

The anatomy of local negotiations

Humanitarian access and local organisations in Syria

Eva Svoboda



Key messages

- Access is a key challenge in delivering aid to the 13.5 million people in Syria who need it, for 'local' and 'international' actors alike. All aid agencies, whatever their provenance, face similar access challenges and address them in similar ways.
- Since the start of the conflict in 2011, a diverse set of local organisations has emerged, ranging in size from a handful of volunteers on a small budget to multi-million-dollar operations with hundreds of staff and volunteers. Some provide direct assistance, while others do so remotely.
- Just being 'local' does not automatically translate into better access, though having good contextual knowledge does give an organisation an added advantage. However, while personal networks help in establishing the necessary trust and acceptance to negotiate access in the first place, such acceptance is not limitless. Sustained access must be earned through effective, reliable, timely and relevant humanitarian assistance that demonstrates tangible benefits.

Humanitarian access – or more accurately the lack of it – has been a defining issue since the conflict in Syria began in 2011. While there have been ebbs and flows over the past six years, access has never been country-wide or sustained. Insecurity is a major obstacle, both for Syrians and for aid agencies, and parties to the conflict have rarely heeded repeated calls by the UN Security Council to allow unimpeded access. Siege warfare not seen since Sarajevo or Grozny is denying vital assistance

to hundreds of thousands of people in besieged or hard-to-reach areas.¹

The issue of access has typically been looked at from the perspective of organisations that are part of the 'formal humanitarian system' (the UN, international NGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement). But how does constrained access affect actors not

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Photo: A soldier at a military checkpoint in Syria.
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¹ See <http://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/syria-country-profile/about-crisis>.

part of that formal system? How do they negotiate access, and are the challenges they face different simply because they are local?²

A typology of 'non-traditional' organisations

Our understanding of the humanitarian system as we have known it for the past 150 years has changed. What was once assumed to be an arena dominated by UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and international NGOs is now seen to encompass a plethora of organisations, entities and actors all engaged in one form or another in humanitarian action. One such category – local or 'non-traditional' groups – forms the focus of this research.

Most humanitarian, human rights and civil society organisations in Syria were established following the uprising against the government in 2011.³ Few if any existed beforehand given the Syrian government's hold on civil society. Six years on, Syria is home to a diverse set of organisations ranging in size from a handful of volunteers on a small budget to multi-million-dollar operations with hundreds of staff and volunteers. Some provide direct assistance, while others do so through remote management. Like organisations from the formal system, non-traditional groups are also 'neither monolithic nor immutable'.⁴ The range of ideologies, affiliations and agendas is similarly diverse. While it is impossible to accurately map all local organisations in Syria, this research identified the following categories:

Local councils

Local councils have emerged as governance structures in areas where the Syrian government no longer has any control. They often serve as intermediaries for access negotiations between local and international organisations on the one side, and armed groups on the other. Some have their own humanitarian coordination offices.

Diaspora groups

Diaspora organisations operate through pre-existing local networks of personal, professional and family connections. Given their familiarity with and presence in both the country of origin – in Syria's case, predominantly in opposition-held areas – as well as the country of settlement, diaspora groups hold a unique position in terms of raising public awareness in their adopted country to the plight of their fellow Syrians. Many of the more established diaspora groups act as mentors to local and newly created groups in Syria.

Unregistered community-based and civil society organisations

Many of the unregistered community-based organisations (CBOs) that emerged around the 2011 uprising engaged more in civic activities and peacebuilding than in assistance activities. However, as the conflict has continued and needs have grown, many of these groups have shifted their focus to relief activities. Most operate in opposition-held areas.

The private sector

Businesses, based both within Syria and in neighbouring countries, also provide assistance. While many operate with the permission of the Syrian government, there have been instances of Turkish businesses working in opposition-controlled areas of the country, albeit without permission. INGOs and UN agencies have partnered with some of these businesses to deliver in-kind assistance in northern Syria. While the conflict is having a significant impact on Syria's economy – the World Bank estimates that the country's GDP contracted by 19% in 2015⁵ – the war has also led to the emergence of a new category of businesses directly benefiting from the chaos and violence, and from restrictions on humanitarian access.⁶ Such business activities (smuggling, levying of transit fees, controlling access points) thrive off the conflict, and those engaged in them have little interest in seeing its end.

Faith-based organisations

Charitable work by faith-based organisations has a long history in Syria, and networks established over many years, including with churches abroad, have proved useful in the delivery of assistance. Other

2 The distinction between 'traditional', 'non-traditional', 'local' and 'international' can be unhelpful, but these are the terms we currently have, and thus are used here.

3 This is similar to the conflict in Ukraine, where organisations were created following the demonstrations in Kiev that began in 2013. See Veronique Barbelet, *'It's Not Their War': Humanitarian Access and Local Organisations in Ukraine*, HPG Working Paper, forthcoming, 2017.

4 C. Bennett et al., *Time to Let Go: Remaking Humanitarian Action for the Modern Era* (London: ODI: 2016).

5 See <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/economic-outlook-spring-2016>.

6 R. Turkmani et al., *Countering the Logic of the War Economy in Syria: Evidence from Three Local Areas* (London: LSE, 2015).

faith-based groups emerged in the early stages of the conflict, often funded through private donors in the Gulf states.

The lines between these various categories can be fluid, not least because individuals hold positions in more than one type of organisation. Civil society groups also assume multiple roles and have multiple objectives, pursuing development, humanitarian, peacebuilding and human rights work simultaneously, rather than compartmentalising relief work into its own category of response.⁷ Some groups established with the purpose of pursuing peace-building or defending human rights have increasingly seen their efforts channelled, some would say ‘diverted’, towards relief work as emergency needs have mounted.

The anatomy of local negotiations

Sadly, Security Council resolutions calling for unhindered access in no way mean automatic access on the ground. Typically, access boils down to negotiations in the field directly with those able to grant it. There is an impression that access mainly involves negotiations at checkpoints with men with guns. This is true when it comes to negotiating access routes, but it is only part of the picture. Local councils often assume the role of intermediaries in access negotiations: local aid agencies speak to local councils, which then negotiate with communities and armed groups in what could be called ‘second-hand’ negotiations. Local councils’ ability to successfully negotiate access rests on a number of factors, including capacity and efficiency (more developed in some than in others). Some of the larger local councils fulfil certain governance functions, including the management of assistance through their own humanitarian affairs departments. As such, local councils play a critical role in access negotiations, as well as in the coordination and delivery of assistance, for example as members of the Syrian Coordination Platform. They can also provide information on needs, and in some instances third-party monitoring.

While critical, local councils’ relations with armed groups can also be contentious, to the point where an

armed group may replace a council with one more in line with its own political views.⁸ Syrian organisations may also be faced with competing local authorities, compelling them to negotiate with several local councils. In areas under the control of Islamic State (IS) or other Islamist groupings, local councils are at best challenged by parallel Islamic councils, and at worst outright replaced by them. Thus, while local councils – and affected communities – may have significant influence on the behaviour of armed groups, there are limits to that influence. Being armed gives them the power to impose their will if they so choose.

Is being local enough to get access?

Over the past six years, the profile and role of Syrian organisations providing assistance and protection has significantly increased. That role has also been acknowledged by organisations of the formal humanitarian system. Such acknowledgment has not, however, translated into the kind of systematic support (financial, security training, insurance, capacity-building) that genuine partnerships would require.⁹ While both sets of actors struggle to obtain – let alone maintain – access in many areas, it is clear that local organisations have a particular advantage that allows them to gain access where international organisations may be unable to do so. But is the fact that an organisation is local synonymous with better access? Is this perhaps an oversimplification of a much more complex process? What does ‘local’ even mean?

Personal ties help in reaching communities in need, though what constitutes personal ties is not always clear. They may be based quite literally on personal networks, though they often extend beyond family and kin to encompass shared ethnic and, in some cases, ideological ties. It is these ties, and the trust that comes with them, that allow local organisations to enter into access negotiations, but they do not guarantee success. Trust is based on several elements:

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Katherine Haver, *Tug of War: Ethical Decision-making to Enable Humanitarian Access in High-Risk Environments*, Network Paper 80, November 2016; K. E. Stites et al., *Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings – The Cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan*, 2015; K. Mansour, *UN Humanitarian Coordination in Lebanon: The Consequences of Excluding Syrian Actors*, Chatham House Research Paper, 2017.

⁷ R. Khalaf et al., *Activism in Difficult Times: Civil Society Groups in Syria*, 2011–2014, Badael Project and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2014.

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- Syrian groups are often perceived to be more accountable than international NGOs. They also tend to stay when international organisations decide to withdraw for security reasons.
 - Affected communities see Syrian organisations as better informed about local needs.
 - Syrian organisations tend to be more agile and flexible in how they respond because they are already present on the ground and suffer less from cumbersome bureaucratic procedures than larger organisations from the formal sector.
 - Some groups derive their legitimacy from their ‘revolutionary’ origins. While such credentials might give them an advantage, their perceived lack of neutrality may affect their ability to gain access.

Findings from this research show that, whatever arguments, skills, knowledge or networks help local organisations gain access, sustaining that access is much more difficult, and contingent on a range of factors including ones outside these organisations’ control. The terms of any agreement reached with armed groups, local councils or affected communities can change, and may have to be renegotiated; unless assistance is timely, adequate and relevant, access can be lost ‘simply’ because the organisation did not deliver. Simply being local is not necessarily the key to better or more sustained access.

Conclusion

A plethora of so-called local organisations are actively providing assistance and protection in Syria. There is a tendency to label them, to establish categories, and while this may be helpful in identifying broad trends, labels often end up reinforcing differences and a sense of ‘us and them’ that is unhelpful, inaccurate and simplistic. As the humanitarian sector gears up to engage with another, associated, label – ‘localisation’ – it will be important to critically examine what this really means. Before ‘localisation’ becomes the catch-all label for anything that is not international, we should ask ourselves who is local and who is not, and whether it really matters for the efficient and effective delivery of assistance and protection to people in need. Better, more nuanced analysis is needed of where Syrian organisations provide an advantage in terms of access, and where they might struggle. This would identify gaps and opportunities for systematic collaboration and support. It is hoped that the discussion on localisation will allow a better understanding of who local organisations are, how they work, including in places where access is limited, and how collaboration between a diverse set of organisations – local, international and those lying somewhere in-between – can be improved, with the aim of providing better assistance and protection to people in need.