

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

### Key Messages:

- Local organizations employ a variety of coping strategies to manage uneven funding streams, donor withdrawal and other external shocks. Based on evidence from Iraqi Kurdistan, some of these strategies are more effective than others in ensuring longer term survival of the organization.
- International partners can support the sustainability and longevity of their local partners by funding for longer time periods, procuring commodities locally, supporting civil society connections and providing core funds.



Photo: Associated Press

The conflict and humanitarian crisis in Syria has highlighted the pressing need for evidence-based guidance on **partnerships** between international and local organizations in **remote management settings**. This includes environments where access is limited either due to insecurity or restrictions imposed by host governments. This is the second briefing paper emerging from the full report, *Breaking the Hourglass: Partnership in Remote Management Settings, The Cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan*. This briefing paper specifically examines the issue of donor withdrawal, and draws on data from Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria. This study was funded by the U.S. State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and focused on the experiences of and challenges for international and national organizations working to deliver humanitarian assistance from Turkey into northern Syria<sup>1</sup>. We believe that the findings and recommendations from this report have broad applicability for other remote management or highly insecure settings. The full report includes recommendations for local organizations, international organizations and bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors.

Findings specific to donor withdrawal shed light on the following:

- a) Identification of coping strategies employed by local organizations to manage uneven funding streams and donor withdrawal
- b) Methods for supporting sustainability of local organizations
- c) The importance of core funds for the longevity of local organizations

## Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings

### Methods

Two country cases were explored in the course of this study. The Syria case focused on contemporary cross-border humanitarian operations running from Turkey into Syria. We used qualitative methods to gather longitudinal data over nine months (late 2013-mid 2014) on five pairs of local and international organizations engaged in humanitarian action. Interviews also took place with representatives from more than 25 donor, international and local organizations involved in the Syria response. The Iraqi Kurdistan case examined the development of civil society in the years following Operation Provide Comfort (1993), and represents a historical analysis of the consequences for local organizations of rapid Western donor withdrawal. Key informant interviews were conducted with representatives of current or defunct organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan. Findings are informed by a global literature review on humanitarian assistance in highly insecure environments. Our data analysis entailed the coding of 120 interviews, followed by a “ground-truthing” workshop in October 2014 attended by more than 60 representatives from Syrian, Turkish and international organizations in Gaziantep, Turkey.

### Key Findings

#### Coping Mechanisms

Working in volatile and unpredictable environments, local organizations must rely on a variety of adaptive strategies to handle sudden changes in access, security, donor preferences and funding. The following coping mechanisms were identified by longstanding Iraqi Kurdish organizations, and were reflected in some interviews with the more recently established local Syrian organizations as central to maintaining organizational integrity in uncertain and high-risk settings.

Dormancy: Several Iraqi Kurdish organizations still in existence 20 years after the end of Operation Provide Comfort explained that they went dormant during periods of lean funding. Their organizations were able to function like accordions - expanding and contracting depending on available funds. The Syrian

organizations in this study were too new to have experienced periods of dormancy.

Downsizing: Several organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan cut salaried personnel and relied on volunteers to maintain operations during periods of reduced funding. This strategy of turning to volunteers is contingent on strong relationships with the local communities. The use of volunteers is a common strategy among Syrian organizations, both because there is inadequate core funding to cover salaries and because there is little reliability of funds from one month to the next.

Private Sector and Income Generation: Similar to many large international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), local organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan turned to the private sector to improve long-term sustainability. Strategies included child sponsorship programs, donation campaigns with domestic and foreign corporations, investment in real estate, and advertising revenue. The shift to the private sector was regarded as one of the most successful strategies for supporting longevity. Many of the portfolios of Syrian local organizations already included significant contributions from private entities (individuals and businesses). However, many of these organizations reported that the sources and amounts of private funding were becoming scarcer as the war continued. This decline in the portion of private support may have negative repercussions if other funding streams decline or fluctuate.

Political Involvement: Some Iraqi Kurdish became more politically active in an attempt to secure funds. This included alignment with opposition or incumbent parties or strategically associating with high profile politicians. Likewise, some local Syrian organizations relied on the networks of exiled political parties, and support from donor countries with similar political ideals to secure financial and material support for their operations.

Becoming an INGO: Several local organizations - both Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish - were actively working on becoming more international in scope. This included registering the organization outside the region, hiring expatriate and English-speaking staff,

## Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings

---

and developing strategies to directly approach country donors, rather than working with INGO intermediaries.

Diversification: Successful organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan worked to diversify activities and funders during challenging periods. We saw this coping strategy increasingly employed by Syrian organizations over the course of this study. For instance, when faced with suddenly reduced access to populations, some Syrian organizations shifted to less capital-intensive activities. One organization working in an area overtaken by the Islamic State switched from delivering commodities (such as food baskets) to educational activities. This strategy attracted less attention and avoided the difficulties of moving goods through checkpoints. Syrian organizations in this study were increasingly investing in websites and developing their portfolios in an effort to become more attractive to a range of potential donors. In particular, organizations with a smaller range of funders saw this as a means of diversifying their exposure to sudden withdrawal or cessation of funds.

Those coping strategies that Iraqi Kurdish organizations reported were most effective in supporting their long-term survival included going dormant during lean times, downsizing, increasing their reliance on the private sector and diversifying activities and funding streams. Organizations that became increasingly political tended to not be successful in the longer term, and the organizations attempting to expand to INGO status faced difficulty in realizing this goal. For Syrian organizations, it is still too early to determine which adaptive strategies will ultimately support their longevity.

### Supporting Sustainability

**F**ew international organizations or donors are contemplating withdrawing humanitarian support from Syria at present, but both local and international stakeholders recognize that this is a future inevitability. In addition, data from this study show that funding streams can change abruptly for other reasons, including domestic political pressure in donor countries and changing dynamics on the ground in

Syria. The experiences of civil society organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan have important implications for how best to support the longevity of organizations in Syria. In addition, many Syrian organizations were already facing challenges regarding sustainability, and their recommendations for improvements in this regard are also captured in this section. Overall, our analysis indicates that sustainability is an important part of the partnership process, and can be built and incorporated throughout this relationship.

### Capacity

Many international organizations are heavily invested in assessing and building the capacity of their local partners. This study demonstrated that capacity can be conceived of in organizational and operational terms. Organizational capacity - normally prioritized by international organizations - includes competencies focused on management, governance and decision-making. Operational capacity - where local organizations more likely excel - refers to the delivery of programs and projects and is based largely on local knowledge, networks, access and logistics. Often there is a mismatch between what international and local organizations prioritize in regard to capacity. However, in order for any organization to be successful in the long term, the development of both operational and organizational capacities must ensue. International and local partners need to recognize the differences in how they contemplate capacity and to focus on developing both operational and organizational components.

### Funding Cycles

Many international organizations fund only short (one or two month) or one-time projects with their local partners. Multiple short-term projects strain local organizations where their capacity is weakest - organizational capacity. Longer-term funding cycles and extended partner agreements could reduce the burden on individual organizations, increase the opportunity for learning and knowledge exchange, and ultimately support the sustainability of the local organization.

## Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings

---

### Local Procurement

Local procurement of goods has the potential to contribute positively to the sustainability of local organizations and economies after donors withdraw. Procuring locally also decreases the number of checkpoints that goods must be moved through to reach the beneficiary communities. On the flip side, financial exchanges can be more difficult to document and vendors may be reluctant to provide advance quotes, invoices or receipts. These are some of the many trade-offs that international organizations and donors must consider when choosing to operate effectively in a conflict zone.

### Support for Civil Society

Sustainability is enhanced when international partners support local organizations that build civil society alliances. Humanitarian assistance can often promote competition and deepen existing divisions on the ground. Program design should take into account potential sources of tension and include support for cross-cutting connections between local actors. Data from the Syria case revealed that the partnership selection process and external requirements for program activities often strained relationships between local organizations operating in the same space. A selection and design process that is more inclusive may help to support coalition building across divergent groups. This may improve service delivery as well as building relationships across dividing lines to support civil society, and help to promote sustainability in the face of donor withdrawal.

### The Centrality of Core Funds

Local organizations in both Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria identified the lack of core funds as the primary impediment to their long-term sustainability. Most local organizations interviewed for this study did not receive support from international donors for overhead or core operating costs. These costs include salaries for many employees as well as rent, transport, fuel, security, and communications. Additional costs - often tied to donor requirements but not covered by partnership contracts - include support for monitoring and evaluation, proposal development, finance, public

relations and advocacy. Several local organizations described that they were hesitant to ask for core support due to the very competitive nature of partner selection. Others explained that they had asked for such funds from international partners but were turned down. Respondents from local organizations reported that the lack of support by international partners for essential core costs had a negative impact on trust - a commodity essential for a successful partnership.

## In Conclusion

Donors and international organizations working in Syria are increasingly focused on providing humanitarian assistance in collaboration with local actors. Whether out of necessity due to security concerns, or with an eye toward building civil society and a belief that local ownership improves response - there is a need to understand the components that support the longevity of local organizations. This study has shown that sustainability can be enhanced by adaptive strategies on the part of local organizations, but also by the behavior and practices of international organizations. A long-term horizon will help support the development of civil society, and help to ensure that populations affected by crises have support that extends beyond the short project-based funding cycles of international donors.

---

<sup>1</sup>The first briefing paper examined challenges in identifying partners and forging partnerships in remote management settings, capacity building, donor requirements and M&E. The full report and briefing papers are available at [fic.tufts.edu](http://fic.tufts.edu).