



**Statement of Anna Cervi  
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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
House Foreign Affairs Committee

Hearing on:  
**The Ongoing Humanitarian Crisis in Syria**

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I would like to thank the co-chairs, Congressman James McGovern (D-MA) and Congressman Christopher Smith (R-NJ), for holding this important and timely hearing on the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria and for inviting the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) to testify.

I join you today from Damascus, Syria where NRC has been registered since 2015. Over the course of the conflict, we have provided aid to hundreds of thousands of Syrians through various means: across conflict lines into besieged and hard-to-reach areas and within communities overcome by displacement in different parts of the country. Our mission is to support those affected by forced displacement to access timely and effective assistance, resist shocks and, when the crisis ends, rebuild their lives. Our programs support the restoration of child and youth education opportunities, rehabilitation of community infrastructure, recovery of agricultural livelihoods and access to basic household items. My testimony today centers on NRC's experience out of the Damascus Hub of the UN-led Whole of Syria response.

**Overview of humanitarian needs**

It is difficult in just five minutes to relay the host of needs that civilians inside the country continue to face, much less give justice to the millions of human stories, fears and personal tragedies that the words "humanitarian need" signify in real life. Allow me to share at least one of them with you today.

I recently visited an elementary school in Eastern Aleppo where NRC is working with children, teachers and parents to help students reengage in learning and overcome the trauma of today's conflict. At the back of a freshly painted classroom, a young girl approached me to say: "Miss, listen very carefully to me. Due to the war I have now lost three years of studying. No, do not get me wrong, I do not need your compassion. I need your help in ensuring this school keeps running because I want to become a doctor when I am 21, and I am already late for that." There are 2.1 million out-of-school children in Syria, all of whom need our help to reclaim their futures.

The biggest challenge NRC faces today is addressing the sheer magnitude of the needs of the population in Syria, wherever they may be in the country. This includes 5.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), many of whom now experiencing protracted displacement, 136,000 IDP returnees and 41,570 refugee returnees this year. In many of the overburdened communities in Aleppo and Rural Damascus where we work, access to basic services remains limited and more than one in four is an IDP or a returnee. Active hostilities in some areas continue to harm

civilians, and systemic issues inhibit the fulfillment of basic rights, including the pervasive lack of legal civil documentation, high contamination of explosive remnants of war or access to basic services. This contributes to concerning protection gaps, especially for vulnerable groups (youth, children, persons with disabilities and women).

Nevertheless, the resilience and determination of Syrians to withstand the conflict and, in some places, rebuild their lives is striking to all of us operating here. As my recent trip to Aleppo indicates, we must join efforts to build upon this further.

### **Principled response under question**

Our experience suggests that as areas have changed control, it has been possible for us to reach more people in need. Since the early days of the offensive on Eastern Ghouta in February 2018, for instance, NRC has been continuously present in the area – first to receive newly displaced persons fleeing heavy violence, then to follow up with transitional education and recreational activities and, now, to enable access for out-of-school children to the region's damaged schools.

Nonetheless, programming in line with humanitarian principles at scale is far from easy and risk-free in any war-torn country; Syria is no exception. While we must overcome various challenges to deliver an effective and timely response, three specific program areas best illustrate the tension between our mandate to respond to urgent needs and our duty to also uphold the other principles in practice.

First, there are genuine concerns that our aid risks not reaching those for whom it is intended, the approximately 7.2 million in need in government-controlled areas, 1.1 million of whom reside in communities which changed control last year. This ultimately undermines the humanitarian principle of impartiality. These concerns arise when NRC is unable to regularly target areas of high vulnerability with the right kind of assistance, serving locations in Rural Damascus or Aleppo with shelter assistance, information on legal civil documentation and youth programs, either because they witnessed particular damage and destruction, faced besiegement or were historically underserved. While we may be able to *physically* reach people in these areas, we must deal with regular attempts by authorities to regulate how we assist them. We also contend with donor restrictions which limit support to specific modalities of aid delivery in some parts of the country. Together, these dynamics constrain our ability to deliver in an impartial manner.

Similarly, there are valid questions about the extent to which humanitarian programs out of the Damascus hub are distinct from the influence and interests of the Syrian government or other entities, and hence, truly independent while still respecting state sovereignty. These concerns arise when we are required to partner with a national organization to gain entry to the country in the first place or when we receive requests from a line ministry to intervene in a particular location.

Lastly, there are regular challenges to the ability of our assistance to 'do no harm,' which remains at the core of our responsibility as a humanitarian organization. The specter of doing harm arises when we do not have adequate information or access to develop informed and conflict-sensitive interventions because we cannot conduct a quality, multi-sectoral needs assessment or bring the

right technical expertise into the country to build capacity. We run the risk of intervening too quickly without adequately assessing local community dynamics or being too slow to respond at the height of an emergency.

### **NRC's response**

So, how does NRC approach this complex, ever-shifting and delicate environment? Establishing and maintaining our ability to operate in a principled manner has relied on a very intentional and adaptable approach in which:

- (1) We choose the direct implementation of activities as a preferred modality rather than relying on local partners or sponsoring organizations as a conduit. 98 per cent of our annual budget is allocated to direct implementation.
- (2) In seeking registration, we established clear operating principles which to this day dictate the parameters for our engagement with Syrian authorities and other relevant actors. This means that interference in internal processes such as recruitment and procurement is a redline for NRC and we retain the ability to sign distinct MOUs with technical line ministries on top of our registration in Syria.
- (3) We advocate with decision makers when a permission is slow to arrive, a visa for our staff is refused or a new regulation affecting operational space is introduced. We maintain ongoing dialogue with Syrian authorities and partners at various levels to address these constraints, even when the ultimate result may be unsuccessful or the process of negotiation cumbersome.
- (4) We diversify coordination and cooperation with a wide range of international and national actors to help troubleshoot access blockages, mitigate dependence on one actor over another and support a more neutral position in the country.

Let me help illustrate how NRC addresses some of the challenges to respond in a principled manner through examples from our own experience. While pre-developed beneficiary lists originating from local authorities are often a starting point for an assessment, triangulation and verification is necessary to mitigate risks of partiality. NRC often receives a list of damaged humanitarian infrastructure (e.g. schools) in a particular area from the relevant line ministry. Our teams follow up with a damage assessment for each site, relying on standard NRC vulnerability criteria. We will narrow down a list of locations based on considerations of conflict sensitivity, in recognition that investments in particular communities risk playing into certain political, social or historical grievances. We will coordinate with other humanitarian partners to fill gaps and choose locations where we can best meet needs and avoid doing harm.

This year NRC received only two requests from the Government of Syria to intervene in an area, once in rural Hama and recently in Dar'a -- areas where humanitarian needs are staggering but NRC chose not respond due to limited existing capacity. Against this backdrop, NRC has established channels for recipients of assistance to contact us and provide feedback, so that we can remain more attuned to the needs and wishes of the affected population over time. Through email, SMS, WhatsApp, phone calls and complaint boxes, we can quickly identify a problem and adapt our projects accordingly.

Taking a principled approach to aid delivery from Damascus requires that our teams plan for the long-term. We take calculated decisions, based on open dialogue with our donors and negotiations with relevant national and local entities. As you can imagine, this also necessitates that we manage the design and delivery of our programs with a tremendous amount of patience.

Approaching the humanitarian response in this manner, however, does come with a cost. It can result in undue delays in implementation, disruption of donor-agreed timelines or additional bureaucratic hurdles simply because we want to protect our independence. This can have reverberating effects on the people and communities we serve.

### **Conclusions**

While the landscape I detailed above affects all aid agencies conducting programs in areas of government control, NRC's experience, alongside many others, suggests that through conscientious planning and steadfast commitment it is indeed possible to program in a principled manner. NRC's approach is distinct in its combination of direct program implementation, diversification of partnerships and establishment of clear operating parameters; together these elements support greater independence and impartiality.

Very often my peers and colleagues, in referring to their role as humanitarian workers in Syria or in the resilience of the Syrian people, talk about courage -- courage in serving at the forefront of a highly complex crisis and in enduring highly difficult conditions. It requires similar courage to face assertive interlocutors and negotiate the necessary space to carry out our programs; it must be done if we want to be there to support Syrians when they need us most. There is much more that can and should be done to support the resilience of the population in a way that is dignified. All of us in this room have a role to play, even when it may feel overwhelming.

Moving forward, we look to members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and other branches of the U.S. government to encourage all U.S. funded partners to consider some of the approaches outlined above, drawing on our experience. U.S. foreign assistance to Syria remains crucial to addressing the immediate needs of those affected by displacement and helps chart their future recovery. This includes ensuring adequate, flexible and timely funding to strengthen the protection of the population through the continuity of humanitarian assistance, conduct of mine action programs and appreciation of the unique needs and assets of women and youth in the response.

I wish to sincerely thank the Commission for its focus on this tremendously important issue, and for extending me the privilege of testifying today. I look forward to answering your questions.