

Study on the effectiveness of humanitarian partners and funding relations of the Netherlands

Case study report – Syria

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Disclaimer: the opinions expressed in this report are those of the evaluation team, and do not necessarily reflect those of IOB.

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1 Introduction

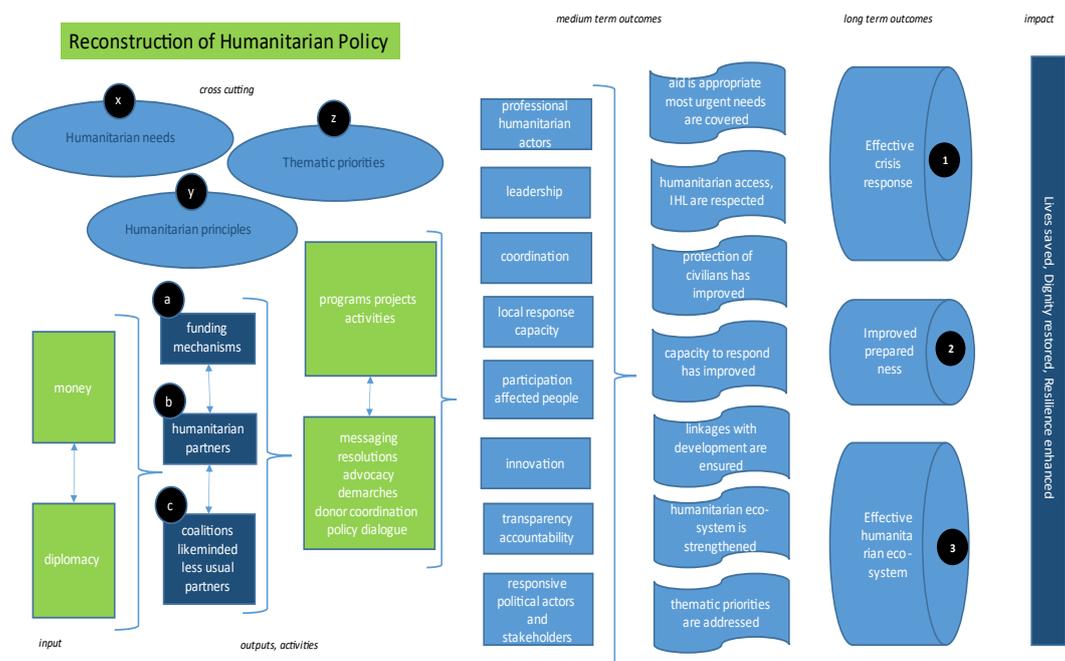
1.1 Background to the study

“The humanitarian objectives of the Netherlands are defined by the wish to save lives, restore dignity and enhance the resilience of people affected by humanitarian disasters and crises”.¹ To meet such objectives the Dutch government has provided financial support to a number of selected humanitarian partners and funding mechanisms, providing non-earmarked, semi earmarked, and earmarked funding with a global coverage. Furthermore, the support aims “to support an effective crises response, to improve preparedness, and to build an effective humanitarian eco-system”.² Such funding is supplemented by diplomatic and advocacy activities.

So as to evaluate the effectiveness of such activities, the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IOB) has commissioned a number of evaluations and reviews, including this case study, being one of three case study countries, the other two being Yemen and South Sudan. The consolidation of all such activities will be undertaken by IOB themselves.

Figure 1 below reflects Dutch humanitarian policy between 2015-2020, indicating inputs, outputs, activities, cross-cutting principles, medium-term and long-term expected outcomes, as well as intended impact. It also illustrates the three fundamental pathways adopted to reach the above-mentioned objectives: a) funding mechanisms, b) humanitarian partners, and c) humanitarian diplomacy. These are the key focal areas of the study. Each pathway is further elaborated in detail (see Annex 1) where the assumptions underpinning the expected outcomes are indicated.

Figure 1. Dutch Humanitarian Policy 2015-2020



¹ Terms of reference, Annex 1 Reconstruction of Humanitarian Policy.

² Terms of reference, page 1.

For pathways a and b, the Dutch government department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid (DSH) “allocates around 40-55% of the humanitarian budget as predictable, flexible, and unearmarked core funding to a limited number of “experienced humanitarian partners”, with whom there is a long-term relationship”.³ Partners include UN organisations such as the World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations’ Children’s Fund (UNICEF), UN organisation for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), and the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), plus Red Cross partners - the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and The Netherlands Red Cross (NLRC) - as well as the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA). Such organisations are trusted to spend such funding where needed most, whilst considering the Dutch government’s humanitarian objectives and priorities.

Unearmarked funding through DSH annual contributions to the “experienced humanitarian actors” for the period 2015-2020 are as follows:

Table 1. Annual €M allocation to experienced humanitarian partners by year

Year	WFP ⁴	UNICEF ⁵	UNOCHA	UNHCR	ICRC ⁶	IFRC	NLRC	DRA
2015	36.0	15.0	5.0	33.0	40.0	0	15.0	-
2016	36.0	19.0	5.0	42.0	40.0	0	16.5	-
2017	49.0	17.0	7.0	46.0	40.0	0	17.4	60.0
2018	36.0	17.0	5.0	33.0	40.0	0	17.2	60.0
2019	36.0	10.2	7.0	33.0	40.0	0.2	16.2	70.0
2020	36.0	10.2	7.0	33.0	45.0	0.9	24.9	70.0

Additionally, “softly (semi) earmarked funding is made available for ongoing chronic crises, in response to new developments, and acute crises during the year. On average, 30-40% of the overall budget is allocated to partners for humanitarian assistance in specific crises”.⁷ For such specific crises, DSH selects the most appropriate partner or funding mechanism that the partner manages, for example, the UN Country Based Pool Fund (CBPF) or the DRA, setting aside approximately €15 million at the start of each year.⁸ DSH also contributes a significant sum annually to the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) fund, often the second-highest donor each year. The balance of DSH’s humanitarian budget has consisted of direct earmarked contributions to experienced partners in specific countries. This method of funding has not been utilised in Syria since 2016.

Annual allocations to the UN CERF fund, as well as CBPF and direct funding contributions to Syria, were as follows:

³ IOB report: “Dutch decision-making on humanitarian assistance: Strengths and Weaknesses. September 2021

⁴ WFP was supported with €108M for 2019 through 2021.

⁵ UNICEF has received €51M for the period 2109-2023

⁶ The ICRC has been provided €120M to cover three years from 2019 onwards. This was supplemented with a €5M COVID top up in September 2020

⁷ IOB report: “Dutch decision-making on humanitarian assistance: Strengths and Weaknesses. September 2021.

⁸ Ibid.

Table 2. Annual CERF and CBPF Contributions

Year	Netherlands annual contribution to the CERF9 \$M	CERF allocation to Syria \$M	DSH allocation to Syria Humanitarian Fund (SHF) \$M	DSH allocation to Syria Cross Border Humanitarian Fund (SHCF) \$M	DSH direct allocation to Syria
2015	59.2	29.9	10.2	-	18.0
2016	60.5	-	9.2	-	2.0
2017	71.3	-	5.3	-	-
2018	67.9	-	6.0	-	-
2019	71.3	-	5.4	8.6	-
2020	98.0	54.9	3.7	13.1	-

The CERF and pool funding is allocated in country by UNOCHA to a range of UN agencies, plus INGOs and NGOs.

DSH also aims to promote cross-cutting thematic priorities such as localisation, innovation, and the triple nexus, as well as other specific focal areas. Currently, there are eighteen thematic priorities, and the ongoing assumption is that the above-mentioned core funding, together with flexible support for ongoing and new crises, will enable the Netherlands to gain influence and promote the adoption and inclusion of such thematic priorities within the humanitarian sectoral responses. These assumptions were reviewed within the scope of this study: please refer to the relevant findings sections below.

1.2 Scope, approach and data collection methodologies

This Syria study covers 2015 to 2020, albeit conversations naturally focused on recent years and the current ongoing operational context. Syria was selected as a case study country due to the complexity of the continuing humanitarian context, the presence in the country of the “experienced partners”, and the level of support provided to the CERF and CBPF.

To have a perspective of the overall Syria humanitarian response it was necessary to review activities both within the government-controlled areas (GCA), as well as those beyond government control, in this instance, in North-West Syria (NWS). As such, key informant interviews (KIIs) were undertaken with experienced partner and DRA staff in both Damascus (DAM) and Gaziantep (GTZ), Turkey, from where the cross-border operations are managed.

The main objectives of the case study, as stated in the ToR, are to:

1. Shed light on the effectiveness of Dutch supported partners in delivering humanitarian aid.
2. Provide insights into the conditions and circumstances under which the Netherlands as a donor enhances or hampers the effectiveness of these

⁹ Taken from individual CERF annual reports 2015 – 2020.

partners in the delivery of humanitarian aid. This includes an evaluation of the effectiveness of several funding mechanisms used by the Netherlands: core funding, pooled funds, country earmarking and the Dutch Relief Alliance.¹⁰

The case study has examined “how different funding mechanisms and humanitarian partners have delivered results on three policy objectives of Dutch humanitarian assistance since 2015:

1. The ambition to deliver timely, needs-based, effective, principled and high-quality humanitarian assistance;
2. The ambition is to be coherent with broader development approaches and crisis responses; and
3. The ambitions to innovate and localise.¹¹

The study has also looked at the strengths and weaknesses of DSH’s humanitarian partners, briefly reviewing partners’ operational and programmatic performance and the timeliness and functionality of the supported mechanisms.

Beyond this, the country case study has also reviewed the relationship between the Dutch government and its selected partners, if this relationship has influenced the effectiveness of partner aid delivery and the extent to which such relations have led to the adoption of the Dutch government’s thematic priorities. Furthermore, diplomatic and advocacy initiatives, either individually or alongside other donors, has been assessed. Once more, the assumptions underlying the diplomatic humanitarian pathways have also been reviewed.

The overall approach of this study was consultative, through a mixture of methodologies, as follows:

Key informant interviews (KIIs) with:

- Recipients of unearmarked funding (six: UNCHR, UNICEF, WFP, UNOCHA, ICRC, IFRC)¹²
- Recipients of CERF funding and direct funding (three: UNCHR, UNICEF, WFP)
- Fund managers and recipient partners of CBPFs (OCHA Amman, Damascus, and Gaziantep, plus three SCHF recipient in Gaziantep, and two Damascus based SHF recipients).
- Local partners of the above organisations (three)
- Recipients of DRA funding - consortium members (six)
- Recipients of DRA funding – one consortium member local partner
- Amman Dutch embassy staff (one)
- Other donors and embassies (FCDO, Swiss embassy)

¹⁰ Terms of reference page 1.

¹¹ Terms of reference, page 2

¹² Partners were interviewed separately re operations in GCA and NWS, plus some sector chiefs and programme officers. A total of 14 interviews were held with experienced partner staff.

The above list includes the recipients of each type of funding mechanism. Interviews were agreed to be anonymous and confidential, and as such, the names of some partners have been withheld within this report.

A number of interview guides were elaborated and utilised as relevant based on meeting the research questions, sub-questions, and judgement criteria indicated in the research matrix elaborated in the inception report.

Observation/Site visits:

The Team Leader, together with a representative of IOB, undertook a four-day trip to Amman to talk with key UN partners, Dutch embassy staff and other donors and embassies.

Similarly, the local consultant visited Gaziantep for two days, to talk to UN and DRA partners and visit their work sites, including a visit to the cross-border logistics hub managed by WFP.

Another Damascus-based consultant conducted site visits to one of the livelihood projects implemented by IFRC/SARC in rural Damascus and engaged with some beneficiaries. Two key informant interviews with project implementers were conducted onsite and three interviews with beneficiaries in rural Damascus. A multi-sectoral interview guide for such meetings had been elaborated in preparation.

Desk Research:

An analysis of partner project documents has provided some guidance as to how well partner interventions have met their objectives. A bibliography of documents can be seen in Annex 4.

Data Analysis:

The information gathered using the methodologies indicated above were entered into an analysis matrix where all the feedback to each evaluation question and sub-question were gathered on one excel spreadsheet, therefore enabling the consolidation of information and feedback in one location, generating the initial findings and conclusions. This greatly facilitated the formulation of the debrief workshop presentations and subsequently this case study report.

Debrief workshops:

Before writing up country case study reports, a debrief workshop has been conducted remotely to test initial findings and conclusions from the data gathered to date, identify any gaps in the data collected, and answer any initial questions that arose. Attendees were predominantly from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in the Hague and in-country or regional Dutch embassy staff.

Partner survey:

A partner survey has been undertaken; however, as the results cannot be sorted on a country basis, this information will be utilised for the synthesis report.

Overall, the study has been both summative in that it has reviewed how effectively funding to date has been utilised and formative. It will look forward to identifying any possible improvements and changes to ongoing practices.

Intended users of the report include:

- MFA staff in the Hague (IOB office, DSH, and other relevant technical departments).
- Embassy staff in Amman responsible for programme implementation and monitoring.
- Embassy staff elsewhere, globally.
- DRA partners, both in-country and at their global and regional headquarters.
- Other donors and interested stakeholders (UN Partners and the Red Cross Movement recipients).

1.3 Research questions

As per the ToR, the research questions were as follows:¹³

RQ 1 How effective are Dutch-funded actors in the humanitarian system (UN Agencies, Red Cross family and NGOs) in achieving Dutch humanitarian goals?

- 1.1 What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of various funded humanitarian actors, how can these be explained, and in what way have these delivered added value in the delivery of humanitarian assistance?
- 1.2 Have Dutch-funded actors in the humanitarian system delivered timely, needs-based, principled humanitarian action? What have been the factors of success or failure?
- 1.3 What has been the contribution of Dutch-funded actors to the objective of innovation, localisation and coordination with broader development goals? What best practices are identified and what has been the added value for realising humanitarian goals?

RQ 2 What kind of funding relation does the MFA have with its various partners, and how does this relation enable or hamper their effectiveness in delivering humanitarian aid?

- 2.1 [How are funding decisions made within the MFA?]
- 2.2 What types of relations between MFA and recipient organisations emerge from these funding decisions, and how do these relations enable or hamper the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance?
- 2.3 How have the priority themes of innovation and localisation been promoted within these relations?
- 2.4 How have policy changes in response to the IOB Policy Review of 2015 been implemented, and to what extent have these changes contributed to achieving Dutch humanitarian goals?

The research question this effectiveness study will not address 2.1. This question has been taken up separately by IOB itself. Please note also that question 2.4 was also reduced by IOB in as much as only the level of ongoing monitoring of Dutch government activities, together with the effect of diplomatic activities, has been reviewed.

¹³ ToR page 3.

1.4 Limitations

The short period in which to assess organisational functionality was the main limitation of the case study. Usually, an evaluation of one of the UN partner's effectiveness in-country would take months utilising a large team of evaluators. In this study, only a few short interviews per organisation have been undertaken, generally one hour in length. This has been supplemented at times by field visits and secondary research so that a reasonable impression of each funding recipient's effectiveness has been possible, together with an overview of how they have contributed towards meeting the objectives of the Dutch government's humanitarian policy objectives.

Similarly, this has not been a standard evaluation in that a donor has funded a specific project in one geographical location. The non-earmarked funding is given at an HQ level, so it cannot be associated with any particular project, moreover, the reality is that the Dutch government funding has its "fingers in many pies". This, however, does not make funding easy to evaluate, as recipient organisations can struggle to identify programmes they feel the Dutch government have funded and as a consequence what they feel they should be presenting to the study team. This has led to delays in terms of how quickly some organisations have responded to the study's initial enquiries.

The breadth of questions the evaluation team has been looking into has been extensive. This has meant that not every topic has been raised with every interviewee. As such, although a clear attempt has been made to answer all of the questions set, some answers will be deeper and more evidence-based than others.

Security has been an issue in that it is not possible to enter NWS to talk to partners and beneficiaries there. This does not apply to just the evaluation team, but to all UN and INGO agencies running NWS operations from Gaziantep. Similarly, it was necessary to select programme sites close to Damascus for field visits that were easy to access and secure.

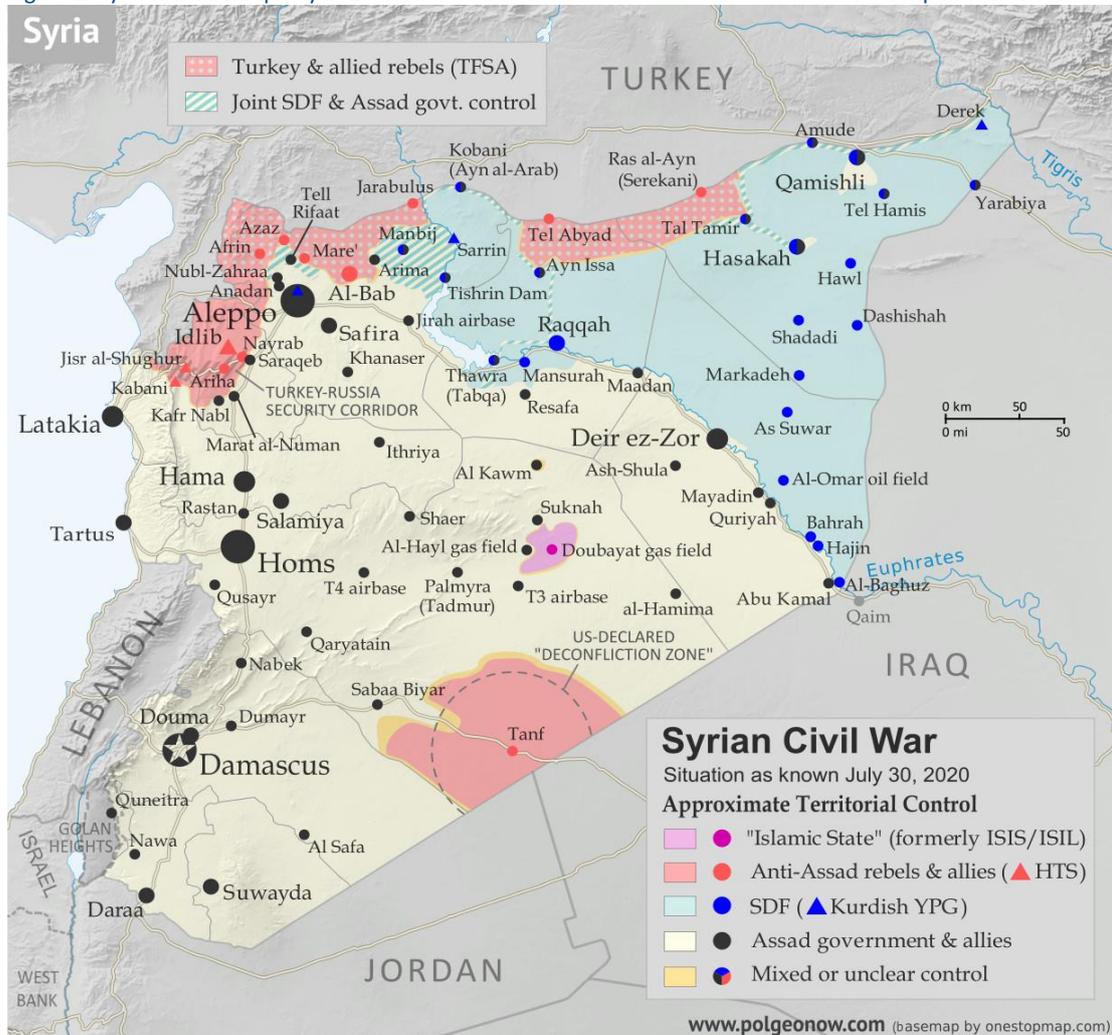
Finally, the early years of the study scope have been challenging to discuss/assess due to staff having moved on and the natural focus of discussions on recent or ongoing contextual circumstances.

2 Syria country context

2.1 Operating context

Figure 2. Syria Conflict Map July 2020

Source: www.polgeonow.com



The Syrian conflict started in March 2011 with peaceful demonstrations in Deraa in the south of the country, which later spread out across all of Syria, buoyed by political and military support from foreign countries willing to intervene in Syria’s internal affairs.¹⁴ By mid-2012 the UN had characterised the situation as a civil war. By January 2013, Syria was considered an L3 emergency.

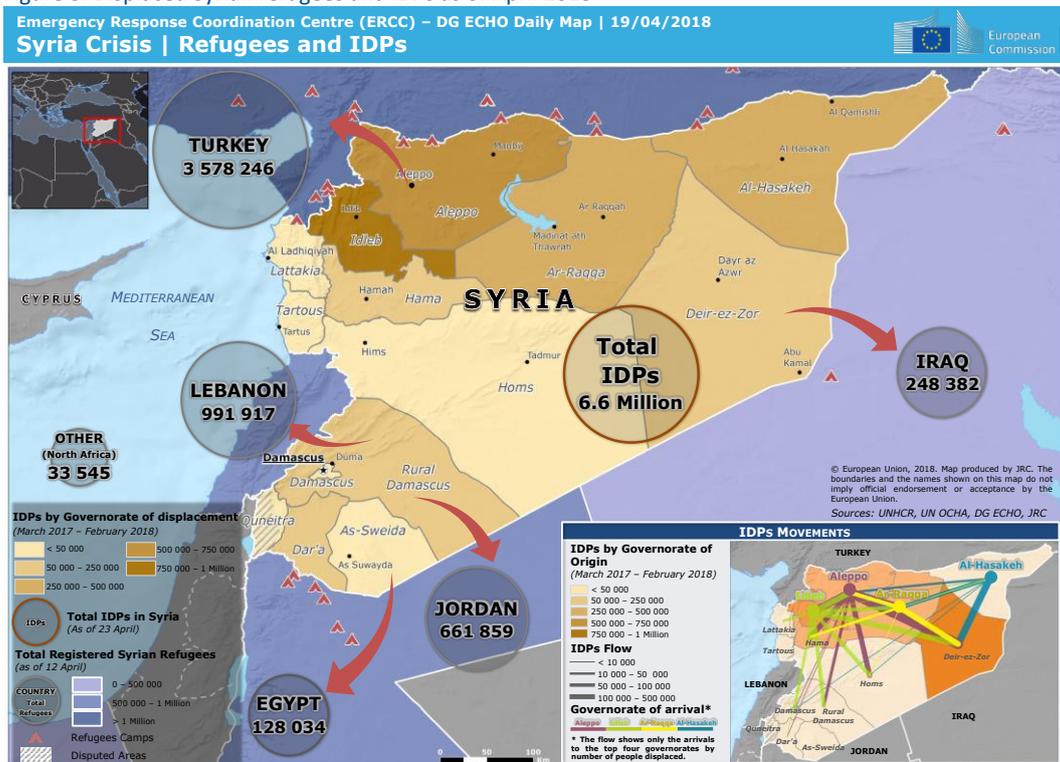
At the peak of the crisis in 2017 and 2018, over 13 million people needed multi-sectoral humanitarian support,¹⁵ within Syria. According to the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) in Figure 3 below, 6.6 million

¹⁴ Destroying a nation, The Civil War in Syria, Nikolas Van Dam.

¹⁵ HRP Syria 2018: 13.1M. HRP Syria 2017: 13.5M

were internally displaced. Approximately 5.6 million were displaced in countries surrounding Syria. In 2016 Islamic State (IS) declared a caliphate in eastern Syria.

Figure 3. Displaced Syrian refugees and IDPs as of April 2018



Source: Emergency Response Coordination Centre-DG ECHO

Much has changed since then, with the Syria Defence Forces capturing virtually all of the previously held IS areas and the Syria government, with support from Russia and Iran, taking back most of the rest of the country apart from the area surrounding Idleb in the North-West and Turkish controlled areas along the Turkish border. Compared to previous years, the situation inside Syria is currently relatively peaceful.

The result of the civil war, however, is a country deeply divided between government-controlled areas (GCA) (around 70-80% of the country/population) and the rest (non-GCA). Overall, the situation is now more stable. However, the humanitarian crisis continues to be severe, particularly in the North-West, parts of the North-East and Rural Damascus.¹⁶ Continuing insecurity, a loss of livelihoods, a loss of housing and vital infrastructure, reduced agricultural and other economic capacities, and a widespread loss of access to essential health and educational services are issues that remain. More recently, an economic collapse - including the impact of sanctions and a dramatic fall in the value of the Syrian currency - has exacerbated the situation, as qualified professionals continue to leave the country, turning what was a middle-income country a decade ago into what is now a low-income country.

¹⁶ UN OCHA: Needs and Response Summary, February 2021

2.2 Humanitarian overview

The UN country team leads the overall humanitarian response, producing a Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) based on an annual Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO). The HRP consolidated activities in Syria, includes North-West Syria (NWS) and North-East Syria (NES), albeit the coordination of such activities takes place separately, i.e. by OCHA in Damascus and Gaziantep, and by an NGO forum in NES. The HRP for 2020 requests \$3.4 billion to support 11 million people in need, mostly falling under the protection, Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), health and food security sectors.¹⁷

Through the adoption of resolution 2165 (2014) and its subsequent renewals 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020), 2533 (2020) and 2585 (2021) until 10 January 2022, the UN Security Council has authorised UN agencies and their partners to use routes across conflict lines and the border crossings at Bab al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa, Al-Ramtha and Al Yarubiyah, to deliver humanitarian assistance, including medical and surgical supplies, to people in need in Syria. Since 10 July 2020, by resolution 2533, Bab al-Hawa has been the only crossing open at this point. The Government of Syria is notified in advance of each shipment. A UN monitoring mechanism was established to oversee loading in neighbouring countries, including confirming the humanitarian nature of consignments.¹⁸

Of a total population of approximately 21.7 million, about 14 million people in Syria need humanitarian assistance, and 6.9 million are internally displaced as the conflict enters its 11th year. In the second half of 2021, hostilities re-intensified along frontlines in northern and southern Syria, triggering new displacements and destruction. The economic situation rapidly worsened, the country reaching a fiscal deficit of around two trillion Syrian pounds.^{19 20} Indeed, the devaluation of the Syrian pound and increases in prices for essential goods in 2021 have been identified as one of the main drivers of the country's worsening humanitarian crisis, as 60% of the population were food insecure, and 90% lived below the poverty line.²¹

In 2022, as areas are less affected by hostilities, downward trends in all major need drivers are expected,²² and humanitarian assistance needs are expected to increase for those residing along, or moving away from, frontlines.²³ 800,000 new displacements and 250,000 return movements are expected.²⁴ Already in January 2022, up to 45,000 people were displaced as a result of hostilities in Al-Hasakeh.²⁵ As of 2021, the top three humanitarian needs were food/nutrition, livelihood support, and electricity assistance,²⁶

¹⁷ Syrian HRP 2020

¹⁸ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/cnv_syr_xb_regional_oct2021_211102_en.pdf

¹⁹ UNOCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic', Global Humanitarian Overview 2022, accessed at <https://gho.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic> on 07/01/22.

²⁰ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview 2020* (April 2020), p.19.

²¹ USAID, Factsheet no. 2 of Fiscal Year (FY) 2022: 'Syria – Complex Emergency' (January 7, 2022), p.3.

²² UNOCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic', accessed at <https://gho.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic> on 07/01/22.

²³ UNOCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic', accessed at <https://gho.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic> on 07/01/22.

²⁴ UNOCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic', accessed at <https://gho.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic> on 07/01/22.

²⁵ UNHCR, 'Syrian Arab Republic' (January 2022), p.1.

²⁶ Shelter/NFI Sector Whole of Syria, 'Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter and NFI Sector: Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022', p.3.

though given the particularly severe winter conditions the country is currently experiencing, winterisation has likely overtaken electricity assistance in terms of priority.

EARLY RECOVERY, BASIC NEEDS AND SERVICES, LIVELIHOODS

The recent economic downturn and COVID-19 restrictions combined with the physical destruction of infrastructure and large-scale displacement paint a bleak picture, characterised by loss of livelihoods, high levels of unemployment, competition over scarce livelihood opportunities, and overburdened social services.²⁷ The country's average monthly expenditure tripled between 2020 and 2021 whilst its average monthly income remained the same.²⁸ Damaged infrastructure, a lack of critical supplies, and financial instability have curtailed, and continue to curtail, people's access to basic services.²⁹ Reliable access to electricity is low across the country and has impacted myriad sectors and hinders prospects for resuming economic activities,³⁰ as do poor conditions of access ways and roads.³¹ Compounding these challenges even more, are a lack of technical staff to maintain basic services as well as a lack of training. An estimated 11.6 million people need early recovery and livelihood support.³²

FOOD SECURITY, LIVELIHOODS, AGRICULTURE, AND NUTRITION

Approximately 14.2 million people are in need of food and livelihoods assistance³³ and an estimated 12.4 million people are food insecure.³⁴ Furthermore, an estimated 81,700 children between 6 and 59 months suffer from chronic malnutrition³⁵ and 4.9 million pregnant and lactating women and children need lifesaving nutrition interventions.³⁶ Food security has been greatly affected by protracted displacement, stagnant salaries, loss of livelihoods, reduced food production, and record-high food and fuel prices.³⁷

The delivery of emergency assistance – despite previous advocations for the transition towards recovery and reconstruction of the agricultural sector – is critical as the upcoming season is likely to be affected by below-average precipitation and inadequate availability of seeds.³⁸ When it comes to crop production, insufficient and poorly distributed rainfall during the 2020/2021 agricultural season in combination with several heatwaves, the high costs of inputs, limited availability of irrigation water, and high cost of fuel for pumping resulted in the contraction of the harvested cereal area.³⁹

²⁷ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, pp.64-65.

²⁸ Shelter/NFI Sector Whole of Syria, 'Syrian Arab Republic: Whole of Syria Shelter and NFI Sector: Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022', p.12.

²⁹ UNOCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic', accessed at <https://gho.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic> on 07/01/22.

³⁰ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, p.65.

³¹ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, p.65.

³² UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, p.64.

³³ 'Syria: Sector Objective 1 – Food Assistance Dashboard', Whole of Syria Food Security Sector (November 2021), p.1.

³⁴ 'USAID, Factsheet no. 3 of Fiscal Year (FY) 2022: 'Syria – Complex Emergency', USAID (February 4th, 2022), p.1.

³⁵ WFP, 'WFP Syria: Country Brief', (November 2021), p.1.

³⁶ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, p.77.

³⁷ WFP, 'WFP Syria', p.1.

³⁸ FAO, *Special Report: 2021 FAO Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic*, (December 2021), p.2.

³⁹ FAO, *Special Report*, p.1.

WASH

Over half of the population is also in need of some kind of WASH assistance, be it with water quality, sanitation, solid waste management, a heavy financial burden linked with purchasing water, or hygiene supplies, while seven million are highly dependent on humanitarian WASH assistance.⁴⁰ Internally-displaced people (IDP) living in last resort sites, who are fully dependent on humanitarian assistance, experience some of the worst WASH conditions, yet WASH infrastructure and service provision in many parts of the country needs major repairs and operational support.⁴¹ At the same time, north and northeast Syria face an acute water crisis due to drought and damaged infrastructure. Indeed, insufficient rainfall and historically low levels in the Euphrates has led to reduced access to water for drinking and domestic use for over 5 million people, as well as substantial harvest and income losses and an increase in waterborne diseases; in the long term, this is expected to increase food insecurity and malnutrition rates.⁴²

SHELTER AND NFI

As of 2022, almost 6 million people are thought to need shelter assistance, with the most concentrated needs in Aleppo, Idlib, Ar-Raqqa, and Rural Damascus governorates.⁴³ Nearly 5 million are estimated to need non-food support.⁴⁴ The severe winter weather created additional hardships for 250,000 people in Aleppo and Idlib and saw two young children die in camps, reportedly from hypothermia. Priority needs include cash assistance, means of heating, food rations, tent repairs, and replacements for destroyed tents.⁴⁵

HEALTH

Over 12 million people are in health need in Syria, with nearly 8 million with acute health needs.⁴⁶ The health system remains heavily disrupted despite a reduction in attacks on healthcare in 2020. Health risks include gaps in essential services for patients with non-communicable diseases, high levels of disability, trauma, and burns related to conflict, and increased likelihood of water, food, and airborne disease outbreaks due to poor living conditions in terms of shelter and WASH facilities, increased risk of communicable disease transmission (including COVID-19) due to displacement and overcrowding, shortages of medical supplies, impeded referrals of urgent medical cases to hospitals, and a prevalence of mental health disorders.⁴⁷ Attacks on healthcare personnel are an ongoing problem, especially in large IDP camps. Moreover, health facilities are either not functioning or partially functioning. No NES districts meet the emergency threshold of at least ten hospital beds per 10,000 people, and over 50% of physicians are estimated to have left the area.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, p.82.

⁴¹ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, p.83, p.82.

⁴² UNOCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic', accessed at <https://gho.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic> on 07/01/22.

⁴³ Shelter/NFI Sector Whole of Syria, 'Syrian Arab Republic', p.15.

⁴⁴ Shelter/NFI Sector Whole of Syria, 'Syrian Arab Republic', p.19.

⁴⁵ UNHCR, 'Severe Winter Weather Response in North-West Syria: Flash Update No. 3' (10 February 2022), p.2.

⁴⁶ 'Health Sector Bulletin', Health Sector Syria (January 2022), p.1.

⁴⁷ WHO, 'Flash Appeal 2022: Northeast Syria', p.1.

⁴⁸ WHO, 'Flash Appeal 2022', p.1.

PROTECTION

Protection continues to be a multifaceted concern in the protracted conflict, as people's safety, security, and wellbeing are continually violated. Civilians in parts of the country remain exposed to hostilities, resulting in civilian casualties and forced displacements,⁴⁹ and explosive ordnance poses a continuous threat – a threat posed, 25% of the time, to children and of life-long impairment for two out of three survivors.⁵⁰ Other direct consequences of the conflict - including widespread poverty, economic downturn, destruction of housing and property, displacement, substandard living conditions, family separation, breakdown of family and community support structures, and the interruption of education - cause high levels of psychological distress. Indeed, protection issues disproportionately affect women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups, who also face additional challenges in accessing services.⁵¹

EDUCATION

11 years of conflict have taken their toll on Syria's education system. In 2021, 97% of the 6.9 million people in need of humanitarian education assistance were children aged 3 to 17; The continued use of schools for non-educational purposes, hostilities, and other safety concerns greatly impact the safe use and availability of education services, especially in the north, while reduced learning hours in response to the COVID-19 crisis combined with the worsening economic situation is no doubt increasing the number of dropouts and lowering rates of return.⁵² The lack of secondary education and certified curricula in many areas and disheartened teachers lacking pay and training, furthermore, only limits children's educational chances.⁵³ In 2020, 2.45 million children were out-of-school, and a further 1.6 million were at risk of dropping out.⁵⁴

2.3 DSH Support

DSH's experienced humanitarian partners: UNOCHA, WFP, UNICEF, and UNHCR, together with the International Committee (ICRC) and the International Federation (IFRC) of the Red Cross Movement,⁵⁵ are fully operational within this context. Each organisation will have benefited from core unearmarked funding at the Hague level. As such, how that funding has supported their activities in Syria will be reviewed in this study.

CERF funding by year to each of the experienced humanitarian partners is as follows:

⁴⁹ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, p.56.

⁵⁰ UNMAS, 'Fact & Figures: Victims of Explosive Ordnance Accidents in Syria', p.1.

⁵¹ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview* in UNICEF, 'Syrian Arab Republic' (2022), p.2.; UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, P.56.

⁵² UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, pp.67-68.

⁵³ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, p.68.

⁵⁴ UNOCHA, *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, p.67.

⁵⁵ Working alongside the Syrian Red Cross

Table 3. CERF funding to experienced humanitarian partners by year - Syria⁵⁶

Year	CERF allocation to Syria \$M	CERF Syria Allocation to WFP \$ ⁵⁷	CERF Syria Allocation to UNICEF \$M	CERF Syria Allocation to HCR \$M
2015	29.9	5.5	6.1	6.5
2016	-	-	-	-
2017	-	-	-	-
2018	-	-	-	-
2019	-	-	-	-
2020	54.9	10.5	14.2	16.6

In 2015 the CERF approved the disbursement of over USD 1 million to the Logistics Cluster to ensure that the transshipment operation continues without interruption until the end of the mandate for transshipment operations granted by UN Security Council Resolution. Accordingly, Syrian trucks drive across the border to Kilis and Reyhanli where thousands of kilos of relief items are cross-loaded from Turkish trucks and sent back across the border to serve areas otherwise unreachable to the humanitarian community.⁵⁸

The Syrian Humanitarian Fund (the UNOCHA-managed in-country CBPF), has been consistently supported, with the Netherlands being the most significant contributor in 2015 and 2016, but since then the DSH contribution has reduced over time, both in quantity and proportionately. DSH recently became a substantial contributor to the Cross Border Humanitarian Fund that manages funding into North-West Syria out of Gaziantep, Turkey, the third-largest contributor in 2020.

Table 4. DSH contributions to Syria CBPF

Year	DSH Allocation to Syria Emergency response Fund \$M ⁵⁹	Total contributions received	DSH %	DSH Allocation to Syria Cross Border CBPF \$M	Total contributions received	DSH %
2015	10.2	31.5	31%	-	-	-
2016	9.2	44.8	20%	-	-	-
2017	5.3	35.5	15%	-	-	-
2018	6.0	35.9	17%	-	-	-
2019	5.4	71.8	7%	8.6	134.7	6%
2020	3.7	55.3	7%	13.1	155.1	8%

DRA has funded a joint response plan in Syria from January 2018 until the end of 2021. The total budget for these four years is €12 million, with the following implementing partners: CARE Netherlands, Cordaid, Dorcas, Oxfam Novib, Save the Children Netherlands, Terre des Hommes Netherlands, War Child Holland, World Vision, and ZOA (lead) implementing multisectoral activities (Food Security and Livelihoods, WASH, Cash,

⁵⁶ Taken from the relevant annual CERF fund reports 2015-2020.

⁵⁷ <https://cerf.un.org/what-we-do/allocation-by-country>

⁵⁸ <https://logcluster.org/blog/transshipment-lifeline-millions-syria>

⁵⁹ Taken from individual CBPF reports.

Protection, Shelter, and Health), in government-controlled areas around Aleppo and Rural Damascus. They are working with several local partners to facilitate programme implementation.^{60 61}

DRA also supports activities in non-government-controlled areas across northern Syria with a total budget of €2,243,851 in 2020 (including a €300,000 COVID-19 supplement in April 2020). The implementing partner is War Child, working alongside local implementing partners Ashti and Dan for Relief and Development.⁶² Furthermore, since June 2019, DRA has provided €2,500,000 (including €500,000 COVID-19 supplement) to CARE Netherlands (lead), Stichting Vluchteling, War Child, and World Vision for their work in Northwest Syria.⁶³

In terms of direct DSH funding to agencies in Syria, in 2015, UNHCR was given €18 million, in 2016, WFP was given €2 million, and in 2017 World Vision received €7,000.

⁶⁰ Al Ihssan, Armenian Catholic Church, Armenian Protestant Church, Caritas Syria, Catholic Church, Greek Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East & Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development (GOPA-DERD), Maronite Church, Nabni wa Nastamer, Presbyterian Church, St Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee (EPDC) of the Syrian Orthodox Church, Syrian Commission for Family and Population Affairs (SCFPA), Syrian Society for Social Development (SSSD)

⁶¹ DRA Impact Report 2020

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ The local partner names are anonymised in the DRA impact report.

3 Overview of the effectiveness of support to humanitarian partners (RQ1)

3.1 Strengths, weaknesses and challenges of funded humanitarian actors

Experienced and implementing partners' added value: key roles each agency provides within the humanitarian community.

Each experienced and implementing partner has unique strengths and weaknesses that shape its added value to the humanitarian community. Discussions with IFRC revealed that it played a high-level role in diplomacy and access negotiations, plus as an implementor. Indeed this double role they reported resulted in its 2018 50 million CHF appeal being fully funded. Despite a recent reduction of funding due to its reduced role as an implementor, IFRC's core function has returned to the capacity building and development of the Syrian Red Cross (SARC). In reality, the Dutch funding supports both block support to the NLRC, and the IFRC DREF mechanism. Interviewed Red Cross volunteers highlighted the importance of its work in the Al-Hol camp, providing protection and referral case management to the 60,000 IDP inhabitants and for the foreign fighters, through SARC staff.

UNOCHA is the custodian of the pooled funding mechanisms (SHF in Damascus and SCHF for cross borders from Turkey). Both are considered unique with respect to their management structure, for example, an advisory board to the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) with members from UN, INGOs, NGOs, plus donor representatives, (including a Dutch government representative on the SHF board, being the regional humanitarian advisor based in Amman). Furthermore, both funds aim to provide strategic guidance, set priorities, and follow an inclusive process (with a broad participation of representatives from the UN, INGOs, NGOs) in the development of its manuals and its decision-making. Such funds also provide a forum to facilitate advocacy initiatives with respect to changing priorities at a higher level. For example, as per an SCHF interviewee, the need to move away from tents to better temporary solutions, plus the need to establish the Early Recovery Cluster to consolidate the somewhat scattered early recovery activities.

UNICEF focus their activities on mothers and children. It leads the Education, Nutrition, Child Protection, and WASH clusters. It plays a vital role in the provision of RUTF⁶⁴ and vaccines, among other multisectoral lifesaving activities. UNICEF also targets the reduction of child recruitment in military actions. Interviewed local NGOs receiving funding through UNICEF, appreciated the technical knowledge transferred to them through job mentoring.

WFP is the most prominent actor in Syria. Its food assistance reaches more than 5.6 million people a month with food baskets. Beyond food distributions, their response

⁶⁴ Ready to Use Therapeutic Food

pillars are malnutrition prevention, livelihoods (LLH), school feeding, and a multi-sectoral approach to resilience, in partnership with other UN agencies, including the COVID-19 response. Bringing extensive experience in setting logistics and telecommunications clusters in crisis, WFP manages the Logistics Hub in Rehanli, leveraging its strong relationships with the government of Turkey. It received USD 1 million from the CERF to fund such activities.

UNHCR brings years of experience in managing refugee camps plus technical knowledge on shelter and WASH. Wattan, one of the leading implementers of UNHCR, depends mainly on close coordination with UNHCR to build its capacity in those areas. UNHCR's high-level relations with the government in GCA are used to negotiate the safe return of refugees. Furthermore they play a vital role in the protection sector by providing legal aid and civil registration to facilitate returnee movements. They are also involved in the rehabilitation of facilities for IDPs.

The key strength of the DRA partners is their ability to adapt to changing operating environments. Over the years, the control of many territories has alternated between the different fighting parties. DRA partners have adapted their structure as required. The Syria Joint Response SJR4 consortium split into two hubs based on access, and continued to provide much needed coordinated support till now. Another example is Terre des Hommes (TDH), one of the SJR consortium members, which shifted its emergency response from Idleb into Lattakia, Tartous, Homs and Sweida, while continuing to focus on GCA, Aleppo and Rural Damascus.

CORDAID, a DRA partner who was not registered in GCA areas, had pre-existing sectoral experience in health and livelihoods and used the DRA top-up to expand its activities in North-East Syria through GOPA,⁶⁵ its local partner, doing water trucking and hygiene kit distributions. The international NGOs interviewed had sectoral strengths in their areas of intervention, combined with access to advanced knowledge through their global and regional networks. TDH's experience in disability inclusion was shared through training and technical advice to other NGOs. Some gained operational strengths: COOPI, a SHF recipient, had access to almost all GCA (except Deriezzour and Swaida) and is considered one of the very few international field-based organisations doing direct implementation with direct access to beneficiaries at a household (HH) level providing home rehabilitation for people with disability.

Oxfam - operating from Damascus and receiving funding from DRA and the SHF - started working with the Ministry of Water Resources in 2013-2014 for WASH interventions and was one of the first INGOs to start cash programming with approval from MFA and the Ministry of Social Affairs. Some INGOs have reach through their international presence, and do advocacy for funding i.e. Care Netherlands. They provide strategic guidance to the field offices. Care is another long-standing DRA partner who participated in 6 rounds of funding and then left the consortium in 2020 due to their HQ's shift in prioritisation to

⁶⁵ the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East.

NES in 2021; its close presence with local NGOs in Gaziantep helped develop strong partnerships.

Local DRA partners built their technical capacity through close partnerships established under the DRA consortium. For example, Kesh Melek received training and technical advice from War Child on how to integrate civic education, using “IDEAL curriculum” and “She deals” education approaches. Other organisations like Wattan, Ihsan, and IYD (Uluslararası İnsani Yardım Derneği) used their local knowledge and ability to deliver, despite security risks and challenging local dynamics.

Wattan is one of the interviewed local implementing partners, and it is one of the five most prominent NGOs inside Syria. As a member of a group of six organisations working in different non-humanitarian sections (Youth, Media, Economic recovery, and others), its strengths come from a deep community understanding and cross-sectional knowledge. Like other interviewed local implementers in non-GCA (Ihsan and IYD). It provides multi-sectoral services (Shelter, NFI, Health, FSL, WASH, Education) and receives funding from UN Agencies and International NGOs and also can access SCHF. To its credit, it also had the ability to build its institutional capacity in line with expansionary needs over recent years.

“We have built a strong relationship with the Turkish authorities and managed to connect nine electricity stations with AK energy grid”.

Ihsan, local implementer in NWS

Weakness and challenges

As for weaknesses, both UNICEF and WFP raised the issue of “brain drain”, the ongoing deployment of Syrian skilled workers overseas, plus the difficulty in maintaining adequate staffing levels due to the short-term nature of funding. Graduates don’t have experience, and it is not easy to get visas for short-term experts to fill the gaps. Furthermore, UNICEF has struggled to find funding for cluster leads, meaning that programme managers are “double hatting” having to cover both roles at once.

During the key informant interviews, discussions revolved around the lack of experienced partners' direct access to some GCA areas and the total dependence on local partners and third-party monitors in NWS. No agencies have access to NWS to see what is happening there. In GCA areas, international organisations risk their access being blocked if the Government of Syria (GOS) think their interventions in non-GCA areas are considered a violation.

Government approvals, either at a ministerial or local province level, are critical challenges in GCA areas and the main factor behind delays. UNOCHA believes that the coordination system is still maturing, and the relations with the government are still evolving. However, INGOs have to get the approvals for programme activities to start, and

this can take time. Interviewed Damascus-based actors appreciated the UNOCHA's key role in this respect. For example, COOPI mentioned that UNOCHA could be very responsive if they are engaged early on in any access issues faced by humanitarian partners.

With three active humanitarian hubs in operation,⁶⁶ coordination challenges continue to affect the ability of recipient partners to effectively deliver humanitarian assistance in Syria, as reported by many interviewees. Implementers inform that sharing information on areas of operation is voluntary with no obligation to commit, which results in a high risk of overlap in activities.

Limited direct communication between partners in the different hubs is one of the main operational weaknesses. The complicated political/security situation imposed a structure of three separate hubs with firewalls on sharing specific information. This is a crucial challenge reported by interviewed INGOs/Local NGOs. UNOCHA coordinates the establishment of needs annually through the Whole of Syria plan; however, feedback received from different humanitarian partners indicated that there is not sufficient communication/coordination between the hubs during actual implementation.

Aid deviation is one of the risks some interviewed humanitarian partners recognise. The UN Monitoring Mission (UNMM) border operations have established procedures to mitigate this risk and ensure humanitarian convoys are also protected from airstrikes/attacks. The GOS is informed of every convoy crossing to avoid being targeted. Trucks can be delayed from the Syrian side due to insecurity, lack of fuel, or external interference that sometimes results in bottlenecks.

"Operations are smooth because of the Turkish government's acceptance to open the customs clearance office inside the logistics hub. This way, shipments are inspected, cleared for export, sealed, and escorted until they leave the borders"

WFP Logistics

Other challenges raised by interviewed humanitarian partners in GCA are insecurity, a complicated context, money transfer challenges, fluctuating currency exchange rates, and a lack of infrastructure to support innovation. Agencies continue to search for solutions, for example, to mitigate against issues related to delayed funding or money transfers, TDH used pre-financing and receive money through ZOA Netherland directly instead of through TDH Italy/TDH Netherlands.

Staff induction and training needs to be done online, however there is no electricity or internet. The economic situation is increasing the needs across the country and funding is decreasing, leading to challenging decisions on prioritisation. This complex situation was best described by Care as "emergencies within an emergency".

⁶⁶ Gaziantep into NWS, Damascus into the GCAs, and NES into NGCAs.

Similarly, in non-GCA, challenges include fake documentation, identity fraud, the requirement for family books⁶⁷ and addresses - which makes the verification of beneficiaries very difficult - the transfer of money, and an inability to comply with Turkish registration regulations, for example, means there are a limited number of work permits granted.

Another issue raised by experienced partners was the difficulty in dealing with donor “red lines” i.e. the refusal of donors to fund anything that might be considered as developmental support that might aid the government of Syria who they oppose. Donors are seemingly okay supporting lifesaving activities but nothing more. This can make programme implementation difficult, as lines between humanitarian versus development activities are sometimes difficult to draw. For example, how can a teacher, whose salary can be supported, teach students without a classroom, which donors are not willing to renovate or rebuild.

Risk sharing and mitigation measures (financial risks, reputational risk)

Remote management of operations in NWS/NES increases the dangers of aid deviation and potential corruption, fraud and other reputational and financial risk issues. These are mitigated through third party monitoring and frequent independent evaluations/reviews by donors and implementers. The majority of interviewed experienced partners agree that the risks inside the country were passed mainly to local partners, as quoted “approvals are the responsibility of NGOs” and “we depend on and trust our local partners.” The experienced partners depend largely on the local partners' access, and they have put a lot of trust on their capacity to deliver.

Despite the risk associated with the close relationship between the government and SARC, interviewed donors have opted to support IFRC/ICRC as they have better access to beneficiaries and can manage those associated risks. Some interviewed donors also raised the issue of government interference in the selection of beneficiaries, and they request their implementers to apply sufficient measures to prevent that. For example, IFRC limited its use of cash assistance to avoid sharing beneficiaries' personal information.

In NWS, local NGOs, for instance, GAN (Ghiras Al-Nahda) and IYD, use the power of community acceptance and support to navigate the interference of the Salvation Government.⁶⁸ Others like Kesh Melek had to change their location of operation due to local authorities' pressure and lost, as a result, their access to the DRA fund. One main challenge that is becoming increasingly more relevant due to the situation in the Ukraine, is the ability to replicate the cross border pooled fund in case of the Russian veto of the extension of the UN Resolution in July 2022. According to both interviewed donors and DSH local partners, the reduced funding amount will result in a significant gap that is hard for local agencies to step up to fill. According to UK Foreign Commonwealth Development

⁶⁷ Family books are usually issued by civil registration centres, and they are kept up to date as a family identification document showing the number of wives and children

⁶⁸ The name the NWS “government” uses.

Office (FCDO), their newly set mechanism may resolve that, and Interim North Syria Aid Fund (INSAF) might try to replicate the pooled fund role.

Overall many challenges still remain: security risks, the inability to formally coordinate between the hubs, a rapidly changing environment, and short term funding, or funds delivered late.

3.2 Timeliness and effectiveness of partner interventions (Beneficiaries' feedback)

Timeliness of interventions

During the field visit to IFRC/SARC livelihood project in Htaitet Turkman, Rural Damascus interviewed beneficiaries confirmed that they have been visited by SARC and were consulted about the type of assistance they need. Their feedback as shown below reflects achieved results and how it impacted their life.

"We returned from displacement in 2018, with my widowed daughter and two kids, we make a living of the two sheep we received from SARC, they are now five!"

55-year-old female interviewee

"It is useful and we eat better now, we don't sell milk we drink and make yoghurt. My disabled child used to take sheep for feeding and he enjoyed this"

80-year-old male interviewee

"I asked for sheep and SARC brought two for me. When I had a severe car accident, I sold the baby sheep to pay for the operation"

71-year-old female interviewee

The implementation staff interviewed during this visit believe that the close coordination with the local directorate of agriculture and the frequent visits to the communities to assess the needs are two key success factors, however, delays in receiving the funding resulted in one year delay in implementing the activities.

Timeliness of interventions depends on receiving approvals on time, an issue widely raised by GCA based DSH partners. Partners in NWS recalled times when the allocation for agriculture activities, for example, would be announced very close to the start of the planting season, but the long processing times for proposals and disbursement of funding resulted in delays in activities. Similar reports have been reported with respect to the distribution of UNICEF winterisation items which have been late each year so far.

“Implementation of activities is timely within what we can control”

Ihsan

Most interviewees believe that the short-term nature of funding cycles (6 months on average and exceptionally a one-year DRA funding) negatively affects the partners' ability to achieve results and make a sustainable impact. The speed of decision making is another factor affecting the timeliness of interventions; for example, WATTAN believes that UNCHR funded activities tend to be much timelier as its decision making is in Ankara. UNICEF also tries to speed up processes by decentralising decision-making progress to each of its hubs.

Interviewed users of the logistics hub describe the operation as very effective and timely, and credit for this goes to the logistics cluster. The average request processing time is 72 hours but can go down to 24 hours in an emergency.

“Immediate treatment for chemical attacks were sent to Khan Shikhon in April 2017 and got delivered to hospitals in less than 48 hours”

WHO

Needs assessments

Several kinds of needs assessments are conducted annually, some coordinated and managed through the different clusters with comprehensive geographical coverage, for example, the Food Security and Livelihood review (FSLA) is undertaken on an annual basis. Another example, at the national level, is a critical study conducted by UNICEF and its partners on the causes of under-five mortality, guiding the development of the federal child and maternal health strategy and supporting humanitarian planning.

Interviewed partners appreciate the benefits of these assessments, but they believe it takes a long time and much coordination. Other partners tend to conduct local assessments to inform the design of the specific activity and for proposal development. For example, OXFAM conducted a household assessment to test the feasibility of cash assistance in Deir Ezzour in 2021. Interviewed DSH experienced partners in GCA raised the issue of limited access to beneficiaries for evaluations due to approvals. That lack of access to beneficiaries' data limited their ability to implement a cash intervention.

DRA partners coordinate closely at the beginning of the funding cycle to establish joint needs assessments used for preparing the DRA Entry Form. For example, TDH conducted a needs assessment on behalf of Cordaid. Having direct contact with the local communities gives the local partners a good understanding of the needs and what the experienced humanitarian partners depend on. Ihsan, for example, is trying to identify the families who need humanitarian assistance and who would benefit from income-generating activities or small livelihood support over a long period so as to reach self-sufficiency. Interviewed UN agencies believe assessments tend to be relatively good and help understand the community's needs leading to the relevance of implemented

activities. That said, site selection and beneficiary lists can be difficult to agree with local authorities, who may try to influence beneficiary selection. In the end, this can become a process of negotiation.

Humanitarian Principles

Partners' interventions were designed to align with accepted humanitarian principles. However, actual implementation proved to be more challenging due to the conditions imposed by the different parties of the conflict and controlling bodies at each hub. Humanitarian partners confirmed that they remain committed to humanitarian principles and standards in action, despite the challenges of government/local authority interference in the selection of beneficiaries, the design of activities or blocking access.

Efforts to mitigate interference included:

- Trainings on humanitarian principles and Sphere Standards were run by different organisations at all hubs.
- Potential violations of humanitarian standards concerning DSH humanitarian partners led, in some cases, to changes in activity or location to avoid the issue. OXFAM, for example, had challenges in implementing cash assistance due to requests to share beneficiary lists, so they stopped the programme.
- Third party monitoring and regular vetting and background checks are used by donors and experienced partners

Donors depend on UN agencies or the IFRC/ICRC who have more capacity to deal with such interference or risks of humanitarian principles violations. Experienced partners have larger bargaining power with governmental and quasi-governmental institutions, who are actively seeking international recognition, and are aware of the reputational damage a dispute with IFRC/ICRC and UN agencies could cause.

Effectiveness of coordination and the role of clusters

The effectiveness of coordination varies between the different hubs. DSH experienced partners work and coordinate with many international and local partners.

In Non-GCA areas, key informants have reported that the clusters effectively share technical knowledge, triangulate assessment findings, and encourage partnerships. However, as mentioned by local partners, it is difficult for NGOs with limited resources to actively participate in the many meetings due to their limited human resources and time available.

Some clusters tend to be much more effective and receive more funding like protection, they can also communicate better with other sectors through protection mainstreaming.

At the same time cross-sectoral coordination among other sectors is a weakness, some local partners believe.

“We lack a real strategy on Syria, and there is little coordination across the different sectors”

Local implementer in Gaziantep

Participation in cluster coordination meetings is exclusive to humanitarian NGOs who can access pooled funds. Some key players like civil society organisations or voluntary institutions are excluded, as raised by Kesh Melek, one of the former DRA partners in NWS. This limits their funding opportunities despite their abidance with humanitarian principles and work in addressing key rights-based issues like education, protection, women’s empowerment, civil defence, search and rescue.

In GCA areas, coordination meetings are conducted for sharing knowledge; UNOCHA was commended for their deep understanding of the operational context and advocating for access. Bilateral coordination, though, tends to be more effective, and partners tend to discuss sensitive conflict issues in smaller meetings, as elaborated by COOPI.

Bilateral coordination on rapid response between CORDAID and DORCAS started through the SJR 2021. Dorcas' local partner was providing protection services (GBV, CP, Protection, Case management) in Harasta in Rural Damascus, while Cordaid was providing health services (Minor medical procedures support and partial surgical procedures support) in Ein Tarma (7 km from Harasta).

Both collaborated to do referrals between the two centres and share information on both centres' services.

Effectiveness of implementation

The effectiveness of humanitarian assistance in Syria is affected by the lack of a coherent approach to aid in the country. Leading governments and quasi-governmental organisations are continuously “instrumentalising aid for political purposes”.⁶⁹ Donors' restrictions to avoid such politicisation of humanitarian assistance make it impossible for humanitarian players to deliver aid consistently.

As reported by humanitarian partners, over the last two years, the improvement in the security situation has allowed for better programming. They have sought to work collectively on improving the beneficiaries' preparedness levels across the sectors.

⁶⁹ The Future of Humanitarian Operations: Aid and Politics in Syria, Center for Strategic & International Studies, CSIS, July 2021

However, the short funding cycles and lack of sufficient contributions to cover the size of imminent humanitarian needs are limiting progress.

“To some extent, yes, we met the needs, but needs are growing bigger than available funding. We are more effective in emergency response situations but cannot achieve any longer-term impact”

SHF partner

“DRA is a reliable fund, significant in terms of diversification, its ability to plan, close co-ordination opportunities, and willingness to support more sustainable approaches to the humanitarian situation”

DRA partner in Damascus

For DRA partners, effectiveness is improved by the regular nature of the funding. The regularity of receiving funds every year for example has helped TDH build its capacity, and it has also deepened coordination among consortium members.

DRA consortiums tend to be more practical, considering each partner's geographical focus and coordinated role with complementary activities. Another critical factor is its improved coordination over time and its transparency when it comes to resource allocation. Regular funding and an emergency top-up fund increased the consortium members' ability to achieve intended results.

“Issues which were initially discussed are now harnessing its results of maximising the benefits to the beneficiaries, for example, working in the same areas allowing for referrals between the different services provided by all consortium members.”

DRA partner

In addition to having better access, local implementers can be considered more cost-effective; while UN/INGOs overheads reach 40%, local NGOs consume 15% only.

Some interviewed local partners, however, reported a negative impact of some activities like using agricultural land for building more sustainable shelters than tents. In some cases, targeting criteria push desperate beneficiaries to negative behaviour like increasing the family size, fake documents, double registration and moving into camps to receive assistance. In general, more recovery and resilience activities are needed as recognised by the interviewed DSH experienced partners. Long term programming will allow people to be less reliant on humanitarian assistance.

According to some UNICEF interviewed staff, the effectiveness of their operations is reflected in: (a) the continuity of working with the same Implementing Partners saves cost in terms of capacity development and time spent during the planning/designing phases, (b) the emphasis on community engagement to find local solutions, (c) their rehabilitation

of water systems for long-term cost-savings and d) non-earmarked funding enabling them to respond quickly to sudden-onset emergencies.

One negative aspect is that some interviewed UN agencies see the pooled funds as not fit for purpose. The approach seems to be cumbersome and complying with all restrictions of location-specific proposals up to the community level is challenging in the rapidly changing Syrian context. Similarly, some international and local implementers explained how any programmatic change requires amendment requests and raised concerns over the impact of the risk assessment process on their access to funding. Risk assessments are done for both local and international implementers.

How can the strengths and weaknesses of humanitarian partners be explained? What are the success and failure factors?

The research data suggest that humanitarian partners' strengths and weaknesses can be explained as the de facto result of three key determining factors, the first of which is access to areas of implementation and beneficiaries, which depends mainly on the organisation's ability to register and operate legally in coordination with the different governing bodies (MFA/Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Education, etc) in Government Controlled areas GOS, and the Syria Democratic Forces (SDF), Salvation Government, and Turkish authorities in non-government-controlled areas.

International partners like IFRC benefited from having a pre-established partnership with the Syrian Arab Crescent dating back to the response to Iraqi refugees in 2003, which allowed them to negotiate early involvement in the Syria response in 2011. This partnership gave IFRC unique access to the beneficiaries in the most critical time of an active conflict, for example establishing humanitarian corridors to hard to reach and besieged areas. Similarly, the UN agencies in Damascus had a strong presence, partnerships, and logistical facilities.

Government restrictions on implementation through specific intuitions, for example, SARC, were gradually relaxed over the years, allowing WFP, UNICEF and UNHCR to partner with a pool of INGOs, local NGOs, charities, CBOs and faith-based organisations. Having Memorandum of Understanding with the government in Turkey also gave the advantage to WFP, for example, to kick-start operations from bordering cities like Hatay, Rehanli and Gaziantep.

International NGO registration and operating approvals in Syria and surrounding countries were challenging. TDH successfully established a working relationship with SARC under the SJR consortium in 2015, but many others continue to work in government-controlled areas remotely. Cordaid, through its base in Erbil, and Save the Children from Amman, gave them the ability to operate in SDF controlled areas without the fear of GOS retaliation. On the other hand, Oxfam established work in GOS areas limits its access to operate in NES post-ISIS. Similarly, UNOCHA can't work with the de-facto authorities in NES.

Local NGOs were registered in Turkey and other surrounding countries relatively quickly but had limited technical and financial capacity to comply with local rules and regulations, such as work permit requirements in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, as compared to UN agencies and INGOs.

Secondly, access to a diversified portfolio of funding channels empowered the DSH humanitarian partners to continue operating and improving their effectiveness over time. Legal presence in GOS areas and direct implementation are two conditions to receive funds through UNOCHA managed SHF, as reported by interviewed partners. Being a humanitarian NGO is also a condition for participating in cluster coordination, limiting the access of civil society organisations like Kesh Malek and the Syrian Civil Defence from accessing the Cross Border pooled fund (SCHF).

UNICEF, WFP and UNHCR have full access to core funding from DSH and access to pooled funds; INGOs enjoy the same, albeit at a smaller scale. Interviewed local NGOs (Ihsan, Wattan and GAN) recognised the negative impact of funding unpredictable on their ability to deliver humanitarian support effectively, especially since they rarely have access to core funding or direct contributions. Both international and local NGOs access to pooled funds is limited to the risk assessment carried by the fund manager UNOCHA, and it dictates the funding ceiling of each allocation. GAN reported their ability to raise some funds through crowdsourcing or gulf donations.

The third factor shaping the strengths and weaknesses of DSH humanitarian partners is the timing of engagement. International NGOs operating early from inside Syria in 2012-2013 had a better position in managing operations remotely when forced out of the country, for example, Care, Save the Children. GAN was a local NGO working in besieged areas and was closer to IDP communities and able to serve them better when all were forced into displacement to Idlib.

3.3 Innovation, localisation, nexus, and co-ordination within interventions

Opportunities to advocate for the DSH thematic objectives of innovation and coordination within broader development goals are substantially more available through DRA partners due to the direct relations the consortium lead and the other partners have. Interviewed DSH experienced partners confirmed that these priorities are discussed and adopted as appropriate at a higher level, then passed to the field offices as guidance. Localisation is another objective inherently addressed by the nature and set-up of the Humanitarian Response in Syria, which largely depends on local partners' access to the targeted

communities and international partners acting as funders, technical advisors, and on-the-job capacity building providers.

“No push, rather “reasonable direction”, in terms of focusing on thematic areas according to DSH/DRA’s understanding of the emergent priorities, and encouragement towards working together in focus areas”

DRA partner

Innovation

Innovation solutions have been encouraged by DSH's experienced partners like UNICEF and UNHCR. Interviewed local implementers provided several examples of solar energy in WASH, double panels for shelters in the protection sector, and cash for NFIs in non-GCA areas. The use of cryptocurrency is an area of further exploration to overcome money transfer risks and challenges. Cordaid, through the DRA, procured a vetting system to overcome the difficulties of cash-based interventions. This system was used to ensure that individuals or entities are not included in the terrorists' lists, or were affiliated with, or supporters of terrorists.

In NWS, despite the limited funding for vital environmental issues, DSH partners successfully produced Biogas from organic waste and created medical waste insulators. UNICEF and UNHCR in the WASH sector utilised solar-powered water systems in the absence of electricity or hybrid water stations and undertook remote monitoring of water stations to overcome access issues.

Figure 4. UNICEF-funded IYD Solar system in Harim



"We were quite innovative in integrating civic education in schools curriculum, using an "Ideal curriculum" and "She deals". Developing a protection policy for Idleb Education Directorate is one of the results we achieved"

DRA partner Kesh Melek

In GCA, opportunities for innovation diminish due to the lack of infrastructure. Some DSH partners like COOPI expressed their frustration with their inability to use any innovation in activities due to the lack of electricity, internet, and fuel. Oxfam piloted solar energy, but the high investment and space requirements reduced its attractiveness to the donors.

Localisation

"Regularity of funding and improved coordination over time, both largely helped us achieve results and build the capacity of the local IPs"

DRA partner

The limited capacity of local partners is an issue, according to the majority of interviewed humanitarian partners, international and local. The absence of civil society in all areas and the lack of a proper governing body to regulate the work of NGOs increase the operational risks of partnerships.

"We are more confident with INGO and UN risk management"

International donor

UNICEF interviewed staff have witnessed the transition and improved performance of local implementers who went from zero experience to having a good capacity in a relatively short period. With more than 50 different local partners, WFP tries to provide technical support in financial reporting, beneficiary registration, AAP complaints mechanisms, and the management of food distribution points. UNHCR partners also commended them for their peer-to-peer support in areas of financial and logistics management.

Similarly, IFRC supported SARC to scale up astronomically at the start of the conflict, working with branches to increase the number of volunteers and reach a more significant number of beneficiaries. With DSH contributions, IFRC helped augment the livelihoods team from 2 to 10 persons, and there are now 110 volunteers currently working in this sector across the country.

However, UN agencies' management acknowledges the risks of remote implementation through local partners and the lack of a central governing body. Despite this, UNOCHA's SHF in Damascus almost met its target of allocating 25% of its funding to local implementors, albeit that the capacity to implement and ability to deliver is the main

priority. “We are here for the people, whoever is the best positioned to assist them, receives the money”.

Such a priority to deliver was also recognised by DSH partners in non-GCA, for example, some convoys were channelled through Wattan, which has an enormous warehouse, and then distributed to other NGOs for onward distribution so as to increase efficiency.

Overall, DSH experienced partners have enhanced the capacity of local partners to some extent. Oxfam gave an example of Humanitarian Standards training being provided. Ihsan explained how GOAL helped develop accountability standards and improve supply chain management. Save the children helped local partners build conflict of interest and sensitivity procedures and allocated a budget for capacity building.

“Our local implementers capacity improved over time, which qualified them to receive funding from other sources and increase resources”

DRA international partner

From a donor perspective, “the need to use local potential equals the need to take risks to make it happen”. Those risks include aid deviation or direct/indirect support to the GOS authorities. In practice, the majority prefer to pass this risk to the UN agencies, and trust that they have the required experience/capacity to mitigate those risks.

The integration of local partners into DRA programming started with SJR7 with their participation in kick-off meetings. Eventually, through a learning process, they became more active in the decision-making process. Cordaid believes there is positive engagement with the local implementers across three pillars: financial management, operational support, and strategic direction.

Local implementers raised the issue of the lack of a natural coordinating body inside NWS to set priorities and coordinate humanitarian efforts; NGOs are left to fill in for the role of the government in providing services. Resources limit local partners' ability to participate in many coordination meetings, and the different donor reporting requirements and implementation conditions add a significant burden on them.

There are no budgeted capacity-building activities under the pooled funds allocations, but UNOCHA informs that they provide technical support. The evaluation of proposals is usually done at two levels, a strategic committee and a technical review. Implementers receive advice and feedback in an inclusive process which helps build their capacity.

Nexus

Nexus initiatives that link humanitarian and development activities and organisations in Syria are few and far between. According to UNOCHA, there is no bridge in Syria, although the humanitarian response plan has now been set to cover two years. The international community is holding on to any funding for recovery or development to add pressure for a political resolution to the conflict.

Some developmental activities are ongoing, however, ICRC have their “too big to fail” initiative and UNICEF are implementing Emergency Recovery/Peace Building interventions such as: (a) rehabilitation and local capacity development for durable water & sanitation services and (b) Al-Bab water station rehabilitation which utilises local resources and operational support. Despite the red lines, according to UNOCHA, 36% of 2021 funding went to resilience-building activities⁷⁰, the third pillar of the HRP. In Syria's context, resilience is lifesaving, as lives depend on a certain level of reconstruction.

3.4 Assessment of underlying assumptions

Annex 1 contains the three humanitarian pathways elaborated by the Dutch government to illustrate the expected medium and long-term outcomes expected as a result of the financial and diplomatic inputs provided, as consolidated in the humanitarian policy diagram shown in figure 1 above.

Within these three pathways, there are numerous assumptions whose validity each case study has attempted to review, albeit there are so many that they have been prioritised. The assumptions highlighted in blue within each pathway and repeated here have been selected for comment. Those most relevant for EQ1 have been reviewed here, while the remaining, more relevant to EQ2, are evaluated at the end of the next section.

The following key assumptions, mostly taken from the humanitarian pathway, have been assessed based on findings from the Syria context as indicated above. Some have been grouped as appropriate, and a judgement as to the validity of the assumption indicated:

⁷⁰ In 2020, the SCHF increased its funding to Early Recovery cluster. Focusing on creating livelihood opportunities for vulnerable IDPs, returnees, and host populations. Cash for work (CFW), small grants, asset rehabilitation, as well as business growth and vocational training. Activities such as rehabilitation of roads, socio-economic and community infrastructures have been prioritized in NWS.

Assumption	Comment	Validity
<i>Humanitarian partners have added value on the basis of specific knowledge and expertise, deliver relevant assistance, and act with integrity, working according to humanitarian principles.</i>	The core funded “experienced partners”, together with the DRA and CBPF recipients bring a wealth of experience and a broad spectrum of sectoral expertise, each having their own added value. The NNGOs provide access to affected communities and a knowledge of needs, and they manage to deliver the assistance navigating the contextual challenges and security risks. A considerable number of assessments are undertaken, and as a result, the support provided is relevant to beneficiary needs. Funding shortfalls and restrictions result in gaps and mean that beneficiary’s needs are only partially met. All humanitarian partners work according to humanitarian principles within what they control. Trainings on humanitarian principles and Sphere Standards were run by different organisations.	Agreed
<i>UN, Red Cross and NGOs are able to make an independent and impartial assessment of humanitarian needs. Partners address most urgent needs.</i>	A lot of efforts are made by partners in terms of undertaking both national and local assessments. DRA partners focus their collaborative efforts on jointly assessed geographical locations to maximise the benefits to the beneficiaries’ communities. For each Hub (Gaziantep, Damascus, and NES), a considerable number of cluster-led or INGO and NNGO-led assessments are conducted in accordance with their operational context and limitations. There is a need for standardisation and improvement as the quality of each assessment is somewhat reliant on the partner’s capacity and the procedures they have in place. Overall, however, partners address the most pressing needs. What is lacking is support to more resilience building and sustainable solutions.	Partially Agreed
<i>If local organisations are in the driving seat this will lead to better needs assessments and lower cost of aid delivery.</i>	NNGOs are still building their capacity, protocols, and experience in terms of undertaking assessments and implementing programmes, however, they are better in dealing with local authorities and have a better understanding and stronger relations with the beneficiary communities. Overall, however, international organisations have stronger capacities in terms of diversified access to funding, assessment tools, and reporting. As for lower cost, local partners are reported as having lower operational costs, particularly in terms of overheads, however, donors trust that UN agencies and INGOs are better in risks management and monitoring to limit aid deviation.	Partially Agreed

Assumption	Comment	Validity
<i>NGOs bring added value to innovation/Partners innovate and address thematic priorities/ Innovation will increase effectiveness and efficiency of aid.</i>	Opportunities for innovation on a small scale were exploited by NNGOs in NWS with the support of UN agencies, mainly in the WASH sector using solar energy and biofuel etc. A lack of suitable infrastructure such as the internet, electricity and fuel, limits these opportunities in GCA areas. A lack of funding limits the potential to adopt innovative solutions at scale, and therefore increasing effectiveness and efficiency.	Partially Agreed
<i>Partners enhance local response capacity.</i>	The study has captured several good examples of bilateral collaboration between UN agencies, INGOS and NNGOs: mentoring, coaching, and sharing tools, procedures, and systems has contributed to enhancing local response capacity. These partnerships sometimes form a barrier to newcomers who as yet do not have the same capacity levels. NNGOs had to build their capacity exponentially over a short period of time to cope with the increased demand from partners and growing needs of the communities. This is happening to a lesser extent with CBPF programmes, although that the technical review committee, which is an essential step in the allocation of funding process, provides some technical advice.	Agreed
<i>NGOs have large implementing capacities and can often work in places where the UN has no access.</i>	Due to access challenges, implementation of activities in the Syria context depends largely on local partners capacity to implement and access. However, the political conditions of engagement and funding restrictions means that funds are channelled through UN agencies and INGOS. There is a need here for the assumption to clarify within the pathways as to whether they are referring to INGOS or NNGOs.	Partially Agreed
<i>DRA will improve the effectiveness of aid and prevent fragmentation.</i>	The DRA Consortium is a good example of close collaboration between INGOS and NNGOs to coordinate, cooperate, integrate and learn from each other. If doing so on a larger scale this would have improved the quality of the support provided to Syrian beneficiaries. Utilising a consortium lead as a conduit for the funding has generated a less fragmented approach for the Dutch government than having to go through each INGO directly. An approach that is somehow replicated by other donors like FCDO.	Agreed

Assumption	Comment	Validity
<i>Large scale crises ask for deployment of big multi-lateral agencies.</i>	The economies of scale and experience of the large UN agencies means they are invariably required to support large scale crises, especially in a complex conflict scenario with multiple actors and stakeholders.	Agreed
<i>UN led co-ordination prevents gaps and overlaps and determines which actor is best suited to deliver aid on the basis of quality, capacity, presence, access and speed/ Partners support UN leadership and actively contribute to humanitarian co-ordination.</i>	<p>There is a need for a central co-ordinating body and UNOCHA is well experienced in delivering this role. UNOCHA also leads the process in terms of who should be the recipients of the CERF and pooled funds. Such decisions are taken in co-ordination with cluster leads who provide analysis of the gaps they have identified by location. The UN, and the relevant recipients, then coordinate with the local authorities for approvals, and through NNGOs for implementation. However, the pooled funds processes tend to be cumbersome and result in some delays, and the coordination meetings are perceived as unwelcoming for other key players like civil society organisations.</p> <p>In terms of selecting the best actor to provide the support this is generally decided through two committees: a strategic committee and technical committee. Risks assessments set the ceiling/limit of funds that can be received by individual INGOs and NNGOs, however, the need for more clarity regarding the criteria for such assessments arose during this study.</p>	Partially Agreed
<i>Aid delivery based on humanitarian principles is the best way to guarantee appropriate needs based effective aid.</i>	The neutrality and impartiality of aid is the most effective to earn the respect on both sides of any conflict and eventually access. Similarly, having a humanitarian code of conduct has helped funding recipients work with the local authorities, i.e. by stating there are rules that have to be followed. Such humanitarian principles support the acceptance of the humanitarian actors and therefore improve access, whereby actual needs can be ascertained. In the Syria context, those humanitarian principles are used as leverage with local authorities to gain access to beneficiaries.	Agreed
<i>Partners ensure linkages with development.</i>	Very few resilience building activities have been integrated into programmatic activities and there is no clear link between the humanitarian partners and the development agencies. The lack of exit or development strategy within the Syria context is clear.	Not Agreed

4 Relationships with partners

4.1 Types of relations funding mechanisms generate

Most interviewed partners expressed their gratitude for the DSH's flexible unearmarked funding, which allows for rapid and strategic responses by core partners to humanitarian crises. UNICEF strongly believe that Netherlands' flexible contributions have made a significant impact on the overall impact of their "Thematic Funding".⁷¹ It filled a gap of \$500,000 in NWS allocation.

"Given the highly politicised environment in Syria, Netherland contribution to the GHTF supported UNICEF to deliver a principled and equitable delivery of assistance for children regardless of their location in the country."

For UNICEF, unearmarked funds are critical, even if small. They boost specific capacities like training and skills development (for example, training teachers to cope with IDPs in Tartus), rehabilitation of schools, and printing of schoolbooks. The flexibility of GHTF also allowed UNICEF to quickly airlift lifesaving health and nutrition supplies in the northeast as hostilities escalated in the last quarter of 2019 and monitor the situation of displaced populations in refugee camps Aleppo and Al Hasakeh.

DSH non-earmarked funds go to WFP's Strategic Resource Allocation Committee (SRAC)⁷² immediate response account, which supports sudden onset emergencies. Another example of how Dutch funding was crucial for WFP is that they utilised CERF funding to establish their Gaziantep logistics hub.

For UNHCR, the timing of the non-earmarked funding at the start of the year, or in December, is critical to kick start interventions. Even if starting with only a small percentage of funding available in January, this is sufficient to last until around April, when the earmarked funds arrive. Such non-earmarked funds are also shielded from politicisation of where funds to be allocated and spent.

If registered, local organisations can access CBPF funds directly. Access is dependent on risk assessments which dictate the maximum fund local implementers can receive per allocation, being based on a global questionnaire which covers multiple areas, including HR processes, partner performance indicators and achievements against milestones.

From the UNOCHA perspective, the pooled funds can be used for many smaller projects, and risk management is a donor requirement. If a local partner is classified as high risk,

⁷¹ UNICEF refer to the core non-earmarked funding as "Global Humanitarian Thematic Funding (GHTF)"

⁷² <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/83c89c21f2ca46d79eb7d92bbcc6aab9/download/>

they will be monitored more. The priorities come from the cluster leads who coordinate the HRP and come up with the most critical gaps and sector-specific actions.

Some of the interviewed UN agencies would agree that the shift from funding multiple smaller projects to unearmarked funding for a smaller group of selected partners led to better programming and policy. “We value their principled approach; it allows UNICEF to respond based on our principles before being more restricted” (UNICEF Damascus). CERF is preferred to CFBF as it can be released quicker and is not as labour intensive.

Despite the acknowledged appreciation of each source of funding the study did not discover any close relationships between non-earmarked, CERF and SHF recipients and the Dutch government. As mentioned by one key informant “Funding loses its identity once it is in the pot”.

The relationship gets closer with the DRA consortium partners when donor representatives (Dutch MFA) attend annual kick-off meetings and closures. Most interviewed partners thought their engagement with the Dutch government was positive even if they were not present in the country, and more field visits are encouraged.

“Non-earmarked money is like gold”

IFRC

IFRC thought the Dutch “were one of the most flexible donors and really helped us, we can attribute their funds to programmes and deliverables”⁷³. Regular engagement with the Dutch government via the NLRC and information sharing were also reported. Dutch funding supports both a block support to the NLRC, and the IFRC DREF mechanism, which can release emergency funds within 48-72 hours.

Most interviewed partners see DSH funding as flexible and believed the relevant humanitarian staff had a good understanding of the operational context, showing good technical substance in their conversations with implementers. DSH is perceived to be not focused on visibility but instead on results achieved. That said, the need for increased Dutch presence within Syria was mentioned, initially to improve working relations, but also to have access to informal meetings when issues that cannot be mentioned in reports are discussed.

For some implementers, DRA is the only funding mechanism available, for example, CORDAID. Similarly, for Kesh Melek, critical activities were stopped completely when this funding source was lost. For others, it is key to ensure a diversification of funding, like Care.

The DRA emergency top-up fund improved implementation timeliness through its unearmarked funding. For example the TDH rapid response in Al-Hol camp filled a gap by

⁷³ IFRC quoted that funds had been spent livelihoods (60%) and SARC capacity building (20%).

distributing dignity and well-being kits to women. Oxfam used the top-up envelope to respond in hard-to-reach areas in 2021 and earlier in 2016 to cope with a large influx of IDPs and stockpiling.

According to DRA partners, funding streams can be improved if the contracts can be signed for 18 months instead of a year. For pooled funds, the timing of donor allocation is vital since assignments are dependent on the UN resolution; 2022 allocations need to be done before 10 July, for example.

4.2 Promotion of thematic priorities

The lack of close links between the Dutch government and its experienced partners, as mentioned above, makes it difficult for DSH and regional humanitarian staff to push for thematic priorities locally. More influence perhaps is possible between DSH, the DRA, and the international and local consortium members. Overall, however, there would appear to be good ownership of the priorities, particularly the main themes such as localisation and innovation, although the study was not able to identify a link between such ownership and any Dutch government advocacy efforts. The thematic priorities involved were agreed during the Grand Bargain process, and are well accepted throughout the humanitarian community. The possibility that such influence was exerted at a HQ level through the core funding was not explored by the case study team.

The Amman based Regional Humanitarian Advisor is a member of both the SHF and the SCHF advisory group, and can have some influence as a result of this role, especially as UNOCHA itself is trying to ensure that the different donors' priorities are highlighted and communicated to the fund clients. How much influence has been asserted or whether it has been necessary, has been difficult to assess.

Increased localisation was one of the main priorities integrated and adopted by partners. Discussion over the themes and how to adopt them in policies and interventions will have happened at the HQ level, and through the DRA consortium lead, but again this theme is a global priority on every organisation's "to do" list and there is little evidence to suggest that Dutch funding is driving this theme forward.

Similarly, other themes are promoted by different actors, for example, the lead agency for PSEA in country is UNICEF. So far, they have managed to deliver trainings to a number of agencies, however, progress is difficult as the Syrian government are not willing to engage in the process. The Syrian context can make gender-sensitive and protection themes difficult to push for.

The question as to whether or not Dutch government prioritisation of a theme is the result of a consultative process was not investigated

4.3 Monitoring and diplomatic activities

As to whether the Dutch government has been able to increase its monitoring of ongoing supported activities within the scope period of the case study, the answer is no. Field level monitoring of experienced partner or CERF/SCHF/SHF fund activities has not been possible by Dutch Govt staff in person due to visa and security concerns. The Dutch government does not have positive diplomatic relations with the Syrian Government and it is currently unclear as to how well a Dutch government representative would be received in country.

Clearly however, there would be advantages to such excursions, not only in improving relations with funded recipients but also in terms of increasing knowledge levels as to what are the current operational challenges at both the official and unofficial level. This is especially important as recipients often use third party monitors themselves and it would be good to have first-hand information and feedback from beneficiaries. Also, some partners, for example, are somewhat minimalist in terms of providing written reports.

That said, from the humanitarian partners' point of view, DSH seems to have sufficient access to up-to-date information to have an informed opinion about implementing humanitarian assistance in Syria. This is evident in the DSH flexibility and approach towards implementing DRA funding. However, it would be optimistic to think that either the Hague or Amman staff have the sufficient knowledge to assess partners' performance. Similar to the EU, UK and other major donors, DSH lacks a clear strategy on Syria due to its political sensitivity.

The diplomatic efforts of the Dutch government has been generally well appreciated by their UN partners especially with respect to their support for the extension of the cross-border UN resolution. This issue will become highly politicised over the coming months as a result of Russian involvement in the Ukraine and the likelihood that they will veto an extension this time round.

4.4 Assessment of underlying assumptions

The following key assumptions, mostly taken from the diplomatic⁷⁴ and funding pathways have been assessed on the basis of findings from the Syria context as indicated above, plus feedback from humanitarian actors. Some have been grouped together as appropriate:

⁷⁴ Assumptions referring to Hague level capacity and activities have been excluded as these have not been reviewed in this case study.

Assumption	Comment	Validity
<i>Providing non-earmarked, predictable funding to a core number of professional organisations enhances specialisation and necessary scale</i>	Experienced partners have reported that the predictable non-earmarked funding has enabled them to fill gaps in programmes that have faced funding shortfalls, enabling specialisation to occur.	Agreed
<i>Predictable unearmarked funding leads to efficient effective and timely delivery of aid</i>	DRA partners have stated their appreciation regarding the predictability and the regularity of their funding mechanism. This they believe has contributed to the effectiveness of their programming. Similarly, the UN agencies have stated that they appreciate the consistency of the core funding in that they have been able to utilise the non-earmarked funding to kick start their operations whilst other funding arrived. The flexibility of the core funding also reportedly allows such agencies to fill gaps where there are funding shortfalls. Both of these positives will go some way to ensuring the timeliness of aid. The timing of the funding actually affects the timeliness of the interventions in non GCA areas, especially with seasonal activities agriculture, winterization, and the UN SCR for continuity of cross border humanitarian activities. Another factor affecting timeliness in GCA is approvals, even if the funding is available, not having government approval for activities to start can lead to delays.	Partially Agreed
<i>Partners improve their capacity to respond (especially) if and when receiving unearmarked predictable funding.</i>	As mentioned above, the flexibility of the funding enables recipient agencies to fill gaps. The predictability allows them to retain experienced staff and resolve capacity constraints that organisation may be facing. The further assumption is of course that the recipient agencies will use any funds wisely and economically.	Agreed
<i>Through dialogue with partners donor co-ordination and monitoring, NL is able to assess the effectiveness of UN red Cross and NGOs</i>	Dialogue with, and monitoring of partner activities should provide sufficient information so as to enable the Dutch government to assess the effectiveness of their recipient partners to a certain extent. However, to establish the true effectiveness of a particular agency in any country a full scale multi sectoral evaluation would need to take place. Thankfully the agencies themselves tend to organise these, for example, WFP CSPE evaluations. Such reports are normally available online. Were the regional humanitarian advisor able to visit Gaziantep and Damascus on a frequent basis that would enable more direct dialogue that generates a greater awareness of partner interventions.	Partially Agreed

<p><i>Accessible knowledge and capacity at DSHH and embassies to assess whether UN, RC or NGOs do indeed have the expertise, professionalism and capacity to take decisions according to needs, principles, and thematic priorities. Adequate knowledge of IHL and humanitarian principles at an embassy level</i></p>	<p>Such assumptions are reasonable, and one would assume to be further verified during any recruitment interview process. However, what is missing from the assumption is the necessity for such individuals to be able to access field level interventions on a regular basis. This is applicable not only to regional staff but DSHH staff from the Hague. With respect to the experience and expertise and capacity of the regional humanitarian staff member, this would appear to be good and more than enough to fulfil the role.</p>	<p>Partially Agreed</p>
<p><i>The NLs has enough flexibility to adjust to changing contexts and is able to keep updated and solid information position</i></p>	<p>With respect to DRA funding there is clear feedback that the funding is flexible enough to adapt to the changing context. The same has been said to apply to the non-earmarked. Pooled funds process are perceived as cumbersome and not fit to the rapidly changing Syria context. In country funding recipients will surely be aware of ongoing contextual changes. This would be more difficult for the remote embassy staff in Amman. Also, without in-country presence, the Dutch government will be missing out on the informal discussions on topics that may not make it into official reports.</p>	<p>Agreed</p>
<p><i>The NLs has insight into power relations and direct or indirect access to power holders and stakeholders</i></p>	<p>Having a regional humanitarian advisor who is in regular contact with partners active in country it is reasonable to assume that this insight into power relations is ongoing. What is missing, however, is direct or indirect access to such power holders as the Dutch government has no official relations with the Syrian authorities and no presence in country</p>	<p>Partially Agreed</p>
<p><i>Multi annual funding gives the NLs a good reputation and influence /The NLS has influence because of its good reputation as a large predictable and trustworthy humanitarian donor. /Being a large and flexible donor gives NLs leverage</i></p>	<p>The Dutch government has a good reputation based on the flexibility and diversity of its funding. What is not evident is any leverage or influence the Dutch government is achieving. As understood from field level partners, organisations are reporting that they follow the Dutch government's thematic priorities irrespective of whether or not the Dutch government is pushing for them. Perhaps this happens to a certain extent at a HQ level.</p>	<p>Partially Agreed</p>
<p><i>NLs is able to influence partners towards desired outcomes. /Humanitarian actors and partners can be influenced to act in line with donor policies.</i></p>	<p>As above, there is little evidence of Dutch government influence on policy adoption except perhaps for the influence of international DRA partners over their local counterparts.</p>	<p>Invalid</p>

<p><i>Strong political engagement is indispensable to the success of humanitarian aid. This asks for continuous interaction between diplomacy and the political arena</i></p>	<p>The assumption is of course reasonable, however, diplomatic interaction within the Syrian context is somewhat tense, evident within the donor “red lines” issue. As noted above, there are no diplomatic relations between the Dutch government and the Syrian authorities, however, the experienced partners are engaged on a daily basis. Dutch diplomatic endeavours with respect to the extension of the cross border resolution have been appreciated by partners.</p>	<p>Agreed</p>
<p><i>Working with professional humanitarian partners will help to improve humanitarian access</i></p>	<p>There is a clear need to work with partners who have experience in implementing large scale operations. Invariably these are UN agencies or INGOs. However, these organisations have their constraints in the Syria context, and as such it is also important to work with local partners, who may be perhaps less experienced, or “professional” in terms of their policies and procedures but can provide access and knowledge that the international partners may not have.</p>	<p>Agreed</p>
<p><i>The NL has a credible claim and is a credible partner in a particular context</i></p>	<p>The consistent annual funding provided by the Dutch government makes them a credible partner within the Syrian context. However, the lack of in-country presence and access to those in positions of power (no diplomatic relations) reduces their status.</p>	<p>Partially Agreed</p>

5 Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Overall conclusions and lessons learnt

The following conclusions are drawn from the findings indicated above as per the research questions set out in section 1.3

RQ 1 *How effective are Dutch-funded actors in the humanitarian system (UN Agencies, Red Cross family and NGOs) in achieving Dutch humanitarian goals?*

Dutch-funded actors are effective in delivering humanitarian assistance, operating from three different hubs (GCA Damascus, NWS and NES). Such effectiveness depends mainly on their access to beneficiaries, funding sources/modalities, and how long they have been engaged in the response. Coordination challenges and short-term funding, however, continue to affect the ability of recipient partners to deliver humanitarian assistance in Syria as effectively as they would like to.

The lack of a real diplomatic or humanitarian strategy for Syria leaves all humanitarian partners in a vicious circle. Humanitarian partners are frustrated with the current scale of humanitarian needs despite substantial efforts to date to alleviate human suffering.

DRA consortium effectiveness is high due to the high level of coordination of activities and regular funding. Moreover, the flexible emergency fund increased the consortium members' ability to achieve intended results. Together with the other funding recipient interventions, overall Dutch funding has contributed to meeting ongoing beneficiary needs and contributes towards the Dutch government objectives of saving lives, restoring dignity and enhancing resilience.

Each experienced and implementing partner has unique strengths and weaknesses that shape its added value to the humanitarian community. IFRC/ICRC play a diplomacy role in addition to having broad access to beneficiaries through working closely with SARC. UNOCHA leads the HRP process and is the custodian of the pooled funds, which provide an opportunity to fund many small projects. UN agencies implement large scale programmes and lead the clusters coordination mechanism, offering unique technical expertise combined with access to large scale funding. They have the necessary experience and are well-positioned to manage large scale operations.

The key strength of the DRA partners is their ability to adapt to changing operating environments and their geographically focused collaboration which maximises the benefit to beneficiaries.

International NGOs share their field implementation expertise and provide on the job capacity building to the local NGOs. The local NGOs' deep understanding of the local context and ability to deliver despite the challenging operational context make them a critical player that UN agencies, International NGOs and local communities depend on. Over 12 years into the humanitarian crisis, access continues to be challenging. Experienced partners lack direct access to some GCA areas, approvals are lengthy

processes, and access could be blocked if involvement in NES is perceived as a violation by GOS. Experienced partners depend primarily on local partners and third-party monitors in NWS. Timeliness of activities depends on approvals in GCA and on the availability of funds in non-GCA.

Humanitarian partners share the findings of the different types of assessments conducted to understand community needs better and ensure their activities' relevance. Large scale, cluster coordinated assessments and small local assessments are used to triangulate data and funds raising.

Aid deviation is one of the risks humanitarian partners face and several mechanisms have been established to mitigate that. Examples are vetting of individuals and entities, the UNMM monitoring system of convoys, and third-party monitoring. Other challenges include insecurity, complicated context and operation setup, money transfer challenges, fluctuating currency exchange rates, identity fraud and fake documentation, and a lack of infrastructure to support innovation.

Despite implementation challenges, DSH experienced partners remain committed to humanitarian principles and standards in action and are ready to make necessary adjustments to avoid violations of beneficiaries' rights or authorities' interferences.

Localisation occurs naturally as a result of the access challenge and the set-up of Syria's humanitarian assistance delivery system. Implementation of activities depends mainly on local partners' access and ability to work in different controlled areas within the donors' set red lines. The need to further build the capacity of local partners is raised by both international and local implementers equally.

Coordination places a burden on cluster leads and local implementers. Some clusters tend to be much more effective and receive more funding. Cross-sectoral coordination is an area for improvement. There is also a need for the inclusion of critical local partners other than humanitarians, for example, civil society groups, women support groups and civil defence organisations.

Innovation opportunities were explored in WASH, Shelter and cash for NFIs in non GCA. Those opportunities diminish due to the poor infrastructure in GCA i.e. the lack of electricity, Internet, and fuel.

Nexus initiatives that link humanitarian and development activities and organisations are limited due to funding restrictions. The international community is holding on to any funding for recovery or development to add pressure for a political resolution to the conflict.

RQ 2 *What kind of funding relation does the MFA have with its various partners, and how does this relation enable or hamper their effectiveness in the delivery of humanitarian aid?*

Interviewed partners expressed their gratitude for the DSH's flexible unearmarked funding, which allows for rapid and strategic responses by core partners to humanitarian

crises, as well as their support to the pooled funds. Overall, this has increased partner ability to deliver effective humanitarian interventions. Some partners would agree that the shift from funding multiple smaller projects to unearmarked funding for a smaller group of selected partners led to better programming and policy.

However, there is no close relationship between non-earmarked, CERF and SHF recipients and the Dutch government, although the relationship gets closer though with the DRA consortium partners. This is evident in that the expected influence the Dutch government thought would materialise in terms of incorporating thematic priorities has not materialised. Partners agree with such thematic priorities and invariably include them in their programming, but not necessarily as a result of Dutch government leverage.

Overall, engagement between funded partners and the Dutch government remains positive. The Dutch government is seen as an important donor who has a good understanding of the operational context, as evident in the flexibility of the funding provided.

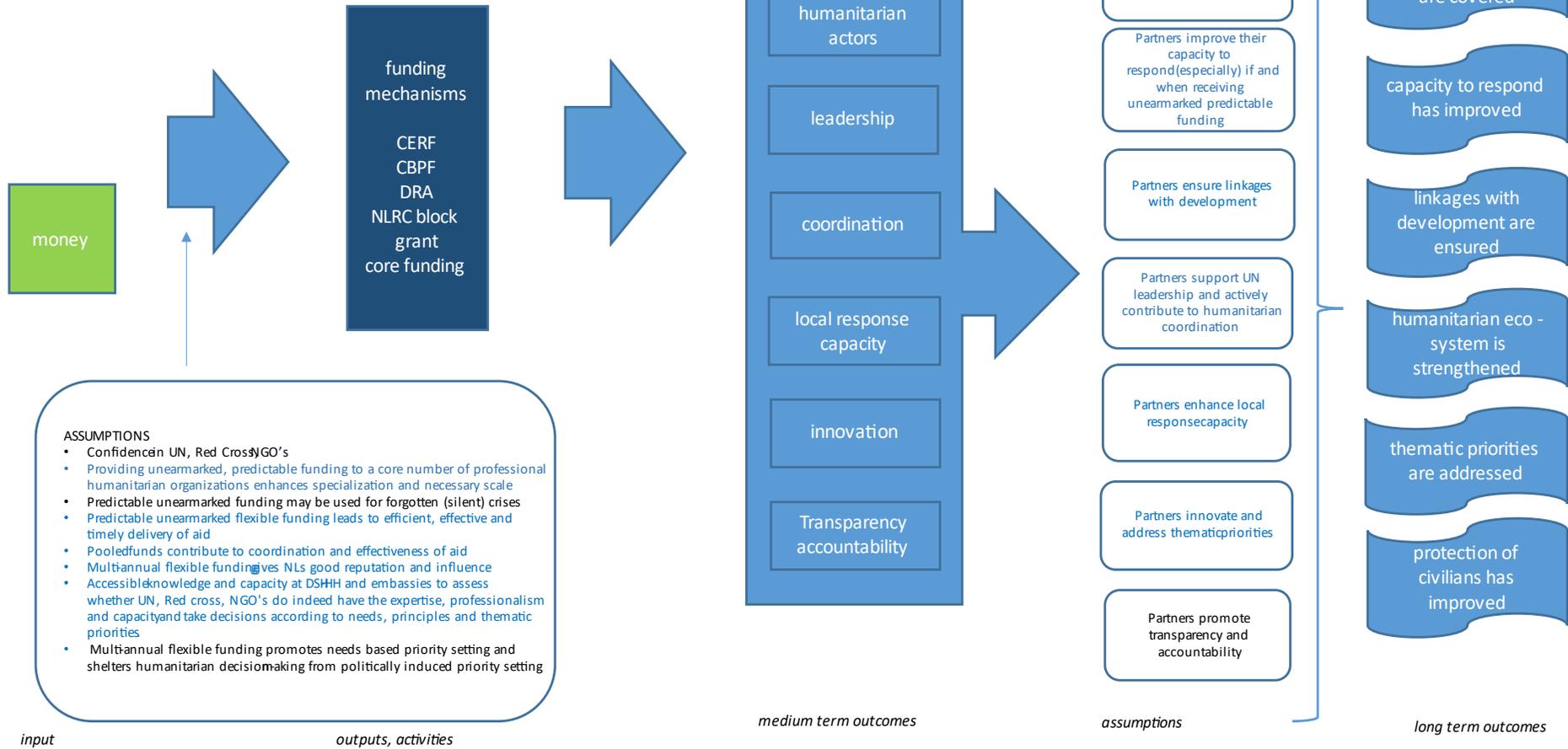
5.2 Recommendations

1. The Dutch government should continue to support the diverse range of HQ based funding mechanisms.
2. However, to counter the issue of brain drain, there is a specific need for a dedicated fund for capacity building and the training/enrolment of new graduates into humanitarian aid organisations.
3. Similarly, dedicated funds within the DRA consortium for localisation and technical support to local NGOs, especially in governance, reporting and financial management, so as to deliver assistance more efficiently, should be made available.
4. Funding streams should be improved by moving from short-term funding into 12-18 months funding cycles. This would allow for better planning and management of resources, the retention of experienced staff, and better achievement of results and increased impact.
5. Improve timeliness of funding taking into account the seasonality of needs and the lag between receiving funds and actual delivery.
6. Aid deviation is one of the risks; DSH is advised to encourage its humanitarian partners to continuously use vetting systems and closely monitor the delivery of supplies and equipment to their destination and verify financial transactions.
7. There is a need to review the underlying policy pathway assumptions, for example, with respect to the level of influence Dutch funding generates and the capacity of NGOs. Similarly, there is a need to clarify as to whether assumptions are referring to INGOs or NNGOs.
8. The international community and donors should be encouraged to re-activate their diplomatic efforts to seek a political solution in Syria that will stabilise the country and allow recovery activities to start. A clear strategy need to be set in place.

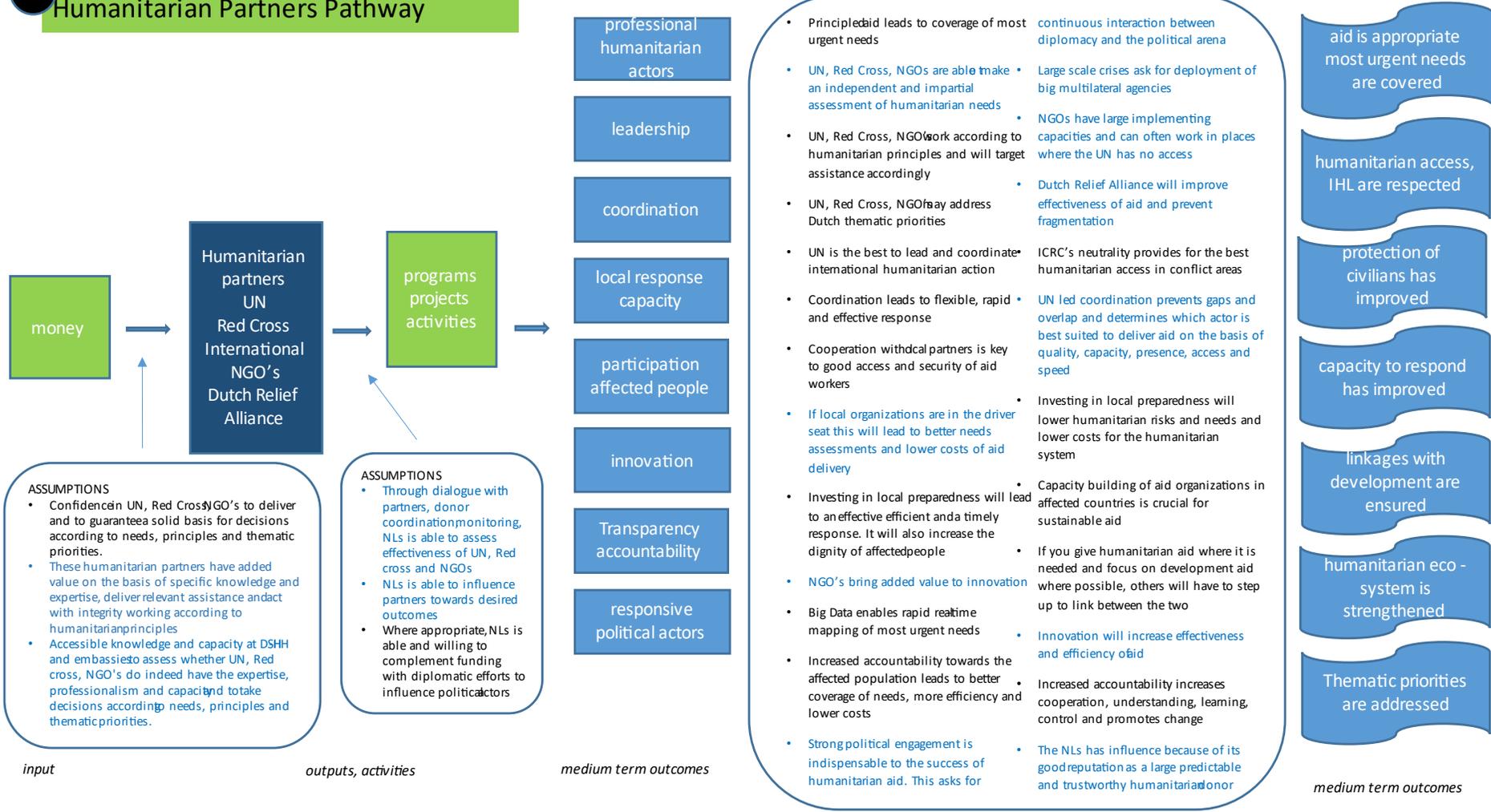
Annexes

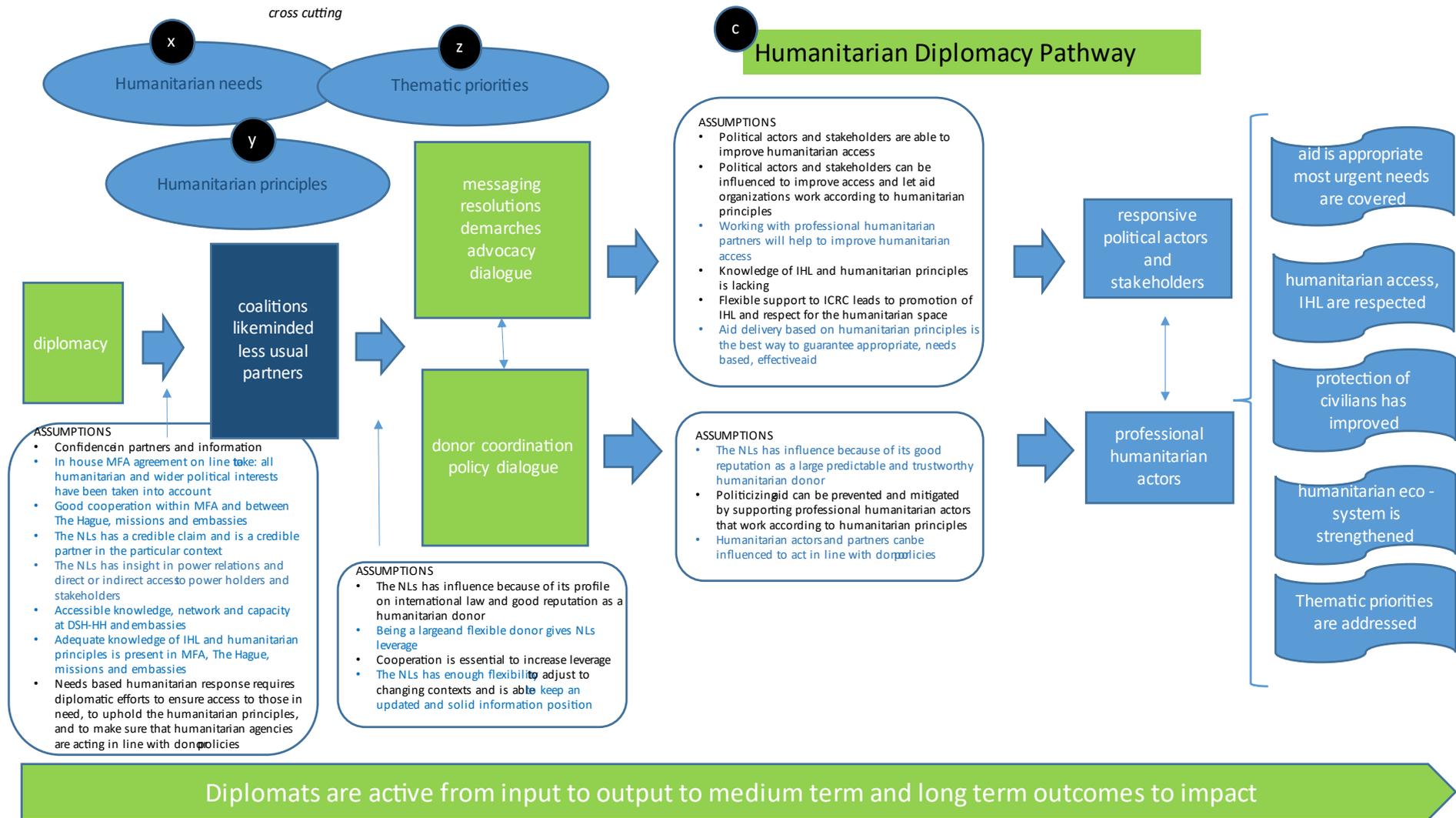
Annex 1 Humanitarian Pathways

a Funding Mechanisms Pathway



b Humanitarian Partners Pathway





Annex 2 Strengths and Weaknesses

	Principled Approach	Timely intervention	Needs based	Localisation	Innovation	Nexus	Main strengths	Main weaknesses	Main challenges
OCHA	++	++	++	++	0	0	High-level negotiations with authorities on behalf of the Humanitarian Partners Annual SHF and SCHF monitoring reports Manage co-ordination, the cluster system, and the CERF and Country Based Pooled Fund	Needs Assessments are not standardised across partners No role in NES	Arrival of funding late in the year (Oct / Nov). Development of processes that are flexible but still mitigate against the different risks
WFP	++	++	++	++	0	0	Timely intervention within rapid response mechanism, response within 72 hours. Management of the logistics hub Conduct regular third-party monitoring Food security assessment and programme coverage	Largely food in-kind assistance	Working with multiple partners in the three different hubs
UNICEF	++	++	++	++	++	0	Timely intervention within rapid response mechanism, response within 72 hours. Multi sectoral approach but focused on mother and child	Dependence on Local partners with limited capacity	Handling several coordination clusters
UNHCR	++	++	++	++	++	0	Support to repatriation programme Technical experience in shelter and camps WASH	Dependence on Local partners with limited capacity	Infrastructure not in place for returnees to come home to.
ICRC	++	++	++	++	0	0	Acceptance by GOS and ability to access beneficiaries with SARC	No access to non GCA	
CBPF	++	+	++	++		0	Detailed annual monitoring reports Increased percentage of funding for local organisation each year Allocations based on cluster lead identified needs.	Needs Assessments are not standardised across partners Slow approval and lack of flexibility affects timeliness	Timing of funding
CERF	++	++	++	0	0	0	Timely distribution of funding Gap filling potential	Only open for UN partners	0

Core/ Non - earmarked	++	++	++	++	-	0	Flexible timely predictable funding	Not conducive to monitoring	Minimal partner reporting
DRA	++	++	++	++	-	0	Geographically focused, transparency in funds allocation, joint assessments, complementary activities and flexibility in responding to emergencies through the top-ups fund Capacity building of local partners - localisation Comprehensive ways of sharing learnings Strong connections with DSH	Small size of funding	Consortium is split for GCA-Non GCA

Key:

The more triangulation the darker shade of pink, i.e. 1 to 4 of the following sources

- Mentioned by stakeholders/key informants
- Found in secondary research
- Finding/observation on a field visit
- Finding one/more focus groups

Rating per priority:

- n/a no findings or not relevant
- 0 information insufficient to assess properly
- not OK,
- + OK – some activities/progress
- ++ on the right track
- +++ very good channel to fund for this priority

Annex 3 Acronyms

CBPF	Country Based Pool Fund
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
DG	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
ECHO	
DRA	Dutch Relief Alliance
DSH	The Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid
FAO	Food and Agriculture Office of the United Nations
GCA	Government controlled areas
GOS	Government of Syria
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
IOB	Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs
KII	Key informant interview
NNGO	National non-governmental organisation
NLRC	Netherlands Red Cross
NWS	North West Syria
NES	North East Syria - SDF controlled areas
SCHF	Syrian Cross Border Humanitarian Fund
SHF	Syrian Humanitarian Fund
TDH	Terre des Hommes
TL	Team Leader
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs
WASH	Water Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme

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