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The NGO sector in Syria – an overview

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Introduction

This paper gives an overview of the NGO sector in Syria. It was originally written in 2010 as an internal INTRAC document to support a capacity building project for the Syrian NGO sector, conducted by INTRAC in conjunction with the Syrian NGO Platform and UNDP, and which benefited from a grant made by the British Embassy in Damascus in 2010. Given the emergency now engulfing Syria, both INTRAC and the author feel it would be useful to publish it – the urgent need for humanitarian aid to Syria during the crisis, some of which may be channelled through local partners, and effective reconstruction and development work in a post-Assad Syria will require a good understanding of the current NGO sector in Syria.

As the paper was written in 2010, and the author has not visited Syria since July 2011, details on more recent developments are less prominent and may contain errors. Nor is the information on the sector complete; this would require a much longer paper. However, this paper gives a basic understanding of the NGO sector in Syria and the context in which it operates. The paper only covers charitable and developmental organisations; there are also occupational, professional and cultural organisations in Syria which may have the potential to undertake developmental activities.

Brief background details on Syria

Syria (the Syrian Arab Republic) is located in western Asia, bordering Lebanon, the Mediterranean, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and Israel. The capital is Damascus, with other major cities including Aleppo, Hama, Deir az-Zour, Homs and Latakia. The country is divided into 14 administrative provinces. Geographically, Syria consists mainly of an arid plateau, but agriculture is possible in around 25% of the territory, mainly the coastal areas, and the north-east and south, where rain and river-fed agriculture is possible. However, in recent years both water sources have significantly decreased and severe droughts have made life very difficult in the agricultural regions, especially the north east. Until recently, urbanisation in Syria was low (estimated at 3.1% for 2005-10), but this has increased considerably due to the droughts. Syria has limited oil reserves and this has been an important source of government income. Experts expect these sources to decrease in the near future.

The Arabic name for Syria (*al-Sham*) traditionally meant the entire region of the Levant; after World War II, what is now the modern state of Syria was carved out as a French mandate. Syria gained independence from France in 1946, followed by an unstable period of coups and coup

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attempts. In 1962 an emergency law was declared, which is still in place today. In 1963 the Arab Nationalist Baath party took power, and in 1970 Hafez al-Assad became President, bringing political stability through increasing suppression of political dissent. He was succeeded upon his death in 2000 by his son, Bashar al-Assad. The Assads are Alawites, a minority Muslim Shia sect. Although officially a parliamentary republic, the country is effectively ruled by the Baath party, with power largely concentrated in the President and a small group of military and political strongmen, who are widely seen as constituting a repressive and corrupt dictatorial regime. Political freedoms are virtually non-existent, although religious minorities are largely left alone. Under its socialist banner, the Baath party established infrastructure such as roads, water and sanitation and electricity across Syria, and a basic welfare system of free public health care and education up to and including university level. Although initially these services were of a reasonable standard, quality is now very low and demand very high.

Syria has played and continues to play an important political and strategic role in the region, and received financial and political support from the USSR during the Cold War, and from the Arab Gulf states, particularly during the 1960s and 70s. It has a close relationship with Iran, and has been involved in Palestinian and Lebanese affairs and conflicts. Syria has fought two wars with Israel, and lost the Golan Heights to Israel in 1967, resulting in the loss of an important strategic area and water source and the internal displacement of thousands of Syrian Golanis and some Palestinian refugees, mostly now resettled in and around Damascus. Syria had a brief union with Egypt from 1958 to 1961. Syria is surrounded by conflict zones: recurrent Kurdish problems in eastern Turkey, the war in Iraq, dormant hostility with Israel (with occasional small cross-border incidents) and recurrent instability and a long civil war in Lebanon.

Internationally, over the past decades, Syria has been relatively isolated; this was partially self-imposed, with links with the outside world closely monitored or blocked, and an emphasis on economic self-sufficiency. Isolation has also been partially internationally imposed due to Syria's perceived support to 'terrorist' causes, its links to Iran and its position towards Israel. Under the Bush administration, Syria was put under an economic boycott, and an American raid into Syria from Iraq caused a further strain in relations. In recent years, and before the uprising against the regime, there was a slight thawing of relations under the Obama government and with the UK, though no practical steps towards closer relations were taken. Since the uprising, Syria has again become increasingly isolated, with sanctions imposed and relations with the West deteriorating rapidly in response to the regime's violent repression of the growing protest against its rule.

In the most recent census (2009) Syria had a declared population of around 23 million people. In terms of religion, its population is mainly Sunni, with significant Alawite, Shia, Druze and Ismaili minorities, as well as a number of Christian groups; the regime and the population are generally tolerant of religious and other minorities. Ethnically, 90% of the population is Arab, but there are significant Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian, Turkmen and Circassian minorities. There is also a large Palestinian refugee community (496,000[2]) living in refugee camps around the country which are administered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA). In the wake of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, a large number of Iraqi refugees moved to Syria. Estimates range from 800,000 to two million people, although many have since returned and some have emigrated to the West. Apart from the Kurds and the poorer Iraqis, many of whom live in Syria without identity papers, religious and ethnic minorities and Palestinian refugees are treated like Syrian nationals and are given cultural and religious but no political freedom.

[2] UNRWA, 'Syria: Facts and figures', available at www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=55 (retrieved 12 June 2012)

Syria is perceived as a middle-income country. However, UNDP figures for 2005, using Syrian criteria, showed that 30% of the population lived in poverty, and that 11.4% lived below the subsistence level. Poverty is likely to have grown substantially due to the drought and even more so since the start of the uprising. Syria's economy is largely based on agriculture (16.9%[3]), oil and industry (27.4%), and tourism and services (55.7%). A significant source of income derives from remittances. Traditionally a socialist country with a very large government sector and a nationalised industry, in recent years Bashar al-Assad made moves towards some economic liberalisation, his so-called 'social market economy'. Certain sectors of the economy were opened up, with more privatisation and contracting out of state services (including to some charity organisations), and supposedly improved market regulation. This 'liberalisation' process moved very slowly. Impediments included a large and poorly performing public sector, declining oil production, widening deficits, mismanagement and rampant corruption, weak financial and capital markets and high rates of unemployment (unofficially estimated at 20%) – due to rapid population growth, a high percentage of young people (35% of the population is under 14) and limited foreign investment. To most Syrians, the most obvious sign of the liberalisation has been a rise in prices, more foreign companies, declining public services and far greater inequality, and this is seen by many experts as a key reason behind the unrest.

A potted history of charity and NGOs in Syria

Syrian (and Arab) culture places great emphasis on generosity. Family and extended family (or tribal) connections as well as patronage (*wasta)* continue to play an important role and provide a crucial safety net in the absence of sufficient state support. This has protected many vulnerable Syrian families from falling into poverty. There are also informal community networks in Syria such as women's communal savings networks, which play a similar role.

Syria has a strong tradition of religiously-inspired giving, by both Muslims and Christians. These donations are often made directly to the religious institution, which distributes them, usually in 'relief' type fashion. Like many other countries, Syria also has a range of charitable organisations set up by society ladies or wealthy individuals. These types of traditional 'charity' associations (*jam'iyat khairiya*) have existed in Syria since before independence.

In 1958 the then Syrian government issued a new law for charitable associations, and many existing organisations registered under this law. Some new organisations were also set up following the law. The government established the Syrian Women's Union and children's and youth unions, such as the Baath Pioneers, and amalgamated the labour unions, all of which were subsequently dominated by the Baath party. These were the only organisations allowed to work on women's, youth and labour issues. The government also set up Unions for Charitable Associations, although these do not appear to play a significant role.

Between the 1960s and 90s registration of new Syrian charitable associations was rare and difficult, although many people continued to serve their community informally; if a strong patron was involved the government would generally not interfere with groups as long as the work done was not too sensitive or political. In the very late 1990s the government relaxed its stringent monitoring of local organisations somewhat, and subsequent to the accession of Bashar al-Assad, in the early 2000s, a small group of new, more professional and developmental associations were registered. However, this period ended relatively quickly, particularly because a

[3] Figures that follow taken from CIA, 'The World Factbook: Syria', available at www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html (retrieved 12 June 2012)

number of human rights groups arose (related to 'the Damascus Spring') which the regime cracked down on. In recent years registration has again been made more difficult. Moreover, the term 'civil society' (*al-mujtama'a al-madani*) gained negative connotations for the regime due to its connection to the Damascus Spring. In recent years people have avoided the term, using *al-mujtama'a al-ahl*i instead. Advocacy is rarely practiced as it is seen as political activity; and capacity building is done by some organisations, but is seen as suspicious by the regime.

Bashar al-Assad's wife, Asma al-Assad, has consistently portrayed herself as a keen supporter of social development and NGOs and set up several high-profile organisations herself, recently amalgamated into the Syria Trust. The Trust set up the NGO Platform, a joint project with UNDP (registered as an independent charity in 2011). The Platform aims to develop the NGO sector through information, networking and capacity building, although its approach is rather top-down.

NGOs in Syria are required by law to register with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MOSAL). MOSAL is a small ministry with limited resources, staff numbers and capacity (until 2001 it did not have a single computer, and it still only has a few). It regularly changes ministers, who are all perceived as closely related to the security services, and recent ministers are said to take a much harder line with associations. The Ministry has a difficult role to play. On the one hand it performs a security function against (perceived and real) foreign threats, in particular in terms of regime fears of so-called Zionist, Islamist, American and imperialist or neo-colonial intrusion into Syria. MOSAL also has a role of fostering social development, especially as poverty increases and government ability to meet people's needs is decreasing. There are elements within the Ministry that would like to encourage reputable organisations to develop further, and the Ministry has played a somewhat positive role in some international development projects that helped to develop local organisations. The Ministry probably also realises that the Syria Trust Platform could compete with it in work with the NGO sector. The Minister of Social Affairs was therefore quite positive about NGOs at the 'First Development Conference' organised by the Syria Trust in January 2010, at which civil society development was lauded as the way forward for Syria. Things have gone rather backwards since then.

Syrian charitable organisations are still regulated by the 1958 law on associations, which is administered by MOSAL. Organisations wishing to register have to apply to the Ministry, which then goes through verifications, particularly of the people involved in the charity. Most of this checking is done by the security services, which play a key role in managing the third sector. Once an organisation is approved, which can take from seven months to many years and often involves charities using strong 'connections' (*wasta)* to move their application through the bureaucratic maze of the Ministry, the charity has several obligations. It has to send minutes of meetings, accounts and reports to MOSAL, sometimes appoint a Ministry approved director, and Ministry and security officials can attend its meetings. Organisations have to stick to the activities they have set out in their objectives and any broadening of activities has to be pre-approved (although this is apparently easier than initial registration). There is a lack of clarity about whether organisations are allowed to set up branches, and some organisations have been asked to register their branches in the governorates as new, independent organisations (which further complicates NGO figures). Local organisations are not allowed to make direct contact with, or be contacted by, or request or receive funding from INGOs not present in Syria; this should be channelled through MOSAL, which coordinates this with the State Planning Commission and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (and the security services).

The charity law is outdated and cumbersome. There is little information available for groups about how to apply for registration, and the law is open to various interpretations and often superseded by the Emergency Law. In recent years a number of experts, consultants and Ministry officials

were working on a new NGO law, but this appears to have been shelved. Meanwhile registration continues to be difficult. Many organisations have not been able to, or chosen to, register and continue to work 'under the radar'. This leaves them open to problems, although registration also brings its difficulties in terms of oversight and slow approval processes.

Quantitative or qualitative information on Syrian charities is very hard to come by. There is no national body in Syria comparable to the UK Charity Commission that monitors and provides information to and on charities. MOSAL holds mostly handwritten files on registered associations, but this information is very limited and often considered confidential by officials. A few partial lists have been published but these contain limited and sometimes incorrect information. Several international organisations have conducted studies on the NGO sector, but these are largely internal. Few NGOs have websites, or detailed information on their work available in other formats, and when they do it is usually not in English. There are no Syrian NGO directories or websites. This greatly impedes the sector in, for example, fundraising, undertaking joint projects or networking. The Syria Trust, through the NGO Platform, had plans to provide more detailed information on NGOs, including a possible website. It had also been in discussions with the British Charity Commission. Whether anything will come of this given the current circumstances is not clear.

There are no reliable statistics on the numbers of Syrian NGOs. This is partly because there is little information available, partly because many are unregistered, and partly because there is confusion on the definition of an NGO; there is probably also regime suspicion about any 'mapping' exercise. Official estimates of registered NGOs range from 300 to 2,000 but these could include branches, cultural organisations and organisations that may have ceased to operate. Ministry records are also not always maintained as local officials often know organisations personally and do not always feel the need to register details, or may forget to pass them on to Damascus. Overall, the number of formal organisations is low due to the regime's repressive nature and the difficulty of registering. However, enthusiasm for community activism is strong, as can be witnessed by the myriad community groups and committees that have formed throughout Syria since the uprising, supporting people in violence affected areas with services ranging from field hospitals to human rights monitoring, food parcels and rubbish collection.

Syrian charities are highly centralised and urbanised, with most located in Damascus or the south, and the rest generally found in the big cities. There is a dearth of organisations in the north east, where overall conditions are also much more difficult than in the rest of the country.

Types of Syrian organisations

Classifying Syrian NGOs is very difficult; it is perhaps best to say that there is no such thing as a typical Syrian NGO, given the lack of a clear definition and the wide range of organisations, many of whom may not meet the typical definition of a developmental NGO. There are, however, many people in Syria who do much work in their communities through various formal and informal mechanisms. The classification below is the one the author finds useful in describing the situation of charitable and developmental organisations in Syria, and ranges from formal and informal organisations that are long-established, and do more 'traditional charity' work, to newer, more developmental and professional organisations and groups. However, many are a mix of these various elements.

a) Religious organisations

These are usually set up by or in close conjunction with religious establishments (mosques, churches) or religious personnel (nuns, priests). They tend to be strong organisations, rarely interfered with by the government (as long as they do not engage in politics); with a relatively secure income. They are usually managed by religious leaders and community elders, and have good access to volunteers. They may also have some paid staff. They tend to get all or most of their funding from the religious establishment, individuals, or religious organisations abroad. Activities tend to follow a 'calendar' of relief work or run institutional service providing facilities.

Examples include the Islamic Orphanage in Hama: set up with funding from wealthy Muslims, it runs an institutional school and boarding house for orphans, with strict rules and regulations; another example is a small Christian organisation in the old city of Damascus which runs a small school for mentally disabled children; and an individual nun's collections of money and in-kind donations for poor families, supported by Syrian individuals and resident expats.

b) Traditional charitable associations

These organisations resemble religious organisations in nature. They are either secular or may have a strong religious bias, but are not related to a religious establishment. They are often set up by well-intentioned elderly society ladies or wealthy individuals, and run services similar to the religious organisations. They obtain their funds from the community and from charitable events, often of a traditional nature (Ramadan meals, charity bazaars, etc.).

Examples include the organisation of Mrs Khani, which provides financial, food and educational support to poor families, and traditional vocational training and literacy classes for women, and is supported by a group of conservative, older women. Dar al-Hanan runs a home for the elderly in rural Damascus. In Aleppo there is an association that (unusually) acts as a shelter for female 'young offenders', providing housing, training, and health care.

c) Community organisations

There are a number of people who run relatively small and low key initiatives in the community that focus on a specific need. They may be registered, or they may work unofficially within their own community. Often they have a rich patron who provides connections, protection and some income, or they set themselves up as a company and rely on income as well as donations. Their work can range from very traditional to more developmental, and they are often open to capacity building and learning from others. They tend to rely on volunteers and some paid staff.

Examples include a small organisation in Homs which educated a group of blind children in the home of one of the parents, with a wealthy local mother with a blind son as the 'patron'; and a German woman in Damascus who, through her company, teaches rural and refugee women traditional embroidery and sells their (high quality) products in Syria and abroad, and pays the women partially in cash and partially in a one-off group annual community payment or projects. There are also various publishing houses which run educational activities for children.

d) Developmental NGOs

In recent years a small number of more professional, developmental NGOs have been established. They usually involve more professional people, technical experts, stakeholders and enthusiastic volunteers (often university students or recent graduates). These newer NGOs attempt to work along more professional lines, with some paid staff, regular capacity building, enthusiastic middle and working class volunteers, and interesting ideas and projects. They often manage to raise funds from embassies, the UN and through Corporate Social Responsibility.

One example is the Syrian Environmental Organisation, set up by a group of professional women, which runs a number of projects to raise environmental awareness and to tackle environmental issues directly (clean up campaigns, setting up an environmental/educational garden near the old city). There are various similar organisations in the provinces, including one for the protection of birds and one that aims to educate children on the environment. Another is the Little Roses Association, set up by a doctor of physiotherapy together with parents of disabled children and other professionals. The organisation sets up small treatment clinics in community facilities in remote rural areas, and trains local physiotherapists and midwives on prevention and treatment of physical disabilities. It is funded by individuals, charity events, and increasingly by foreign organisations and local and international companies. There is also a new organisation for and by disabled women. The Syrian Young Entrepreneurs Association is run by enthusiastic young and well-educated Syrians and provides mentoring and business support to, and job fairs for, young people, largely funded by companies and embassy grants.

e) Syria Trust organisations

Syria Trust organisations are set up by Mrs Assad or her organisations, and are generally well-funded (although the Mrs Assad aimed for them to become financially self-sustaining). They tend to take a developmental approach, and are able to pay for staff who are young, well-educated, and fluent in English, generally from the Syrian upper middle and upper classes (but with few links to the constituencies served). These organisations are still relatively young and have yet to prove their mettle. They have done a great deal of work and some interesting projects, which are highly praised in some quarters, but are also regularly criticised for being ineffective, out of touch with life in poor communities, spending too much money, and being too image-focused.

Examples of Syria Trust organisations include Firdus, an organisation for rural development, and a number of other organisations working on youth issues, young entrepreneurship, rural development, micro-credit, child libraries and museums, etc. Mrs Assad used the Trust partially as an ‘incubator’, developing new organisations that were then made independent.

NGO activities

Many Syrian organisations, particularly religious and traditional associations, focus on relief-type charity. This may include financial and in-kind support to poor families and individuals, support for education (ranging from school supplies for individual children, scholarships, and actually running schools), health care (from paying for operations and operating pharmacies to running clinics, sometimes partially fee-paying); vocational training (often in very traditional trades, particularly for women, and often without much study of actual market needs), institutional care for disabled people, the elderly, or orphans (which in Syria often means children of single parents, or from ‘problem families’).

Community organisations, developmental NGOs and Syria Trust organisations focus on more developmental aims. Their work may include the environment, protection and development of traditional crafts, youth employment initiatives, capacity building, awareness raising, small credit, training for parents, nursery teachers or health care workers, rural development projects, etc..

Certain issues are considered sensitive by the regime, such as women’s issues, issues related to young people and students, human rights, democracy and civil society, and quality of education. ‘Capacity building’ is also sensitive, as it is often understood as making NGOs too unruly. No organisation in Syria works directly and openly on advocacy; in the few cases where

organisations do press for social change, they do so very carefully and in direct cooperation with relevant government departments.

NGO activity has been strongly affected by the uprising. At the time of writing, the regime was responding with great violence to the protests against its rule. There are also rumours of violence by some armed groups. The situation has resulted in at least 15,000 people dying, many more disappearing, being tortured or injured, as well as large-scale population displacements away from areas of conflict to safer areas and neighbouring countries. The situation and economic sanctions have caused severe economic malaise and there is also serious damage to infrastructure. In the midst of this situation, NGOs were trying hard to continue their normal activities, which often serve the poorest in society: their waiting lists have grown considerably. Some are also quietly helping with the relief effort within the country.

The uprising has also seen the emergence of many new informal groupings who are delivering a variety of new activities, often at considerable personal risk. This includes setting up field hospitals; provision of medicine, food, non-food items and funds to displaced families; reports to foreign media and NGOs on the human rights situation; repairing damaged homes; organisation of regular services such as rubbish collection and education; and psycho-social and mediation activities. Funding and in-kind support is being provided by local Syrians, and also channelled in from Syrian, Arab and other individuals and organisations in the Arab world and Europe. Some groups are more able to deliver than others, and though some are fiercely non-sectarian and non-political, some groups may be closer to the armed opposition. Involvement in relief activities, especially medical aid to injured civilians, is high risk. Many volunteers working with formal and informal groups and organisations have been arrested, tortured and in some cases killed.

There are still no foreign relief organisations operating in the country other than the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, which, although it has good volunteers on the ground, is often perceived as close to the regime. Some UN organisations such as the World Food Programme are able to provide relief aid as part of their normal mandate. A number of international NGOs are supporting Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, but they are not able to operate freely inside Syria.

NGO capacity

a) Assessing needs and planning

Many organisations work to a set ‘activities calendar’ or provide a particular service which changes little from year to year. Others may act on sudden short-term needs (for example, when Lebanese refugees fled into Syria during the 2006 Israeli attack) in addition to their regular work. In many organisations, the approach is short-term and reactive.

Few organisations have the knowledge about, or the ability, or see the need, to assess needs with stakeholders and plan for work on this basis. Monitoring and evaluation are done ad hoc, in person or often not at all. Few organisations know how to write reports that clearly reflect the project, that are written in good and clear language, and that, importantly for funding, are written in English. As a result, it is often hard for charities to show their results or learn from previous work, or to address urgent needs. It also means staff are often very overstretched or unmotivated.

b) Managerial and organisational capacity

Organisational capacity in Syrian organisations falls somewhere between two ends of the spectrum. On the one hand are organisations that are run along more ‘developmental lines’, with professional management structures, trained and well paid staff, and that actively manage their volunteers. These organisations include mainly the Syria Trust organisations, and a few others. They are well funded and connected, with well (often foreign) educated people involved.

However, they often do display some or all of the characteristics of older charities described below. In addition, these 'well-heeled, professional, developmental' organisations are sometimes accused of having little relation with the people they serve. On the other end of the spectrum there are the 'traditional charities'. Again, some may have more traditional elements, and some may be working towards a more structured and developmental form of management. There is no hard and fast rule; some traditional organisations may be managed in more professional ways, while newer charities may have very unprofessional elements.

Traditional organisations are usually run by their Board, which tends to consist of community elders, generally older and/or influential or wealthy men or women, who meet from time to time to discuss the organisation. One of them may act as a director, running the organisation on a daily basis, either on a paid or volunteer basis; in some cases there is no daily management. Few of the board members or directors tend to have strong management experience.

There is a tendency for the senior management to give priority to men, older people, and those with political or financial status to serve on the management team. Very few organisations involve their 'beneficiaries' or stakeholders in their management or staff.

Boards may be assisted by volunteers, or junior staff, who often do not have contracts and are usually unpaid, or paid expenses or a small salary. This means the only people who can afford to work for them as staff are often young women looking for temporary employment until they are married. Lines of authority are generally opaque, and managers tend to be autocratic in their decisions, with little involvement of staff or volunteers; follow up and support to staff tends to be indirect and ad hoc. There is also a real misunderstanding of volunteering: most volunteers expect to be given 'incentives' and although this might be justified to some extent, especially when they are expected to travel or make phone calls, it has rather muddied the waters in terms of what volunteering really means. High unemployment among young people means that many have unrealistic expectations of volunteering changing into employment.

Traditionally, volunteers and staff are not trained for the job they do, although they make up for this with commitment and enthusiasm. There are very few training facilities in the paramedical or social development fields, and those that exist provide very outdated and theoretical training. The low pay has an impact, as those with the right skills are educated abroad, and would not be willing to work for the low salaries offered by NGOs. Organisations rarely invest in staff training, and tend to emphasise buildings, vehicles and relief activities when they have money (*hajar qabal bashar*: bricks before people). Many organisations welcome training by foreign organisations (which has been more readily available in recent years); however, such training is usually in English and attended by senior staff. There are generally few systems in place to ensure that such training is embedded in the organisation through longer term follow up.

NGO administration is usually done by hand; few organisations have computers or even typewriters, and they often are not used effectively when they are available. There are usually few files, and no clear or effective information systems. Financial matters are often left to individuals, and even though organisations may be entirely reputable, the systems are hard to follow. It does not help that many donors donate in cash to people they know within the organisation, with little demand for accountability and reporting.

c) Resource mobilisation

There is a strong tradition of giving in Syria, due to cultural emphasis on generosity, strong family and community links, and the religious traditions of charity. Muslim *zakat* is donated by nearly every Muslim, usually directly to the mosque or to Muslim organisations. This is an excellent

source of income for charity organisations. The problem is that the donors often wish to remain anonymous and do not request accountability; and that the donations must benefit people directly, i.e. they cannot be used for 'core costs' or salaries. They are also often directly related to particular events (Ramadan, etc.), or to 'approved Muslim aims' which include orphanages, food or building mosques. There has as yet not been any call for a different use of *zakat*, a call that can only come from within the Muslim world.

Syrians also give in other ways. They may donate to non-religious charities, or give when they marry or die. Companies and individuals often have particular causes they donate to on a regular basis. Organisations also gain income from membership fees, although these are small amounts. Some may gain income from running a service (for example, a hospital charging richer patients to pay for poorer patients, or similar set ups for schools).

Some organisations get some support from MOSAL; this may be in the form of land, premises or seconded staff, and MOSAL also has a very small budget for donations to charities. Usually governorate charity budgets are divided between the charities in a particular governorate. Many charities use traditional forms of fundraising: personal contacts, appeals around religious holidays, Ramadan or gala dinners, and charity bazaars selling non-marketable handicrafts.

A few organisations are starting to write proposals to companies or local international organisations, organising sponsored walks, or encouraging people to donate through text message, for example. Corporate Social Responsibility has started in Syria, particularly by international companies recently arrived in Syria (private banks, mobile phone companies, etc.) as well as oil companies. There is some international funding available, too, through locally based organisations: Embassies, the EU, UN organisations, and occasional Arab or international aid.

Many organisations still fundraise appealing to pity rather than using a rights-based or development education approach. Fundraising is still in its infancy and many organisations could benefit from help with this. Many Syrian organisations have no clear fundraising strategy; they rarely know that funds are available from (locally based) international organisations due to limited information and awareness that they are allowed to access them. Moreover, donor information is often only available in English and requires the use of computers, which many organisations do not have. International donors based in Syria tend to say that they receive few proposals for their funds, that the proposals they receive are not up to standard or not the type of project they want to support, and that when they do support projects they often fail, or fail to report. Donors tend to be contacted by the 'usual suspects': organisations able to write proposals in English, which are often the organisations that already have considerable (access to) funds.

At the time of writing international governments and NGOs were earmarking funds for relief aid to Syria, but these were channelled through UN agencies, the Red Cross or agencies working with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, given that the Syrian government did not allow others to work with crisis-affected Syrians and had not allowed access to relief agencies.

Technical support to the sector

There are very few sources of technical support for NGOs. Ministries occasionally channel technical training from Arab or international organisations to Syrian associations. Various organisations have provided some capacity building for NGOs in recent years, including the Danish Institute, the Said Foundation, the Aga Khan Foundation, the British Council, the Dutch

Institute, SEBC, and the EU. There are now also a few for-profit outfits in Syria which provide this training. Overall, however, training opportunities are still limited.

Training often consists of short courses in specific aspects of the project management cycle, emphasising proposal writing and fundraising. Often these courses are held in Damascus and are sometimes in English, which means they are usually attended by the more advanced organisations. Those who attend are often board members, which impedes passing on learning to staff (volunteers); if staff or volunteers attend, they may not have the influence to change the organisation.

In general, and given the Syrian rote learning system of education which discourages problem solving, initiative and creativity, people find it hard to translate learning into practice, and into the organisation. Without the trainers' careful assessment of the trainee organisation, the person attending, and post-training support in the field, it is unlikely that considerable change will be achieved. It also seems that starting with proposal writing and fundraising is the wrong way around, when what organisations should probably do first is to think through their mission, vision and goals.

Many people expect financial payment to attend training courses (so-called incentives).

International organisations in Syria

There are a number of UN organisations in Syria, including FAO, IFAD, ILO, IMF, UNCTAD, UNESCO, UNIDO, UNDP, UNRWA, WFP and WHO. Some have offices in Damascus; others work through regional offices and local representatives. They tend to work on large projects with ministries, and occasionally with local organisations. There are also a few branches of international organisations in Syria. These include the Syrian Family Planning Organisation, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, and SOS Children's Villages. The former two are semi-governmental.

There are very few international NGOs in Syria. For many years it was difficult for INGOs to work in Syria – few INGOs seemed interested, the Syrian regime was suspicious of INGO intentions, Syria was considered a middle-income country and there was no legal framework for INGO establishment or operation. A very small number of INGOs worked directly with ministries, others supported well-established organisations financially or in-kind through long-standing agreements, and others worked indirectly and unofficially through personal contacts, churches or mosques.

A few new organisations started work in Syria in the late 1990s, including the Aga Khan Development Network, which was keen to work in Syria given the Ismaili communities in the country. It negotiated with the government for diplomatic status, which was granted in 2001. It now has a large office and a wide range of social and economic development programmes across the country. The Said Foundation, a UK charity set up by a Syrian millionaire living in Europe, provided capacity building for disability NGOs and government institutions in close cooperation with MOSAL. It opened an office in Damascus in 2001 and has since registered as a Syrian foundation. Movimondo, a small Italian NGO, carried out several development projects under the umbrella of the EU and UNRWA, and also operated a small office for a period of time.

Various other international organisations are keen to work in Syria, and have tried to enter the country at various times, but most were turned down or felt they were not able to work without a protective legal framework. A number of organisations expressed interest in working in Syria after the invasion of Iraq, which led to in large numbers of destitute and traumatised Iraqi refugees arriving in Syria. The Syrian government decreed that such organisations had to apply for

registration to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, which would be a partner for their work and would have to approve all payments and activities (including counter signing cheques etc.). For a number of international organisations, it was not possible to work in this way and they withdrew. Over 20 organisations applied, and ten have been given approval to work in Syria, but only with Iraqi refugees. They may, however, hope that they can eventually operate on a broader basis.

At the time of writing, only a few of the UN organisations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent were active in addressing the humanitarian crisis resulting from the uprising. Other international NGOs were not given permission by the regime to work on the humanitarian crisis.

Conclusion

In 2010, the civil society sector in Syria consisted of a good, though small, basic infrastructure of traditional charitable and some developmental organisations, many with a relatively reliable income stream, and some of which were willing to become more developmental. There was also some space for the development of further organisations, and interest from various communities to set them up, especially as needs were growing rapidly and the government was less able and willing to meet them. There was some international funding available, and more international organisations were, in principle, interested in working in the country. Unfortunately, things deteriorated well before the crisis and have got immeasurably worse since the uprising began.

At the time of writing, many local informal and formal organisations were trying hard to continue their normal services, and some were actively involved in trying to alleviate the problems resulting from the violence. Some were able to operate due to their strong trust and support in the community, many others worked for their community despite the risk to their lives.

The positive side to the crisis is that the Syrian community spirit has shown itself to be very strong. There is most definitely a civil society spirit in Syria. Individual Syrians are getting together through existing or new groups to help other Syrians in need, with young people playing a particularly active role. These young people and informal groups are gaining significant experience and knowledge about their communities, are providing channels for aid into Syria, and are a promising basis for the development of the sector and the country in a post-Assad era. They need support, in terms of protection, technical skills and funding for relief aid.

Support to NGOs when circumstances allow would do well to focus on the following elements. Technical and managerial skill development will be crucial to a healthy NGO sector, but this will have to take a different format to the ‘one week training in Damascus in English’ format. True partnership with INGOs, mentoring, and developing diploma and adult education courses may be viable alternatives. For donor governments, some of the ways to tackle the NGO situation in Syria (when circumstances are conducive) are to draft a new NGO law, invest in relevant bodies to regulate, support and develop the sector, and design good information systems on NGOs and donors. Work needs to be done particularly in areas of the country where NGOs are underrepresented but where needs are often greater and skills even lower.

Syria is a strategic country with a wealth of resources. Its brave young people are its greatest resource. They are developing a new civil society which holds promise for Syria’s future. An effective NGO sector will be a very strong mechanism to bring about democracy and social justice in a future Syria.