

Webinar on North West Syria – update and a Call to Action

28-05-2020

The people living in North West Syria continue to endure a severe humanitarian situation as their lives remain impacted by the effects of displacement, military operations, the protracted conflict and the collapse of the Syrian Pound. On top of that comes the threat of a Covid-19 outbreak.

As a follow up to a round table organized by KUNO in March, another webinar on the situation in North West Syria was organized, to provide professionals with an update on the situation and to present a Call to Action from the Syrian Networks League (SNL).

Speakers:

Reintje van Haeringen, Director CARE Netherlands.

Nawras Al Husein, Lead of the DRA Joint Response in North West Syria.

Mohammad Kanfash, Director of Damaan.

Marriet Schuurman, Director Stability and Humanitarian Aid, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Dr. Mohammed Zahid, Country Director Physicians Across Continents (PAC) and Representative of the Syrian Networks League.

Moderated by **Peter Heintze**, KUNO (Platform for Humanitarian Knowledge Exchange in the Netherlands).

Introductions

Dr. Mohammed Zahid – PAC Country Director and Representative of the Syrian Networks League

Dr Zahid started with some data on the humanitarian response in North West Syria: 1 million IDPs between December 2019 and now, 60% of them are children, 20% women. Syrian NGOs are on their own on the ground, since international assistance cannot cross borders. Humanitarian staff is displaced together with IDPs, leading to transfers from hospitals resulting in the loss of essential care and deaths that could have been prevented.

The cross-border resolution by the UNSC (2504) will expire in less than 2 months (10 July 2020), it shows the dependence of humanitarian organizations on political issues and the political will to renew the resolution.

Covid-19 is a concern because of the dissemination of the disease: people cannot take any appropriate measures, staying home is no option if there is no home, or if one is dependent on going out for work. The other concern relating to Covid is the capacities of the humanitarian organization that have reached their limits.

The call to action [[read here](#)] of the SNL asks for more support and more funding. The Dutch government and other donors should start to deal directly, in a more efficient way with the local – Syrian – NGOs, since they are the backbone of the response. The Dutch government and the EU should also use their political influence for negotiations and the SNL asks the humanitarian community to use their advocacy efforts in order to address the needs of the suffering community in the North West.

Mohammad Kanfash – Director of Damaan

Mohammad Kanfash emphasized that the biggest challenge today in the North West is no longer conflict, and the threat is no longer bombs. In the foreseeable future, it's the deteriorating humanitarian and socio-economic situation. Massive displacement, 1 million people over a few months, the threat of Covid and its secondary effects like closed borders as well as the deteriorating economy; the Syrian pound has devaluated by almost 100 % between April and May. In April, almost 80% of the people was dependent on humanitarian aid, by now it's almost everyone in the North West. All of this has pushed the region in unprecedented levels of poverty and suffering. And all of this with the looming expiration of the UNSC resolution 2504.

Mohammad Kanfash asked, just like his colleague Dr Zahid, for more support, money is of essential need for the time being. Direct funding and support to the first responder is needed, especially if the resolution is not going to be renewed, they will be the ones that keep working on the front lines. Cross-line operations need to be scaled up too.

It is important to know that the current needs are not just created now. In 2018, against all pleas and against the better judgement of many people on the ground, major donors cut their donations to Idleb (and the entire NW region), leaving the population without much needed support.

Marriet Schuurman – Director Stability and Humanitarian Aid, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) shared the concerns that are voiced in the *Call to Action*. The impacts of the Covid-crisis, primary and secondary can be seen in the multiplication of humanitarian needs. MFA also appreciates the resilience of the Syrian people and the local NGOs, and at the same time recognize that their abilities are reaching a limit.

Marriet Schuurman indicated that responding within the Covid crisis is kind of a Litmus test, when it comes to localization and making a difference on the ground. For NW Syria, MFA is scaling up, in financial terms as well as in terms of humanitarian diplomacy. This is done through UN channels, by supporting the global call for a ceasefire and by supporting the renewal of the cross border resolutions.

On direct support and direct funding Marriet Schuurman said they do recognize their limitations, it is not simply a bureaucratic or administrative limitation, but it is a question of accountability to the Dutch taxpayer. Therefore, there are capacity limits in directly funding local responders, the MFA has to use channels like the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) and the country based pool funds (UN). By using these channels effective partnerships can be created to get the money and funds where they are needed the most.

Reintje van Haeringen, Director of CARE Netherlands (lead in the DRA JR in North West Syria)

Within the DRA the situation in NW Syria has been high upon the agenda for a long time. It is clear that more communication and a joint agenda setting of (I)NGOs is needed. Partnerships and networks should be looked at to effectively organize humanitarian aid in North West Syria, CARE international is for example part of the Syrian INGO Regional Forum (SIRF).

Covid-19 might be an opportunity to re-emphasize the importance of cross-border activities, of funding and of the role of local NGOs. The need for direct funding is high, especially because in the NW Syria situation, INGOs like CARE are not even on the ground themselves. New mechanisms to channel funds and monitor these funds need to be created. Local NGOs and INGOs are

interdependent, and that should be used in these funding mechanisms. The same goes for the risk-sharing factor in this discussion.

Nawras al Husein, CARE Netherlands, lead of the DRA Joint Response in North West Syria

Nawras al Husein shared some detailed information on the CARE-led DRA acute crisis Joint Response in North West Syria. The JR reached around 100 000 individuals, it was led by CARE together with other DRA partners. The period initially was from July 2019 to December 2019, but in 2020 a new period was added from February 2020 to August 2020. In that second part of the Joint Response another 2 million euros were allocated by the DRA, topped-up with another 500 000 euros for the Covid response. In total more than 70 000 people are targeted with this response, focussing on shelter, WASH, multi-purpose cash, health and protection.

Key points from the discussion

- The needs of the population in the North West is already dire, and will become only worse in the near future due to more displacement, the secondary effects of the Covid-crisis and the lack of access to education and health facilities.
- The Netherlands are one of the major contributors to the Syrian humanitarian response, they work closely together with the Syrian community. The Syrian Networks League (SNL) exists of 8 alliances and networks that work together to divide mandates, avoid competition in providing humanitarian aid on the ground and share available resources.
- Funding mechanisms in the humanitarian system need to be changed. For example, direct funding to local actors should be done in an accountable way, but keeping in mind that it is not always possible to have people on the ground to monitor the situation (as is the case in North West Syria).
- On the psychosocial support: there is recognition of the importance of this approach, at the same time in the current situation needs need to be prioritized and malnutrition and keeping children alive is higher on this list.
- On the Syria IV Brussels conference – potential key messages for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs:
 - The SNL together with other Syrian (civil society) organizations (more than 150 actors) have started a Brussels taskforce. They are working on categorizing the needs and priorities of the Syrians.
 - The need to change the humanitarian response system, especially on ways to get funds to the Syrian population on the ground. Localization and risk-sharing needs to be operationalized.
 - Cross-line operations should be scaled up.
 - Political negotiations need to be scaled up. Pressure from the EU and from Russia on actors in Damascus and the North East is needed. The same goes for the discussions on the UN resolutions, that needs to be renewed.
 - A change from an acute crisis joint response to a protracted crisis joint response should be made. The situation can no longer be seen as an acute crisis, and the focus should be on more long-term solutions.
- Localization and risk-sharing need to be operationalized, instead of staying container terms used to reference to all kinds of activities, without leading to practical implementations on the ground.

- The Covid-crisis should be used as an opportunity to make processes more fluid, and to think outside of the box. Re-assess the situation on the ground, and re-assess the lessons we learned on how to do things radically different.