



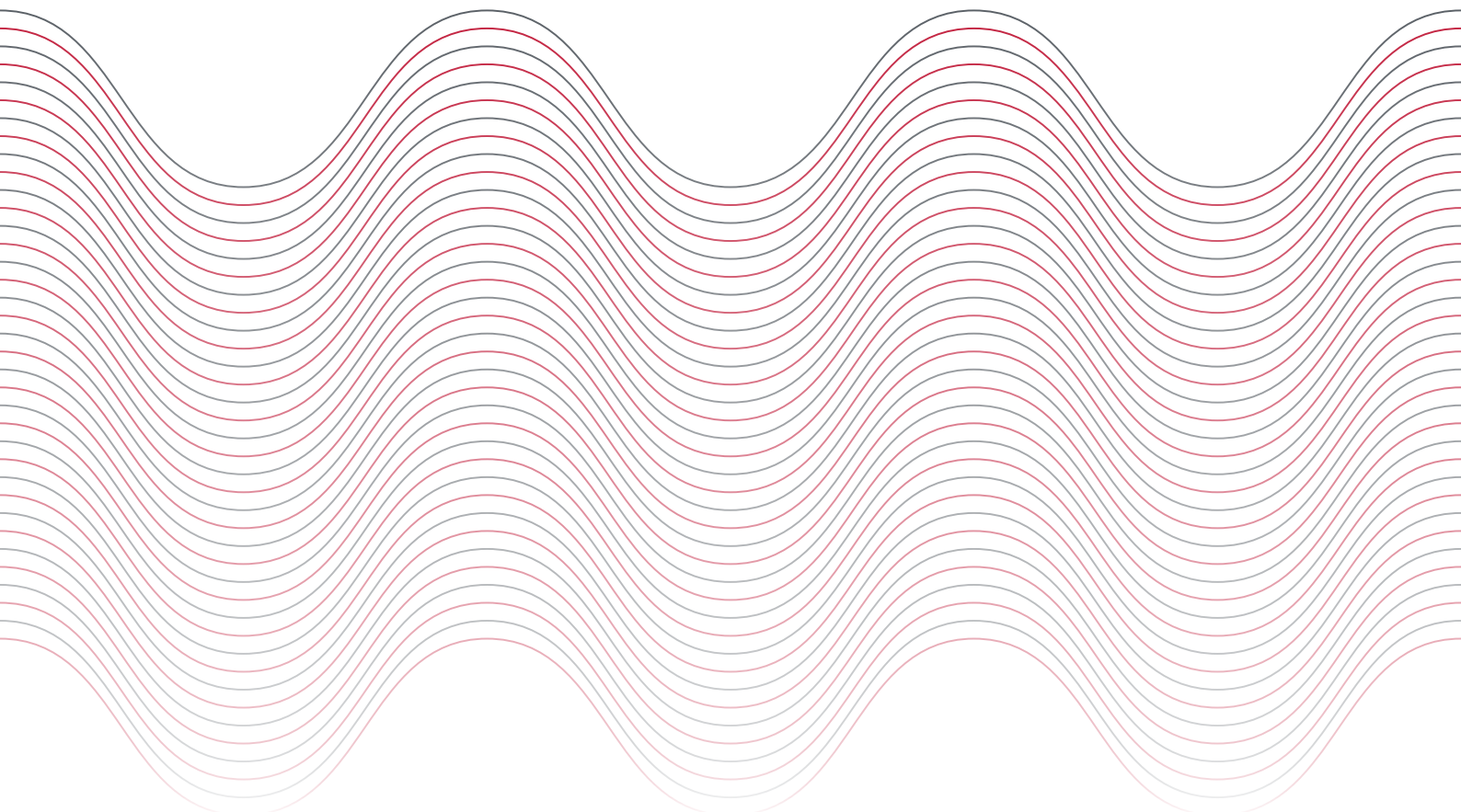
Post-Earthquake Perspective

Challenges and Strategies for Humanitarian Aid in
Northwest Syria

*Building Resilience: An Analysis of Principled Humanitarian
Action in the Protracted Crisis of Northwest Syria*

Ad Hoc Series Part 2

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GLOSSARY

AFAD	DISASTER AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY	KII	KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW
AFNS	AID FUND FOR NORTHERN SYRIA	MSNA	MULTI-SECTOR NEEDS ASSESSMENT
BHA	BUREAU FOR HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE	MPCA	MULTI-PURPOSE CASH ASSISTANCE
DTG	DESIGNATED TERRORIST GROUP	NES	NORTHEAST SYRIA
DRHC	DEPUTY REGIONAL HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR	NGO	NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION
ECHO	EUROPEAN COMMISSION HUMANITARIAN AID OFFICE	NWS	NORTHWEST SYRIA
EU	EUROPEAN UNION	OCHA	OFFICE FOR THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS
ERL	EARLY RECOVERY AND LIVELIHOODS	QFFD	QATAR FUND FOR DEVELOPMENT
FCDO	FOREIGN COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	INGO	INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION
FFO	FEDERAL FOREIGN OFFICE	SARC	SYRIAN ARAB RED CRESCENT
GOS	GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA	SCHF	SYRIA CROSS-BORDER HUMANITARIAN FUND
GIZ	GERMAN AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	SIG	SYRIAN INTERIM GOVERNMENT
HC	HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR	SNGO	SYRIAN NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION
HLG	HUMANITARIAN LIAISON GROUP	SSG	SYRIAN SALVATOIN GOVERNMENT
HNAP	HUMANITARIAN NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROGRAMME	UNDP	UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME
HNO	HUMANITARIAN NEEDS OVERVIEW	UNGA	UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
HRP	HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE PLAN	UNMM	UNITED NATIONS MONITORING MECHANISM
HTS	HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM	UNSC	UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL
ICRC	INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS	UNXBM	UNITED NATIONS CROSS-BORDER MECHANISM
IDP	INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSON	UN	UNITED NATIONS
IHL	INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW	WASH	WATER, SANITATION, AND HYGEINE
INGO	INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION	WFP	WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME
		WOS	WHOLE OF SYRIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The humanitarian aid landscape in Syria, particularly in Northwest Syria (NWS), has been plagued by significant structural problems that have become more apparent in the wake of the recent earthquakes. The first part of the Post-Earthquake Perspective series explored how failures of the international system's earthquake response highlighted the ways in which the NWS humanitarian landscape is constrained in the delivery of principled humanitarian assistance in NWS. This has only been exacerbated since the earthquakes, as the Government of Syria (GoS) has expanded its influence over cross-border aid access through a shift to a consent-based agreement that now underpins the United Nations cross-border mechanism (UNXBM). At the same time, needs have only worsened in the protracted crisis of NWS following the earthquakes, with Syrian non-governmental organizations (SNGOs) now facing heightened security and access risks owing to the uncertainty around the continuity of the UN presence.

Relative to the profound challenges faced by actors implementing a principled humanitarian response through impartial aid delivery in Syria, evaluations of the application of humanitarian principles are rarely included in analyses of the NWS context. This report includes three areas of inquiry which have been formed based on concerns voiced by stakeholders in the Syrian context since the earthquakes. Section I addresses calls for a 'principled humanitarian response' in NWS; it examines how efforts to uphold internationally accepted humanitarian principles have fared during negotiations on the legal authorization for UN cross-border aid access into NWS, as well as their application in the formation of resilient aid strategies during a protracted crisis. Section II evaluates calls for an increased focus on early recovery in NWS, outlining the existing approach to early recovery programming and how it has been implemented thus far in the specific NWS context as well as the ways in which early recovery can be supported to provide corresponding for the benefit of communities in the region. To do so, it finds that it is necessary to transition from viewing the Syrian crisis as an emergency to treating it as a chronic state of crisis that requires reorienting humanitarian principles to minimize aid dependency and strengthen community resilience over the long-term. It analyses the required support services for implementing early recovery activities in tandem with immediate life-saving interventions for a more efficient use of donor resources over the long term. Finally, Section III evaluates calls from both SNGOs and donors to support implementing partners in navigating their operational challenges in a highly volatile and politicized response environment. It examines the current risks faced by NGOs implementing the humanitarian response in NWS amid increasing cross-border vulnerability to the GoS, and outlines the vital components of UN support for the resilience of an NGO-led response, such as providing UN cover for NGOs negotiating community access and mitigating legal risks associated with local authority engagement. In sum, the report aims to add to existing discussions surrounding possible paths forward for the humanitarian response in NWS, particularly in tackling increasing politicization and worsening needs amid an ongoing, protracted crisis.

KEY FINDINGS

I. Evaluating Humanitarian Principles in Northwest Syria

Objective: To provide an analysis of how humanitarian principles have been considered within the legal authorization of cross-border access and how they can be applied in the context of Syria's protracted crisis.

- Given the GoS's track record of obstructing, politicizing, and diverting aid, and in the absence of evidence indicating a change in behavior, dependence on GoS consent for UN cross-border activity undermines the initial purpose of UNSC Resolution 2165 and thus principled cross-border aid.

- Ambiguities surrounding the recognition and classification of aid denial weakens the appropriate application of a wider legal framework to determine the conditions under which humanitarian organizations can lawfully deliver cross-border assistance in NWS.
- The UN's predisposition to state sovereignty is at tension with the humanitarian mandates of its aid agencies, hampering their ability to impartially deliver aid to vulnerable communities in areas of non-state governance, even when states are violating humanitarian principles.
- Humanitarian principles must be applied in the context of NWS's protracted crisis, directed at reducing humanitarian needs over time by increasing the resilience of communities against underlying vulnerabilities in living conditions.
- Early recovery has been identified by humanitarian stakeholders as necessary for increasing the resilience of communities in NWS against cross-border vulnerability, increased aid dependency, and risk of future shocks. This can be delivered alongside life-saving interventions to ensure longer-term donor value-for-money.
- The long-term resiliency of humanitarian efforts depends on the further empowerment of SNGOs beyond their role as local implementing partners, to raise their voice in the determination of priorities, needs, and operational requirements of effective programming.

II. Early Recovery: Building Resilience in the Humanitarian Response

Objective: To provide a preliminary effort aimed at exploring the application of early recovery thus far in the NWS context by identifying existing gaps in its coordination and implementation, as well as how interventions can be further supported to improve the resilience of communities to future crises and shocks.

- Donor red lines around early recovery are often drawn from the blurred boundaries between early recovery and reconstruction, leading to political sensitivities. Subsequent ambiguity in the terminology of interventions leads to inconsistent and fragmented approaches to early recovery programming in NWS.
- Increased advocacy around early recovery programming has not translated to increased funding or a shift towards a longer-term, community systems approach in NWS. This inhibits the cross-cutting benefits early recovery could offer in ensuring the resilience of multi-sectoral assistance, including its conjunction with humanitarian relief efforts.
- There are difficulties in forming a comprehensive assessment of current early recovery implementation due to its spread across the Early Recovery & Livelihoods (ERL) Cluster and others, as well as insufficiently nuanced programming indicators. This limits the collation of systemic data that could be used to better communicate to donors priority and opportunity areas for needs reduction.
- Early recovery should aim for resilience building against future shocks, as well as sustainability over time. The goal is to make communities less dependent on aid by ensuring that the benefits of humanitarian relief are not lost or undone.
- The complex data requirements for programming which targets the resilience of communities, including early recovery, differ from those of static assessments of humanitarian need, with greater importance placed on risk mitigation, crisis preparedness, and multivariate time series analysis.
- Analysis of community resilience must consider risks specific to the operational context and be informed by local partners, with social cohesion and climate-change identified as two key, long-term vulnerabilities for early recovery programming in NWS.

III. Supporting the NGO Response in Northwest Syria

Objective: To outline the current challenges faced by NGOs implementing the humanitarian response in NWS amid increased cross-border vulnerability to the GoS, and to examine areas in which the international community can support the resilience of an NGO-led response.

- High-level UN negotiations on cross-border access have overlooked the practical, on-the-ground requirements for humanitarian action, while continuity planning provided insufficient detail for NGOs to adequately reduce their vulnerability to UNSC non-renewal. A more inclusive approach to the perspectives of implementing SNGOs is required.
- Partnerships across all layers of the NWS humanitarian landscape should aim to be more collaborative within the WoS architecture through the amplification of the voices of those on-the-ground and closest to the communities they serve.
- Complementary pooled-fund mechanisms, such as AFNS, can be advantageous for longer implementation timeframes alongside the SCHF to broaden the scope of humanitarian action in NWS with a greater focus on resilience-building activities.
- To scale-up an NGO response through complementary funding mechanisms, emphasis should be placed on the operational adaptations of the SNGO community to the unique context of NWS and their existing compliance demands in order to support their use of the fund.
- The technical support of the UN for the wider humanitarian response in NWS remains vital. Particularly OCHA's Gaziantep hub, plays an essential role in the coordination of programming through the WoS structure and negotiating both cross-border and local access for NGOs to ensure independent and impartial delivery of assistance to those in NWS.
- As the UN response shifts towards a consent-based model, efforts must be directed at retaining the integrity of the WoS structure to prevent further obstruction of the NWS humanitarian landscape by the GoS, including OCHA's Access Unit and a strengthened Risk Management Unit.

INTRODUCTION

In many respects, the failures in the international response to the February earthquakes that struck Northwest Syria (NWS) were a continuation of pre-existing structural issues in the region's politicized humanitarian landscape. Humanitarian actors who have safeguarded human rights for over four million people for over a decade, and who were again there to shoulder the earthquake response, saw the disaster as simply the latest chapter in a protracted, ever-worsening crisis. Yet, the indiscriminate, apolitical nature of this particular event perhaps distinguishes it from the previous devastations caused by the Syrian conflict. The principles of neutrality and impartiality underpinning humanitarian action are no more necessary than in the reflection of such a disaster. The move towards a cross-border response that is impaired in its ability to be impartial and independent, however, has exposed a new level of clarity regarding the politicization of the response and architecture within which humanitarian actors operate in the region. The 'post-earthquake perspective' examined in this research series, therefore, should not be viewed merely as a distinctly new state of crisis. Instead, it should be understood as an instrumental inflexion point for scrutinizing the political- and security-driven responses of those positioned to address the needs of individuals.

Whereas Part I of the series looked to outline and diagnose specific points within which the international response failed to uphold humanitarian principles, Part II hopes to provide potential steps forward in the NWS humanitarian landscape. Since the publication of Part I, humanitarian operations have continued to be treated as a tool of geopolitical brinkmanship by governments. Not only has this fundamentally jeopardized cross-border aid access, but it has also placed further risk on the operations of the Syrian non-governmental organization (SNGO)-driven response on-the-ground in NWS. Over two months since the failure of the latest United National Security Council (UNSC) vote, SNGOs have little clarity over where to concentrate their efforts for operational continuity. This poses a tangible risk to the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts as SNGOs possess valuable local expertise and acceptance that could significantly enhance the quality and efficiency of aid delivery and response.

The destruction caused by the earthquakes have further prompted a re-evaluation of the humanitarian approach to the crisis in NWS, which begins with the recognition that a 12-year-old emergency response system does not adequately address the worsening needs and structural vulnerabilities in the region. While immediate humanitarian relief must remain in focus, the long-term success of programming in NWS depends on a shift towards building resilient systems and communities capable of withstanding future shocks. Donor priorities have often been constrained by concerns about the potential ramifications of investing in resilience-building initiatives in NWS. This risk-averse approach has increased reliance on immediate relief aid and inadvertently fostered aid dependency among local communities. There are growing calls for the need to strike a balance between providing life-saving aid and implementing longer-term strategies aimed at strengthening community resilience. Such a balanced approach does not only maximize the impact of interventions and create multiplier effects but could also offer a more efficient use of donor resources.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

DATA COLLECTION

This study draws upon a combination of insights gathered through desk reviews, key informant interviews (KIIs), and personal networks. The study incorporates findings from iMMAP's Research & Analysis Unit's previous analyses, including [monthly contextual updates](#), [spot reports](#), and [thematic ad hoc reports](#), which were published following the earthquakes. The study also benefited from rapid research and evaluation reports released after the earthquakes from the wider sector, such as the humanitarian bulletins produced by OCHA and other UN agencies, along with programming updates shared by NGOs.

Between March and September 2023, iMMAP conducted key actor mapping to understand the roles and responsibilities of various humanitarian actors in NWS. It carried out semi-structured KIIs with various representatives of the humanitarian response in the region, including Gaziantep-based coordination representatives, donor representatives and advisors, Syria-focused analysts, and S/INGO representatives. The KIIs were guided by topic lists, tailored from a master list of questions according to the expertise of each representative. This approach was designed to encourage a flexible exchange of views, aiming to capture nuanced perspectives that are often underrepresented in existing literature. Prior to conducting the interviews, iMMAP secured informed verbal consent from all participants, including permission for audio recording and transcription. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all participants were assured that the collected data, including recordings and notes, would be securely stored and made accessible only to iMMAP's Research & Analysis Unit.

In its capacity as an information management (IM) agency, iMMAP participated in various coordination meetings held by OCHA Gaziantep and the NGO Forum during the earthquake emergency response period. This firsthand experience offered important insights into the capacity of existing mechanisms, including the challenges associated with data collection in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes. Indeed, the tangible impact of specific and urgent issues around communications and coordination of NGO efforts during this period provided some of the impetus for this report.

LIMITATIONS

The analysis of this report is constrained by the dynamic and evolving nature of the post-earthquake context in NWS. Given that less than seven-months have passed since the earthquakes struck the region, variables are subject to substantial changes that might impact humanitarian operations and actors. Many stakeholders are still determining their humanitarian approach among rapidly evolving geopolitical developments. Nevertheless, many of the dynamics that have intensified since the earthquakes have long been present, posing long-term challenges to humanitarian actors in NWS. This, therefore, allows for sufficient analysis of the constraints of the NWS aid landscape and future humanitarian strategies.

I. EVALUATING HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

Objective: Section I provides a political analysis of how humanitarian principles have been considered during negotiations on the legal authorization of cross-border access into NWS. It further looks at how humanitarian principles, most often applied in emergency contexts, can be applied in the context of the protracted Syrian crisis.

The ethical and operational framework of the international response to humanitarian crises is guided by four core principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence.¹ Yet, the failures of the response to the February earthquakes in NWS were widely attributed to the politicization of these principles, specifically how the delivery of life-saving aid deviated from considerations of impartiality and neutrality. While the purpose of humanitarian assistance is to relieve suffering by adhering to these principles, longstanding geopolitical considerations superseded these imperatives in international decision-making. As identified in [iMMAP Post-Earthquake Perspective, Part I](#), this divergence reflects an emphasis on the protection of state sovereignty by international actors, a focus that is structurally embedded by the intergovernmental nature of the UN. The earthquakes provided a lucid snapshot of the tangible consequences of this for the lives of millions in NWS. They also served as a magnifying glass, highlighting the longstanding challenges faced in upholding these principles within the structural and political dynamics that have long determined and limited the efficacy of the humanitarian response in NWS. Over the duration of the Syrian conflict, tensions between the principles of impartiality and neutrality on the one hand, and sovereignty on the other, have increasingly confined the scope of international humanitarian action. Subsequently, stakeholders across the aid landscape have reiterated the need for principled humanitarian action in NWS.² However, this should be applied within the context of the protracted Syrian crisis, ensuring aid programming reduces the needs of vulnerable communities over time, rather than exacerbating aid dependency. Life-saving assistance should not be limited by the short-term nature of aid mechanisms that have been developed within political constraints, but must be complemented with interventions addressing the resilience of communities.

Key Findings

- Given the GoS's track record of obstructing, politicizing, and diverting aid, and in the absence of evidence indicating a change in behavior, dependence on GoS consent for UN cross-border activity undermines the initial purpose of UNSC Resolution 2165 and thus principled cross-border aid.
- Ambiguities surrounding the recognition and classification of aid denial weakens the appropriate application of a wider legal framework to determine the conditions under which humanitarian organizations can lawfully deliver cross-border assistance in NWS.
- The UN's predisposition to state sovereignty is at tension with the humanitarian mandates of its aid agencies, hampering their ability to impartially deliver aid to vulnerable communities in areas of non-state governance, even when states are violating humanitarian principles.
- Humanitarian principles must be applied in the context of NWS's protracted crisis, directed at reducing humanitarian needs over time by increasing the resilience of communities against underlying vulnerabilities in living conditions.

¹ Dorothea Hilhorst, "[Classical Humanitarianism and Resilience Humanitarianism: Making Sense of Two Brands of Humanitarian Action](#)," September 10, 2018.

² SNHR et al., "[Joint Statement: The Position of The Syrian Non-Governmental Organizations Regarding the Recent Developments on the Cross-Border Humanitarian Assistance](#)," August 30, 2023.

- Early recovery has been identified by humanitarian stakeholders as necessary for increasing the resilience of communities in NWS against cross-border vulnerability, increased aid dependency, and risk of future shocks. This can be delivered alongside life-saving interventions to ensure longer-term donor value-for-money.
- The long-term resiliency of humanitarian efforts depends on the further empowerment of SNGOs beyond their role as local implementing partners, to raise their voice in the determination of priorities, needs, and operational requirements of effective programming.

BALANCING SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES IN CROSS-BORDER ACCESS

The legal foundation of the UNXBM was laid in 1991 when the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted Resolution 46/182.³ Based upon the broader principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, this resolution set forth twelve guiding principles that have shaped the mandate of OCHA in conflict zones.⁴ These principles outline the conditions under which international aid agencies can gain access to areas of armed conflict, providing multiple avenues for legal authorization under international humanitarian law (IHL). In line with its interpretation of IHL as an intergovernmental organization, the UN prioritizes obtaining legal authorization through the consent of the sovereign authority, usually the internationally recognized government of the affected state. This approach aims to respect the “sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unity of States,”⁵ under the assumption that these governments are both willing and capable of facilitating aid distribution within their borders. OCHA’s legal guidelines emphasize that, according to IHL, a state’s responsibility to meet the needs of its citizens—or those under its effective control—is a fundamental aspect of its sovereignty.⁶

Complexities arise, however, when dealing with sovereign governments that arbitrarily restrict access to humanitarian aid. This has been a recurring issue in the Syrian conflict and is a common feature in many intrastate conflicts worldwide that involve fragmented polities with multiple authorities. In situations of arbitrary refusal to provide sovereign consent, legal authorization to deliver international aid can be secured either through a UNSC resolution or by obtaining the consent of “parties concerned” to the conflict.⁷ At the time of the establishment of the UNXBM in July 2014, there was no unified local authority from which to obtain such consent. However, the situation has evolved, and legal experts argue that the consolidation of control by the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and Syrian Interim Government (SIG) over border crossings into NWS now provides a suitable local authority. This allows for access negotiations and the possibility of obtaining consent from such concerned parties to the conflict.⁸

The UNXBM was set up with the unanimous approval of Resolution 2165 by the UNSC due to GoS’s arbitrary refusal to consent to principled cross-border aid as the recognized state authority, providing legal authorization for four specific border crossing points to facilitate UN humanitarian aid.⁹ Resolution 2165 was specifically designed to provide a legal framework for cross-border aid delivery into NWS in response to the unmet needs, siege campaigns,

³ UNGA Press Release, “[General Assembly Adopts Five Humanitarian Aid Resolutions, as Delegates Debate Best Strategies for Responding to COVID-19, Conflict, Climate Change Crises](#),” December 10, 2021.

⁴ OCHA, “[Disaster Response: Guidance Frameworks](#),” September 10, 2007.

⁵ OCHA, “[What is General Assembly resolution 46/182?](#)” March 2012.

⁶ OCHA et al., “[Oxford Guidance on the Law Relating to Humanitarian Relief Operations in Situations of Armed Conflict](#),” October 27, 2016.

⁷ OCHA Policy Series, “[Cross-Border Relief Operations: A Legal perspective](#).”

⁸ American Relief Coalition for Syria, “[2014 is not 2022: Why the Continuation of UN-Coordinated Cross-Border Aid into Syria Absent a Security Council Resolution is Lawful](#),” 2022.

⁹ UNSC Press Release, “[With Millions of Syrians in Need, Security Council Adopts Resolution 2165 \(2014\) Directing Relief Delivery through More Border Crossings, across Conflict Lines](#),” July 14, 2014.

and arbitrary aid denial and corruption systematically conducted by the GoS in areas outside of its control.^{10 11 12} As outlined in *iMMAP Post-Earthquake Perspective, Part I*, the UNXBM was designed to circumvent the need for GoS consent by merely notifying it about humanitarian transshipments. This mechanism has become a central component of the humanitarian infrastructure in NWS to protect the principled nature of cross-border aid.

At the time of its establishment, Resolution 2165 played a pivotal role in facilitating humanitarian aid to areas outside of GoS control. Cross-border access was underpinned by the application of humanitarian and impartial principles to assist those in dire need. However, with the internationalization of the Syrian conflict, the UNXBM has been increasingly and successfully challenged by GoS-allies on the UNSC, specifically Russia and China, on the basis that it infringes upon Syrian sovereignty.¹³ Basing legal authorization of cross-border access upon a UNSC resolution has allowed the GoS to indirectly deny aid through the threat of a Russian veto during annual and semi-annual renewal votes. In fact, Russia has exercised its veto power on Syrian cross-border aid five times since 2019.¹⁴ As a result, aid access has been progressively limited in NWS and other opposition-controlled areas to Bab al-Hawa in Idlib as the only border crossing available to UN-supplied aid, while also confining humanitarian interventions to short-term projects. This development is part of a broader trend where international aid negotiations are leveraged by autocratic regimes for their own political and security gains.¹⁵ For example, each renewal of the UNSC mandate for NWS cross-border access has come with various concessions from the UN, including greater focus on cross-line aid delivery through Damascus and increased support for early recovery efforts in GoS-controlled areas.¹⁶

Most recently, on July 11, the latest UNSC resolution for aid delivery through Bab al-Hawa, the only remaining UN-mandated cross-border point into NWS, expired.¹⁷ Amid wider geopolitical tensions, Russia again vetoed a nine-month renewal proposed by penholders Brazil and Switzerland.¹⁸ A Russian counterproposal for a six-month renewal also failed, effectively ending the UNSC's legal authorization for cross-border aid into NWS. Unexpectedly, three days later, the GoS granted "sovereign consent" for the UN to continue using the vital Bab al-Hawa crossing. But this offer of consent was conditional: (i) all deliveries must be carried out "in full cooperation and coordination" with Damascus; (ii) any communication with groups labeled as "terrorists" is prohibited; and (iii) all aid delivery must be supervised and facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), bodies headquartered in Damascus and strictly controlled by the regime.¹⁹ These conditions were later rejected by OCHA as "unacceptable" for carrying out "principled humanitarian operations."²⁰ The second condition, which would prevent the UN from engaging with the necessary parties to carry out safe humanitarian operations, would prevent NGO access for implementation. While in relation to the dominance of ICRC and SARC, OCHA stated that the condition violated the principle of independence and that it is plainly impractical given that both organizations have no humanitarian footprint in NWS.

However, the letter from OCHA did indicate that the consent-based proposal from the GoS could serve as a "basis" for the UN to lawfully conduct humanitarian operations in NWS. This acknowledgment came despite OCHA's expressed

10 Security Council Report, "[Syria: Monday Vote on Draft Resolution on Cross-Border and Cross-Line Humanitarian Access](#)," July 13, 2014.

11 Zaman Al-Wasl News, "[UN's Food Rations to Zabadani Contained Inedible Rice: Local Council](#)," January 15, 2016.

12 Human Rights Watch, "[Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria](#)," June 28, 2019.

13 Lawfare, "[The Demise of the Syria Cross-Border Aid Mechanism](#)," August 23, 2023.

14 Ibid.

15 Foreign Affairs, "[Humanitarian Blackmail: How Belligerents Use Negotiations Over Aid to Extort the West](#)," August 16, 2023.

16 Security Council Report, "[In Hindsight: Six Days, Five Resolutions, One Border Crossing](#)," July 31, 2020.

17 UNSC Press Release, "[Security Council Rejects Two Draft Resolutions Aimed at Renewing Cross-Border Humanitarian Operations in Syria's North-West](#)," July 11, 2023.

18 iMMAP, "[Context Update: Northwestern Syria](#)," July 13, 2023.

19 Reuters, "[UN Aid Set to Resume Aid to NW Syria After 'Understanding' with Damascus](#)," August 9, 2023.

20 Reuters, "[Un Raises Concerns Over Syria Aid Route From Turkey, Cites 'Unacceptable Issues'](#)," July 14, 2023.

concerns about maintaining impartiality, neutrality, and independence while working in full cooperation with Damascus.²¹ On August 7, it was announced that OCHA had negotiated an agreement with the GoS for the UN to use Bab al-Hawa crossing for a six-month period, based on the consent of the GoS.²² However, at the time of publication, the specific and crucial conditions accompanying this agreement remain unclear.

The shift toward a consent-based model for cross-border aid delivery in fact began when the UN sought approval from the Assad regime to open two additional crossings following the earthquake. This set a precedent for securing consent from Damascus for aid deliveries through Bab al-Hawa. In February, the GoS timed its approval for the additional crossings for UN operations strategically, making the announcement just prior to a UNSC meeting where a proposed resolution to open the two crossings for a period of 12 to 18 months was to be discussed. The anticipated resolution was reportedly leaked to the regime.²³

This reliance on consent from a regime accused of committing war crimes against its own population sets a troubling precedent. Such a stance challenges the principles of impartiality and neutrality in humanitarian assistance, with significant human and operational implications for aid agencies. First and foremost, the initial rationale for involving the UNSC in cross-border aid access—namely, the GoS's arbitrary denial of impartial aid to those under opposition control—has become increasingly overlooked by negotiating parties at the UN. The regime has effectively co-opted a cross-border operation, originally designed to function without its approval, into one that now necessitates its consent. This shift has occurred without any evidence or assurances of a change in the regime's behavior concerning the arbitrary withholding of aid or the persecution of Syrians in NWS. Cross-border negotiations have coincided with ongoing, deadly shelling and airstrikes by Russian-backed regime forces across NWS, such as the killing of White Helmets volunteer Abdul-Basit Ahmed Abdul-Khaleq in a double-tap strike while on a rescue mission west of Aleppo on July 11.²⁴ Amid continued violence conducted by the regime on aid workers, additional protection concerns arise for NGOs if their access to communities is contingent on the consent agreement with the GoS.

Secondly, the deferral to consent illustrates the real-world consequences of differing interpretations under IHL regarding the classification of a state's arbitrary denial of aid. Ambiguity in the classification of aid denial impacts the legal framework within which humanitarian organizations can deliver cross-border assistance.²⁵ While the GoS has formally granted consent for aid operations, this does not automatically negate the possibility of arbitrary denial. The regime has a track record of strategically obstructing, manipulating, and selectively distributing aid for political and military gains. It may likely exploit this consent to further its own objectives using these methods, thereby violating the core humanitarian principles guiding international aid. This concern is heightened by the conditions initially outlined in the regime's letter to the UNSC. Important work has been done to advocate for increased monitoring and clarity over what classifies as aid denial, diversion, or obstruction in modern, protracted conflicts.²⁶ At the heart of these efforts are calls to clarify how the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence bound a state's obligations under sovereignty in IHL.

Thirdly, the UN, as an intergovernmental organization, is inherently structured to protect the sovereignty of member states. But in doing so, and like any other power structure, it disempowers and marginalizes the communities and

²¹ Ibid.

²² UN News, "[UN: Deal Reached with Syria to Reopen Main Border Crossing from Türkiye](#)," August 9, 2023.

²³ KII, SNGO representative; Reuters, "[Assad Approved Syria Quake Aid with a UAE Nudge, Sources Say](#)," February 23, 2023.

²⁴ Syria Civil Defense Media Release, "[A Statement on the Double-Tap Attack of a White Helmets Rescue Team and the Martyrdom of Volunteer Abdul Basit Ahmed Abdulkhaleq](#)" July 11, 2023.

²⁵ OCHA Policy Series, "[Cross-Border Relief Operations: A Legal perspective](#)."

²⁶ Emma Beals, "[Convoys, Cross-border, Covert Ops: Responding to State-led Arbitrary Aid Denial in Civil Wars. Lessons from Syria, Myanmar, and Ethiopia](#)," June 2023.

peoples that it is not designed for; in this case, individuals falling under areas of opposition–control in NWS. Yet, within these areas are often those most in need, whom the UN’s humanitarian mandate aims to help through key agencies, such as OCHA. There must be recognition of the inherent tension between the respect for state sovereignty in UN intergovernmental politics and the humanitarian mission of aid agencies when assistance is distributed in areas of fragmented or contested state sovereignty, often under de-facto governance by armed groups. This tension is theoretically reconciled through the acknowledgement, written into OCHA’s guiding principles, that international organizations can temporarily impair the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a state for humanitarian relief operations when the state has arbitrarily rejected live-saving assistance for civilians in need.²⁷ For instance, IHL dictates that during a situation where a lack of humanitarian aid would result in the starvation of civilians, there is no valid reason any party to the conflict can put forward to justify a denial of access to those in need.²⁸ However, this rationale has not been sustained in the international legal approach to aid provision in NWS.

PRINCIPLED AID IN THE PROTRACTED CRISIS OF NORTHWEST SYRIA

As identified above, OCHA’s guiding principles acknowledge that state sovereignty can be temporarily impaired for humanitarian action in the case of arbitrary refusal of aid. However, the temporary nature of this caveat leaves little space for its application over time, with the short timeframes of the UNXBM illustrating the reticence of actors to accept a longer-term humanitarian intervention in NWS. This leaves a gap in guidance around how humanitarian principles should be applied in cases where there are long-term humanitarian needs that are not being met by the sovereign government. The conditions of NWS are indeed that of a protracted crisis, in which citizens are still persecuted and in acute need, with no sign of reprieve in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the regime still arbitrarily refuses aid access, which would justify OCHA’s mandate to impair sovereignty; OCHA itself acknowledged that the conditions attached to the GoS consent proposal would undermine a principled humanitarian response.

While the UNXBM is the central pillar of the international humanitarian response in NWS, it is dependent on short-term renewals of authorization from a UNSC resolution or GoS consent. It is, therefore, limited in its capacity to facilitate a principled response that is appropriate for the conditions of NWS as a protracted crisis. For instance, Amnesty International noted that improvements to crucial WASH systems require timelines longer than six months to be effectively implemented and sustained.²⁹ Feedback from communities in NWS also highlighted that even 12-month funding cycles are inadequate for realizing long-term goals and outcomes in generating employment opportunities and developing value chains.

The more the UNXBM has become embedded in NWS’s humanitarian response, the more actors have become dependent on its short-term renewals at the UNSC, and, by extension, to the prominence of sovereignty within this structure. This dependency has manifested in short-term project planning timeframes, cyclical funding modalities, and frequent advocacy for political negotiations. The cost-benefit analysis of programming and the associated opportunity costs of early recovery interventions are determined by limited timeframes of programming cycles, notably the 6-to-12-month lifecycles of the Syria cross-border humanitarian fund (SCHF). If donors are looking to evaluate which activities will most assuredly achieve the priorities of the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP)

²⁷ OCHA et al., “[Oxford Guidance on the Law Relating to Humanitarian Relief Operations in Situations of Armed Conflict](#),” October 27, 2016.

²⁸ Erwin Biersteker et. al, “[Humanitarian Support in a Denial of Access Context: Emergent Strategies at the Interface of Humanitarian and Sovereign Law](#),” June 17, 2021.

²⁹ Amnesty International, “[Syria: UN Security Council Must Renew Cross-Border Aid for at Least One Year to Avert Humanitarian Catastrophe](#),” July 5, 2023.

within this period, urgent life-saving assistance will inevitably be chosen. Humanitarian organizations are therefore restricted to temporary, stop-gap measures and bounded operations, through predominately humanitarian relief. Yet, this fails to address some of the structural vulnerabilities underpinning the reasons why so many people are in need of this aid, perpetuating trends of aid dependency.

While undeniably vital, the focus on humanitarian relief fails to address the underlying structural vulnerabilities that are often the root causes of worsening living conditions. Initially designed for emergencies, this approach has endured for over a decade in the face of ever-increasing needs in NWS. It has operated under the assumption that Syria's fractured governance is transient and that a long-term humanitarian strategy is contingent upon achieving a 'political resolution' to the Syrian crisis. Yet, this approach has treated the Syrian crisis as a continuous emergency rather than a persistent reality or norm, with significant implications for how humanitarian aid is conceptualized and delivered in a principled manner.

OCHA and other UN agencies, guided by a mandate to improve humanitarian conditions, serve a critical function in any aid landscape. Under the exceptional circumstances of emergencies, the tension between the respect for state sovereignty, a cornerstone of UN intergovernmental politics, and their mission of providing life-saving international assistance is intended to be temporary. Any impairment of state sovereignty for humanitarian causes is restricted to a crisis period and is not deemed to create conditions of a new normality. Indeed, part of the inherent aversion to extending international humanitarian strategy into the long-term is the implications for impairing sovereignty in this manner. Nevertheless, the mandates of OCHA and other UN agencies, underpinned by a commitment to humanity, do not cease to apply after an arbitrary amount of time despite a continuing crisis.

To apply humanitarian principles in NWS requires a recognition that the region's crisis no longer reflects the state of emergency for which they were originally designed. It is no longer an exception, but the normality for the millions of people living in NWS who are vitally dependent on international aid to survive. The twelve-year duration of the Syrian crisis challenges justifications in classifying humanitarian action in NWS as a temporary stopgap for needs that have been triggered by a finite emergency. Ignoring these challenges only exacerbates the cyclical crises inflicting the region's population as systemic vulnerabilities in basic services compound frequent shocks, such as cholera outbreaks, natural disasters, or renewed conflict. Short-term interventions have predominantly comprised the default, reactive approach to addressing needs in NWS, but often serve as band-aid solutions that treat symptoms rather than the vulnerabilities that perpetuate continuously worsening conditions.

A range of humanitarian stakeholders, and reflected in multiple KII inputs, have suggested a principled humanitarian response needs to focus on building increased resilience within NWS communities and within the response itself.³⁰ Indeed, when the German Agency for International Cooperation or (GIZ), pledged 15 million euros to rehabilitate the public infrastructure damaged by the earthquakes and further train healthcare staff in NWS, its statement noted the necessity for consolidating the sustainability of humanitarian projects.³¹ These measures have been suggested to not only be cost-efficient, complementing life-saving assistance and effective at reducing humanitarian needs over time, but are also likely to create positive multiplier effects for community resilience rather than exacerbating existing aid dependency.³² If humanitarian principles are designed to guide actors in emergency life-saving efforts, their application over time should aim for the longevity of the benefit of humanitarian action. This would contribute to dignified and sustainable individual and communal resilience that not only empowers communities to withstand shocks and achieve self-reliance, but also save lives over an extended period of time.

³⁰ SNHR et al., "[Joint Statement: The Position of The Syrian Non-Governmental Organizations Regarding the Recent Developments on the Cross-Border Humanitarian Assistance](#)," August 30, 2023; KII, donor representatives, SNGO representatives.

³¹ German Federal Foreign Office Press Release, "[After the Earthquake: Germany is Helping the People in Turkey and Syria](#)," August 21, 2023.

³² AFNS Strategic Allocation Report, "[Perspectives on Aid to the Northwest of Syria](#)," March 2023.

Increasing the resilience of communities and supporting the humanitarian community within NWS additionally reduces the vulnerability of the response and cross-border access to politicization. This was demonstrated no more clearly than in the earthquake response, where SNGOs, who are closest to vulnerable communities, responded swiftly to the needs of communities by operationalizing commercial crossings and rapidly generating needs assessments.³³ In assessing structural vulnerabilities underpinning acute needs, they have both the expertise and access to deliver contextualized programming, as well as the understanding of potential operational barriers for implementation. Insufficient consultation with affected communities and SNGOs to inform more effective interventions risks donor detachment from the evolving needs and realities on the ground and inadvertently limits the scope of their response.³⁴ The ways in which the international community can support the NGO sector to achieve this, and particularly SNGOs, is explored in *Section III*.

The humanitarian approach in NWS is yet to be configured in a manner that addresses both the immediate and longer-term needs of affected communities, while situating these efforts within a nuanced understanding of the Syrian conflict as an enduring crisis. Due to funding shortfalls and tight timeframes, donors are often presented with a trade-off between continuing to fund immediate humanitarian needs or investing in longer-term activities that offer delayed benefits. This was particularly brought to attention in the months following the earthquakes with the World Food Programme's (WFP) announcement that it would have to cut its food basket distributions in NWS by 40 percent due to insufficient funding.³⁵ Although not a universal experience, major donors in the Syrian context struggle to justify reallocating funding away from these needs, particularly for their humanitarian agencies.³⁶ Yet, transitioning to resilience-building initiatives does not mean diverting resources from relief aid, but rather addressing them both simultaneously by incrementally increasing efforts to make longer-term programming more effective and strategic through funding of support services, which simultaneously align and can offer benefit for humanitarian relief implementation.

It is widely acknowledged, particularly from implementing partners in NWS, that unless there is attention directed towards increasing the long-term resiliency of communities, NWS will be stuck in perpetuating cycles of crises underpinned by chronic vulnerabilities in its basic services.³⁷ The Syrian crisis has entered its twelfth year with no sense of resolution for NWS in sight, and donors are looking to protect budgets that have spiraled over the last decade. A strategy to increase resiliency and self-sufficiency is needed through an expansion of the timeframe under consideration for calculations of the opportunity cost of programming.

Calls for a shift in the humanitarian response in NWS have been translated into increased advocacy for early recovery, including in reviews of the earthquake response.³⁸ The primary objective of early recovery is to reduce the dependency of communities on humanitarian relief, moving them towards means of supporting themselves more sustainably. Under its traditional understanding, early recovery refers to specific programmatic actions to restore basic and essential services.³⁹ Programs generally include income-generating activities, community infrastructure rehabilitation, debris management, and social cohesion and community interventions.⁴⁰ It is hoped that by addressing the lack of basic infrastructure, communities will be able to recover from recurring cycles of crises, simultaneously bringing about

³³ iMMAP, "[Ad Hoc Series Part I: Post-Earthquake Perspective: Challenges and Strategies for Humanitarian Aid in Northwest Syria](#)," June 15, 2023.

³⁴ KII, donor advisor

³⁵ WFP, "[Syria in Crisis: Food Ration Cuts Set to Plunge Million into Severe Hunger](#)," June 13, 2023.

³⁶ KII, donor advisor

³⁷ UNSDG, "[Building Community Resilience to Break the Cycle of Suffering in Syria](#)," August 19, 2022.

³⁸ Refugees International, "[Earthquake Aftermath: Aiding Northwest Syria Without Rehabilitating Assad](#)," June 8, 2023.

³⁹ UNDP, "[UNDP and Early Recovery](#)" November 2012.

⁴⁰ UNSC, "[Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139\(2014\), 2165\(2014\), 2191\(2014\), 2258\(2015\), 2332\(2016\), 2393\(2017\), 2401\(2018\), 2449\(2018\), 2504\(2020\), 2533\(2020\), 2585\(2021\), 2642\(2022\) and 2672\(2023\)\(S/2023/464\)](#)," July 22, 2023.

a higher return on funding allocated to these challenges.

SNGO implementing partners should also be better supported to articulate these areas of mutual benefit through enriched information management and better resources for understanding risks to programming over time. As explored below, this requires considerate and accumulative efforts to tangibly move forward with localization, with approaches that are led by the initiative and understandings of SNGOs and communities, rather than to achieve donor policy obligations. This is additionally necessary given the political contingencies around cross-border access in conjunction with major funding flows going through INGOs. The long-term resiliency of humanitarian efforts will crucially depend on the further empowerment of SNGOs beyond their role as local implementing partners, to raise their voice in the determination of priorities and needs for effective programming.

II. EARLY RECOVERY: BUILDING RESILIENCE IN A HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Objective: Section II provides a preliminary effort in assessing the application of early recovery so far in NWS's context, existing gaps in its coordination and implementation, and how interventions can be further supported and targeted to improve the resilience of communities to future crises and shocks.

Multiple stakeholders in the Syrian context have called for more early recovery funding in the last few years, particularly in the aftermath of the earthquakes. However, donor appetite has often been constrained by a refusal to acquiesce to demands put forward by the GoS on the international community to rehabilitate the Syrian economy. The potential consequences on the outcome of the Syrian conflict have understandably measured donor attitudes, and increased fears that early recovery simply equates to reconstruction. In other, less fragmented contexts, early recovery is often pushed forward by a central authority, which has created a general deficit in the analysis of its application in areas of non-state authority. Although these concerns should not be overlooked in assessing the remit of humanitarian action, this has taken worthwhile attention away from what benefits early recovery could bring for aid, specifically in NWS, to help some of the most vulnerable communities in Syria. As the crisis has become more protracted, the relief-oriented approach of the humanitarian sector in NWS has struggled to create tangible reductions in needs, motivating an evaluation of how interventions targeting the resilience of communities can be supported in the region. Any expanded early recovery programming in NWS should be accompanied with contextual analysis of possible associated risks and necessary best practices to inform donors' and implementing partners' strategies. This is particularly important to ensure that early recovery programming, while reducing unintended consequences of aid dependency, can also avoid exacerbating intercommunal tensions that may arise over the long-term. Other post-conflict contexts illustrate the importance of implementing early recovery programming in a contextualized manner that considers security, political, social cohesion, and climate change risks, as well as the data landscape required to support resilience interventions.

Key Findings

- Donor red lines around early recovery are often drawn from the blurred boundaries between early recovery and reconstruction, leading to political sensitivities. Subsequent ambiguity in the terminology of interventions leads to inconsistent and fragmented approaches to early recovery programming in NWS.
- Increased advocacy around early recovery programming has not translated to increased funding or a shift towards a longer-term, community systems approach in NWS. This inhibits the cross-cutting benefits early recovery could offer in ensuring the resilience of multi-sectoral assistance, including its conjunction with humanitarian relief efforts.
- There are difficulties in forming a comprehensive assessment of current early recovery implementation due to its spread across the Early Recovery & Livelihoods (ERL) Cluster and others, as well as insufficiently nuanced programming indicators. This limits the collation of systemic data that could be used to better communicate to donors priority and opportunity areas for needs reduction.
- Early recovery should aim for resilience building against future shocks, as well as sustainability over time. The goal is to make communities less dependent on aid by ensuring that the benefits of humanitarian relief are not lost or undone.
- The complex data requirements for programming which targets the resilience of communities, including early recovery, differ from those of static assessments of humanitarian need, with greater importance placed on risk mitigation, crisis preparedness, and multivariate time series analysis.

- Analysis of community resilience must consider risks specific to the operational context and be informed by local partners, with social cohesion and climate-change identified as two key, long-term vulnerabilities for early recovery programming in NWS.

ASSESSING EXISTING EARLY RECOVERY

POLITICAL AMBIGUITY

Early recovery programming is broadly considered a subsequent stage to the immediate humanitarian aid response. However, it is yet to be implemented in NWS in a systematic way. Despite its humanitarian objectives, early recovery coordination is generally led and funded by development, not aid, agencies. For instance, German funding for early recovery is sourced from GIZ rather than the Federal Foreign Office (FFO), and the ERL Cluster is coordinated by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) representatives.⁴¹ However, early recovery differs from reconstruction in several key ways. Unlike reconstruction, which is often a long-term, centralized process led by the governing authority and driven by non-humanitarian imperatives,⁴² early recovery is fundamentally needs-based. It is implemented strictly for humanitarian objectives, focuses on increasing community-level resilience, and is not intended as an instrument of investment.

The state's involvement in reconstruction efforts has made such interventions politically sensitive for many stakeholders. This is because these actions could be seen as supporting the regime, which views them as a bridge between immediate relief and long-term reconstruction. Consequently, this sensitivity spills over into early recovery efforts, with the classification of projects becoming blurred as donors struggle to distinguish between the two. This causes discrepancies between the approaches among major donors in Syria,⁴³ such as whether early recovery should include infrastructure rehabilitation projects. In practice, early recovery initiatives can inevitably contribute somewhat to political outcomes that many donors look to avoid furthering in Syria. Issues around the possible consequences of early recovery assistance bolstering problematic governing actors became particularly pertinent in NWS with the 2018 Turkish incursion into Afrin⁴⁴ and the subsequent consolidation of control by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) over Idlib in 2019.⁴⁵ In Idlib, the terrorist designation of HTS has provided hard compliance and political barriers to foreign investment or assistance for rehabilitation projects, which has had consequences for political appetites for early recovery in the region.

Donors often create a spectrum of classification for humanitarian funding to bend around their stated red lines on reconstruction and early recovery. For instance, although the EU has placed funds into three categories: "humanitarian" aid (the majority), "resilience" aid, and "stabilization" aid,⁴⁶ member states can flexibly interpret these broadly defined categories. Some have argued that this semantic manipulation leads to an over-emphasis on delineating humanitarian and development aid for political ends,⁴⁷ which in turn deters humanitarian organizations for approaching funding for interventions that address longer-term issues or the structural needs in Syria.⁴⁸ This disparity in terminology and ambiguous red lines also leave INGOs and implementing partners dealing with inconsistency over project and

41 KII, donor advisor

42 Atlantic Council, "[The Politics of Early Recovery Aid in Syria. Is it Actually Reconstruction Aid?](#)" February 8, 2022.

43 The Century Foundation, "['Early Recovery' Aid Can Provide Vital Relief to Syrians—If Donors Follow Through](#)," December 16, 2021.

44 VOA News, "[AP Explains Turkey's 'Operation Olive Branch' in Afrin, Syria](#)," 22 January 2018.

45 CSIS, "[Rescuing Aid in Syria](#)," February 2022.

46 International Crisis Group, "[Ways Out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum](#)," November 25, 2019.

47 KII, Syria analyst

48 The New Humanitarian, "[How the Earthquakes Could Spark Progress for Disaster Risk Reduction in Syria](#)," April 24, 2023.

activity approval, requiring additional efforts to amend proposals and change elements according to each donor.⁴⁹

Central guidance around the remit of early recovery for organizations and humanitarian agencies is largely determined by the HRP, established as part of the Whole of Syria (WoS) approach.⁵⁰ Response planning by the UN ERL Cluster was set up and is determined solely by prioritized objectives in the HRP.⁵¹ In 2015, one of the HRP's strategic objectives was to "strengthen resilience, livelihoods and early recovery through communities and institutions" in Syria.⁵² The ERL cluster was set up with two main sector priorities: (i) to ensure access to basic services through the rehabilitation of roads, educational, and health facilities, and (ii) to support livelihoods through the support of small businesses, job opportunity creation, vocational trainings, and value chain support.⁵³ The UN, therefore, supports early recovery and livelihood projects across five areas: (i) the repair and rehabilitation of critical civilian infrastructure; (ii) the removal of debris and solid waste; (iii) income-generating activities and market-based interventions; (iv) vocational and skills training; and (v) social cohesion and community interventions.⁵⁴

However, illustrating its political sensitivity, the term 'early recovery' was removed from the HRP's 'third pillar' in the subsequent year.⁵⁵ It has since been simply referred to as increasing the "resilience of affected communities by improving access to livelihood opportunities and basic services."⁵⁶ Despite it being one of the pillars of the HRP, funding directed to increasing resiliency in Syria has remained stifled as humanitarian actors prioritize urgent needs relief. In 2022, early recovery still only amounted to roughly 12.5 percent of HRP funds in Syria as a whole.⁵⁷

In a region such as NWS, where acute humanitarian needs are exacerbated by severely compromised infrastructure, the traditional boundaries between what is considered 'life-saving' humanitarian aid and what is seen as 'life-sustaining or 'rehabilitative' work become increasingly less clear-cut. For instance, rehabilitating a hospital aims for a lasting impact but brings immediate, life-saving benefits. Similarly, providing a community with a clean water source also prevents immediate loss of life due to reductions in waterborne diseases. Donor agencies funding early recovery projects have indeed historically preferred activities such as water infrastructure rehabilitation due to its clear links of necessity for water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) programming and the acutely poor condition of Syria's water systems posing a clear threat to life. For example, in NES, EU member states financed the rehabilitation of water pumping stations, as well as medical clinics, as part of greater 'stabilization' efforts.⁵⁸ In regime-held areas, and despite its strong stated policy of refraining from funding Syrian reconstruction prior to political transition, the EU even supported "a joint non-humanitarian programme with the UN,"⁵⁹ including irrigation and sewage network rehabilitation.⁶⁰ The approach taken towards water system rehabilitation indicates that there are possible programming synergies between early recovery and life-saving interventions for NWS. It goes above existing donor perceptions of the trade-off between funding either life-saving or life-sustaining assistance to one

⁴⁹ KII, SNGO representative

⁵⁰ KII, donor advisor; The New Humanitarian, "[Outcry at UN Plans to Consolidate Syria Aid Operations in Damascus](#)," April 23, 2019.

⁵¹ KII, early recovery specialist

⁵² OCHA, "[2015 Strategic Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic](#)," December 18, 2014.

⁵³ KII, early recovery specialist

⁵⁴ UNSC, "[Implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 \(2014\), 2165 \(2014\), 2191 \(2014\), 2258 \(2015\), 2332 \(2016\), 2393 \(2017\), 2401 \(2018\), 2449 \(2018\), 2504 \(2020\), 2533 \(2020\), 2585 \(2021\), 2642 \(2022\) and 2672 \(2023\)](#)," April 20, 2023.

⁵⁵ OCHA, "[2016 Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Plan: January - December 2016](#)," December 29, 2015.

⁵⁶ Humanitarian Action, "[Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Plan](#)," 2023.

⁵⁷ OCHA Financial Tracking Service, "[Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Plan 2022-2023](#)."

⁵⁸ International Crisis Group, "[Ways Out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum](#)," November 25, 2019.

⁵⁹ The Syria Report, "[Q&A with Dan Stoiculescu, Head of the EU Delegation to Syria](#)." June 14, 2022.

⁶⁰ UNDP, "[Italy Contributes EUR 2.5 Million to Support Vulnerable Communities in Homs with Enhanced Access to Safe Water, Sanitation Services and Livelihoods](#)," July 26, 2022.

where humanitarian objectives can be achieved through a combination of both.⁶¹ Particularly when considered in the long-term Syrian context as a protracted crisis, life-sustaining interventions become life-saving.

INCREASED ADVOCACY WITH LIMITED IMPLEMENTATION

Early recovery programming received greater focus and increased advocacy in Syria after July 2021,⁶² when wording referring to increased funding directed at this pillar of the response was explicitly included in the UNSC Resolution for cross-border access. It acknowledged that “international humanitarian aid should go beyond emergency assistance and include support to ‘essential services’ through early recovery projects,” including within the WASH, education, and shelter clusters.⁶³ This was widely seen as a concession to the GoS at the time, which had long been advocating for increased funding towards rehabilitating its crippled economy and had used the UNSC renewal vote as leverage to get early recovery reflected in the resolution.⁶⁴ Yet, KII inputs widely noted that political constraints persistently resulted in limited dedicated funding and subsequently a patchwork of early recovery programming with little strategic direction.

Since the earthquakes, there has been another acceleration in political and humanitarian dialogue surrounding early recovery initiatives for Syria. Early recovery was explicitly referenced in the pledging statement from the International Donors’ Conference for the people in Türkiye and Syria held in Brussels in March 2023, with the funds to be used to “support early recovery and resilience, helping Syrians to rebuild their lives.”⁶⁵ Ahead of the 7th Annual Brussels Conference in June 2023, 11 NGOs sent a joint letter to the UK government calling for the prioritization of early recovery and resilience, including infrastructure rehabilitation, livelihood restoration, and access to essential services.⁶⁶ Highlighting the widespread destruction of the earthquake and its nature as a natural disaster, Martin Griffiths noted in his briefing to the UNSC in advocating for a 12-month cross-border extension the growing importance of a stronger international consensus on early recovery and relaxed political demarcations on the term.⁶⁷ Although there was an initial boost to early recovery funding, this was largely derived from its role in the emergency response with the majority of funding allocated for debris removal.^{68 69} Other activities to increase access to basic services such as the rehabilitation of health centers, roads, and two water stations remained limited in scale in terms of beneficiary reach.⁷⁰

Formed as the second phase of the earthquake response, the SCHF’s latest reserve allocation in May 2023 seemingly indicated a shift towards life-sustaining from life-saving assistance.⁷¹ The first strategic envelope of SCHF’s allocation was dedicated to “ensuring access to lifesaving and life-sustaining integrated services by supporting the transition from

61 KII, donor representative

62 KII, early recovery specialist

63 UNSC, “[Security Council Extends Use of Border Crossing for Humanitarian Aid into Syria, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2585](#)” July 9, 2021.

64 KII, early recovery specialist

65 ECHO, “[Pledging Statement: International Donors’ Conference for the people in Türkiye and Syria](#),” March 20, 2023.

66 Action Aid et al., “[Joint Letter From 11 NGOs for UK Government Ahead of Brussels Conference](#),” June 15, 2023.

67 UNSC Press Release, “[Briefers Stress to Security Council Syria’s Worsening Situation Needs Fully Funded Humanitarian Response Plan, 12-Month Extension of Cross-Border Aid Mechanism](#),” June 29, 2023.

68 KII, early recovery specialist

69 OCHA and cluster data of the earthquake response shows a sharp increase in funding allocated to early recovery programming, quadrupling from 0.07 million in February to 0.28 million in March to reach 602,616 (direct and indirect) beneficiaries by April 2023. However, 352,481 of these were beneficiaries of debris removal activities. Source: OCHA, “[Syrian Arab Republic: Cross-Border Humanitarian Reach and Activities from Türkiye \(April 2023\)](#),” July 16, 2023.

70 Early Recovery and Livelihood Cluster, “[Northwest Syria: Earthquake Response 2023](#),” April 26, 2023.

71 OCHA, “[Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund: 2023 Third Reserve Allocation – Strategy](#),” May 22, 2023.

emergency to sustainable response.” Early recovery interventions include multipurpose cash assistance (MPCA) for livelihoods, the rehabilitation of WASH systems (including restoration of the crucial Kafruh dam), and the connection or expansion of 14 water stations across NWS. Importantly, it noted the need to strengthen coordination and support services through data collection, information management, and monitoring, as well as support for the multi-sector needs assessment (MSNA) to cover Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme’s (HNAP) critical absence. The third envelope of the allocation strategy targeting improved “access to basic services, through integrated single and multisectoral activities” looks towards livelihoods support underpinned by emergency employment for critical infrastructure rehabilitation. Dignified shelter interventions also factor in required infrastructure improvements.

However, KII inputs noted that following the earthquakes there has been little sustained increase in funding towards early recovery that would reflect the increased attention seen in political dialogue, and that it had similarly been affected by the previous year’s funding cuts to Syrian humanitarian budgets. Only an additional US\$1 million was reportedly allocated to the ERL cluster, reaching a total budget of US\$22 million.⁷² The shift in political dialogue therefore has been backed by little substance to bring about a longer-term, cohesive strategy for early recovery programming that was advocated for after the earthquakes. The informal conversations prompted in donor capitals by the earthquakes as to what an early recovery environment would look like in NWS, and for Syria more broadly, remained bound by political red lines.⁷³ The GoS is seen to have leveraged the earthquake response to push for its strategic objectives, such as boosting its international legitimacy through accelerated normalization, easing sanctions regulations, and, importantly, to acquire more funding for early recovery to support the Syrian economy. Some donors have consequently dug their heels in to reiterate that humanitarian funding will continue to be determined by the HRP with life-saving aid prioritized.

When assessing existing early recovery programming in NWS, it is also important to highlight the direct from donor, or bilateral, funding for rehabilitation projects from non-Western donors that typically make up the majority of UN pooled funds. Regional donors operate within different political lines to Western donors, although they are still very much governed by domestic foreign policy priorities. Turkey, for instance, has pledged millions to initiatives of rehabilitation and reconstruction to NWS. Although part of its stated policy is to create ‘safe conditions’ for the return of refugees,⁷⁴ it also aims to further consolidate Turkish territorial presence and governance in northern Syria⁷⁵ while boosting the construction sector vital for its deteriorating economy. Additionally, Qatar, historically one of the strongest supporters of the Syrian opposition,⁷⁶ has cooperated with Turkey to fund large-scale dignified shelter programs that many would argue classify as reconstruction. A joint initiative between Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD) and the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) aims to establish an “integrated city” to benefit 50,000 refugees in NWS, for example.⁷⁷ In light of the 2.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) currently inhabiting NWS, these projects remain small-scale. However, they are important to consider when illustrating the wide range of early recovery attitudes and resultant interventions across NWS that, together, make coordination of early recovery programming such a challenging endeavor.

⁷² KII, early recovery specialist

⁷³ KII, coordination representative

⁷⁴ Syrian Observer, “[Erdogan to Return One Million Syrian Refugees to Northern Syria](#),” May 4, 2022.

⁷⁵ The Washington Institute, “[Rebuilding a Society: The Key to Success for Turkey’s New Syrian Resettlement Villages](#),” May 26, 2022.

⁷⁶ Middle East Monitor, “[Qatar May Find Itself Isolated on Syria Normalization](#),” May 4, 2023.

⁷⁷ QFFD, “[Qatar Fund for Development \(QFFD\) and the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Authority \(AFAD\) Laid the Foundation Stone for a Project to Establish an Integrated City in Northern Syria](#),” May 25, 2023.

THE HUMANITARIAN ARCHITECTURE OF EARLY RECOVERY IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

The ERL Cluster is vital within the UN architecture in NWS to coordinate the operational implementation of early recovery projects. Offering a focal point for organizations implementing rehabilitation and livelihoods activities, the cluster comprises between 70-80 INGO and SNGO partners, with 40 directly working with the cluster on active projects at the time of writing.⁷⁸ Meetings with early recovery implementing partners across clusters and areas of NWS are opportunities for NGOs to share updates and common challenges. This is further supported by monthly meetings with OCHA and daily bilateral inter-cluster coordination.

However, a notable proportion of early recovery activity in NWS is done within other clusters independently of ERL Cluster coordination, such as the rehabilitation of bakeries under the Food Security and Livelihoods (FSL) Cluster, or some health and educational facility rehabilitation.⁷⁹ Livelihoods support, in particular, is carried out across sectors, with cash-for-work programming not reported to the ERL Cluster. This creates difficulty for the ERL Cluster to have comprehensive oversight of all early recovery programming in NWS. Due to the overlapping yet dispersed nature of this programming, the ERL Cluster is unusually placed in its potential to contribute to more inter-cluster coordination, which is vital for the operational benefit of partners. It is focused on information management of ERL activities under its purview for the SCHF, raising any implementation issues to inter-cluster coordination bodies, and ensuring non-duplication of project implementation. But it is currently limited in having sufficient oversight to advance early recovery assistance towards a systemic or strategic approach.

The difficulty in sourcing comprehensive data on early recovery programming to provide an integrated assessment reflects its fragmented nature. Much of dignified shelter programming, for example, is conducted by Arab donors with little public information regarding area selection, social cohesion efforts in high-displacement communities, and beneficiary impact.⁸⁰ While the SCHF and ERL Cluster may provide the most coherent data on the reach of early recovery projects, these are assimilated from a blurred mix of designated ERL programming and further activities conducted within other clusters and are not comprehensive. As many of these projects address the rehabilitation of singular nodes of a water, electricity, or road network, this culminates in a very limited overall picture of connected infrastructure vulnerabilities that may jeopardize other humanitarian efforts. For example, the impact of inaccessible roads and electricity shortages on the delivery and storage of pharmaceutical supplies for medical centers. The given indicators for ERL programming from the SCHF appear to exacerbate this outlook, with metrics prioritizing the quantity of projects rather than their interconnectedness across humanitarian needs or the sustainability of initiatives.⁸¹ KII inputs noted the limited utility of given indicators for ERL programming due to a lack of understanding by partners of the types of activities they are able to report on for early recovery.⁸²

SUPPORTING RESILIENCE IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

The focus of early recovery should be on ensuring that any sector-specific rehabilitation or livelihood benefit, to the extent possible, is resilient in the face of shocks and sustained over time. If the goal of early recovery in NWS is to decrease aid dependency, there needs to be a consideration of how the gains of humanitarian relief efforts are not lost or undone. Early recovery should aim to prevent anticipated recurrent crises that undo the work of humanitarian actors through building resilience.

⁷⁸ KII, early recovery specialist

⁷⁹ KII, early recovery specialist

⁸⁰ KII, SNGO representative

⁸¹ [Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund Program Manual](#), April 2022.

⁸² KII, early recovery specialist

However, the difficulty in forming an overarching assessment of all early recovery activities in NWS culminates in barriers to forming a strategic approach to improve the long-term resiliency of humanitarian programming in NWS. Early recovery specialists have previously been limited in their ability to form more strategic approaches due to a lack of focus and ultimately underinvestment from conventional funding mechanisms for necessary support services.⁸³ As explored above, this has been exacerbated by challenges to data collation due to the dispersed array of early recovery programming. Additionally, insufficiently nuanced indicators inhibit effective communication to donors regarding the efficacy of early recovery interventions over time. There is a level of disjunction between existing understandings of early recovery in a programming or operational sense, and the wider implications and requirements of what it is trying to achieve.

Humanitarian actors will need to present a persuasive case to generate donor support for a shift towards an early recovery approach, demonstrating its cost-effectiveness and principled merit to improving the lives of those in need in NWS. There is currently very little will to invest in the new thinking necessary to move early recovery beyond the assumed equation with reconstruction by donor aid agencies, as well as little motivation to increase funding for programming implemented in the existing manner.⁸⁴ General donor skepticism has been exacerbated by the fact that billions of humanitarian relief aid funneled into Syria has done little to stem spiraling needs in a protracted conflict. If donors are to fund more embedded programming that can achieve the overarching priorities of the HRP, there needs to be increased and coordinated efforts to show how this funding mitigates wastage by achieving strategic goals that are targeted to encapsulate and reduce future risks. Advocacy to donors cannot only call for more funding for early recovery; there also needs to be calls for the support services necessary to increase the efficacy of these funds within an ever-changing humanitarian landscape.

The international community has begun a more strategic consideration of early recovery, which gained further necessity following the earthquakes. Prior to the earthquakes, the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (DRHC) for the UN NWS hub in Gaziantep requested an early recovery advisor to assist the Humanitarian Liaison Group (HLG).⁸⁵ However, concerns have been noted over the lack of consultation of the ERL Cluster regarding eventual implementation of the strategy, with the coordination body responsible for its execution currently unclear. Although the inputs of the ERL Cluster heavily informed the strategy, the cluster did not lead the strategic review. The cluster plays an operationally important coordination role in managing early recovery as a cross-cutting element to humanitarian programming. It could be further supported to deliver a more strategic approach to early recovery in NWS in a similar way to mainstreamed technical areas of programming, such as gender analysis and integration or cash assistance, which are applicable across sectors, sub-sectors, modalities and interventions.

In general, donor guidance generally encourages programmatic coordination across the priorities identified in the HRP. This includes early recovery programming, with SCHF guidance noting how cluster priorities are expected to address multiple pillars of the HRP, including the third to increase the resilience of affected communities by improving access to livelihood opportunities and basic services.⁸⁶ Such integration is reflected in multi-sectoral needs assessments, projects conducted outside of the ERL Cluster, and in project proposal requirements to contribute to integrated response strategies as a whole.⁸⁷ For example, the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) has outlined how a lack of funding for early recovery initiatives and a subsequent deterioration in access to basic services are interrelated. The lack of electricity and fuel, in particular, is highlighted as an underlying restriction to the sustained rehabilitation of basic services, as water systems rely increasingly on pumps for irrigation and supply

⁸³ AFNS Strategic Allocation Report, "[Perspectives on Aid to the Northwest of Syria](#)," March 2023.

⁸⁴ KII, donor advisor

⁸⁵ KII, early recovery specialist

⁸⁶ OCHA, "[Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund: 2022 First Standard Allocation Strategy](#)," April 29, 2022.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

to camps and medical facilities in the context of worsening drought.⁸⁸ This fundamentally undermines humanitarian relief priorities across clusters of WASH, Health and Food Security.

The integration of other “strategic cross-cutting elements” of humanitarian programming are more comprehensively and explicitly addressed in donor guidelines.⁸⁹ This includes efforts to mainstream gender and protection considerations within programmatic interventions or the implementation of MPCA. USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) guidelines articulate how these technical approaches are not specific to a particular cluster but are applicable across all sector modalities and interventions.⁹⁰ For example, all project proposals must include tailored information on how gender analysis and integration or gender-based violence risk mitigation is considered within their sector. Partners’ activity design then specifies how gender integration is implemented, monitored, and evaluated throughout the duration of the project.⁹¹ Moreover, the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) has provided in-depth guidance on integrated protection and food assistance programming, which examines how programs that fail to take into account protection concerns can result in negative impacts on food security.⁹²

Early recovery mainstreaming can be considered to operate on the same principle of ‘do no harm’ for beneficiaries as that of protection or gender analysis, by ensuring any rehabilitation or livelihood activity brings about a sustainable benefit to communities and avoids aid dependency. Considering early recovery as a similar cross-cutting element will ensure that any early recovery intervention is integrated with simultaneous benefit to the provision humanitarian relief while alleviating beneficiary need over time. However, the push for integration results in varying degrees of success in terms of tangible operational impact for early recovery. A barrier to early recovery being applied as a cross-cutting cluster approach is its frequent execution as isolated activities of rehabilitation of a certain facility, or a livelihoods project implemented for limited period of time. These are often done with limited consideration on the project’s long-term integration into and consequences for the community.⁹³ The integration of early recovery is both limited by disconnection from NWS contextual variables, such as important considerations of displacement dynamics,⁹⁴ or by a limited sense of systemic assessment and implementation. Standard indicators prioritize the quantity of interventions over evaluations of interrelated dynamics and limit the scope of integration possible through allocation strategies. Inter-sectoral coordination bodies, in close cooperation with the ERL Cluster, are likely to be best positioned to develop a more informed early recovery approach.⁹⁵ This should be designed with the objective of establishing an interrelated understanding of key risks, variables, and information requirements for resilient humanitarian relief.

DATA ANALYSIS REQUIREMENTS

Programming aimed at enhancing community resilience and recovery has distinct data and information requirements compared to traditional humanitarian relief efforts. In the case of immediate assistance such as food baskets or medicines, target areas can be prioritized based on estimates of populations at immediate or urgent risk. The SCHF framework, for instance, aggregates this data using various criteria: severity of the situation, percentages of IDPs and people in need, allocation targets from the previous year as a percentage of people in need, and the number of clusters identifying a sub-district as a priority. However, when this data is extrapolated for longer-term programming,

⁸⁸ OCHA, “[2022 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic \(February 2022\)](#)” February 22, 2022.

⁸⁹ OCHA, “[Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund: 2023 Third Reserve Allocation – Strategy](#),” May 22, 2023.

⁹⁰ USAID, “[Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance Emergency Application Guidelines](#),” February 14, 2023.

⁹¹ USAID, “[Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance Emergency Application Guidelines](#),” October 12, 2022.

⁹² ECHO, “[Guidance for Integrated Protection & Food Assistance Programming](#).”

⁹³ COAR, “[Durable Solutions and Early Recovery in Syria](#),” March 25, 2023.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ EHA Connect, “[Coordination for Environmental Mainstreaming in Disaster Management](#),” 2022.

additional variables come into play. These variables pertain to both potential evolving needs of the community and the capacity for program implementation. Special attention must be given to factors such as risk mitigation and crisis preparedness. Consequently, a more sophisticated impact analysis is required, one that incorporates a range of intervening variables and employs advanced modeling techniques.

Closer cooperation between the various stages of the analysis cycle would increase current impact analysis and risk assessment capacity and improve the contextualization of early recovery initiatives within NWS dynamics. Currently, NWS analysis is largely siloed among various NGOs working on the Syrian context, most of which have restricted field resources and limited integrated information management or value-chain and econometric analysis capabilities.⁹⁶ The scope of analysis produced is often limited to the remit and resources of the larger project within which analysis units sit. This impedes cross-sectoral research coordination in theme and methodology and creates barriers to effective data continuity. Coordinated information management for complementary and accessible data sharing would help identification of data gaps between organizations for planning, reporting, and advocacy.⁹⁷

Greater efforts could also be made to ensure that research and analysis produced are on areas of focus most operationally relevant to SNGOs. Due to the direction of funding flows, research is often conducted on behalf of the donor community, which faces different risks than implementing partners. The inclusion of considerations regarding the most urgent operational risks to SNGOs, rather than pressures internal to donor aid agencies, is particularly important for how terms of reference are written for research activities. Their design should look to incorporate greater technical expertise from sectoral experts on-the-ground in NWS to ensure the most pertinent issues are being assessed for the humanitarian response.⁹⁸

Conversations around the data needed for effective humanitarian programming in NWS, and Syria more broadly, are not new. The full development of the HNAP in 2018 was born out of a need to expand data collection beyond basic information on population trends to include data on health and demographic indicators, as well as socioeconomic indicators.⁹⁹ Crucially, and differently to its previous format, HNAP was a cross-UN agency project, with multiple relief agencies making decisions about data priorities. The benefits of having such data have been explicitly acknowledged by both OCHA and donors, with the former highlighting the significance of impartial data collection for the humanitarian community to clearly advocate for principled priorities. The tangible deficit in the primary data on basic needs available across Syria is due to both security and operational constraints on data collection in the region, as well as the politicization of such programs. The loss of HNAP had both significant impact for assessing immediate needs of communities for humanitarian relief, but also symbolized a loss of any ability to measure, cross-reference, and evaluate consistent data points over time and geographical area. This has severe consequences for the planning stages of programming and prioritization for donors. Operating with data collected through a unified methodology is essential to informing humanitarian programming, and the nuanced requirements of early recovery initiatives in particular.

This information is crucial for humanitarian actors to effectively communicate to donors how their money is being spent and advocate for where their money should be directed. This is particularly the case in advocating for the life-saving potential of early recovery. Guidance for SCHF allocations notes that “proposed interventions are expected to explain how the project will support individual and communal resilience and/or self-reliance.”¹⁰⁰ However, current

⁹⁶ ACAPS, “[Syria: Data and Analysis Ecosystem](#).” August 18, 2023.

⁹⁷ EHA Connect, “[Information and Data Sharing: Sharing Environmental Information and Data in Emergency Response](#),” 2022.

⁹⁸ Steering Group for Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations, “[Syria Coordinated Accountability and Lesson Learning \(CALL\): Evaluation Synthesis and Gap Analysis](#),” May 2016.

⁹⁹ DEVEX, “[Exclusive: The Day the Data Died in Syria](#),” May 12, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ OCHA, “[Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund: 2023 Third Reserve Allocation – Strategy](#),” May 22, 2023.

gaps in the data landscape in NWS challenge an accurate calculation of the sustainability of interventions. The data available to inform humanitarian programming tends to provide a static picture of the most urgent risk to life in NWS, both in the data collected and how it is processed. This is underlined by demands to demonstrate intervention impact within the short-term implementation timeframes of NWS cross-border access. Consequently, a data bias is created in the minds of donors towards quantifiable humanitarian relief programming (e.g. quantity of food baskets distributed), and limits appetite for funding more strategic initiatives. For example, there is often limited donor funding for auxiliary support tools or initiatives, including improved data analysis capacity, which do not provide direct beneficiary-related outcome points.¹⁰¹ The result is programming that is only designed to address short-sighted priorities.

Similarly, although integrated programming is mandated by donor guidelines, project indicators lack metrics to evaluate the interrelated or sustained impact of these interventions. Deriving data on contributions to community resiliency can be particularly complex as it requires proving a negative—the absence of a decline—or a future embedded crisis. For example, the immediate beneficiary reach of each rehabilitated health center may be limited to the community in its immediate geographical vicinity. But the long-term positive contribution of this facility to the resiliency of a whole district’s health network will only be proven once tested during a crisis, whereby it contributes to reduced deaths or cases. A facility’s beneficiary reach is multiplied if it is coordinated with the rehabilitation of multiple centers within the local water network, for example, simultaneously reducing future health and WASH needs. Yet, projections of lives or resources saved in this process is an almost impossible metric to estimate during the proposal and planning stages of an individual rehabilitation project. It is often only with hindsight that the negative impact of a lack of these initiatives is fully illustrated, as was visible during the cholera outbreak in late 2022 in which the deteriorated state of the water and health systems of NWS was attributed to the rapid spread and death rate.¹⁰²

To effectively support early recovery programming, there needs to be a wider range of both data collected and the types of analysis it supports. In an exceptionally volatile environment such as NWS, effective horizon-scanning for risk analysis is vital to underpin any humanitarian programming that seeks to improve community resilience by identifying the most vulnerable communities over time. For example, changes in natural resource levels, including water, will have a direct impact on the needs of beneficiaries of WASH programs year-on-year. Indeed, HNO notes a new survey methodology for early recovery with context indicators for forecasting of sector specific activities in livelihoods, access to basic services, infrastructures conditions, and social cohesion.¹⁰³ This takes into greater account socioeconomic indicators, such as inflation rates, which pose risks to the resilience of these activities over time. The UNSC also set out a global data strategy, which included an initiative called the Complex Risk Analytics Fund.¹⁰⁴ This pooled fund looks to contribute data analytics resources for the humanitarian sector to better illustrate and mitigate interconnected risks in crisis settings. Donors should look to direct investment in these efforts to increase the efficiency and impact of their funding in specific humanitarian settings, such as that of Syria.

In order to understand the impact of risks on programming in NWS, the capacities of actors to tackle existing vulnerabilities and potential future threats must also be understood. Humanitarian needs will be offset by the capacities and resilience of the response to deal with crises. Most data collection in the humanitarian sphere is focused on needs assessments to provide a detailed picture of those communities most vulnerable. But there is even less information available on the capacity of the current humanitarian response in NWS.¹⁰⁵ Symptomatic of the cross-border remote access constraints, a limited UN and INGO footprint on-the-ground in NWS prevents

¹⁰¹ AFNS Strategic Allocation Report, “[Perspectives on Aid to the Northwest of Syria](#),” March 2023.

¹⁰² Aron Lund, “[Cholera in the Time of Assad: How Syria’s Water Crisis Caused an Avoidable Outbreak](#),” January 24, 2023.

¹⁰³ OCHA, “[2022 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic \(February 2022\)](#),” February 22, 2022.

¹⁰⁴ [Complex Risk Analytics Fund Webpage](#).

¹⁰⁵ KII, donor representative

an overarching perspective of current programming and SNGO capacity. The collation of this information would facilitate better coordination and assessment of crisis preparedness levels in the NWS response, as well as assisting prioritization for donors.¹⁰⁶

The importance of determining response capacity was illustrated both in the earthquake response and during the uncertainty around cross-border non-renewal since July for contingency planning. For instance, there is minimal data on the usage of commercial crossings into NWS which has prohibited an accurate and comprehensive picture of cross-border vulnerabilities and resilience in the case of non-renewal. KII inputs identified how a significant issue preventing the scaling of non-UN operations and effective contingency planning is the lack of reporting on the use of borders.¹⁰⁷ OCHA only tracks the numbers of trucks, or transshipments, that go through the UN hubs, in accordance with reporting and briefing requirements of the UNSC for humanitarian operations in NWS. But it does not track goods imported commercially outside of the UNXBM. Other UN agencies may track commercial border use through the cluster architecture,¹⁰⁸ but do not provide inter-sectoral data. After the earthquakes, there were some efforts to fill this data gap by OCHA, who requested information from NGOs on usage of border crossings for goods and staff, including those most utilized and the constraints faced in using them.

Potential risks to early recovery programming that may likely impact the resilience of interventions over time in NWS can be identified both from other contexts and known vulnerabilities within the current Syrian conflict. Often the integration of these considerations into project assessment, planning, and evaluation stages are left too late for effective mitigation, with adaptation left as the only strategy for humanitarian actors. Below, this report examines two key risk areas that have been identified through research inputs as central concerns for the resilience of early programming in NWS. Their consideration is motivated by a need to contextualize interventions within current and future stresses in order to ensure funding is not wasted on projects that are not socially or environmentally sustainable.

I. RISK MITIGATION: CLIMATE-CHANGE

Syria has been ranked 156th in the world for climate vulnerability and preparedness¹⁰⁹ – a materially worse position than both Iraq and Libya, countries that receive considerably more attention in the region for climate-risk analysis and its intersection with conflict-sensitivity.¹¹⁰ In the case of Iraq, a vast and important proportion of this analysis finds that a lack of preventative planning and action to reverse environmental neglect and exploitation following the emergency response phase worsened community vulnerability to further conflict dynamics.¹¹¹ The humanitarian sector has been slow to acknowledge environmental considerations must be included in any shift to sustainable post-conflict resolution. Instead, a vacuum has been left for ruling elites and armed authorities to continue to exploit natural resources both for their own income and against opposing communities.¹¹²

To avoid early recovery programming succumbing to the same aid dependency limitations of existing humanitarian relief, an evaluation of climate-risk for interventions and potential impact on activities is required. In a country that is already crippled by water geopolitics, floods, and wildfires, any early recovery approach across Syria needs to account for the environment's current and potential impact on humanitarian interventions. To prevent the deterioration of food security, WASH, and protection programming, the longevity of interventions should be assessed during implementation against risks of persistent drought and desertification. Rehabilitating an existing irrigation system or

¹⁰⁶ KII, donor representative

¹⁰⁷ KII, SNGO representative

¹⁰⁸ OCHA, "[What is the Cluster Approach](#)," March 31, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ University of Notre Dame, "[ND-GAIN Country Index](#)."

¹¹⁰ CSIS, "[Libya's Civil Society Crackdown Exacerbates Its Climate Woes](#)," May 2, 2023.

¹¹¹ The Century Foundation, "[The Deep Roots of Iraq's Climate Crisis](#)," July 11, 2023.

¹¹² CSIS, "[Local to Global: Tensions Course through Iraq's Waterways](#)," May 12, 2023.

water station will have limited benefit if natural water systems are vulnerable to an eradicated supply in three to five years' time. As communities recover, natural resources are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, intensifying the environmental footprint of post-disaster recovery and further degrading essential local ecosystems for livelihoods. Addressing water insecurity, improving land-use management in agriculture, and restoring ecosystems are essential for improving the living conditions and resilience of communities in NWS.

The implementation of an effective strategic shift towards early recovery will require greater integration of environmental considerations in preparedness and situational analysis, response planning, and resource mobilization. This includes Climate Disaster Risk Reduction (CDRR) analysis into humanitarian strategies, the establishment of effective and usable early warning systems for environmental hazards, and a concerted effort to improve natural resource management and governance within current programming and future value-chain support. The inclusion of these approaches has generally received limited attention by coordination bodies and donors, despite playing a critical cross-cluster role.¹¹³ As is the case across the aid sector, disaster prevention has generally been deprioritized against immediate humanitarian relief needs. However, there is no clearer example of how this neglect can exacerbate future humanitarian need than environmental pressures.

Since the earthquake, there has been some examination of how small-scale CDDR efforts could be implemented following natural disasters or in fragile and politicized contexts such as NWS.¹¹⁴ Typically conducted by government and international development agencies, their inclusion in humanitarian strategy falls within the same political debates as other early recovery programming. Yet in other contexts, such as that of South Sudan, humanitarian actors developed a platform to aggregate information on hazards, exposure, and vulnerability, across a broad range of risk areas including climate change and the environment.¹¹⁵ This was supported by the establishment of a Risk Working Group made up of focal persons from UN agencies, donors, NGO programs and the South Sudan UN country office. While in the Philippines, following Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, the early recovery cluster collaborated with the shelter cluster, local, and national actors to implement an initiative addressing debris clearance while providing work and livelihoods opportunities to recover agricultural activity.¹¹⁶

The importance of inter-cluster coordination for climate-risk mitigation in humanitarian programming is key, both in identifying potential cross-cutting areas of benefit and in the data requirements for the evaluation of environmental impact of inter-cluster programming. Environmental degradation often has the greatest impact on the most vulnerable in a community, with implications for gender and protection mainstreaming.¹¹⁷ Similarly to how gender and protection concerns have been integrated across education, health, and WASH programming, climate-change risk mitigation can be similarly mainstreamed throughout project proposals through effective coordination. This could involve establishing partnerships between international, national and local environmental actors, the inclusion of environmental vulnerability metrics in needs assessments and MEL processes, and further disseminating information across sectors to inform programming.

II. RISK MITIGATION: SOCIAL COHESION

Over a duration of the Syrian conflict, the social cohesion and community structures of local populations in NWS have been severely impacted. The region has disproportionately endured multiple cycles of violence, leading to wide-scale displacements that have significantly weakened and fragmented local communities. Today, local communities

¹¹³ AFNS Strategic Allocation Report, "[Perspectives on Aid to the Northwest of Syria](#)," March 2023.

¹¹⁴ The New Humanitarian, "[How the Earthquakes Could Spark Progress for Disaster Risk Reduction in Syria](#)," April 24, 2023.

¹¹⁵ UNDRR, "[In South Sudan, A New Risk Management Tool Makes Strides](#)," December 6 2022.

¹¹⁶ EHA Connect, "[Coordination for Environmental Mainstreaming in Disaster Management](#)," 2022.

¹¹⁷ EHA Connect, "[Crisis Response and Recovery: Including the Environment in Crises Response and Recovery](#)," 2022.

contend with worsening economic conditions and soaring poverty, competition over social structures and economic resources, limited access to basic services, diminishing formal and informal dispute resolution mechanisms,¹¹⁸ as well as recurring displacements and IDP returns. These challenges have not only eroded the region's social fabric, making communities increasingly vulnerable to external shocks, but also have serious implications for future efforts to foster social cohesion.¹¹⁹

Displacements in NWS have uprooted communities, disrupted social networks, and placed significant strains on host communities and service provision. IDPs perceive that they face discriminative treatment from host communities over land use, scarce resources, and perceptions of their greater access to humanitarian aid.¹²⁰ One of the primary reported causes of tension between IDPs and host communities is indeed that the latter perceive international assistance to disproportionately benefit IDPs, exacerbated by NGOs' tendency to concentrate their resources mainly on camps, often overlooking the needs of the adjacent communities.¹²¹ For instance, in the wake of the earthquake, competition for limited resources reportedly escalated between IDPs in shelters and host communities, as the latter believed they were deemed unjustly ineligible despite their unmet needs.¹²² These tensions were further aggravated by the lack of transparent and clearly communicated selection criteria used by NGOs.¹²³ This has also been reportedly a persistent source of sensitivity among IDPs themselves residing within camps. Returnees and out-of-camp IDPs also face discrimination and are often perceived negatively within their communities. Additionally, economic- and security-driven displacements to comparatively stable areas also exacerbate tensions, as strains on already vulnerable services and limited job opportunities heighten both intra- and inter-community tensions between local residents and IDPs.¹²⁴

Yet, the majority of early recovery efforts in NWS thus far have been largely disconnected from these social cohesion concerns, owing to funding constraints and contextual limitations.¹²⁵ If not promptly and adequately addressed, these sensitivities and tensions stemming from unresolved grievances could further threaten stability in the region and become increasingly challenging to resolve in the future. Building resilience by improving communal relationships, rebuilding community structures, and mitigating resource-based sensitivities is crucial to mitigating these risks. Social cohesion programming should be grounded in a sound understanding of the micro-level context. Conflict sensitivity analysis should identify suitable community entry points, including interest-based dialogue, to encourage participatory and constructive interaction and strengthen cohesion between different sides of the divide. Crucially, communities must be empowered to lead these efforts by being equipped with the knowledge, tools, and support needed to identify the enabler and inhibitors to strengthen community bonds, as well as their broader impacts.

SNGOs tend to focus their interventions on communities where they have pre-existing relationships and where they have already performed due diligence, which can result in an unequal allocation of resources and services. This approach risks perpetuating existing social inequalities and exacerbating community tensions. Moreover, when integrating early recovery into livelihoods programs, for example, it is crucial for organizations to conduct a thorough analysis to understand the dynamics and dependencies between different communities in the value

¹¹⁸ PeaceRep, "[The Impact of Community Leaders on Social Peace in Northern Syria](#)," August 24, 2023.

¹¹⁹ HNO, "[Humanitarian Program Cycle 2023](#)," December 2022.

¹²⁰ Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, "[Local Reconciliation Committees in Northern Syria](#)," 2021.

¹²¹ Protection Cluster et al., "[Rapid Protection Assessment Findings: Syria Earthquake, February 2023 Protection Sector Report](#)," February 21, 2023.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, "[Local Reconciliation Committees in Northern Syria](#)," 2021.

¹²⁵ COAR, "[Durable Solutions and Early Recovery in Syria](#)," March 25, 2023.

chain.¹²⁶ Selecting one specific community for a part of a value chain can create or exacerbate intercommunal tensions. To mitigate such challenges, it is essential to embed conflict-sensitive strategies into both the planning and execution phases of the project.¹²⁷

Coordination bodies, such as the ERL Cluster, should review the distribution of needs assessments and corresponding resources of implementing partners to sufficiently ensure impartial identification of the most vulnerable communities and facilities. These assessments should clearly communicate the criteria used for selecting communities for rehabilitation projects, and, where possible, be methodologically consistent with criteria used more broadly across the sector. Moreover, it is crucial for implementing staff to involve local communities in the decision-making process, granting them a sense of ownership over the projects. This participatory approach not only fosters community involvement but also ensures the long-term sustainability of the facilities. However, humanitarian actors should be mindful of the extent to which local authorities and councils, community gatekeepers, and community committee members, or other representatives represent the various interests of the community and not their own.

In the post-rehabilitation phase, there is often inadequate planning for the sustained availability of facilities and services generated through early recovery activities, especially for marginalized groups. SNGOs need to ensure that women and other marginalized populations continue to benefit from these facilities by implement a robust M&E framework to track the effectiveness and inclusivity of the services upon the end of interventions.

¹²⁶ AFNS Strategic Allocation Report, "[Perspectives on Aid to the Northwest of Syria](#)," March 2023.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

III. SUPPORTING THE NGO RESPONSE IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

Objective: To outline the current challenges faced by NGOs implementing the humanitarian response in NWS amid increased cross-border vulnerability and to examine areas in which the international community can support the resilience and independence of an NGO-led response.

Under the challenging operational landscape of NWS, SNGOs have consistently proven their ability to respond to accumulative emergencies and acute needs when faced with increased security risks and access constraints. They have demonstrated remarkable resilience, adaptation, and efficiency, including in the direct aftermath of the earthquake, which illustrates their unparalleled operational understanding of the NWS humanitarian landscape, built over more than a decade of navigating a crisis status quo. Despite this, NGO concerns about the implications of implementing assistance in NWS have often been sidelined in aid access negotiations and contingency planning. This exclusion poses a tangible risk to the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts as NGOs possess valuable local knowledge and operational capabilities that could significantly enhance the quality and efficiency of aid delivery and response.

The shift towards a consent aid model poses further constraints and highlights the need to increase the resilience of an NGO-led response that leverages alternative funding sources and aid modalities. However, the UN's role in delivering life-saving assistance at the required scale and coordinating efforts through the WoS architecture to provide programming, protection, and access support for NGOs remains vital, especially as the environment becomes increasingly complex and uncertain. The core of a consent-based agreement, despite the specifics of the attached conditions, will be ever more vulnerable to politicization reinforced by a deference to sovereignty. This will continue to be ingrained in the UN humanitarian structure, with its operational and funding manifestations inhibiting the type of response required, as outlined in the previous section. Therefore, it is essential that the NWS humanitarian response is reinforced by complementary aid modalities that can deliver the early recovery assistance necessary to save the lives of those at risk throughout the protracted crisis in NWS.

The previous section outlined how humanitarian principles should be applied to contexts of protracted crises to increase the resiliency of relief programming for vulnerable communities through an early recovery approach. Amid the increased vulnerability of a safe UN cross-border response following the consent agreement with the GoS, the following section will examine how a principled, NGO-led response can facilitate resilient aid programming. The section has been written in the context of continued negotiations at senior UN levels on the accompanying conditions of a consent-based agreement with the GoS. It is, therefore, susceptible to the uncertainty of rapidly evolving circumstances that may affect the nature of support needed for NGOs to continue to deliver aid for communities in NWS, both within and in a complementary nature to a consent based UNXBM.

Key Findings

- High-level UN negotiations on cross-border access have overlooked the practical, on-the-ground requirements for humanitarian action, while continuity planning provided insufficient detail for NGOs to adequately reduce their vulnerability to UNSC non-renewal. A more inclusive approach to the perspectives of implementing SNGOs is required.
- Partnerships across all layers of the NWS humanitarian landscape should aim to be more collaborative within the WoS architecture through the amplification of the voices of those on-the-ground and closest to the communities they serve.

- Complementary pooled-fund mechanisms, such as AFNS, can be advantageous for longer implementation timeframes alongside the SCHF to broaden the scope of humanitarian action in NWS with a greater focus on resilience-building activities.
- To scale-up an NGO response through complementary funding mechanisms, emphasis should be placed on the operational adaptations of the SNGO community to the unique context of NWS and their existing compliance demands in order to support their use of the fund.
- The technical support of the UN for the wider humanitarian response in NWS remains vital. Particularly OCHA's Gaziantep hub, plays an essential role in the coordination of programming through the WoS structure and negotiating both cross-border and local access for NGOs to ensure independent and impartial delivery of assistance to those in NWS.
- As the UN response shifts towards a consent-based model, efforts must be directed at retaining the integrity of the WoS structure to prevent further obstruction of the NWS humanitarian landscape by the GoS, including OCHA's Access Unit and a strengthened Risk Management Unit.

THE VOICE OF NGOS IN POLITICAL NEGOTIATIONS

Despite the centrality of SNGOs to the humanitarian response in NWS, they have largely been kept on the periphery of developments among international actors regarding crucial cross-border access and its operational consequences. Due to the politicization of aid access into NWS, dialogue is often kept at high UN negotiating levels, but this can forgo a detailed understanding of the operational requirements for humanitarian action on-the-ground. Understanding of the NWS environment for SNGOs on-the-ground has been limited, particularly regarding the importance of community acceptance for programming implementation. This is partially a result of the remote access of international actors to NWS, but is additionally due to the difficulties in the indirect advocacy and communication of SNGO interests via the WoS coordination structure to reach the highest UN levels. Moreover, SNGOs operating in NWS can often lack a sense of cohesiveness and strong coordination processes relative to the other hubs in the WoS structure, which can limit the effectiveness of advocacy on their behalf. Nevertheless, in an evolving context where political decisions can have significant security risks for the workers of these organizations on-the-ground, it is essential that these operating conditions are considered within the positions of those negotiating on their behalf.

For example, as the politicization and uncertainty around the UNXBM has increased, the international community aimed to reduce the vulnerability of the NWS aid response with continuity planning in the event of non-renewal.¹²⁸ These have primarily included forecasts of funding gaps for programming areas and possible sources of alternative funding to the SCHF, as well as evaluations of anticipated systemic challenges in shifting focus from a UN modality. However, continuity preparations have not provided sufficiently detailed explanation for NGOs as to how operations would be impacted by a UNSC non-renewal, resulting in a limited tangible reduction of their own vulnerability.¹²⁹ Despite parallel calls for increased localization, key details for continuity efforts regarding UN operations have been held within externally driven processes at donor-levels, with high levels of political sensitivity. Requests to OCHA and donors from the NWS NGO community for information regarding programming consequences in the event of a cessation of SCHF funding face an absence of in-depth detail regarding which projects would be cut and in which locations. NGOs are largely dependent on their respective clusters' levels of preparation for this information, as well as their own capacity to generate scenario planning. They still face uncertainty as to which of their activities they should seek alternative funding to support and scale-up, tangibly impacting project design and priorities

¹²⁸ KII, Syria analyst

¹²⁹ Refugees International, "[Earthquake Aftermath: Aiding Northwest Syria Without Rehabilitating Assad](#)," June 8, 2023.

for subsequent funding cycles.¹³⁰ This disproportionately impacts SNGOs who receive less direct-donor funding, despite comprising the bulk of responders on-the-ground.¹³¹ As explored below, changes to the involvement of UN coordination structures and technical support has significant consequences for an NGO-led response. A lack of assurances over the commitment of these structures in the absence of a UNSC resolution inhibits the NGO community from cohesively replicating and developing these structures where necessary.

This trend has continued throughout negotiations regarding the conditions of a consent-based agreement between the UN and GoS, where the communication of the position of NWS SNGOs has struggled to be effectively communicated to senior levels. The sensitive, political nature of bilateral negotiations between UN headquarters and the GoS has meant that the information flow between those on-the-ground, the OCHA Gaziantep Hub, and UN officials has been stifled. Much of the advocacy from the NGO community in NWS is required to be communicated through multiple layers of WoS UN architecture. The NGO community in NWS must provide a cohesive voice to be communicated to OCHA Gaziantep hub's Humanitarian Liaison Group (HLG), to then be advocated for at the WoS level, and finally to UN HQ. Despite the publication of the position of the NGO community,¹³² a level of disjunction has emerged within the UN's institutional understanding of associated risks of a consent-based model for SNGOs, underscored by ongoing concerns around the neutrality and bias of the WoS structure.¹³³ This has resulted in sentiments that the conditions attached to a consent-based agreement will be imposed on the NWS humanitarian community, rather than one that reflects a consensus between SNGOs and the UN of what not only is acceptable on principle, but operationally implementable.¹³⁴

The absence of any cross-border aid through Bab al-Hawa weeks after a consent agreement was reached between the GoS and UN illustrated the validity of these concerns.¹³⁵ The HTS-SSG reportedly refused to communicate with UN agencies, including OCHA, to facilitate shipments through Bab al-Hawa and their distribution in Idlib in protest of their exclusion from negotiations on cross-border access and the conditions of the agreement with the GoS.¹³⁶ This dispute placed almost two million people at risk of starvation in NWS, as prepositioned bread rations ran out in camps across Idlib in the last week of August, in addition to worsening water shortages, with WFP unable to distribute additional food baskets.¹³⁷ Although negotiations between Bab al-Hawa authorities and UN agencies reportedly moved forward to allow access,¹³⁸ the omission of SNGO warnings and dialogue with local authorities has jeopardized the ability of the UN to safeguard overarching aid access to one of the most vulnerable regions of Syria. Aid access for NWS is undeniably premised on the ability to conduct cross-border operations, but it also comprises distribution within fragile community contexts. Due to restrictions of remote access for international aid agencies, significant consideration should be given to the consequences of any agreement for implementing partners in NWS. Voices of the NGO community must, therefore, be included sufficiently at WoS and UN HQ levels regarding cross-border access agreements and consequential continuity planning to ensure operations can continue impartially and independently.

¹³⁰ KII, SNGO representative

¹³¹ CSIS, "[Rescuing Aid in Syria](#)," February 2022.

¹³² MedGlobal, SNA, SNL, Syria Civil Defense, and Syria Relief, "[Joint Statement - the Position of The Syrian Non-Governmental Organizations Regarding the Recent Developments on the Cross-Border Humanitarian Assistance](#)," August 30, 2023.

¹³³ Health in Humanitarian Crises Center, "[Cross-Border Humanitarian Mechanism to Northwest Syria: Current Status and Implications](#)," July 26, 2023.

¹³⁴ KII, SNGO representative

¹³⁵ UN News, "[UN: Deal Reached with Syria to Reopen Main Border Crossing from Türkiye](#)," August 9, 2023.

¹³⁶ Enab Baladi News, "[Despite 'Understandings' Between the UN and the Regime, What are the Reasons for the Lack of Entry of UN Aid Into Northwestern Syria?](#)" March 9, 2023.

¹³⁷ Syrian Network for Human Rights, "[SNHR Condemns the Halting of UN Humanitarian Assistance Delivery via Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing for Seven Weeks to Date, Threatening Tens of Thousands of Civilians' Lives](#)," August 28, 2023.

¹³⁸ Humanitarian Action Coordination, "[مكتب تنسيق العمل الإنساني في إدلب يفوض الأمم المتحدة باستخدام معبر باب الهوى في شمال غرب سوريا للدخال، المساعدات الإنسانية](#)," September 12, 2023.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMPLEMENTARY OR ALTERNATIVE FUNDING MECHANISMS

In the context of political uncertainty around the UNXBM, donors have been increasingly aware of the vulnerabilities posed to humanitarian funding for NWS due to the dominance of the SCHF. Ongoing donor and UN dialogue to explore a complementary or alternative financing mechanism culminated in the creation of a multi-donor pooled fund in late 2022, under the working title of the Interim Northern Syria Aid Fund (INSAF).¹³⁹ The initiative was set up with the support of the UK's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) acting as the lead contractor for the Fund Management Agent in the form of a consortium led by Adam Smith International.¹⁴⁰ Now known as the Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS) since its formal launch in December 2022, this pooled-fund had an initial mandate to arrange a financing mechanism to take over, if ever necessary, the role of the SCHF within the broader cross-border architecture. Although the original motivation for AFNS was indeed to provide a level of contingency preparation, donors recognized the utility of a complementary funding mechanism that could operate alongside the SCHF, regardless of non-renewal.

Complementarity between AFNS and the SCHF could facilitate a greater range of programming conducted by humanitarian response in NWS. With the potential to operate beyond some of the political restrictions faced by the SCHF, a complementary fund can fill gaps in the wider response architecture and within SCHF allocations that are currently under-resourced.¹⁴¹ In this regard, for example, AFNS aims to facilitate programming that is: (i) flexible, operating beyond 12-month timeframes and with potential capacity to rapidly release funds when required; (ii) responsive, conducted by local organizations rooted in the needs of their communities; and (iii) sustainable, contributing to life-saving outcomes through supporting SNGO resilience and reducing international aid dependency. This ultimately comprises longer-term interventions that cannot be funded within the timeframes of UNXBM agreements, and contribute to further direct financing of SNGOs through a pooled-fund mechanism.

One advantage of a pooled-fund is that there is no relationship between a certain donor's contribution and an individual grant.¹⁴² This has the potential to alleviate restrictive, political red lines within government aid agencies which have prevented funding being directed to historically problematic programming, such as early recovery.¹⁴³ AFNS seeks to address the shifting acknowledgement of the limited impact that current relief-dominated programming has had in reducing humanitarian needs while facing repeated cuts to NGO funding. Instead, as a pooled-fund, it has the opportunity to support early recovery interventions that are implemented by SNGOs in conjunction with tangible life-saving outcomes, as a cross-cutting element of integrated programming. Although life-saving assistance should remain prioritized, this should be complemented by efforts to consolidate the resilience of communities to address the needs of vulnerable populations in the present NWS context. For instance, multiple clusters, including WASH and FSL, have identified a need to implement interventions for improved climate resilience as a life-saving priority. This approach aims to go beyond the division, often perceived by donors, between funding either emergency relief or early recovery, to apply a balance of each according to the most urgent gaps identified by communities.¹⁴⁴

The formulation of effective allocation strategies is significantly contingent on cooperation with (and within) the current cluster structure of the humanitarian response and the articulation of current needs-gaps, opportunities

¹³⁹ KII, donor representative

¹⁴⁰ [Aid Fund for Northern Syria Manual](#), March 2023

¹⁴¹ [Aid Fund for Northern Syria Charter](#), January 2023.

¹⁴² [Aid Fund for Northern Syria FAQs](#), February 25, 2023.

¹⁴³ KII, donor representative

¹⁴⁴ KII, donor representative

for integrated programming, and risks of possible overlap.¹⁴⁵ It requires engagement from incumbent donor and coordination structures to evaluate how the funds can be employed to further cluster objectives. To facilitate this, for example, AFNS' Strategic and Technical Review Committee (STRC), which includes cluster leads and co-leads as well as independent technical experts, contribute to AFNS allocations from existing cluster strategies and priorities, in addition to analysis produced by external research institutions.¹⁴⁶

An additional challenge for a complementary pooled-fund is to ensure full and considered engagement with local actors that have evolved to uphold the humanitarian response in NWS. Regarding its aim to be responsive to local needs, AFNS has sought to build out systematic community feedback mechanisms in the assessment and design of its allocation strategies.¹⁴⁷ This community input falls outside of SNGO partner proposals of their own identified gaps and comprises part of AFNS's localization strategy to go beyond direct funding of SNGOs, on the rationale that communities will better communicate needs on-the-ground. However, although there may be cases in which some NGOs are more divorced from community needs than others, the operational conditions, social dynamics of heavily displaced communities, and evolution of the humanitarian sector in NWS must be considered. Remote-access restrictions have resulted in the development of a strong NGO sector in NWS that has adapted over 12 years to operate in a dynamic, complex, and pressured environment. This comes with correspondingly deep expertise of how to practically implement programming in an incredibly fragile and insecure context. Particularly in regard to advancing localization, SNGOs often face requests from multiple, overlapping donor initiatives in the form of surveys and workshops, as well as efforts from within the cluster system.¹⁴⁸ AFNS's objectives hinge on effective integration with both existing community and SNGO initiatives and structures. But greater insight is needed not only on the presence and capacity of SNGOs operating in NWS, but also to map which efforts are currently underway in the same direction as those AFNS hopes to advance.¹⁴⁹

There is wide acknowledgement that increased clarity across the sector over the capacity of AFNS will alleviate gaps in understanding and identify opportunities for engagement. For instance, after delays to disbursements of the first allocation following the earthquakes, questions arose within the NGO community as to how prepared AFNS is to process large swathes of additional funding in the case of non-renewal.¹⁵⁰ The gaps-driven strategy of AFNS corresponds to the continued SCHF ability to fund a vast majority of urgent humanitarian relief, such as food baskets and pharmaceuticals. An end to the SCHF would likely impact AFNS capacity to direct funding to innovative and localized early recovery programming that goes beyond predominantly life-saving relief.¹⁵¹

The capacity to rapidly process funds to new implementing partners as needed is related to a key issue identified by humanitarian stakeholders around the partner selection for previous AFNS allocations, with only limited SNGOs qualifying to apply for funds during its first.¹⁵² KII inputs attributed AFNS's narrower partner selection for the first special allocation as an exceptional risk-management decision to distribute funds as quickly as possible within the first few months of AFNS's operation, due to the longer time taken for compliance checks of new partners.¹⁵³ It is important to note, here, the early stages of AFNS's formal establishment as a fund that is developing strategy and procedures within an evolving context. The criteria for the first allocation, shared with the NWS NGO fora in

¹⁴⁵ [Aid Fund for Northern Syria Regular Allocation Strategy June 2023.](#)

¹⁴⁶ [Aid Fund for Northern Syria Handbook January 2023.](#)

¹⁴⁷ [Aid Fund for Northern Syria Regular Allocation Strategy June 2023; Aid Fund for Northern Syria Special Allocation Strategy January 2023.](#)

¹⁴⁸ KII, SNGO representative

¹⁴⁹ KII, SNGO representative

¹⁵⁰ KII, SNGO representatives

¹⁵¹ KII, donor representative

¹⁵² KII, SNGO representatives

¹⁵³ KII, donor representative

December 2022,¹⁵⁴ was part of a trial run for the new pooled-fund and, therefore, saw various areas of improvement identified. Nevertheless, concerns remain over the time necessary to clear a backlog of advanced compliance requirements of a larger range of local implementing partners before a new fund could take up a comparable role in the response to existing mechanisms.

A complementary fund indeed brings several benefits to the flexibility and resilience of the cross-border response in NWS, that will be maximized over time with further engagement, communication, and information sharing between AFNS, SNGOs, and communities. However, this should come with consideration that a complementary pooled-fund, as a consortium of existing donors, adds another layer of required compliance and reporting requirements for NGOs in addition to the direct from donor and SCHF funding processes they already go through.¹⁵⁵ The impact of these additional demands disproportionately affects smaller NGOs, and further proactive support regarding strategies' definition, partners eligibility, and fund operational guidance will be useful to ensure partners are not excluded from participation. There are undoubtedly sensitive political calculations as to the associated risks of consolidating an alternative fund to the SCHF. However, at a time of significant uncertainty for those operating in NWS, alongside acute risks to aid provision to beneficiaries as a result of time-intensive cross-border access negotiations, there are important discussions to be had regarding how AFNS can best support the cross-border response.

Crucially, a complementary fund presents just one pillar of a multifaceted, possible alternative modality for cross-border continuity. Amid commentary on the politicized response to the earthquakes, stakeholders called on donors to boost funding through AFNS.¹⁵⁶ These have only intensified since the non-renewal of the UNSC Resolution in July, and during the subsequent consent-based agreement negotiations. However, these have often been accompanied by an overemphasis of the role of AFNS within the wide cross-border response. This has contributed to a misconception that they can operate in a comparable nature to OCHA, misidentifying the specific technical, and politically limited, remit of AFNS as a funding mechanism which does not operate as a coordination body for procurement or access.¹⁵⁷ It is only one component of the broader architecture, and which requires donor, NGO, and UN support and guidance to be effectively utilized to increase the resilience of the cross-border response. Neither the SCHF or AFNS can push for OCHA and other supporting UN agencies to facilitate their complementary roles within the UNXBM and the auxiliary coordination necessary to help distribute funds, including within any consent-based cross-border agreement. Existing, and future, efforts of cooperation between actors are key for the possibility of tangibly integrating a parallel fund into the existing aid infrastructure.

The limited role of AFNS as a pooled-fund is similarly reflected in the support that will be required in the logistical processes of cross-border aid delivery. Outside of the UN transshipment procedure through Bab al-Hawa, NGOs use a number of commercial border crossings into NWS. Although not without risks, existing NGO usage of commercial crossings provides an opportunity for this modality to be scaled-up and coordinated to compensate for the gaps and vulnerabilities of an UNSC-mandated system. Non-UN commercial cross-border activity has continued to play an essential role in the NWS aid landscape for humanitarian programming procurement. Implementing partners in NWS import a notable proportion of their supplies commercially outside of the UN Transshipment Hub system, including when using SCHF funds and other essential access and negotiations components of the UNXBM.¹⁵⁸ Although some SNGOs purely use the UNXBM for their programs, a number only use it to acquire supplies for which they need additional procurement support, such as controlled pharmaceuticals. For other materials, they use border crossings commercially, through Bab al-Salameh, al-Ra'i, and al-Hamam. To scale-up an NGO response through the use of a

¹⁵⁴ [Aid Fund for Northern Syria Special Allocation Strategy January 2023](#).

¹⁵⁵ KII, humanitarian coordination representative

¹⁵⁶ Refugees International, "[Earthquake Aftermath: Aiding Northwest Syria Without Rehabilitating Assad](#)," June 8, 2023.

¹⁵⁷ KII, donor representative

¹⁵⁸ KII, SNGO representative

pooled-fund such as AFNS will, therefore, require a corresponding scale-up of commercial cross-border aid delivery to reduce vulnerability to the politicization of a UNXBM.

UN COORDINATION, ACCESS, AND RISK MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

It is difficult to overstate the importance of technical support from the UN for a continued humanitarian response in NWS, including any implementation of alternative funding mechanisms. The UNXBM is not only comprised of trucks of physical aid and a logistical transshipment process, but it also plays a key leadership role for access, coordination, and procurement through the WoS architecture. UN-supplied aid items are just one part of the broader humanitarian response in NWS. Elements such as the payment of staff salaries, cash assistance, facility maintenance, MHPSS, among others, may come directly from donors or INGOs, and often as commercial cargo, but remain dependent on the continued cluster and working group UN coordination structure. The WoS system was created to bring together multiple response areas under a common coordination framework, but which sits outside each operational hub, to help align programming, funding distributions, and aid delivery across opposition- and GoS- controlled areas. It also attempts to provide a degree of neutrality in the Syrian humanitarian landscape in the context of systemic instrumentalization of aid by the GoS. Additionally, OCHA's Access Working Group, including its lead Access Unit, plays an essential role in interacting with local authorities on behalf of humanitarian actors, particularly when managing incidents of restricted access and security risk. If this wide support system is not upheld, cross-border assistance through any alternative funding or logistical mechanisms will be difficult to implement on the ground.

The post-earthquake period allowed, for the first time, substantive OCHA access to NWS alongside the opening of Bab al-Salameh and al-Ra'i crossings in February. Prior to this, OCHA had not been able to have meaningful insight into the cross-border operations into NWS.¹⁵⁹ By the end of May, the UN had completed 116 inter-agency cross-border missions.¹⁶⁰ This increased access allowed for greater monitoring of SCHF projects and insight into issues faced across sectoral programming, as well as operational difficulties faced by implementing partners on-the-ground. There have reportedly been subsequent improvements in the coordination of the NWS humanitarian response, including tackling interference in the aid operations of SNGOs from local authorities.

Since the expiry of the cross-border UNSC resolution in July, concerns around the disproportionate influence of the Damascus regional hub over UN operations have grown into fully-fledged fears about the abandonment of the WoS structure, which has been in place for almost ten years. The new UN resident coordinator and humanitarian coordinator in Damascus has reportedly advocated for a more integrated "One Syria" approach led by Damascus, a possibility that has only become more worrisome with the shift to a GoS consent-based model of cross-border access.¹⁶¹ The condition attached to the initial GoS consent proposal regarding a requirement of the UN to collaborate with the regime for the coordination of aid implies a weakened or eradicated WoS system. Despite questions over its neutrality,¹⁶² the WoS structure provides a vital firewall between the Gaziantep and Damascus hubs to protect aid operations in NWS, which the regime has repeatedly targeted over the course of the Syrian conflict.

The independence of the Gaziantep UN regional hub is particularly important to safeguard data and information

¹⁵⁹ KII, Syria analyst

¹⁶⁰ UNSC, "[Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 \(2014\), 2165 \(2014\), 2191 \(2014\), 2258 \(2015\), 2332 \(2016\), 2393 \(2017\), 2401 \(2018\), 2449 \(2018\), 2504 \(2020\), 2533 \(2020\), 2585 \(2021\), 2642 \(2022\) and 2672 \(2023\) \(S/2023/464\)](#)," July 22, 2023.

¹⁶¹ The Middle East Institute, "[Lessons From Syria's Aid Response: The Case for Continued Cross-Border Operations](#)," June 27, 2023.

¹⁶² Health in Humanitarian Crises Center, "[Cross-Border Humanitarian Mechanism to Northwest Syria: Current Status and Implications](#)," July 26, 2023.

about humanitarian operations in NWS. In the Syrian context, data collection and its analysis are often politically targeted, which can impact the institutional coordination of its aggregation. For example, the HNO or Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) has been increasingly used as a negotiating tool by the GoS, as it looks to suppress the ability of humanitarian actors in NWS to communicate needs, raise funds, and inform allocation strategies. Moreover, continuity planning for NGOs has often been restricted due to the risk that the collation of operational data of the NGO response would further GoS arguments against the UNXBM, jeopardizing humanitarian action in the transition period from UNSC non-renewal. The Gaziantep hub has played a key role in efforts to ensure independent data collection in NWS and its inclusion in cross-country needs assessments, while upholding the firewall to protect information sharing protocols between regional hubs. The loss of the WoS structure, and the Gaziantep hub, risks further suppression of the necessary data to underpin the humanitarian response in NWS.

The move to a consent-based UNXBM exacerbates access-related and programming risks for humanitarian actors' operations, exposing the UN to a reduced ability to neutrally and impartially safeguard aid in NWS. Moreover, a lack of definitive understanding around the conditions with which UN agencies are able to operate under this agreement creates uncertainty and potential risk for several components of the WoS and Gaziantep structure. Exacerbated by different UN agencies holding different assumptions for the continuation of UN access in the event of non-renewal. Prior to the refusal of local authorities to engage with OCHA, UN coordination operations, including the Access Unit's contact with local authorities, had largely continued after the UNSC resolution expired in July. This illustrates the divided conclusions of UN agencies and HQ regarding their ability to support the response in the absence of a UNSC resolution or consent agreement with the regime. Additionally, although cluster coordinators have been funded until the end of the year, anxieties are growing among SNGOs over their resourcing once the six-month period of consent finishes. Despite assurances from OCHA Gaziantep to the NGO community that they will not roll-down of their operations, the possibility of a sustained response will ultimately be dictated by UN HQ policy once an agreement with the GoS has been substantiated. Capacities such as monitoring conducted by UN bodies, as well as intra-sectoral coordination and cross-sectoral integrated programming, including early recovery, may be weakened if the UNXBM is discontinued without planned transition.

KII inputs suggested a common attitude among the donor and UN community that, due to the remote-access constraints of NWS, SNGOs have become self-sufficient in negotiating and managing access to beneficiary communities with local authorities.¹⁶³ This has been illustrated by recent suggestions that SNGOs can arrange access for the UN to communities in Idlib amid the refusal of local authorities to engage with OCHA after the announcement of the consent agreement. A common risk mitigation strategy borne out of NWS's fluid operational constraints is the continual risk delegation to other actors. Donors delegate oversight risks to UN agencies and INGOs, who then pass on implementation risks to SNGOs; yet, this fails to appreciate associated security risks involved in such negotiations,¹⁶⁴ The refusal of HTS to engage with OCHA should not lead to increased burden on frontline SNGOs to negotiate access for UN aid distribution. Rather, it is the international credibility of the UN's neutral position that should drive access negotiations to those in need, on behalf of all humanitarian actors in NWS. The negotiating power that SNGOs have with local authorities is rooted in acting as a collective that is underpinned by the clout of UN support.¹⁶⁵ For the UN to step back from arranging wholesale access to Idlib would risk case-by-case basis negotiations between HTS, local authorities and SNGOs. This would allow these actors to barter between organizations to extract added benefits or greater aid in exchange for access to their area, much like tactics used by the GoS.

Moreover, without the negotiating influence of the UN, NGOs operating in NWS could face a complicated array of legal

¹⁶³ KII, donor representative

¹⁶⁴ Cash Working Group for Northwest Syria, "[Cash Feasibility Assessment 2020 for Northwest Syria](#)," March 2020.

¹⁶⁵ CSIS, "[Lessons Learned from a Decade of Humanitarian Operations in Syria](#)," April 22, 2021.

challenges related to sanctions and counterterrorism measures.¹⁶⁶ The classification of HTS as a designated terrorist group (DTG) has led to a reluctance of aid agencies and donor governments to work with the group and its administrative arm, the SSG. Due to concerns over aid diversion by DTGs, money laundering, and associated reputational risks, NGOs have been required to implement more robust monitoring systems and compliance measures.¹⁶⁷ Donors have often suspended or paused programs, and blacklisted certain NGOs for non-compliance, which has created reluctance among some organizations to work in areas where DTGs are present irrespective of existing vulnerabilities and needs. For instance, in 2017, one INGO operating in NWS ceased its activities after an investigation by USAID found that the organization's aid workers, "under duress," included members of HTS in their food assistance programs.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, in 2018, when HTS began imposing taxes on humanitarian aid convoys passing through the Bab-al Hawa crossing, the US and the UK directed their aid partners to stop using the crossing, while OCHA asked the SSG to remove these fees to facilitate aid delivery.¹⁶⁹ Under pressure from Western and Turkish authorities, HTS agreed to discontinue taxing the humanitarian convoys. SNGOs are often hesitant to report unintended outcomes when dealing with local authorities, as any reports of interference could result in donors ending assistance.¹⁷⁰ This strategy often places unfair burdens on implementing partners, especially for staff at the end of the chain such as field officers.

The work of the UN Access Unit to advocate for access collectively on behalf of NGOs is, therefore, essential in a context of delicate relations with local authorities, as well as increased risks of targeting by the regime of any assistance operating outside of the consent-based model. Greater efforts are needed to develop approaches to risk management for actors in NWS that are rooted in and support the existing capabilities of SNGOs in navigating the operating environment. This should crucially utilize the recently established Risk Management Unit (RMU) in its responsibility to assist cross-border operating NGOs in integrating joint risk assessments and analyses into planning, performance, and monitoring in a collaborative approach across the sector.

¹⁶⁶ The distinct impact of each is beyond the scope of this paper, given the difficulties in differentiating them and the difficulty to obtain accurate data on their respective tangible effects on NGO operations.

¹⁶⁷ Humanitarian Policy Group, "[The Impact of Bank De-Risking on the Humanitarian Response in the Syrian Crisis](#)," August 2018.

¹⁶⁸ The Humanitarian, "[Syrian Militants Served American Food Aid: US Watchdog](#)," August 23, 2018.

¹⁶⁹ The Humanitarian, "[US and UK Halt Key Syria Aid Shipments Over Extremist Taxes](#)," October 2, 2018.

¹⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch, "[Questions and Answers: How Sanctions Affect the Humanitarian Response in Syria](#)," June 22, 2023.

CONCLUSION

The weight of a natural disaster on a context already devastated by over a decade-long conflict can limit perceptions of possible ways forward to improve the lives of those living in affected areas. Media attention on the Syrian context has declined since the February earthquakes, soon overtaken by similar events in often fragile contexts elsewhere in the world. However, this should not be taken as reflective of an equivalent decline in the efforts of humanitarian stakeholders at all levels who have persisted in upholding the humanitarian response in Syria for over twelve years. Implementing partners on-the-ground continue to adapt to ever-tightening operational constraints and funding cuts, while donor aid agencies navigate forming effective allocation strategies amid the re-prioritizations of their government foreign policy objectives towards other, emerging contexts. There have been repeated crises and political setbacks over the duration of the Syrian humanitarian conflict, throughout which these actors have continued to implement urgent humanitarian assistance. While the impact of recurring conflicts, displacement, and the addition of natural disasters remain undeniably devastating, the true magnitude of the impact lies in people's ability to cope and recover. So long as there are people on-the-ground working to save the lives of those most vulnerable, the international community has a responsibility to examine how best they can be supported and, at a minimum, protected.

Although it has persisted for more than a decade, the dynamic and volatile Syrian crisis sometimes inhibits more systemic evaluations of the humanitarian response while actors rush to tackle cyclical, frequent emergencies and correspondingly acute needs. The earthquakes and subsequent political developments can provide a point in the crisis for new approaches to the response that are committed to humanitarian principles. Further efforts will need to be made at the highest levels of international humanitarian coordination to increase the resilience of the humanitarian response in NWS. If humanitarian principles are to be followed to achieve their ultimate objective to reduce suffering, this can no longer refer to a response dominated by only relief, but to assist the existing efforts of NWS humanitarian actors in improving the conditions of their own communities.

This report has sought to identify how humanitarian principles can be realigned to support the resilience of the NWS humanitarian landscape in reducing both its vulnerability to increasing cross-border politicization and aid dependency. Although many aid actors are not in a position to determine political outcomes, this report explores ways in which humanitarian action can withstand the risks posed by the current trajectory of the conflict. There are evidently considerable barriers to the execution of a shift in approach, a large proportion of which depends on longstanding political positions that dictate donor governments' appetite and approach to the crisis in NWS. Yet, there is a need for analysis to identify potential avenues where humanitarian strategy can be better contextualized and streamlined.

Many issues in this report touch upon broader themes in the sector that pose questions for the structure and dynamics of the international humanitarian system and are beyond the scope of this report. These include the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, localization, and protracted crises as the 'new normal.' There are, therefore, much larger discussions to be had, and nuances to consider, within these issues. However, this report aims to establish a contextual basis from which early considerations can be made for how these issues can be applied to the specific NWS context.