



Structured Chaos: how nonprofits in conflict settings became an economic sector

The Role and Dynamics of
Non-profit Sector in Syria

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Report number 2 :

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This research is based on analysis of primary and secondary data. The facts and context analysis is a joint effort among the research team and experts to capture the most important aspects of the situation and doesn't necessarily reflect the organization's views. Although IMPACT exerted efforts to verify information, information in this research has relied on the perspectives of its participants

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social and political change. To this end, IMPACT focuses on long-term, balanced support to individuals and organizations in both conflict and developed countries through its fields of development, dialogue, and social engagement.

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List of acronyms:

- **AANES:** Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria
- **AFNS:** Aid Fund for Northern Syria
- **AHAO:** AANES Humanitarian Affairs Office
- **DINGOs:** Damascus Based International Non-Governmental Organizations
- **GONGOs:** Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations
- **GoS:** Government of Syria
- **HTS:** Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
- **ICRC:** International Committee of The Red Cross
- **IDP:** Internally Displaced Person
- **INGOs:** International Non-Governmental Organizations
- **KI:** Key Informant
- **LA:** Local Authorities
- **M&E:** Monitoring and Evaluation
- **MSMEs:** Medium Small and Micro Enterprises
- **MVT:** Molham Volunteering Team
- **MoDHA:** Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs
- **MoE:** Ministry of Education
- **MoH:** Ministry of Health
- **MoLA:** Ministry of Local Administration
- **MoSAL:** Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor
- **NES:** Northeast Syria
- **NGOs:** Non-Governmental Organizations
- **NPS:** Non-Profit Sector
- **NRC:** Norwegian Refugee Council
- **NWS:** Northwest Syria
- **RCC:** Raqqa Civil Council
- **SARC:** Syrian Arab Red Crescent
- **SCHF:** Syria Cross Border Humanitarian Fund
- **SDF:** Syrian Democratic Forces
- **SIG:** Syrian Interim Government
- **SNA:** Syrian National Army
- **SRI:** Syria Resilience Initiative
- **SSG:** Syrian Salvation Government
- **STD:** Syria Trust For Development
- **TRC:** Turkish Red Crescent
- **UN:** United Nations
- **UNICEF:** United Nations Children's Fund
- **UN-OCHA:** United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
- **UNSC:** United Nations Security Council
- **WFP:** World Food Program



Introduction

The report aims to understand the socioeconomic role of non-profit sector (NPS) entities at the local level by identifying the local needs they address and evaluating the quality, impact, and inclusivity of the services they provide. It also analyses the dynamics of NPS entities and their power relations with influential actors in each studied area. Additionally, the report examines the procurement process adopted by different NPS entities, focusing on bid criteria, transparency levels, and efficiency monitoring.

The report includes secondary data and information but it relies mainly on primary data collected through a semi-structured questionnaire from 46 key informants (KIs) residing in areas controlled by different authorities in Syria. The coverage includes Damascus and Aleppo in government-controlled areas, Qamishli and Raqqa in Self-Administration-controlled areas, Idleb controlled by the Salvation government, and A'zaz controlled by the Interim government, representing the de facto authorities in the country. The semi-structured questionnaire encompasses questions about the socioeconomic role of NPS entities and NPS dynamics and power relations. To ensure consistency, fieldwork researchers from all areas received comprehensive training to secure a unified understanding of the questions. KIs were selected based on their experience and knowledge of NPS activities in the six studied areas, encompassing the four types of NPS entities previously identified.

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations associated with this data. Firstly, the numbers and percentages provided by the KIs are indicative and may not represent exact figures. Secondly, the narratives shared by KIs could potentially be influenced by personal experiences, leading to inherent biases. We conducted follow-up meetings with fieldwork researchers to mitigate potential subjectivity in the KIs' responses. These meetings aimed to clarify any uncertainties and allowed for revisiting the relevant KIs to gather additional information when necessary.

The report is divided into three sections. The first one is the analytical framework of the report. The second section focuses on the socioeconomic role of NPS entities at the local level, analysing key categories such as food and nutrition, health, education, job opportunities, housing and infrastructure, and social cohesion. This section concludes with an overview of the general characteristics of the NPS's socioeconomic role. The third section delves into NPS dynamics and power relations, exploring the influence of different actors on NPS entities and the procurement process within the NPS. It concludes with recommendations aimed at mitigating the effect of negative factors to enhance the NPS's impact and promoting inclusivity and transparency within the existing power dynamics.



I. Analytical Framework

The protracted conflict in Syria has led to a significant deterioration in the overall socioeconomic and humanitarian conditions of the country.¹ The needs of the population are growing; yet, the formal and quasi-formal institutions are fragmented, corrupt, contested, and inefficient.² Amidst this turmoil, the role of NPS entities emerged as crucial in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by Syrians. These entities became essential providers of humanitarian aid, filling critical gaps in healthcare, education, shelter, and food security. The unprecedented scale of the conflict necessitated the involvement of NPS not only in immediate relief efforts but also in social cohesion and peacebuilding initiatives.³

Within this landscape, analysing the diverse roles of Syria's NPS across its various controlled regions is imperative. Thus, the analytical framework entails identifying the main activities undertaken by NPS within the country, followed by an analysis of how these activities cater to the specific needs of each area. The framework should also include evaluating the efficiency of NPS efforts in meeting these needs, considering factors such as service quality and the tangible impact on local communities within different controlled zones.

Furthermore, Syria's intricate conflict has led to complex and dynamic relations between different groups of actors, including formal public authorities, military and security entities, civil society institutions, and international stakeholders. The various de facto authorities further add to the complexity, each exerting distinct control over different geographical regions in Syria. Within this intricate landscape, comprehending the power relations of NPS with these various groups of actors becomes paramount, as the effective functioning of NPS relies heavily on these relations. Hence, the analytical framework must navigate the diverse array of actors and their interactions with NPS entities. This analysis involves assessing the influence wielded by different groups of actors over these entities and their authority in governing them.

Hence, the report embraces a comprehensive analytical framework that delves into two dimensions. Firstly, it explores the intricate socioeconomic roles assumed by NPS entities, unravelling their level of contributions and efficiency. Secondly, it examines the complex power dynamics that shape the interactions between NPS entities and various actor groups, influencing the essence of these entities' operations.

Within this context, the framework employs a wide operational definition of NPS, encompassing a range of organizations and initiatives that strive to address social and economic needs of local communities without pursuing profit or financial gains for their owners. Individual activities aimed at supporting local communities are not incorporated within this definition. However, the scope includes initiatives, even those not formally registered with relevant authorities, as long as their primary objective aligns with fulfilling community needs and advancing social welfare.

The framework categorizes NPS entities based on the comprehensive operational definition. It identifies two primary groups: international and local NPS entities. The international group comprises organizations with headquarters outside Syria, operating in multiple countries. Within this group, we recognize two types: UN agencies, which play a significant role in humanitarian, emergency, and early recovery efforts in Syria, and other international organizations apart from the UN agencies. On the other hand, we differentiate local NPS entities into charities, which typically concentrate on specific poverty reduction activities, and NGOs, encompassing both registered and unregistered initiatives, often involved in a broader range of development-related activities.

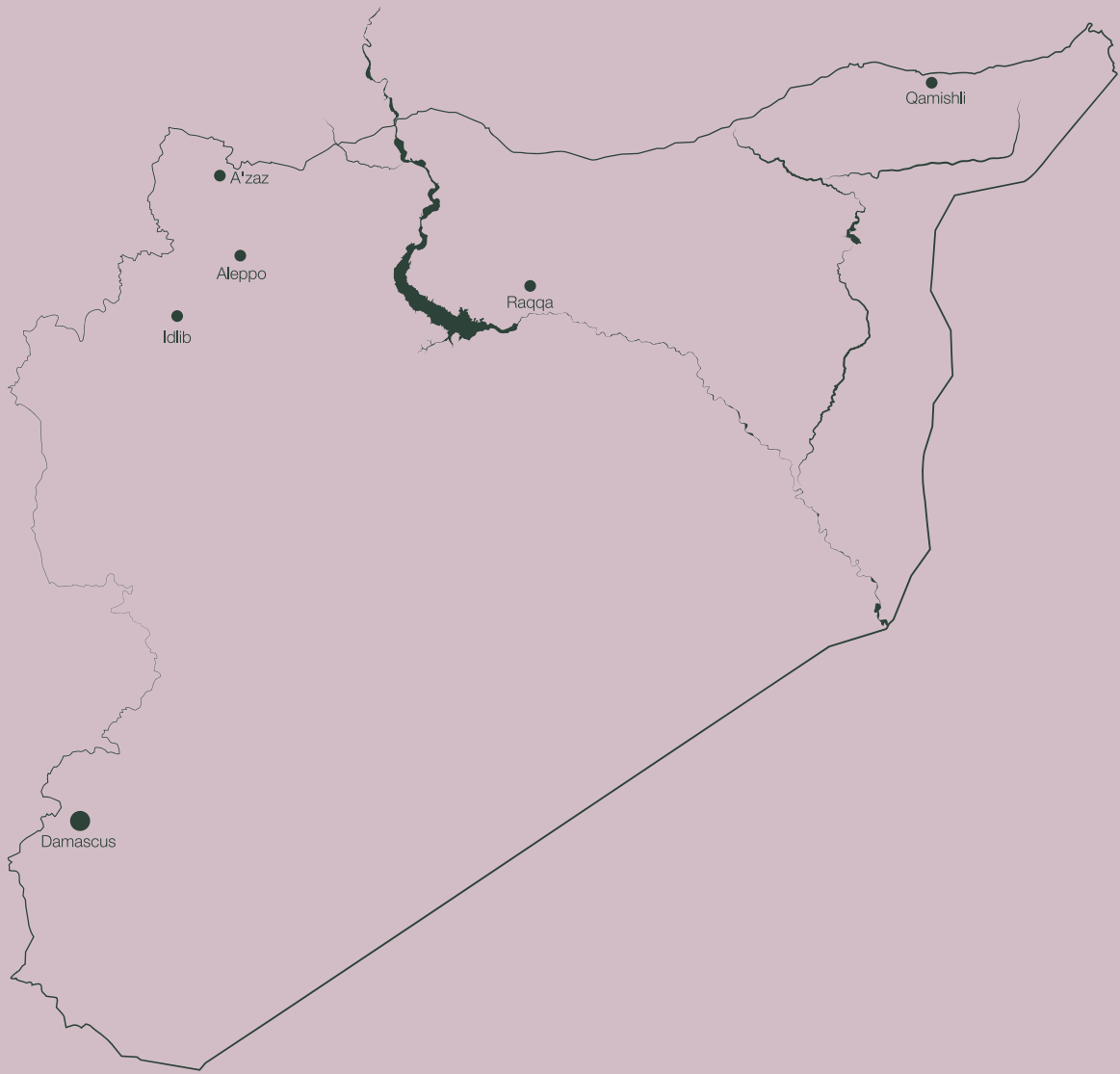
The report adopts this comprehensive analytical framework to serve as a valuable tool for policy makers and international actors. By understanding the diverse socioeconomic roles NPS entities play and the intricate power dynamics that influence their operations, stakeholders can make informed decisions about resource allocation and intervention strategies. Importantly, this framework also sheds light on how external support can affect power relations on the ground, ensuring that humanitarian and developmental efforts align with the needs of the affected populations while avoiding unintentional consequences that could perpetuate conflict or marginalize certain groups.

1 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic", December 2022, <https://bit.ly/45qopE7>

2 Zaki Mehchy, Haid Haid, Lina Khatib, "Assessing Control and Power Dynamics in Syria", November 2020, Chatham House, <https://bit.ly/3s2y4SL>

3 Conflict Dynamics International and FarikBeirut, "Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing for Peace", 2016, Swisspeace, <https://bit.ly/44e13jU>





Damascus

Idlib

Aleppo

A'zaz

Raqqa

Qamishli

II. The Socioeconomic Role of the Non-profit Sector

The report presents an analysis of non-profit sector's (NPS) support in Syria, delineating six groups based on the nature of their interventions. This operational categorization of NPS socioeconomic activities is derived from the list of projects and activities funded in Syria by the international community. It also takes into consideration the broad definition of socioeconomic status, which includes factors such as income, living conditions, education, and health.⁴

1. **Food and nutrition:** this group pertains to the distribution of sustenance to individuals and families grappling with food insecurity. Such provisions are disseminated through designated distribution centres where recipients can collect food or by delivery to households and individuals in need.
2. **Health services:** this group encompasses a range of initiatives. These include free or low-cost clinics, facilitating access to medications without charge, and efforts to enhance health infrastructure by rehabilitating healthcare facilities damaged during the conflict. Additionally, NPS undertakes procurement endeavours to acquire essential medical equipment to meet the needs of local communities.
3. **Education services:** this group encompasses various interventions. These involve offering free or reduced-cost educational training, covering school or university fees for socioeconomically disadvantaged students, rehabilitating educational institutions that have suffered damage, providing complimentary training programs for teachers, supporting access to online educational resources, and supplying necessary equipment to facilitate learning.
4. **Job opportunities:** this group involves NPS providing grants and offering loans with favourable conditions to micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and start-ups. Furthermore, these organizations facilitate demand-driven vocational training programs designed to enhance employment prospects for individuals.
5. **Housing conditions and infrastructure at the local level:** this group encompasses initiatives aimed at rehabilitating dwellings adversely affected by the conflict and procuring household equipment to improve living conditions for deprived individuals and families. The infrastructure-related activities include, for instance, supplying free solar systems to households, distributing water to families in need, and conducting public street cleaning initiatives to enhance the overall quality of urban environments.
6. **Social cohesion:** this group encompasses activities that foster unity within communities, such the conduction of women's empowerment initiatives, the encouragement of volunteerism through projects and programs that benefit local communities, and the support of collaborative endeavors between different regions. As a further reflection of social cohesion and the efficiency of NPS entities during a catastrophe, this report also acknowledges the relief support provided by the NPS following the earthquake that occurred in February 2023.

4 V. Nagaraju, N. Nirmala Mani, S. M. Reddy, "Determinants of the Socio-Economic Status (SES) - Literature Evidence", 2019, Vol 22, Issue 4, Think India Journal, <https://bit.ly/3qt4ghV>



1. Food and nutrition

The protracted conflict in Syria has had a significant impact on the availability and accessibility of food. The agricultural sector has experienced a substantial decline in production, with a decrease of over 30% between 2010 and 2020, forcing Syrian authorities to rely on imports, even for vital crops like wheat.⁵ The drop in production has contributed to the surge in food prices to reach levels approximately 76 times higher in the first half of 2022 compared to 2009 prices,⁶ while most Syrians have a sharp deterioration in their incomes. Consequently, around 55% of the total population in Syria currently faces acute food insecurity, with 2.5 million individuals depending entirely on humanitarian aid.⁷ Food security assistance to Syria is estimated at about USD 7 billion between 2012 and 2022, representing 28.2% of the total volume of humanitarian assistance for this period.⁸ These percentages underscore the catastrophic state of food and nutrition in Syria while underscoring the crucial role that non-profit sector organizations play in mitigating the impact of food insecurity on Syrian households.

a). Needs addressed by NPS

Food insecurity has emerged as a significant concern affecting a substantial number of Syrian families, according to KIs in Damascus and Aleppo. An INGO manager operating in Damascus, estimated that over 80% of the city's population is in-need of food assistance. This estimation was corroborated by a UN employee in Aleppo, who attributed the high percentage to the ongoing deterioration of economic conditions. The KIs' opinions concur that NPS entities play a pivotal role in addressing food insecurity among vulnerable families. On average, they estimated that NPS entities fulfil the food assistance requirements of nearly half of the families in-need.

However, many KIs in the two cities indicate that the capabilities of NPS are decreasing in terms of providing food assistance due to two factors, the first one is that the focus of donors is gradually shifting "from food baskets to resilience and early recovery projects," as mentioned by the director of an NGO in Damascus. The second factor is that "funding and donations for food assistance have dropped, resulting in having only 25 charities capable of providing such support out of 184 registered charities", as said by a board member of a charity in Aleppo and highlighted in reports 1 and 3 of this project.

In the regions of Raqqa and Qamishli, there are variations in the estimated percentages of people experiencing food insecurity, as reported by KIs. In Qamishli, the percentage is estimated to be around 70%, while in certain areas of Raqqa, it could reach as high as 90%. Consequently, the role of NPS becomes crucial in addressing this pressing issue. A UN employee in Qamishli highlighted that "food aid provided by NPS entities covers approximately 50% of families in need of food assistance in the region". In Raqqa, charities play a significant role in providing food assistance through various initiatives each year. However, a charity manager in Raqqa emphasized that "the demand for food aid is immense, and charities are only able to address a small portion of it".

The significance of agriculture activities in the regions of Raqqa and Qamishli underscores the crucial role of NPS support in ensuring food security for numerous families. This is especially true for Raqqa, where international organizations allocate funding to local NGOs "to initiate agriculture projects and assist farmers in enhancing their productivity," as highlighted by a director of an NGO operating in Raqqa. However, it is important to note that this form of support has experienced a decline, primarily due to "the discontinuation of several international programs that previously provided assistance in this regard," as noted by a director of another NGO in Raqqa.

In Idlib, the percentage of individuals requiring food aid is estimated by the KIs to range between 70% and 80% of the total population; however, the support provided by NPS covers less than 40% of those in need, according to estimations by two UN employees working in the Idlib region. An employee in an INGO further estimated the coverage rate to be less than 10%, primarily due to "restrictions imposed by international organizations to operate in [Idlib] region". These restrictions are based on the fact that the dominant authority in Idlib is sanctioned by the international community including UN agencies⁹, Al-Nusra. Consequently, a charity

5 Zaki Mehchy, Hala Haj Ali, Samer Alnakib "Mechanisms of Exploitation: Economic and Social Changes in Syria during the Conflict" [Arabic-English], 2022 The Day After and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, <https://bit.ly/3QECBFq>

6 SCPR, "SCPR's Consumer Price Index in Syria: October 2020-June 2022", [Arabic-English], 2022, The Syrian Center for Policy Research, <https://bit.ly/456v5Y5>

7 WFP, "Syria Arab Republic: Annual Country Report 2022", 2023, World Food Programme, <https://bit.ly/3QGJ7LW>

8 Calculated based on data available on: <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/218/summary/2022>

9 See the Security Council related press release: <https://press.un.org/en/2018/sc13365.doc.htm>



manager in Idleb emphasizes the crucial role of charities in providing food aid compared to the other types of NPS entities. However, their financial capacities are limited, as they rely on individual donations.

In A'zaz, a UN officer working in the area estimated “that the percentage of families in need of food aid could reach as high as 85% of the total number of households,” including the surrounding areas and camps. Many KIs have indicated that NPS entities are able to cover a maximum of 35% of the food needs in the region, and approximately half of the food aid is provided by UN agencies, with the World Food Program playing a prominent role. In contrast, two charity directors in the area have highlighted that “local charities can only address 15% of the food needs.” This is primarily due to the limited and decreasing support from international organizations towards these local charities, coupled with the significant and escalating demand for food aid among families in the area, particularly among displaced households and those residing in camps.

b). Quality and impact of food assistance

In Damascus and Aleppo, charities play a crucial role by providing medium to high-quality food items that have a tangible impact on the targeted beneficiaries. However, these charities also acknowledge the limited availability of essential supplies. The CEO of a charity in Damascus pointed out that “the items provided are often based on the donors’ perception rather than actual needs, leading some individuals to sell them.” On the other hand, INGOs provide a good-quality aid that meets basic needs, although there are concerns about its long-term sustainability and the limited coverage for families facing food insecurity. Additionally, the inclusiveness of INGOs is hampered by a decreasing number of beneficiaries due to a drop in funding.

Local experts in these areas highlight the insufficiency of the food aid in quantity and quality, leading to scarcity and unsustainability. They also point out that corruption and cronyism further worsen the situation, “as those in control manipulate aid services and target groups,” as stated by a local NGO director in Aleppo. The UN acknowledges that reduced funding and stricter donor criteria have resulted in lower accessibility to beneficiaries. While the impact of UN aid is good, it is primarily short-term relief, offering temporary support for basic needs.

In Qamishli and Raqqa, charities strive to provide relatively good food quality, “although there is a lack of specialized companies for quality control,” as stated by a charity employee in Qamishli. The impact of their food distribution is somewhat acceptable, as it helps alleviate food poverty among many deprived families. But inclusivity remains a challenge as they cannot reach all people in-need. INGOs focus on providing high-quality food but face challenges in sourcing supplies “due to market limitations and transportation restrictions,” as indicated by a manager in an INGO in Raqqa. It is noteworthy to mention that the availability of goods, especially essential food items, is confronted with significant challenges. These challenges encompass a water crisis, sharp currency depreciation, elevated transportation costs, disruptions in international trade due to the Ukraine crisis, and distortions in the supply chain. As a result, a considerable portion of households in Northeast Syria cannot afford essential food items.¹⁰

The food aid provided by NGOs in these areas varies in quality, depending on the financial status of these organizations and the market fluctuations. Its impact is limited by insufficient financial support and growing local needs. Inclusivity in food distribution is not fully achieved, as NGOs often target specific areas and groups, leaving out a significant portion of the population. The UN agencies distribute food aid with generally good quality, “but their impact, while notable for deprived families, is not sustainable enough to address ongoing needs,” as mentioned by a UN employee in Qamishli. The UN’s programs cover various areas and individuals based on family size and monthly needs, but they are unable to meet the needs of all areas.

In Idleb, charities depend on partnerships and aim to provide appropriate food baskets. While the impact of their programs is generally good, a charity employee mentioned that “there is a persistent issue of inclusivity, where some families receive more food baskets, while others receive none at all due to biases in the distribution process.” These biases are related to corruption and cronyism. While the INGOs food quality, impact, and inclusivity are generally good, the effect of their programs may be temporary due to insufficient resources.

NGOs in Idleb provide essential food items to beneficiaries for a certain period, focusing on the most vulnerable groups in society. However, the assistance provided may be limited due to the shortage in financial support and the prioritization of most deprived households. The UN have also been providing food assistance with good quality and suitability for individuals and families in need. However, a UN employee indicated that “these projects are not sustainable and only achieve temporary impacts.”

In A'zaz, NGOs contribute to hunger reduction and strive for inclusivity; however, an NGO employee said that “they cannot support some newly displaced individuals, who were not able to provide the required documents to prove their identities, lacking the required documentation for registration.” Moreover, few NGOs distribute food aid based on personal connections and favouritism.

10 REACH, “Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria”, March 2022, <https://bit.ly/3s4QVwu>



INGOs have a significant role in providing food aid, particularly for displaced populations. They collaborate with local NGOs, sharing beneficiary lists and avoiding duplicate assistance. They try maintaining a high level of inclusivity through professional selection processes and extensive monitoring and evaluation.

Charities in A'zaz adhere to quality standards in food and nutrition projects. They prioritize extremely impoverished households in providing food assistance. The UN agencies have expanded its cash assistance to provide flexibility to families in buying food. The UN's impact is significant, meeting the beneficiaries' essential needs based on globally recognized standards. However, there is room for improvement in terms of inclusivity. A UN employee stated that "favouritism and corruption play a role in obtaining relief, with instances of manipulation and forgery of documentation to access support."

2. Health Services

The ongoing conflict in Syria has resulted in a severe decline in the health sector, primarily due to the destruction of healthcare facilities, shortages of medicines, and the exodus of skilled medical professionals. The estimates show that only half of the public hospitals are fully functioning, and up to 50% of the medical workforce has left the country, leaving 12.2 million people in need for health assistance.¹¹ The situation has been exacerbated by the scarcity and rising costs of medicines, as well as the added impact of COVID-19 and the catastrophic consequences of the earthquake in February 2023. Considering these circumstances, the role of NPS entities in providing healthcare services in Syria has become increasingly crucial.

a). Needs addressed by NPS

According to estimates from KIs, in average nearly half of the people in studied areas who require health services benefiting from NPS entities to access the necessary care. In Damascus and Aleppo, charities struggle with the high cost of medications and high demand. INGOs primarily focus on medical consultations and primary healthcare service but "face capacity challenges in addressing the growing healthcare needs," as indicated by a manager in INGO operating in Damascus. NGOs have low number of healthcare staff working on a voluntary-basis and rely financially on international organizations. The UN organizations operate healthcare centres but face limitations, including the chilling effect and overcompliance of sanctions, in providing free medications and specialized surgeries.

In Qamishli and Raqqa, charities provide free clinics and some surgeries with limited capacity, especially for complex diseases. An INGOs employee in Qamishli mentioned that in these areas "INGOs have a good presence, and they provide various healthcare services" and support local hospitals. Local NGOs have limited programs and focus on basic medical assistance. UN agencies have many interventions in health sector but face licencing difficulties and shortage in medical equipment and trained staff.

In Idlib, charities and NGOs play a crucial role by covering a range of health services, including surgeries, and raising awareness. A UN employee indicated that "UN support, directly or via local organizations, many health facilities." INGOs provide financial and in-kind support to health centres and some hospitals. In A'zaz, NGOs support hospitals and provide free medical, ambulance, and pharmaceutical services. INGOs mainly offer financial and logistical support, while charities have a limited contribution to the healthcare sector.

b). Quality and impact of health assistance

The Ministry of Health in Damascus and Aleppo monitor the services provided by charities; thus, these charities adhere to good standards. However, they face limitations in the availability and affordability of healthcare supplies. A charity CEO in Damascus mentioned that healthcare services do not cover all types of specialized treatments or medications and "are not fully inclusive since they prioritise vulnerable groups." INGOs offer a good variety of quality healthcare services, although they do not meet the high demand. However, there are challenges related to limited resources and reaching all beneficiaries, particularly in rural areas.

NGOs in these areas provide good-quality healthcare services, including high-cost procedures and medications. However, there are limitations in selecting beneficiaries and a shortage of trained personnel. A UN employee in Aleppo indicated that "the quality of healthcare services provided by UN agencies is high, although there are challenges with the quality and effectiveness of medical

11 WHO, "Annual Report: Health Sector in Syria 2022", 2023, Health Cluster, World Health Organization, <https://bit.ly/459YO2z>



supplies and equipment.” The UN has a wide reach and partnerships, ensuring good-quality services in many areas and covering various aspects of healthcare.

In Qamishli and Raqqa, the overall quality of healthcare services provided by charity institutions is good. But there is a shortage of “doctors, health facilities, and certain types of medications, especially for complex diseases,” as mentioned by a charity employee in Qamishli. The healthcare services do not adequately cover many rural areas. The quality of healthcare services provided by INGOs is acceptable but not as good as it should be. There is a shortage of equipment and medical staff. The services primarily concentrate on the cities and the camps rather than the rural areas.

NGOs in these areas provide a good-quality healthcare services when there is support. However, the services are limited and focused a lot on awareness campaign. The geographical coverage is relatively broader, targeting everyone regardless of any criteria. The quality of healthcare services provided by the UN agencies is average due to the lack of modern equipment and skilled medical staff. A UN employee in Raqqa indicated that “UN agencies have a good impact on the provision of health services; however, they are limited in terms of covering all types of diseases.”

In Idlib, charities cover a wide range of healthcare services, “including the costly surgical operations for those who cannot afford them,” as indicated by a charity employee. INGOs have limited direct impact on healthcare but address some needs for the sector, such as medical equipment and medicines. NGOs offer suitable healthcare services, including treatment, surgeries, and medicines, to benefit diverse populations in need. The UN’s healthcare program is relatively good, supporting hospitals and health centres, providing medical supplies and vaccines, and benefiting people without discrimination.

In A’zaz, charities generally offer average-quality services, but the monitoring and oversight mechanism is weak. INGOs provide good-quality services, but their impact is somewhat poor due to projects’ discontinuity and low implementation rates. NGOs offer suitable healthcare services, “focusing on cleanliness and safety with limited coverage of diseases, particularly complex cases,” as mentioned by an NGO employee. The UN provides acceptable services but faces limited capacity and high demand.

3. Education Services

The ongoing conflict in Syria has had a devastating impact on education in the country. Educational facilities and equipment have been destroyed, and skilled teachers have been forced to migrate due to difficult security and economic conditions. Additionally, all parties involved in the conflict have exploited the educational system to promote their own ideologies and gain children’s loyalty against the “others”. As a result, approximately one-third of schools are non-functional, and around 6.4 million children require educational assistance, including 2 million who are out of school.¹² The declining capacity of the public and private sectors to provide quality education has underscored the crucial role of NPS in addressing the urgent challenges faced by the education sector across all regions of Syria.

a). Needs addressed by NPS

The KIs’ estimates show that, in average, around 30% of children in need of education assistance benefiting from NPS entities to have the required education services. Charities in Damascus and Aleppo could play a vital role in education by providing training courses for children to enable them to return to school. However, a board member of a charity in Aleppo said, “The Ministry of Education restricted the establishment of educational and training centres by charities.”¹³ INGOs in these areas focus on raising awareness of the importance of education and providing vocational courses. They have shown significant interest in education, providing substantial support and funding to several education-related activities, including rehabilitating some schools. NGOs face a shortage of educational projects due to funding constraints, although in certain places in Aleppo and for a short term, they have provided significant assistance.¹⁴ The UN has an enormous role in supporting the education sector in coordination with the Syrian

12 UNICEF, “Whole of Syria: Education Response, January to August 2022”, 2022, The United Nations Children’s Fund, <https://bit.ly/3DXaBFp>

13 One explanation is that Education is crucial for the Syrian government to mould children’s political perspectives according to its goals. Therefore, close monitoring is vital. Enabling charities to offer educational services would broaden involvement, curbing the Syrian government’s control.

14 Operating under the oversight of the Syrian government, these NGOs have focused their assistance on deprived families residing in eastern Aleppo city, which used to be out of government control until late 2016. The NGOs’ efforts aim to enhance the government’s public support and alleviate financial burdens on the government.



government. Furthermore, UN agencies aspire to align their educational assistance with the demands of the labour market. A UN employee indicated, “UN agencies also focus on providing job training and education to address unemployment.”

Charities in Qamishli and Raqqa have a role in providing educational training for children; however, “the political relations between the Syrian government and the Self-administration affect their capacities and which curriculum they should focus their efforts on,” as mentioned by a charity employee in Qamishli. INGOs play a significant role in providing education support and rehabilitating schools but are limited to a small number of beneficiaries. Similarly, NGOs in these areas face significant challenges in contributing to the education sector, with the dispersion of the children among private, government, and self-administration schools¹⁵. Together with UN agencies, they have contributed to education through initiatives such as school rehabilitation, integrated education programs, and support for teacher training.

In Idleb, charities primarily focus on religious education rather than formal education. INGOs have limited involvement in education “due to recent constraints imposed by the local authorities,” as indicated by an INGO employee.¹⁶ The few NGOs working in education face challenges in securing funding for education and receiving limited support, as highlighted in report 1 and 3 of this project. The UN is trying to cover various problems in the education sector, such as a lack of infrastructure and inadequate funding. In A’zaz, charities have a limited role in education, focusing mainly on religious studies and providing some support for out-of-school students. The INGOs’ role in education is generally weak. According to an INGO employee, “This is due to the control and regulations [related to curriculum and educational modules] imposed by the Turkish government or the interim Syrian government.” NGOs have minimal involvement, primarily providing logistical support and stationery. The UN, particularly UNICEF, plays a significant role in providing educational materials and equipment in coordination with local authority.

b). Quality and impact of education assistance

Charities in Damascus and Aleppo depend on their trained and cost-effective staff to provide high-quality and inclusive education. However, a charity director in Aleppo said, “Their services have limited reach, particularly for marginalized children, and they lack emphasis on creative education.” INGOs in these areas prioritize vocational training and education for dropouts, resulting in long-term benefits. They face challenges with trained staff and curriculum development, and their services are limited due to funding reductions. NGOs provide good services with a focus on specific areas, but their reach is limited, and they struggle to cover all levels and provide necessary resources. A UN employee in Damascus indicated, “UN agencies offer diverse educational courses, mainly vocational trainings, in addition to materials and equipment,” but face limitations in reducing dropout rates and reaching all areas comprehensively.

Charities operating in Qamishli and Raqqa provide an acceptable quality of education with the support of UN agencies. However, this support does not meet expectations “due to the existence of different curricula, with the majority of schools following the self-administration curriculum, which lacks international recognition,” according to a charity employee in Qamishli. INGOs in these areas lack a clear vision for supporting the education sector. While they focus on rehabilitating education infrastructure and improving staff capacity, their impact remains limited. Local NGOs play a crucial role in restoring the education process and implementing donor programs such as awareness campaigns on the significance of returning to school, and educational sessions to help children make up for missed schooling. However, the political instability and the presence of different curricula pose challenges to their efforts. The UN’s support to the education sector is of good quality, but a UN employee in Qamishli noted that “intervention is limited due to political conflicts between self-administration and the Syrian government, which hampers educational development.”

In Idleb, charities usually focus “on necessities such as food, resulting in education receiving less attention and support,” according to a charity employee. The impact of INGOs’ efforts is limited, although they provide some support in teachers’ salaries, stationery supplies, and even school rehabilitation. However, there is a need for more comprehensive support to address the needs of the education sector. NGOs provide good quality support for the education sector. An NGO employee said, “NGOs’ impact is visible in reducing [primary] school dropout rates; however, their support covers specific schools or regions.” The support provided by the UN in the education sector is of good quality, but there are limitations in its implementation.

In A’zaz, charities provide good quality education services based on educational standards. They have a positive impact, but their coverage is limited. INGOs contribute to the education sector by building and renovating schools, providing logistical support, and offering training programs. However, their services are “often temporary and lack sustainability,” according to an INGO employee. Local NGOs generally offer good quality education services, but their coverage and impact vary. The UN face challenges in providing good-quality education due to limited funding.

15 Salwa Al-Ahmad, “Education – an arena of political contestation : the case of Qamishli city in North-Eastern Syria”, June 2023, Research Project Report, Syria Trajectories, European University Institute, <https://bit.ly/3QBpqVx>

16 An expert in Idleb has highlighted that support from INGOs should be facilitated through signing an official memorandum of understanding with local authorities. Nonetheless, numerous INGOs decline to engage with these authorities due to their affiliation with the sanctioned group Hayat Tahir al-Sham (HTS).



4. Job creation and employability

The Syrian conflict has had a devastating impact on employment and job opportunities. The destruction of infrastructure and economic activities resulted in a significant decrease in the overall number of jobs. Unemployment rates reached a staggering 42.3% by the end of 2019, with a loss estimated at 3.7 million jobs compared to what would be the total employment if the conflict did not happen.¹⁷ Moreover, the labour force preferences shifted from low-profit productive activities to high-risk, high-profit illegal activities. This situation highlights the pressing need for NPS to increase employment and employability in productive sectors.

a). Needs addressed by NPS

According to KIs, NPS entities are a growing source for decent job opportunities and projects that improve employability. However, their overall contribution to the labour market remains relatively small. There are two types of contributions: the first involves generating job opportunities within the NPS entities themselves. The second type of contribution aims to increase employability for individuals through various means, such as training sessions, and providing financial support to establish micro and small enterprises. Charities in Damascus and Aleppo focus on small-scale opportunities, but they face limitations with the high market uncertainty. INGOs have limited employment opportunities due to resource scarcity, “but they empower vulnerable families through economic support projects,” according to a manager in an INGO in Damascus. Some NGOs offer employment opportunities, especially for youth, but professional empowerment and job creation efforts are limited. The UN aims to create temporary and permanent employment opportunities, but the proportion of training programs is small.¹⁸

In Qamishli and Raqqa, NPS entities offer a small number of job opportunities that cannot effectively address the high unemployment rate in the area. NGOs, INGOs, and UN agencies provide vocational training programs to enhance employability, but the limited and weak market hinders individuals from starting their businesses. While working in the non-profit sector is often considered preferable to the public or private sectors, the availability of opportunities in this sector is limited.

In Idleb, charities have limitations in employing all those in need, and employees often rely on grants or project-based work. INGOs have few projects that generate jobs, primarily in education and small-scale initiatives. Local NGOs offer employment opportunities through local development projects and cash-for-work arrangements. The UN agencies’ role in providing employment is secondary, with a focus on supporting sustainable projects. In A’zaz, while NPS entities contribute to creating employment opportunities, various challenges limit their impact. These challenges include inadequate funding, limited resources, high unemployment rates, and the economic situation in the region. Efforts are being made to provide vocational training, support small-scale projects, and address the significant need for job opportunities.

b). Quality and impact of job-related assistance

In Damascus and Aleppo, charities provide a limited number of job opportunities with average financial returns. They focus more “on humanitarian support for vulnerable households rather than job-generating activities,” according to a charity director in Damascus. INGOs concentrate on connecting job seekers with employers and provide professional training and support for small-scale projects. While their impact is generally positive, the market scope for their initiatives is limited. NGOs often lack proper planning and market research, resulting in mismatched occupations and redundant projects. However, there are success stories where beneficiaries have benefited significantly. The UN implements programs to empower youth and improve access to the job market. But a UN employee in Aleppo said, “There is plenty of room for improvement in market analysis and job-generating projects’ design.”

NPS entities in Qamishli and Raqqa offer job opportunities and a few job-generating projects, but they are limited and may not meet all the needs. Charities provide a small number of decent-paying jobs, but they have few projects related to enhancing employability. INGOs offer opportunities but require informal connections for recruitment. They have some initiatives on projects related to the labour market, which are not sustainable. NGOs provide good employment options, but “funding constraints make jobs unstable and reduce their interests in initiating employment-related programs,” as mentioned by an NGO employee in Qamishli. The UN agencies provide limited job opportunities with high competition. They have also launched several job-generating projects which

17 SCPR, “Justice to Transcend Conflict: Impact of Syrian Conflict Report”, [Arabic-English], 2020, The Syrian Center for Policy Research, <https://bit.ly/3QFkJtP>

18 For example, UNDP in Syria, which is considered as the main UN agency working on employment and employability, has supported between 2021 and 2023 less than 4000 microbusinesses and built business capacity for about 18000 people. See <https://bit.ly/45o9IBk>



have a limited impact on local communities' employment and employability due to the limited size of the local market and poor purchasing power that do not allow to have many projects under each specific sector like barbershop.

In Idlib, charities provide job opportunities through projects, which can temporarily improve the income of individuals and families. INGOs offer employment opportunities within their projects but with limited impact due to the scarcity of projects and lack of job stability. NGOs focus on creating work opportunities that provide a means of surviving but only for a short term. The UN offers limited job opportunities through projects and cash-for-work programs, aiming to alleviate unemployment. In A'zaz, charities offer moderate quality and impact, providing temporary employment opportunities, but inclusiveness is limited. INGOs have a good impact on beneficiaries' economic conditions, but employment and employability projects face issues of favouritism. NGOs contribute to better living standards but lack regulated recruitment processes. UN projects are important with the challenges of nepotism and limited opportunities. An NGO employee said, "Addressing inclusiveness and sustainability is crucial for more impactful and inclusive outcomes of NPS's projects regarding employment and employability in the area."

5. Housing and infrastructure

The conflict in Syria has caused extensive damage to critical infrastructure, such as electricity, water, transportation, sewage, and irrigation systems, due to military operations, looting, and resource shortages.¹⁹ Housing in the region has suffered from two types of damages: the destruction of buildings, with estimates indicating that 328,000 dwellings were destroyed or severely damaged, and an additional 600,000 to 1 million dwellings were moderately or lightly damaged.²⁰ Moreover, housing conditions have significantly deteriorated, with many homes lacking access to home appliances and services, primarily due to the destruction of infrastructure and the declining purchasing power of Syrian households. Many NPS entities, particularly UN agencies and INGOs, have a growing role in mitigating the impact of poor infrastructure and housing conditions.

a). Needs addressed by NPS

According to the perspective of most KIs, the current spending by NPS entities on rehabilitating infrastructure and addressing housing needs is insignificant compared to the substantial requirements in these areas. Moreover, the restrictions imposed by many Western countries on supporting any activities related to reconstruction, combined with the lack of a clear distinction between reconstruction and early recovery activities, make it difficult for NPS entities to secure funds for housing and infrastructure projects. In Damascus and Aleppo, charities primarily offer loans for certain housing needs such as solar energy systems to replace the poor public electricity, with most funding covered by UN agencies. But they have limited or no contribution to infrastructure rehabilitation. INGOs are actively working on housing needs and infrastructure rehabilitation but face challenges in reaching all affected communities. A manager in an INGO in Damascus stated that "most INGOs coordinate with local authorities to conduct infrastructure rehabilitation projects." NGOs are currently not involved in addressing housing conditions or infrastructure rehabilitation unless they are implementing partners for international organizations' projects. The UN agencies play a significant role in infrastructure rehabilitation but do not provide direct housing support. They should collaborate with "local administrations and municipalities to implement any infrastructure rehabilitation projects," according to a UN employee in Aleppo.

Charities in Qamishli and Raqqa have not been involved in infrastructure with a limited role in housing rehabilitation. Some of them have provided "some assistance in terms of loans for installing household solar energy systems," according to a charity employee in Qamishli. INGOs are actively involved in rehabilitating irrigation channels and sewage systems, particularly in rural areas. They also fund small projects like street lighting. Local NGOs in these areas have limited involvement in housing rehabilitation, and their focus is mainly on lighting and road maintenance projects in various neighbourhoods. An INGO employee in Raqqa mentioned that "they lack the necessary funding and support to address infrastructure needs effectively." The UN agencies provide alternative houses to those who have lost their homes and been displaced from various regions due to conflicts. They also support infrastructure's projects, including electricity, water, and sewage system.

19 Zaki Mehchy, Hala Haj Ali, Samer Alnakib "Mechanisms of Exploitation: Economic and Social Changes in Syria during the Conflict" [Arabic-English], 2022 The Day After and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, <https://bit.ly/3QECBFq>

20 UN-Habitat, "Consideration for a Housing Sector Recovery Framework in Syria", 2022, Urban Recovery Framework, Thematic paper, <https://bit.ly/47ruemF>



In Idlib, charities focus on providing rental assistance to displaced and vulnerable individuals who cannot afford housing. They also offer limited support for home repairs and essential supplies “such as water tanks and solar energy panels,” according to a charity employee. INGOs engage in limited activities related to infrastructure, such as sewage system rehabilitation. Local NGOs play a role in housing by providing housing rehabilitation, rent assistance, and essential supplies. The UN’s provides shelters to a growing number of displaced individuals. The UN’s infrastructure support is limited to road improvement and lighting. In A’zaz, charities play a vital role by building housing units for displaced individuals based on specific criteria. INGOs focus on infrastructure like sewage system rehabilitation and less on housing units, despite high demand. Local NGOs target housing conditions for vulnerable groups with limited contributions to infrastructure. The UN primarily provides basic shelter in camps but needs more comprehensive solutions.

b). Quality and impact of housing and infrastructure assistance

In Damascus and Aleppo, few charity institutions focus on immediate necessities, “such as solar-powered streetlights, which has a noticeable impact on reducing harassment and supporting girls’ education [by creating the appropriate environment for girls to continue their education],” according to a charity manager in Aleppo. However, many charity projects lack proper follow-up and coordination, affecting their effectiveness. INGOs have good-quality projects monitored by multiple stakeholders, leading to sustainable impacts on communities and improved access to essential services. But they face different challenges like project maintenance due to limited resources. Like charities, the few NGOs involved in housing and infrastructure projects focus on small activities such as streetlighting that have a good but limited impact on local communities. UN agencies implement infrastructure and housing projects with strict planning and quality standards, positively impacting local communities access to services. However, the complexities of such projects and “government approval-related issues may limit progress,” according to a UN employee in Damascus.

In Qamishli and Raqqa, charities’ services are often limited and weak in addressing infrastructure needs. They focus on immediate needs, such as providing solar-powered streetlights and rehabilitating certain government facilities or parks. A charity employee in Qamishli said, “While the quality of services and support for infrastructure projects is acceptable, there are challenges in comprehensive monitoring and maintenance, resulting in limited sustainability.” INGOs generally implement projects with good standards and quality, but their coverage and impact in the infrastructure sector are still limited. They rarely focus on improving housing conditions in affected areas. The lack of funds and the bureaucracy of local authorities hinder the sustainability of their interventions. Local NGOs coordinate with public and private sectors to address immediate and specific needs of good quality. UN projects in the infrastructure and housing conditions are crucial but not widespread. Dealing with local authorities and lack of funding hinder the sustainable impact of these projects.

In Idlib, charities provide housing support to vulnerable individuals, and their interventions are positively impacting their living conditions; however, they have limited ability to undertake infrastructure. INGOs do not have significant housing projects, and their interventions in this sector are not evident. The impact of their infrastructure-related projects is considered acceptable, “but the scale of their interventions is limited,” according to an INGO employee. NGOs’ efforts in housing interventions have positively impacted many families, helping them find temporary shelter and essential amenities. The impact of the limited interventions in infrastructure-related projects is significant, benefiting various parts of the city and its surrounding camps. The UN agencies’ interventions do not seem to fully address the housing needs of the region. The quality of the provided services is sometimes inadequate. Their interventions in terms of infrastructure are considered crucial and beneficial but limited in coverage.

In A’zaz, charities, NGOs, and some INGOs play crucial roles in providing housing support in good quality. These efforts have a positive impact on vulnerable families. One compelling illustration is the Molham Volunteering Team, a nonprofit charitable organization that has successfully constructed 2,000 homes, greatly benefiting approximately 12,000 individuals who were previously living in tents.²¹ This housing initiative relies entirely on generous donations from individuals all around the globe. However, their interventions might be limited due to resource constraints, lack of efficient monitoring system, and security conditions. The UN agencies’ emergency housing assistance is essential, but there is a need for further improvement in addressing long-term housing needs effectively. Charities’ infrastructure interventions might be limited but contribute to a better public service. INGOs’ projects have a significant and long-lasting impact, with good inclusivity. Local NGOs offer acceptable services, with a significant impact on the community, but some needs remain unmet. UN agencies’ projects have “mixed results, high impact within the city, and moderate inclusivity, with some areas still lacking essential infrastructure,” according to a UN employee.

21 An interview with the communication officer at Molham Team with Alaraby Al-Jadeed [Arabic], May 2023, <https://bit.ly/4704wW8>



6. Social cohesion

Throughout the conflict in Syria, all parties involved have resorted to violence and coercive tactics, alongside leveraging identity politics to sow division and polarization within society. These strategies have been employed to gain control over the populace and manipulate their efforts to serve the interests of the ruling powers.²² As a result, trust among individuals and between the public and dominant institutions has eroded significantly. Moreover, social injustice has surged, and social solidarities has been disrupted. The social capital index registered a staggering 43% drop by the end of 2019,²³ reflecting the catastrophic impact of the conflict on social cohesion. Addressing these issues and rebuilding social cohesion become crucial tasks for NPS in fostering a more equitable society.

Given the similarity observed in social cohesion-related projects across areas, as indicated by the KIs' responses, the analytical approach in this section shifts to comprehensive coverage of all areas; instead of the prior focus on each area as seen in previous sections.

a). Needs addressed by NPS

There is a similarity between the different studied areas in terms of social cohesion related activities. The data shows a growing recognition of the importance of social cohesion activities in all studied areas. However, it is difficult for the KIs to determine the percentage of these activities conducted by NPS entities out of the overall social cohesion activities that usually are closely monitored by authorities. In all areas, charities typically play a minor role in direct social cohesion activities, as their primary focus is on addressing tangible household needs such as food and health services. However, charitable activities can enhance social cohesion, as long as they remain free from politicization, by promoting voluntarism and fostering a culture of solidarity within and between communities.²⁴

Similarly, local NGOs in various regions have a significant impact on social cohesion, even if their projects may not directly address it. Some NGOs have specific social cohesion activities, such as women empowerment, youth dialogue, and cultural and arts programs. INGOs in all areas typically collaborate with local organizations to implement social cohesion projects. These partnerships allow for a more comprehensive approach to community integration and foster cultural understanding and acceptance among diverse populations. UN agencies place significant emphasis on social cohesion activities and integrate them into various projects and interventions. Their focus spans from cultural dialogue to women's empowerment and legal advocacy, including raising awareness about rights and protection principles.

b). Quality and impact of NPS on social cohesion

In all areas, charities encounter obstacles when addressing sensitive issues related to cultural, religious, and sectarian diversity, making it challenging to meet the community's deeper needs. Despite offering valuable activities for vulnerable groups, such as women, their impact can sometimes remain surface-level due to limited resources, a challenging social environment, and inadequate trainer expertise, as expressed by many KIs in different areas. INGOs showcase efficient project implementation with a focus on community cohesion. However, they struggle to measure the long-term impact of their initiatives. Moreover, there's a need to enhance diversity in beneficiary selection to ensure inclusivity and cater to the varying needs of the population.

NGOs generally achieve success in their activities, but their coverage remains limited, and there is a lack of proper follow-up and impact monitoring. Some NGOs have a positive impact, particularly benefiting women and children during conflicts. UN agencies adopt a wide range of community cohesion projects. However, the effectiveness of their initiatives varies, influenced by the complexity of local contexts and sometimes limited creativity in design. Harsh living conditions, social norms, and prioritizing basic needs also pose challenges for UN agencies in implementing cohesion activities.

22 SCPR, "Justice to Transcend Conflict: Impact of Syrian Conflict Report", [Arabic-English], 2020, The Syrian Center for Policy Research, <https://bit.ly/3QFkJtP>

23 Ibid

24 Brian L. Heuser, "Social Cohesion and Voluntary Associations". *Peabody Journal of Education*, 2005, Vol 80 No. 4, p. 16–29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3497050>



The earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria in February 2023 reflects social cohesion and shows the challenges facing NPS entities while providing humanitarian and emergency assistance in Syria. The earthquake primarily affected areas in Aleppo, Idlib, and A'zaz, which are under the control of different de facto authorities. Despite this complexity, various regions responded promptly by providing emergency food, ready-to-eat meals, hygiene items, medical aid, temporary shelters, and first aid services. NPS entities from different areas demonstrated social solidarity by offering support regardless of the dominant authorities. However, the movement of aid across internal lines was hindered by constraints imposed by these authorities, resulting in only a limited amount of assistance reaching affected communities from areas controlled by other de facto authorities. Despite the efforts of different NPS entities to support those in need, their responses were marked by poor coordination and chaos due to various challenges, including political obstacles. Moreover, resources were scarce, leaving many vulnerable families without essential assistance for clothing, medicine, and housing. The response from the UN agencies, particularly in A'zaz and Idlib, faced delays and inadequacies, impacting the timely execution of rescue.

7. General NPS characteristics

Based on the analysis of the KIs' interviews regarding the socioeconomic role of the NPS entities in various areas in Syria, we identify the following general characteristics:

- All NPS entities play an important role in supporting the socioeconomic status of households in all areas affected by dire economic conditions and limited involvement of public authorities. However, the extent of their impact varies across different regions and sectors.
- The capacity of NPS entities to meet families' social and economic support needs is facing a growing gap due to the continuous deterioration of economic conditions in all areas and the decrease in international funds related to Syria.
- Distinguishing between the contributions of different types of NPS entities can be challenging. Often, there are projects where charities and NGOs act as implementing partners for INGOs and UN agencies, leading to overlapping efforts.
- Lack of coordination among NPS entities, even within the same area, results in project duplication, inefficient aid distribution, and wastage of resources, thereby hindering the overall effectiveness of their initiatives.
- Working under a humanitarian and emergency umbrella for most NPS entities tends to make them unsustainable with limited long-term impact, as more comprehensive development strategies may be overlooked.
- The ongoing political instability and de facto division of Syria create challenges for NPS entities to complement each other's projects and reduce the overall effectiveness of their initiatives.
- Strict security monitoring and the requirement of security approval for NPS entities' projects in all regions of Syria limit their capacity to undertake projects based on community needs, often restricting their work to projects favoured by de facto authorities.
- The lack of a robust implementation monitoring system, combined with the prevailing security conditions and weak rule of law in many areas, has exposed certain NPS entities' projects to corruption and favouritism, impacting their overall effectiveness.

Addressing all weaknesses in NPS entities necessitates a political solution to achieve sustainable peace in Syria, a complex endeavour that demands persistent efforts and is currently not achievable. Nevertheless, practical steps can achieve immediate improvements in NPS efficiency. Enhancing coordination among NPS entities will lead to a more efficient and impactful approach. Implementing a transparent and robust monitoring system is crucial to combat corruption and favouritism, ensuring that projects genuinely cater to community needs and achieve their intended impact.



III. Influence and Power Dynamics

This section attempts to assess and analyse the levels of influence and power dynamics among four broad categories of actors involved in non-profit sector funding, planning and operations. The first category is formal public actors, which includes the Syrian government and other de-facto authorities across the main zones of control in the country. This encompasses central governance entities with their relevant ministries and offices, as well as local governance structures such as municipalities and local councils. Second, we consider international actors to primarily include international donors, UN agencies and INGOs present in various capacities across the different cities studied for this research. The third category includes all local civil society actors, where civil society groups, development organizations, charities, and religious entities that carry out not-for-profit activities. And fourth, we assess the role of military and security entities on NPS operations across the areas studied. The section also analyses procurement transparency and monitoring in relation to NPS, along with the impact of the earthquake that occurred on February 6, 2023, on the sector.

1. Formal public actors

The report outlines formal public actors within the context of the study as all entities and institutions responsible for crafting and implementing formal policies and regulations concerning the non-profit sector. It differentiates between two categories of formal actors. The first category encompasses the central government, including ministries and high-level executive entities. In Syria, four de facto governmental entities operate under the different authorities, which include the Syrian government, AANES, the Salvation government in Idlib, and the Interim government in northern areas. The second category is local administration and local councils, including formal entities at the local level, such as city councils and municipalities.

a). Influence on NPS entities

In government-controlled areas, the central government's impact primarily emanates from regulations mandating organizations to register and secure security approvals to operate. As one charity worker mentioned, the relationship with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MoSAL) can be viewed as "interference," guided by an outdated Charity Law (Law No. 93) governing their engagement.²⁵ All non-profit organizations must register with MoSAL and secure approvals, granting the ministry authority to adjust program goals and objectives to align with the government's strategy. The MoSAL's influence extends to requiring aid actors to collaborate with affiliated entities such as Syria Trust for Development (STD) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent organizations.²⁶ These entities, described by key informants as operating as "government representatives," also function as implementation partners and facilitators, ensuring activities adhere to the government's objectives. An INGO worker in Damascus highlighted the partnership with SARC, where the organization engages in all projects, and SARC handles the direct distribution of in-kind aid.

On the other hand, local administrative structures in government-controlled areas exert varying degrees of influence on planning and implementation, depending on factors including the target area, capacity, project type, and implementing organization. Local administration entities sometimes contribute to NPS as implementation partners or facilitators, offering insights into needs and contextual assessments during the planning phase. However, some key informants from local NGOs reported "inactive" or "weak" partnerships with local administrations, leading to heightened central government influence at the local level. For those who do work with local administrations, including local organizations as well as international actors like INGOs and UN agencies, local administrations' role is primarily in facilitating movement and access, while they may also play a supervisory role. Reportedly, local infrastructure projects required the participation of local administration entities.

25 For more on the law and its applications, please see "No Room to Breathe: State Repression of Human Rights Activism in Syria" published in 2007 by Human Rights Watch. Link: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/10/16/no-room-breathe/state-repression-human-rights-activism-syria>

26 These organizations maintain explicit connections to the Syrian regime, thereby enabling the regime to manipulate humanitarian aid for its own gains. The report "Rigging the System" published by Human Rights Watch underscores these affiliations. Link: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/06/28/rigging-system/government-policies-co-opt-aid-and-reconstruction-funding-syria>. For more SARC and STD, please see Report #1 of this series on the non-profit sector in Syria.



In Raqqa and Qamishli, NPS entities navigate interactions with both the Damascus government and the AANES, while UN agencies require approval from Damascus for their operations. An NES-based UN worker pointed out the reluctance of the “Damascus government to accept UN intervention in areas outside its control.” Occasionally, AANES institutions still issue approvals for to implement programs in and access certain areas, yet this was described primarily as a legal procedure by key informants in the area, while they “do not intervene in the design and planning of programs.” While they may prefer having more projects related to rehabilitation and infrastructure, they acknowledge “the shared interest” in responding to the needs of local communities. Non-UN NPS actors highlighted the coordinating and facilitating role played by the AANES’s Raqqa Civil Council. On the other hand, local administrations in the two cities primarily act as facilitators, aiding access to local communities and individuals in need. They provide approvals and security clearances and maintain lists of beneficiaries. However, KIIs generally depict their involvement in planning and implementation as limited. An INGO worker in Raqqa emphasized that “INGOs work independently, with their work parameters dictated solely by needs.”

In Idleb, the Salvation government exercises oversight over NPS activities, functioning as the central coordinator for programs and access within its territories. While it doesn’t tend to meddle in program plans, it leverages bureaucratic authority through registration and approval prerequisites. This framework allows for extensive coordination of NPS activities via the Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs,²⁷ active since 2019, which orchestrates access and the movement of NPS staff and supplies. However, it’s pertinent to mention that the SG rarely implements its own independent social projects, indicating a substantial reliance on NPS actors to deliver services and livelihood opportunities.

In A’zaz, the Interim government, largely controlled by Turkey, wields a notably diminished influence within its areas.²⁸ NPS actors are not mandated to register or secure approval from the IG. A respondent working for an INGO in the region outlined that the IG “comes second in coordination and work permits after the local council.” In practice, the IG collaborates with NPS actors for tasks such as supply importation through the Bab Al-Salama border crossing, managed by the IG. Moreover, coordination is evident in projects falling within the health and agricultural sectors, which fall under the management of IG ministries.

Local administration entities in Idleb predominantly assume a facilitative role concerning NPS programs. They enable access within their territories and provide essential equipment and subsidiary services, all under the SG’s Ministry of Local Administration. In A’zaz, however, local administration entities possess a noteworthy degree of influence over the planning and execution of NPS projects. They stand as the “official institution for acquiring beneficiary and population data, and obtaining approval for the implementation of the project,” as conveyed by an NGO worker stationed in the area. Organizations’ registration and approval of projects are obligatory by the local councils, making them the highest authority within their administrative areas. Projects are also often handed over to the local administrations in the area upon their completion.

b). Power dynamics in governing NPS entities

In Damascus and Aleppo, the central government and NPS share significant interests, with the latter often filling the role of service providers to society, contributing to local economies, and addressing gaps left by a shrinking public sector. A UN employee noted that NPS “play [the state’s] role in providing services to society.” These actors mobilize local economies through employment opportunities and injecting cash, often in hard currency, into local markets. MoSAL seeks to control non-profit sector activities to serve government interests and “feed into its corruption system.” This is achieved by “forcing partnerships” with affiliated entities to monopolize the sector and restrict lucrative partnerships.²⁹

Local administration entities in government-controlled areas are viewed as partners with shared interests, serving as entry points to communities, facilitating access to information, target areas, infrastructure networks, and mobility for organizations’ staff. They are also recipients of capacity-building programs aligning with community resilience objectives. NPS significantly contribute to service provision, addressing gaps in under-resourced local administrations. Power dynamics are complex, with local administrations’ roles varying between facilitation and limitation and the widespread corruption within most governmental entities.

In Raqqa and Qamishli, power relations of public actors with NPS vary significantly between UN agencies and local organizations, most notably seen in interactions with the AANES’ Humanitarian Affairs Office. This office, a key player within the AANES,³⁰ man-

27 Syrian Salvation Government, Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs, accessed August 2023. Link: <https://bit.ly/3Z4nWFq>

28 Local councils coordinating with NPS actors in the area only formally follow the Syrian Interim Government, yet in practice they mostly comply with directives issued by official Turkish provincial administrations. For more, please see Report #1 of this series.

29 See “UN Procurement Contracts in Syria: A “Few” Bad Apples?” published in 2022 by Syrian Legal Development Programme and Observatory of Political and Economic Networks. Link: <https://opensyr.com/en/pages/p-16>

30 The Humanitarian Affairs Office within the AANES is the “the official interlocutor of civil institutions” operating in the area. Link: https://aanegov.org/?page_id=320



ages registrations, work permits and coordination with NPS actors. INGOs and UN agencies are also required to register with this office, though they generally face less scrutiny and fewer restrictions compared to local organizations. In addition to the Humanitarian Affairs Office, local organizations must coordinate with committees and offices within the local administration structure based on their project's focus.³¹

Local administrations in Raqqa and Qamishli play crucial roles as primary entry points into their communities. This role stems from either legal registration requirements or their operational importance and extensive local networks. Alongside bridging gaps in capacity, they are also an integral component in coordinating and planning service provision activities by NPS entities operating in their areas. This sometimes meant that “those on top do not know what’s happening at the bottom” of the governance hierarchy, as described by one INGO worker in Raqqa city, which undermined “quality and accountability” in local programs. Similar to other areas, corruption networks involving employees within NPS organizations were identified as significant influencers of NPS programs by various interviewees.

Despite variations in the roles played by governments in Idleb and A’zaz, both rely on international and local NPS actors to address needs and provide services in sectors like health, education, economic development, infrastructure, and livelihoods. The pronounced demand for these services, in an area with about 4.1 million people in need,³² underscores the shared interest. However, a UN field officer in A’zaz cautioned about potential conflicts arising from the IG’s attempts to amplify its influence over NPS operations.

Local administrations are often perceived as heavily reliant on the SG in Idleb. Their primary role involves facilitating NPS operations under the coordination of the SG’s Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs. On the contrary, local administrations in A’zaz possess greater autonomy and actively engage in their communities. Close coordination between NPS actors and local administrations in A’zaz is essential. This collaboration allows them to “collectively set operational priorities, update data, and engage in monitoring,” as emphasized by a UN field officer. However, Turkey wields substantial influence over local authorities in A’zaz,³³ enabling it to shape the interactions between these authorities and NPS entities.³⁴

2. International Actors

To include international and internationally-affiliated NGOs, UN agencies, and international donors.

a). Influence on NPS entities

Western governments (and Japan) have almost consistently been the largest donors to Syria’s aid response across the various zones of control, is largely funneled through INGOs, UN agencies and a few local NGOs. International aid actors of INGOs and UN agencies are the largest non-profit actors in the country.³⁵ They intervene in a wide variety of sectors, sometimes partnering with local implementing partners. The influence of international actors on NPS activities largely stems from their position as major sources of funding and resources, in addition to their high technical and coordination capacities relative to local NPS entities. This allowed them considerable influence over the planning and implementation of programs they fund, requiring specific technical and service quality standards, determining target areas and sectors, and supervising and evaluating projects either directly or through third parties. Yet decisions by Damascus-based UN agencies and INGOs must fall in line with the government’s strategy. A key informant working as a program manager for a UN agency in Aleppo noted that the “[UN’s] planning process remains under the central government’s plan and is intersected with it.” Multiple key informants working for international actors noted that coordination

31 See “Priority and Decision Making: Determinants of Localisation of Aid in Northeast Syria” published in 2021 by IMPACT. Link: https://impactres.org/reports/priorities_and_decisions_localisation_NES_En.pdf

32 See Situation Report for North-West Syria published by OCHA in July 2023. Link: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/syria/>

33 See “The Turkish Intervention in Northeast Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies”, published in 2021 by EUI Middle East Directions. Link: https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69657/MED_RR_2021_01s.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y

34 For more on this, please refer to Report #1 of this series.

35 According to UNOCHA’s Financial Tracking Service, in 2022, UN agencies received over 52 percent of Syria’s total incoming funding of \$2.57 billion. International and Internationally-affiliated organizations (not including Red Cross/Red Crescent Organizations) received nearly 33 percent. For more details, please see: <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/218/summary/2023>. More details on this could also be found in Report #1 of this series.



also occurs among them “to avoid implementing the same projects.” While international actors might have considerable technical sectoral expertise, their plans and objectives are constrained by their commitment to their donors and to agreements with the central government.

But not all INGOs funding programs in government-controlled areas are registered in Damascus. Damascus-based INGOs (DINGOs) coordinate through the DINGO Forum, which includes 26 INGOs.³⁶ They often implement programs directly given their presence on the ground. Other INGOs work from abroad through a network of local partners. In that capacity, they effectively play the role of fund managers and mediators between foreign government donors and implementing partners, allowing them a high level of influence on project planning and supervision over project implementation through third parties.

Following a Russian Veto in January 2020, UN agencies could only access northeastern Syria through their Damascus-based offices. In Raqqa and Qamishli, UN agencies, and international INGOs registered in Damascus, can only partner with local NPS actors registered and approved by the Syrian government. Local organizations operating entirely outside of government-controlled territories are off-limits, such as many working in Raqqa and Qamishli cities in northeastern Syria.

UN agencies and international organizations have considerable influence over NPS activities in Raqqa and Qamishli, although the former are limited by their relationship with the government in Damascus. UN agencies wield considerable influence over planning in “most humanitarian programs,” according to a UN employee in Qamishli, as they implement their own programs and supervise others they fund but are carried out by implementing partners. But target areas and partners to UN agencies need to be registered and approved by the government in Damascus. Only camps officially recognized by Damascus, namely Al-Hol and Al-Majmoudli camps, can be accessed by UN agencies. According to key informants in the area, UN agencies officially hold limited to no communication with other NPS entities in the area who work without approval from Damascus, potentially limiting collaboration among NPS actors. A UN worker in Raqqa stated that UN agencies could only coordinate among each other.

But INGOs in northeastern Syria coordinate with each other, local NPS actors and governing authorities through bodies such as the NES NGO Forum, which has an “OCHA-like mandate.”³⁷ The forum includes around 40 INGO and 5 or 6 local NGOs, and regularly meets with the AANES’ Humanitarian Affairs office. NPS entities in the forum implement their own programs, guide the planning and design of programs carried out by implementing partners, and supervise the implementation process. This coordination body of INGOs and local NGOs established coordination mechanisms where they share data and lessons-learned, and coordinate projects plans and implementation to avoid duplication of efforts.³⁸ NPS actors in the forum operate through an informal border-crossing with Iraq,³⁹ while many are present inside northeastern Syria, with primary focus on IDP and refugee camps and former ISIS-controlled areas. Notably, UN agencies are not members of the NES NGO Forum, although some coordination remains. And donors often seek to set certain guidelines and quality standards on all actors they fund, although their engagement is seen more clearly in what a UN worker in the area described as “large and sensitive projects,” where they supervise, monitor and evaluate programs through third parties.

International actors in Idleb and A’zaz also have considerable influence over NPS programming. Donors were often described as “the most important actors in influencing programs” by key informants in the area. Through UN agencies, INGOs, or third-party monitors and facilitators, donors could monitor and supervise programs on the ground, and assess whether to extend, renew, or suspend funding to aid projects. But among all international actors, INGOs are “the most important implementing partners licensed to work on the ground in the area,” according to a key informant working for the UN in the area. Data, needs assessments, and program evaluations prepared by INGOs constitute an important resource to all NPS actors. They may also channel funds to local implementing partners. However, INGOs operational presence is much more pronounced in Idleb and areas under the SG than in A’zaz and other IG areas, which are likely dominated by Turkish and Turkish-backed NPS actors on the ground, such as the

36 Presentation by Riad Sabbagh, Norwegian Refugee Council, published in June 2021 by the Human Security Collective. Link: https://www.hscollective.org/assets/20210622_Launch-NYU-Report.pdf

37 “The Northeast Syria (NES) NGO Forum is the lead coordination body for NGOs working cross-border from Iraq and from within NES, into SDF-controlled areas of Aleppo, Deir-ez-Zor, Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh Governorates in Syria ... The NES Forum undertakes the following functions on behalf of its members: representation and liaison, operational response coordination including information management; humanitarian access negotiations, advocacy, and engagement with local NGOs.” For more on the NES NGO Forum, please visit the Forum’s website. Link: <https://nesngoforum.org/>

38 More information on the NES Forum could be found in Report #1 of this series.

39 UN agencies could no longer access the crossing following a Russian veto in January 2020. Other NPS actors could still operate through the border-crossing, but their access is occasionally interrupted, subject to fluctuations in the relationship between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq and the AANES. The most recent suspension of the border-crossing occurred in May 2023 and last for nearly a month. For more on the closure, please see “Intra-Kurdish tensions paralyze northeast Syria’s main border crossing” published on 21 May 2023 by Al-Monitor. Link: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/05/intra-kurdish-tensions-paralyze-northeast-syrias-main-border-crossing>



Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) and the Turkish Red Crescent.⁴⁰ A local council worker in A'zaz stated that “[INGOs’] role is very weak and negligible due to the very small number of international organizations present in the region, as there are only one or two organizations in the A'zaz region.” Their periodic reporting remains important in feeding into programs, however, and local organizations reportedly still benefit from INGOs’ experiences and lessons-learned in program implementation, according to KIIs working for local organizations in A'zaz.

But UN agencies do not have a prominent physical presence in the two areas, and they primarily operate through local and international partners. WFP is the “largest and most important” UN agency in the area, and together they play a significant role in “defining and designing programs according to the needs,” according to key informants overseeing UN programs there. They also provide funding to local and international NPS entities through mechanisms like the Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF).⁴¹ And through partnerships with local and international organizations, a field coordinator for the UN in the area noted that WFP provides food cash vouchers to local beneficiaries in A'zaz, which they can use to purchase food products from local traders. Thus despite their limited physical presence, UN agencies remain an integral part of the humanitarian response in northwestern Syria.

b). Power dynamics in governing NPS entities

Humanitarian and development programming in Damascus and Aleppo is significantly influenced by international actors, yet only within parameters set by the government in Damascus. Coordination and shared interests are high between international organizations and UN agencies, largely due to similarities in values, funding origins, objectives and goals, types of projects and target areas, and even implementation modalities. Their extensive technical expertise and established relationships with external donors allow them to be important implementers on the ground, and a significant source of funds and resources to local implementers. But the relationship between local and international NPS actors might involve some tensions. They do share interests in the delivery of services, but they don't always agree on priorities and values. A key informant working for a charity in Damascus pointed to a gap in shared values, stating that “not all charities have similar orientations with international organizations, and not all charities train [on] gender.” One NGO worker in Damascus noted that her organization “competes” with local organizations with religious or conservative leanings “specifically regarding women's issues.”

Another factor restricting engagement and shared interests between local and international NPS actors is the latter's tendency to partner with a limited set of local organizations, often those affiliated with de-facto authorities and their power networks. Due to “corruption within UN offices and pressure from the authorities,” said one key informant working for a local NGO in Damascus, “meant that UN agencies only deal with a small and limited number of organizations, preventing the rest from grants.” One worker at a local NGO referenced the Norwegian Refugee Council, an INGO that is “only allowed to work with and through Syria Trust for Development,” an entity considered as operating in favor of the Presidential palace. Interestingly, some key informants working for local NPS entities in Aleppo and Damascus sometimes referred to INGOs as competitors. An NGO KI in Aleppo reported “conflict of interests” with INGOs “over locations and sectors of work, in addition to obtaining funding and staff.”

Almost all respondents in GoS areas spoke of the, “major role,” played by donors in planning and implementing interventions, indicating they have, “mutual goals and interests.” One local NGO head stated, however, that conflict sometimes emerges in terms of the implementation directives, needs assessments and project modalities, namely, “that donors try to impose and that doesn't fit reality and its needs.” This is because projects implemented by all NPS actors from UN agencies to local and international NGOs all have to abide by parameters set by donors, especially for earmarked funds. This does not however apply across the board, as some organisations, most notable UN agencies, sometimes receive non-earmarked funds, allowing them more flexibility in implementing programs more quickly and independently.

In Raqqqa and Qamishli, UN agencies remain influential, but their role is confined by restrictions imposed by Damascus, giving prominence to coordination bodies involving local and international NPS actors. Multiple KIIs, working for local and international organizations in the two cities, reported a “complementary relationship” with UN agencies, with an INGO worker stating “international organizations can reach places and respond to needs where UN agencies can't.” But the limitation of working through Damascus opened the door for corrupt and exploitative relationships. A UN worker in Qamishli claimed that “shared interests between old staff and for-profit entities in the area” impact who can enter procurement contracts with the UN. It also distances UN agencies from local communities. An NGO worker in the city added that few people from Qamishli city can be hired by UN agencies “because hired staff are coordinated with Damascus.” “Those wanted for military conscription or who are considered political or security risks” by the

40 For more on Turkish state and affiliated organizations operating in northwestern Syria, please see Report #1 of this series.

41 The Fund is managed through UNOCHA's offices in Turkiye. For more, please see: <https://www.unocha.org/turkiye/about-syria-cross-border-humanitarian-fund>



government in Damascus cannot join UN agencies. INGOs and local NPS actors are not confined by restrictions from Damascus, and they coordinate through the NES NGO Forum, where INGOs are both direct implementers and important funding channels to local organizations. Despite this separation, however, key informants working for UN agencies in both Qamishli and Raqqa noted that “donors at the top of the hierarchy are the same” for both UN agencies and INGOs, “creating shared goals” and allowing for indirect coordination.

International actors operate in Idleb and A'zaz through a variety of modalities and mechanisms, the largest of which remains a UNSC mandated response coordinated by UN agencies from Turkiye. UN agencies have not established a physical presence in northwest Syria and instead rely on a network of international and local NGOs to carry out programming, with Bab al-Hawa border crossing being the main entry point of aid.⁴² Western donors and UN agencies alike are wary of increased engagement in northwest Syria, not least due to the hegemony of recognized terrorist⁴³ or sanctioned⁴⁴ non-state actors. This prompts increased vigilance in aid programming in the area, and increases the importance of “gaining the trust of donors” who might “prematurely suspend programming,” according to a key informant working for an INGO in the area, which potentially “undermines local trust in the organization.” UN agencies also cannot ensure consistency in programming in northwestern Syria, as their operations are subject to decisions and political disputes within the UNSC. Although still integral to the response, those factors make the UN's role all but reliable, shedding light on the instability inherent in the aid response in northwest Syria.

Through networks of sectoral and multi-sectoral coordination clusters including local and international NPS entities, often headed by UN OCHA, UN agencies remain crucial for the aid response in northwest Syria. Over 4.1 million people are accessed with emergency food aid, cash assistance, vaccinations, medical supplies, hygiene kits, etc.⁴⁵ This operation modality allows UN actors to engage with local organizations to “develop their skills and capacity and [support] early recovery projects,” according to a key informant working as a field coordinator for the UN in northwest Syria. INGOs play a central role in the aid operation, implementing projects directly or through local partners in the area. Bodies and platforms such as the Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS)⁴⁶, and the Syria Resilience Initiative (first established in 2016 as the Syria Resilience Consortium) help international and local NPS actors coordinate their programming in the area. NPS actors in the area generally have “similar goals and visions in providing services to local residents” according to a charity worker who described the relationship with INGOs as “complementary.”

3. Local Civil Society Actors

This category includes local NGOs, large businesses, MSMEs, and religious entities with operational presence or influence in the three main de-facto zones of control in Syria.

a). Influence on NPS entities

Almost all local civil society actors in government-controlled areas play a subsidiary role in NPS programming, although some remain considerably more influential than others. Local NGOs, charities, and religious entities primarily function as implementing

42 Continued access through Bab al-Hawa has relied on fragile, short-term agreements between UNSC member states, with Russia (and China) often using its veto to give the government in Damascus more control over the aid response in the north. Bab al-Hawa border crossing north of Idleb has gradually become the only cross-border entry point for UN agencies into Syria without consent from Damascus. The UN's cross-border modality was initiated in 2014 under UNSC resolution 2165 to include four border crossings northwest, northeast, and south of the country. But by July 2020, Bab al-Hawa became the only border crossing through which UN agencies are allowed to deliver aid without approval from Damascus. For more on the United Nation Security Council's resolutions sanctioning cross-border aid delivery, please see the list compiled by the Security Council Report through the following link: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/security-council-resolutions/?ctype=Syria&cbtype=syria

43 For a more detailed brief on Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the US- and UN-classified terrorist organization in control of Idleb, please see the Actor Profile published on 26 July 2023 by ACLED. Link: <https://acleddata.com/2023/07/26/actor-profile-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts/>

44 The Syrian National Army, a loose Turkey-backed umbrella operating in northern Syria, includes groups and fighters that are sanctioned by U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). Those groups are: Ahrar al-Sharqiya was sanctioned in July 2021; and Suleiman Shah Brigade and the Hamza Division were sanctioned recently, on 17 August 2023.

45 For more, please see UNOCHA's reporting on the aid response in northwestern Syria. Link: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/syria/>

46 The Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS) is a “Humanitarian multi-donor Pooled Fund established in October 2022 to meet priority needs in the north of Syria with a primary focus on the northwest of the country, where 4.1 million people are in urgent need of assistance in 2022.” For more on ANFS, please see: <https://afns.org/>



partners to UN agencies and INGOs, and they are required to follow their guidelines and meet agreed project objectives and goals. They tend to have extensive local networks that allow them to navigate local contexts and dynamics more effectively. Although religious entities tend to allocate aid efforts to communities based on religious affiliation, their special legal status differentiates them from other local NPS actors.⁴⁷ This “legal cover,” described one key informant working for the UN, helped them navigate complex bureaucratic procedures, although it sometimes required NPS actors to tweak project objectives that may clash with certain religious values.

But among local civil society actors, the government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) are by far the most influential among local NPS actors. The most notable of those are Syria Trust for Development,⁴⁸ and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC),⁴⁹ the local subsidiary of the International Committee of the Red Cross. But perhaps at the very bottom of the influence hierarchy are the informal (or illegal) NPS entities. They could be structured NGOs or ad-hoc local initiatives that operate without a legal registration with the Syrian government, although still under the watchful eye of Syria’s many security branches. According to key informants from Aleppo and Damascus, those entities cannot access funding streams provided by UN and registered international organizations. But this allowed their activities to be relatively more localized in their planning, design, and implementation when compared to projects funded through international actors. Their illegal status, however, made them more susceptible to blackmail and resource siphoning by security forces, according to key informants.

For-profit businesses could partner with NPS actors, or run their own NPS entities. UN and international organizations in government areas sign procurement and service provision contracts with for-profit businesses for a variety of reasons, including to procure aid supplies and office equipment, or to acquire protection for staff or goods. From that position, trading businesses who procure supplies on behalf of aid actors in government areas could manipulate prices, according to key informants working for NPS actors in the areas, thereby affecting spending decisions. Although NPS actors are generally required, either by donor governments or by their own internal policies, to assess procurement contracts through a bidding process, suppliers who enter those bids all but monopolize the market due to their connections to high-ranking government officials or the al-Assad family.⁵⁰ Businesses, mostly large ones, could run their own NPS entities or become major donors to ones. Some key informants described large businesses as “donors” or “major contributors” to aid operations.⁵¹ This allows them not just to influence these organizations, but to entirely dictate their programming, use them to buy products that the businessman already sells, launder their ill-acquired cash, or whitewash their reputations for political gains.⁵² Medium and small businesses tend to be target beneficiaries of programming by INGOs and UN agencies. It is still possible for them to win procurement bids, yet their limited resources, capacity, and access remain major limiting factors.

47 Religious entities’ relationship with the central government is through the Ministry of Religious Endowments (MoRE) rather than MoSAL. They thus operate under a different legal status, and are granted more financial and operational independence than other civil society organizations. For more analysis on the evolution of religious entities under the Syrian state, please see the article titled “The Religious Domain Continues to Expand in Syria” published in March 2019 by the Carnegie Middle East Center. Link: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/19/religious-domain-continues-to-expand-in-syria-pub-78624>

48 Research by Nidal Betare, Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff, and Munzer al Awad published in June 2022 by The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy cited a former INGO employee saying “Asma and Bashar al-Assad have turned humanitarian aid in Syria into a profitable industry. Asma al-Assad has used her knowledge and experience in managing the Syria Trust for Development to build a systematically corrupt humanitarian aid system in Syria.”

49 The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre noted that “60% of international aid in Syria is channeled through SARC,” in an article published in August 2019 by the center. Link: <https://syriaaccountability.org/inside-the-syrian-arab-red-crescent/>. The figure was attributed to an academic article accessed by the center, written by Reinoud Leenders and Kholoud Mansour, and published in June 2018 by the Academy of Political Science’s Political Science Quarterly. Link: <https://academic.oup.com/psq/article-abstract/133/2/225/6848229?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

50 Research published in November 2022 by the Observatory of Political and Economic Networks and The Syrian Legal Development Programme, titled “UN Procurement Contracts in Syria: A “few” Bad Apples?” found that many of the UN suppliers are either owned or are closely connected to warlords and war profiteers. The report quotes a businessperson: “To know who is behind any contract, check who can import that material. In Syria, currently almost nothing is locally produced, and everything is imported. Those who can import and are allowed to do so are linked to the regime, and to one of the main three: Bashar al-Assad, Maher al-Assad or Asma Al-Assad.” Link: <https://opensyr.com/en/pages/p-16>

51 Donations may also arrive from diaspora communities and philanthropists to specific local charities and development NGOs. This largely depends on the organization’s ability to establish strong trust-based relationships with such donors. While those donors may have some requests regarding the type of service provided with those funds (donations for Eid sacrifices, for instance), NPS organizations often have a larger degree of freedom in dispensing those funds.

52 Among the most famous examples was the self-proclaimed charity named Al-Bustan Association, run by President al-Assad’s cousin Rami Makhoulouf, and was blacklisted by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 2017 for “recruiting and mobilizing individuals to support and augment Syrian military forces.” Link: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0087>. Following a fallout between Makhoulouf and the President in 2020, the entity was reportedly renamed into Al-Areen Charitable Foundation under the new management of the President’s wife, Asma. For more, please see the following report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights: <https://www.syriahr.com/en/288933/>



In A'zaz and Idlib too, local NPS largely function as implementing partners with international actors, while local suppliers and traders procure aid and other operational materials. Local NPS actors are often better informed on local dynamics, and their “evaluation remains better in improving and designing projects based on need,” according to a UN project supervisor operating in the area. The many local organizations present in the area play an important role in delivering “many relief and development projects in the area,” according to a local council worker in A'zaz, who perceived them as more important in implementing aid projects than international organizations. Suppliers and traders are required to provide supplies according to agreed quality, price and other criteria set by donors, or down the chain by international or local NPS actors. Failing to meet the criteria could result in suspending or terminating the project “which constitutes a challenge for organizations, and affects the speed of implementation,” according to an INGO employee in the area. It is primarily for this reason that NPS actors seek traders with whom they have an established trust, and might later be less keen to diversify their partners in order not to increase their risk. Key informants also noted that NPS actors carry out assessments of market prices through regular communication with major businesses, although some hinted at an inherent bias where traders might inflate reported prices to receive larger contracts from NPS actors. An NGO worker stated that their feedback “cannot be relied on ... as their profit interests may interfere in any proposal.”

Local civil society actors in Raqqa and Qamishli cities also support international actors in supplying materials and the implementation of aid programs. They could also feed into the planning and design of programs given their local and contextual experience and understanding. But the presence of pockets still controlled by the government in Damascus,⁵³ and the need for UN agencies to acquire Damascus' approval for aid programs in northeastern Syria complicates aid operations.⁵⁴ In both Qamishli and Raqqa cities, only Damascus-approved local NGOs and businesses could work with UN agencies, and their role is seen largely as representing the Syrian government's interests. But local actors in the area have proven valuable for INGOs working independently from Damascus. According to key informants, “some projects can only be implemented through local businesses,” such as the distribution of fuel materials or in project components that require manual labor, while an INGO worker noted some local NGOs “could independently implement programs” financed by INGOs. INGO workers in Qamishli stated that major businesses “have the capacity to implement programs efficiently” and that they play a “big role in most relief and service provision projects.” Religious entities, when present, function as partners in the implementation of some projects that typically target communities of their same confessions, and rarely provide services outside them. But their status in their communities, an INGO worker in Qamishli noted, made them effective in “fundraising for emergency projects.” When asked about relationships with religious entities, key informants working for the UN in the area noted that it is limited to “church organizations in Al-Hasakah and Qamishli.”

b). Power dynamics in governing NPS entities

Local NPS entities and businesses rely heavily on international funds and resources made accessible through UN agencies and INGOs. Some might have more resourced networks than others, but key informants noted negative competition over funds and resources, where reportedly some entities claim expertise they don't have, thereby undermining overall humanitarian objectives. An NGO head in Damascus noted that competition even exists between NGOs and businesses to win service contracts regarding garbage removal, road repairs, ‘city decorations,’ etc. Local NGOs may also have competing interests or values with religious entities due to the latter's conservative social conduct. An NGO head in Damascus saw this conflict more clearly in “causes related to women” and women empowerment programs. An INGO worker in Aleppo said that religious entities have “an interest in networking with all actors to benefit and serve [their] regions and members of its sect.” Key informants often referenced an abundance of religious entities in the NPS sphere, with a charity worker in Damascus stating that “every religious authority ... either owns a charity or has influential members in one”. Indeed, after all, for- and non-profit entities, religious or not, should fulfill requirements set by the UN and international organizations if they were to access future funding opportunities. But reportedly, the criteria are not always clear. Key informants working for local charities and organizations in Aleppo and Damascus pointed to partnerships “imposed” on international actors by the Syrian government. Any presumed power international actors have stems primarily from being donors and trusted channels through which international funds could flow into Syria. Real power, however, relies heavily on how close an actor sits to al-Assad's tightening inner circle of warlords and close family members.

53 The Syrian government controls pockets within Qamishli and Al-Hasakeh cities, commonly known as ‘security squares.’ Tensions often arise between armed forces affiliated to the AANES and the Syrian government, sometimes escalating to violent conflict. In August 2023, violent clashes erupted between fighters belonging to Al-Jbour tribe and the government-affiliated National Defense Forces in Al-Hasakeh city following harassment of a tribal notable crossing one of the latter's checkpoints in the city. See link. Tensions are often reported in Qamishli city as well, leading to blockades at entry points into the city. See link.

54 The UN Security Council failed to extend independent UN access into northeastern Syria following a Russian and Chinese veto in January 2020. See UNSC Resolution 2504. Link: [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_RES_2504\(2020\)_e.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_RES_2504(2020)_e.pdf)



In northwest Syria, businesses and local NPS actors seek to establish lasting relationships with donors and international organizations to ensure funds continue to flow. According to key informants, this might incentivize some businesses to “take out competition” and establish a relative control over the market. This reportedly also allows them to “manipulate the prices of products that are difficult to find in local markets or cut corners after the signing of the partnership contract to deliver lower quality products” and increase their profit margin. Smaller traders and suppliers cannot afford to compete and they require capacity building support from NPS actors. The bureaucratic requirements alone could be cumbersome to some small and medium businesses to enter bids with local and international NPS entities. Local NPS entities also rely on funds flowing through international NPS actors, yet some also perceive a competition with them in acquiring human resources. INGOs tend to pay higher salaries, they often attract the more skilled labor away from local organizations who can’t match INGO salaries.⁵⁵ This also increases employee turnover at local NGOs, and prevents them from benefiting from experiences accumulated by their experienced staff who could seek better pay with international NPS actors.

In northeast Syria too, local actors benefit from funds flowing through UN agencies and INGOs, and their interest lies largely in ensuring they continue to receive those funds to maintain operations. This reliance on funds, like in other areas, sometimes trumps the need to achieve lasting humanitarian and development outcomes which relies on the actors’ capacity and experience. A key informant working for an NGO in Raqqa noted that some NPS entities’ “implementation may not be as agreed upon,” causing delays and hindrances in achieving project goals. Political limitations, such as those confining the operations of UN agencies, also negatively impact NPS activities outcomes. A UN worker in the city stated that UN agencies are not allowed to partner with many local NPS actors in the city, and end up working with actors without necessary understanding of local conditions. And “local NGOs cannot get a license from the GoS, so they are deprived from partnering with UN agencies,” he added. But some key informants in both Raqqa and Qamishli also noted that informal or familial relationships between local NGO staff, local businesses and local administrations could incentivize nepotism in contracting and targeting according to some KIIs.

4. Military and Security Entities

The report defines military and security entities as all formal and informal armed groups who are present on the ground in each of the studied areas and can influence the safety and security of local populations, NPS actors, and the mobility of goods and people across different areas. There are numerous armed groups across the Syrian territory, each with varying degrees of affiliation to de facto authorities and external powers. Affiliations of different armed groups and their role on the ground often meant that those groups could sometimes have varying degrees of autonomy in enforcing their own conditions on NPS actors, or to exercise leverage that is independent from the ruling de facto authorities. This autonomy is often determined by the ability of de facto authorities to control the different factions in their areas, and marginalize those who seek to challenge it. In government-controlled areas, those groups include the Syrian army, local paramilitary groups with diverse affiliations, and foreign armed groups managed or influenced by Russia and Iran.⁵⁶ In northwestern Syria, Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) controls Idleb and its surroundings, while different factions under the loose umbrella of the Syrian National Army operate in the area extending from Afrin to Jarablus, and from Tal Abyad to Ras Al-Ain as Turkish proxies. In northeastern Syria, the main armed actors are the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the internal security forces (Asayish).

a). Influence on NPS entities

In government-controlled areas, NPS actors need to obtain security approvals before they carry out any activities, and they are required to offer considerable oversight to security entities over their programs. UN agencies and international organizations coordinate with official security entities in order to determine which areas they are allowed to target in their programming. Beyond security approvals, a UN worker in Aleppo noted that “[security entities] are present in all stages of a project” for oversight, and they tend to intervene mainly in activities that involve “dialogue sessions or cultural empowerment.” But that ‘presence’ is much more invasive for local NPS actors. Security and military entities could require alterations to program plans, and may impose fees before allowing

55 UN agencies and INGOs generally pay the highest salaries among all employers across the three main zones of control in the country, and usually provide benefits such as health insurance. For more on the pay gap between employees of different types of NPS entities and between those and public sector employees across the different zones of control, please see Reported #1 of this series.

56 For more details, please see “Country Guidance Syria 2023” Published in 2023 by EUAA. Link: <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-syria-2023/3-actors-persecution-or-serious-harm>



programs to continue. This could involve altering target areas, target populations, or even the whole modality of NPS intervention. Key informants who work with local charities in Damascus and Aleppo noted that any “topics, proposals and themes for all activities can only be set up after the approval [of security entities]” who in turn “try to benefit financially in any way.”

In both Idlib and A’zaz, they offer security and protection during the implementation of programs and in case security incidents arise. Unlike Idlib, which is controlled primarily by HTS, NPS entities need to coordinate with multiple armed factions that operate in A’zaz and other Turkish-influenced areas in northern Syria. Armed groups in both Idlib and A’zaz provide security during aid distributions and program implementation for project staff and beneficiaries. This, however, might be a double-edged sword. A worker at the A’zaz local council stated that security and military entities “may hinder the implementation of some projects in areas they control under a number of excuses,” with the goal of extracting fees or portions of in-kind aid materials.

Similar to other areas, security entities in Raqqa and Qamishli could use their role in granting security in target areas to influence programs by NPS actors or extract royalties and fees. A UN field coordinator in the area claimed that such instances occur “only in areas controlled by the Syrian government.” NPS entities in Qamishli city, where security actors affiliated to both the GoS and AANES are present, need to acquire security clearances from both actors. Notably, when not working within government-controlled territories, NPS entities wield more leverage in their relationship with security entities in northeastern Syria. A key informant working for an INGO in Raqqa, whose security is managed by the SDF and Asayish, noted that the organization “would suspend any activity” where they detect “any form of interference.”

b). Power dynamics in governing NPS entities

In government-controlled areas, a parasitic relationship characterizes the dynamics between NPS entities and security and military forces. To grant security approvals and access into target areas, security and military entities benefit “from all initiatives and activities” where they are able to extract cash and/or goods intended for aid programs, according to a key informant working for an INGO in Aleppo city. This parasitic relationship becomes even more risky for unregistered local organizations. Legal registration of local NPS entities with the government in Damascus can be costly and cumbersome, pushing some to operate illegally, yet still under heavy scrutiny from security branches in the area. Those organizations have to offer much bigger compromises to the security entities, often in the form of siphoned cash or in-kind aid, or otherwise risk persecution by security forces.

In Idlib and A’zaz, armed groups provide safety and security for NPS actors providing services in the area. In Idlib, the Salvation Government and HTS, the entity responsible for security in the area, are strongly connected. And thus ensuring that NPS actors can safely implement their programs and deliver needed services is in the interest of de-facto authorities hoping to solidify their local legitimacy. But this cooperation is significantly more limited for gendered programs to support and empower women.⁵⁷ In A’zaz, perhaps due to the lack of an effective, unified political and military leadership, armed groups are more likely to intervene in NPS programming. A key informant working for an INGO in the area claimed that security entities try to siphon aid cash and goods to their own fighters and their fighters’ families.

In Raqqa and Qamishli, NPS entities have a shared interest in maintaining the security in their areas of operation. A field coordinator for the UN in Raqqa noted that NPS programming in poor areas reduces crimes and corruption, thus seen as in the interest of the Asayish and SDF managing security in the city.

5. Procurement Transparency and Monitoring

Across Syria, procurement eligibility criteria followed by NPS actors are often enforced by donors and/or major INGOs and UN agencies who channel funds to local organizations. Each organization and UN agencies could have different procurement criteria for projects they fund, yet they often revolve around three major elements: price, quality and delivery time of the service or product(s). Those also cover aspects related to operational experience, access capacity and other technical conditions. Other elements could also include the supplier’s experience in delivering similar services or working with NPS actors, existing capacity, reputation, and

57 Report #1 of this series quotes a report by journalist Jalal Suleiman titled “Jihadi group in Syria’s Idlib seeks control of NGOs” which states that HTS has forbidden “all projects concerned with supporting, empowering and educating women, prosecuted several feminist activists.” Suleiman’s report was published in June 2022 by Al-Monitor. Link: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/jihadi-group-syrias-idlib-seeks-control-ngos#ixzz7YS9eODuK>



whether they are on sanctions lists or connected to terrorist organizations. However, as noted by a variety of KIIs across all zones of control in Syria, these measures could sometimes only be a formality. In addition to “small value contracts” that are subject to much more lax criteria, faking of proposal bids, inflating contract costs, and tacit agreements between NPS staff and suppliers are some of the ways through which these criteria are undermined. Also, legal requirements imposed by de-facto authorities could limit the options available for NPS actors. A clear example is seen in the work of UN agencies in GoS areas and NES. UN agencies’ suppliers in the area “must have a commercial record [i.e. formal registration] with the Syrian government even if procurement is related to areas outside the government’s control”, according to UN workers in the area. UN agencies are also confined to working with suppliers with bank accounts known by the GoS, or through money exchange offices approved by the GoS.

b). Damascus & Aleppo

UN agencies and INGOs have a set of criteria to ensure sufficient transparency and monitoring of procurement practices. This includes third party monitoring, sharing program documents with donors, and publishing of results and reports on accessible online platforms. KIIs working for UN agencies and INGOs cited having a “strict financial policy and close supervision on all [procurement] operations.” Corruption, security risks and lack of capacity and clear policies may hinder transparency efforts by local NGOs and charities, with some key informants citing “low capacity to set clear guidelines” as a major undermining factor to transparency. Yet they do implement transparency measures “in some cases, at the request of the donor” according to a charity worker in Damascus. Notably, this lack of capacity is sometimes driven by the informal nature of the market. Some suppliers provide fuel to NPS actors through the black market to avoid price, tax and other restrictions by the Government.

However, according to a variety of KIIs, these principles - while they might be rigorous and detailed on paper - are not adequately followed in practice. Here are a number of examples of practices that overlooked those principles:

Contracts “under the table”: to avoid the time-consuming process to acquire government approvals to implement a project, an NPS entity enters an illicit agreement with a private sector supplier, where the latter also could avoid taxation.

Monopoly: suppliers may bribe NPS actors’ staff to ensure they win procurement bids. Some businesses could also dominate the market merely due to their connections with security entities and/or the ruling authorities. According to an INGO M&E officer in Aleppo, this is often seen when bids by NPS actors are repeatedly won by the same suppliers.

Fake bids: most NPS actors require at least three different bids as a criterion to ensure fair competition among suppliers. But a UN worker operating in government-controlled areas noted that an NPS actor’s staff may agree with a supplier to provide fake bids stamped by two different traders merely to ‘check the box’.

b). Raqqa & Qamishli

Most KIIs in NES noted similar transparency measures in procurement contracts, including public bids, assessing bids by multiple teams, etc. But similar to other areas in Syria, these measures are not always effective, “medium-sized and small bids which are controlled by procurement departments” within NPS organizations are often subject to more lax procedures. Procurement contracts vary by size, and their criteria may differ between different actors and donors. For UN agencies, contracts below 10,000 USD are subject to less scrutiny.⁵⁸ Furthermore, an INGO worker in Qamishli noted that “not all organizations abide by transparency measures in procurement, where bids are not announced in the right places,” he added that sometimes “documents are faked to present bids under different names but in reality they belong to the same supplier.” In other instances, “a deal can be made [by NPS staff] with the supplier to provide materials to NPS projects under [inflated] prices,” said a charity worker in Qamishli, where the extra amount could be split between the supplier and some employees at the NPS organization. In Raqqa, an NGO worker noted that “local community committees... from the city would follow up with us on the implementation of the project and take the opinions of the beneficiaries as well.”

c). Idleb & A’zaz

The transparency measures adopted by different NPS actors in the area are similar and seemingly thorough, with little notable differences when compared to NPS entities in other zones of control. Those measures change depending on the size of the contract and the amount of money committed, but as reported by KIIs from a variety of local and international organizations and UN

58 For a better technical understanding of procurement and solicitation methods and requirements, please revise the United Nations Procurement Manual updated in June 2020. Link: <https://www.un.org/Depts/ptd/sites/www.un.org.Depts.ptd/files/files/attachment/page/pdf/pm.pdf>



agencies, they largely fall along the lines of the following:

- Issuance of public bids accessible through the organizations online platforms
- Announcing clear criteria for sharing bid proposals, including by email or in closed envelopes submitted to the organization's postal address.
- Bids are opened in the presence of multiple teams, including the M&E team, and sometimes including staff from offices outside Syria, especially in the case of INGOs and UN agencies, and the bidders.
- Clear communication of relevant deadlines
- Requiring stamped receipts of expenses

But some KIIs, especially those working with local NPS actors, noted that those measures can be “a formality”. Respondents noted the presence of corruption, nepotism, and favouritism, with some contractors receiving “special treatment,” according to a charity worker in A'zaz. A local council worker in the city also noted that delays in discovering cases of nepotism and “sometimes embezzlement” by NPS actors “showed that committing to transparency measures is only in form not in substance.” A field coordinator working for the UN also noted instead that UN contracts do not always take volatile market conditions into consideration, where changes in prices could sometimes “cause the trader a huge loss.”

6. Impact of the February 6 Earthquake⁵⁹

The earthquakes that hit northern Syria and southern Turkey had an immense impact on the dynamics governing aid operations across the country. An unprecedented natural disaster, the earthquake shocked local and international structures in the aid system, and caught actors off-guard. Donors and local and international NPS actors had to react quickly, yet they were constrained by policy and mobility constraints set for political and security considerations prior to the earthquake. Days and weeks after earthquake, the US⁶⁰ and EU⁶¹ temporarily amended their sanctions and restrictive measures targeting Syria, which significantly complicated and limited financial transactions into the country, while reaffirming that their sanctions do not target humanitarian assistance. But the earthquake revealed inherent weaknesses within the Syria aid response, and post-earthquake reactions largely fell short in addressing the immediate needs resulting from the natural disaster. The death toll in Syria alone exceeded 7,000 people.⁶²

In the days and weeks following the earthquake, NPS actors and donors rushed to fill in gaps exposed by the natural disaster. UN agencies had to increase intra-agency coordination, and government and private donors ramped up their donations, which was further aided by sanctions waivers issued by the US and EU.⁶³ Needs across Syria were already high, but mobilizing private local and diaspora resources became easier, according to some key informants, since the disaster was not apolitical in nature. Although UN agencies and INGO are present, one way or another, across all Syrian territories, they were severely unprepared to timely address earthquake needs and participate in search and rescue efforts. De-facto governance structures across Syria's three main zones of control also lacked the capacity and resources to respond. International actors and de-facto governance structures had to rely on localized NPS and business entities present on the location of the disaster, who “took the helm” of earthquake response activities, according to key informants across the country. But those too lacked the equipment and experience needed to respond to the

59 For a more detailed analysis of the earthquake impact on the economy and NPS actors, please see Report #3 of this series.

60 On 9 February, 2023, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued Syria General License (GL) 23, which “authorizes for 180 days all transactions related to earthquake relief that would be otherwise prohibited by the Syrian Sanctions Regulations.”

61 On 23 February, 2023, the EU amended its restrictive measures to “facilitate the speedy delivery of humanitarian aid” for a period of six months. This amendment reportedly “waived the need for humanitarian organisations to seek prior permission from EU member states national competent authorities to make transfers or provide goods and services intended for humanitarian purposes to listed persons and entities.” Please see link: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/23/earthquake-in-turkiye-and-syria-eu-amends-restrictive-measures-in-place-regarding-syria-to-facilitate-the-speedy-delivery-of-humanitarian-aid/>

62 See Relief Web's Syria/Turkey Earthquakes Situation Report #7, March 8, 2023. Link: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syriaturkey-earthquakes-situation-report-7-march-8-2023#:~:text=The%20death%20toll%20from%20earthquakes,Turkey%20and%207%2C259%20in%20Syria.>

63 According to the UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service, donations covered %100.7 of the Syria Earthquake Flash Appeal 2023 plan. Link: <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1149/summary>



event. In government-controlled areas, they were aided by government-approved international actors, primarily UN agencies, and they received support from states friendly to Damascus, such as the UAE and Algeria, and other INGOs through the UN's Global Disaster Alert and Coordination System.⁶⁴

But assistance and rescue efforts were immensely more difficult in northwestern Syria. The UN does not have any prominent physical presence in northern Syria, and the UN-coordinated humanitarian response in northwestern Syria was run from Turkey. But The Turkish provinces of Hatay and Gaziantep, the seats of the UN's aid response to northwestern Syria, saw significant road and infrastructure damages, debilitating the UN emergency response and significantly limiting access through Bab al-Hawa border crossing, the only point along the Syria-Turkey border through which UN agencies could provide aid without al-Assad's prior approval. Heightened efforts by the de-facto Interim Government controlling Bab al-Hawa border crossing, and local councils across northwestern Syria were reported by key informants. But statements made by the Syria Civil Defense organization, one of the principal Syrian rescue organizations in the area commonly known as the White Helmets, kept issuing calls for help several days after the earthquake.⁶⁵ This exerted immense pressure on aid workers, local and international aid organizations, and local governance structures in the area "to distribute emergency aid to survivors and carry out search-and-rescue efforts," according to key informants, and coordinate among each other and with security entities.

The earthquake aid response scene, as described by key informants working for local and international organizations and local governance structure in northwestern Syria, was chaotic at best. Criteria for procurement and contracting were often ignored, "rapid, direct contracts" were signed with owners of rescue, drilling, and crane machinery "with exemptions from some standards as prices", prices of food, non-food, and shelter items were raised, and goods quality fluctuated immensely as local responders scrambled for aid material to provide to survivors. Turkish NGOs and government agencies, largely seen as having considerable influence in northwest Syria,⁶⁶ prioritized the aid response at home. For political considerations, de-facto authorities in northern Syria refused crossline aid delivered from northeastern Syria and from Damascus.⁶⁷

64 The agency issued the following document in coordination with the Syrian government to facilitate the flow of material assistance and rescue teams. Link: https://vosocc.unocha.org/GetFile.aspx?file=120871_EQ_Response_-_Entry_for_Supplies_and_Staff_Facilitation_Syria.pdf

65 On February 10, 2023, Raed al-Saleh, head of the White Helmets, condemned the UN's failure to deliver needed humanitarian assistance to northwestern Syria. The UN six-truck convoy that entered Syria on February 10, according to al-Saleh, was only a regular shipment planned before the earthquake. See link: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-white-helmets-chief-slams-un-earthquake-response-2023-02-10/>. Al-Saleh told Reuters that the UN "are not delivering the aid that we are in most need of to help us save lives with time running out." See link: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/first-un-aid-quake-convoy-reaches-syria-sources-say-2023-02-09/>

66 Often, reports regarded areas in northwestern Syria, especially those taken by Turkey following multiple military operations since 2016, as "under Turkish authority ... not only politically and militarily, but in the provision of services." For instance, see link: <https://syriadirect.org/12-years-on-revolution-service-institutions-under-turkish-authority/>

67 On 9 February, 2023, SDF Spokesperson, Farhad al-Shami, said on Twitter that "the Turkish-backed armed groups are blocking aid access" for aid convoys provided by the AANES in northeastern Syria. Also, see "The United Nations: Failure to obtain the approval of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham impedes the transfer of earthquake aid." Published on 12 February, 2023 by MCD.



Overall Recommendations

The analysis underscores the increasing socio-economic significance of NPS in Syria, particularly given the ongoing decline in economic conditions and living standards across all regions of the country. Simultaneously, the prevailing power dynamics and institutional complexities within which NPS entities operate, coupled with resource scarcity and inadequate infrastructure, highlight the formidable obstacles that hinder NPS from effectively alleviating the challenging living conditions faced by most Syrians. The following are the key findings concerning the socio-economic role of NPS and the power dynamics that shape NPS activities. Additionally, we provide practical recommendations to mitigate the impact of disadvantages identified in these findings.

A widening gap exists between the growing needs and the limited NPS capacity, exacerbated by poor coordination among NPS entities, resulting in unsustainability, inefficiency, fragmentation, and duplication.

- International donors and organizations should strategically invest in the long-term administrative and programming capacity of local NPS entities and potentially their local governance partners, with the aim of supporting the resilience of NPS institutions. Such investments should not be one-off projects, but rather a part of a multi-faceted, long-term approach to provide local organizations with the resources and support they need to better implement and coordinate their programs. This could be achieved by establishing an online training platform that offer topic-specific skill trainings as well as allow for ad-hoc support and feedback exchanged between local NPS entities themselves, and with international actors to allow for a better sharing of experiences and lessons-learned, as well as enhance coordination among NPS entities to reduce fragmentation in the aid response and avoid duplication of efforts.
- Local and international NPS organizations should invest in evidence-based advocacy and awareness campaigns to encourage more donations into the underfunded Syria aid response. This should focus on the importance of integrating development programming that allows for longer sustainability of programs and their implementing organizations. Needs-based interventions would be strengthened if paired with objectives that aim to enhance social cohesion and community and NPS actors' resilience, and where dwindling funds would have more value for money. Facing rising needs and consistently declining funds, every dollar spent should be geared toward the long-term recovery of target communities, empowering communities and local organizations to expand their networks and diversify their resources.

Stringent security oversight and the need to register NPS entities limit NPS project selection, favouring actors, initiatives, and projects approved by de facto authorities to serve their needs and objectives. Additionally, the absence of effective monitoring systems leads to corruption and favouritism, impacting NPS effectiveness.

- UN agencies and INGOs should leverage their significant economic weight in their areas of operation to negotiate better operational conditions and reduce bureaucratic and security restrictions limiting their efficiency and access. This is especially true for organizations bound by agreements with the Syrian government in Damascus, through which their access to areas and beneficiaries, as well as their ability to contract independent NPS and private sector actors have been consistently limited. International actors should push for a one-off approval mechanism where de-facto authorities only approve general goals, objectives and project modalities set in the annual response strategy, rather than having to acquire approvals for each project planned.
- Furthermore, international donors should be adamant in imposing clear partnership and procurement selection and eligibility criteria. Indeed, NPS actors should be cognizant of the conditions imposed by their operating environment where the context of operation may not allow for fair market competition or equal participation and access in NPS programming. But in doing so, international donors and their partner organizations should not compromise their transparency and accountability criteria, and undermine the do-no-harm principle. For that purpose, monitoring and impact evaluation should be made integral components of contracting and bidding processes, to minimize potential gains siphoned by malign actors, and allow for more effective and efficient programming.



NPS procurement criteria are undermined through practices such as the manipulation of proposal bids, the inflation of contract costs, and the existence of tacit agreements between NPS staff and suppliers, in addition to the inclusion of “small value contracts” that bypass donor and NPS entity eligibility and selection criteria.

- Improve transparency and accountability through measures that international donors can impose on NPS entities, including UN agencies. This includes mandating the development and dissemination of clear procurement guidelines and standard operating procedures, along with the establishment of regular reporting mechanisms and the implementation of periodic audits to ensure compliance with transparency standards. It is crucial for international donors to invest in strengthening the skills and capacity of NPS staff engaged in procurement by offering comprehensive training and capacity-building programs. These programs should encompass workshops and online courses, with a consideration for collaboration with local training institutions or experts.
- International donors can further promote diversity within the supplier pool by advocating for measures that encourage small and medium-sized businesses. This can be achieved by mandating NPS entities to actively solicit bids from a wider array of suppliers, with a particular emphasis on small and medium local businesses. Implementing open and competitive bidding processes should be a priority, accompanied by efforts to streamline and simplify the registration process and develop user-friendly guidelines to attract new entrants. Moreover, selection criteria should not rely solely on prices and quality but should also incorporate provisions aimed at fostering the growth and participation of small and medium enterprises.
- Offer technical and financial assistance to establish multiple, effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems to ensure the fairness, transparency, and efficiency of the procurement process. These systems should encompass:
 1. Internal M&E within NPS Entities: Create internal audit and review mechanisms to guarantee adherence to the recommended guidelines and procedures.
 2. Donors’ M&E System: Implement a donors’ M&E system that may include conducting on-site visits, financial audits, and reviews of procurement documentation.
 3. External Auditors: Engage independent external auditing firms or organizations to conduct audits and evaluations.
 4. Civil Society M&E System: Foster a robust civil society M&E system, involving academic and research entities, to serve as vigilant watchdogs and report any instances of corruption, favouritism, or inefficiency they identify. It is crucial for the civil society M&E system to be led by Syrian individuals and entities, ensuring a transparent and inclusive governance structure that promotes trust and accountability.

The growing reliance of NPS on international funds heightens NPS vulnerability due to fluctuating political interests of donor countries, dynamics between international donors and de facto authorities, the nature of funded projects, and the financial stability of donor organizations.

- Syrian NPS entities should proactively engage with local businesspersons and the Syrian diaspora to diversify their funding sources and support projects across different regions in Syria. It is essential for NPS entities to collaborate among themselves to develop these strategies through a participatory approach, enhancing their credibility and preventing duplication of efforts. International Community’s Role: The international community should play a role in facilitating these resource mobilization efforts. This includes working on easing sanctions to enable more efficient financial transactions from Syrian diaspora individuals and entities to local NPS organizations. However, such facilitation should be accompanied by an effective monitoring system to ensure that the funds are utilized for independent NPS’ initiatives.
- International donors and organizations can focus more on offering financial and technical assistance to empower NPS actors in establishing self-sustaining social enterprises across various regions in Syria. These enterprises can take various forms, such as earned-income social enterprises, where NPS entities generate revenue from the sale of products or services to fund their social initiatives. International support should encompass capacity building for individuals to create and manage these enterprises, as well as providing financial backing. However, this support should be contingent on the feasibility and market viability of these ventures, alongside assessments of their potential social impact. International support efforts should prioritize the most feasible and sustainable enterprises, ensuring inclusivity and transparency in the selection process.



- Establish direct communication channels between international donors/organizations and local NPS entities to facilitate open discussions regarding project needs and priorities. These communication channels should prioritize the safety and security of NPS entities, and an online secured platform could serve this purpose effectively. Additionally, NPS entities and international donors should engage in discussions about direct financial transaction methods. The goal is to navigate sanctions effectively and prevent any unwanted interventions from de facto authorities. It's important to note that these communication channels and payment methods may need to vary not only across regions with different de facto authorities but even within a region controlled by the same authority.

These recommendations are interconnected and relevant across the different regions. The sequencing of their implementation should be contingent upon available financial and technical resources, as well as accessibility to NPS entities and specific areas. Moreover, it's imperative to engage in discussions with local NPS entities to determine the priority of implementation based on their unique contextual insights and needs.



