

**NORTHWEST SYRIA**

**THE IMPACT OF  
COVID-19 ON THE  
DELIVERY OF AID FOR  
INGOS AND LOCAL  
NGOS -**

**OPPORTUNITY OR  
CHALLENGE FOR AID  
LOCALISATION?**

**kuno**



Syrian White Helmets Spreading Awareness in Camps  
Source: The Syria Campaign, 2020

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- **March 2011:** Protests in southern Syria begin spreading to Idlib governorate (gov.) in September and intensifying in Aleppo the following year.
- **Early 2013:** Opposition controlled areas include most of Idlib and northern Aleppo gov., as well as parts of Hama and Latakia governorates.
- **Mid-2014:** So called ISIL starts expanding its areas of control in northern and eastern Syria. By May 2015, the territory under ISIL control includes large parts of northern and eastern Aleppo gov.
- **December 2016:** The Government of Syria (GoS) retakes control of the entire city of Aleppo, following six months of besiegement.
- **March 2017:** Turkish-backed opposition forces conclude operation, controlling areas between Afrin and Menbij districts in northern Aleppo.
- **October 2017-February 2018:** The GoS makes significant territorial gains in Hama, Aleppo and southern Idlib gov.,
- **January-March 2018:** Turkish Forces and Turkish-backed opposition groups enter Afrin
- **September 2018:** The Sochi agreement leads to a demilitarised zone around the front line, guaranteed by Russia and Turkey. Idlib, western Aleppo and north-western Hama are some of the last remaining opposition-held areas in Syria
- **December 2019-March 2020:** Conflict intensifies, leading to a significant reduction in opposition-controlled territory.
- **5 March 2020- present:** conflict stabilizes after peace treaty signed between Turkey and Russia on March 2020 which solidified significant territorial gains by the GoS in Idlib and Aleppo.

Change in opposition-controlled areas



Sources: REACH, 2020

## Research Project & Context

The global health crisis COVID-19 has accelerated the needs of vulnerable populations receiving humanitarian assistance in crisis-affected countries, such as Syria. In the initial months of the pandemic, COVID-19 related mobility restrictions, quarantines and physical distancing posed major challenges to international and local aid organisations to address those needs. Local actors became immediate responders (Brubaker et al, 2021). The pandemic response has reaffirmed a debate regarding “aid localisation”, a concept which refers to commitments of of equal decision-making in partnerships, 25% direct funding and local leadership and coordination, made in the 2016 Grand Bargain policy document by the largest international aid organisations and the donor community to ensure effective and sustainable aid (IFRC, no date; Brabant and Patel, 2017).

In response to Covid-19, the platform for humanitarian knowledge exchange (KUNO) called for evidence-based research on how restrictions and challenges posed by COVID-19 have been addressed by humanitarian practitioners in crisis contexts (VHL, 2020).

With CARE NL, as a member of the KUNO initiative, and commissioner of this research project, the research addressed their aim to uncover principle impacts of the pandemic on the delivery aid but also identified how the pandemic has altered the relationships between international and local organisations, as part of the ongoing aid localisation debate (Personal interview, 2020)

To answer the given objectives, my research project looked at aspects that shape and challenge the delivery of aid for the collaborative response by international and local NGOs in the context of Northwest Syria. An analysis of literature findings combined with qualitative content analysis from interviews with 8 staff from international and local NGOs, and 1 donor organisation, active in the response to Northwest Syria, determined that the impact of COVID-19 was most acute on aspects of their interaction on partnerships, coordination and funding but that main challenges in their relationships were of systemic nature.

# The Impact of COVID-19 on the Crisis and the Organisation of the Response

## Situation Overview in Northwest Syria as of June 2020:

- Of 4.1 million people in NWS, **2.7 were internally displaced** of whom 1 mio were displaced due to the escalation of conflict in December 2019. **Ongoing hostilities continue**
- In total, half of the population in NWS was in need of humanitarian assistance. **50% of people in NWS relied on food assistance** as a primary source (European Commission, 2020)
- **Camps** in NWS were in bad conditions: due to informal set-ups they are prone to flooding and **lack vital infrastructure** such as access to water and sewage
- Since June 2020, the **devaluation of the Syrian Pound** reached historical heights. It weakened by 360% in one year since June 2019. High inflation and continued depreciation of the SYP have led to a significant **decline in the purchasing power of households** (OCHA 2020; REACH 2020)
- Humanitarian support, particularly that of shelter remained limited due to **barriers in access** (REACH, 2020)

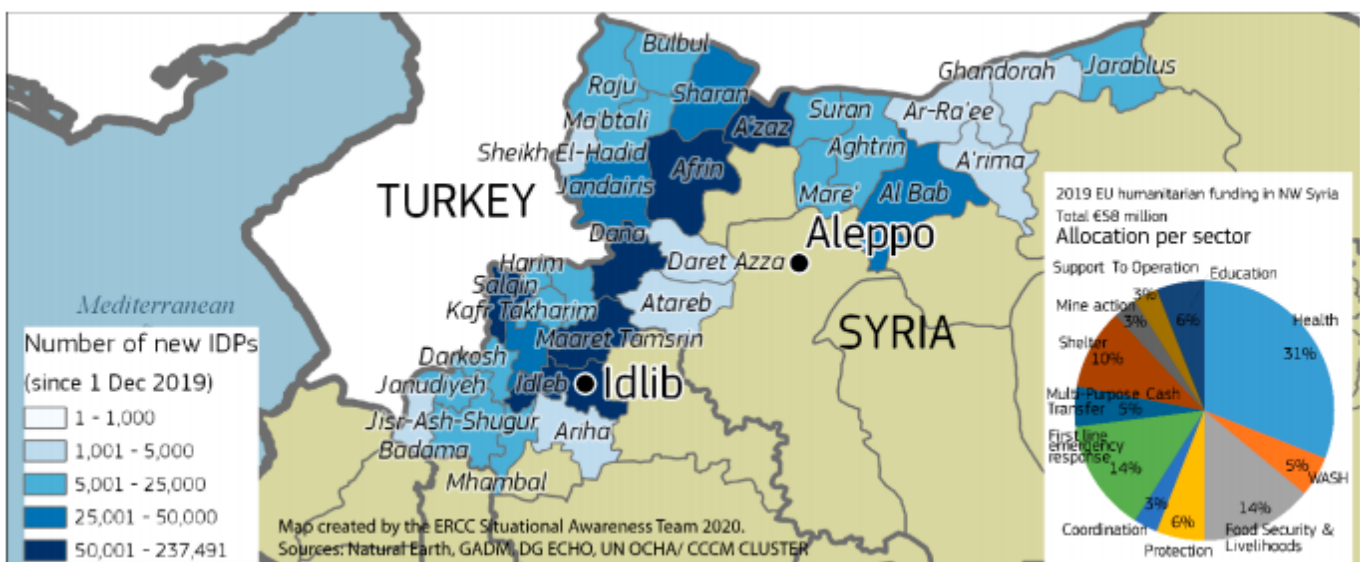
## With COVID-19:

- **Needs** especially for **WASH** have **accelerated** in light of increasing infections.
- The deteriorating economy has made **more people food insecure**. Due to harsh conditions markets remained open, exposing more people to the virus.
- **The lack of sufficient hospitals** and COVID-19 equipment, testing facilities and medical personell exacerbated the response to the virus (REACH, 2020)
- Initial assessments found that **97% of humanitarian activities to Northwest Syria were initially affected by preventive measures** related to COVID-19 in March 2020, while **60% of organisations reported funding concerns** (OCHA, 2020)

10 years of conflict in Syria have shaped the aid environment: nearly half of 22 million Syrians have been displaced, of them 6 million internally. Violence, displacement, economic decline and food insecurity have resulted in 60% of people in need of humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2020). Particularly, the protracted political and humanitarian situation in the opposition controlled area, Idlib Governorate, in Northwest Syria, has drawn much attention of the international community. A region which saw an influx of 1 million refugees in the beginning of 2019 (UNHCR, 2020).

In an effort to provide humanitarian aid, humanitarian organisations have increasingly been confronted by rising obstacles: ongoing violence against aid workers, administrative roadblocks such as registration issues for NGOs, sanctions, financial restrictions, and aid diversion by armed groups disrupted the delivery of humanitarian services (Roepstorff et al, 2020; Dixon et al, 2016) Literature refers to Syria as "one of the most challenging places in the world to deliver aid to" (Balkhi, 2021; McGoldrick, 2016; Hall and Todman, 2021).

COVID-19 has exacerbated these needs. Overcrowded shelters and the lack of access to water and sanitary equipment make it impossible for people in Northwest Syria to comply with preventative health measures. The destroyed health system, lack of medical personnel and equipment exacerbate the existing dire living conditions for Syrians. At the same time, humanitarian services were interrupted or delayed.





# The Impact of COVID-19 on the Relations between local, international NGOs and donor organisations

Increasing challenges in humanitarian access posed a critical factor to effective aid delivery. Mutual cooperation between international and Syrian actors was the result of the aid environment (Els et al. 2016; Todman and Hall; 2020). Most crucial aspects that shaped the interactions between local, international NGOs and donor organisations were found among partnerships, coordination and funding dimensions, necessary to evaluate the impacts of COVID-19 and assess progress on the localisation commitments (Dixon et al. 2016; Van Brabant and Patel, 2017).

Findings from primary and secondary data found that the nature of partnerships between international and Syrian organisations was of unequal power. Subcontracting arrangements between partners was most common. Those were often determined by strict donor compliances, resulting in limited decision-making capability for LNGOs in project designs, little financial resources for capacity building, or the need for local's EU registrations to qualify for direct funding. High risks of aid diversion and fraud by non-state actors, which appeared as a by-product of the high risk environment, caused mutual trust issues (Personal interviews, 2020).

With COVID-19, partnerships were most impacted by an increased online communication. Since COVID-19 preventative measures were enforced by humanitarians rather than by local authorities, fast decisions needed to be made, increased communication efforts among INGOs and partners was felt, causing uncertainty and stress for staff.



Source: Arabnews, 2020

A significant outcome was that the COVID-19 crisis was better managed by partners, due to their familiarity of working within the Syrian crisis. For example, since remote communication was already the prevailing way of communication prior to COVID-19, it helped partners to timely implement COVID-19 measures and changes (Personal interviews, 2020).

Although clusters for the cross-border assistance were active ever since the conflict, local leadership roles remained absent. With COVID-19 a "COVID-19 Task Force" was managed by international organisations. While the absence of local leadership in UN clusters was noted, a stronger network of local-local cooperation appeared as a key finding, such as the Syrian NGO Alliance (Personal interviews, 2020).

Funding was a major contributor in defining the relationships between partners. Commitments at 25% direct funding were not implemented. Underlying structural issues accounted as a reason, such as with INGOs as "funding intermediaries", producing high transaction costs. With COVID-19 more flexible and additional funding was supplied by donors. Future funding concerns due to global economic decline dominated the sentiments (Els et al., 2016; personal interviews, 2020).

# The Impact of COVID-19 on Localisation

Discussions of the need to ensure localisation-made commitments in terms of increased decision-making for local actors, more direct funding and local leadership arose renewed attention during COVID-19.

Research findings showed that these commitments lagged implementation. A major obstacle was to define a local actor and hence, who qualified for direct funding. The absence of indicators measuring the performance of localisation was criticised. Although reaching a consensus on the importance of localisation, remote locations of donors and INGOs led to the disconnection of the real needs in the field.

**“Localisation becomes a romanticised concept”** (R4, personal interview, 2020).

Close ties between political and humanitarian agendas, posed challenges to aimed commitments of localisation.

**“Power is the gatekeeper and this is with big international NGOs”**

(R4, personal interview, 2020)

Power imbalances between the global north and the south addressed criticism on the setup of the international humanitarian system as an underlying barrier to transformational change.








The momentum of COVID-19 created awareness for the idea of localisation, and raised attention to the case of Syria. Opportunities were noticed in the enhanced digital infrastructure, quick and creative programmatic adaptations and additional COVID-19 funding. The most positive outcome posed the overall recognition and the need to increase local decision-making as well as the access to pooled funds, the call for local proposals and the increased local to local cooperation. Highlighting “all gaps in the system” discussions with humanitarian practitioners led to a call for concrete actions for improved collaboration ensuring the effective delivery of aid.

## Two Most Important Recommendations

First, drivers for structural change are multifaceted and need to occur on different levels. Donors and policy makers need to **define localisation** in identifying SMART indicators and set a specific time frame for achieving results. Markers of localisation could follow the START Network’s approach to localisation (see image below)

Secondly, CARE NL and other INGOs need to advocate for **equitable partnerships** at donor level. Risks can be reduced in calculating costs adequately: increase the amount of **funding for local capacity strengthening**, provide **insurance for locals**, and **call for local proposals**. In M&E, ‘success’ must be measured by both, the number of beneficiaries assisted and the quality of performance by locals.

### Seven dimensions of localisation

FUNDING	PARTNERSHIPS	CAPACITY	PARTICIPATION REVOLUTION	COORDINATION MECHANISMS	VISIBILITY	POLICY INFLUENCE
						
25%	Less sub contracting	Institutional development	Of crisis affected communities Gender, age, disabilities...	National actors greater presence and influence	Roles, results and innovations by national actors	National actors greater presence and influence in international policy debates
As directly as possible	More equitable	Stop undermining				
Better quality						

The Start Fund, Start Network  
and Localisation

Source: Patel and Van Brabant, 2017

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