparency in decision-making, and establishing robust feedback mechanisms specifically about the partnership process.
- Devote attention to both accountability to beneficiaries and accountability to donors. Monitoring and evaluation in remote management settings is a complicated process, and one that should focus on the quality of outcomes as well as the processes of humanitarian action. Field staff from local organizations should be included in M&E protocols and processes, and international

organizations should ensure that outside actors (such as third-party monitors) are sensitive to the local context.

- Provide core funds to local partners in order to promote longer-term sustainability. Local partners should gradually be encouraged to procure goods locally, support projects with longer-term horizons, build civil society alliances, and develop their own contingency plans.
- Provide fora for local partners to learn from one another. These discussions and exchanges—on what works, what does not, and how challenges can be overcome on the ground—will often be more useful than the trainings organized by international actors.
- Recognize that cultural differences—including in modes of communication, working, and conditions that build or erode trust—may lead to divergent understandings of the same situation.
- Recognize that in contexts such as Syria many local organizations are newly formed and may need additional support to understand the language, processes, and architecture of international partners and the broader humanitarian system.

Local organizations should:

- Be willing to learn and accept feedback from their international partners and donors.
- Be honest with their international partners about security concerns, difficulty meeting donor requirements, and other challenges.
- Recognize the importance of core costs and salaries and communicate these needs to their partners and potential partners.
- Familiarize themselves with humanitarian principles and the ethos behind these principles.

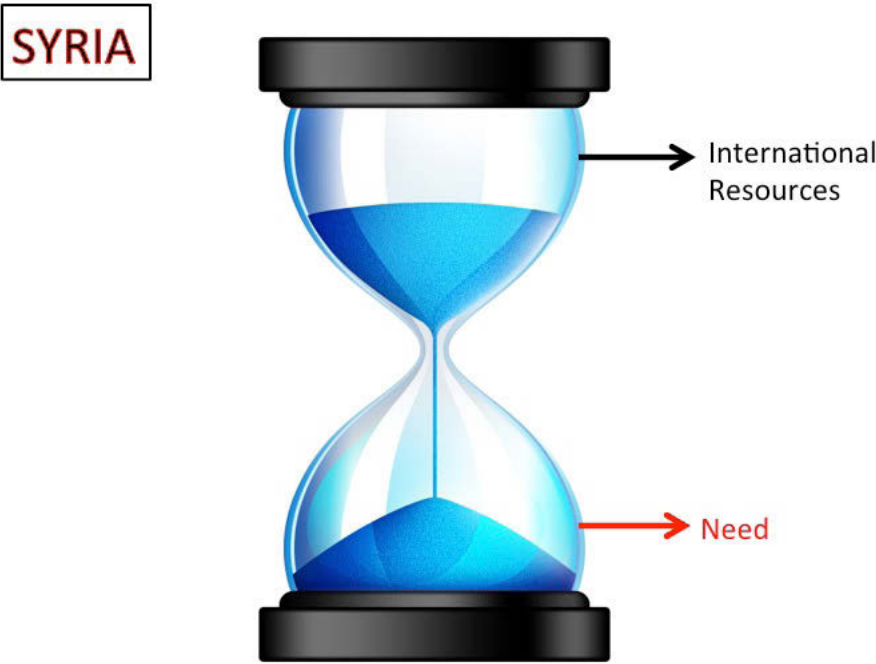
I. INTRODUCTION

Overview

This study set out to examine partnerships between international and local organizations delivering humanitarian assistance in remote management and insecure settings. Motivation for this study emerged from informal conversations with humanitarian actors along the Turkish-Syrian border in the spring of 2013. Members of international organizations expressed concern, confusion, and frustration with the lack of tools, expertise, and guidance available to them as they attempted to provide humanitarian assistance from Turkey into Syria. Organizations were increasingly required to consider remote partnership models as security in opposition-controlled areas deteriorated and access became progressively restricted. While many international organizations have developed internal partnership guidelines, most approaches are not designed for emergency situations, but rather, for longer-term development contexts or

where humanitarian space is accessible to outsiders. Furthermore, existing best practices and recommendations for partnerships are rarely informed by systematic or evidence-based research.

We conceptualized the concerns of humanitarian actors in remote management contexts as akin to an hourglass, with the top sphere representing the magnitude of international resources earmarked for the crisis, and the bottom representing the volume of need on the ground. In between these two spheres is a bottleneck that limits the flow of resources from the international community to war-affected civilians. While efficient resource flow is a challenge in any humanitarian situation, a preliminary scoping study allowed us to theorize that this pinch point in the center of the hourglass was a function of both the operating environment as well as the partnership process.



The study set out to answer the following research question:

What are the best and most effective ways for international and local organizations to partner in remote management settings?

The four primary objectives of the study were to document the most effective methods and processes for:

- Identifying potential local partners
- Assessing and building capacity of local organizations
- Engaging in remote Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL)
- Preparing local organizations for donor withdrawal

Each of these objectives has been focused on *remote management settings*, which are commonly defined as complex humanitarian crises where international organizations, or international staff, have limited access due to a lack of permission from the host government and/or extreme insecurity.

Design

To answer the research question and meet the objectives of the study, two country cases were explored: Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan. The Syria case focused on contemporary cross-border humanitarian operations running from Turkey into Syria. The Iraqi Kurdistan case examined the development of civil society in the years following Operation Provide Comfort in 1993, and thereby represents a historical analysis for the purpose of this study.

Methods were qualitative and consisted of an extensive review of secondary sources and qualitative interviews conducted with representatives of Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish grassroots organizations, Syrian diaspora organizations, Syrian local councils, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), representatives of various United Nations bodies,

and representatives of donor countries concerned with Syrian civil society development and humanitarian assistance. In total, the study comprised of 123 interviews that were conducted in English or Arabic between November 2013 and September 2014.

The study began with a global literature review on partnerships in insecure settings. Next, interviews with a range of INGOs at the headquarters level were conducted about organizational partnership practices. We then conducted interviews with a large sample of government donors, government implementers (private contractors), UN bodies, INGOs, and local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) concerned with humanitarian action or civil society development. These organizations were all involved in elements of cross-border operations from Turkey into Syria.

To examine trends and organizational experiences more deeply, we invited five Syrian organizations and their international partners to participate in a paired longitudinal case study. This approach allowed us to regularly interview various members of each local organization and their international partners over a period of nine months. Interviews were open-ended and semi-structured, and questions were similar in theme across meetings. Syrian organizations interviewed included: two grassroots organizations, two diaspora organizations, and three arms of a provincial council.² International organizations interviewed included: one country donor, two government contractors, two INGOs, and one organization that received funding from Gulf donors.³ All interviews and conversations were held under the condition of strict confidentiality, including between partners. While each side of the local-international pair was aware of its counterpart's participation in the study, we did not share information between the members of the dyad. The identity of any individuals or organizations that participated in this study has not, and will not, be shared.

² For this study, we define grassroots organizations as local non-governmental organizations that are not registered in Syria. Diaspora organizations are those run by Syrians but registered outside Syria. A more detailed and nuanced explanation is in Section III B.

³ As local organizations rely on more than one source of funding, our paired case study approach included more than five international organizations.

In total, we interviewed representatives from 46 different organizations throughout the course of this study. By no means did we interview all organizations currently operating cross-border from Turkey into Syria or all organizations that exist in Iraqi Kurdistan. It should be noted that Turkish organizations were not actively sought out for inclusion in this study. The scoping study revealed that partnerships between host country NGOs and local organizations are fundamentally different from those between international and local organizations. With a wish to reduce variance and increase generalizability of our findings to other remote management settings, the study focused particularly on Syrian grassroots and diaspora organizations and international actors. The sample size is not representative in a strict sense. Rather, we engaged in continuous snowball sampling, and sought to interview all organizations willing to speak with us. Given the length of the study, some organizations that were initially reluctant to be interviewed later sought us out for inclusion in the study. For the paired case study sample, we purposively included a range of organizations that represented cross-border operations both on the local side (grassroots, diaspora, local councils) as well as the international (government donor, implementer, INGO). Furthermore, we strove to interview several members of each case study organization in order to triangulate perceptions and information.

The choice to study cross-border operations from Turkey into Syria, rather than from Jordan, Iraq, or Lebanon into Syria was motivated by three factors. First, the majority of cross-border assistance into northern Syria is procured from Turkey. Second, international and Syrian organizations are higher in number and greater in visibility in Turkey than in Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon. Third, the remote management focus of the research necessitated examining assistance to opposition-controlled areas of Syria, and Turkey shares the longest border with non-regime-controlled areas.

In September 2014, after analyzing all interview material, we held a workshop in Gaziantep, Turkey. This workshop was open to all local and international organizations operating cross-

border from Turkey to Syria, and was attended by more than 60 organizations. Participants included representatives of Turkish organizations, donor countries, government implementers, INGOs, Syrian local councils, diaspora organizations, and grassroots organizations. The purpose of this workshop was two-fold. First, we aimed to present our main results and to “ground-truth” these findings with national and international actors, including study participants. Second, we facilitated a feedback session about the study’s core findings. Feedback garnered from the workshop has been integrated into the results presented in this report.

The next section, Section II, provides a detailed literature review on remote management and partnership practices in a variety of settings. Findings from the research are presented in Section III and are organized around the main objectives of the study. Section IV provides a set of recommendations for local and international organizations, as well as donor countries. Given that the voices of local organizations are rarely heard in these fora, we have intentionally highlighted their perspective in this report.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A common point of consensus across much of the literature on contemporary humanitarian aid intervention is that conflicts are becoming more frequent, intense, and complex. The greater instability—and growing sense of insecurity—is seen as a consequence of the global trends and imbalances that followed the end of the Cold War and the rise in globalization. In that window of time, the humanitarian aid community has witnessed a dramatic shift, not only in the types of conflicts and emergencies to which it must respond, but also in the ways in which it can and is expected to intervene in order to protect and assist the world's vulnerable populations.

Two separate but complementary trends have helped define this shift. The first, a direct response to rising insecurity, has been *remote management*, wherein intervening aid organizations have responded to heightened risk by withdrawing key senior international staff and upper national management from the conflict zone, and instead relying on local staff or partners to continue programming at reduced levels. The second is an industry trend towards the *localization or local ownership* of programs. The latter implies a greater role for local stakeholders, including governments, civil society organizations, the private sector, and beneficiaries in the agenda setting, implementation, financial management, and overall “ownership” of development efforts in their respective countries as a means for guaranteeing sustainability.

The transition implies a new role for the major international organizations that have traditionally been the primary implementing bodies in complex emergencies. These (mainly Western) international organizations have operated through their own strategic visions as the purse holders, technical experts, and drivers of change. But as the impetus to carve out a greater role for local stakeholders has grown—in part due to increased demand on the part of

local governments and organizations—partnerships and partnering arrangements have taken on greater importance in the operational strategies and programming plans of aid interventions across the board.

While there has been growing enthusiasm for partnering and localization across the donor, international, and local stakeholder spectrum, the rollout of these practices has varied across organizations, contexts, and field locations. At the headquarters level, Western international organizations (particularly INGOs) are paying more attention to their partnership strategies by commissioning reviews, research, and best practice guidelines to help instruct field offices on working with local partners. However, in the field, standard operating procedures for engaging local partners can be vague, disjointed, or missing entirely. As with operating procedures and practices in multiple sectors, this is especially true in contexts of emergency response, active conflict, and rapid response.

Evaluations of humanitarian aid operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan, and Somalia demonstrate that the mechanisms for sustaining operations through remote management in the context of war are largely ad-hoc, often taken at the field level, and without a standardized industry or between-country approach for engaging local actors. The more recent case of Syria presents many of these problems and is in many ways more extreme.

Unlike the above-mentioned interventions, where international organizations' emergency response efforts shifted to remote management throughout the conflict, the need to operate remotely was the case with Syria almost from the outset. The Syrian government's strict regulation of entry into the country, as well as its long-standing policies of obstructing civil society in general, meant that not only could international organizations, particularly INGOs, not easily enter Syria at the onset of the crisis, but also that those that were present

prior to the crisis were heavily regulated and had few local partners to work with, even as the scale of violence and suffering increased.⁴

Today, the majority of international aid going into Syria is happening cross-border from Turkey.⁵ The implication for international organizations is that they must contend not only with cross-border programming, operations, and logistics, but also issues of operating cross-line between armed opposition groups and the regime. Local partnerships have been key to these operations, providing access for many international organizations to areas they could not otherwise reach due to security or political concerns.⁶ For their part, local organizations—many of which were only established in response to the conflict—have been able to engage with a wide network of international donor bodies and humanitarian agencies for the first time. Many of these local organizations have developed their capacity while working with or alongside international organizations.⁷

Remote Management in the Literature

While operating remotely has been a tactic in a range of humanitarian aid interventions in the past, discussion regarding “long-term” remote management began only in the past decade.⁸ The complex crises in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq pushed consideration of remote management as a recurring programmatic theme to the fore, as international organizations found themselves increasingly entrenched in remote management practices.⁹

In the context of humanitarian aid interventions, remote management is different from “decentralized programming,” which generally refers to vesting more decision-making power at the local level, either through local staff or partners, for a variety of operational needs.¹⁰ Remote management, however, implies a more serious shift in operational approach, usually due to insecurity. Authors Donini and Maxwell provide a broad definition of remote management as: “the withdrawal of senior international or national humanitarian staff from the location of the provision of assistance or other humanitarian action—as an adaptation to insecurity, and a deviation from ‘normal’ programming practice.”¹¹ The Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) defines remote management as “a type of operation carried out from a distance” whose nature is a “reactive, unplanned position due to deteriorating security conditions.”¹² In both cases, however, the implication is that remote management is a “temporary” adaptation and usually an ad-hoc measure rather than an intended approach.¹³

Remote management is largely viewed as “less than desirable” due to its reactive nature and the physical and logistical distance between upper management and field operations and staff. It is assumed that international organizations concede at least a degree of quality and impact in favor of sustaining some level of operation.¹⁴ In insecure and limited-access contexts, “remote management programming has the important benefit of allowing some aid programming to

⁴ H. Slim and L. Trombetta, 2014, “Syria Crisis Common Context Analysis. Co-ordinated Accountability and Lessons Learning (CALL) Initiative,” IASC Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations Steering Group, New York, p. 45.

⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 45–46.

⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

⁸ A. Donini and D. Maxwell, 2014, “From Face-to-Face to Face-to-Screen: Remote Management, Effectiveness and Accountability of Humanitarian Action in Insecure Environments,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 95, pp. 383–413.

⁹ A. Stoddard, A. Harmer, and J. S. Renouf, 2010, “Once Removed: Lessons and Challenges in Remote Management of Humanitarian Operations for Insecure Areas,” *Humanitarian Outcomes*, New York, p. 14.

¹⁰ Donini, p. 3.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹² A. Harmer, A. Stoddard, and K. Haver, 2010, “Providing Aid in Insecure Environments, Good Practice Review 8 Update,” *Humanitarian Policy Group*, Overseas Development Institute, London, p. 83.

¹³ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

continue, but it entails a number of hazards and disadvantages.”¹⁵ Specific challenges may include difficulty returning to direct programming (a “remote management trap”); potential impacts on overall quality of programming; difficulties in monitoring, reporting, and ensuring beneficiary accountability; and added costs.¹⁶

One of the greatest concerns of remote management involves the transfer of security risks from international to local staff. Given the increase in attacks against foreign aid workers in recent years (up by 60 percent by some estimates¹⁷), it is understandable that agencies pull out international staff members. Shifting implementation to local staff and partners assumes that these individuals face fewer security risks.¹⁸ However, studies of remote management in contexts such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia point out that while the nature of threats to international versus national staff vary, the local staff often face extreme risks without the benefit of support or resources often available to international actors. In addition, “the rising attack rates for national [staff] correlate[s] with the increased use of remote management operations by international agencies.”¹⁹ In other words, while nationals were already at risk, the shift in modalities further increases local staff’s exposure to security threats.

The perception that remote management is a temporary constraint on programming has likely contributed to the paucity of best-practice literature and policies for operating standards. “Across the community of aid agencies, the general lack of contingency planning and strategic preparation for remote management scenarios greatly exacerbates the challenges involved,” Harmer et al. write in a recent study.

“Moreover, the dearth of agency guidelines and procedures on the subject seems particularly problematic given how widely the practice is used in insecure settings.”²⁰

However, research evaluating the growing complexity of conflicts over the last two decades demonstrates that remote management is often protracted and extends far longer than initially anticipated.²¹ In his evaluation of the political and operational implications of providing humanitarian assistance in Somalia via remote management, Bradbury writes, “Some have concluded that remote management is likely to become more common practice among humanitarian agencies in the future ... and are taking the opportunity to embrace this way of working and to learn from the experience.”²² However, even with a growing body of experience, it is still true that “most organizations have no formal policy on remote management; any policy or good practice guidance that exists has been driven by the field.”²³

Risk Management

An important conversation happening alongside the growing debate on remote management is that of risk management. Spearheaded primarily by a group of UN bodies, a new approach to security and risk management, known as the “enabling approach,” is quickly gaining ground in conversations surrounding humanitarian aid in insecure environments. Unlike the prior approach that highlighted risks and respectively limited activities, this new method concentrates instead on program objectives and aims to “identify all possible measures to allow for secure delivery against those goals.” In short, it is a narrative of “how to stay”—and how to continue

¹⁵ Stoddard, “Once Removed,” p. 10.

¹⁶ Stoddard, “Once Removed,” pp. 8–9.

¹⁷ Stoddard, “Once Removed,” p. 10.

¹⁸ A. Stoddard, A. Harmer, and K. Haver, 2006, “Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: Trends in Policy and Operations,” HPG Report 23, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, London, p. 38.

¹⁹ Stoddard, “Once Removed,” p. 28.

²⁰ Harmer et al., 2010, “Operational Security Management in Violent Environments,” Humanitarian Practice Network No. 8, Overseas Development Institute, London, p. 96.

²¹ Stoddard, “Providing Aid,” p. 22.

²² Bradbury, M., 2010, “State-building, Counterterrorism, and Licensing Humanitarianism in Somalia,” Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford, p. 10.

²³ Stoddard, “Once Removed,” p. 16.

to implement at appropriate levels—rather than “when to leave.”²⁴ The focal shift is based on a security approach that emphasizes weighing the benefits and possibilities of sustained delivery against risks, instead of the previous “automatic” security triggers that denied such flexibility.²⁵

In the 2011 OCHA report, “To Stay and Deliver,” Jan Egeland writes: “The objective for humanitarian actors in complex security environments, as it is now widely recognised, is not to avoid risk, but to manage risk in a way that allows them to remain present and effective in their work. This shift from risk aversion ... to risk management represents the culmination of the past decade’s evolution in thinking and methodology for programming in insecure conditions.”²⁶

The OCHA document indicates that as the practice of remote management grows, it can form part of the narrative of “stay and deliver” in ways that emphasize the appropriate engagement of local and national actors, even from a distance. “While [remote management] poses many challenges for effective and accountable programming, some areas of good practice are emerging. These include investing in highly localized staff structures for field offices, recruiting staff members in consultation with their communities, and appointing nationals from the diaspora as international staff,” Egeland writes.²⁷

Importantly, standardized approaches to remote management can also provide an alternative to “bunkerization,” which is another recent industry trend that has garnered much criticism. “Bunkerization,” or the retreating of international aid workers into fortified compounds of “private international space,”

represents the height of the aid industry’s sense of insecurity and anxiety.²⁸ “There is little point in an aid agency being present in a country if its staff remain behind compound walls or cloistered in safe areas and capital cities, unable to work with the people in need,” Egeland states.²⁹ Effective and well-organized remote management can, therefore, represent a middle ground that helps secure an organization’s on-the-ground presence by effectively leveraging local networks while taking into consideration the safety and security of international or similarly threatened staff.

Types of Remote Management

While the common feature in remote management is an element of distancing between international staff and the conflict zone with an increased reliance on local and national staff, there are several mechanisms for engaging as such. Donini and Maxwell identify various sub-types of remote management in emergency humanitarian aid interventions as:

- Remote programming
- Remote control
- Remote support
- Remote monitoring
- Remote partnership³⁰

The above represent different ways of adapting to insecurity and sustaining programming at a distance, but their common feature is the space between those making decisions and the intended beneficiaries.³¹ Furthermore, evaluations of remote management practice highlight the importance of distinguishing between “deliberate local partnering and capacity-building ... and reactive operational modifications,” which can both fall under the guise of remote management.³²

²⁴ J. Egeland, A. Harmer, and A. Stoddard, 2011, “To Stay and Deliver: Good Practice for Humanitarians in Complex Security Environments,” Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, p. 7.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁷ Egeland, p. 2.

²⁸ M. Duffield, 2012, “Challenging Environments: Danger, Resilience and the Aid Industry,” *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 5, p. 475–492 (p. 477).

²⁹ Egeland, p. 2.

³⁰ Donini, p. 22.

³¹ Ibid., 22.

³² Stoddard, “Providing Aid,” p. 38.

While it is important to keep in mind the challenges and consequences inherent in remote management, the various modalities for remote partnership and the *added security* they can afford are likely to remain features of humanitarian aid response in emergency contexts in the near to mid-term future. The mechanisms by which these operations are undertaken therefore deserve a full review, building upon prior experiences, their impact, and the nascent literature that is beginning to grow.

Partnerships

The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other's contributions. Local capacity is one of the main assets to enhance and on which to build. Whenever possible, humanitarian organizations should strive to make it an integral part in emergency response. Principles of Partnership, 2007³³

In 2007, the Global Humanitarian Platform, a consortium of UN and non-UN organizations, endorsed the Principles of Partnership as a commitment to making a greater and more equitable space for local partners in the global humanitarian arena. The commitment forms part of an important and growing conversation on partnerships in international relief and humanitarian aid over the last decade. Indeed, whereas the argument for working with local partners has been advocated since the 1980s, it has only been in the last 10 to 15 years that any meaningful or concrete steps have been taken, particularly at the headquarters level, to make local partners fully engaged actors in operations.³⁴

The principle aim in advocating in favor of partnerships is to aid in the localization and community buy-in, or “ownership,” of programs

and projects. This includes local involvement in design informed by indigenous expertise, and ensures viability and sustainability of programs and projects. The conversation around partnerships has progressed considerably. Today, partnering strategies are advocated on many fronts: top-down from donors, bottom-up from local organizations and beneficiaries, within INGOs, from host governments, as well as by third-party stakeholders committed to helping promote partnerships across sectors.

Policy Shifts

In 2014, USAID announced a new framework in its approach in engaging local actors as part of its commitment to sustainable development. By placing the focus on local capacity and communities, USAID's Local Systems Framework “contributes to the ongoing transformation of the way the Agency does business by defining clear and practical steps toward realizing a vision of development that is locally owned, locally led and locally sustained.”³⁵ The framework forms part of a new reform agenda on behalf of the US development arm called “USAID Forward,” which sets forth a new approach for development and aid by focusing on dynamic and high-capacity local partnerships, including institutions, civil society, and the private sector.³⁶

The Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network (MFAN), an important coalition of international development and foreign policy practitioners, has been instrumental in helping the US government define this agenda. Building upon industry knowledge, the coalition advocates in its 2014 platform, “The Way Forward,” that US aid and development efforts should have significantly more commitment to developing country ownership in three areas: ownership of priorities, ownership of implementation, and ownership of resources.³⁷ This is based on full engagement of

³³ Global Humanitarian Platform, 2007, “Principles of Partnership—A Statement of Commitment.” icvanetwork.org/system/files/versions/Principles_of_Partnership_English.pdf.

³⁴ W. Guyot, 2014, “Strategy Refresh Phase 1 Partners' Aspirations Report,” International Rescue Committee, p. 7.

³⁵ US Agency for International Development (USAID), 2014, “Local Systems: A Framework for Supporting Sustained Development,” Washington, DC, p. v.

³⁶ U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), 2014, “USAID Forward,” <http://www.usaid.gov/usaiddforward>. Accessed Sept. 10, 2014.

³⁷ Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network (MFAN), “The Way Forward: A Reform Agenda for 2014 and Beyond,” Washington, DC, p. 6.

local partners wherever and whenever possible: “Local institutions in developing countries ... should be the first and default option for delivering aid where appropriate capacity and conditions exist,” MFAN concludes.³⁸

In 2008, one of the widest meetings of the humanitarian aid and development community occurred in Accra, Ghana. The convention included representatives from more than 80 developing countries, all OECD donor countries, some 3,000 civil society organizations, UN bodies, and multilateral institutions to discuss the effectiveness of current aid practices. The outcome, the Accra Agenda for Action, built upon the previous Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, and placed a central focus on local “ownership” and “inclusive partnership” as fundamental principles in aid effectiveness.³⁹

While the movement towards more inclusion of local partners in the agenda setting and implementation of aid has been well received, the effectiveness of strategies is still being tested. “Multi-stakeholder collaboration is now widely seen as vital to creating a more equitable and sustainable world. But such collaboration ... can be time-consuming and complex to build, manage and scale up effectively,” reads a report that focuses on the initiatives of one major INGO, World Vision, to build partnering as a key staff competency.⁴⁰ Furthermore, partnerships require a high level of trust, transparency, and commitment, and the mechanisms for achieving those not only require patience and care, but are also highly variable and with no one-size-fits-all approach.⁴¹

Understanding Partnerships

Nevertheless, with the sector on a clear and determined march towards greater localization via partnerships, INGOs operating in humanitarian emergencies are beginning a

process of self-reflection and strategic review to identify how to better accommodate and align with the trend. The first questions this begs are: what is partnership, and what makes a good partner?

The International Business Leaders Forum (IBLF) recently published a review in league with World Vision that explores the different types and potential implications of cross-sector partnerships in the NGO sector. While focused mainly on INGO-business partnerships, “Under the Spotlight: Building a Better Understanding on Global-Business NGO Partnerships,” highlights important partnering arrangements and options for the industry as a whole. These include:

- Advocacy type
- Business type
- Sponsorship type
- Marketing type
- Capacity-building type
- Brokering type⁴²

While the definitions for partnering vary widely, at the most basic level all partnerships are based on mutual trust and understanding. “The strongest partnerships tend to be those that have arrived at an agreed and explicit definition between those involved as to what they mean by their partner relationship,” authors Ros Tennyson and Tom Harrison explain in the IBLF review.⁴³ With so many commitments and risks inherent in the process of collaboration—time commitments, opportunity costs, funding costs, interdependence—the process of finding and establishing strong partnership is in no way straightforward.⁴⁴ “Each partner needs to understand the potential risks and rewards of their fellow partners almost as deeply as their own if they are to really commit themselves to genuine collaboration and the principle of ‘mutual benefit,’” Ruth Allen writes in “Local

³⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁹ The Accra Agenda for Action (AAA) and Paris Declaration, 2008, Accra, Ghana, <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/45827311.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Partnership Brokers Association and World Vision, 2014, “Brokering Local Collaboration,” p. 2.

⁴¹ R. Tennyson and T. Harrison, 2008, “Under the Spotlight: Building a Better Understanding of Global Business-NGO Partnerships,” International Business Leadership Forum, p. 6–7.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 20–21.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

Partnerships: A Guide for Partnering with Civil Society, Business and Government Groups.”⁴⁵

The IBLF review identifies five “critical success factors” common across the gamut of partnerships:

- Full commitment by the entirety of both organizations, not just by select individuals
- Commitment to ensuring added value for all partners involved
- Fostering a “learning culture” that allows for the internalization of lessons and builds upon errors
- Full respect and trust among all actors
- Focusing on a “strategic impact” beyond the basic successes of the project as the goal of the partnership⁴⁶

However, the literature demonstrates that the sector has a long way to go before achieving the full objectives of mutual benefit for both international and local entities in humanitarian aid partnerships. “Partnerships with national and local actors have long been identified as a source of problems in international humanitarian aid,” Ben Ramalingam, et al. write in “Missed Opportunities: The Case for Strengthening National and Local Partnership-based Humanitarian Responses.” “Insufficient investment in and commitment to such partnerships [have been] the biggest hindrance to effective performance.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, it would appear that the majority of INGOs have failed to adequately appreciate the priorities, assets, skill sets, approaches, wishes, and needs of their local partners in strategizing approaches for partnership and engagement. “It is only recently that local partners’ experiences and perspectives have been actively solicited and presented as evidence for reform within the humanitarian system,” the

International Rescue Committee (IRC) highlights in its strategic review of the organization’s partnerships approach.⁴⁸ IRC admits that too often the organization “unilaterally decides with whom and under what conditions” it will partner. “This instrumentalist tendency to find ‘implementing partners’ ... is fundamentally at odds with partners’ desire to be viewed as drivers of change in their own right.”⁴⁹

However, finding ways to effectively partner promises gains for both sides. According to Mercy Corps’ “Local Partnerships” handbook, successful partnerships will yield a sum that is greater than its parts, and help “ensure that development initiatives capture the creative potential of diverse actors for deeper impact, foster local ownership for sustainability, and are integrated for effectiveness in addressing complex problems or new opportunities.”⁵⁰ For local organizations looking to have a greater impact on their communities, strong partnerships with higher-capacity INGOs promise not only technological and organizational capacity development, but also greater independence and the ability to gain more influence in the communities in which they serve.⁵¹

Partnering in Emergencies

One critical factor, however, is the ability to partner effectively in the context of emergencies and rapid-response operations. Many international organizations find these to be the most challenging conditions in which to support a true partnership arrangement. It should be noted that while there is little literature on partnerships in emergencies, there is even less literature on partnerships during conflict.

International groups are frequently disinclined to partner with LNGOs during an emergency, especially if there is no prior relationship with a

⁴⁵ R. Allen, 2011a, “Local Partnerships: A Guide for Partnering with Civil Society, Business and Government Groups,” Mercy Corps, p. 27.

⁴⁶ Tennyson, p. 30.

⁴⁷ B. Ramalingam, B. Gray, and G. Cerruti, 2013, “Missed Opportunities: The Case for Strengthening National and Local Partnership-based Humanitarian Responses,” Action Aid, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam GB, and Tearfund, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Guyot, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁵⁰ Allen, “Local Partnerships,” p. 4.

⁵¹ Ibid.

local partner upon which to build.⁵² In its guide for local partnerships, Mercy Corps directly identifies two instances when *not* to partner, with important implications for emergency settings: i) “In emergency contexts where partners are not established before a rapid-onset crisis or do not have the capacity to change roles in an emergency;” and ii) “when the program activities or affiliation with Mercy Corps or our donors could put the partner at risk, such as some conflict contexts.”⁵³

While there are several case examples where partnerships in emergencies have emerged successfully, the operational policy of avoiding partnerships during conflict can obviate what might otherwise be a highly beneficial arrangement, especially in conditions where access is insecure and limited. “INGOs should not assume that partnerships are impossible or undesirable in emergencies. Instead, there is a need to push the boundaries of what INGOs can expect to gain from partnerships in these contexts, and what working in partnership can bring to local organizations’ ownership of decisions during emergencies,” Ruth Allen writes in her article, “Partnerships in Rapid-onset Emergencies: Insights from Pakistan and Haiti.”⁵⁴

There are indeed valuable lessons to be gained from partnering in emergency contexts, such as the ability for INGOs to remain aware of needs and to rapidly respond to changing conditions on the ground, as well as much added value. “Learning is one of the most consistent expectations of local partners, in emergencies and otherwise. Particularly with new partners and those that require significant capacity support, or when working among sensitive groups, such as in conflict situations, creating a culture of continuous, intentional learning is a basic part of a ‘do no harm’ approach,” Allen writes.⁵⁵ Allen’s further claims that by not

adhering to partnering principles early on during emergencies, organizations can inadvertently fail to meet basic needs since they are deprived of the “knowledge, resources and assets” available through local partners.

Transferring Risk to Partners

It is important to note, however, that with the varied definitions behind partnerships, many INGOs will claim that they do in fact follow a partnership path during emergencies, especially in complex situations that are being remotely managed. In a review of remote management practices in insecure contexts, Stoddard identified partnerships as one of the three main mechanisms by which INGOs remotely managed programs while operating in Afghanistan. In this case, however, local partners were mainly responsible for implementation of programs that were otherwise designed and set by the INGO, indicating that the local organization operated more as a sub-contractor, and less as true a partner.⁵⁶

This again calls into question the nature of a partnership, and the all-important debate around security risk transfer, either to local staff, or in this case to the local partner. In evaluating the implications of remote management on the effectiveness of humanitarian aid, Donini highlights that partnerships are a key risk mitigation strategy for INGOs operating in insecure environments. “Effectively outsourcing security risks to the local partner” is one standard way for sustaining programming under insecure conditions, Donini claims.⁵⁷

However, as previously discerned, one of the greatest pitfalls of remote management is the irresponsible transfer of security risk to local actors who are often equally at threat, but have less training and capacity to address security concerns. The conversation is once again drawn back to the lack of a strategic approach for

⁵² Ibid., p. 25.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ R. Allen, 2011b, “Partnerships in Rapid-onset Emergencies: Insights from Pakistan and Haiti,” *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine* 50 (Apr.), <http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-50/partnerships-in-rapid-onset-emergencies-insights-from-pakistan-and-haiti>. Accessed Sept. 7, 2014.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Stoddard, “Once Removed,” p. 17.

⁵⁷ Donini, p. 19.

undertaking partnerships. “The approach taken to partnerships in the majority of humanitarian responses tends to be reactive, driven by emergencies, and shaped by ad-hoc interactions ... The sector is not yet systemic about partnerships,” Ramalingam et al. assert.⁵⁸ It can be argued that this lack of planning is what is contributing to the less-than-ideal partnership arrangements often witnessed in emergency settings.

Benefits of Partnering

Yet the same advantages that can be gained from full partnerships in less urgent contexts are found in emergency settings. Local context and knowledge of the pre-crisis situation is critical in shaping responsive, appropriate, and therefore impactful and effective interventions during an emergency. Strong partnerships in emergencies can also enhance the transition between different phases of emergency response cycles and boost accountability throughout, Ramalingam et al. explain.⁵⁹

In “To Stay and Deliver,” Egeland highlights a number of partnership approaches in remote management and their respective advantages. For example, signing agreements with certain parties that are known and trusted in the community is one way for increasing access. Another mechanism that has worked in the past is signing community-wide memoranda of understanding with local entities in each area of operation before beginning programming.⁶⁰ Donini highlights the by-and-large successful approach of establishing institutional partners in the emergency sphere, such as the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit in Somalia, with which the entire sector can engage as a conduit for key issues, including needs assessment and monitoring. These types of arrangements can facilitate access and acceptance, and even help combat the growing perception that international organizations, particularly Western ones, are affiliated with a military or foreign government entity. Egeland does warn, however,

that humanitarian aid organizations must bear in mind issues of neutrality when engaging with such actors.⁶¹

Despite the extent and type of partnership undertaken in an emergency context, however, accountability to the local partner itself is a top priority across the board. When working with previously established partners, Allen states in “Local Partnerships” that, “At minimum, we owe partners an explanation of our choices in an emergency ... What’s preferable is to discuss how the partnership could be adjusted to collaborate in the response.”⁶²

Open and frank conversations that are grounded in the critical success factors of partnership are just as key in emergency contexts as they are in more stable conditions. The maintenance of a partnership requires commitment, trust, openness, and mutual understanding between both parties, and should avoid simple mechanisms of *risk transfer and the over-burdening* of one party. That these conversations and modalities have not been integrated fully into the discussion of partnerships in emergency and remote management contexts is a glaring misstep at best, and an exacerbating factor of war and suffering at worst. To this end, it is important that, in present and future conflicts where the international aid community finds itself relying somewhat or overtly on remote management partnerships, all factors are duly considered and prepared ahead of any such mission.

⁵⁸ Ramalingam, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Egeland, p. 20.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 20.

⁶² Allen, “Local Partnerships,” pp. 17–18.

III. FINDINGS

This section discusses the findings emerging from the case studies in northern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan. We cover the broad areas of remote management, partnerships, identifying potential local partners, capacity, monitoring and evaluation, donor requirements, donor withdrawal, and trust.

A. REMOTE MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

The impetus for this study arose from the growing number of cases of remote management in humanitarian response. As discussed in the literature review, this increase is the result of several trends in Western aid practice: i) increased engagement in areas that were previously off-limits due to insecurity, sovereignty, or lack of national interest; ii) expansion of the use of partnership approaches in multiple sectors, including humanitarian response; and iii) increased reluctance on the part of international organizations or their donors to take security risks. These trends merge in situations such as Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria and result in the model of remote management whereby international agencies have withdrawn expatriate and senior management staff from the area of intervention.

The Syria case study highlighted many of the problems common to remote management settings, including loss of direct oversight, difficulties maintaining accountability, and the increase in reporting requirements. The data demonstrate that a remote management model involves a series of trade-offs and compromises for both the local and the international organizations, as well as between the international organizations and their donors. These trade-offs are mainly around issues of access, security, risk, and reporting requirements, including M&E. The literature review has

covered questions of security and risk, and later sections of this report provide detail on reporting requirements and M&E. The remainder of this section focuses specifically on the critical question of access based on lessons and anecdotes from the Syria case study.

Access

In the case of Syria, the local organizations with the best access—which normally correlates to being able to reach the populations in greatest need—are also the organizations that represent the greatest risk to their international partners. These organizations and their personnel are moving in extremely insecure areas. They are, by nature, interacting with armed groups: this interaction is required in almost all instances to secure and maintain humanitarian access. These organizations are therefore also the organizations that are most likely to experience the loss or diversion of goods and cash when operating throughout the conflict zone. They are the least likely to be able to do follow-up M&E or to provide receipts or invoices to comply with the requirements of their international partners (such as vetting local providers, documenting transactions, and getting multiple quotes for potential services or inputs).

The issue of cash assistance is illustrative of the tensions and trade-offs associated with risk. The data for this study make clear that cash is both the easiest form of assistance to deliver and the most useful for beneficiaries in many areas.⁶³ For example, interviewee respondents at local Syrian organizations explained that cash is by far the preferred means—and often the only plausible means—of providing assistance in the besieged areas surrounding Damascus. Western-based international actors, however, are rarely able to accept the risks of providing cash assistance inside Syria. Such hesitation is well-founded in

⁶³ The value of cash is supported by the recent IRC study among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, which found that cash grants (\$575 to 87,500 families) were used to fill refugees' greatest needs, including food, water, and warm items for winter. Positive externalities were also associated with the receipt of cash, including increased access to education and a decrease in the number of households that sent children out to work. International Rescue Committee, 2014, "Emergency Economies: The Impact of Cash Assistance in Lebanon," Beirut, Lebanon, August.

regard to the risks involved: one individual interviewed in this study claimed he had to maneuver through more than 50 checkpoints in order to move material assistance from the Turkey-Syria border into areas around Damascus. An individual from another organization who transported cash provided by Gulf donors into these areas reported a loss of approximately three to four percent due to “taxes” by armed groups.

While the risk of aid diversion is clear and present in contexts like Syria, especially with cash assistance, these losses could also be seen as a form of indirect operating costs. In the case of the organization paying three to four percent of aid as a tax, when combined with the same organization’s estimated operating costs of eight percent, the loss in indirect costs is significantly lower than at most international organizations or academic institutions.

The example of moving cash through a highly insecure and contested area is indicative of the difficult decisions facing international organizations and their funders. Accessing vulnerable populations requires a degree of risk. Most of the international organizations we interviewed very much wanted to be able to reach these populations, were aware of these trade-offs, and were willing to take the associated risks. The Western-based entities, however, did not believe that their international funders (i.e., bilateral and multilateral donors) had the same tolerance for risk. International organizations must therefore use their unrestricted funds if they wish to engage in this form of work, but face potentially significant repercussions and public backlash should these operations go awry.

The Syria case demonstrated several additional considerations regarding access and need that we believe are broadly applicable to efforts to deliver aid in active conflict environments. First, *neither access nor need is constant*. Access is continuously changing and often arbitrary. Access may be possible one day in a given location and

impossible the next. Similarly, the needs of the local population are constantly changing due to shifts in the conflict and impacts of the conflict on local markets, transportation links, infrastructure, basic services, etc. While population needs always shift (due to shocks, seasonality, and other external factors), the particularly inflexible nature of remote management—which often entails sub-contracting out deliveries of food baskets or non-food items in pre-determined places—calls into question the effectiveness of the response. Highly prescriptive sub-contracts may help to manage financial risk, but this method of delivering aid is often unable to take into account the dynamic nature of need. Decisions regarding the use of strategic and financial resources are made by those who lack access to the areas or populations in question, which inevitably impacts the nature and effectiveness of the response.

Second, *access is highly relational*. Individual or organizational access to a given area or population depends in large part on local networks, reputations, and levels of established trust. In conflict settings where control of people, territory, and transit routes is shifting and contested, these relationships can be either assets or liabilities, and these changes have direct implications on access.

Third, *access is a form of power*, and controlling access is a means of exercising and demonstrating this power. As in numerous other conflict zones, in northern Syria the intersection of power and access is most visible in checkpoints on roads and in the granting or refusal of permission to operate in certain areas. Armed groups⁶⁴ will arbitrarily permit or allow transit or operations to take place in a given area, and such arbitrariness demonstrates their control. This could mean, for instance, that nine trucks in an aid convoy are allowed to pass, while one is held back. Similarly, the first part of a distribution in a location may be allowed while the second part is prohibited. Access may be allowed for distribution, but prevented for M&E activities.

⁶⁴ By this we mean all parties to the conflict currently on the ground within Syria or controlling access to Syria, which includes the range of secular and Islamist opposition forces, Turkish border officials, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), and Assad forces.

Such actions are intentional and functional: they serve to establish and reinforce power dynamics. One respondent working with a local Syrian organization explained how his team adjusted the pace of their work in an effort to avoid potential intervention by local authorities:

If [you] take 20 trucks and decided to distribute them all directly, the local authority will see that you are making a distribution quickly, so they will use this as an opportunity to pressure you. They know [the international partner organization] wants you to distribute quickly, so they will put pressure on you during this time because they know you are under stress. So now, with our slow distribution, we are showing the [local] authorities that we are not operating urgently, that we are not in a hurry or under pressure from [the international partner organization]. So the authority won't think that they can tell us what to do.⁶⁵

This anecdote illustrates the awareness of the armed actors as to the relationship between the local and international partners. The armed groups are cognizant that the Syrian organizations are attempting to operate within set parameters of efficiency and accountability. Interference with these arrangements becomes another means of exercising power through the control of humanitarian space.

The arbitrary nature of access is a problem for local organizations and the intended beneficiaries, but can also undermine trust between the local and international partners. It becomes difficult, for instance, to explain why one truck did not reach the distribution point when the others did, or why half of the commodities reached the targeted community but the other half had to be distributed elsewhere. Local organizations stated that at times their international partners were unable or unwilling to grasp the complexity of the difficulties of access. In turn, international

organizations felt that in some instances their local partners used these constraints as excuses for the failure to execute a program as stipulated or to adhere to reporting requirements in a standardized manner or in a timely fashion. As an expatriate upper manager at an international organization stated:

All of these [local organizations] account so poorly and their receipts could be fabricated and the costs are always higher than what we know they should be ... there could easily be someone making money.⁶⁶

B. PARTNERSHIP

Modalities

This study uncovered a range of cooperative models for international-local cross-border operations from Turkey into Syria. These arrangements loosely fall into three categories:

- **Direct Implementation:** Some INGOs either fully or partially engaged in direct implementation. They hired Syrian staff directly, and/or maintained warehouses and offices inside Syria.
- **Sub-Contract:** Some INGOs engaged in sub-contractual relationships. These were largely short-term and logistical in nature, focusing on the delivery or distribution of commodities such as food baskets, non-food items (NFIs), and winterization and hygiene kits. These are also referred to as “truck and chuck” relationships, highlighting the practical, businesslike, and temporary aspect of this type of agreement.
- **Partnership:** The third modality involves a more inclusive partnership between an international organization and local grassroots or diaspora organizations. Such partnerships are meant to be underwritten by a range of principles including equality, transparency, responsibility, and complementarity.⁶⁷ In the context of Syria, such partnerships varied in terms of duration, monetary amount, and decision-making power.

⁶⁵ Interview with local Syrian organization, Gaziantep, 2014.

⁶⁶ Interview with international organization, Gaziantep, 2014.

⁶⁷ See the Global Humanitarian Platform for a full description of principles. Accessed November 30, 2014 at <http://www.actalliance.org/resources/policies-and-guidelines/partnership/7934-principlesofpartnership.pdf>.

One observation from this study is that sub-contractual relationships were often described as “partnerships” by donors and international organizations. From the LNGO perspective, this usage was experienced as both confusing and condescending. While many local organizations understood the need for this type of logistical and delivery-based relationship, the conflation of these two modalities by international organizations weakened trust and damaged the working relationship from the LNGO perspective. As one member of a Provincial Council explained:

From the beginning, we told [our international partners]-- all of them-- that we want them to not just be our donors, but

also partners. That they not just give us money and equipment, but also advice and opinions to make our work better. But until now, frankly, it’s only projects we’ve received. We didn’t build partnership relationships.⁶⁸

Types of Partner Organizations

In a remote management context, international organizations can generally consider partnering with three types of local organizations: legally registered LNGOs, unregistered LNGOs, and diaspora organizations. Such organizations vary along five main dimensions, summarized in the following table.⁶⁹

Table 1: Potential Local Partners--Types

	Relations with Ruling Government	Period of Emergence	Regulated Visibility	International Donor Experience	Community Relations
Legally Registered LNGO	Yes	Pre-emergency	Some	Yes	Regulated
Non-Registered LNGO	No	Newly Established	Little to None	No	Close
Diaspora Organization	Registered with Ruling Government	Pre or Post Emergency	Compliance with laws where registered	Yes	Limited

Legally registered LNGOs are recognized by the local government; they tend to have been established before the onset of the emergency. In contexts with limited space for civil society, these organizations might have been involved in other types of “charity work” such as support for widows, orphans, or the poor. Legally registered LNGOs often have worked with international donors in the past, and they normally have some type of regulated visibility within the community. For example, they have a fixed address, an online presence, established points for aid delivery, or have undergone a type of independent financial audit.

Unregistered LNGOs have limited or no connection to the ruling government. They tend to be established in response to an emergency, and have limited previous international donor experience. While unregistered LNGOs may have some visibility within the community where they operate, they are not externally regulated.

Diaspora organizations are generally registered with a foreign government. While they are likely to have international donor experience, they generally have less visibility and accountability with conflict-affected communities as they

⁶⁸ Interview with senior member of a Provincial Council. Gaziantep, 2014.

⁶⁹ Interview with INGO Program Director.

primarily work with sub-networks. Diaspora organizations are generally bound by the legal rules governing charity work in the country where they are registered.

In the case of Syria, international organizations operating from Turkey have had the opportunity to partner with unregistered LNGO and diaspora organizations. Syrian diaspora organizations are typically registered both with the Turkish government and another country—most often the US, UK, or Gulf countries. Syrian diaspora organizations were formed almost exclusively after the onset of the crisis, although some existed in an alternative form pre-conflict, most often working with charity for vulnerable groups. Unregistered LNGOs—subsequently referred to in this report as grassroots organizations—are obliged to operate with secrecy, as they are considered enemies of the state and are hunted by the Assad regime.

The relative benefits and drawbacks of working with diaspora versus grassroots organizations were identified throughout the course of the study. Members of several INGOs admitted that their initial selection of partners did not fully take into account the stark differences between these two types of organizations. This admission stemmed from pressure to become operational quickly and a general ignorance of the full range of possible Syrian organizations with which to partner. International organizations described gravitating toward those Syrian organizations that had self-presented at international fora. Representatives of diaspora organizations were able to communicate in English; many international organizations had no Arabic speakers on staff. However, such skills say little about operational capacity of the diaspora organization, including its ability to access target areas, or the quality of the relationships it holds with local communities. Ironically, access and community legitimacy are often the skills that international organizations seek in a partnership. As one UN official said,

Syrian LNGOs are too small. They don't have a representative with an office, someone to come to the meetings. Our session is

open, it is not restricted, but they don't have the personnel to come. Donors come, INGOs, diaspora, everyone else. The problem is in terms of capacity—hotel, travel, it is not something that easy ... So it is mostly INGOs or bigger organizations with capacity that can attend. As such, there is not good representation.⁷⁰

Dimensions of Partnership

This study revealed that international-local partnerships among organization operating in northern Syria varied along a number of dimensions. These included:

- **Duration:** Most agreements were short term (30 days to 3 months), while only a few were multi-year.
- **Contract type:** Some partnerships were designed to be a one-off arrangement, while others were continuous throughout a contractual period. Throughout the course of the study, the idea of “piloting”—or engaging local partners on a trial basis—became increasingly prevalent and gained traction on both sides of the partnership spectrum.
- **Type of assistance:** The majority of partnerships involved in-kind assistance (food baskets, NFIs, medical supplies, etc.). However, some (mostly non-Western donors) provided local partners with cash to procure and deliver assistance, particularly in areas under siege.
- **Value of the grant:** There was a large range in the monetary value of the contracts, with the majority less than 50,000 USD. The largest contract we learned of was over 3 million USD.
- **Agenda setting:** There was variation in which organization drove the agenda-setting in the partnerships. This includes the overall design of the project, site selection, resources involved, beneficiary criteria, modes of distribution, and M&E systems. The international partner was most often the organization that set the agenda. However, those organizations with a primary focus of LNGO capacity building were more willing to share this role.

⁷⁰ Quote from UN official about sector-specific meetings. Gaziantep, December 2013.

In addition to the dimensions described above, this study identified a set of additional variables that held strong influence over partnerships in the Syria context, and are likely to hold relevance for other insecure settings as well.

First, how the international organization *defines its end goals* influences the type of partnering relationship that evolves. At one end of the spectrum, the international organization wishes to reach beneficiaries in an environment with poor access. The partnership is thus seen as a means to an end. This arrangement looks more like a “truck and chuck” scenario and often involves short-term contracts around transportation and delivery. The other end of the spectrum involves international organizations that are interested in building the long-term capacity of the local organization with an aim to contribute to civil society development and sustainability. The full spectrum exists in the Syria context, although the majority of configurations lie somewhere between the extremes of the spectrum.

It is important to note that all local organizations in this study worked in multiple modalities—mostly with sub-contractual agreements and in partnership with international organizations. As well, local organizations participated in partnerships with varying dimensions. For example, one local organization might work with six international organizations—some with “truck and chuck” models, others in a short-term pilot capacity, and still others with a longer-term horizon. This means that the local organization must juggle the projects in their portfolio, which vary in terms of who is setting the agenda, types of goods, value of the grant, and donor requirements. This is particularly difficult for a new organization that has little experience or is unfamiliar with the aid architecture.

Second, this study found that the *international organization’s capacity to partner with local organizations* is as important to a successful partnership as the local organization’s capacity to program. This is despite the fact that the language around capacity and capabilities is almost exclusively geared toward local organizations. International capacity, as

described here, refers to several aspects.

The first is *institutional culture*. Some international organizations have streamlined partnership approaches and civil society development as a fundamental aspect of their mission. Other organizations view partnerships as a last resort, to be implemented when the operating environment is so restrictive they are left with no other option. These differences were observed over the course of the study. Some international organizations had entered the Syria response with the intention to work only in partnership with Syrian organizations. Others began with direct implementation. By the close of data collection period, organizations that had relied on direct implementation models had invariably incorporated a partnership element into their operations. Interviews with both local and international organizations revealed that partnerships were more effective and efficient when “partnerships” were streamlined in the institutional culture of the international organization.

The *stability of the international organization within the local context* also dramatically influences its capacity to partner. In Turkey, many international organizations reported rapid and frequent turnover of senior management and insufficient funding to hire staff dedicated to the partnership process. This was often a function of short funding cycles, lack of clarity in partnership strategy, and uncertainty in how long the organization would engage in the Syria crisis. One organization reported that its country director had changed seven times over the course of a year. Many LNGOs reported that communication was regularly hampered because they were required to speak with different staff each time they reached out to their partner organization.

The *country donor’s level of comfort with risk* will also determine the INGO’s overall capacity to partner with local organizations. Some donors are more risk averse than others in relation to liability, loss and diversion, accountability, and working in politically sensitive areas. Donor positions are often at odds with local organization priorities and needs. For example, one Provincial Council member explained:

We asked [our international partner] for equipment to pull people from the rubble [caused by barrel bombs], but they said ‘no’ because it is considered military equipment. What are we supposed to give those working in rescue.....roses? It is like saying that the surgery was successful but the patient died.

Furthermore, this study showed that donor country attitudes can change throughout the course of a crisis. For example, one country donor who supported an INGO that worked exclusively with local partners abruptly pulled its funding after several media outlets reported that Western aid was being leaked to the terrorist group, the Islamic State. Fearing that they were supporting this armed group, and not able to fully account for their humanitarian support in this complex remote management situation, funding was cut to the INGO and thus to the local partner.

Considerations

Findings from the study identified a set of additional considerations for international organizations looking to partner with local organizations in remote management settings. First, *partnerships take time*. There are no shortcuts, and this may present an inherent tension when expecting an emergency response in a remote management setting. Second, *there is no checklist* for finding a good partner. This highly complex process is context specific.

Third, *partnerships are enhanced when the operational environment is collaborative and trusting*. In other words, when there is an atmosphere of information-sharing, cooperation, and joint problem solving between international organizations, partnerships improve in terms of quality, ease, and coverage of activities. At the start of the research process, there was minimal communication and coordination between international organizations. This was in part fueled by donor concerns about security, fears of “partner-poaching” between INGOs, and OCHA’s late arrival to Turkey. In short, levels of mistrust amongst international organizations

operating from Turkey into Syria were extremely high. The inability to engage in a coordinated response, including the inability to share pertinent information and engage in joint action, led to a disharmonized approach to working with the same small pool of organizations. This negatively affected the absorptive capacity of local organizations and ultimately compromised humanitarian activities. As the environment became more trusting and open, international organizations were able to improve their activities related to partnerships.

Fourth, the *context is constantly changing*, from decisions made at the country donor level, to shifting conflict dynamics on the ground, to the intervention of international actors. During the course of the study, both shocks and slower-moving processes profoundly influenced international-local partnerships. For example, several local organizations that relied on traditional sources of funding like donations faced reductions as the Syria crisis entered its fourth year. INGOs also experienced cuts in funding as donor fatigue has started to set in, and as funds are increasingly diverted to support new crises emerging worldwide. In order to manage this reduction of support, several INGOs have entered into cooperative relationships, developing formalized unions and networks. These consortia-style organizations represent a new “player” in cross-border operations, and international organizations are, at present, unsure how to best engage with these structures.

A similar example of shifting policy objectives was the introduction of UN Resolution 2165 during the summer of 2014, which authorized cross-border and cross-line delivery of humanitarian assistance in Syria without government consent.⁷¹ This Resolution represented a significant “game changer” for international and local NGOs operating cross border from Turkey into Syria. Before the Resolution was passed, the majority of INGOs operating from Turkey into Syria had integrated partnership strategies into their operations. They had increasingly moved toward longer-term relationships and supported LINGOs in setting

⁷¹ For complete text of the Security Council Resolution, see <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2165>. Accessed October 30, 2014.

their own agendas, including project design and implementation. After the passage of the Resolution, UN bodies sought both INGOs and LNGOs to engage in logistical, short-term sub-contracts, where the UN dictated which resources were to go where. This mode of operating, which is, to date, inflexible, represents a kind of “reversal” in partnership development and ignores some important lessons learned in the Syria crisis.

C. IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL LOCAL PARTNERS

Many of the strategies for identifying potential local partners in more stable settings—such as competitive calls for partners or extensive partner mapping—are inappropriate for emergency or conflict environments. Such settings often necessitate rapid responses, but also carry risk to both local and international partners, particularly when they are involved in cross-border or clandestine operations.

This study revealed a range of methods used by international organizations to identify potential local partners. The most predominant strategies employed were:

- Contacting other INGOs to inquire about which organizations they were partnering with
- Participating in Coordination Meetings where LNGOs presented themselves
- Considering LNGOs that self-presented to INGO offices

Furthermore, selection of local partners tended to be based on an assessment of local organizational capacity, access to target areas, program alignment between local and international organizations, and financial and operational vetting.

Despite being the most common, these methods are relatively passive in that they do not seek out the full range of partnership possibilities in a given context. These techniques also necessarily give preference to local organizations that are endowed with the time, resources, language skills, and networks to present themselves to, and

converse with, international organizations. Such methods biased the selection process towards Syrian diaspora organizations over local grassroots organizations. The diaspora organizations were perceived to be more “Western” given their language capabilities, registration, and presence.

These three types of partner identification also place extensive importance on the reputation of existing organizations and on the willingness of INGOs to share partnership information with other international organizations. Often in emergency settings, time is a scarce resource, and operational organizations do not have sufficient time to build their reputation. Moreover, as mentioned previously, the operational context along the Turkish-Syrian border was steeped in secrecy—at least at the start of the crisis—with minimal communication and coordination between international organizations. The mixture of such conditions and the limited methods employed to identify local partners ultimately resulted in a situation whereby a large proportion of assistance was allocated to only five Syrian organizations, all of which were diaspora organizations. These organizations were ultimately flooded with resources, and struggled with issues of capacity, scale, rightsizing, and staff burn-out. As one representative of an INGO said:

We have Human Resources concerns. In March 2013, X *diaspora organization* had four staff. Now [nine months later] they have more than 50. In March, they had one warehouse inside Syria, now they have three. We are worried they are growing too fast. There is no management team. There is no HR. All communication goes through the CEO; he doesn't even have a deputy.⁷²

A few international organizations followed a more extensive and deeper process to identify potential local partners. These methods included one or more of the following:

- Comprehensively mapping civil society and using triangulation to verify accuracy
- Contacting pre-conflict networks. Most often these included embassy contacts or

⁷² Interview with INGO about their diaspora organization partner. Gaziantep, early 2014.

those at the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC).

- INGO staff relying on local knowledge and personal networking. In some cases, new staff were brought on because they had such knowledge and networks.
- Gathering information from social networking sites, such as Facebook, Viber, or personal blogs.
- Attending regional/local events and conferences where local organizations are present
- Interviewing local community members
- Soliciting information from the host country about its knowledge of operational local organizations

These deeper identification activities require access to information, and access is at least in part conditioned on the presence of: i) staff with personal knowledge of the country in crisis; ii) dedicated partnership advisor/s; and iii) positive relations with the host country—in this case, Turkey. These processes are further buttressed when information can be shared between international organizations, and/or when a coordinating body—such as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)—can effectively engage at the start of a crisis.

It is worth noting that the selection process is not entirely one-way. This study revealed that local organizations are also undergoing a sophisticated selection process when considering the different international organizations with which to partner. Particularly as the crisis progresses, local organizations are keeping systematic information on which international organizations are trustworthy, make good on their promises, treat their own Syrian staff well, engage in “real” partnerships rather than sub-contractual relationships, and encourage joint decision-making. International organizations that cultivate a positive reputation in this sense ultimately have more high-quality partners from which to choose.

D. CAPACITY

Organizational versus Operational Capacity

Capacity is a broad and widely used term. It appears frequently in the literature around partnerships and came up often in our field interviews, but was often not defined or understood in the same way. The case studies for this research pointed to two distinct ways in which capacity might be understood or considered. The first is **organizational capacity** and the second is **operational capacity**. For the purposes of this study, we define organizational capacity as being centered on management, governance, and decision-making—all aspects that enable projects to take place. In contrast, in this discussion we use operational capacity to refer specifically to the delivery of programs and projects. Understanding the differences in these forms of capacity proved helpful in analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the international and local organizations.

Overall and unsurprisingly, the international organizations were much stronger in organizational capacity than their Syrian counterparts. This meant that most of these organizations had: a clear mission and vision; tested systems of financial management; defined systems of governance; and efficient internal operations. For international organizations working in Turkey, having high levels of organizational capacity also normally (but not always) meant being legally registered in Turkey, having prior experience of operating in a conflict environment, having clear systems for procurement and logistics in place, being adept at writing proposals and donor reports, and having dedicated personnel to oversee discrete tasks such as grants and program management. Importantly, these components of capacity were either built into the architecture of the organization—as in the case of INGOs with presence in multiple countries and experience in setting up offices in new locations—or were largely set up prior to the start of the humanitarian response into Syria. To generalize, an institution with high organizational capacity engaging in humanitarian response normally aims to put in place the organizational structure, establish the

mission, decide on which sectors to focus on, staff advisory boards, and build management systems before they start to operationalize.

In contrast, the local organizations in our case study were much more focused on and stronger in operational capacity. They were generally less robust in regard to organizational capacity. Many of these organizations only became established after the start of the crisis in Syria, and were focused on strengthening their operational capacity, including their ability to conduct assessments, establish and maintain local networks, and develop sector-specific skills. They were attempting to deliver services or implement programs while simultaneously building their management structures and other critical organizational elements.⁷³ In most instances, operations began small scale and in response to immediate needs, with employees working almost entirely on a volunteer basis. Growth of the organization and associated organizational capacity must therefore take place at the same time as ongoing and high-stress operations.

We asked participants in this study what capacity meant to them and what they considered to be important components of capacity. Not surprisingly, personnel from international organizations were more likely to emphasize elements of organizational capacity (in particular past experience, financial record-keeping, and organization documentation). In contrast, representative of local organizations emphasized operational components, such as beneficiary relationships, access, and quality of networks. These two types of capacity are not mutually exclusive, and both are important to successful operations in an insecure environment or complex humanitarian emergency.

While this analysis does not seek to prioritize one form of capacity over another, the Syria case study does illustrate that different perspectives on capacity at times contributed to

misunderstandings between international and national partners. For instance, occasionally respondents from international organizations would voice frustrations regarding “the amount of time it takes [a local partner] to return a required financial report.” This indicates the international emphasis on systems of internal management and strong financial systems—areas in which the local organizations are often weak. In contrast, individuals from local organizations were more likely to complain about the bureaucracy or cumbersome decision-making process of the international partner. “The [INGO] still hasn’t decided what to do with the goods now that we can’t deliver in [specified location]! Don’t they know that people’s lives depend on these goods?” one respondent exclaimed. The local organizations were highly focused on meeting the needs of beneficiaries, sometimes at the expense of maintaining positive donor relationships. For their part, many respondents within the international organizations did recognize the disconnect in discussions regarding capacity, in the meaning of capacity, and in the pressures that the local organizations were under to adhere to their funders’ requirements. A staff member at an INGO said,

INGO: But I have a consistent sense of guilt—because we are responsible for the situation [a local partner organization] are now in.

TUFTS: What do you mean?

INGO: They are trying to exceed their own capacity. We do see every day the signs that they are at the edge of their capacity. We see them as a favorable partner, but our requirements, the number and needs of beneficiaries, and the time frame ... they are struggling a bit in some of those aspects.⁷⁴

⁷³ Some of the diaspora organizations pre-dated the start of the conflict, but radically shifted the nature of their work once the conflict began.

⁷⁴ Interview with INGO. Gaziantep, 2014.

Capacity Building

Partnership approaches often include strategies for building the capacities of local organizations. In the case of Syria, international actors are the ones who define the elements of capacity deemed most important. Capacity-building approaches are therefore top-down in nature—a frequent complaint on the part of the local organizations. In other words, the international partners dictate the areas in which the local partners need capacity improvements, and then subsequently provide mandatory trainings for these skills. That said, the combined data from local organizations indicate that local actors felt the following types of capacity to be the most important:

- Leadership and management skills within their organizations
- Assessment and proposal writing skills
- Financial capacity, including how to improve their internal documentation systems
- Capacities for building and maintaining trust
- Capacity for improved systems of mentoring and mutual advice

Interestingly, the first three bullets on the above list are remarkably similar to those areas in which international actors often feel that their local partners are lacking. The local organizations were clear in their dual interest in wanting to build capacity in these areas, i.e., they were aware of their internal management needs and shortcomings, and they were also aware that improving capacity in these areas made them more attractive to international partners and funders. The last two bullets on the above list illustrate the ways in which the priorities of the national and international actors often diverge. These components of capacity—trust, mentoring, receptivity to advice—emphasize the importance of relationship skills and personal connections. These aspects are often stressed by local organizations but are less likely to be highlighted as important by international actors. While there are clear areas of overlap, the existing differences can lead to a potential misalignment of priorities and intentions. The

international actors want to build or support the areas that they deem most important, while the local actors want greater assistance with other components. The implications of this difference are discussed further in the concluding section.

There was general consistency in the literature and in our research as to the modes for building the operational and organizational capacity of partner organizations.⁷⁵ We cover these in brief here, with specific reference to the Syria case study, and intentionally highlight the experiences and perspectives of the local actors as the participants in capacity-building endeavors.

- *Trainings:* By far the most frequent method of capacity building found in our data was trainings. Local organizations reported that the most useful trainings are those that are smaller in size and are specific to their own organizational needs (i.e., tailored individual approaches as opposed to pooled trainings for multiple organizations or for different levels or departments within the same organization). In addition, local organizations strongly preferred trainings on mutually-selected topics. Respondents from local organizations felt that trainings were more often about donor compliance than about aspects that could build local capacity over the longer term. Lastly, local organizations felt strongly that trainings should not be excessively time consuming, as these deplete valuable time and staff resources, as evident in the following comment from a senior staff member at a local organization:

We had five days of training and it wasn't at all what we wanted. They are not studying our needs. I have to recover all the hours I spent during the training in the night ... Now they want me to send all my senior staff to Istanbul for nine days. How am I to do that? What will happen to all of our operations and our obligations to other projects and donors?⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Interview with INGO Program Director. See Guyot

⁷⁶ Interview with local organization. Gaziantep, early 2014.

- *Workshops*: These are similar to trainings but normally have an end goal of a mutually produced output, such as a strategic plan, while also building capacity. The more specific and goal-oriented nature of the workshop model can help to avoid some of the top-down problems with trainings. When facilitated well, workshops can be a means of contextualizing and applying learning and sharing information. Workshops can bring theory and practice together in a way that trainings cannot and can combine international expertise with the local context and knowledge.
- *Partnership focal points*: Some international organizations employ a dedicated focal point person or persons to work with the local partners. These individuals interact continuously with the local organizations and engage in regular dialogue and exchange. This model is more intensive than the common approach of having a sub-grants manager at the international organization to work on the financial components of partnerships. The focal point person works more holistically to understand and address the needs of the local partner, and does this beyond the relatively limited lens of project deliverables. Local organizations with partners who utilize this model felt strongly that this was absolutely the most effective method for improving organizational and operational capacity. This model requires extensive time, resources, and commitment on the part of the international organization.
- *Secondments*: This approach entails an employee of the international organization sitting within the local organization. We were aware of this model but did not have specific examples in any of our partnership pairs. Based on other examples, this model can work well if the structure and goals are mutually agreed upon and if both sides are open to the model. This requires shared views on the priority areas for capacity building and having the “right” personalities interacting within both organizations. If the secondment model is not entirely consensual on the part of the local organization, it runs the risk of being perceived as an auditing function or as another requirement to receiving funding.
- *Pilot projects*: The pilot project model normally consists of an initial disbursement of small grants to a local partner organization, with the opportunity for continuation or expansion if the pilot project is a success. The pilot model allows the international organization to assess the organizational and operational capacity of the local partner. The local organization in turn is able to assess the nature of the partnership relationship and to get a sense of the reporting requirements and restrictions. A pilot approach may also allow both organizations to build or improve internal systems needed to ensure successful partnerships. In addition, because pilot projects are often small and entail less financial risk to the donor, international partners may be more likely to concede decision-making power on aspects such as design, delivery, and control over resources. This may allow the local organization to focus on the approaches that best fit the situation in ways that are sometimes prohibited in much larger and more expensive (and hence deemed riskier) projects.

E. MONITORING AND EVALUATION (M&E)

An important part of remote management is monitoring, a component of humanitarian aid interventions that becomes all the more critical when access is restricted and organizations have limited means of corroborating programming on the ground. Accurate information coming back from the field is essential, however, as it allows programming to be as responsive as possible to real needs on the ground, as well as providing upward accountability to donors.

While all aspects of MEAL—monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning—prove challenging when there is little to no access for international organizations, it is the first two components that pose the greatest difficulty and cause the most angst. This is due to the logistical and operational challenges of conducting M&E in conflict zones, and the awareness that M&E is the primary currency through which trust is built from the international perspective. “With

less on-site monitoring, programmes naturally run the risk of poorer performance, less accountability, and potential corruption or diversion of funds,” Egeland writes in “To Stay and Deliver.”⁷⁷ To combat the risks in lack of oversight and perceptions of decreased programming quality, a number of innovative monitoring techniques in remotely managed contexts have developed.

Types of Remote MEAL

This discussion will focus mostly on the monitoring, evaluation, and accountability aspects of MEAL, over those of learning. A global review of remote MEAL practices employed in insecure areas reveal that there are four main categories: those that are i) INGO based; ii) community based; iii) local partner based; and iv) monitored by third parties. Below is a discussion of some types of remote MEAL, their applicability to Syria, and some of the benefits and drawbacks of each.

INGO-based methods include:

- *“Call centers”* were used in Somalia by several international organizations operating remotely to all operating facilities to check on staff, supplies, and operations.⁷⁸
- *GPS shipment tracking*, in which goods are barcoded and scanned upon delivery, is a technique that is routinely used in northern Syria.
- *Regular debriefing meetings* is a technique used by several INGOs in this study to gather information about partner activities and programs. With this method, the onus is on the local partner to be skilled in gathering pertinent data, objectively reflective in operations, and honest in their communication with international partners.

Community-based methods include:

- *Crowd sourcing*—or obtaining information from large groups of people, usually via SMS or the internet—was used heavily in recent Kenya elections. In northern Syria, crowd sourcing is not a possibility because there is a lack of functional communication networks.

In the south, cellular communications are monitored by the secret service. However, many local organizations use Facebook or Twitter to document their activities, and community members often comment about the quality of the activities on these sites, or as part of blogs. Community members have also been found to post comments when planned activities do not take place.

- *Broadcasts on planned activities* to intended beneficiaries are another community-based method for M&E. In Nepal, such broadcasts were used to help reduce corruption and increase transparency. Broadcasting activities in Syria are not currently possible because of security concerns.
- *Reliance on existing local communities* was used in Afghanistan to monitor key indicators, collect data, and report to INGOs. In Syria, local council structures could be a candidate to support M&E functions. However, they are political bodies, and regularly provide their own humanitarian assistance to communities, and as such are not a neutral organization.
- *Complaints boxes* were used extensively in Sri Lanka. One international organization in this study utilized complaints boxes in northern Syria. Syria remains a difficult context for this method, because INGOs cannot access the boxes and must rely on the local organization to deliver the appropriate forms.

Local partner methods are either led by the actual partner or by a peer local organization.

These are direct types of M&E and include:

- *Photos/videos of distributions* are used in Somaliland and are extensively used in Syria. The Syria case tends to include geo-tagging of photos to verify the date and location. This method is believed to decrease diversion, and allows for “real time” monitoring. The drawback, however, is that photos/videos do not confirm that the distribution occurred the way it was designed, nor if the intended beneficiaries were reached. It also says little about the quality of work. Carrying this type of

⁷⁷ p. 26.

⁷⁸ Donini, p. 19.

information or equipment might also put monitors at risk. Relying on this method where there is limited electricity and bandwidth may not be the most effective use of staff time.

- *Web-based remote project monitoring* was used by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in Iraq. A Project Tracking Base was used to monitor activities undertaken by local partners. Members of local organizations sent geo-tagged photographic evidence of project progress, with future funding conditional on such evidence.
- *Daily verbal reports*, conducted between local and international organizations, often involve key qualitative indicators that have been agreed upon in advance, and help to build a longitudinal picture of operations. Several international organizations require this level of communication with their local partners in Syria. At present, there are not continuously accessible, reliable, or secure communication systems in northern Syria. One local case study organization that was required to provide daily reports to their international partner described that several of the schools they had been repairing were bombed by the regime soon after completion. They hypothesized that they were targeted because of these daily contact requirements and an inability to guarantee the security of their communications. Similarly, another local organization reported that requirements of daily communication meant that they often had to travel long distances by car—through areas actively bombed by the regime or under the control of extremist groups—in order to find a functioning internet portal to communicate with their partners. Findings from this study reveal that such requirements were a drain on local organization resources and capacity, and put local partners at risk.
- *Peer observation*, in which one local peer organization observes and evaluates the work of another, has been used in Burma, and is currently being piloted in Syria. While the efficacy of this method is still unknown, this study did find that many local organizations currently call on trusted members of their personal networks, local councils, or LNGOs to verify or observe different stages of their

projects. Often, these observations are conducted without the direct knowledge of the local organization staff being observed. Local organizations were found to engage in this type of peer M&E of their own volition, not as a requirement from their INGO partner.

Third-Party Monitoring (TPM), over the course of the study, has increasingly gained a reputation as the “gold standard” in remote M&E by international organizations operating from Turkey into Syria. While most organizations are currently contemplating this option, only a few have successfully piloted third-party monitors. TPM involves a private firm that has skilled personnel and standardized, but tailored, tools to conduct M&E for international organizations under short-term contracts. The interest in TPM is predominantly related to the assumed neutral role of the company, as well as the personnel’s specific expertise. Over the course of the study, several TPM firms formed in Southern Turkey to meet the growing interest and demand from international organizations.

Despite these benefits, the study identified several potential drawbacks to assuming TPM is the “magic bullet” for remote M&E. First, TPM is resource intensive. It is expensive, and funds to cover TPM are inevitably drawn from other activities such as local organization capacity development or direct relief efforts. Second, using the same TPM multiple times may compromise the firm’s objectivity or neutrality, which is the fundamental benefit of TPM. Third, as the contracts for TPM are issued by the international organization, the firm is accountable to the hiring institution, which may weaken their presumed objective role.

Often the decision to engage in TPM is made between the management level of the local organization and the international partner. Often field staff is left out of the process. This study showed that such exclusion led to tension on the ground between the TPM team and local organization field staff. Extensive groundwork needs to be conducted between field staff and management of one or both partner organizations in order to guarantee buy in and

decrease the possibility of conflict. In a similar vein, not all TPM companies are Syrian and might not understand the local context. TPM behavior can significantly impact LNGO operations, beneficiary experience, and the trusted relationship between the LNGO and the communities they serve. One TPM decided to call beneficiaries by telephone to ask if they had received food baskets from a certain donor. Beneficiaries were frightened by this approach, believing that they were being spied upon. Many refused assistance afterwards. One local organization in the study explained that a TPM team accompanied their field team to make observations during a distribution. The local organization team usually worked in teams of four, and the TPM insisted on a team of six. In other words, ten people approached a beneficiary with a single food basket. Two people were asking a lot of questions, and third was taking pictures. This behavior also frightened the beneficiaries and damaged local organization–community relations.

General Observations

MEAL was found to be a frequent priority for international organizations, with the agenda being driven or imposed by international organizations on their local partners. Local organizations reported that they had to juggle several MEAL plans for different donors, something that consumed more time and resources than the local organization had capacity to manage. Often these requirements were in excess of what the INGO needed to provide to their own donors. One local organization that was a case study explained that they had 16 donors, each with a different set of MEAL requirements, none of which were financially supporting this organization in MEAL activities.

At the same time, this study found that local organizations increasingly streamlined MEAL into their own programming. The merits of MEAL were appreciated in their own right, apart from donor requirements. Several local organizations described devising their own internal M&E methods and procedures. They followed their own guidelines even when donors, such as private ones or those from the

Gulf, didn't require it. Local organizations that engaged in this process did so because they recognized that it improved their accountability to all donors as well as to beneficiaries. They also sought it as a way of becoming more attractive to potential donors and decreasing rates of diversion.

Both local and international partners expressed the centrality of trust to the success of MEAL. Where trust exists, local organizations are less likely to feel policed by their donors. INGOs reported that one of their central challenges is debunking myths around MEAL—showing that MEAL is a right of donors, has demonstrable impact on the effectiveness, quality, and responsiveness of projects, and is something that can increase the credibility of local organizations. This process of legitimizing MEAL, as described above with TPM, is most beneficial when it involves field staff as well as management. This study found that some international organizations are actively trying to engage in MEAL activities that focus on mutual goals and priorities.

F. DONOR REQUIREMENTS

Aside from requirements specific to MEAL, requirements are a substantial component of the partnership chain—between country donors and international organizations, and down to the local organization. This section focuses on three main themes that regularly arose during interviews over the course of this study.

First, donor requirements often strain local organizations where they have the least amount of capacity—that is, in *organizational capacity*. As described above, local organizations do not rely on a single international partner, but on average have multiple partners. To date, there has been little effort across international organizations to streamline their demands, leaving local organizations juggling multiple sets of donor requirements. Furthermore, some international organizations provide local partners with templates that are only in English, requiring the local organizations to translate written requirements from Arabic to English, further straining LNGO organizational capacity. Also, as described in the previous section, other

international organizations require daily communication, which may increase risk and is expensive and resource intensive given the limited means for communication.

Second, international organizations often do not factor *security* into their requirements. Several local organizations described being faced with the dilemma of receiving international support or putting their staff, vendors, and beneficiaries at security risk to comply with donor requirements. Despite the highly dangerous environment, many international organizations continue to require that local organizations provide them with the names of individual beneficiaries. Either because of a lack of internet connection or lack of resources to electronically generate such lists, they are often hand carried across the border to donors in Turkey. One local partner explained that in order to provide international organizations with beneficiary lists from an under-siege area, they were obliged to pay smugglers (from their small core budget) to move people and documentation across siege lines. Another local organization that works in western Ghouta—a part of Damascus that is alternatively under regime and opposition control—described that many residents are too afraid to have their names recorded by the local organization, and are thus excluded from receiving aid, despite the fact that they are in need and meet beneficiary criteria.

As part of this study, we interviewed a local organization that worked in under-siege Damascus and thus was only able to operate with cash assistance. The LNGO could find only one Western donor willing to support them in this way, but the donor requirements were prohibitive. In order for the organization to receive assistance to procure and assemble goods for 2,000 food baskets, the donor required the local organization to use a microphone and call the townspeople together in the public square. The local organization explained that such a public meeting would be a likely target for the Syrian regime's air force. They had also already conducted a needs assessment in that community and knew that 5,000 families were in need. They were confident that calling a general meeting would not only compromise the entire community's safety, but also would delegitimize

the local organization, because they would have insufficient support to cover the entire community.

Invoices are often required when goods are procured by local organizations inside Syria. Several local organizations explained that despite understanding the need to document expenses paid out, carrying such receipts to donors is a security risk. One person reported that he walked tens of kilometers on foot in order to avoid multiple checkpoints to deliver invoices to an international organization. Similarly, some international organizations require quotes or estimates from a minimum of three potential vendors for goods and services inside Syria. These quotes must show an official stamp. Local organizations reported multiple problems in fulfilling these obligations. First, many vendors are operating informally and in hiding because of the conflict environment. Many do not want to share their personal information with Western donors as it puts them personally at risk. Many armed factions, including the regime, target those who interact with foreigners. Lastly, many local organizations are able to procure goods inside Syria *because* they have trusting relationships with local vendors. Such requirements can challenge the trust within these networks, and may risk the ability of local organizations to provide assistance to beneficiaries.

Finally, some donors still require that their logos be placed on goods despite the fact that these represent strong political statements. Some logos indicate an alignment with the West and others with Gulf States. One striking example is an INGO that required its local partners to distribute NFIs with a symbol of a cross. The local organization felt that this put both the LNGO and beneficiaries at risk.

Despite this lack of streamlining security into requirements, either at the donor country or INGO level, INGOs and donors are *generally* receptive to receiving feedback from local organizations about the problems they encounter with requirements. When the difficulty is raised, donors often engage in joint problem solving with the local partner, and attempt to make requirements more flexible. This study revealed

that local organizations often have difficulty articulating the problems they face with donor requirements, and thus international organizations do not have a complete understanding of what local partners face in the field. The issues of trust and communication will be discussed in depth in Section H.

G. DONOR WITHDRAWAL

As part of the research project, a historical case study was conducted on the development of civil society from the time of Operation Provide Comfort in northern Iraqi Kurdistan in the early 1990s and forward. This case was selected to better understand how civil society organizations—including those involved in humanitarian operations—evolved over time, and how they adapted to shocks and eventual donor withdrawal. Like Syria, Iraqi Kurdistan historically had very low levels of civil society activity. After the Operation Provide Comfort intervention, international resources poured into the region in the form of humanitarian action and support for civil society development. Several local organizations formed during this time. Iraqi Kurdistan went through several periods of turmoil, including a civil war in the mid-1990s, leading to rapid donor withdrawal. The US invasion of Iraq in the early 2000s also represented a significant shock to the region, as did the more recent spillover effects of the Syrian conflict, the presence of ISIS, and foreign military intervention in 2014. All of the organizations that participated in this study in Kurdistan were involved in responding to the Syrian crisis.

Coping Strategies

Interviews with eight long-standing local organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan revealed a set of coping mechanisms that they employed to manage uneven funding streams, donor withdrawal, and other external shocks.

Dormancy: Several local organizations described going dormant during periods of lean funding. Similarly, others described rapidly adapting like an “accordion”—expanding and contracting the organization depending on available funds.

Downsizing: Several local organizations cut salaried personnel and increasingly relied on volunteers to complete their work during times of reduced funding. Volunteers were drawn from both local communities and from international pools of student interns. The strategy of relying on volunteers is dependent on strong LNGO–community relationships, and a solid international reputation. Local organizations that employed this strategy had made a conscious effort to improve their credibility. They invested in resources to facilitate the development of community relationships and organizational reputation.

Private Sector and Income Generation: Several organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan turned their attention to the private sector in an attempt to improve their longer-term sustainability. These strategies included child sponsorship programs, approaching domestic and foreign corporations for donation campaigns, investing in real estate for rental income, and soliciting revenues from advertising. Organizations reported that these approaches were largely successful in enabling them to continue their existence.

Political Involvement: Several local organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan became more politically active in an attempt to secure their funding flows. This included aligning with opposition or incumbent parties, or strategically associating themselves with individual politicians. Those interviewed indicated that this approach was largely unsuccessful as a means of maintaining uninterrupted funds.

Moving toward INGO Status: Several local organizations operating in Iraqi Kurdistan were actively working on becoming more international in scope, as they believed this would improve their overall sustainability. This included trying to register the organization outside the region, hiring expatriate and English-speaking staff, and designing strategies to approach country donors directly. While some organizations had begun this process, they not had completely transitioned to INGO status at the time of this study.

Closure: Not surprisingly, several Iraqi Kurdish organizations closed their organizations after

donors withdrew. One government funder who worked in Iraqi Kurdistan during Operation Provide Comfort said that after US funding was withdrawn, a large proportion of skilled local staff that had worked for local organizations left the country in search of better opportunities. “Brain drain” was a concern shared by several higher-capacity diaspora Syrian organizations as well.

Supporting Sustainability

Due to the high intensity and continuous nature of the conflict, international organizations have not actively sought to prepare their Syrian partner organizations for eventual donor withdrawal. However, the concept of sustainability *is* a priority for some—particularly local organizations that must face a continuously changing context within Syria and funding shocks with their international partners.

Diversion tactics: In the face of sudden reduced access, some Syrian local organizations shifted from more to less capital-intensive activities. For example, one organization working in an area that was taken over by ISIS changed from commodity-based projects (delivery of food baskets and NFIs) to activities that were centered on education and awareness raising.

Diversification/Fund-Seeking Elsewhere: Over the course of the study, several members of Syrian local organizations increasingly understood the importance of their external image to potential donors. They began to invest in websites and portfolios, and to solicit letters of recommendation. This was particularly the case for those who were dependent on a small range of funders and wished to diversify their risk by broadening their range of potential donors. One Syrian organization that unexpectedly lost a large percentage of its revenues quickly approached other donors to continue operations. The fact that the organization had already developed trusting relationships with Western and Gulf donors, and had a positive track record in maintaining these relationships, helped it to manage this shock of sudden donor withdrawal. In addition, given that many of the diaspora organizations working on the Syria response are already aligned with regional donors, political

parties, or movements, we would expect to see increased politicization of the response if Western donors and organizations were to withdraw from or scale back the extent of their funding to Syria.

Core Funds: Local organizations identified that a lack of support in the form of core funds is the primary impediment to long-term sustainability of the organization. Syrian local organizations do not generally charge international partners or donors for overhead or core operating costs. Many employees are working without salaries, and fundamental organizational costs such as rent, transport, fuel, and communications are not accounted for in local project budgets. In addition, many organizational costs—which are often tied to donor requirements—are not covered by partnership contracts. Such costs might include those related to MEAL, proposal development, finance, public relations, and advocacy.

Managers of grass roots organizations described that they rely on donations or their own personal private reserves to cover these costs. These private funds are either unsteady or in the process of drying up. Members of several local organizations believed it was not within their right to ask INGOs or donors for core funds. In a competitive context, such as the Syria response, they feared they would not be selected amongst the pool of potential partners if they requested such support. Others explained that they had asked for core support from their international donors and were turned down. This lack of willingness to support core costs for local organizations was something that was identified as a dynamic eroding trust, because organizations cannot be fully functional or sustainable without this core support. This tension is heightened as local organizations become aware that INGOs include overhead charges in their budgets to donors. On the flip side, international partners reported feeling skeptical when local partners approached them with such requests after the start of their partner relationship. They wondered why local organizations would suddenly request additional funds—in the form of overhead—for projects they had been implementing all along *without* such support.

From the perspective of international organizations operating from Turkey into Syria, sustainability of local organizations in the face of donor withdrawal—aside from capacity-building activities—has not been a central aspect of partnership design. One notable exception comes from an implementing partner of a donor government that supports local councils. When local councils approach the contractor with proposals to fund projects, the contractor only selects those projects that are likely to survive their eventual withdrawal. In addition, they only support projects that rely on goods procured inside Syria. They also only select projects that build alliances between different groups rather than those that deepen existing cleavages. The contractor had defined these conditions as those that would help the sustainability of local councils after donor withdrawal.

In addition to these measures, the importance of supporting operational *and* organizational capacity is tantamount to supporting the sustainability and longevity of local organizations. Such a holistic approach should be considered fundamental to international organizations that are interested in helping local partner organizations prepare for eventual donor withdrawal.

H. THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST

One of the most important lessons from the Syria case study has to do with the role of trust in partnerships. This lesson is broadly applicable across partnership models, and in particular in the context of remote management. The study showed that trust was an absolutely essential element of the partnering relationship, but international actors often placed less emphasis on trust than did their national counterparts. This disproportionate emphasis on trust is due, in part, to the characteristics of capacity discussed earlier. Due to relatively high levels of organizational capacity, an international organization normally has multiple levels of safeguards and checks in place to ensure that the operation runs smoothly and efficiently. Procurement is standardized, vendors are vetted, financial reports are routinely audited, and processes exist for handling complaints or problems. Trust is an added benefit that clearly contributes to successful outcomes, but the existing systems and mechanisms are set up to operate even in the absence of high levels of trust.

In marked contrast to their international counterparts, the local organizations do not normally have in place the established and tested mechanisms and safeguards. Operating systems are instead based on social (and often political) relationships and networks. Trust is the glue that holds all these relationships and networks together; trust is the currency that enables the hiring, procurement, humanitarian access, financial reporting, etc. Importantly, when a local organization feels that trust is lacking in a partnership relationship, it undermines both the work and the basic premise of the operation. For example, as mentioned previously, some local organizations are reluctant to report the full extent of the security problems they are facing within Syria. Representatives of these organizations said that they did not have a good enough relationship with their international partners to share this information, and they feared that such disclosures would put their funding at risk. At the same time, however, most staff members from international organizations said that they wished that their local partners would be more open with them in order to jointly assess and manage risks.

The stark difference in the role and importance of trust for the respective partners has the potential to undermine the partnership relationship. The international actors do not fully comprehend the way in which trust—or lack of trust—influences both the partnership and operations on the ground. For their part, the national actors are perplexed by what they see as a lack of personal investment and commitment to the partnership relationship. Furthermore, trust serves different functions for the different organizations. For the international organizations, trust is a code that ensures that expectations—i.e., deliverables—are met in a timely fashion. For the local organizations, trust is more of an existential concept that means people will do what they say they will do, even if they are *not* in touch on a daily basis, if invoices are not standardized, or if the deliverable is delayed.

The list below highlights a few of the ways in which national actors felt that trust was created or eroded in their partnership relationship.

Building Trust

- Face to face meetings
- Dedicated partnership person in INGO
- Language capabilities
- Clearly defined roles
- Fulfilling commitments
- Demonstrated flexibility
- Joint problem solving
- INGO respects LINGO opinions

Eroding Trust

- Lack of overall transparency
- Feelings used (for networks/sub-contracts)
- Excessive documentation
- Top-down communication
- Condescending attitude
- Cultural insensitivity
- Slow response time

Many of the aspects in the above list seem self-evident, such as the importance of face-to-face meetings and not engaging in condescending behavior. Some of these components, however, are indicative of cultural differences in how organizations function and the nature of expectations. It became apparent over the course of the data collection for this study that international actors are often unaware that they were undermining their relationship with their local partners through their actions or inactions. For example, while partnership meetings are frequently held in person in the early stages, phone or email communication tends to soon replace face-to-face meetings. This shift is about efficiency for the international actors; it is not meant to be a slight and is the manner in which they are accustomed to working. In contrast, for local partners, the lack of regular in-person meetings is often perceived as irritating and disrespectful. Likewise, some respondents from local organizations complained that staff members from international agencies saw themselves as “experts” on how best to implement humanitarian programs in a conflict zone. Local actors feel this attitude was condescending and patronizing. For their part, international actors feel that their partners—many of whom have no experience running non-profit organizations or delivering relief—can at times be defensive and are often unwilling to hear constructive feedback as to how programs and operations might be improved.

Our analysis implies that often the problem comes back to cultural differences that influence the way in which the feedback is delivered—i.e., based on tone, style, format, or location and language of meetings—rather than the content of the feedback itself.⁷⁹

The manner in which decisions are made within the partnership has a direct impact on levels of trust. National actors feel respected when their input, experience, and opinions are given equal weight in making decisions about programs or problems that arise. Full participation is validating to the relationship and contributes to overall levels of trust. In contrast, local organizations strongly object when they find that a relationship that was billed as an actual partnership is in fact primarily a sub-contractual arrangement that the donor is using for logistics or network purposes. Similarly, lack of transparency and what local organizations view as “excessive document requirements” lead to mistrust.

The ways in which the international organizations operate—both in regard to program implementation and on the personal level—also influence the overall partnership relationship. For instance, those international organizations that are able to respond with flexibility to emerging situations on the ground in Syria are respected. Flexibility of response is seen to demonstrate compassion, understanding,

⁷⁹ While this discussion is framed as “expatriate” versus “locals” staff, in fact many international organizations employ many Syrians or nationals from the region (Turks, Jordanians, Egyptians, etc.). Hence “culture” and “behavior” can be as much about the agency as the individual. In addition, even when an international organization is heavily staffed by nationals from the region, western expatriates often hold the high-level positions and make decisions that the lower-level staff are expected to execute.

and being attuned to the needs of the Syrian people. A high degree of flexibility is relatively rare for Western international organizations tied to bilateral and multi-lateral donor funding requirements, timetables, and vetting requirements. Although this constraint is widely recognized by local organizations, it remains a point of contention. The result of perceived or actual inflexibility, of course, is that the local organizations turn to alternative sources to fill emerging and often critical needs (such as a medical response to a chemical weapons attack). These alternative sources are most often Gulf States or wealthy individuals based in the Gulf or elsewhere. Such funds are often much more flexible and can be accessed more rapidly; the benefactors often have political agendas and make no pretense of adherence to humanitarian principles.

Trust is about relationships, and the nature of the personal relationships and interactions is generally considered much more important for the local organizations than the international ones. This is best illustrated through the example of one local organization that has a coding system for all the individuals within their international partner organizations. Individuals are coded based on how easy they are to work with, and staff members within the local organization steer their interactions accordingly. This anecdote not only illustrates the importance of relationships, it also serves as a reminder to the international actors that they are not the only ones engaged in vetting and assessments.

The ability to fulfill commitments is extremely important to local organizations. Several of the local organizations in our study dealt with a shortfall in funding from their international partner over the course of the research. Local partners stressed that this had a major impact on trust within the relationship. This reaction was difficult for many of the international actors to comprehend, as they felt that it was clear that their own funding was based on donor policies and/or pipeline issues entirely beyond their control. They felt that they had done everything possible to support the local organization, including regular communication about the issue. International actors are perplexed that their local partners seemed to “take these things

personally” as opposed to recognizing the much broader arena in which these dynamics were occurring. Indeed, this description of the personal level of the conflict is extremely apt, and the question is returned to in the conclusion section.

Means of Building and Improving Trust

Our study pointed to clear ways in which to build and improve trust within partnerships. Those discussed here were largely agreed upon by both local and international organizations in the Syria case study. Agreement does not, however, imply simplicity of implementation. The following were identified as the main means of building trust:

- *Joint agenda setting:* International organizations recognize that joint agenda setting is key to positive partner relationships. Local organizations very much want to have a greater voice in decision making throughout the project lifecycle. However, local organizations generally felt that international actors were unwilling or unable to allow for full participation in this regard. In most partnerships, the local organizations felt that the agenda-setting was still largely top-down in nature.
- *Openness to partner perspective:* International organizations recognize the importance of their partners’ perspectives and experiences on Syria-specific matters. Incorporating this perspective could be enhanced through improved communication. Local organizations felt that higher-level and more regular and in-person meetings would help to indicate openness in this regard.
- *Forum for feedback and reflection:* Some partners institutionalized means for communication and joint evaluation. For example, one set of partners used a scorecard to review the relationship every three months. Another set had regular meetings to discuss how the partnership was going. Holding such meetings does not, of course, guarantee improved communication, and some individuals felt that such meetings were mostly window dressing to meet the requirements of the bilateral donor.

One of the greatest challenges is that *time* is one of the essential variables for building trust between organizations, but time is in very short supply given the nature of the conflict response. Time spent in meetings or building relationships through social interaction has a major opportunity cost; this point was constantly stressed in regard to training requirements, for instance. Furthermore, additional time would likely have little impact on trust without improvements to quality of communication between the partners. Both sides agreed that while poor communication damages trust, external factors, such as poor infrastructure, can also impede what might otherwise be positive communication. In addition, some local organizations found requirements for excessive communication, e.g., daily phone calls, to be cumbersome and an implication of lack of respect and trust.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes with some further thoughts on the nature of partnerships in situations of insecurity characterized by remote management. Regardless of the circumstances, we found that the equity of partnerships is questionable when one side has all the money and holds most of the decision-making power. This is a common dynamic of partnerships between international and national actors, but is more nuanced in a remote management setting because while the international players continue to hold all the money, the local players hold *all* of the access. The nature of remote management means that the international actors have no choice *except* to partner if they wish to be involved in the humanitarian response. This raises the question of when, where, and why international actors should be involved in these settings to begin with.

The Role of the Conflict

International actors raised the question of whether the tendency of their local partners to “take things personally” impedes effective partnership approaches. In many ways this aspect—the personal—represents the intractable central problem for partnerships in remote management settings. For local actors and organizations operating in Syria or other insecure settings contexts, *it is personal*—it is about their countries, their livelihoods, their families, and their future. Many of the grassroots organizations were established due to personal experiences with the conflict itself—i.e., a medical doctor was driven by the situation around him to begin treating bomb victims from his neighborhood. The international actors, on the other hand, are physically removed from the conflict and are attempting to manage the situation through logframes and checklists. Many of the expatriate staff will move on to the next hotspot in three, six or eighteen months’ time.

By its very nature, remote management places into stark contrast the roles and priorities of the international versus national actors. The primary job of the international organization in a remote management setting is to manage their local

partners. This may include designing programs, securing the supply chain, working with bilateral donors, engaging in coordination, etc., but the focus remains on the mechanisms of the partnership. In stark contrast, the primary responsibility of the local organization is to deliver the goods or provide the services. Managing the relationship with the international actor—through reporting, M&E, daily phone calls, weekly reports or any other mechanisms—is much lower on the list of priorities and concerns. Again, this returns us to the differences in capacity types: the local organization is almost entirely focused on its operations, while the international organization is prioritizing organizational reporting and structures.

In short, there can never be parity between the international and local organizations in settings such as Syria due to the inability to balance or even comprehend the scale of risk, loss, and threat. There is nothing “remote” about the situation in northern Syria for the local organizations included in this study. Their offices are being bombed, their employees attacked, their movements monitored, and their lives are in constant danger. Most are not even taking salaries. Some international respondents voiced concern that the local organizations are not taking security concerns seriously enough; our data show that the local actors are managing security risks at a level that most international actors could not begin to imagine. This disconnect in experience is constantly reinforced and is one of the many reasons that the local actors are reluctant to share the true nature of their experience with their international partners. The differences in how the conflict shapes (or does not shape) the experience of the various actors was illustrated clearly in an interview with a diaspora organization funding grassroots Syrian organizations. Accustomed to the short-term funding cycles of 12 or fewer months, as is common in emergency settings, one of the authors of this study inquired as to the normal length of the projects funded by the diaspora organization. Surprised stares and an uneasy silence were followed by the response: “How long is the war?”

Specific Recommendations

Bilateral and multi-lateral donors should:

- Recognize that partnerships in remote management contexts are fundamentally different from other settings. Donors should take this uniqueness into account before supporting international organizations that work with local partners.
- Evaluate their tolerance for risk (including the potential that organizations will interface with armed groups and also that flexibility may be needed regarding standardized requirements) before supporting partnership initiatives or operating in remote management settings.⁸⁰
- Design their requirements to prioritize security for both national and international actors over other reporting considerations, by emphasizing that security is the top priority for all actors, having clear contingency plans in place to take into account the shifting security conditions, ensuring that security costs at the local level (including guards, adequate offices, trainings, insurance, etc.) are included in project grants for local organizations, and encouraging open feedback about emerging conditions.
- Solicit information from both international and local fund recipients in order to fully understand the potential difficulties with meeting reporting requirements.
- Be clear about the conditions under which they would consider withdrawing funding, in order to build trust and open channels of communication along the partnership chain.
- Work with international partners to streamline and simplify requirements to the extent possible in order to reduce the burden on local partners.

International organizations should:

- Assess their motivations for choosing to be present and active in response to a given emergency. Involvement should be based on having a comparative advantage such as an

established presence or history in the region, strong regional networks, staff with advanced language skills, or expertise and demonstrated success in remote management settings.

- Assess their motivations for partnering and their capacity to partner before initiating the partnership processes.
- Encourage cooperative approaches with other international actors in order to decrease the time and energy required to manage partnerships with local organizations. These approaches could include identification of local actors, joint capacity assessments, and opportunities for shared learning. In addition, cooperative efforts could focus on harmonizing reporting formats, MEAL systems, and financial management systems.
- Hire dedicated partnership staff as focal point persons who can serve as mentors to local organizations.
- Use active methods to identify local partners, including mapping, research through social media outlets, reliance on local experts, interviews with community members, and contact with pre-conflict networks. Collective approaches across international organizations can greatly improve this process. Avoid passive methods for partner identification that can lead to bias and less effective partnerships.
- Assess and build both the organizational and operational capacity of local partners. This holistic approach will help local organizations prepare for eventual donor withdrawal.
- Design their requirements to prioritize security for local organizations over other reporting considerations. This can be done by emphasizing that security is the top priority for all actors, having clear contingency plans in place to take into account the shifting security conditions, ensuring that security costs at the local level (including guards, adequate offices, trainings,

⁸⁰ For assistance on evaluating risk, see OECD, 2011, “Managing Risks in Fragile and Transitional Contexts: The Price of Success?” <http://www.oecd.org/dac/incap/48634348.pdf>; and M. Jacquand and S. Ranii, 2014, “UN Development System Risk Management in Fragile States,” Center on International Cooperation, New York University, New York, [cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/un_dev_risk_mgmt_ranii_jacquand_1.pdf](http://nyu.edu/sites/default/files/un_dev_risk_mgmt_ranii_jacquand_1.pdf).

insurance, etc.) are included in project grants for local organizations, and encouraging open feedback about emerging conditions.

- Recognize that trust is a central component to successful partnerships and that trust can serve different functions. International organizations should engage in active measures to build trust with their local partners, such as holding regular in-person meetings to exchange information and ideas, ensuring transparency in decision-making, and establishing robust feedback mechanisms specifically about the partnership process.
- Devote attention to both accountability to beneficiaries and accountability to donors. Monitoring and evaluation in remote management settings is a complicated process, and one that should focus on the quality of outcomes as well as the processes of humanitarian action. Field staff from local organizations should be included in M&E protocols and processes, and international organizations should ensure that outside actors (such as third-party monitors) are sensitive to the local context.
- Provide core funds to local partners in order to promote longer-term sustainability. Local partners should gradually be encouraged to procure goods locally, support projects with longer-term horizons, build civil society alliances, and develop their own contingency plans.
- Provide fora for local partners to learn from one another. These discussions and exchanges—on what works, what does not, and how challenges can be overcome on the ground—will often be more useful than the trainings organized by international actors.
- Recognize that cultural differences—including in modes of communication, working, and conditions that build or erode trust—may lead to divergent understandings of the same situation.
- Recognize that in contexts such as Syria many local organizations are newly formed and may need additional support to understand the language, processes, and architecture of international partners and the broader humanitarian system.

Local organizations should:

- Be willing to learn and accept feedback from their international partners and donors.
- Be honest with their international partners about security concerns, difficulty meeting donor requirements, and other challenges.
- Recognize the importance of core costs and salaries and communicate these needs to their partners and potential partners.
- Familiarize themselves with humanitarian principles and the ethos behind these principles.

Operating in remote management contexts or through partnerships in insecure environments remains a relatively unexplored area. This study provides documentation and analysis on some of the specific issues and considerations, but the evidence gap on how to best improve practice remains large. Deepening knowledge on local-international partnerships in remote management settings will require further evidence-based research. Areas for specific investigation could include:

- Systematic testing of partnership models to draw conclusions about the most effective methods for international-national partnering in remote management settings
- Development of indicators to assess and measure changes in capacity of local organizations over time. This will also enable an assessment of the most effective capacity building activities. This would require quantitative methods and a substantial sample size.
- Expanding research to additional countries where remote management is the primary mode of service delivery to improve generalizability of recommendations

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Feinstein International Center

Tufts University

114 Curtis Street

Somerville, MA 02144

USA

tel: +1 617.627.3423

fax: +1 617.627.3428

fic.tufts.edu