Feinstein International Center

Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings, The Cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan

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Key Messages:

- Operating in remote management settings entails inherent tensions and trade-offs, primarily related to access and risk. The ability to balance this friction influences the success of partnerships and humanitarian action.
- Partnerships are most successful when the international organizations are clear on their end goals and are able to articulate these intentions to local partners.
- Capacity is essential but understood in different ways by the different actors. The capacity to partner is as important for international organizations as for local organizations; international organizations should build their capacity to partner before entering into remote management operations.
- Partnerships between international and local organizations in highly insecure or remote management settings require resources that can be in short supply in these settings, namely time and trust.

Photo: Isabel Hunter

The conflict and humanitarian crisis in Syria has highlighted the pressing need for evidence-based guidance on **partnerships** between international and local organizations in **remote management settings**. This includes environments where access is limited either due to insecurity or restrictions imposed by host governments. This briefing paper presents findings from ***Breaking the Hourglass: Partnership in Remote Management Settings, The Cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan*.** This study, funded by the U.S. State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), focuses on the experiences of and challenges for international and national organizations working to deliver humanitarian assistance from Turkey into northern Syria. The case of Iraqi Kurdistan provides historical perspective and insight into how organizations cope with withdrawal of donor funds when there is a change in political situation or when a crisis ends.

Although this study focuses on Syria with reference to Iraqi Kurdistan, we believe that the findings and recommendations have broad applicability for other remote management or highly insecure settings. The full report includes recommendations for local organizations, international organizations and bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors.

Findings specifically shed light on the following:

a) Specific challenges of partnerships in remote management settings;

b) The means through which international organizations identify partners;

c) The challenge of capacity building;

d) Donor reporting requirements, including monitoring and evaluation (M&E), in remote management settings;

e) The importance of trust in partnerships.[1]

Methods

We used qualitative methods to gather longitudinal data over nine months (late 2013-mid 2014) on five pairs of local and international organizations providing humanitarian assistance from Turkey into Syria.[2] Interviews also took place with representatives from more than 25 donor, international and local organizations involved in the Syria response. Key informant interviews were conducted with representatives of current or defunct organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan. Findings are informed by a global literature review on humanitarian assistance in highly insecure environments. Our data analysis entailed the coding of 120 interviews followed by a "ground-truthing" workshop in late October 2014 attended by more than 60 representatives from Syrian, Turkish and international organizations in Gaziantep, Turkey.

Key Findings

Access and Risk: Operating in remote management settings requires trade-offs

Remote management involves a series of trade-offs and compromises for local and international organizations as well as for donor entities. Decisions must be made around access, risk, security, and reporting requirements, including monitoring and evaluation (M&E). The required compromises result in inherent tensions; the ways in which organizations are able to manage these tensions affects partnerships and the nature of humanitarian action.

One of the main areas of tension is the balance between access and risk. The Syria case study brings into stark clarity the contentiousness and complexity around access. The data show that access (like beneficiary needs) is constantly shifting. Access is highly relational and dependent on local networks. Access is arbitrary, and control of access by armed groups is a form of power. Access relates closely to risk, and the ways in which different actors prioritize access correlates to their tolerance for risk. For example, the local organizations with the best access to populations in need represent the greatest risk to international actors, as access requires moving through highly insecure areas and interfacing with armed groups. This example also highlights the different understandings of risk: for international organizations and their donors, risk is primarily about liability or loss (of funds or commodities). For local organizations in contrast, risk is about physical insecurity—to their operations, families, and themselves. Such divergent interpretations of risk contribute to tensions that create discord in partnerships.

Partnership models between international and local organizations vary widely. The study identified a continuum of partnership approaches, ranging from largely logistical relationships (the "truck and chuck" model) to those aimed at building the long-term capacity of the local organizations and contributing to civil society. The location of a specific partnership on this continuum depends in large part on how the international organization defines its end goals. Frequently these goals were unclear and/or poorly articulated to the local partners. This absence of clarity was found to negatively influence the quality of the partnership.

The study found that the international organization's capacity to partner is as important to successful

1. The study also examined donor withdrawal, which will be covered in a separate and forthcoming briefing paper.
2. We collected data under an agreement of confidentiality. While each side of the international-local pair knew that their counterpart was in the study, we did not share any information between the two sides. In addition, we do not disclose the names of any organization involved in this study.

operations as the local organization's capacity to partner. This includes the international organization's institutional experience with and views on partnerships, the internal and personnel structure to support partnerships, and a stable staff presence in the country of base operations. Additionally, international organizations must have a clear understanding of their donor's tolerance for engaging in a high risk environment.

Locating Partners: The Problem with Passive Methods

The study illustrated a number of methods for identifying potential local partners in remote management settings. Most international organizations followed for this project engaged in relatively *passive* means for partner identification. These included reliance on the networks of other international organizations, participating in coordination meetings that included local organizations, and being approached directly by potential partners. These methods prioritize local organizations with the resources that enable them to make contact with international organizations (English fluency, access to international fora, time and money to attend such meeting, etc.). Diaspora organizations are more likely to possess these skills than their grassroots counterparts. Passive identification processes limit the pool of potential partners and create a degree of bias in favor of diaspora organizations. In this study, the selected few organizations chosen through such passive processes ended up partnering with multiple international organizations and became over-burdened.

More *active* partnership identification methods were practiced by a small number of international organizations. Such methods include stakeholder mapping, use of pre-conflict connections, networking through existing contacts or social media, participating in regional and local events, and interviews with local actors. These deeper methods require time, outreach, and the existence of specific skills or experience within the international organization.

Different perspectives and strengths regarding capacity: organizational versus operational capacity

Capacity remains a major question in the minds of international actors and donors. The study found wide discrepancies in how organizations understood capacity and how best to develop it.

One of the clearest discrepancies is the difference between *organizational* capacity and *operational* capacity. Organizational capacity refers primarily to the structures and systems for management and governance. Operational capacity refers to the ability to carry-out programs and projects. International organizations are normally stronger than their counterparts in regard to operational capacity, and they emphasize these aspects in their partner relationships. This entails focusing on local organizations' management structures, financial systems, and documentation processes. Local organizations, in contrast, more heavily value operational aspects, including beneficiary relationships, access, quality of networks, and the ability to quickly meet pressing needs on the ground. This difference at times leads to misunderstandings and misalignment of priorities for capacity building.

There is much attention paid to capacity building in the context of partnerships. Overall, local organizations (and particularly grassroots organizations) are aware that they need assistance in creating financial systems, improving their management skills, and learning mechanisms of the humanitarian system such as writing proposals and conducting needs assessments. Trainings are the most prevalent form of capacity building. Local organizations appreciated some elements of the trainings, but many complained that the agendas were often top-down in nature and required extensive time commitments of valuable staff. The preferred trainings were those that were small in size, tailored to the specific needs of the local organization, and based on mutually set agendas. From the perspective of local organizations, the most effective and preferred means of capacity building was to have a focal person in the international organization who worked closely with the partner over time.

The emphasis upon—and challenges with—donor reporting requirements and M&E

The study demonstrated how monitoring and evaluation takes on heightened importance in remote management settings. This is due to the logistical difficulties of conducting M&E in a conflict zone, and the awareness that the continuation of the partner relationship depends heavily on the quality of reporting. Organizations in Syria were conducting M&E mostly through photos, videos and geo-referencing of distributions, as well as verbal reports and peer observations. Third-party monitoring (TPM) became increasingly popular over the course of the study, despite the fact that it is highly resource intensive.

Most of the local organizations in this study had little to no prior experience with M&E. International actors strongly emphasized M&E with their local partners, both out of concern for the quality of aid delivery and as a means for tangible reporting—a scarce resource in remote management environments. Some local organizations felt that the emphasis on M&E was a sign of distrust. Others perceived an asymmetry in the emphasis of accountability to donors versus accountability to local beneficiaries. Additionally, understaffed local organizations were often juggling multiple distinct M&E plans. While TPM could reduce some of these burdens, such monitors were at times insensitive to the culture or to the conflict dynamic. Interestingly, this study found that local organizations increasingly recognized the merits of M&E in their own right and streamlined these elements into programming, even in the absence of pressure from international organizations.

Donor reporting requirements are important tools in remote management situations. The political context of Syria and the presence of extremist militants translate to even greater emphasis upon effective reporting systems. However, for the local organizations, such requirements create strain where they have the least amount of capacity, specifically in organizational capacity. In addition, international organizations often fail to factor security concerns into reporting requirements. Some local organizations felt that they had to put their staff, vendors, and beneficiaries at risk in order to comply with donor requirements.

There are multiple challenges in regard to reporting mechanisms in remote management settings. However, the international organizations—including country donors—who participated in this study made it clear that they are receptive to receiving feedback from local organizations about the problems they encounter. Most local organizations, however, are reluctant to be fully transparent about the extent to which they face obstacles while carrying out their operations. They fear funding will be jeopardized. A similar breakdown in communication is often replicated between the international organization and *their* donors.

Trust is the essential ingredient for local operations, but trust plays a different role in the functioning and mindset of international actors

One of the most important lessons from this research is the importance of trust in partnership relationships. We found that trust served different functions for international and local organizations. International organizations have multiple levels of safeguards and systems in place to ensure minimal losses and smooth operations. Trust is therefore helpful but ultimately replaceable. In contrast, for local organizations, trust is the primary and most important element for maintaining both organizational and operational success. Trust is central to all negotiations—to the daily question of access, to staff safety and security, to the procurement of goods and services, and to the impartial delivery of assistance. Such a sharp contrast in perspectives means that international organizations do not fully appreciate the extent to which trust and trust-building matter to their local counterparts. As a result they do not place as much emphasis on creating or maintaining trust in their daily interactions with their partners. The absence of a trusting relationship is acutely felt by the local actors and weakens the overall partnership.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The true equity of partnerships between local and international actors can be questioned when one side has all the money and holds most of the decision-making power. This dynamic is more nuanced in a remote management setting because while the international players continue to hold *all* the money, the local players hold all of the access. The international actors have no choice except to partner if they wish to be involved in humanitarian response.

By its very nature, remote management places in stark contrast the roles and priorities of the international and local actors. The primary role of international organizations in remote management settings is to manage their local partners. The primary role of local partners is to deliver goods and provide services to people. It is personal for local actors because the conflict is affecting their families, neighbors, and countrymen. They are concerned with saving lives, securing livelihoods, and preparing for a better future. With these tensions and differences in mind, the study concludes with recommendations on creating and maintaining successful partnerships in remote management settings.

- International organizations and donors should evaluate their tolerance for risk before becoming involved in remote management settings.
- Time, trust and flexibility are the most important aspects of successful partnerships in remote management settings.
- Active forms of local partner identification are more successful than passive forms of identification. Cooperative approaches with other international actors can lessen the burden.
- Capacity is a complex concept. The assessment of capacity should be directed toward both international and local organizations. The dimensions of *both* organizational and operational capacity should be considered when engaging in capacity assessment, building and strengthening activities.
- Donor requirements are important for accountability but create a time and resource burden for the local partners. They can also compromise security.

For the complete study see: fic.tufts.edu/publications