



Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

A faint, dotted world map is visible in the background of the cover page.

Australia's Humanitarian Response to the Syria Crisis

Evaluation report

September 2014

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This evaluation was commissioned by the Middle East Branch (MEB) of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). MEB approached the Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) in early 2014 with a request for assistance in conducting the evaluation. ODE agreed to provide a staff member to lead the evaluation. This evaluation is the first project level evaluation conducted by ODE since the 'Operational Evaluations Section' was established in February 2014. Technical oversight was provided by the Independent Evaluation Committee.

The evaluation team comprised Simon Ernst (Team Leader) from ODE, Kate Sutton (Humanitarian Adviser) with the Humanitarian Advisory Group, and Lisa Brown (Humanitarian Officer) from DFAT's Amman post. The team brought to this evaluation humanitarian, program management, and monitoring and evaluation expertise alongside a sound understanding of the current context and corporate knowledge of DFAT's systems and the response to date.

The evaluation team would like to express sincere thanks to the DFAT staff, partners and beneficiaries who shared openly their insight into the Syrian crisis and their reflections on Australia's response. Thanks also go to DFAT staff in Amman and Beirut and those at UNICEF Lebanon, Beyond Association, Arc en Ciel, UNHCR Jordan and CARE Jordan for helping facilitate the evaluation team's field work



Figure 1: Tal Sarhoun informal tented settlement, Lebanon

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Executive Summary

This evaluation examines the effectiveness of Australia's humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis. It considers the efficacy of material assistance provided and that of Australia's diplomatic efforts. The evaluation identifies ways in which Australia's ongoing response can be strengthened in the context of what has become a protracted, and expanding, humanitarian crisis.

Context

The Syrian conflict presents the largest humanitarian crisis in recent times, killing over 190,000 people, resulting in mass casualties and placing over 13.7 million people in need of urgent humanitarian assistance.¹ Levels of displacement are enormous with over 9.4 million Syrians repeatedly displaced both internally, and as refugees within the region. There are an estimated 4.75 million civilians in hard-to-reach areas, including 241,000 in inaccessible, besieged areas which are not currently receiving humanitarian assistance.²

The regional impact of the crisis is immense. Refugees began to arrive in surrounding countries in late 2011 and numbers have continued to escalate. There are now over 3 million refugees registered in the region, with Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan hosting the highest numbers.³

The Australian response

Since the Syrian conflict began, Australia has provided \$130.81 million for humanitarian assistance inside Syria (\$59.5 million) and in neighbouring countries (\$71.3 million). Although these sums are substantial, the level of Australian funding provided is modest in comparison with some other donors. Australia's funding has been directed to UN agencies, international humanitarian organisations and Australian NGOs to provide lifesaving assistance—predominantly in protection, shelter, water and sanitation, food and medical assistance. Further longer term assistance has also been provided for health care and education.

Main findings

Australian leadership

Through its position on the United Nations Security Council, Australia has exercised particular leadership on improving humanitarian access to vulnerable populations within Syria. This achievement is widely acknowledged as ground breaking and has potential to set a precedent in international humanitarian law.

Sustained diplomatic action is necessary lest we address the effects but neglect the cause. This will require stamina, as neither a political nor military solution to the crisis are imminent.

Strategy and focus

Whilst Australia's response to the Syria crisis has been broadly relevant and appropriate, its coherence has been less than optimal in the absence of a clear strategic vision. Funding has been spread across too many partners, reducing its potential effectiveness and straining the ability of department staff to manage and monitor. The sector spread of investments is too broad and the complex balance between humanitarian, resilience and development funding requires further consideration. Whilst the geographic focus of Australian funding has been appropriate to date, changing dynamics in the region mean this will need to be reconsidered going forward. Partner selection could also be further optimised with a focus on fewer, deeper relationships, primarily with those who have a long-standing presence and well-established capacity in the region.

Australia's response to the Syrian crisis has consisted of both program support and diplomatic initiatives. Improved communication between Canberra and relevant posts presents opportunities for better coordination and alignment of these efforts, and would bring likely benefits in both effectiveness and efficiency.

Recommendation 1:

DFAT develops a multi-year Syria response strategy which articulates policy, sector, funding and relationship priorities. The strategy paper should set out a consolidated scope of engagement which can be feasibly supported by aid and non-aid staff at posts and in Canberra. Such a strategy should consider prioritisation of assistance to Lebanon and within Syria, and whether there is a need for a program response to help cement gains made through Australia's diplomatic efforts on humanitarian access.

Recommendation 2:

DFAT should consolidate its number of partners in a bid to reduce transaction costs and strengthen the level of engagement and dialogue. This should continue to reflect a balance between UN, NGO and international humanitarian partners in recognition of the important roles and strengths of each.

Recommendation 3:

Consistent with the above strategy, the department consider upgrading the humanitarian officer position in the region. Due consideration should be given to the need for language skills, humanitarian expertise and DFAT corporate knowledge. The position requires sufficient seniority to facilitate meaningful engagement with partners on policy issues and to provide field based input to programming decisions taken in Canberra.

Adequacy and appropriateness of funding

Australia's financial support for the Syrian response has been substantial but this may now be in decline. Financing for calendar 2014 to date equates to little more than a third of total funds committed in 2013. Funding from other international sources has also failed to keep pace with the alarming escalation in the number of refugees and people in need. Whilst humanitarian crises in Iraq, West Africa (Ebola) and the Palestinian territories compete for international attention, the scale of death and displacement caused by the conflict within Syria remains as bad as ever.

On a positive note, the flexibility associated with Australian un-earmarked support is highly valued by UN partners as it avoids duplication and facilitates effective needs-based targeting on the ground. However flexibility has to some extent been counter-balanced by a strong element of unpredictability, as the response has been characterised by a large number of discrete financial allocations of varying value. This has had a negative impact on planning.

As the crisis is prolonged, refugees turn to destructive coping mechanisms such as child labour, child marriage, prostitution, selling of assets, and debt. The UN and other aid agencies have implemented efficiencies to try and do more with less. Detailed vulnerability mapping is utilised to target assistance where it is most needed. Nevertheless UNHCR in Lebanon estimates that at current funding levels, 80,000 people will go without primary health care, 24,000 families will not receive blankets this winter and 55,000 children will miss out on formal education.

Host nations are straining under the burden of the number of refugees; this is particularly evident in Lebanon where refugees comprise 25% of the population. In such circumstances tensions between refugees and locals would be understandable. Lebanon maintains a fragile level of stability but continued support to poor Lebanese and refugees alike, delivered in a conflict sensitive manner, is critical.

With the Syrian conflict likely to take years to resolve, and with the emergence of other related, and in all likelihood equally intractable conflicts, the need for urgent life saving humanitarian aid seems set to continue.

Whilst the Australian Government's new development policy articulates a clear focus on the Indo-Pacific, scope remains for the department to provide modest levels of support for priorities beyond the region.¹

Funding triggers and mechanisms

The funding mechanisms employed for the response have been timely and flexible, but do not provide the predictability now required in the form of multi-year funding. Arguably, these mechanisms are better suited to responding to sudden-onset natural disasters within our own region than to protracted humanitarian emergencies born of conflict. In the context of a crisis now spanning more than 3 years, the department's ability to ensure the effective targeting of its assistance to the vulnerable through well-established partners of sound capacity is more important than the ability to turn funding decisions around within a few days.

Recommendation 4:

DFAT explores the possibility of creating a dedicated, multi-year program fund, which would underwrite a minimal but predictable level of financial support for the Syrian crisis response. Support from such a fund could be supplemented by mandated flexibility financing, if and when this became available.

Recommendation 5:

DFAT consider amending the Humanitarian Partnerships Agreement (HPA) or developing an alternative mechanism with a view to;

- a. larger and multi-year funding tranches to address slow onset or protracted emergencies
- b. limiting the number of agencies selected through a funding round, and
- c. strengthening the emphasis on established, local capacity as a criterion in partner selection.

¹ While the Australian Government has stipulated that at least 90 per cent of country program aid should be spent in the Indo-Pacific region, potentially this still allows for \$300 - \$400 million per year to be allocated elsewhere.

The quality of Australian aid

Australia's UN partners consistently voiced a preference for Australian aid, given minimal ear-marking and modest reporting requirements. This practice represents an important area of good practice in line with good humanitarian donorship principles. However Australia's deliberately low-maintenance approach to engaging with multilateral agencies limits opportunities to advance policy priorities. For example, whilst it is evident that Australia is an active proponent on disability issues with the UN in New York, this evaluation could find little evidence that delivery on the ground had been shaped by consideration of such concerns.

In the last year the UNHCR led refugee response has taken a number of measures to introduce resilience building measures into its programming, and work collaboratively with host governments on targeted support to both refugees and host communities. Both Jordan and Lebanon are now seeking donor funding for their own plans to promote resilience and stabilisation. Increasingly donors are now faced with a complex series of decisions whether to fund government or UN led interventions, longer term development or immediate and urgent humanitarian needs. The need for conflict-sensitive programming that reaches both refugees and poor host communities is undeniable. Given funding levels, these different approaches and objectives compete. This changing dynamic requires DFAT to re-consider how best to balance a focus on both resilience building and lifesaving aid delivery.

Accountability, management and learning

The nature of the Syrian conflict imposes some significant limitations on the ability of Australia and its partners to monitor and evaluate humanitarian support. Nevertheless a number of partners are using innovative means, and new technologies, to assist in tracking the delivery of assistance. This is an area of obvious interest given Australia's leading role in establishing greater cross border access to vulnerable populations within Syria.

Across the three different partner groups (UN agencies, NGOs and international humanitarian partners) there appears to be significant variation in the department's reporting requirements. At one extreme it was suggested to the evaluation team that the volume of reporting received was too great to facilitate either a useful accountability or learning function. At the other end of the spectrum, requirements are so light that it was not clear to the evaluation team whether anyone knew what the funding had actually been used for. Better reporting from UN agencies is required if the department is to have visibility over where Australian funds are spent and what has been achieved. Greater financial disclosure, particularly around the overheads of the UN and its contracted partners, is needed to strengthen accountability. These are very similar findings to those from the evaluation of Australia's response to the 2011 Horn of Africa crisis.

The evaluation team conducted focus group discussions with approximately 50 refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. This is a small sample in a large population. Nevertheless, feedback provided was unequivocal in highlighting the lack of accountability of aid agencies to affected populations as a major weakness.

Recommendation 6:

DFAT should request brief bi-annual financial and impact reports from UN agencies to promote enhanced transparency and accountability on the use of unearmarked funds.

¹ <http://ochr.org> accessed 24 Aug, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> accessed 18 Aug 14

² Congressional Research Service, Syria: Overview of the Humanitarian Response, February 2014, page 3

³ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> accessed 28 September 2014

Management Response

The Review of Australia's Humanitarian Response to the Syria Crisis was well-researched and of a high quality, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) thanks the evaluation team for its work in delivering a comprehensive product in a limited period of time. While the report focuses on Australia's Syria response, its findings may also be broadly applicable to other responses to protracted crises. DFAT welcomes the analysis in the report and either agrees or agrees in principle with all the recommendations.

Australia has provided more than \$135 million in humanitarian assistance to people affected by the conflict in Syria since it began in 2011². Assistance has been delivered through UN agencies, international humanitarian organisations, Australian NGOs and technical experts for food, shelter, protection, health, water and sanitation, and education. It has been provided to people in need inside Syria as well as refugees and host communities in surrounding countries.

DFAT welcomes the evaluation team's findings that Australia's response to the Syria crisis has been broadly relevant, appropriate and aligned with the international community. This includes the geographic focus of our assistance and the use of UN and NGO partners. We note in particular the value UN agencies place on unearmarked Australian funds and the flexibility this allows to quickly and effectively respond to emerging needs. DFAT also welcomes the finding that Australia exercised particular leadership on improving humanitarian access in Syria through its role on the UN Security Council.

The report highlights a number of challenges Australia's response has faced and suggests areas for improvement. In particular, DFAT acknowledges the value in continuing to seek program coherence, despite the unfolding crisis making it difficult to predict future needs. In addition, DFAT notes the need for improved reporting, particularly from UN agencies on how Australian funds are spent to increase accountability and visibility, in line with the Good Humanitarian Donorship principles.

Going forward, there are a number of practical suggestions outlined in the report which DFAT will consider progressing. The Middle East Branch will work with the Humanitarian Response Branch to help develop a strategy to guide Australia's response to the Syria crisis. Part of these discussions will include exploring ways to enable some predictability around Australian assistance, including the priority areas and partners, and increasing capacity at posts. These lessons will also have broader applicability to the Humanitarian Response Branch's work in reviewing how DFAT engages with other protracted crises. However, any decisions regarding future funding will need to be made in line with the Government's aid policy and budget allocations.

²This figure differs to that cited in the report as between completion of the evaluation and finalisation of the management response in January 2015 the Australian Government made further funds available.

Recommendation		Management Response
<p>1. DFAT develops a multi-year Syria response strategy which articulates policy, sector, funding and relationship priorities. The strategy paper should set out a consolidated scope of engagement which can be feasibly supported by aid and non-aid staff at posts and in Canberra. Such a strategy should consider prioritisation of assistance to Lebanon and within Syria, and whether there is a need for a program response to help cement gains made through Australia's diplomatic efforts on humanitarian access.</p>	<p>Agree</p>	<p>The changing dynamics of the conflict and the refugee situation will continue to be monitored and any funding decisions made in line with where and what assistance is needed most. The Middle East Branch will look to develop a strategy for the Syria response in 2015, which will include details of priority sectors and partners and guide any future funding. The Middle East Branch will continue to seek technical support from the Humanitarian Response Branch in the development of the strategy and associated implementation.</p> <p>Australia's position on the UN Security Council was key to improving humanitarian access inside Syria. Australia co-authored Resolutions 2139 and 2165, the latter which authorised UN agencies and partners to deliver aid into Syria cross-border from Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. The Middle East Branch will determine how these gains can best be taken forward in the strategy.</p> <p>The Humanitarian Response Branch is currently reviewing how the Department responds to protracted crises. The Humanitarian Response Branch will continue to closely engage with the Middle East Branch to ensure the approach is fit for purpose in the context of the Syria response.</p>
<p>2. DFAT should consolidate its number of partners in a bid to reduce transaction costs and strengthen the level of engagement and dialogue. This should continue to reflect a balance between UN, NGO and international humanitarian partners in recognition of the important roles and strengths of each.</p>	<p>Agree</p>	<p>DFAT will continue to work with a range of humanitarian actors in the Syria response, depending on which organisation is best placed to respond to the needs in-country. However, DFAT acknowledges that fewer partners will help reduce transaction costs and lead to a more coherent response. A strategy (Recommendation 1) will better define the priority sectors for the Australian response and help identify the priority partners.</p> <p>In the most recent tranche of funding for Syria since the evaluation (October 2014), a UN agency and an NGO received assistance, both of which have been important, long-term partners in Australia's response.</p>

<p>3. Consistent with the above strategy, the department consider upgrading the humanitarian officer position in the region. Due consideration should be given to the need for language skills, humanitarian expertise and DFAT corporate knowledge. The position requires sufficient seniority to facilitate meaningful engagement with partners on policy issues and to provide field based input to programming decisions taken in Canberra.</p>	<p>Agree in principle</p>	<p>DFAT agrees that there would be benefits from increased resources being dedicated to the response. This objective can be achieved in a range of ways, including by building the capacity of existing staff on humanitarian policy and programming and reprioritising resources as needed. Staffing needs at posts are reviewed regularly.</p> <p>DFAT Canberra-based staff will also travel to the Middle East where possible to assist posts as necessary.</p>
<p>4. DFAT explores the possibility of creating a dedicated, multi-year program fund, which would underwrite a minimal but predictable level of financial support for the Syrian crisis response. Support from such a fund could be supplemented by mandated flexibility financing, if and when this became available.</p>	<p>Agree in principle</p>	<p>DFAT agrees with the benefits of a multi-year program fund for partners and beneficiaries alike. However, the possibility of creating a multi-year program fund needs to be considered alongside the Government's focus of the aid program in the Indo-Pacific and the implications of the recent aid budget cuts.</p>
<p>5. DFAT consider amending the Humanitarian Partnerships Agreement (HPA) or developing an alternative mechanism with a view to;</p> <p>a. larger and multi-year funding tranches to address slow onset or protracted emergencies</p> <p>b. limiting the number of agencies selected through a funding round, and</p> <p>c. strengthening the emphasis on established, local capacity as a criterion in partner selection.</p>	<p>Agree in principle</p>	<p>The Humanitarian Response Branch is reviewing how DFAT responds to protracted crises. DFAT agrees in principle with the ideas raised in points a, b and c, noting however that larger and multi-year funding tranches to address slow onset and protracted emergencies will be dependent on the available budget.</p> <p>The HPA is scheduled to conclude in December 2015. DFAT does not intend to amend the current agreement, as this would not be cost effective or practical. However, DFAT will consider these recommendations when developing a successor mechanism to the HPA.</p>
<p>6. DFAT should request brief bi-annual financial and impact reports from UN agencies to promote enhanced transparency and accountability on the use of unearmarked funds.</p>	<p>Agree</p>	<p>DFAT will raise the need for improved reporting from UN partners through existing high level consultations and participation on executive boards to promote enhanced transparency and accountability. Requests for supplemental reporting will be negotiated in the context of Australia's commitment to the Good Humanitarian Donorship principles.</p>

1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose

Since the Syria conflict began in 2011, Australia has provided a significant and diverse package of humanitarian assistance to people in need inside Syria and in neighbouring countries. This evaluation of that assistance was commissioned in order to:

- › To assess the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian assistance delivered by Australia's partners,
- › To inform the strategic funding and policy direction of additional Australian assistance, including engagement with national governments and humanitarian partners, and
- › To build knowledge within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (the department) on how to best respond to humanitarian needs arising from conflict, particularly where these are associated with protracted crises

This evaluation seeks to answer the question: *what can the Australian Government do to improve its humanitarian response to the crisis in Syria?*

1.2 Evaluation questions

The Review of Australia's humanitarian response to the Syria crisis is guided by four high level areas of enquiry;

- › how Australia responded
- › how Australian assistance was delivered
- › how well the needs of affected people were met
- › achievements of the Australian response

Chapters three to six examine each area in turn providing an assessment of the relevance, appropriateness, effectiveness, coherence and impact of the Australian response. The terms of reference for the evaluation including detailed evaluation questions are provided at Annex One.

1.3 Methodology

This evaluation was a rapid and modestly resourced exercise with a carefully designed scope and a deliberate focus on key strategic partners. Data gathering was undertaken in two phases; document review and interviews with DFAT staff followed by an eight day field trip to both Lebanon and Jordan. A structured approach to data gathering and sampling was outlined in an evaluation plan which included a series of detailed guides for key informant interviews and focus group discussions. The department's Independent Evaluation Committee and the Middle East Branch provided feedback on the plan prior to its finalisation.

The following provides a summary of data gathering and analysis methods employed. A fuller description of these is provided at Annex Two.

Document review (including secondary data and literature)

The evaluation team reviewed over 55 documents drawn from academic and grey literature on the Syria crisis, implementing partner strategies, appeals and reports, specialist studies and other evaluations. Documents were coded according to relevant evaluation questions. An annotated bibliography was then prepared and used to guide fieldwork investigations. A list of documents reviewed is available at Annex Three.

Key informant interviews

Twenty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with government and implementing partners in Jordan and Lebanon and the department's staff in Amman, Beirut, Canberra, Geneva, New York and Rome. Interviews were conducted using a guide derived from the evaluation key questions/matrix. A team member took detailed notes during each interview and most were also audio recorded.

Focus group discussions

Four focus group discussions were held with over 50 beneficiaries in both Jordan and Lebanon. These provided a critically important perspective on the appropriateness of assistance provided relative to the needs of refugees. These discussions also revealed some negative features associated with the response.

A focus group discussion was also held via telephone with the Australian NGOs involved in the response. This was supplemented by interviews in the field with a number of these NGOs.



Figure 2 : Za'atari refugee camp, Jordan

2 Context

2.1 The Arab spring and the Syrian crisis

The crisis emerged in the broader regional context of the Arab spring, when a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions spread across the Middle East. In Syria civil resistance and protests against the Syrian Baathist government started in early 2011. Protests were organised by Syrian activists at a local level in response to a backdrop of increasing economic disparity and political repression. During the first few months the protest movement adhered to non-violent methods and was met with fierce retaliation by the Syrian government.

In late 2011 the Free Syria Army (FSA) was created and the uprising became militarised. The government responded with indiscriminate bombardment by artillery and air forces, followed by infantry clearance operations.¹ On 4 July 2012 the International Committee of the Red Cross declared it a non-international armed conflict that was subject to international humanitarian law (IHL). During the course of the conflict the FSA became fragmented and a number of Islamist military groups became involved.

There are a number of distinctive characteristics associated with the conflict. There have been extensive violations of human rights and IHL resulting in high numbers of civilian deaths and injury and extreme deprivation. The nature of the weapons used, including the use of chemical weapons, has also contributed heavily to the devastation and loss of life.² Furthermore all parties have used violent strategies including torture, detention and sexual violence.³

Meanwhile the humanitarian response has been severely hampered by lack of access. The Syrian government has maintained a high level of state control over the number of humanitarian agencies and their access within the country. The ongoing fighting and insecurity has further limited access. This combination of factors has hindered the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance.

The context has become increasingly complex in recent months with the advance of the Islamic State (IS) across Iraq and Syria. Taking advantage of the chaos caused by the Syrian conflict, IS has expanded beyond Iraq's borders recruiting vast numbers of Syrian rebels and causing further destruction and displacement of civilians within Iraq and Syria.

2.2 Neighbouring countries and the refugee influx

The refugee response is unique in both scale and composition. Refugees are displaced from a middle-income country where many held good jobs and enjoyed a relatively high standard of living. Host countries are comparatively expensive and as most refugees are unable to work legally savings become rapidly depleted leaving families dependent on assistance that rarely meets all their needs. High operating costs also present a challenge to the humanitarian community. Matters are further complicated by the fact that 85% of Syrian refugees in surrounding countries are living outside camps⁴ hence requiring a new model of refugee

support that is able to both reach refugees across densely populated urban areas and cope with rapidly changing circumstances.⁵

The impact on the social, political and economic fabric of the surrounding countries has been considerable. Governments have been placing an increasing emphasis on the importance of support for host communities and development projects that will promote resilience of the country as a whole. In Lebanon for example the refugees now comprise over a quarter of the population and are increasingly being perceived as destabilising the country.⁶

2.3 Humanitarian response and a shift to a protracted crisis

In 2013 the international community provided over US\$3 billion to fund the humanitarian response inside Syria and the region under the Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP) and the Regional Response Plan (RRP), covering 70% of the overall amount requested by the UN (67.7% and 72.4% respectively).⁷ Within Syria UN OCHA led the humanitarian coordination and response, and in the region UNHCR led the humanitarian response to the refugee crisis.

In 2014 the numbers requiring humanitarian assistance have increased and the funding required to support humanitarian response is unprecedented. The RRP and the SHARP collectively account for 43% of the UN's total global humanitarian appeal⁸ (US\$2.28 billion for SHARP and US\$3.74 billion for the revised RRP). To date donors have contributed US \$2.8 billion, or 47% of the combined SHARP/RRP appeal⁹. Whilst this is a nominal increase compared to the same time last year it also represents a widening of the gap between needs and funding given the escalation in the crisis. It appears unlikely that the 2014 appeal target will be met.

The Syrian crisis has no obvious end in sight. In recent weeks with the international focus on other conflicts in the region the government has reportedly embarked on a renewed military campaign with July 2014 being the deadliest month of the conflict to date.¹⁰ As the conflict drags on so does the continued impoverishment of the Syrian population resulting in further displacement and growing humanitarian needs.¹¹ The capacity of surrounding countries to host more refugees is stretched and their stability potentially undermined. The international community is faced with the reality of a vastly underfunded response and the need to shift to a more sustainable approach. In the face of a protracted crisis the international response needs to continue to address immediate humanitarian needs, promote resilience among displaced and host populations and focus on stabilisation of the surrounding countries.

¹ Hugo Slim and Lorenzo Trombetta, Syria Crisis Common Context Analysis, May 2014, page 35

² United Nations, 7th Report of Commission of Inquiry on Syria, A/HRC/25/65

³ Hugo Slim and Lorenzo Trombetta, Syria Crisis Common Context Analysis, May 2014, page 33

⁴ UNHCR, 2014 Syria Regional Response Plan, Strategic Overview, Mid-year update, page 7

⁵ Hugo Slim and Lorenzo Trombetta, Syria Crisis Common Context Analysis, May 2014, page 59

⁶ <http://www.unhcr.org/533c15179.html> accessed 23 August 2014

⁷ UN OCHA, Financial Tracking Service, <http://fts.unocha.org/> accessed 17 August 2014

⁸ Hugo Slim and Lorenzo Trombetta, Syria Crisis Common Context Analysis, May 2014, page 41

⁹ OCHA Financial Tracking System <http://fts.unocha.org/> accessed 29 September 2014

¹⁰ OCHA

¹¹ Hugo Slim and Lorenzo Trombetta, Syria Crisis Common Context Analysis, May 2014, page 60

3 The Australian response

How relevant and appropriate has the Australian Government's response been given the protracted nature of the Syrian crisis? This chapter examines the strategic and operational dimensions of the Australian response, including;

- › alignment with the department's policies and accepted humanitarian aid principles^a
- › the complementarity of programming decisions with relevant foreign policy initiatives
- › Australian influence and leadership in relation to the broader international response

3.1 Australia's approach

Australia was early to respond to the crisis and this support is now entering its fourth year. This response is characterised by a substantial program of material support in addition to significant diplomatic initiatives on the international stage. Whilst there are noteworthy achievements in these two areas each has essentially followed its own separate course. Interviews with relevant officials in Canberra and at posts^b consistently highlighted the absence of a documented strategy guiding the response and limited insight into how or why programming decisions in Canberra were made.

Findings

- › Whilst Australia's response to the Syria crisis has been broadly relevant and appropriate its coherence has been less than optimal in the absence of a clear strategic vision.

Leadership and advocacy

The later part of the response has coincided with Australia's presence on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) where Australia has been particularly active on issues relating to Syria. These efforts in New York have also been complemented with Australian participation in the Geneva based High Level Group (HLG) on Syria. Interviews with UN and NGO partners and representatives of both donor and host governments highlighted the important leadership role that Australia has played in improving the access that humanitarian agencies have to people in need within Syria. Australia was co-author of resolutions 2139 and 2165. Resolution 2165 passed in July 2014 succeeded, contrary to the expectations of many, in securing authorisation for UN agencies to use the most direct routes for relief including across borders and conflict lines. This has had a ground breaking effect on the ability of the UN to access hard-to-reach populations in opposition held territory inside Syria. Whilst the resolution is still in the early

^a Including, but not limited to, those outlined under the Good Humanitarian Donorship principles

^b Including Amman, Beirut, Geneva, New York and Rome

stages of implementation it potentially marks an important shift in international humanitarian law with repercussions going well beyond the Syrian crisis.

Finding

- › Australia has exercised particular leadership on the issue of improving humanitarian access to vulnerable populations within Syria and this is widely acknowledged as a ground breaking achievement.

Material assistance

Australian financial assistance to date amounts to \$130.81 million in what is essentially a partner mediated response. The Middle East is not a traditional focus area for Australian aid and the department’s aid expertise within the region is limited. As such Australia relies heavily on its partners and whilst interviews revealed universal appreciation of this support, few if any, were able to describe this as being predictable or dependable.

The following figure shows the spread and quantum of funding allocations, each of these at the time was essentially a ‘one-off’ commitment although in many cases subsequent allocations were made. In total Australia has funded 14 separate partners for relatively small individual amounts across 54 allocations.

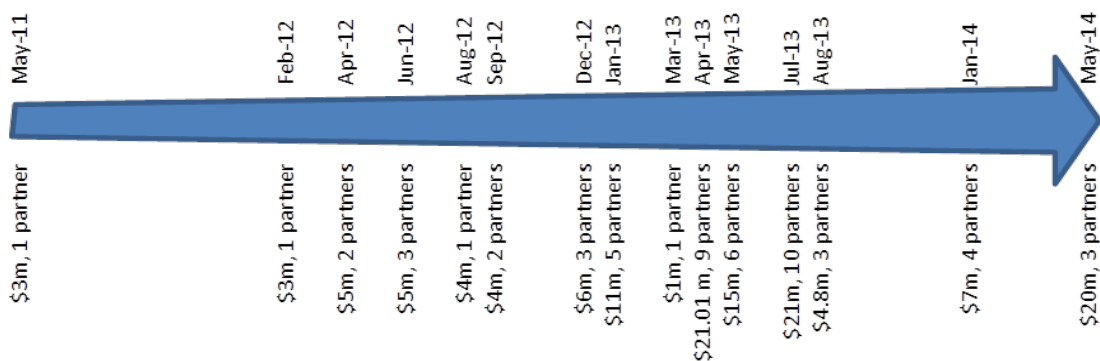


Figure 3: Australian funding in response to the Syria crisis

Over time as the crisis has continued to escalate and the prospects of early resolution become increasingly distant the need for donors to provide multi-year allocations becomes more acute. Whilst some other donors, including the UK, USA and Canada, have begun to adopt such an approach Australia lags in this area.

Whilst the numbers of Syrians in need of urgent help, both within the country and in the region, continues to grow the evaluation team heard widespread concern amongst partners that funding levels may have already peaked and could now be in decline. Under the leadership of UNHCR and UNICEF a robust vulnerability targeting approach has been devised to ensure that those most in need, both refugees and host populations, are prioritised for assistance. Restricted humanitarian access within Syria currently limits the viability of such an approach for those working within the country. Nevertheless whilst assistance appears to be generally well targeted funding shortfalls may require Australia’s partners to cut important support with potentially dire implications for refugee well-being and the stability of host nations alike. In 2013 Australia was the 12th largest contributor to the regional response (at 1.7% of total funds)

and the 9th largest contributor of assistance within Syria (2.2% of total funds)¹. The following figure plots the provision of Australian support against the growth in numbers of people in need^a.

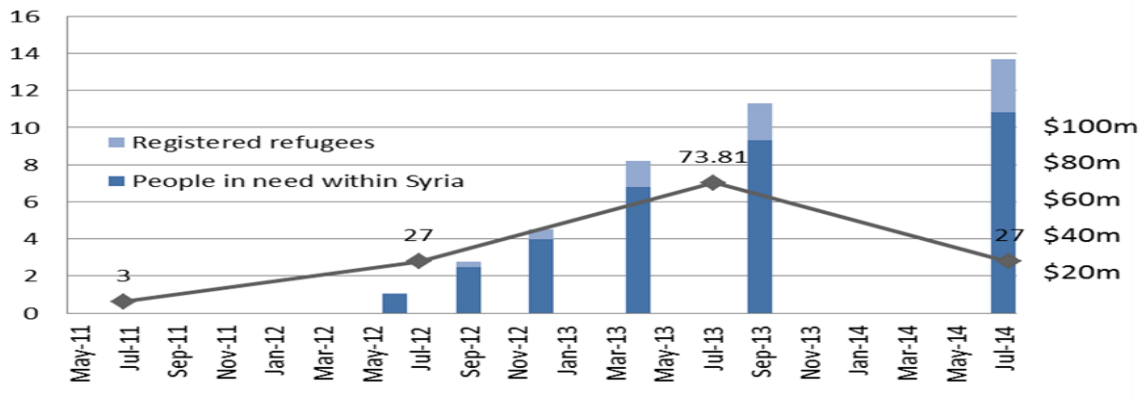


Figure 4 : Needs and the provision of Australian assistance

Finding

- › Australian funding has not been sufficiently predictable nor have funding levels kept pace with needs resulting from the escalation in the crisis.

3.2 Good humanitarian aid

Alignment with policy commitments

A number of key aid policies have been developed by DFAT^b to guide decisions around targeting and delivery of Australian aid. In the context of the Syrian crisis response protection, humanitarian action, disability, and gender policies are of particular relevance.

As a donor mediated response the characteristics of Australian support largely mirror those of the broader international response. Particularly in the case of funding to UN agencies Australia has generally not sought to prescribe programming approaches or otherwise pursue special policy interests. This approach which is characterised by no or minimal earmarking of funds is consistent with good humanitarian donorship principles. However it also limits the ability of DFAT staff to promote Australia’s policy priorities with partners, such as disability and protection, which are perhaps specific to Australia or are not yet part of internationally, agreed and institutionalised humanitarian aid approaches. For example, there was limited evidence of intentional steps to implement a key strategy in the Protection in Humanitarian Action Framework to mainstream protection into humanitarian action.²

Finding

- › Much of the response is in accord with the Humanitarian Action Policy and the Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles, particularly given the flexibility associated with Australian funding.

^a UN appeals are based on calendar year which is the unit of analysis represented in this graph. Analysis by financial year also shows that funding levels peaked in 2013/13.

^b In many cases these policies reflect those of the former AusAID

Supporting partner governments

The governments and people of both Jordan and Lebanon have been generous hosts to large populations of Syrian refugees. Both countries now recognise the need for longer term development and stabilisation initiatives which address structural deficiencies and the challenges to social, economic and environmental sustainability associated with large refugee numbers. Perhaps as a result RRP6 has a large focus on support to host communities. The Lebanon Stabilisation Roadmap was recently launched and is linked to a World Bank administered multi donor trust fund with the government calling on donors to help fund a series of priority projects. Meanwhile the Government of Jordan has had a National Resilience Plan in place since September 2013 and reviews all funding proposals to ensure that a set percentage of resources are allocated to assisting Jordanian host communities alongside Syrian refugees.

Australia has not provided any funding to governments hosting refugees. Representatives of both governments put to the evaluation team the need for a better coordinated response which effectively bridges the gap between humanitarian and development imperatives and requested Australia's moral and financial support in this regard. However as middle income nations in a region geographically distant to Australia a longer term program of development assistance would sit at odds with the current aid policy priorities of the Australian Government.

Interviews with UN agencies and other donors revealed an alternative perspective questioning whether these plans should be prioritised in the face of such overwhelming humanitarian needs and ongoing funding shortfalls. Nevertheless, particularly in Lebanon, the need for assistance which also bolsters the capacity of the government to continue supporting refugees and poor Lebanese alike is acutely apparent.

Finding

- › Australia's support for humanitarian action, including resilience building, through existing partners has been appropriate, the provision of development assistance to partner governments in the region would be contrary to the priorities recently stipulated by the Australian Government for the aid program.

Recovery and resilience building

Despite the longevity of the response the evaluation team found only minimal progress against recovery and resilience building goals. Host government representatives in particular highlighted the need for the UN to adopt a different model indicating that whilst the early response had been entirely appropriate the UN has been slow to adapt to the now protracted situation. Focus group discussions with four sets of refugee beneficiaries in both Lebanon and Jordan were unanimously of the view that assistance provided is insufficient for survival and falls well short of anything that would help them to get on with their lives.

These views should not be taken to suggest that Australia's implementing partners are not aware of the importance of recovery and resilience building or not working to progress this. The No Lost Generation initiative is a good example of where Australian support is being used to invest in the future of Syrian children. Ultimately however more and longer term funding alongside livelihoods opportunities are required for resilience and recovery to be adequately addressed.

Vulnerability targeting

The Australian response includes a clear focus on gender. Consistent with the HPA guidelines these organisations use a gender tool to develop detailed gender action plans. A number of these organisations are implementing programs specifically targeting women and girls including

female headed households. Other organisations (e.g. UNICEF and Save the Children) maintain a particular focus on mothers and children, consistent with their organisational mandates. The World Food Program targets pregnant and lactating women in its food distributions within Syria and UNHCR uses 'female headed household status' as key criterion in assessing vulnerability. Australia also provided support for the protection of women from gender-based violence through funding to UNFPA (3 million AUD).

A similar focus on disability issues is less apparent. The World Health Organisation estimates disability rates as a result of the conflict to be in the vicinity of 3 to 5 times the number of dead, a figure equating to as many as 1 million people.³ According to WHO the state of medical care in Syria is now such that avoidable amputations now frequently occur. Whilst one of Australia's partners within Syria is providing some support to those with pre-existing disabilities this is clearly an area of underserved need though be it alongside many others.

Interviews with DFAT posts suggest sustained engagement with UN agencies at headquarters level on the importance of gender on programming, although it is less clear whether such discussions have specifically focused on the Syria crisis. The same interviews indicate significant variation across posts on the levels of dialogue on disability issues.

Findings

- › Australia's deliberate low-maintenance approach to engaging with multilateral agencies provides limited opportunity for ensuring that gender and disability are adequately considered throughout program delivery.



Figure 5: Non-formal education class delivered by Beyond Association, Lebanon

¹ OCHA Financial Tracking System <http://fts.unocha.org/> accessed 26 August 2014

² AusAID, Protection in Humanitarian Action Framework, 2013, pg. 11

³ Interview WHO

4 Delivery of Australian Assistance

How effective has Australia and its partners been in responding to the crisis? This chapter assesses the performance of both the department and its partners in the response. It examines;

- > the appropriateness of funding sources, triggers and mechanisms relative to context
- > the selection of partners and the degree to which this reflects a coherent approach
- > the appropriateness of monitoring and evaluation arrangements including the degree to which analysis and a commitment to ongoing improvement informed the response
- > whether suitable accountability policies and practices are in place

4.1 Australia's key partners

Australian assistance was delivered through partners including: UN agencies, Australian NGOs and international humanitarian partners. 70% of the funding was given to UN agencies, with the largest allocation of 35 million to UNHCR.

Decisions on partners have been taken largely in Canberra and informed by the identified need and long standing relationships with UN or NGO partners who are on standby agreements.

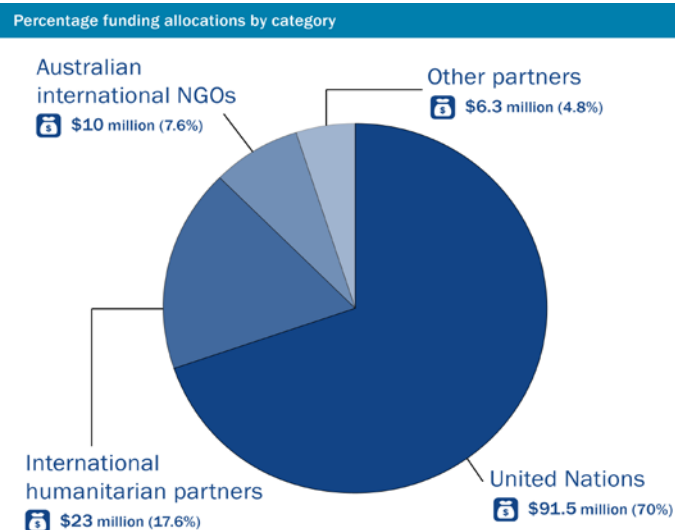


Figure 6 : Percentage allocations by partner category

Appropriateness of partners

There are disadvantages to the breadth of partner base currently contracted for the Syria response. Numerous interviews with DFAT staff exposed the difficulties associated with managing a large number of partners and the high administration and transaction costs. Furthermore, with such a large number of agencies the ability of Australia to effectively partner is compromised, both in terms of facilitating robust exchange of information to inform and influence each other's program and policy responses, and in terms of being able to monitor and effectively support partner programs.

It has been appropriate to have both UN and NGO partners for the regional response. The UN agencies have been able to "act at scale" with reach and leverage that is required given the size of the crisis. UN agencies have also taken on a critical coordination role and have specific

mandates to fulfil in relation to the refugee population. At the same time NGOs play an important role in program delivery and are often the final recipient of Australian and other funding channelled through UN actors. Where they have capacity they can provide a cheaper and timelier alternative to channelling funds through UN agencies.¹ They also play an important advocacy role in holding UN actors accountable through their participation in sector working groups in the region and in Syria.

4.2 Funding triggers and mechanisms

Funding sources

The DFAT Syrian crisis response used two funding sources: re-directed country program allocation from the Middle East North Africa program and mandated flexibility funding from the Humanitarian Division. The total funding allocated to the Syria response from the mandated flexibility funding in any given financial year was broadly and informally agreed between the Middle East Branch and the Humanitarian Division, but was subject to changes in the event of other humanitarian emergencies. The mandated flexibility funding is replenished on annual cycles making it difficult to provide certainty of funding. The Middle East program currently has no dedicated multi-year allocation for Syria or other countries affected by the crisis.

Funding mechanisms

DFAT employed two main mechanisms to distribute funding allocations. The primary mechanism was direct allocation to partners operating within the frameworks of the Refugee Response Plans (RRP 5 and 6) and the Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plans (SHARP 2013 and 2014). Approximately 70% of funding was allocated to partners to implement programs within these coordinated plans, including 20 million AUD that was committed to partners for the implementation of the No Lost Generation (NLG) strategy, which complements and overlaps with the RRP and SHARP. With the exception of NLG Funding was largely un-earmarked. The evaluation team repeatedly heard from UN partners their great appreciation of un-earmarked funding as this allows them to respond to emerging priorities and direct funding to the programs most in need.

The other main mechanism was the Humanitarian Partnership Agreement (HPA) that was triggered in April 2013 (HPA I) and again in July 2013 (HPA II). The HPA rapidly provides funding to Australian NGOs that are part of the agreement (6 NGOs in total) these then decide between themselves which agencies are best placed to respond.

The Australian government made only one small allocation to the Syria response pooled funding mechanism, the Emergency Response Fund (ERF), in 2012. However, it should also be noted that Australia makes regular contributions to the Central Emergency Relief Fund (CERF) that allocated over 72 million to the Syria response in 2013². Australia has also contributed staff support to the response through the RedR register.

Partner	Total
UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	35.00
UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)	23.00
Miscellaneous humanitarian partners	23.00
World Food Programme (WFP)	17.00
World Health Organization (WHO)	7.00
UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)	4.50
RedR	3.90
Save the Children	3.81
UN Population Fund (UNFPA)	3.00
CARE	2.15
Australian Red Cross	2.00
UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)	2.00
Oxfam	1.80
Caritas Total	1.45
World Vision	0.80
Australian Civilian Corps	0.40
Total	130.81

Figure 7 : Funding by partner

Funding triggers

There were a number of triggers to funding allocations, both proactive and reactive. The Middle East program initiated proactive requests to the Minister in response to specific events such as a spike in violence; approach of winter or in response to appeals.³ Unlike development program financing all humanitarian allocations require Ministerial approval. Ministerial visits to the region and key events such the January 2014 Kuwait conference also provided important trigger points where an official or public announcement regarding funding was made. Allocations following funding announcements by other like-minded donors and specific directions from the Minister appear to comprise some of the more reactive triggers in the response.

Despite the intention of the Middle East program to “not spread ourselves too thin” the funding triggers and the “pressure to satisfy other stakeholders” resulted over time in broadening out the scope of the response. The evaluation team believes that the absence of an approved strategy prevented a coherent approach to funding allocations, regardless of the trigger.

Appropriateness of mechanisms

The mechanisms utilised did provide a timely and effective response in the early stages of the crisis. However, the inability to allocate multi-year predictable funding through any of the mechanisms⁴ has become a serious constraint and undermines the efficacy of Australia’s response to this and other protracted crises.

Direct allocation to partners has been an effective and timely mechanism, often building on well-established relationships and existing funding agreements. Quick disbursements to partners with strong capacity, including UNHCR and UNICEF, enabled Australia to support an effective humanitarian response. However, from the perspective of some key stakeholders the transparency of decision making for direct allocations could be improved. Posts in Beirut, Amman, New York, Geneva or Rome were not always aware of the partners that were to receive funding or the process for making decisions. In some cases this has led to funding partners which well informed DFAT staff at posts would have cautioned against given the opportunity. In a small minority of cases direct allocation to international partners and NGOs was not subject to a competitive process and in the limited view of the evaluation team may have resulted in questionable value for money.

The HPA mechanism is appropriate in terms of its timeliness and ability to disburse funds quickly through Australian-based NGOs. One of the perceived benefits of the HPA is that it provides accountability and transparency in terms of criteria for allocations and peer review for organisational capacity.⁵ However, the amount of funding allocated through the mechanism and the number of HPA partners that the funding is divided between undermines the efficiency of this mechanism, with high transaction costs for the government and the NGOs alike.

Interviews suggested that some of the NGOs selected under the HPA mechanism did not have adequate in country capacity to scale up quickly for the response. Some agencies had little previous engagement in country and had to set up, or dramatically scale up, operations (in one case an agency had increased staff from 30 staff to 400 staff in just over a year). One refugee explained that *“there are some societies that are not well established on the ground and they are just established for the sake of making money under the pretext of helping Syrian people.”* It was clear to the evaluation team that agencies that had good access and capacity were those that had also been significantly operational in the region prior to the crisis. This raises questions about the ability of the HPA mechanism, intended to be both cooperative and competitive, to facilitate effective decisions on the appropriateness of each NGO proposal based on operational presence and capacity.

The one off nature of the HPA mechanism was appropriate in the early stages of response, but is inappropriate now in light of the need for multi-year funding that spans the spectrum of humanitarian, resilience and development needs in this context.

There seems to have been inadequate consideration of pooled funding mechanisms that provide a number of advantages for donors, particularly those such as Australia with limited aid personnel in the region. The Emergency Response Fund (ERF) provides a structured on-the-ground decision making mechanism for funding allocation. It provides funding across the spectrum of agencies, including local NGOs that may have greater access. Overhead costs are capped at 3% for OCHA as the administrator and implementing partners can allocate up to 20% of project budgets for indirect costs. The management and monitoring of the process by UN OCHA provides a due diligence and accountability safety net for funding.

Findings

- › Improved communication between Canberra and posts, particularly on programming decisions, would yield benefits in both effectiveness and efficiency
- › Australian funding has been spread across too many partners, reducing its potential effectiveness and limiting the ability of the department to engage meaningfully.
- › The funding mechanisms employed for the response have been timely and flexible, but do not facilitate a well-planned multi-year response which is now imperative.

4.3 Accountability, management and learning

The accountability of partners to the Australian government varies considerably. In line with good humanitarian donorship principles the Australian government does not require UN agencies to report against Australian funding allocations. In addition, most of the Australian funding for this response has been un-earmarked. This makes it difficult for Australia to know exactly where its funding is being spent. At the same time the Australian government requires “better quality reporting” from NGO partners.⁶

Monitoring and evaluation capacity in the context of the Syrian crisis, and in particular for programs within Syria, is severely hampered by limited access. Interviews with partners verified that all have at least basic monitoring systems in place that range from indicator tracking at the project level to household verification checks. In recognition of the key shortcoming under RRP5, a framework of common indicators and the Activity Info database now tracks progress against RRP6.

In the case of work inside Syria some UN agencies and NGOs have invested in remote monitoring mechanisms including the use of third party monitors. However, there remains room for improvement here with use of barcoding and GPS enabled cameras, phones and tracking devices offering the potential to strengthen monitoring. The regional refugee response has better employed innovative techniques making use of iris scanning for registration and cash transfers via ATMs that allows tracking of when and where refugees access assistance.

The evaluation team saw a small number of examples of where the analysis of monitoring data has been used to inform programming decisions. NGO partners reported changes including a shift to cash assistance and greater emphasis on transparency and accountability on the basis of feedback from beneficiary populations.⁷ Australia contributed to WHO’s establishment of an early warning and response system in Syria (EWARS), this allows WHO to track the outbreak of infectious disease and adapt their program accordingly. For example, in August 2014 WHO was

able to identify the outbreak of up to 3663 cases of suspected measles and will respond with a scaled up immunisation campaign.⁸

Despite these strong examples of monitoring systems there are few agencies that spoke confidently about their commitment to evaluation or to identifying unanticipated and even negative impact associated with assistance. UNHCR and Oxfam provided strong examples of evaluations that had recently informed programming, but by and large, partners rely on output level data and have limited systematic insight into outcomes or impact.

There is some evidence that reporting by partners has an impact on the programming strategy of the Australian government, for example the Australian Government's polio response. Early reporting of polio by partners resulted in the Australian Government's quick mobilisation and allocation of funding.⁹

Most partners have established accountability mechanisms primarily in the form of feedback and complaints procedures. However, external assessments have reported that available mechanisms are uncoordinated or under resourced and are "piecemeal".¹⁰ The evaluation team heard that at one point there were 150 hotlines for beneficiary feedback across Lebanon. Independent studies point to a need for greater transparency and accountability¹¹, a finding supported by this evaluation. Across focus group discussions there was strong consensus that beneficiaries had no influence over the type of assistance given; they did not know how to provide feedback; and were disbelieving that agencies would take such feedback seriously. The focus group discussions reflected a previously reported lack of trust and/or understanding amongst refugees about what they are being told, and by whom.¹² Refugees expressed confusion about vulnerability targeting and the different assistance received across the community describing it as dependent on luck or nepotism. This mirrors a recent assessment that found support is not perceived as being distributed to those most in need¹³. There were also allegations of aid workers inappropriately facilitating queue-jumping of individuals awaiting assistance and one organisation treating refugees with aggression and disrespect.

*"There doesn't exist a way to process ... feedback. Even if a way existed, we wouldn't be guided towards that. Within these organizations, there is nepotism ... the assistance that you get or lack thereof depends on the connections you have inside these organizations."*¹⁴

Findings

- › The selection of partners does not adequately consider the analysis of those with the greatest understanding of the context
- › Accountability to affected populations is a large weakness in the international response

¹ Humanitarian Advisory Group, Humanitarian Financing in Australia: scoping report on comparative mechanisms, Nov.2012

² <http://www.unocha.org/cerf/> accessed 26 Sept 2013

³ Interviews with Middle East Branch, Canberra

⁴ Interview with humanitarian division / Interview UNICEF Jordan

⁵ focus group discussion with HPA partners

⁶ Interview humanitarian division

⁷ Interview with SCF / Caritas Australia, HPA 1&2 Incorporation of Lessons Learnt, 2014

⁸ Interview WHO

⁹ Interviews with Middle East Branch, Canberra

¹⁰ Internews, Lost: Syrian Refugees and the Information Gap, November 2013, p. 2

¹¹ REACH, Understanding Social Cohesion and Resilience in Jordanian host communities, Assessment Report, June 2014, p. 2

¹² Internews, Lost: Syrian Refugees and the Information Gap, November 2013, p. 2

¹³ REACH, Understanding Social Cohesion and Resilience in Jordanian host communities, Assessment Report, June 2014, p. 2

¹⁴ focus group discussion women, Jordan

5 Addressing needs

Has Australian assistance been appropriately targeted to meet the most urgent needs of the most vulnerable populations? This chapter explores coverage achieved with Australian funds and whether these were appropriately targeted. It assesses;

- › the appropriateness of the geographic and sectoral funding allocations
- › the extent to which capacity, access and/or needs influenced the delivery of assistance
- › the effectiveness of partner approaches in meeting priority needs

5.1 Coverage and needs

Geographic

The Australian response has focused assistance across three main geographic areas, namely Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, with the largest percentage (46%) targeted to programs in Syria.

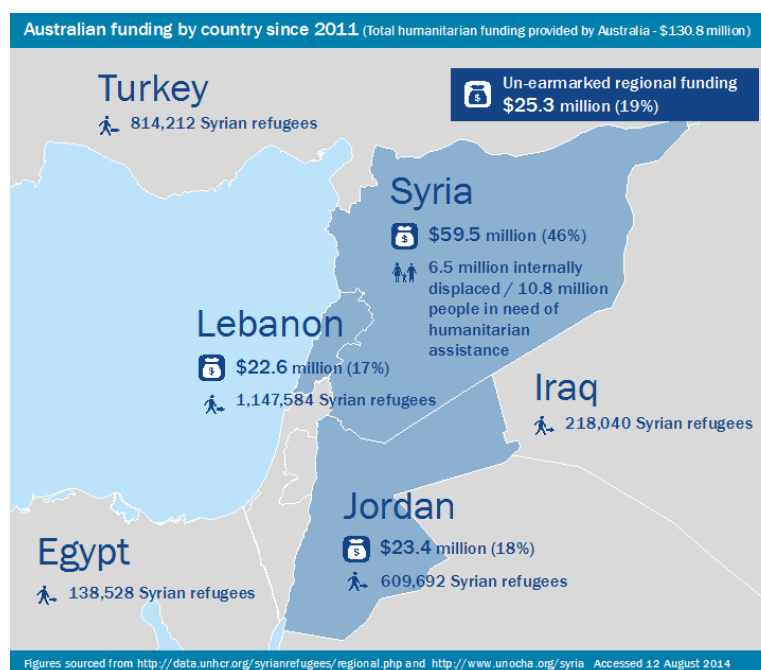
The geographic focus has been broad, but largely appropriate to date given the humanitarian needs and funding short falls across all countries. However, as the context has evolved the vulnerabilities inside Syria and in Lebanon appear to be particularly extreme, and may justify an adjustment in the

proportion of funding allocations to focus Australian funding primarily on Lebanon and Syria.

Inside Syria, the conflict shows no sign of ending and there are likely to be significant humanitarian needs continuing for the foreseeable future. It is also important, in the light of Australia's significant diplomatic efforts to increase access into Syria that the Australian government demonstrates synergy in the program response by allocating funding to take advantage of increased access.

Lebanon is considered by many to be at breaking point. The disproportionately high numbers of refugees in Lebanon are placing the country under extreme stress. The importance of maintaining stability in the country and preventing an escalation of violence is a strong rationale

Figure 8 : Map showing distribution of Australian assistance



for investing now. Currently funding coverage for Lebanon is 29% against the UN appeal request as compared to 36% in Jordan¹. Lebanon also continues to receive and register refugees at a steady pace (over 42,000 registrations in June 2014)² whilst new arrivals and registration in Jordan peaked in 2013 and are steadily declining (approx. 10,000 registrations in June 2014).³

Finding

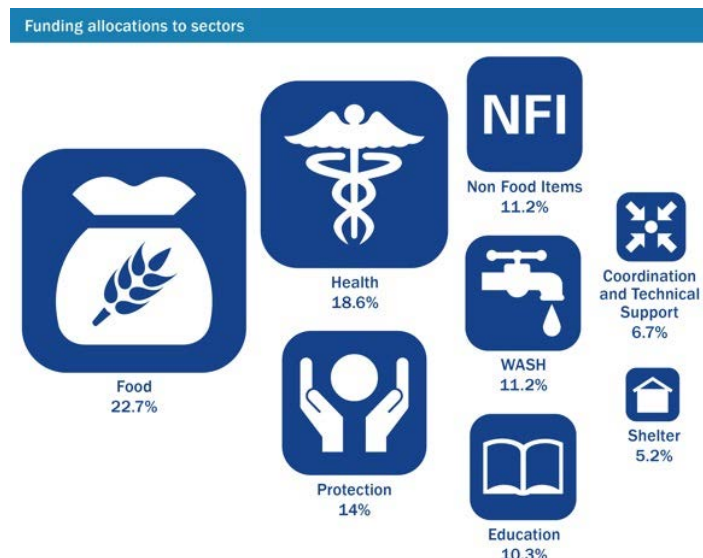
- › The geographic focus of the Australian funding has been appropriate to date but will need to adapt to the continued escalation of needs in Lebanon and Syria relative to the more stable situation in Jordan

Sectoral

There has been a large sectoral spread of the Australian-funded response (see diagram below). An initial focus on health and food was driven largely by humanitarian partnerships and Ministerial discretion. This early focus was appropriate given the distinct nature of the crisis and necessary focus on emergency medical care and war surgery.⁴ Australian funding has recently shifted to incorporate a greater emphasis on education.

Figure 9 : Australian funding by sector

Overall the first two years of the response focused almost exclusively on humanitarian response sectors with limited evidence of resilience building or transitioning activities. In the last financial year (2013 – 2014) there has been a shift to funding resilience programs, with 20 million AUD allocated to No Lost Generation, representing over 40% of the funding allocation for the financial year. This shift to more resilience-focussed funding may be appropriate, but it is essential to recognise the ongoing nature of the humanitarian crisis, whereby the shift of the response cannot be linear (from humanitarian to resilience to development) but rather needs to have all considered in parallel.



Most sectors in refugee hosting countries have moved away from the traditional delivery of humanitarian assistance through distribution of food and non-food items to a greater focus on cash transfer programming.⁵ The refugee population has welcomed this shift explaining in a focus group discussion “*the most important thing is cash assistance*”. It provides a sense of dignity in relation to individuals being able to make decisions about what items they need, and benefits local host economies whilst also entailing lower delivery overheads. However, communication and accountability for cash programming needs to be strengthened. In focus group discussions beneficiaries described the frustration associated with individuals or families receiving different amounts of cash and not clearly understanding why.

Findings

- › The sector spread of investment is too broad putting pressure on a small staff base to be across a broad number of complex issues.

- › The appropriate balance between humanitarian and resilience and development funding is not sufficiently clear

5.2 Access and capacity

Coordination capacity

UNHCR have taken a coordination role for the regional response in line with their refugee mandate and this has presented a unique set of challenges for the agency that also has an operational role. In July 2013 a real time evaluation found that UNHCR needed to clarify and strengthen its approach to coordinating the international response.⁶ Since this time UNHCR has taken steps to incorporate cluster co-lead agencies in the sector working groups and established a separate coordination structure from the operational arm of UNHCR.⁷ Despite these steps some agencies still expressed concerns to the evaluation team that the “double hatting” of UNHCR compromises its ability to play a neutral coordination role. In addition, there has been some critique of UNHCR’s capacity to play a strong advocacy role for the protection of refugees because of the potential trade off in terms of access. Some donors have played a very strong role in urging the UN, and in particular UNHCR and UN OCHA, to better articulate the coordination and decision-making hierarchy moving forward to make the response more effective.

Lack of access

Inside Syria access is severely hampered. Few agencies are registered and operating out of Damascus, and those that are registered are required to work through Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). As a result the international community has been engaged in cross border and cross line operations largely working through local community-based organisations (CBOs). This has potentially constituted a breach of international law as individuals and agencies enter Syria without the approval of the Syrian authorities, as such this has entailed significant risks for donors, agencies, and individuals involved in cross border operations.

In spite of the lack of access, partnerships with both SARC and local CBOs have been relatively successful and agencies are becoming more innovative in their programming and monitoring activities to try to achieve better coverage. Following UN Security Council Resolutions 2139 and 2165⁸ the international community hope that access will continue to improve. Recent delivery of live-saving items in July to the besieged population in Madamiyet Elsham, that had not had any assistance since 2012, is a positive indication of improvement.⁹ This is a situation that Australia will have an interest to follow given their lead role in resolution drafting.

Finding

- › Capacity and access of partners is correlated to their established presence and relationships in context

¹ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107> accessed 09 August 2014

² UNHCR, Registration Trends for Syrians in Lebanon, Statistics as of: 21 August 2014

³ UNHCR, Registered Syrians in Jordan, 26 July 2014

⁴ Hugo Slim and Lorenzo Trombetta, Syria Crisis Common Context Analysis, May 2014, page 36

⁵ Interview with UNHCR Jordan and UNRWA

⁶ Crisp et al, A real-time evaluation of UNHCR’s response to the Syrian refugee emergency, July 2013

⁷ Interview UNHCR Jordan

⁸ UN Security Council, Resolution S/RES/2139 (2014) and Resolution S/RES/2165 (2014)

⁹ <http://logcluster.org/blog/humanitarian-assistance-reaches-madamiyet-elsham-first-time-almost-two-years> accessed 23 August 2014

6 Impact and results

What are the key achievements associated with Australia's response to the Syria crisis? This chapter provides an estimate of the number of people assisted with Australian funds. It also highlights a number of important successes attributable to Australia's role in the broader international response.

6.1 Achievements of Australian assistance

Inside Syria

Increased access

Australia's diplomatic efforts in the Security Council have resulted in major gains in access to hard-to-reach populations through cross border assistance. Although access within Syria changes every day as conflict lines shift early successes include;

- › **Increase in direct access through cross-border aid:** An estimated 2.9 million people are now accessible via the four authorised cross-border points. From the adoption of resolution 2165 to 21 August 2014 the UN deployed approximately 50 trucks to Syria from Turkey and Jordan, carrying food, non-food items, water and sanitation supplies for approximately 67,000 people and medical supplies for almost 110,000 people.
- › **Indirect increase in cross-line access:** As of 21 August 2014, UN agencies had successfully negotiated cross line access from Damascus to hard-to-reach areas in Aleppo, Dara and Rural Damascus, including to more than 30,000 people who had not received assistance in almost than two years. This is a direct consequence of the resolution.

Material support

Australia's diplomatic efforts on improving access are complemented by financing for WFP's food distribution and logistics coordination, to OCHA for response coordination and for WHO's health program within the country. Notably this includes the WHO polio campaign, which after the first reported cases of polio within Syria in 11 years, was successful in preventing a major outbreak. Where other medical assistance has been actively obstructed by government and opposition groups WHO has managed to run eight comprehensive vaccination campaigns in government-held territory and a further seven in opposition controlled and contested areas, reaching at least 2.9 million people.

Other lifesaving assistance provided by Australia includes protection of children, water, primary, reproductive and emergency healthcare, sexual and gender based violence response and education in Syria. Partners told the review team that Australia's early support for activities inside Syria allowed some agencies to leverage contributions from likeminded donors.

Regional Refugee Response

Maintenance of regional stability

The UN Regional Response Plan has supported neighbouring countries, including Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, to provide safe haven to more than 2.9 million refugees. Great strain has been placed on Lebanon and Jordan in particular as the countries with the largest Syrian refugee populations. It is a noteworthy achievement that these two nations remain stable and continue to function effectively. However, disparity in the response between Syrian refugees and Lebanese poor in particular suggests that this stability is very fragile. A significant proportion of the Australian response has been targeted towards these two host countries.

Funding for mission critical operations

Australia's policy of unearmarked funding allows UN partners to shift allocations in order to address emerging priorities. Seventy six per cent of UNHCR's funding is tied to specific projects but the flexibility of Australian funding allows, for example, the UN to respond quickly to spill over conflict in Aarsal, north-eastern Lebanon. Australia's unearmarked approach was consistently highlighted by UN partners as critical to their operations.

Technical expertise

Australian technical experts in logistics, engineering, public health and protection were deployed through RedR and the Australian Civilian Corps. During a period of unrest within Za'atari refugee camp, a group of RedR personnel, fondly referred to as the 'the Aussie team', assisted in the de-escalation of violent protests. This resulted in improved access for UN and NGO personnel provided assistance in what had previously been a no go zone.

6.2 Apportionment and attribution of results

The protracted nature of the crisis requires multiple interventions to address evolving vulnerabilities and needs of affected populations, which are influenced by geographic location, duration of displacement, extent of coping mechanisms and more. A more appropriate measurement than the cumulative number of 'lives saved' would be to assess the number of people who were able to sustainably fulfil basic needs over the period. As noted in the Horn of Africa evaluation, "'people reached' is not, on its own, technically a 'result' as it says nothing about whether the assistance was useful" However, this kind of data is extremely lacking. The number of lives saved and people assisted is more correctly described as the number of life-saving and resilience-oriented interventions.

The majority of Australian funds have been channelled to pooled UN sources for allocation determined by priority needs of the recipient agency; Australia does not require reporting on these contributions. For that reason, quantitative assessment of Australian aid to Syria and the region must be done with consideration to the overall impact of the international response. Apportionment can be used to undertake a broad, calculation of number of beneficiaries reached through Australia's contribution, but this is of limited value for decision making purposes.

A final point is to consider how much of Australian funding reaches intended beneficiaries – have funds been utilised efficiently in order to reach as many people in need as possible? The cost of programming in the region, and consequently overhead costs, is unusually high. A recent DEC review argues that greater efficiencies may be possible through greater specialisation and geographic focus. The report states "arguably there are too many agencies implementing a range of small projects across multiple sectors"⁴. In the current, traditional humanitarian

structure, UN agencies receive the bulk of donor funding, then subcontract implementation to INGOs, who may further contract national partners, hence incurring cascading layers of transaction costs and overheads. As funds become tighter some partners, particularly UNHCR Lebanon and UNICEF Lebanon, have recognised this and looking for efficiencies such as nationalising offices and working directly with national partners.

6.3 Reporting on results

While Australia does not currently require UN partners to provide specific reporting on its implementation of unearmarked Australian funds, agencies demonstrated to the evaluation team that such breakdowns are available. Going forward, Australia could consider requesting minimal targeted reporting from UN agencies to better highlight achievements of Australian funding, without limiting flexibility or placing large reporting burdens on its UN partners.

However, access challenges inside Syria mean that monitoring and evaluation is difficult, even at the output level. By extension, results are not necessarily reliable. For example, primarily due to security concerns World Food Programme uses third party monitors to check on just 40 per cent of its deliveries. Such challenges render a quantitative assessment of ‘lives saved’ very difficult. Notably, a full post-crisis evaluation of Australia’s humanitarian response to the Horn of Africa famine faced similar challenges reporting on impact and results. Nevertheless the following figures are illustrative of the reach achieved with Australian funds.

Figure 10: Number of beneficiaries of Australian assistance

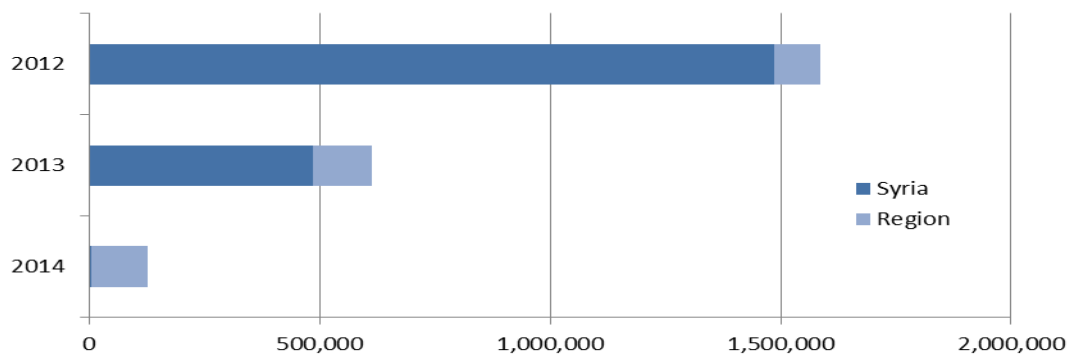
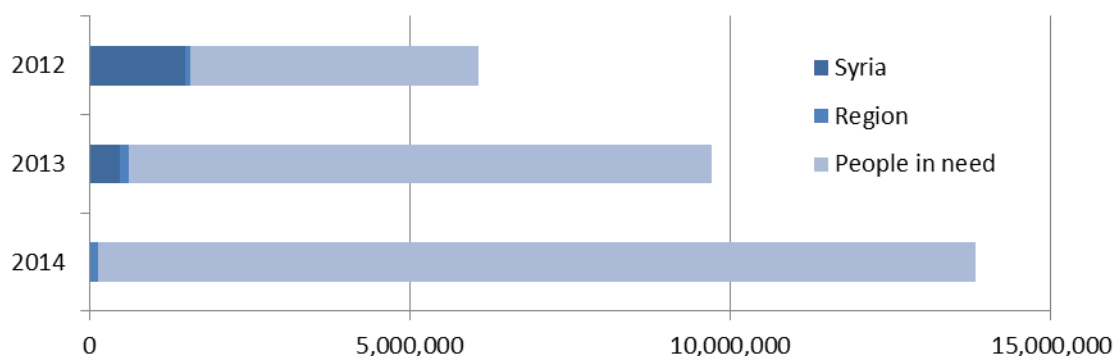


Figure 11 : Beneficiaries of Australian assistance as a proportion of people in need



¹ James Darcy, DEC Syria Crisis Appeal 2013. Response Review: Final Report, October 2013.

Annex One – Terms of reference

TERMS OF REFERENCE

REVIEW OF

AUSTRALIA'S HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE TO THE SYRIA CRISIS

Since the Syria conflict began in 2011, Australia has contributed more than \$130 million in humanitarian assistance to people in need inside Syria and in neighbouring countries. An evaluation of this assistance is both timely and strategic – it will build knowledge within DFAT on how to respond effectively to the Syrian conflict and improve the effectiveness of funds allocated to other protracted crises.

Evaluation Purpose (learning v accountability)

The primary purpose of the evaluation is *accountability*: to ensure partners are delivering Australian humanitarian assistance to the Syrian conflict that is appropriate, effective and efficient. This includes an examination of the quality of implementing partners' reporting, monitoring and evaluation systems.

The secondary purpose of the evaluation is *learning*: to use lessons learned from Australia's response to the Syria crisis to inform the strategic direction of additional humanitarian assistance. It will also inform future humanitarian funding allocations and Australia's engagement with national governments and humanitarian partners in the Middle East region. The review should answer the question: *what can the Australian Government do to improve its humanitarian response to the crisis in Syria?*

Background and Context

Humanitarian Situation in Syria and the Region

Syria is the biggest humanitarian, peace and security crisis facing the world. As the conflict in Syria continues into its fourth year, humanitarian needs escalate. The deteriorating humanitarian situation within Syria, which is causing massive people flows, has the potential to further destabilise neighbouring countries. The UN estimates up to 150,000 dead, 9.3 million people in need within Syria (including 4.3 million children), with 6.5 million internally displaced. Over 2.8 million Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries with projections that refugee numbers could reach 4.1 million by the end of 2014.

Within the region, **Lebanon** is the country most affected by the Syrian crisis – not only by the refugee influx (1,090,538) but also sectarian tensions leading to violent clashes and spill-over of fighting. On 3 April, the number of refugees fleeing to Lebanon surpassed 1 million. Syrian refugees now equal one-quarter of the resident population, with over 220 Syrian refugees for

every 1,000 Lebanese residents, making Lebanon the country with the highest per-capita concentration of refugees worldwide.

In **Jordan**, 595,082 Syrian refugees now constitute about 10 per cent of the population. Competition for basic services (water, health and education), accommodation and jobs is creating tensions between refugees and locals.

As of 6 June, the numbers of registered Syrian refugees and those waiting for registration also include those in **Turkey** (765,369), **Iraq** (225,409), **Egypt** (137,531) and **North Africa** (23,367). With no resolution to the crisis in sight, there is increasing concern about the international community's capacity to respond. On 16 December 2013, the UN launched combined appeals to assist people displaced within Syria, refugees and host communities. The 2014 appeal totals US\$6.5 billion and is the largest in history, reflecting the magnitude of the crisis. The appeal is currently funded at 25 per cent (26 May) as humanitarian needs overwhelm the capacity of traditional sources of funding. The situation demands further prioritisation and targeting of humanitarian assistance and mobilising new sources of funding.

In 2013, Australia contributed US\$20,739,294 (2.2%) to the Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP 2013) and US\$35,768,125 (1.6%) to the Syria Regional Response Plan (RRP5). Australian funding for the UN's 2014 global appeal for Syria is currently (as at 26 May) US\$2,661,266 (0.6%) for SHARP and US\$ 13,466,633 (1.2%) for RRP6.

DFAT's Humanitarian Response since 2011

Since the Syrian conflict began, Australia has provided \$130.8 million for humanitarian assistance inside Syria (\$59.5 million) and in neighbouring countries (\$71.3 million). Australia's funding has been directed to UN agencies, international humanitarian organisations and Australian NGOs to provide lifesaving assistance – predominantly in the shelter, education, protection, food, water and sanitation, and health sectors. A further \$2 million is supporting the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons.

Scope of the Evaluation

The evaluation will focus on Australia's response inside Syria and neighbouring countries (Lebanon and Jordan), where the majority of Australian funding has been directed. It will include an attempt to remotely assess the response inside Syria, particularly issues of aid diversion and humanitarian access, and any impacts on the capacity of partners to provide assistance. It will also include a field visit to Jordan and Lebanon.

The evaluation will review the selection and performance of Australia's major partners responding to the crisis. Where possible, it will assess performance in relation to programs implemented with Australian funding. Where this is not possible, the evaluation will review the performance of the partner overall.

While it may not be possible to include an in-depth understanding of beneficiary (both refugee and host community) perceptions of the response, it is critical that some effort is made to sample beneficiary perspectives through key informant interviews, focus group discussions or other relevant methods. Details of how this is to be undertaken will be included in the Evaluation Plan.

Why the evaluation is being conducted and why now

The evaluation is being conducted to increase visibility of Australian Government response efforts to date and produce an evidence based assessment outlining what impact Australian

assistance (a high value response characterised by minimal field presence) has had in Syria and the region.

Australia has responded to the crisis since May 2011 and has funded programs valued at over \$130 million. An evaluation now offers the opportunity to assess how humanitarian activities have been implemented to date; advise on the management of activities which currently being implemented; and inform longer-term humanitarian programming of any future funding. An end of program evaluation would not offer this same opportunity.

Relevant conceptual models and international standards (not limited to)

- OECD/DAC criteria for evaluating humanitarian action (1999)
- ALNAP guidance for humanitarian evaluation
- DFAT Humanitarian Action Policy
- DFAT Protection in Humanitarian Action Framework
- DFAT Performance Assessment Framework for Humanitarian Action

Key Evaluation Questions

1. Relevance, Appropriateness and Connectedness: How relevant and appropriate has DFAT's response been to the protracted nature of the Syrian crisis?
 - a) What strategic/contextual priorities and constraints influenced DFAT's response to the Syria crisis? Are these effectively addressed in programming decisions and the choice of partners?
 - b) How relevant and appropriate is Australian assistance from the perspective of implementing partners?
 - c) How relevant and appropriate is the assistance provided by implementing partners from the perspective of beneficiaries (both refugees and host communities)?
 - d) Does DFAT's approach align with other corporate policies and guidelines, in particular those related to gender, disability and protection?
 - e) To what extent does DFAT's response, and those of its partners, allow for recovery and resilience building to take place?
2. Effectiveness and Coherence: Has Australian assistance delivered by partners been effective in addressing priority needs?
 - a) How could the effectiveness of DFAT's humanitarian responses to protracted crises, such as that in Syria, be improved?
 - i. How did DFAT engage with partners and other donors, and to what extent did DFAT influence their response to the crisis? Did DFAT's approach align

with Good Humanitarian Donorship principles? Were there any areas in which DFAT showed leadership?

- ii. What were the triggers within DFAT for the release of funds in response to a protracted crisis and are these appropriate?
 - iii. What mechanisms were used to fund implementing partners? Did these mechanisms and corporate systems enable an efficient, timely and appropriate response to the crisis?
 - iv. Could changes to DFAT's corporate systems and/or overall approach, including the type and number of implementing partners, and sectors funded, improve results?
 - v. Was DFAT's overall response guided by a coherent strategy?
- b) Do Australia's partners have the necessary monitoring and evaluating systems required to support credible reporting? Did DFAT use such reporting to support decision making? What improvements could be made to provide DFAT with greater confidence and clarity regarding outcomes and impacts achieved with Australian assistance?
3. Coverage: Has Australian assistance been appropriately targeted to meet the most urgent needs of vulnerable populations?
- a) What coverage has been achieved with Australian assistance? Has assistance provided to both displaced populations within Syria and refugees in neighbouring countries been proportionate and appropriate to circumstances? Have other vulnerable groups, such as host communities, received adequate consideration and coverage?
 - b) Do partners have adequate capacity and access to provide assistance to those in need both inside Syria and neighbouring countries most affected by the influx of refugees?
4. Impact: What has been the impact of assistance provided by Australia?
- a) How many vulnerable people were provided with life-saving assisted (based on results reported by implementing partners)?
 - b) To what extent has Australia's response to the Syria crisis translated into increased participation in international policy dialogue with like-minded, including around issues of humanitarian access and cross-border assistance?

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation methodology will be finalised in consultation between the Middle East Branch and evaluation team, and outlined in the Evaluation Plan. It is likely that the evaluation will include:

- a) **Initial team briefing** by DFAT (by phone) to highlight key priorities and expectations of the evaluation team and provide relevant documentation
- b) **Desk-top review** of documentation relating to DFAT’s response to the Syria crisis, publically available evaluations of recent humanitarian responses to protracted crisis with emphasis on those related to Syria (including those undertaken by other donors, NGOs, humanitarian groups and multilateral agencies); and any other relevant evaluations of DFAT programs, policies, systems and procedures
- c) **Internal stakeholder interviews** including relevant DFAT staff (former and current) in the Middle East Branch and Humanitarian Division (Canberra); and posted DFAT officers in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, New York, Geneva and Rome
- d) **External stakeholders interviews** including Australian and international NGOs, Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), humanitarian agencies, multilateral organisations, other donors and beneficiaries
- e) **Field trip** to Jordan and Lebanon to interview UN agencies, other donors, in-country NGOs, beneficiaries and recipient governments
- f) **Stakeholder workshop/Peer Review** to discuss and refine recommendations (Canberra)
- g) **Analysis of all data** and synthesis of findings into a final report

The field trip will include ‘Reconsider Your Need to Travel’ destinations and possibly ‘Do Not Travel’ (subject to Post advice at the time of travel). This will require participants to have completed relevant DFAT security training and/or participate in security briefing.

Evaluation Timetable

Indicative timeframes are as follows:

Week beginning 2 June	Initial planning and teleconference with DFAT
Week beginning 10 June	Canberra consultations with DFAT staff
June	Desk-top research
23 June	Evaluation Plan submitted
July	Consultations with DFAT Posted officers / Australian NGOs
4 – 14 August	Field visit to Jordan and Lebanon
29 August	Draft evaluation report to Middle East Branch
Week beginning 8 September	Stakeholder workshop/Peer Review with Canberra participants
19 September	DFAT to provide written comments on draft Evaluation Report

Key Deliverables

The main deliverables for this evaluation will be:

- **Evaluation Plan** articulating key evaluation questions, methodologies to collect data, timeline linked to key milestones, proposed schedule for in-country field work and a detailed breakdown of responsibilities between team members.
- **Annotated bibliography** of DFAT and other evaluations relevant to DFAT's humanitarian response, including reported outcomes. Due two (2) weeks after finalisation of Evaluation Plan.
- **Draft Evaluation Report** (including an executive summary) that summarises findings of the review; explores the key issues arising from Australia's humanitarian response to the protracted crisis in Syria; and details recommendations to improve the effectiveness of any additional assistance provided.
- **Final Evaluation Report** incorporating any agreed changes or amendments discussed within the stakeholder workshop/Peer Review or as requested by DFAT. The final Evaluation Report will include an executive summary (of no more than 4 pages), discussion of findings/recommendations (no more than 20 pages) and relevant attachments.

All written documents must comply with the DFAT style guide. Throughout the evaluation, various other minor outputs and work items may be required, as advised in writing by DFAT. These will be identified in the agreed final Evaluation Plan.

Evaluation Team Roles and Responsibilities

Humanitarian Adviser:	Humanitarian expertise and quality research Input into internal/external consultations, field visit, stakeholder workshops and key deliverables Assists with the drafting of desk-top review, Evaluation Plan and final report; leads on analysis of cross-cutting issues (including protection, disability and gender) Total days input = up to 30 days
M&E Consultant/Team Leader:	M&E expertise, leads on technical quality of the evaluation, leads on conclusions/lessons learned Input into internal/external consultations, field visit, stakeholder workshops and key deliverables Leads the evaluation and drafting of desk-top review, Evaluation Plan and final report; ensures final consistency and flow of report documents; leads the in-country visit Total days input = up to 30 days input

MDS (Canberra)

Manages the evaluation process, ensures key deliverables meet DFAT standards and objectives

Amman LES

In-country support, including travel to Lebanon, organisation of and participation in meetings, providing relevant reports/data sources

Data Sources

- UN reports – including (but not limited to) Syria Humanitarian Response Plans, Syria Regional Refugee Response Plans, inter-agency updates, regional updates, individual agency updates
- Humanitarian Partnership Agreement (HPA) NGO reports – Joint Emergency Response Concept Papers (JERCP), quarterly and final reports
- International humanitarian partners – situation reports, global appeals

Annex Two – Methodology

Methods

The evaluation used a range of methods, combining stakeholder interviews, document and literature review and focus groups discussion. Research was largely qualitative, using quantitative secondary data where available and relevant, in particular when looking at results achieved.

Document review

Document review entailed analysis of DFAT policy and strategy materials, humanitarian policy and guidance documents, regional strategy documents (generally from UN agencies), implementing partner reports and proposals and other specialist papers (e.g. special reports on disability, gender based violence etc.). As the initial document search turned up over 90 such papers, the team had to carefully prioritise the review of material given the limited time available. Prioritisation was undertaken according to the following principles;

- › **Materiality** – documents from each of the three partner groups was analysed with an emphasis on the largest partners (by dollar value). The document review focused on assistance provided in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. Where multiple reports exist only the most recent was analysed.
- › **Relevance** – documents, or sections therein, which clearly relate to the key evaluation questions outlined in Annex One and the GHD principles received priority attention.
- › **Credibility and objectivity** – within the selection of documents identified for review the team ensured that a range of sources and perspectives were captured and where possible information was triangulated. Partner claims about performance were read critically for robustness.

Document review was undertaken by two team members who will compile notes in an annotated bibliography. This included a 2 – 3 line description of the source and document purpose and important extracts coded against the relevant evaluation question and GHD principle. Only electronic copies of documents were reviewed so as to assist sharing of notes and highlighted passages with other team members. The annotated bibliography was used to assist in tailoring key informant interviews.

Key informant interviews

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with DFAT staff and Australia's key partners. Interview guides were used to loosely guide discussions. Interviews were prioritised in a similar manner to that outlined above. The approach of using the same or similar questions with each of these partners enabled the evaluation team to reliably identify consistent themes or perspectives in the responses of different partners.

The questions have been coded against the review's key evaluation questions and a number of important GHD principles and this schema was reflected in interview notes. This coding also facilitated subsequent analysis of responses and linkages back to the document review. Each interview was attended by at least two evaluation team members. One of whom took the role of lead interviewer and the other to take notes. The team recorded many of the interviews after receiving permission from informants to do so.

Prior to the commencement of each interview the Team Leader outlined the purpose of the review, how objectivity is assured and the importance of informants providing frank responses. It was explained that the team abides by the Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) code of ethics. Where specifically requested the confidentiality of informant's responses has been respected. Informants wishing to review notes from the interview were offered the opportunity to do so. Informants were made aware that the review's final report will be published on the DFAT website. It was explained that most informants would not get an opportunity to comment on the draft report before it is published but that they would be given an opportunity to respond to any findings specifically relating to them before finalisation.

Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions were used to canvass the views of beneficiaries and Australian NGOs.

Beneficiaries

Focus group discussions with beneficiaries were designed to provide an understanding on the key issues of concern to beneficiaries and their perspectives on the appropriateness and value of the assistance they have received. These discussions revealed some unanticipated and negative outcomes associated with assistance. The information provided by beneficiaries was of some assistance validating partner reports. It provided only minimal insight into the effectiveness of assistance provided within Syria. These discussions also highlighted areas of unmet need.

Separate focus group meetings with men and women were held in both in Lebanon and Jordan. Each meeting was of 60 – 90 minutes in duration and explored five broad questions. Each meeting consisted of 8 – 12 beneficiaries drawn from a range of different ages and demographic groups. All focus group participants were refugees and the team was unable to include representatives of host communities in the discussion. The team was assisted by translators for each meeting. Although partner staff in Lebanon were used to provide translation the nature of feedback provided by participants suggest that objectivity was retained. At the conclusion of each meeting the evaluation team provided a verbal report back to confirm that the beneficiaries' key messages have been understood.

Non-government Organisations

A form of focus group discussion via telephone was undertaken with the five Australian NGOs involved in the Syria crisis response. This discussion with head office staff was complemented by key informant interviews with a number of field based staff. The focus group discussion explored 6 key, multi-dimensional questions, in depth whilst also providing NGOs an opportunity to highlight any issues they have encountered. The discussion was formally chaired so as to ensure all NGOs have a voice.

Triangulation, rigour of evidence and quality assurance

Where possible evidence has been triangulated to ensure rigour. In practice this means that emerging themes from interviews was tested in subsequent interviews. So far as it is

possible major findings from document review have multiple sources, as well as being tested in interviews. Where the rigour behind impact data is tentative the evaluation clearly states this.

The evaluation Team Leader is responsible for production draft and final report which includes quality assurance of input from other team members. The draft report was submitted simultaneously to both the Independent Evaluation Committee (IEC) and the Middle East Branch. This facilitated a review of not just the findings but also comment on the structure and flow of the report, appropriateness of the evaluation method and strength of evidence.

Drawing upon the draft report the Team Leader prepared a summary presentation to elicit feedback from within DFAT at the evaluation peer review. This, combined with comment from the IEC was taken into account in finalisation of the report.

Constraints and limitations

Time and resources

This evaluation is a rapid review exercise which was completed with approximately 80 days of personnel input within a concentrated period of approximately 8 weeks. Given time limitations a deliberate sampling strategy which focuses upon Australia's major areas of expenditure was adopted. It was not proposed, nor would it have been feasible, to review all available documentation or engage equally with all stakeholders.

Sampling

The evaluation maintained a tight focus on the evaluation questions and methods of enquiry outlined in this plan. The proposed sampling strategy was derived with careful consideration as to the likely value of information gathered against the time and opportunity cost associated with each interview and document. Unfortunately once this plan was approved there was little room for flexibility including the investigation of new and emergent issues or the scheduling of additional interviews and consultations.

Limitations on partner planning and reporting

Ongoing conflict within Syria limits the ability of this evaluation and those of Australia's partners to fully assess assistance given within the country. Furthermore the rapid and unpredictable evolution of the Syrian response into a protracted relief and rehabilitation operation will almost certainly have imposed limitations on partner planning, data gathering and analysis.

Access

Access to Syria is not possible for the purposes of this evaluation. Access is also limited to some parts of Jordan and Lebanon. As a result the evaluation is necessarily dependent on partner reports and cannot independently verify the information provided for programs in those areas.

Impact measurement

The evaluation provides an approximation of the impact of Australian assistance in terms of the number of people provided with lifesaving assistance. This assessment is drawn entirely from partner reporting. There are a number of methodological challenges associated with such calculations which are now well understood within the department. It is suggested that whilst the figures derived by the team in this regard may be useful for public communications purposes they are of questionable performance management value.

Attribution and apportionment

The nature of emergency humanitarian response and difficulties around access within Syria make it difficult to attribute improvements or changes to assistance provided by Australia and its partners. Interviews and the document review process have already highlighted significant challenges for most partners in reporting beyond the output level.

Furthermore DFAT has contributed funds to humanitarian organisations alongside a number of other donors, in many cases whilst funding is significant it is still relatively modest. Apportionment of results and program success to DFAT funding is challenging. Nevertheless, the evaluation has endeavoured to draw direct linkages where it is possible to do so.

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