

# **The UK's humanitarian support to Syria**

A performance review

**May 2018**

**The Independent Commission for Aid Impact** works to improve the quality of UK development assistance through robust, independent scrutiny. We provide assurance to the UK taxpayer by conducting independent reviews of the effectiveness and value for money of UK aid.

We operate independently of government, reporting to Parliament, and our mandate covers all UK official development assistance.

### Overall review scores and what they mean

#### GREEN

Strong achievement across the board. Stands out as an area of good practice where UK aid is making a significant positive contribution.

#### AMBER/ RED

Unsatisfactory achievement in most areas, with some positive elements. An area where improvements are required for UK aid to make a positive contribution.

#### GREEN/ AMBER

Satisfactory achievement in most areas, but partial achievement in others. An area where UK aid is making a positive contribution, but could do more.

#### RED

Poor achievement across most areas, with urgent remedial action required in some. An area where UK aid is failing to make a positive contribution.



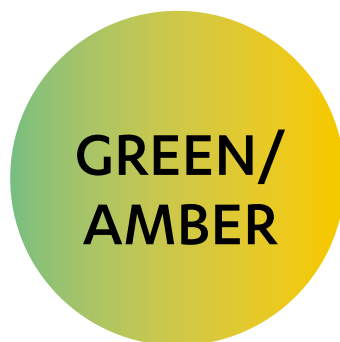
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**DFID has overcome substantial barriers to the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Syria and is providing life-saving support to communities in need. However, DFID took too long to put the required staffing and management resources in place, and its approach to learning has not been systematic.**

At the outset of the crisis, DFID faced limited options for delivering humanitarian assistance inside Syria. In response, DFID set about investing in independent assessment of humanitarian needs and built a capacity to deliver aid across the border from neighbouring countries. UK aid is now reaching vulnerable people and bringing about positive changes to households and communities in some of the hardest-hit areas of Syria. Given the duration of the crisis, however, we judge that DFID has been slow in evolving its portfolio to incorporate more cash-based programming and support for livelihoods, along with more explicit attention to protection activities.

The Syria response was originally managed as a short-term engagement. This persisted even as the crisis grew in scale and complexity. With hindsight, DFID was slow to put in place the necessary staff resources and management capacity to rigorously oversee the response. In time this changed significantly and DFID built up its Syria team and shifted to multi-annual programme funding, with stronger systems for selecting partners, monitoring operations and managing fiduciary risk. Some gaps remain, including around engagement of Syrian partners, attention to safeguarding and independent monitoring.

The latest phase of DFID's humanitarian response and particularly its focus on severity of need has notably been supported by a major focus on data and data analysis. However, on a wider front, DFID's approach to research, evidence collection and learning in the Syria crisis response has been more limited and not systematic. While beneficiary feedback mechanisms are in place, we found little evidence that the information they provide is directly informing programme design. There is also limited evidence that lessons from the Syria response have been captured more widely to inform future crisis responses.

Overall, we find that the UK Syria humanitarian response merits a green-amber score, in recognition of DFID's success, particularly since 2015-16, in building a delivery capacity and helping communities in severe need in acutely challenging and changing circumstances.

### Individual question scores

#### Question 1

**Effectiveness:** How effectively has the UK responded to humanitarian need in Syria?

**GREEN/  
AMBER**

#### Question 2

**Efficiency:** How well has DFID managed its delivery chains?

**GREEN/  
AMBER**

#### Question 3

**Learning:** How well has DFID learned from experience?

**AMBER/  
RED**

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# Executive Summary

The conflict in Syria has been one of the most brutal in modern history, costing nearly half a million lives, displacing more than 12 million people from their homes, including 5.6 million refugees who fled to neighbouring countries, and leaving 5.6 million people in severe humanitarian need in Syria. In response, the UK has mounted its largest-ever humanitarian operation, committing £2.71 billion to the regional response since 2012, with £910 million allocated for humanitarian operations in Syria.

The complex and dynamic nature of the conflict, with rapidly shifting alliances and frontlines, has made for an acutely difficult operating environment. Lacking a presence in Syria, DFID originally managed its operations from London before building up a regional delivery capacity, operating from bases in Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq.

This performance review assesses the effectiveness of UK humanitarian aid in Syria from the beginning of the crisis response in 2012 to the present. It explores how well DFID has identified and reached those in need, whether it has managed its operations efficiently and how well it has learned from experience. In preparing the review, we interviewed past and present DFID staff, consulted staff from 40 of DFID's delivery and downstream partners, and collected data within opposition-controlled Syria, including interviewing aid recipients and local leaders across 28 communities.

## **Effectiveness: How effectively has the UK responded to humanitarian need in Syria?**

The Syrian conflict began as pro-democracy protests in 2011 and escalated rapidly into a multi-party conflict that pitted the Syrian government against a range of armed opposition groups supported by external powers. In 2014-15, Daesh (also known as Islamic State, ISIL or ISIS) seized control of large parts of the territory. Working in unstable and insecure conditions, the UK has supported a complex international operation to alleviate the suffering of communities across Syria. In the period from 2012 to 2017, DFID reports that it provided 9.4 million relief packages, 5 million vaccines and 22 million individual monthly food rations.

DFID's initial delivery options were limited to UN and Red Cross agencies operating out of Damascus. As the conflict escalated, it became apparent that the Syrian government was controlling information on humanitarian needs and limiting access to opposition-controlled areas. Working with other donors, DFID gradually built up reliable data on humanitarian need across the country. It also built up other delivery channels, mainly through international non-governmental organisations operating across the border from Turkey and Lebanon. It worked with the Foreign Office (FCO) and other donors to advocate for a UN Security Council resolution authorising the UN to conduct cross-border operations without approval from the Syrian government, enabling a shift to a 'Whole of Syria' humanitarian response. It also established an Emergency Response Mechanism that gave it the capacity to respond quickly to spikes in humanitarian need. Although it took time, DFID eventually developed the capacity to deliver life-saving support across Syria, despite the very challenging context.

As it became clear that the information on humanitarian needs in Syria was incomplete, particularly in areas controlled by opposition forces, DFID coordinated with other donors and humanitarian organisations to improve coordination mechanisms and needs assessment tools and processes. From 2014, as these efforts improved the quality of information about humanitarian needs, DFID adopted a targeting approach of 'severity over scale' – including prioritising isolated or besieged communities where needs were most acute, even if that meant reaching fewer people overall. Within communities, it directed aid towards the most vulnerable households. Our data collection in Syria, though small in scale, confirmed that UK aid is reaching communities and households in acute need, with appropriate procedures in place to ensure that targeting criteria are fairly applied.

Within the 28 communities we sampled, UK aid had brought about positive changes to the lives of recipients. Distributing food aid and other emergency items had alleviated suffering and allowed recipients to use their own resources on housing and health care. It had enabled some families to send their children back to school. There was also evidence of positive outcomes at the community level, in the form of reduced incidence of local crime, fewer disputes and families having a more optimistic outlook about the future.

However, there are some gaps in the UK assistance. In humanitarian aid, 'protection' refers to measures that help make civilians less exposed to risks, particularly from conflict and violence. Protection is one of the pillars

of DFID's strategy in Syria but is very difficult to achieve in the context of ongoing hostilities, which are often directed against civilians. Since 2016, DFID has encouraged its partners to do more to integrate protection activities into their programmes, but this has been held back by a lack of knowledge and experience and still falls short of what would be expected, given the needs.

We also find that DFID has been slow to shift from emergency relief to programming to support recipients' livelihoods, where security conditions allow. While our interviews found demand for more support in this area, livelihoods programming currently makes up less than 5% of the portfolio. DFID has also made slow progress in its objective of shifting towards cash-based programming, which remains well short of its target of 20% of all assistance by 2019. Lessons from other humanitarian crises suggest that, in the right conditions, moving from food aid to cash payments gives recipients more flexibility to meet their needs and can help to stimulate local food markets.

Overall, DFID's humanitarian response in Syria has improved significantly over time and is now delivering to communities and households in severe need across a much larger share of the country. We award DFID a **green-amber** score, in recognition of its achievements in overcoming practical constraints and developing an effective delivery capacity.

### Efficiency: How efficiently has DFID managed its response?

The Syria operation was originally planned as a short-term emergency response, in expectation of an early end to the conflict. As the crisis escalated, this stance resulted in heavy burdens being placed on the DFID team, compromising the efficiency of response. We find that DFID was slow to acknowledge the size and complexity of the crisis and to shift from emergency response mode.

From 2014, however, DFID built a more substantial Syria team with greater programme management capacity and broader expertise. This enabled it to diversify its programming and invest in stronger systems and processes. It improved its partner selection processes, discontinuing funding to partners that were not aligned with DFID's strategic objectives, and improved its level of engagement with partners. It introduced more standardised reporting tools, including an online reporting system that gave it greater oversight of spending and coverage across the portfolio. Following concerns about its fiduciary risk management practices (including from a past ICAI report), DFID introduced enhanced due diligence processes through its delivery chain. We found that the quality of its due diligence assessments had improved and that delivery partners were being encouraged to share any fraud and corruption problems early and agree on actions to address them. However, the due diligence process did not explicitly address risks around safeguarding aid recipients from sexual exploitation, which has been identified as an issue in the international humanitarian response in Syria. While there have been no specific allegations in respect of UK funding, DFID acknowledges that its efforts to date to address this risk have not been sufficient and is now working to strengthen its systems and processes.

Since 2016, DFID has moved to multi-year funding of its delivery partners, which is intended to reduce transaction costs and encourage longer-term planning. We found that there were indeed substantial benefits for DFID and its international non-governmental organisation partners. However, these benefits were not necessarily being passed on to Syrian partners, many of which continue to be engaged on a short-term basis, hampering their ability to retain staff and build capacity. While there are operational reasons for this, connected to the fluid nature of the Syrian conflict, we find that there has not been a systematic approach to building the capacity of Syrian downstream partners.

Since 2016, DFID has engaged third-party monitors to support its delivery partners and verify that aid is being delivered as intended. While the monitoring gives DFID greater confidence in its partners' own monitoring capacity, we found that the level of verification was not as high as we would expect for an operation of this size, complexity and risk. Between 2016 and 2017, the monitors visited 15 of DFID's delivery partners at least once. However, the visits are only for one day and partners are allowed too much influence over where the monitors visit. DFID acknowledges these issues and is taking steps to address them.

DFID has improved its assessment and monitoring of value for money. Partners are required to detail their administrative costs and the unit costs of key commodities and outline how they will ensure economy, efficiency and effectiveness. However, we found few instances as yet of DFID using this data to secure improvements in economy or efficiency.

Overall, since DFID began in 2014 to move out of emergency response mode and provide more management resources for its Syria operations, there have been significant improvements in DFID's partner selection and engagement, reporting processes and fiduciary risk management, meriting a **green-amber** score. However, there are still some gaps that need to be addressed, particularly regarding independent monitoring, support for Syrian partners and safeguarding.

### Learning: How well has DFID learned from experience?

While DFID Syria set itself the goal of being evidence-based and promoting continuous improvement, we find its learning activities to be small in scale and unsystematic. Although it has invested in some relevant research, this is not based on a clear strategy and there is little active dissemination of the outputs to the delivery partners it is intended to influence. There have been very few programme evaluations, although these are now a requirement of current funding agreements.

DFID encourages its partners to collect feedback from aid recipients on their operations in Syria, but most devolve responsibility for this to their downstream partners. The examples we reviewed consisted mainly of complaints mechanisms; while these have generated useful feedback on operational issues, we find limited evidence that voices of recipients have informed wider learning and programme design.

While DFID Syria has adapted its management processes during the crisis, there is little evidence that DFID is systematically drawing on this at a central level to inform its response to future complex crises. A recent DFID discussion paper proposes some useful operating principles for protracted crises, but DFID has yet to adopt a set of doctrines, processes and tools, drawing on its Syria experience, for managing its response to complex crises. We therefore award DFID an **amber-red** score for learning.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, we find that DFID's humanitarian response in Syria has improved substantially in recent years. DFID has built capacity to overcome the restrictions set by the Syrian government and to reach communities in need across the country, despite an extremely challenging operating environment. However, there have been significant time lags in putting in place the management systems and capacities required to manage the response efficiently. While DFID has adapted in response to practical challenges, its approach to research and learning has not been systematic.

We offer the following recommendations, both for the Syrian operation and for DFID's response to future crises.

### Recommendation 1

As conditions allow, DFID Syria should prioritise livelihoods programming and supporting local markets, to strengthen community self-reliance.

### Recommendation 2

DFID Syria should strengthen its third-party monitoring approach to provide a higher level of independent verification of aid delivery, and continue to explore ways of extending it into government-controlled areas.

### Recommendation 3

DFID Syria should support and encourage its partners to expand their community consultation and feedback processes and ensure that community input informs learning and the design of future humanitarian interventions.

### Recommendation 4

DFID Syria should identify ways to support the capacity development of Syrian non-governmental organisations to enable them to take on a more direct role in the humanitarian response.

### Recommendation 5

DFID Syria should develop a dynamic research and learning strategy that includes an assessment of learning needs across the international humanitarian response in Syria and a dissemination strategy.

#### **Recommendation 6**

DFID should ensure that lessons and best practice from the Syria response are collected and documented, and used to inform both ongoing and future crisis responses.

#### **Recommendation 7**

In complex crises, DFID should plan for the possibility of lengthy engagement from an early stage, with trigger points to guide decisions on when to move beyond emergency funding instruments and staffing arrangements.

#### **Recommendation 8**

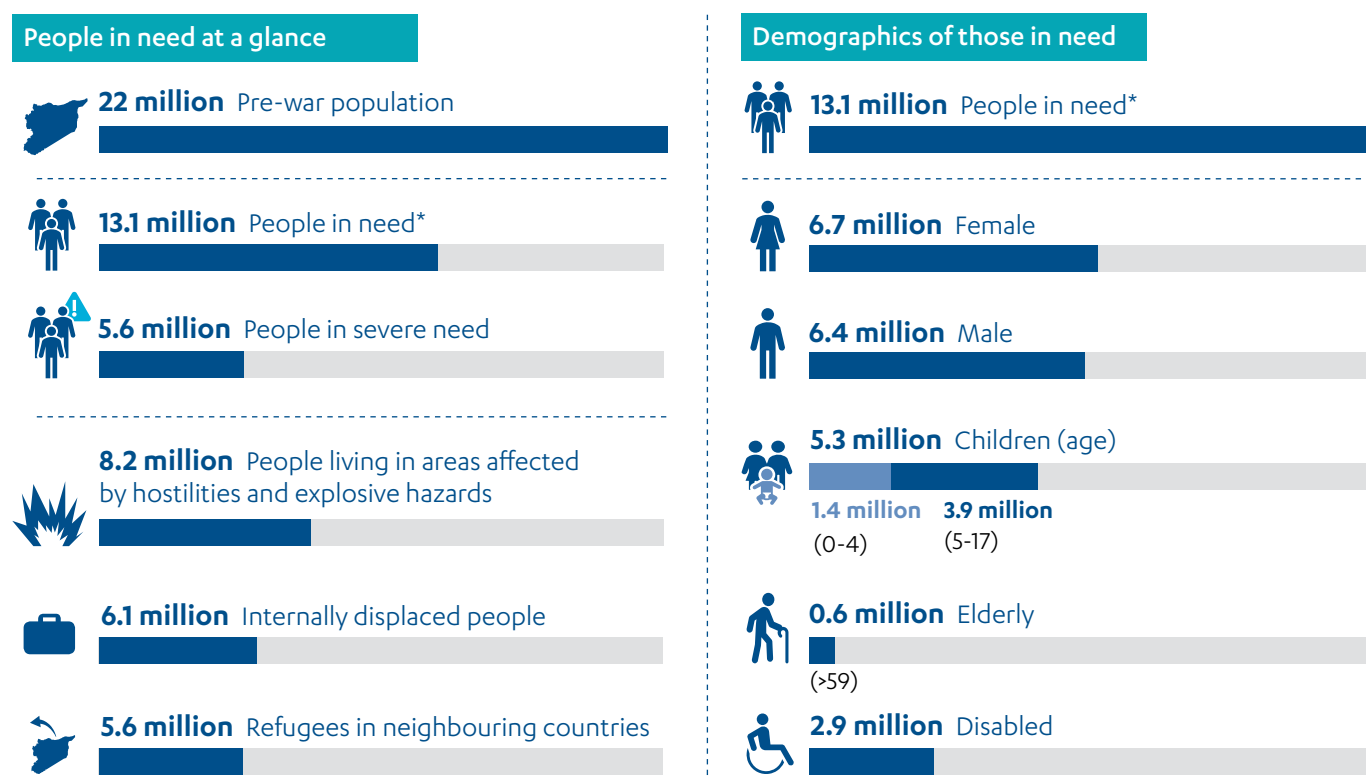
Building on DFID Syria's reporting system, DFID should invest in reporting and data management systems that can be readily adapted to complex humanitarian operations.



# 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The ongoing conflict in Syria, which began with pro-democracy protests in 2011, is one of the most brutal in modern history. Eastern Ghouta, an opposition-held area of Damascus that largely fell to government forces in April 2018 after a five-year siege,<sup>1</sup> encapsulates the catastrophe that has befallen Syrians. Nearly 400,000 residents were subject to bombardment by government forces and their allies, reportedly prevented from leaving by armed opposition groups and denied access to aid for months at a time.<sup>2</sup> Across the country, civilian populations have been victims of a war with multiple parties, fluid alliances and rapidly shifting frontlines, resulting in a humanitarian crisis on an extraordinary scale.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1: The Syria crisis in numbers (November 2017)



\* People in need refers to people whose physical security, basic rights, dignity, living conditions or livelihoods are threatened or have been disrupted, and whose current level of access to basic services, goods and protection is inadequate to re-establish normal living conditions within their accustomed means without assistance. People in severe need refers to those facing more severe forms of deprivation in terms of their security, basic rights and living conditions and face life-threatening needs requiring urgent humanitarian assistance.

Sources: 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview – Syrian Arab Republic, [link](#). Syria Crisis Response Summary, DFID, May 2018, [link](#).

- 1.2 In response, the UK has undertaken its largest-ever humanitarian operation, committing £2.71 billion to the regional response since 2012.<sup>4</sup> The support in Syria has included emergency food aid, the restoration of basic services such as water, health and education and, in more stable parts, assistance with restarting livelihoods.
- 1.3 For DFID, which managed the response, the operational challenges have been substantial. DFID did not have a country office in Syria and had been reducing its presence in the Middle East region for some years before the onset of the crisis. It therefore needed to build a delivery capacity across the region, operating from bases in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. The operational environment within Syria was also very challenging, in the midst of a large-scale multi-party conflict.

1. 'Rebels strike deal to leave eastern Ghouta, say Assad media' *The Guardian*, Peter Beaumont, 1 April 2018, [link](#).

2. Secretary-General's oral report to the Security Council on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2401 [as delivered], United Nations Secretary-General, 12 March 2018, [link](#).

3. The United Nations now considers Yemen, where 22.2 million people need humanitarian assistance following years of war and food shortages, the largest man-made humanitarian crisis. See 2018 Yemen High-Level Pledging Event, UNOCHA, March 2018, [link](#).

4. Syria Crisis Response Summary, DFID, May 2018, [link](#).

**“Humanitarian Assistance** comprises disaster relief, food aid, refugee relief and disaster preparedness. It generally involves the provision of material aid including food, medical care and personnel and finance and advice to save and preserve lives during emergency situations and in the immediate post-emergency rehabilitation phase; and to cope with short and longer term population displacements arising out of emergencies.”

DFID Glossary, [link](#)

- 1.4 This performance review assesses the effectiveness of UK humanitarian aid in Syria since the beginning of the crisis response in 2012. It explores how well DFID has identified and reached its intended recipients, and whether it has managed to achieve the best possible results given the challenging circumstances. It also examines how well DFID has learned from the Syria response.

#### Box 1: What is an ICAI performance review?

**ICAI performance reviews** examine how efficiently and effectively UK aid is being spent on an area, and whether it is likely to make a difference to its intended recipients. They also cover the business processes through which aid is managed to identify opportunities to increase effectiveness and value for money.

Other types of ICAI reviews include: **impact reviews**, which examine results claims made for UK aid to assess their credibility and their significance for the intended recipients; **learning reviews**, which explore how knowledge is generated in novel areas and translated into credible programming; and **rapid reviews**, which are short, real-time reviews of emerging issues or areas of UK aid spending that are of particular interest to the UK Parliament and public.

- 1.5 The review focuses solely on DFID-funded humanitarian assistance in Syria. It does not include UK support to Syrian refugees throughout the region or stabilisation programming funded through the Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF).<sup>5</sup> Our review questions are set out in Table 1. The review follows a 2016 National Audit Office report on DFID’s response to crises, which explored capacity issues within the department and raised questions as to how well it manages the shift from short-term emergency response to sustained engagement in protracted crises.<sup>6</sup>

Table 1: Our review questions

Review criteria and questions	Sub-questions
<b>1. Effectiveness:</b> How effectively has the UK responded to humanitarian need in Syria?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How well has the UK identified humanitarian needs?</li> <li>How effective and, where appropriate, innovative has the UK’s assistance been in addressing and meeting humanitarian needs?</li> <li>How well has the UK coordinated with other humanitarian actors?</li> </ul>
<b>2. Efficiency:</b> How well has DFID managed its delivery chains?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent has DFID selected and managed its implementing partners so as to secure value for money?</li> <li>How well has DFID monitored its portfolio to drive improvements in value for money?</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> ICAI has recently conducted a performance review of the CSSF. See *The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund’s aid spending*, ICAI, March 2018, [link](#). This did not review CSSF programming within Syria but looked at cross-cutting issues relating to the relevance, effectiveness and learning of this fund.

<sup>6</sup> *Department for International Development: Responding to crises*, National Audit Office, January 2016, [link](#).

**3. Learning:** How well has DFID learned from experience?

- How well has DFID engaged with research and lesson-learning and disseminated the results from these processes?
- To what extent has DFID collected feedback from intended beneficiaries and responded to it?
- To what extent has DFID adapted its humanitarian operations in response to lessons learned?
- To what extent has DFID innovated and adapted its humanitarian operations in response to lessons learned (other than beneficiary feedback)?

## 2 Methodology

2.1 Our review methodology included four interconnected components that we used to triangulate information and findings to give us more assurance of the robustness of our evidence:

- **Strategic review:** We analysed the strategies and planning documents that governed the response, as well as management data from DFID on expenditure patterns and human resources. Coupled with interviews with UK government staff, this enabled us to explore the evolution of the response at the strategic, financial and managerial levels.
- **Delivery partner case studies:** DFID's support in Syria is provided through delivery partners, including UN agencies and international non-government organisations (INGOs). Most of these, in turn, subcontract Syrian organisations to distribute aid. Of the 27 partners that have received direct DFID funding since 2012, we selected seven for detailed analysis: three UN agencies and four INGOs (see Annex 1).<sup>7</sup> For each case study, we undertook interviews with DFID, the delivery partners and selected downstream partners at each level of the delivery chain, both at the organisations' headquarters and in Syria. We augmented this with interviews with delivery partners not included in the case studies, enabling us to assess whether the findings of our case studies were representative.
- **Interviews in Syria with affected communities:** Working with a team of Syrian enumerators, we conducted in-person interviews with 330 recipients of DFID-funded assistance. Our programme sample included agriculture, child protection, food, health, livelihoods, non-food items, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). The enumerators visited 28 opposition-controlled communities in three governorates in Syria: Aleppo and Idlib in the north-west and Der'a in the south. They also interviewed 67 community leaders and downstream partner staff. This component allowed us to understand the final link in the delivery chain: the aid recipient.
- **Thematic case studies:** We conducted brief literature reviews of several topics relevant to the humanitarian response, including the use of cash transfers for humanitarian relief, data and knowledge management, and innovation. We supplemented the reviews with interviews with DFID, delivery partners and experts in the field, exploring how DFID and its partners approached each challenge.

2.2 Overall, we interviewed over 600 people in the UK, Syria and neighbouring countries, either in person or remotely (see Figure 2).

### Box 2: Limitations to our methodology

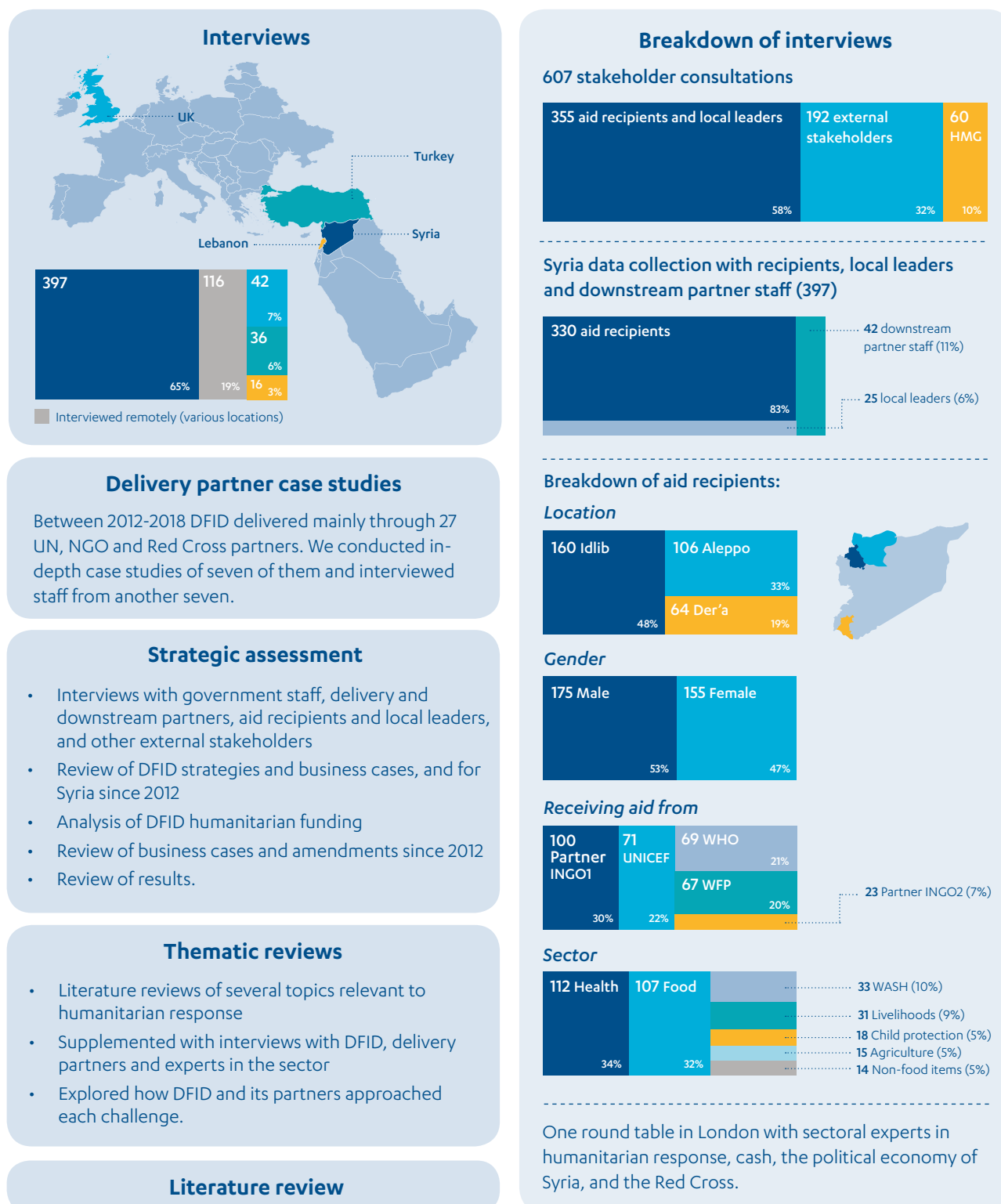
There are several limitations to our methodology created by the difficulty of conducting data collection in Syria and building a representative picture of a highly complex and diverse context. Control of the country is divided among warring factions, including the government and its allies, Western-backed largely Kurdish forces, the Turkish military and its allies, and a variety of armed groups, some with extremist ties. Social and economic dynamics vary widely between communities, making it difficult to draw generalisations from our sample across 28 communities in three governorates.

Our data collection within Syria was limited to opposition-held communities, where we had access. This limits the scope of our findings. We also had limited access to DFID delivery partners operating in government-controlled areas: while we were able to interview some in person in Beirut, most of our engagement with them was by telephone. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent, a downstream partner for nearly all of DFID's delivery partners operating in government-controlled areas, declined our requests for interviews.

<sup>7</sup> The UN agencies in our sample were the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Because of the high level of security risk to many INGO delivery partners' staff, we do not name these partners or their downstream partners in this review.

Additionally, we drew on information from DFID's delivery partners to identify our sample of downstream partners and communities, which introduced a risk of bias into our data. That risk also accompanies interviews with recipients in an ongoing conflict, who may be reluctant to provide negative feedback on humanitarian assistance for fear that it could be stopped. We have sought to guard against bias by triangulating across data sources, and by being circumspect about the degree to which it is possible to draw general conclusions from our data.

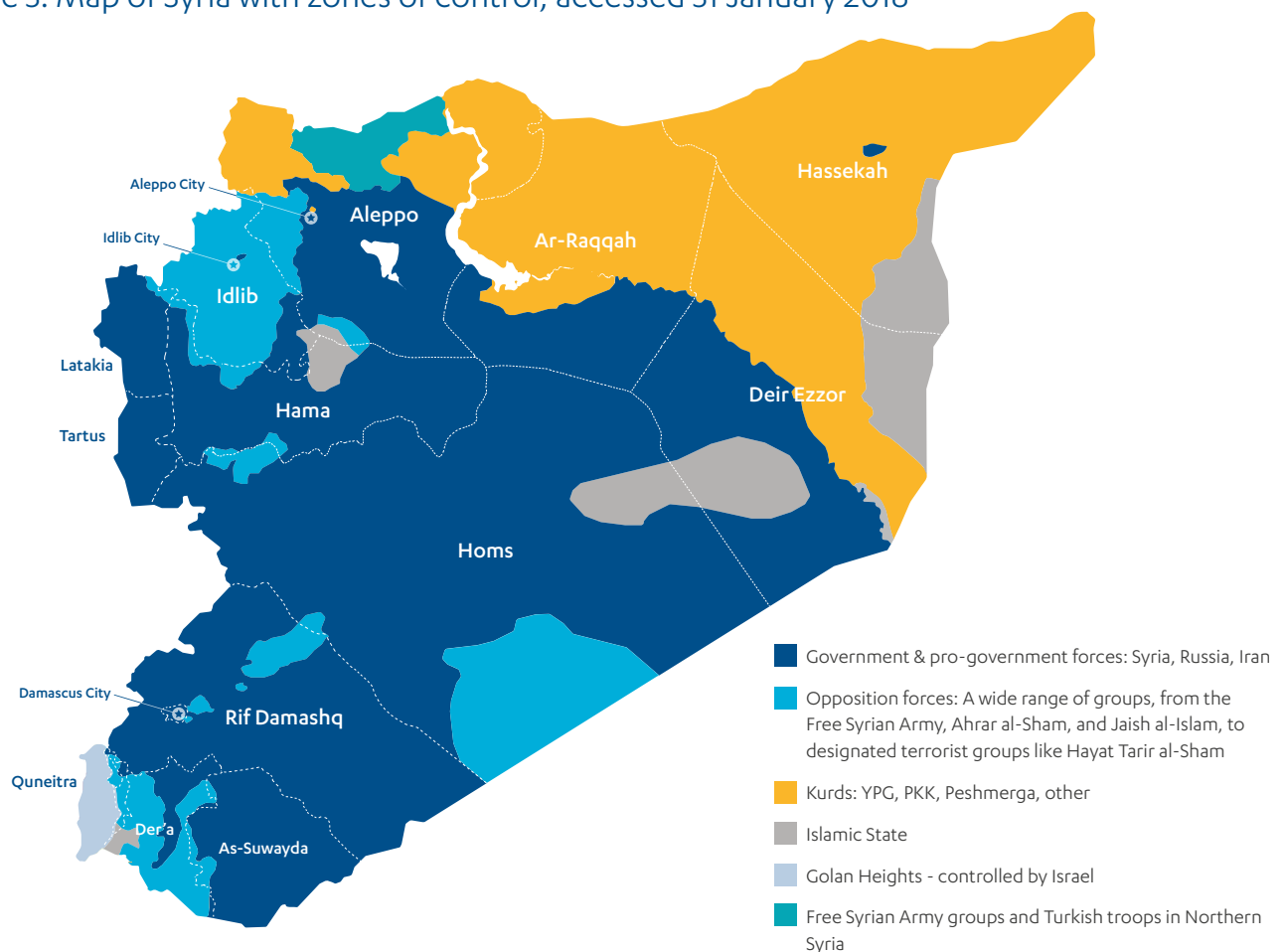
Figure 2: Summary of data collected



## 3 Background

### The Syrian conflict

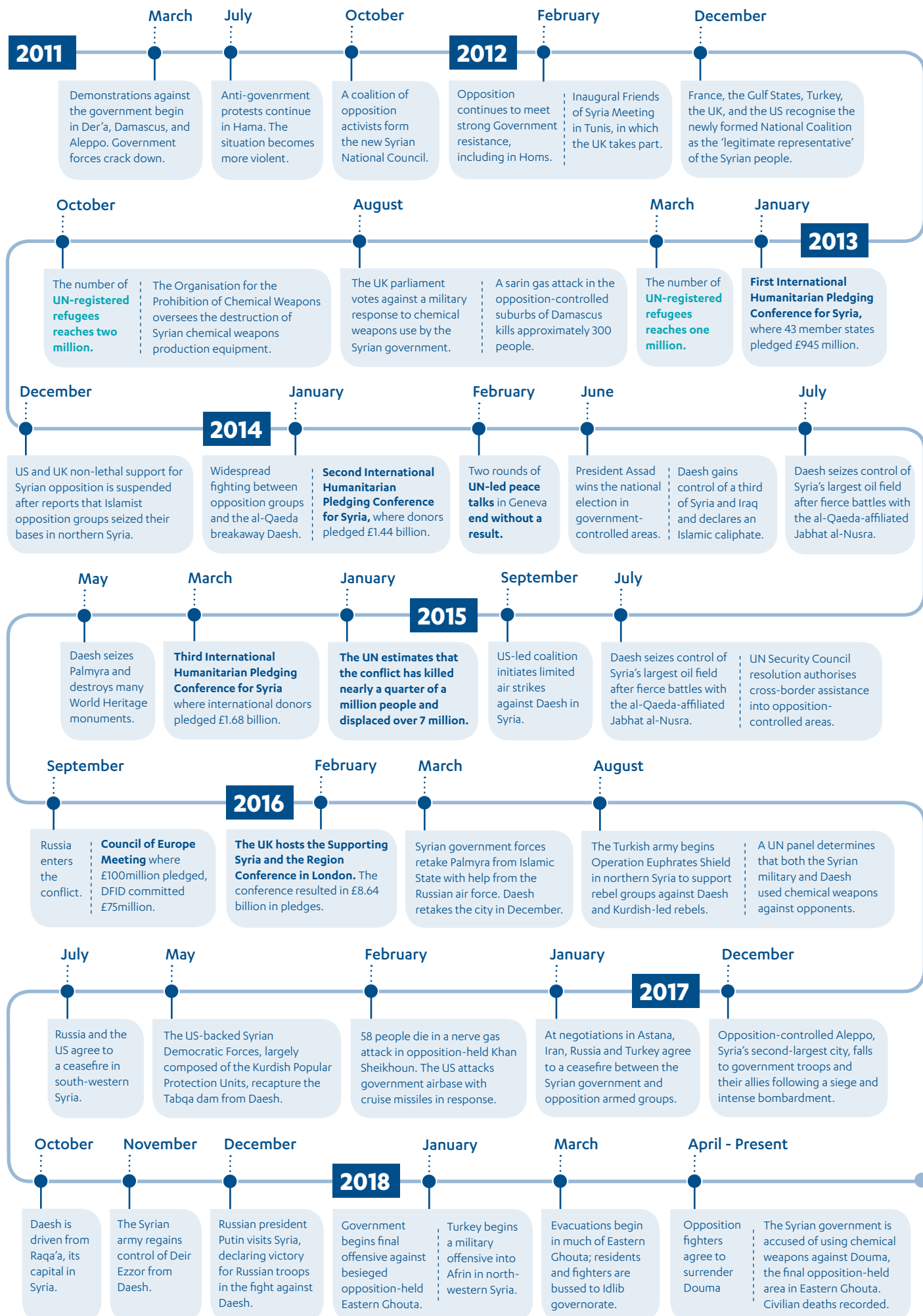
Figure 3: Map of Syria with zones of control, accessed 31 January 2018



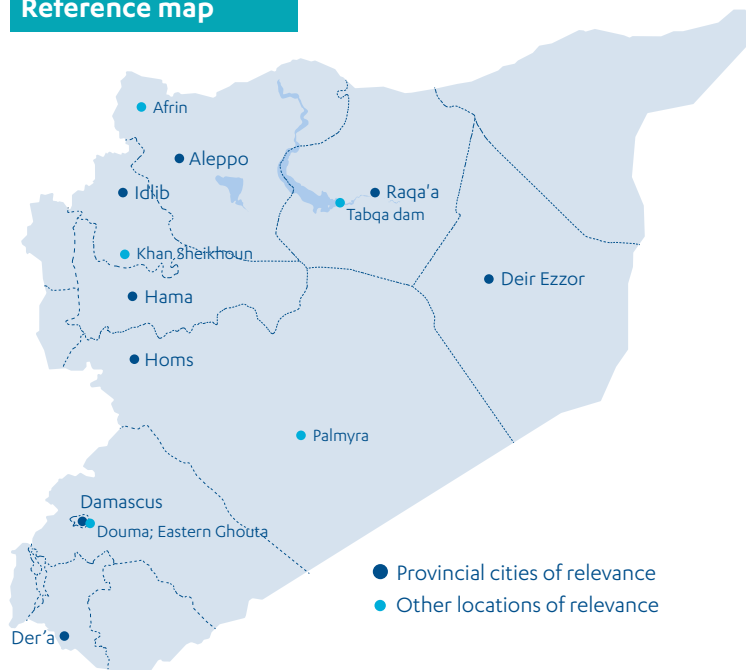
Source: Liveuamap - Syria, [link](#), (accessed 31 January 2018).

- 3.1 Emerging from pro-democracy protests in 2011, the Syrian conflict quickly escalated into a regional war that pitted armed opposition groups, some supported by Western and Gulf countries, against government forces and their Iranian and Hezbollah allies. In 2014-15, Daesh (also known as Islamic State, ISIL or ISIS) seized control of large portions of Iraq and Syria. In September 2015, Russia committed forces to support the Syrian government military and its allies, dramatically shifting the shape of the conflict and leading at the end of 2016 to the fall of Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city and one of the opposition's main strongholds. In August 2016, Turkey also entered the conflict, establishing a buffer zone in northern Syria between two areas of Kurdish control. In 2017, predominantly Kurdish forces backed by the US pushed Daesh out of most of the areas they controlled. This led to another Turkish military operation into Kurdish areas in north-eastern Syria in early 2018. At the time of writing in April 2018, Syrian forces had taken the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta and evacuations of opposition forces and civilians were underway.
- 3.2 The conflict has included the repeated use of chemical weapons against civilian populations, siege warfare and the bombardment of civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and schools. Almost half a million Syrians have been killed. The degradation or collapse of public services have left 13.1 million people – over half of the pre-war population of 22 million – in need of humanitarian assistance, with 5.6 million in severe need. Around 6.6 million refugees have fled the country, including 5.6 million refugees to the neighbouring countries of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan and an estimated additional 1 million to Europe. Forced internal displacement has left 6.1 million Syrians without homes, many of them multiple times.

Figure 4: Key events in the Syrian conflict 2011-2018



## Reference map



## Present day figures

**13.1 million**  
people are in need of humanitarian assistance

**6.1 million**  
of those in need are internally displaced

**400,000**  
people estimated to have been killed by the conflict\*

**£2.71 billion**  
committed to the regional response by the UK since 2012, inclusive of 2018 and 2019 pledged funds.

\* figure is a UN estimate from April 2016

## The UK's humanitarian response

- 3.3 The UK responded to the Syrian conflict with its largest-ever humanitarian operation. To date, DFID has committed £2.71 billion to the wider regional response, including support for refugees in neighbouring countries. Of this, £910 million was allocated for aid in Syria. Figure 5 provides an overview of DFID's funding in Syria. The largest item has been emergency food distribution, at 31% of expenditure between 2012 and 2018, followed by health (20%), non-food items and shelter (14%) and water, sanitation and hygiene (8%). The pattern is typical of an emergency response in a conflict zone.
- 3.4 In the early phase, DFID provided its support mainly through multilateral organisations operating from Damascus. As the crisis deepened, the scale of the response expanded rapidly and came to include a large number of delivery partners, many delivering aid into Syria from neighbouring countries. In 2016, DFID adopted a new strategic plan for its Syria operations, outlining four objectives:
- support conflict reduction and peacebuilding
  - build resilience
  - protect civilians
  - strengthen the enabling environment.<sup>8</sup>
- 3.5 In this strategy, humanitarian assistance falls under the objective of protecting civilians.<sup>9</sup> This is to be complemented where possible with programming to build resilience by restarting agricultural markets and restoring livelihoods, to reduce the population's dependence on aid. DFID's strategy also emphasises recent global policy commitments under the Grand Bargain,<sup>10</sup> including the use of flexible, multi-year funding (see Box 3).

8. *Syria 5-Year Strategic Plan*, DFID, 2016, unpublished.

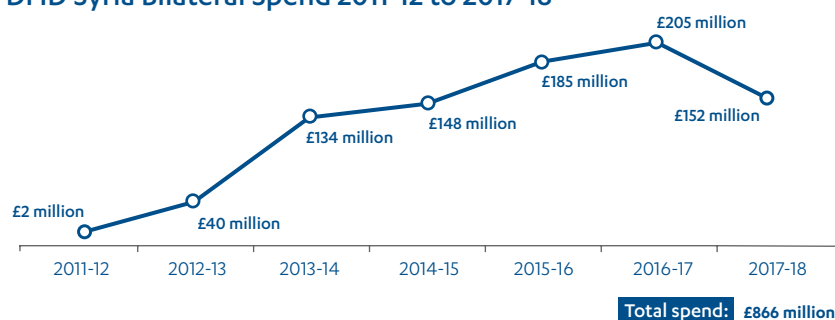
9. This formulation of 'protection' is in keeping with the International Committee of the Red Cross' definition. This includes the provision of relief assistance, aimed at reducing the vulnerability of individuals and communities affected by conflict, as part of a broader set of protection activities. This reflects a departure from DFID's usual approach to mainstreaming protection activities within programming.

10. *The Grand Bargain – A shared commitment to better serve people in need*, September 2016, [link](#).

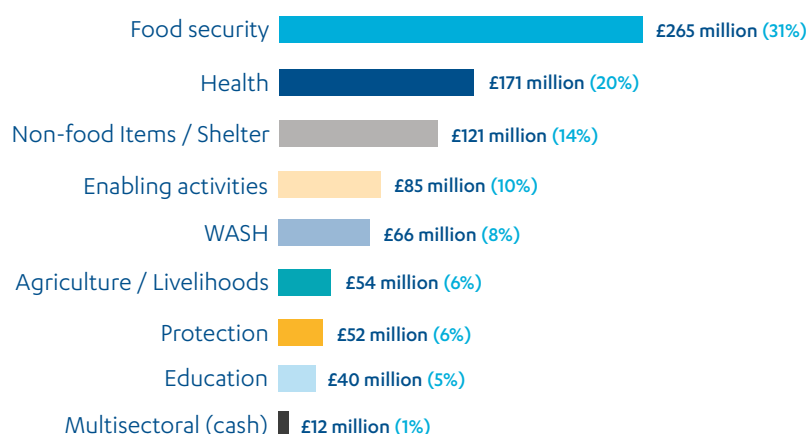


Figure 5: DFID's response

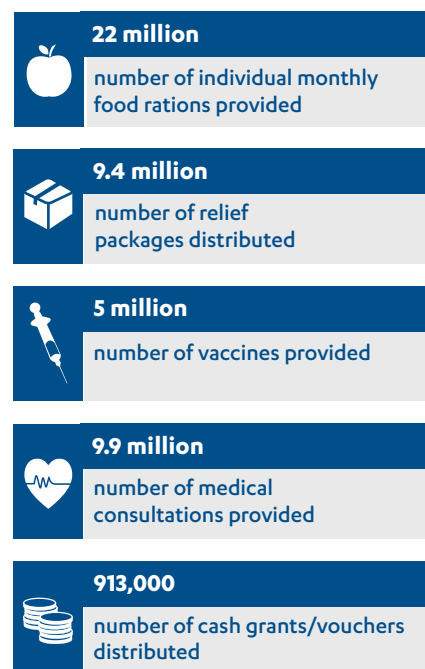
### DFID Syria Bilateral Spend 2011-12 to 2017-18



### Assistance by sector (amount spent 2012-18)

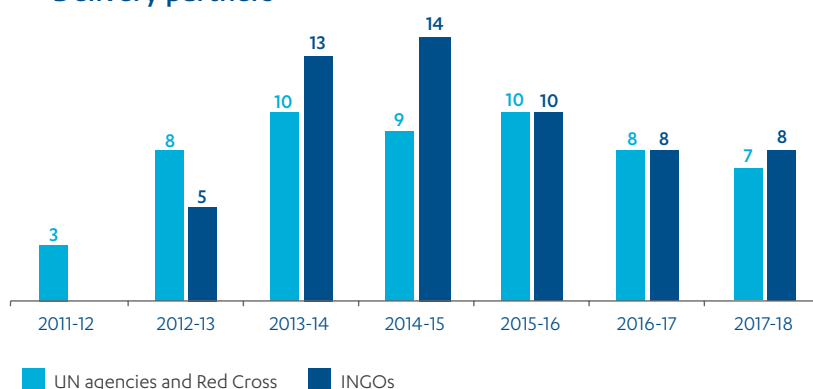


### Key results reported for 2012-17



Source: Syria Crisis Response Summary, DFID, 10 May 2018, [link](#).

### Delivery partners



### Box 3: The World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain

In January 2015, against the background of a growing shortfall in global humanitarian funding, the UN created a high-level panel on humanitarian financing to explore ways of addressing the funding gap. A year later, the panel recommended a set of actions to “deepen and broaden the resource base for humanitarian action” and “improve delivery through ‘A Grand Bargain on efficiency’”. This led to agreement among a group of 30 donors and humanitarian agencies at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 on 51 commitments across ten workstreams, known as the Grand Bargain. The commitments include:

- **Transparency:** Make data on humanitarian funding transparent and available to all.
- **Frontline responders:** Greater inclusion for national and local organisations who are often delivering the bulk of humanitarian assistance.
- **Cash-based programming:** Increase use of cash in humanitarian response and strengthen monitoring.

- **Reduce management costs:** Reduce duplication of management and other costs while providing transparent and comparable cost structures.
- **More joint and impartial needs assessments:** Single comprehensive overview of humanitarian needs and increased collaboration on data collection.
- **Participation revolution:** Improved engagement with communities and streamlined feedback mechanisms; greater utilisation of feedback in programme design activities.
- **More multi-year humanitarian funding:** Increase multi-year, collaborative and flexible planning and funding instruments, with funding recipients applying the same financial terms that they received from donors.
- **Less earmarking:** Reduce the amount of directed funding, reaching a global target of non- and softly-earmarked contribution representing only 30% of humanitarian funding by 2020.
- **Harmonised and simplified reporting requirements:** Simplify and harmonise reporting requirements by the end of 2018.
- **Strengthening engagement between humanitarian and development actors:** Use existing resources to reduce humanitarian needs with the aim of contributing to long-term global development goals.

There is ongoing work under each workstream, each co-led by a donor and an operational agency, to translate the commitments into actions and agreed standards. The UK leads the workstream on cash-based programming, with the World Food Programme (WFP).

## Operating context

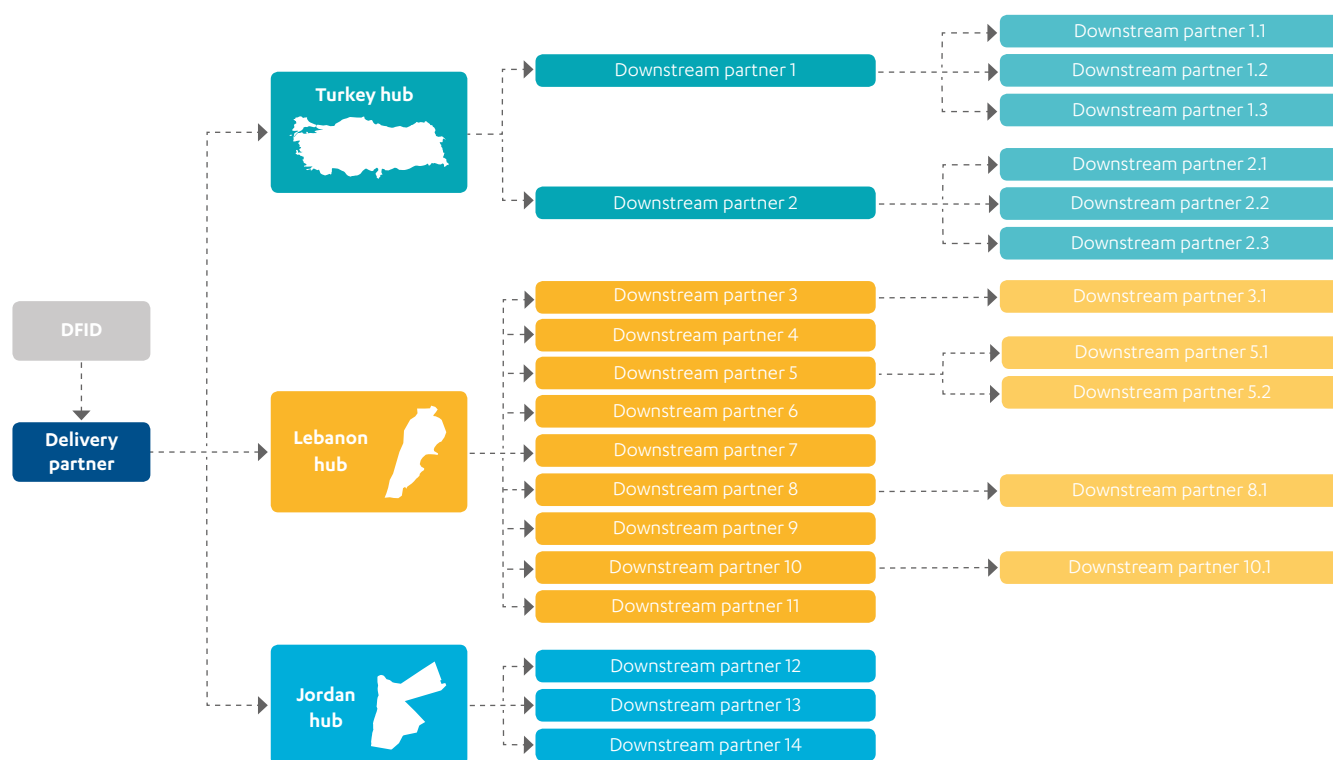
3.6 A complex set of dynamics converged to make delivering humanitarian assistance in Syria a particularly difficult undertaking:

- **Lack of presence:** In the period before the Syria crisis, DFID had scaled back its presence in the Middle East and North Africa region (apart from Yemen and the Occupied Palestinian Territories), to concentrate its resources in low-income countries.<sup>11</sup> As a result, DFID had no recent experience of the political and operational context. The UK closed its embassy in Damascus in early 2012, leaving no standing UK presence in Syria to oversee the response.
- **Remote management and multiple hubs:** Like DFID, many of its delivery partners also operate remotely from hubs in Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. To access people in need in Syria, most of them are reliant on Syrian partner organisations, who deliver the bulk of their assistance.<sup>12</sup> Within Syria, UN agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross also work through Syrian partners. This makes for complex delivery arrangements: delivery partners have multiple operating hubs and downstream partners, often working through long delivery chains (see Figure 6). The need to work across borders increases the costs of delivery in Syria, while operating from multiple countries forces partners to reconcile different national rules and regulations, leading to higher management costs.

<sup>11</sup> In 2011, DFID completed a bilateral aid review in which it announced that it would provide assistance to 28 priority countries, see *Bilateral aid review: technical report*, DFID, 2011, [link](#). In 2016, it added Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria to its list of priority countries.

<sup>12</sup> Not all delivery partners in our case study relied on partners. Some INGOs opted to employ staff directly in Syria as the security situation allowed. However, much of the humanitarian response is reliant on Syrian partners to deliver aid.

Figure 6: Example of a delivery chain for one DFID partner in Syria



Note: DFID has developed and maintains delivery chain diagrams for each project which are informed by data reported by partners in the downstream partner list in the logframe workbook. As the figure shows, the partner reaches Syria from three hubs (Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan) and has 14 immediate downstream partners. Six of those 14 downstream partners have an additional 11 downstream partners between them.

Source: DFID, 2017

- Relationship with the Syrian government:** Early in the crisis, the UK publicly declared its support for the Syrian opposition,<sup>13</sup> bringing an end to diplomatic contact between the two governments. However, under its mandate, the United Nations could only operate with the consent of the Syrian government. Its continued presence in Damascus and cooperation with the government led to deep distrust from partners in opposition areas. The Syrian government also compelled some delivery partners to choose between maintaining a presence in Damascus or continuing their work in opposition-held areas. This situation politicised the choice of humanitarian delivery channels, undermined coordination efforts and led to parallel delivery mechanisms for different parts of the country.
- A fluid operating environment:** The operating environment in Syria is both uniquely challenging and highly changeable. Control of the country is fragmented, frontlines shift frequently, and the intensity of conflict is unpredictable. Parts of the country can be stable for lengthy periods while others face daily fighting or are besieged. Populations are frequently displaced, sometimes multiple times and into areas devastated by years of fighting. DFID staff have described the situation as multiple crises within a protracted crisis.
- Nascent civil society at community level:** Civil society organisations were not well established in Syria before the conflict but emerged throughout much of the country to support communities in need. Most of DFID's delivery partners rely on these organisations to deliver aid (referred to as "downstream partners" in this report). Because of their access to communities and understanding of local conditions, they are a critical link in DFID's delivery chain. As new organisations, however, they are often unfamiliar with humanitarian principles and the norms of the humanitarian system. Many lack experience with donor requirements for accountability and value for money.

<sup>13</sup> *Gifting of Non-Lethal Equipment (Syria)*, UK Parliament Written Ministerial Statements, 19 November 2013, [link](#).

## 4 Findings

### **Effectiveness: How effectively has DFID responded to humanitarian needs in Syria?**

- 4.1 In this section, we assess how well DFID has identified and responded to humanitarian needs in Syria. We examine the evolution of the response and the work that went into building up an accurate picture of humanitarian needs. We draw on our interviews with aid recipients in Syria to assess whether assistance is reaching people in need and what impact it is having on their lives.

#### **DFID has successfully overcome major barriers to the delivery of relief across Syria**

- 4.2 At the beginning of the crisis, DFID's choice of delivery partners was limited to those working from government-controlled Damascus. DFID followed its usual approach for rapid-onset emergencies, channelling funding primarily through the UN humanitarian system and the Red Cross. It did so through a set of 'umbrella' business cases: single programme documents covering multiple partners, without detailed design of individual interventions. This allowed funds to be mobilised quickly, without lengthy design and approval processes.
- 4.3 As required by their mandate, UN humanitarian agencies operated in Syria under the authority of the Syrian government. The Syrian government from the outset exercised a substantial degree of control over their operations. It designated the Syrian Arab Red Crescent both as the coordinating body for humanitarian operations, supplanting the usual role of the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and as the principal downstream delivery partner for assistance. It also placed tight controls on information flows, with a ban on media reporting and restrictions on UN agencies publishing details of their work.
- 4.4 As the response progressed, it became apparent that opposition-controlled areas of the country were underserved. From 2013, DFID and other like-minded donors (including the EU, the Netherlands and the US) worked to build a delivery capacity that was beyond the control of the Syrian government and able to operate impartially across the territory. It did so primarily by working with international non-government organisations (INGOs) operating across the Syrian border, from Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. DFID encouraged UK-based INGOs to move to, or scale up in, the region, to increase its delivery options. Building a cross-border delivery capacity from neighbouring countries took a considerable amount of time. The new delivery partners lacked expertise on Syria and were hampered by the ongoing conflict. Eventually, however, DFID was able to overcome some of the constraints set by the Syrian government and develop a capacity to reach communities in need across the territory. This was a significant achievement in difficult circumstances, which considerably improved the effectiveness and impartiality of the response. We note, however, that humanitarian operations in government-controlled areas continued to operate from Damascus under the authority of the Syrian government, constraining DFID's ability to direct and monitor its operations.


#### **Working with others, DFID has improved needs assessment and coordination, strengthening the international response**

- 4.5 A key part of this shift in approach was developing an independent capacity to assess humanitarian needs across Syria. Reliable, detailed and up-to-date information on humanitarian need is essential both for effective targeting of relief operations and for coordination among multiple humanitarian actors. Recognising that Syrian government-controlled information was incomplete and unreliable, from 2013 DFID supported several independent initiatives to collect data in opposition-controlled areas (see Figure 7).
- 4.6 Along with the EU, the US and other donors, it supported a Joint Rapid Assessment of Northern Syria in 2013, carried out by a coalition of INGOs operating across the border from Turkey. It provided technical and financial support to the Assistance Coordination Unit, an organisation run by the Syrian opposition. The unit coordinated a Syria Integrated Needs Assessment, published in December 2013. These initiatives provided DFID and its donor partners with the first independent picture of needs across the country and a means of cross-checking information generated by the Syrian government and its affiliates.

4.7 Using the information collected through these assessments, the UK – working with other donors – helped to galvanise a shift of international policy on humanitarian access in Syria. Before July 2014, UN agencies could only conduct cross-border humanitarian operations with the consent of the Syrian government, which was usually withheld. UN Security Council Resolution 2165 gave them formal authorisation to access opposition-controlled areas through specified border crossings without government permission.<sup>14</sup> According to key stakeholders, DFID and the Foreign Office (FCO) worked closely together to make the case for this change.

#### The Security Council...

**Deeply disturbed** by the continued, arbitrary and unjustified withholding of consent to relief operations and the persistence of conditions that impede the delivery of humanitarian supplies to destinations within Syria, in particular to besieged and hard-to-reach areas...

**Decides** that the United Nations humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners are authorized to use routes across conflict lines and the border crossings of Bab al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa, Al Yarubiyah and Al-Ramtha, in addition to those already in use, in order to ensure that humanitarian assistance, including medical and surgical supplies, reaches people in need throughout Syria through the most direct routes, with notification to the Syrian authorities... 

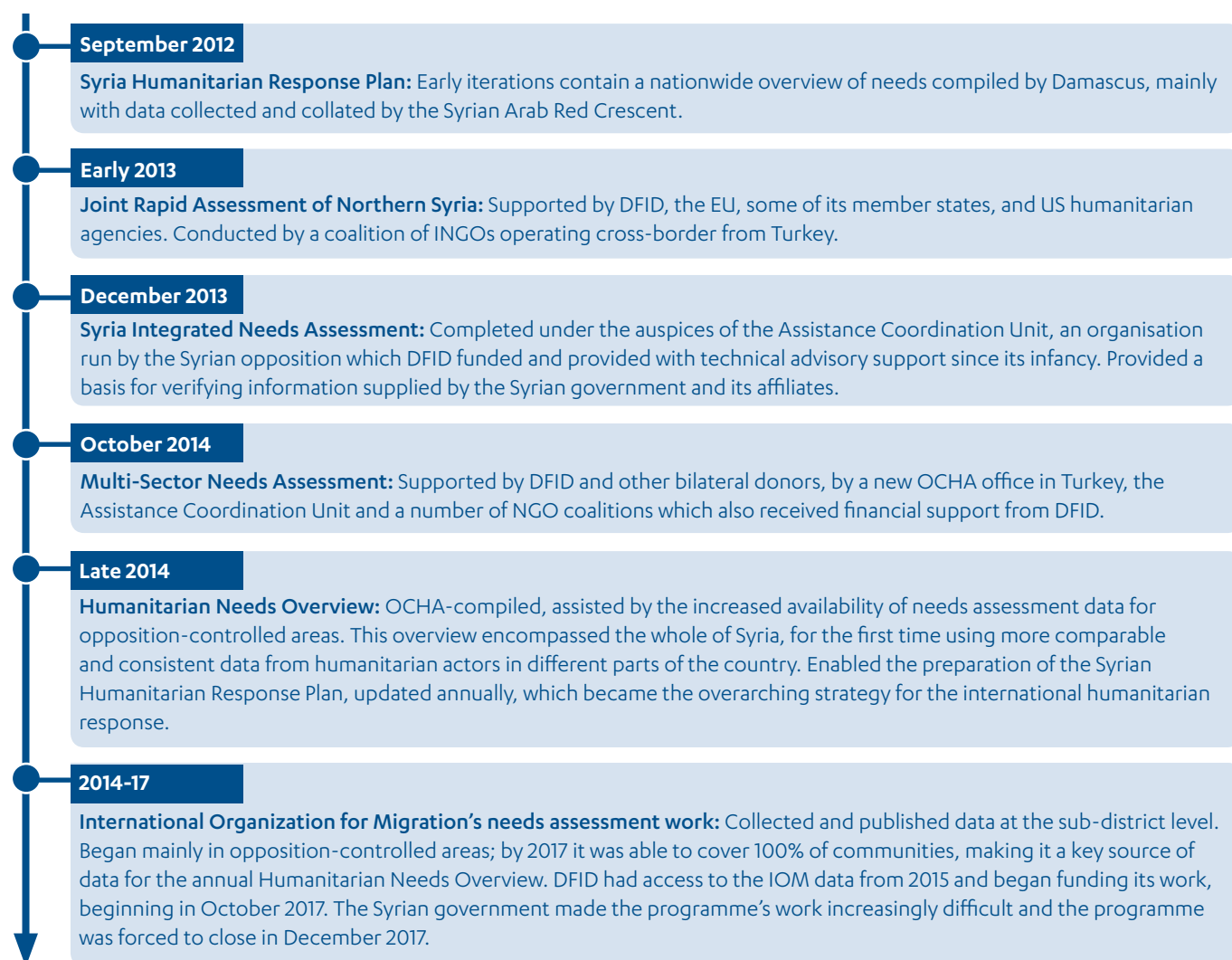
UN Security Council Resolution 2165, [link](#)

- 4.8 Resolution 2165 had important implications for the coordination of the international humanitarian effort. OCHA was able to establish coordination offices in Gaziantep (eastern Turkey) and Amman (Jordan). It set up its standard ‘cluster’ coordination mechanism, where working groups of humanitarian actors share information and coordinate operations in particular clusters, such as food security or health.<sup>15</sup> The Humanitarian Needs Overview in late 2014, for the first time, encompassed the whole of Syria, with more standardised data. This, in turn, enabled the Syrian Humanitarian Response Plan, updated annually, to become the overarching strategy for the international humanitarian response across the whole of Syria. From 2015, OCHA established pooled funds (through its Emergency Response Fund) in each of the neighbouring countries, which facilitated coordination and capacity building of Syrian non-governmental organisations. DFID has contributed to that pooled funding mechanism.
- 4.9 The strengthening of data collection and international coordination has been a gradual process, in the face of continuing practical challenges. While the annual Humanitarian Needs Overviews have improved in coverage and quality, continuing restrictions on data collection limit the level of local detail and therefore their usefulness for informing programming. Nonetheless, we find that DFID’s investments in data collection and coordination made an important contribution not just to the targeting of UK humanitarian aid but also to the overall shape of the international response.

<sup>14</sup>. UN Security Council Resolution 2165, 14 July 2014, [link](#).

<sup>15</sup>. To learn more about OCHA’s cluster coordination, see About Clusters, UNOCHA, [link](#), (accessed May 2018).

Figure 7: Timeline of work to assess humanitarian needs within Syria



## DFID's decision to prioritise populations with the most severe needs was appropriate

- 4.10 As the quality and coverage of needs assessment data improved, DFID began directing aid towards geographical areas based on the severity of humanitarian need, rather than numbers of people in need. A significant share of its support was directed towards opposition-controlled areas that were underserved by the UN and where the humanitarian need was most acute at that point in the crisis. While continuing to contribute to the UN's overall humanitarian response, it also began to place conditions on its funding to UN agencies, to encourage them to target more assistance towards severely affected areas. Along with like-minded donors such as the EU and Germany, DFID also advocated for changes to the targeting principles in the Humanitarian Response Plan, which governs the overall UN response, with some success.
- 4.11 Prioritising 'severity over scale' – that is reaching communities where needs were most acute, even if this meant reaching fewer people overall – is consistent with generally accepted humanitarian principles (see Box 4). DFID's 2017 Humanitarian Reform Policy affirms that, while prioritising severity of need may involve higher unit costs, this can still represent value for money when the principle of equity is considered.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Saving lives, building resilience, reforming the system: the UK Government's Humanitarian Reform Policy, DFID, September 2017, [link](#).

## Box 4: International humanitarian principles

DFID aligns its programming with the four core principles that are widely recognised as guiding international humanitarian operations:<sup>17</sup>

- **Humanity:** Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.
- **Neutrality:** Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.
- **Impartiality:** Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.
- **Independence:** Humanitarian action must be autonomous from political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold in areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.

- 4.12 This targeting approach was nonetheless controversial. Some multilateral partners told us of their view that the decision to prioritise smaller numbers of people with more severe needs in largely opposition-held areas (including besieged areas) was a partisan attempt to strengthen opposition resistance to Syrian government forces. (We note that, given the UN's obligation to work with and through the Syrian government in Damascus, delivering aid solely through the UN would equally have been open to criticisms of partisanship.) Some multilateral partners also claimed that DFID's conditionality was administratively burdensome and unnecessary, as their own methodologies allowed them to target assistance effectively to the most severe needs across Syria.
- 4.13 DFID also identified shortcomings in the UN system for responding to spikes in humanitarian need. It set up its own Emergency Response Mechanism as a quick and flexible funding instrument, based on past experience in Somalia and South Sudan. It allows DFID to call for proposals from partners (typically existing partners that have already been through the due diligence process) as soon as a new crisis emerges. DFID reviews these proposals rapidly and aims to release funds within 72 hours of approval. This has allowed DFID to be more flexible in responding to acute need. For example, in late 2017, it used the Emergency Response Mechanism to preposition relief supplies in Eastern Ghouta, in preparation for an anticipated government offensive.
- 4.14 Overall, we find that DFID's approach to the targeting of its humanitarian assistance was an appropriate response to the available evidence on need, and consistent with the humanitarian principles that the UK espouses. Furthermore, we find that placing additional conditions on funds to UN agencies was defensible, where it was done to improve the targeting of the response. We come back to the question of whether this caused efficiency losses in paragraphs 4.68 and 4.69.

## UK assistance is reaching communities and individuals in need

- 4.15 DFID's vulnerability criteria determine which households are eligible for humanitarian assistance. They consider economic status, size of household, numbers of dependents and people with disabilities, and whether the household is female-headed, among other factors. DFID delivery partners are obliged to draw up lists of recipients according to these criteria.
- 4.16 Through our interviews in Syria, we assessed – on a small scale – whether these criteria were appropriate and being complied with. Feedback from recipients, local leaders and downstream partner staff all suggested that the criteria matched community perceptions of need. Most recipients (83% of 330) and local council representatives (80% of 25) told us that the assistance was reaching the most vulnerable people – although many also expressed the view that need was high across the board. Most of the recipients described themselves as falling within the vulnerability criteria, with many describing

<sup>17</sup> *Saving lives, building resilience, reforming the system: the UK Government's Humanitarian Reform Policy*, DFID, September 2017, [link](#).



extremely precarious situations.<sup>18</sup> We confirmed that DFID's partners have processes in place to investigate any complaints they receive about who is (or is not) included in the beneficiaries lists.

- 4.17 There are, however, local challenges to effective targeting that need to be overcome. In some areas, local leaders attempt to control recipient lists, which can make it difficult for downstream partners to follow DFID's targeting principles (see Box 5). Ongoing conflict and instability also inhibit accurate targeting. Overall, while no targeting approach is foolproof, our data provides a clearer level of assurance that DFID's processes for prioritising vulnerable people are generally effective.

### Box 5: Validating beneficiary lists

We encountered concern from some delivery partners about the role played by local councils in drawing up beneficiary lists. Some councils select recipients according to their own criteria, and in some instances council lists were found to have improperly included relatives and acquaintances. Most downstream partners informed us that they review and correct these lists, as required under the terms of DFID funding. One reported that, on one occasion, it had threatened to withdraw its assistance unless the local council allowed it to select recipients based on the vulnerability criteria. However, a few partners told us that they had, on occasion, accepted the lists in order to preserve good working relationships with local councils.

### There is evidence of a range of positive results from UK assistance

- 4.18 In the period from 2012 to 2017, DFID reports that it provided 9.4 million relief packages, 5 million vaccines and 22 million individual monthly food rations (see Figure 5). In 2016-17 DFID funding provided 4.9 million people with clean water and 3.5 million people with sanitation or hygiene programmes. Around 432,000 children received education services, while over 351,000 children and pregnant and lactating women received nutritional support.<sup>19</sup> We have not verified these figures, although we have reviewed DFID's systems for collecting and aggregating monitoring data from its partners.
- 4.19 These are output-level figures, recording the volume of assistance that DFID has provided, rather than its outcomes, on which there is little data. This is common in humanitarian emergencies: delivery partners count the number of people who have received aid but, given the emergency conditions, rarely attempt to measure what difference it has made in their lives. Given limited resources and difficult operating environments, priority is given to maximising the provision of life-saving support, rather than to more elaborate monitoring and evaluation. However, in some of its most recent programmes in Syria, DFID has begun to require delivery partners to report on outcome indicators and to conduct mid-term and end-of-programme evaluations.
- 4.20 To gain a better picture of the difference that UK humanitarian aid has made, we conducted interviews with recipients in 28 communities in opposition-controlled areas (where we could gain access). Of the 330 recipients we interviewed, 81% reported changes in their circumstances as a result of the assistance. Many reported that food aid had allowed them to use money saved to meet other basic needs, such as housing, health services or other non-food items,<sup>20</sup> and 13 families said they were able to send children back to school. From livelihoods programmes, 53 people claimed that the support had influenced their decision not to leave as refugees, while three reported that it had prevented men from joining armed groups. A clear impact was reported on people's state of mind as well, with some feeling more optimistic and less stressed. "They make me feel like I am human," one person told us.

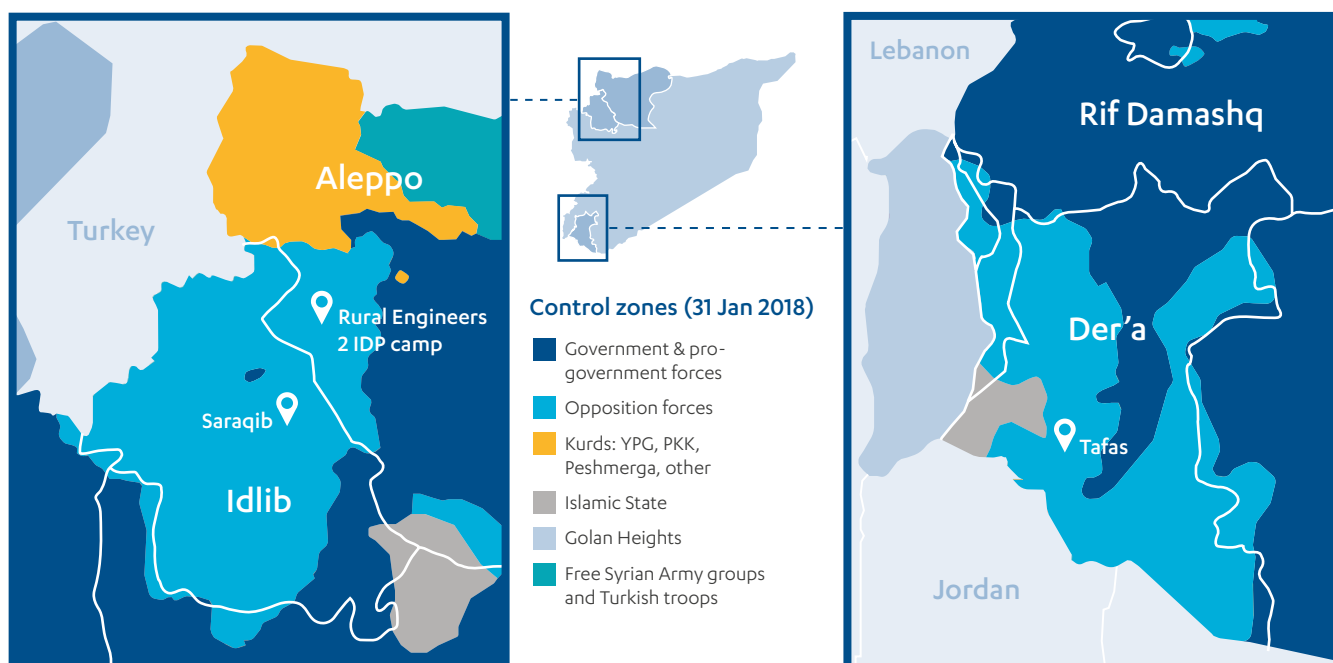
<sup>18</sup> The exception to this was Aleppo governorate, where only 25% of the recipient households that we surveyed included a vulnerable individual according to DFID's criteria. We attribute this variation to the fact that DFID assistance in that area includes a higher proportion of health and water projects, which by their nature serve entire communities rather than individual households. 92% of respondents in Aleppo were of the view that the assistance was reaching the people most in need.

<sup>19</sup> *Syria Crisis Response Summary*, DFID, 10 May 2018, [link](#).

<sup>20</sup> This reflects the findings of one of the few available programme evaluations we reviewed, which concluded that the cash provided by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine refugees, a DFID delivery partner, enabled families to pay for rent, food and health care. *Evaluation of the Emergency Cash Assistance Component of the Syria Emergency Response Programme of UNRWA*, UNRWA, November 2014, [link](#).



Figure 8: Locations of our interviews in Syria



### Rural Engineers 2 IDP camp, Aleppo

- Population: **5,000**
- Percentage of which are IDPs: **100%**
- Distance to frontlines: **15 miles**
- Economy: Very limited, everyone is an IDP
- Local governance: Local council
- Available services: Humanitarian aid
- Challenges: No potable water, not many organisations providing aid

Rural Engineers 2 is an internally displaced person's (IDP) camp which provides free housing and other assistance to the large number of displaced people who cannot afford to pay rent. The recipients we spoke to expressed the enormous needs in the camp. As one explained, "Every person who is here is in dire need of aid because they left their town with only their clothes on them." Another echoed, "We came here with nothing and this aid eased our suffering."

All of the recipients cited the high quality of the food distributed by DFID's INGO partner in the camp. They explained that the food helped cover 60 to 70% of their family's food needs each month and helped reduce their expenses. One said that it kept their family from starving. A few recipients also cited the humanitarian aid they received as the reason their families remain in the area. Several recipients said that the food distribution "...improved the living conditions for everyone, reducing their monthly expenses and making people more comfortable and happier." A few mentioned that food distribution decreased petty crime, as people were less inclined to steal money or food to survive.

### Saraqib, Idlib

- Population: **25,000**
- Percentage of which are IDPs: **25%**
- Distance to frontlines: **30 miles**
- Economy: Mainly dependent on agriculture and trade
- Local governance: Local council and elders council
- Available services: Education, electricity, health services, water
- Challenges: The lack of regular electricity which leads to the inability to pump water

Saraqib is a large town in Idlib which has experienced significant bombardment and other conflict throughout the war.

The WHO-supported clinic that we visited provides free health services to all community members. All of the patients praised the quality of the medical services and the care that the staff demonstrate to them. Many appreciated the fact that the services were free, as they would not be able to access health care or medications otherwise. A few said that the presence of a free health clinic reduced theft, as poorer people were less likely to steal to fund their children's treatment. One said, "High health care costs could force people to steal to treat their children who are suffering in pain in front of them." Patients also explained that the presence of free, high-quality health care provided some security benefits. One explained that "If the clinic or the hospital was not around we would have to go north and that exposes us to kidnapping."

Parents whose children were immunised through the UNICEF-sponsored immunisation unit were equally appreciative of the benefits of having a free service in the town for some of the same reasons. In addition to the benefits of improving children's general health and preventing serious diseases like polio, several mentioned that these services also increased the community's general awareness of health issues.

### Tafas, Der'a

- Population: **75,000**
- Percentage of which are IDPs: **20%**
- Distance to frontlines: **10 miles**
- Economy: Mainly dependent on agriculture and support from families abroad
- Local governance: Local council, shura council, military council
- Available services: Education, electricity, health services, water
- Challenges: Lack of regular electricity, high rate of robberies and kidnapping

Tafas is a large city in the southern governorate of Dar'a. Residents report that the security situation is calm, a major reason why IDPs fleeing conflict in other areas have settled there. This area of the country is dependent on the Syrian government for fuel and fuel supplies are often cut. For this reason, many recipients cited that fuel is their biggest need, along with food and cash.

Nearly all of the participants in the pilot livelihoods project were satisfied with the quality of the support they received and several were able to quickly earn money to help them support their families. One said, "We have begun to have a monthly monetary income and I am now able to provide the things my children need."

The IDPs who received the non-food items expressed appreciation for the support. Many of them left everything behind when they fled the battles against ISIS in southern Syria. One explained the enormous needs these families have: "We are IDPs and don't possess anything. We need everything to survive." While they were very grateful for the support, 11 out of 14 interviewed mentioned that the goods they received were poor quality and quickly became unusable.

- 4.21 Two thirds of the respondents also attested that UK assistance had brought about positive changes at the community level. 60% thought that their communities had become safer places to live largely because they believed assistance reduced robberies, but also because it created a better mental outlook and improved health conditions. Some reported that aid reduced disputes, such as over water. Aid was also seen as a stabilising factor, with 69% of recipients reporting that their communities were more positive places to live and many believing that they had a greater role to play within their communities.

#### DFID's work on protection does not yet reflect the scale of need

- 4.22 According to a Red Cross definition, 'protection' is a category of support in conflict areas that aims to "make individuals more secure and to limit the threats they face, by reducing their vulnerability and/or their exposure to risks, particularly those arising from armed hostilities or acts of violence".<sup>21</sup> It is highly varied and context-specific, including activities such as ensuring the safety of refugees and displaced people, psychosocial support, protection of children, awareness-raising on human rights, and preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence. Protection work is often integrated into wider humanitarian activities – for example by ensuring that camps for displaced people are well lit and shelters located a reasonable distance from food aid collection points.
- 4.23 Effective protection activities are very difficult in the context of a live conflict where civilians are deliberately targeted. Protection also requires a stable presence within the relevant communities, which is lacking. As one DFID staff member observed: "You can't take protection off a truck."
- 4.24 DFID characterises the Syrian context as a 'protection crisis'. In its five-year strategy for Syria, protection is one of four objectives, encompassing both life-saving humanitarian assistance and specific protection activities, which are regarded as "inextricably linked".<sup>22</sup> Annual funding for specific protection activities in Syria, such as child-friendly spaces, women's centres, legal assistance and protection monitoring, has increased from £3 million in 2013-14 to £16 million in 2016-17. A humanitarian adviser on the Syria team is responsible for mainstreaming protection across both programming and advocacy efforts.
- 4.25 When submitting proposals under the 2016-20 business cases, DFID partners were invited to explain how they will integrate protection into their programme design, including:
- Explain how the programme will integrate core protection standards and principles.
  - State whether the programme will contribute to reducing the extent of external risk more broadly.
  - Describe how the programme will contribute to monitoring, reporting and analysis of protection trends.
- 4.26 Within the current portfolio, we found examples of monitoring of protection issues and research on specific topics, such as the targeting of medical personnel by combatants. Specific protection activities include women's centres, legal aid services, child-friendly spaces and psychosocial support. DFID is a major donor to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Syria, which is a leading agency on protection, particularly on sexual and gender-based violence issues, and offers training to other agencies.
- 4.27 Among the INGO delivery partners in our sample, progress on developing protection activities is mixed. One partner has had a multi-faceted programme since the early stage of the conflict, including an intervention to help people displaced by conflict to access civil documents. Others are newer to protection programming and are yet to fully develop their activities, although protection elements may be built into their humanitarian work. They offered several explanations for the slow start, including challenges with recruiting appropriately qualified staff and the difficulty of working from fixed sites, like community or women's centres, given rapidly changing local security conditions. These variations are anticipated in DFID's 2016 Syria strategy, which notes that some partners will have "specialised

21. 'ICRC Protection Policy Institutional Policy', *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 90, no 871, September 2008, [link](#).

22. *Syria 5-Year Strategic Plan*, DFID, 2016, unpublished.

protection programming capabilities” while others will focus primarily on the delivery of relief. However, it notes that “[a]ll should be committed to integrating core protection principles and relevant interagency guidelines into their work as part of good quality programming which has at its core the dignity, agency and safety of the affected population”.

- 4.28 While we acknowledge DFID’s increased efforts on protection, we find that it has been relatively slow to implement a strong protection focus into its operations, given the scale of need. As conditions in Syria allow, we would hope to see DFID looking for opportunities to expand its protection efforts – both programming and advocacy.

### **DFID has been slow to move from emergency assistance to livelihoods support and more flexible modalities such as cash**

- 4.29 Conditions across Syria are highly varied. In relatively stable areas, where agriculture and food markets are operating at a certain level, food distribution may not be the most appropriate way of helping those in humanitarian need. There is evidence from other crises that providing support in the form of cash or vouchers can help to stimulate local food markets and rebuild productive capacity.<sup>23</sup> It is also inherently more flexible, enabling recipients to spend according to their own priorities. There may also be scope to move from relief to helping recipients re-establish their livelihoods – for example, by providing agricultural inputs or seed money for small businesses.
- 4.30 In the 2016 Grand Bargain, 30 donors and aid providers committed to increasing their use of cash-based programming.<sup>24</sup> Globally, DFID has been a leading advocate for the use of cash for humanitarian relief. It convened a high-level panel on humanitarian cash transfers in 2015 and chairs a multi-donor working group on the topic.<sup>25</sup>
- 4.31 DFID’s use of cash in Syria has been gradually increasing, accounting for 14% of its humanitarian support through INGOs up to September 2017.<sup>26</sup> DFID’s goal is for 20% of its total humanitarian expenditure in Syria to be cash-based by 2019. It has made some early efforts to promote a coordinated approach to cash across agencies, supporting a working group on the subject in Gaziantep. However, practical and legal constraints, related to counter-terrorism regulations and international sanctions against Syrian banks, have limited partners’ ability to use Syrian financial institutions to transfer cash into Syria and to recipient households. While there are traditional mechanisms for handling cash payments into and within Syria (such as *hawalas*, which are networks of money agents who exchange value without the need for a formal transfer), they are unregulated and some are reported to pay taxes to terrorist-linked groups and are therefore considered too risky for regular cash transfers.
- 4.32 While the practical challenges with cash transfers are significant, we take the view that DFID should have done more and sooner to build up safe mechanisms for cash programming once it became clear that the crisis would be protracted. DFID is now collecting data on whether conditions are in place for cash programming, including the state of local food markets and possible mechanisms for handling cash payments safely.<sup>27</sup> Humanitarian advisers in Istanbul are working to strengthen partner capacities and coordination mechanisms, and partner logframes now include targets on scaling up the use of cash and vouchers.
- 4.33 Our interviews with people in Syria suggested a clear demand for more livelihoods support. Aid recipients – even those participating in food distribution programmes – indicated a desire for assistance with agriculture or other income-earning activities. Some noted the significance of livelihood programmes in maintaining local markets and strengthening community self-reliance. Interviews with local councils and downstream partner staff also reflected this demand. Of the 36 local council members we spoke to, ten requested more livelihoods programming. One respondent echoed

23. *Doing cash differently: How cash transfers can transform humanitarian aid*, High Level Panel on Humanitarian Cash Transfers, September 2015, [link](#).

24. *The Grand Bargain – A shared commitment to better serve people in need*, September 2016, p. 6, [link](#).

25. *Doing cash differently: How cash transfers can transform humanitarian aid*, High Level Panel on Humanitarian Cash Transfers, September 2015, [link](#).

26. *DFID Syria Portfolio Presentation*, September 2017, unpublished. The aggregate results collected by DFID do not include the UN-delivered assistance, providing only a partial picture of results. Because they are largely funded through the appeals process, the UN agencies are not included in DFID’s objectives for cash programming, which makes it difficult to track results against commitments.

27. Themes suggested by the DFID Syria team in *DFID Syria Independent Monitoring Contract Output 3 - Thematic Reports*, DFID, undated and unpublished.

others' opinion when he said that "finding alternative and sustainable solutions for people" should be a priority for the humanitarian response.

- 4.34 DFID's livelihoods programming remains small in scale, at 6% of the Syria humanitarian expenditure between 2012 and 2018. Among our seven delivery partner case studies, only one, an INGO, had made significant progress with livelihoods programming. The multilateral partners we reviewed had struggled to establish a successful track record in the area and, in one case, had chosen to deprioritise it. In interviews, both DFID and its delivery partners recognised that the transition to livelihoods programming had been slow, attributing it to a lack of capacity within partner organisations and the difficulty of recruiting experienced staff. We also note that the DFID Syria team lacked advisers specialised in livelihoods programming during the first three years of the response (see paragraph 4.44).

## Conclusion on effectiveness

- 4.35 DFID's humanitarian response in Syria has improved significantly over time and is now delivering effectively over a much larger share of the territory. Its early operations delivered vital food and non-food items to civilians in need under challenging conditions, but were limited by a shortage of delivery options and constraints imposed by the complex operating context. DFID worked to overcome these barriers. It built up independent sources of information on needs across the country and developed alternative delivery mechanisms operating from neighbouring countries. Working with the FCO and like-minded donors, it helped to secure Security Council authorisation for UN cross-border operations, enabling the shift to a 'Whole of Syria' approach to the international response. It used its influence as a funder of the UN system to direct assistance towards the communities with the most severe needs.
- 4.36 Our data collection in Syria suggests that DFID's targeting of intended recipients was effective at reaching communities in need and, within them, some of the most vulnerable individuals. We found a range of positive results for both households and communities. While little outcome-level data has been generated to date (as is common in humanitarian emergencies), our findings suggest that DFID has made an important contribution to alleviating the humanitarian crisis, meriting a positive rating.
- 4.37 However, we have several reservations. DFID has been relatively slow to integrate protection activities into its programming, given the scale of need. It has also been slow to move towards livelihoods and cash-based support, which would help to avoid distortion of the local economy and to reduce dependence on aid. While we acknowledge the practical challenges, these are areas where a more concerted effort to shift the balance of programming might have delivered more relevant assistance at an earlier stage.
- 4.38 We award DFID a **green-amber** score, which recognises the value of the role DFID has played to date while pointing to some areas in need of improvement.

## Efficiency: How well has DFID managed its delivery chains?

- 4.39 This section explores how well DFID has managed the delivery of its humanitarian assistance in Syria to achieve the best possible results for the support provided. We explore whether DFID put adequate resources into managing the response, given its scale and complexity. We review the management processes and tools that DFID established, assessing whether they gave the Syria team the information it needed to achieve the best possible results.

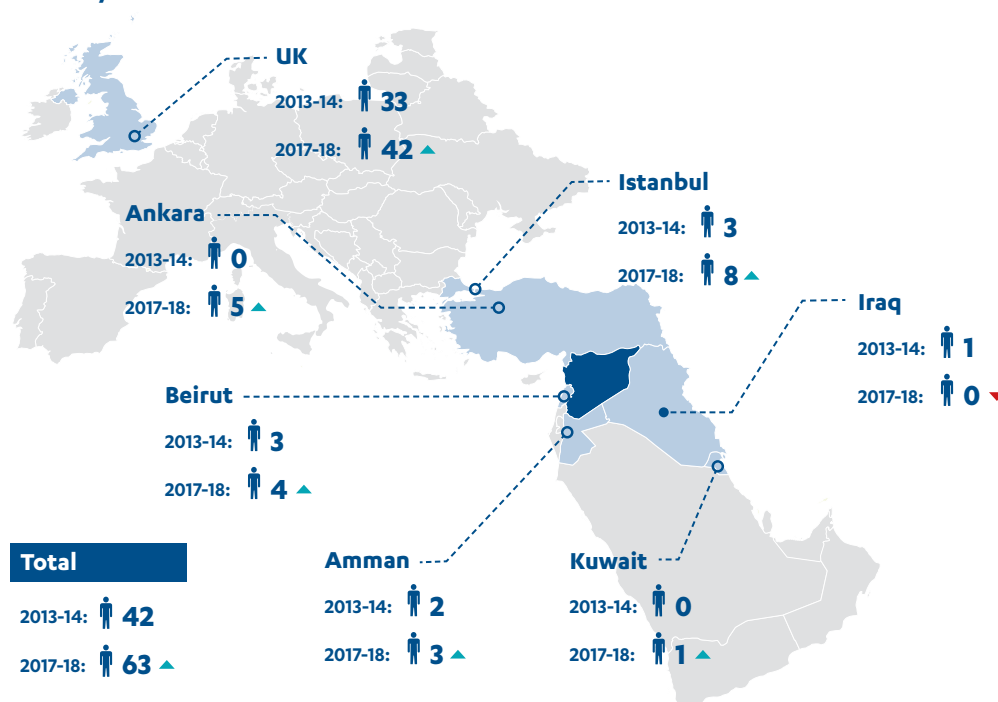
## DFID was slow to acknowledge the scale and extended nature of the crisis and resource its response appropriately

- 4.40 According to DFID staff from the early phase of the crisis, DFID's initial response was premised on the assumption, shared across the UK government and other donors, that the Syrian conflict would end quickly and in the opposition's favour. This led DFID to plan and resource its response in a short-term and iterative manner, scaling up its funding in response to the worsening crisis without putting in place the structures and systems required to manage a crisis of this scale and complexity. The practical challenges of responding to such a dynamic context also hampered longer-term planning.

- 4.41 This meant that DFID continued to use tools and modes of operating designed for emergency response. As mentioned in the previous section, DFID's initial funding was programmed through umbrella business cases without detailed design. As the crisis deepened, both the number of partners and the scale of funding increased on multiple occasions. DFID's annual spending on Syria went from £2 million via three partners in 2012 to £134 million through 23 partners just two years later (see Figure 5).
- 4.42 The Syria team was originally drawn mainly from DFID's Conflict, Humanitarian and Security Operations Team (CHASE OT) – a standing team based in the UK that supports emergency response. It was a small team, with only ten staff stationed in the region, distributed among offices in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. London-based team members were required to remotely manage delivery partners operating from multiple hubs. Travel to the region was costly and time-consuming.
- 4.43 DFID faced a shortage of experienced programme managers to support a rapidly growing operation. DFID's own reviews and our interviews with staff from the period confirm that vacancies remained unfilled for extended periods, forcing DFID to appoint relatively junior staff with no crisis response experience.<sup>28</sup> One DFID staff member described that they were “thrown into the deep end and expected to sink or swim”, leading to a stressful working environment and high turnover of staff.
- 4.44 The advisory team was also staffed mainly by humanitarian advisers, which is usual for emergency response. As the conflict became protracted, however, it called for greater diversity in the response, with programming on livelihoods, health and education. Eventually, DFID expanded the team to include expertise in these areas. However, some stakeholders are of the view that the advisory team profile in the early years of the crisis had held back the evolution of DFID's response, leaving it caught in an emergency response posture until as late as 2015.
- 4.45 The overall programme management capacity of the Syria team has significantly increased since 2014, matching the shift towards separate business cases for each major delivery partner. There are now 63 staff on the team, with a significant proportion (33%) located in the region, where they have greater access to delivery partners for support and oversight. This is a more appropriate level of resource. While much of the response is still managed remotely, DFID's increased presence in the region has alleviated some of the challenges it faced earlier in the response.

Figure 9: Evolution of DFID's staffing numbers and location<sup>29</sup>

#### DFID Syria Team



<sup>28</sup> The DFID-commissioned *Humanitarian Programming Process Evaluation*, 2015, [link](#), the internal audit report *Responding to crises*, January 2016, [link](#), and the review *DFID's approach to managing fiduciary risk in conflict-affected environments*, ICAI, August 2016, [link](#), all highlighted DFID's challenges with staffing its Syria response.

<sup>29</sup> DFID was unable to provide us with staffing numbers for the entire response, so it is not possible to show the full evolution of the staff from 2011-12. Figures in this map include a small number of Turkey and CSSF team members funded through the DFID Syria budget.

## DFID improved its capacity for partner selection and management

- 4.46 The expansion of its Syria team from 2014 onwards gave DFID the resources to invest in management tools and processes that were better suited for an operation of this scale and complexity. We saw signs of improvement in delivery partner engagement. DFID established partner management teams made up of:
- a senior responsible owner – typically a senior manager or adviser
  - a programme manager, to handle daily programme management
  - a technical adviser, who ensures that the sectoral strategy and individual programme activities are appropriate for the context and aligned with best practice.
- 4.47 Interviews with DFID and delivery partner staff confirmed that this tripartite structure, together with DFID's expanded presence in the region, had improved the level and quality of engagement with delivery partners, with better communication and faster decision-making. As well as formal quarterly meetings with partners, following submission of their quarterly reports, informal interactions are also more frequent. DFID staff informed us that they aim to build a relationship in which partners feel able to raise problems as they arise. In some instances, we saw evidence that this had resulted in improved delivery through earlier identification and solving of problems.
- 4.48 We also saw evidence of improvements in partner selection. In preparation for the shift to multi-year funding in 2016, DFID developed new guidance on proposal assessment. Proposals are evaluated against several criteria, including theory of change, value for money, financial management, risk management, due diligence, and monitoring and evaluation. Using these criteria, DFID has rejected proposals that are a poor fit with its objectives, improving the focus of the portfolio. However, we noted some instances where past performance issues or poor relationships with delivery partners were flagged in the screening processes but not addressed in the design or management of the subsequent programme. This suggests some continuing weaknesses in programme management.

## DFID has strengthened the monitoring of its portfolio

- 4.49 In the early phase, DFID's ability to oversee its portfolio was limited by an inadequate set of tools for tracking funding and results. It worked from basic Excel spreadsheets, which grew in complexity and decreased in utility as the portfolio expanded. DFID staff from the time acknowledged that they were "clunky and presented a picture that was, at best, three months behind". As the umbrella business cases came to cover multiple partners and countries, it became enormously challenging for DFID to track both individual programmes and overall results using these spreadsheets.
- 4.50 To address this, DFID Syria established a Risk and Results Team to support monitoring and analysis. Among other things, the team is responsible for tracking results across the portfolio, to assess whether they accord with DFID's objectives. To assist with this, it developed a set of standard reporting templates and a web-based reporting system, Cascade, which became fully operational in April 2017.<sup>30</sup>
- 4.51 We find that the new reporting templates and process are a clear improvement on the previous system. Except for a few multilateral organisations, delivery partners submit their quarterly and annual reports through an online portal using the same template.<sup>31</sup> This enables more timely and uniform reporting on expenditure, results (disaggregated by gender, age and recipient group) and unit costs. This system automates the aggregation of reports, which saves a great deal of staff time and gives DFID improved oversight of both individual partners and the portfolio as a whole. The Risk and Results Team produces a quarterly dashboard on results and can map activities against needs. This analysis helped one DFID adviser to identify an instance where the aid distributed by a multilateral partner did not match up with the areas of most severe need, which were DFID's priorities. DFID was able to use this information to persuade the partner to redirect their operations.

30. Syria Programme Hub (MENAD) Information Management Structure, Version 5.2, DFID, March 2017, unpublished.

31. DFID Syria Crisis Response Programme – Reporting Guidance for Partners with DFID-specific projects, internal DFID document, unpublished.



4.52 There are still gaps in the data system. A limited number of multilateral partners use their own reporting templates rather than DFID's. Additionally, there is as yet little outcome data. Overall, however, this is a significant improvement in the management of the response, which we would expect to lead to more efficiency gains over time as DFID develops a stronger evidence base for its funding decisions. However, we are concerned that it took two years for DFID to develop a basic reporting template and guidance for its partners. It was a further two years before it put in place a comprehensive suite of uniform reporting tools and systems, and the system had to be developed from scratch. Cascade and other tools from the Syrian response may be adaptable to other humanitarian responses, to enable quicker progress on portfolio management.

### **DFID has tightened its processes for managing the risks of fraud and aid diversion**

- 4.53 Syria is a very high-risk environment for fraud, corruption and diversion of aid. In May 2016, USAID announced that it was conducting a fraud investigation into its cross-border operations from Turkey.<sup>32</sup> Three of DFID's delivery partners were implicated in the investigation. Around the same time, a DFID internal audit report and an ICAI report on DFID's fiduciary risk management in conflict zones (for which Syria was a case study) both identified weaknesses in DFID Syria's risk management practices.<sup>33</sup> ICAI's report found that DFID's Syria team lacked programme management experience and was consistently underrating the level of fiduciary risk in its programmes, compared to other conflict zones. We also found that its due diligence reports were being prepared by relatively junior staff (deputy programme managers), resulting in inconsistent quality.
- 4.54 In an updated fiduciary risk management strategy from June 2016,<sup>34</sup> DFID identified a range of measures to strengthen its processes and address the weaknesses that had been identified. It introduced an enhanced due diligence framework, with more rigorous testing of partners' administrative, financial and operational processes. It appointed an accounting firm to carry out due diligence assessments of INGO partners before the awarding of multi-annual funding agreements. Where the due diligence identified gaps in partner systems that were not severe enough to exclude the partner altogether, DFID developed a joint work plan with the partner to address them, with clear milestones and targets. The delivery partners that we interviewed told us that the process was a rigorous one. One mentioned that it had helped to drive improvements not just in its Syria operations, but across its global systems.
- 4.55 DFID Syria also strengthened its due diligence process for its multilateral partners in September 2016, in alignment with DFID's central policies.<sup>35</sup> Its approach consists of an assessment conducted by the due diligence adviser and the relevant programme manager before DFID awards any new funding. The enhanced assessment includes a desk review of previous due diligence assessments, including those from other organisations. They also conduct a minimum one-day visit to each country hub and conduct interviews remotely if necessary. The due diligence report is shared with each agency and incorporated into the agency's business plan and programme delivery plan.
- 4.56 In our 2016 report on fiduciary risk management, we noted the risk that DFID's 'zero tolerance' policy on fraud and corruption might discourage partners from reporting issues in a timely way. DFID has made an effort to address this by creating positive incentives for early reporting. In our interviews with both DFID staff and delivery partners, it was frequently mentioned that DFID encourages partners to report incidents as soon as they occur. Interviewees reflected that, given the high level of risk in Syria, the expectation is not that fraud and corruption cases never occur, but that partners recognise problems early and come up with a solution.
- 4.57 Our 2016 report also identified that fiduciary risks are often most acute lower down the delivery chain, where DFID is not directly involved. DFID requires its partners to carry out due diligence assessments of their downstream partners. The partners reported receiving clear directions from DFID staff on what information they needed to collect and how to conduct the assessment. Downstream partners confirmed to us that DFID's INGO partners were providing them with support and mentoring on

32. 'Suspecting fraud, U.S. suspends some Syrian aid programs', *The Washington Post*, Louisa Loveluck, 26 July 2016, [link](#).

33. *DFID's approach to managing fiduciary risk in conflict-affected environments*, ICAI, September 2016, [link](#), *Department for International Development: Responding to crises*, National Audit Office, January 2016, [link](#).

34. *Syria Programme Hub Due Diligence Approach*, DFID, June 2016, unpublished.

35. *Syria UN Due Diligence Approach*, DFID, September 2016, unpublished.

budgeting, unit cost analysis and financial reporting. DFID also funds two of its partners to build the capacity of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, one of the main downstream partners in government-controlled areas. However, we have no evidence that multilateral partners conduct similar capacity development with their other downstream partners.

- 4.58 Since July 2017, DFID has also instituted delivery chain mapping, to improve its oversight of the delivery chain. Delivery partners are required to provide updated information on their downstream partners every quarter. In practice, we found that the information provided was frequently outdated or inaccurate. DFID reports that the information has revealed instances where several delivery partners rely heavily on the same downstream partner, which increases delivery risk. However, it is not yet clear how DFID will use this data to improve risk management.
- 4.59 Overall, we find a range of improvements in DFID's fiduciary risk management, centred on the enhanced due diligence process introduced in 2016. While the Syrian context will continue to be high-risk, these measures have increased the likelihood that instances of fraud and corruption will be detected and acted upon.

### DFID has only recently begun to respond to safeguarding challenges in Syria

- 4.60 'Safeguarding' – or the protection of aid recipients from exploitation – has become a matter of heightened public concern following revelations in February 2018 of sexual misconduct by Oxfam staff in Haiti during the response to the 2010 earthquake.<sup>36</sup>
- 4.61 There have been similar allegations regarding international humanitarian aid in Syria, dating back to June 2015.<sup>37</sup> In November 2017, a UNFPA report affirmed that the problem of exploitation at aid distribution sites remained widespread.<sup>38</sup> Vulnerable women, such as widows and divorcees, were particularly at risk of being asked for 'sexual services' in exchange for aid. In some locations, adolescent girls reported being unwilling to visit aid distribution points because the collection of aid had become stigmatised.
- 4.62 Safeguarding was not within the original scope of this review. None of the recipients we interviewed volunteered any concerns around safeguarding. This review was not designed to explore sensitive issues of this kind, which require specific interview techniques, and we did not directly assess the safeguarding approaches of DFID's delivery partners.
- 4.63 However, we did examine the terms on which DFID funds its delivery partners in Syria and found that safeguarding has not been systematically assessed as part of due diligence assessments to date. We note that:
- DFID's global due diligence framework, which is used to assess whether delivery partners have the systems and processes in place to manage UK funds, includes a component on ethical issues, but no specific reference to safeguarding. The due diligence template used for assessing INGOs and multilateral delivery partners in Syria was strengthened in 2016-17 with increased focus on compliance with sanctions and counter-terrorism rules and managing the risks of corruption and aid diversion, which were DFID's predominant concerns at the time.<sup>39</sup> Neither the template nor the due diligence reports that we examined (a limited sample) included any specific check of safeguarding policies or practices.
  - The screening tool that DFID uses to assess funding proposals from delivery partners in Syria has some relevant general principles, such as ensuring accountability to beneficiary populations and the inclusion of vulnerable groups. Partners are expected to "integrate core protection standards and principles" into the design of the programmes. There are no specific requirements for safeguarding measures.

36. *Sexual exploitation by Oxfam staff in Haiti*, DFID blog, 10 February 2018, [link](#).

37. 'Syria conflict: Women 'sexually exploited in return for aid'', *BBC News*, James Landale & Vinnie O'Dowd, 27 February 2018, [link](#).

38. *Voices from Syria 2018: Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview*, UNFPA, November 2017, pp. 58-59, [link](#).

39. *Syria Programme Hub Due Diligence Approach* – internal note, DFID, 2016, unpublished.



4.64 Safeguarding is not addressed as part of DFID's third-party monitoring system. While most delivery partners have complaints mechanisms in place, these are not adequate for managing safeguarding risks, as the victims of sexual abuse are unlikely to initiate a complaint.

4.65 DFID acknowledges that its response to date on this issue in Syria has not been adequate. It is now assessing what additional actions are required to embed safeguarding into its funding processes. It recently issued a new, shared, approach to gender in Syria, with new measures including:<sup>40</sup>

- pre-qualification checks of partners' track record in implementing safeguards in similar contexts
- the inclusion of new safeguarding questions in the due diligence framework
- reassessment of safeguarding issues in annual reviews.<sup>41</sup>

DFID stakeholders acknowledge that the challenge of sexual exploitation in humanitarian emergencies is an extremely important one, and that more work will be required to develop systems and processes robust enough to deal with it.

### Multi-year funding has provided programme management benefits to DFID and some of its partners

4.66 As part of the Grand Bargain, DFID has committed to "increase collaborative humanitarian multi-year planning and funding".<sup>42</sup> Its use of multi-year year funding agreements in Syria for the period 2016-20 predates this commitment. It is thought to offer a range of benefits, including efficiencies for both DFID and its partners. INGO delivery partners confirm that it has reduced time spent developing proposals and closing down and re-opening projects. It improves their ability to recruit and retain experienced staff. It also facilitates longer-term planning and enables them to build higher quality relationships with downstream partners and communities.

4.67 However, we found that the benefits of multi-year funding do not extend down the delivery chain to Syrian partners, many of which continue to be engaged on short-term contracts. There are sound operational reasons for this. Syrian partners mostly operate in limited geographical areas. Given the changeable nature of the conflict, DFID's delivery partners prefer to retain the flexibility to change partners and target areas at short notice. The result, however, is that Syrian partners are contracted for as little as three months at a time, hampering their ability to plan their operations and develop their organisational capacity.

#### Box 6: Localising aid delivery in Syria

The Grand Bargain includes a commitment to 'localising' humanitarian response by giving a stronger role to national and local partners in aid coordination and delivery. The intention is to build their capacity and promote support that is better attuned to the local context.<sup>43</sup> The Grand Bargain principle is that humanitarian action should be "as local as possible and as international as necessary".<sup>44</sup>

So far, in the face of a challenging context, DFID has made little progress on localisation. In the 2016-20 funding round, a few Syrian organisations submitted proposals. Only one made it through the initial selection process, but was unable to pass DFID's enhanced due diligence process. DFID has provided funding to one of its INGO delivery partners to work with this Syrian organisation to build up its capacity and address the gaps identified in the due diligence assessment. This pilot is a good start; however, to meet the localisation commitment, DFID would need to invest more effort in capacity building.

40. *A Shared UK Government Approach to Gender in Syria*, UK Government, March 2018, [link](#).

41. *Joint HMG Approach to Gender in Syria*, internal note, DFID, 27 February 2018, unpublished.

42. The Grand Bargain Goal 7, September 2016, p. 5, [link](#).

43. See the arguments surveyed in: *Localising aid: sustaining change in the public, private and civil society sectors*, ODI, March 2013, [link](#).

44. The Grand Bargain Goal 7, September 2016, p. 5, [link](#).

- 4.68 DFID's multilateral partners also questioned whether they had received any practical benefit from the shift to multi-annual funding. The change has come with additional 'earmarking', or conditions limiting the funding to particular activities or locations. Some partners believed that this has undermined any flexibility gains from multi-annual funding. We encountered a clear difference of view between those multilateral partners that receive a substantial share of their funding from the UK and those for whom it represents only a minor proportion. Among the latter group, we spoke to two organisations who expressed considerable frustration at what they described as DFID's 'micromanagement', which imposed administrative and reporting burdens that were out of proportion to the level of support. They considered this contrary to the principles in the Grand Bargain and the UK's global agreements with UN agencies.
- 4.69 As discussed above, we consider it legitimate for DFID to use its influence as a funder to encourage multilateral partners to improve their targeting of population groups in severe need. DFID had reliable evidence that the UN response was unbalanced and made an important contribution to addressing the issue. However, we also see some merit in the concerns expressed by the UN agencies. Where UK funds are mixed with those of other donors, earmarking the UK contribution to specific beneficiary groups is a purely notional exercise. It enables DFID to claim a particular subset of results for the UK without changing the overall pattern of delivery. Two of the multilateral partners told us that the additional administrative arrangements required to report separately on DFID funds were impairing their efficiency. Our view is that DFID should use earmarking of funding only where necessary – and to the extent necessary – to ensure that underserved groups are reached. We will explore DFID's approach to funding UN humanitarian agencies in more depth in a forthcoming review.<sup>45</sup>

### **DFID's third-party monitoring is not robust enough, given the scale and complexity of its operations**

- 4.70 In recent years, independent or third-party monitoring has emerged as an important tool for DFID when operating in access-constrained environments. In our review of UK aid in Somalia, we assessed a relatively mature example.<sup>46</sup> Engaging independent monitors with access to areas that donor staff cannot reach offers a means of verifying delivery, mitigating the risk of aid diversion and identifying underperformance.
- 4.71 In 2016, DFID's Syria team set up a third-party monitoring system, the Syria Independent Monitoring programme, overseen by the Risk and Results team, at a cost of £2.9 million over three years (2016-18). It provides DFID with three outputs: field monitoring reports, assessments of delivery partners' own monitoring systems and thematic research (see paragraph 4.86 below).
- 4.72 Following consultations with other DFID country teams, the Syria team opted to design the independent monitoring system to be 'partner-focused'. DFID staff told us that they found other models to be based on a lack of trust in the partners, which they considered inappropriate for their portfolio. They focused instead on facilitating learning across the portfolio and collecting feedback from recipients (albeit on a small scale), while providing only limited additional verification of delivery.
- 4.73 The independent monitors work with DFID partners to identify and address weaknesses in their monitoring processes. The partners we spoke to who had been through the process agreed that it had been helpful in identifying areas for improvement. DFID's Risk and Results team confirmed that the assessments helped them gain a better understanding of the reliability of partner results reporting.
- 4.74 Between 2016 and 2017, the monitors conducted one-day monitoring visits of 15 of DFID's delivery partners. They completed 22 visits in the first year and 29 in the second, visiting some delivery partners more than once.<sup>47</sup> DFID relies on the field monitoring component as an additional stream of information about its portfolio. However, we found several weaknesses in its design which diminish its utility as a management tool. These include:
- One-day visits allow the monitoring team to engage only ten to 12 respondents per visit, which restricts the value of the findings. One delivery partner stated that the monitors had failed to

45. *The UK's approach to funding the UN humanitarian system, A performance review, Approach paper*, ICAI, May 2018, [link](#).

46. *UK aid in a conflict-affected country: Reducing conflict and fragility in Somalia*, ICAI, July 2017, [link](#).

47. *Programme Annual Review*, DFID, January 2017, [link](#).

understand the programme in depth, leading to inaccurate results. While we were told that an annual one-day visit per project reflects DFID's usual monitoring practice in more benign contexts, this standard is well below the level of remote supervision we would expect for an operation as large and complex as the Syria crisis response.

- Until late 2017, monitors only visited communities in areas under the control of opposition groups. Although they have recently piloted visits in government-controlled areas, DFID still has very little independent oversight of its high-risk operations in government areas given the government's restrictions on access to communities and on this type of activity.
- Rather than choosing monitoring locations randomly or according to objective criteria, DFID's delivery partners provided a list of five suitable locations for a visit, from which the monitors select one. DFID's Risk and Results team explained that this reflects a relationship of trust with implementers. However, it also introduces positive bias, as delivery partners could steer the monitors away from problematic areas.

4.75 Our interviews with delivery partners call into question the extent to which the field monitoring visits have helped them strengthen their operations. Only two of the seven partners in our case studies who had participated in monitoring visits stated that they found the resulting reports useful. Syria Independent Monitoring programme's own partner satisfaction surveys, however, suggest that over 80% of partner respondents found the process useful.

4.76 We have heard from DFID that they are working to address these concerns by piloting two-day monitoring visits and monitoring activities in some government-controlled areas. They have also adjusted their sampling approach to rely less on partner input. Overall, we find that by addressing these weaknesses, DFID could derive more value from its investment in third-party monitoring. Given that this is DFID's largest-ever humanitarian operation, more intensive oversight is required, as far as the situation allows. We are not convinced that it would be at odds with maintaining relationships of trust with partners.

#### **DFID strengthened its value for money processes over the response, but their full utility has not yet been realised**

4.77 Value for money analysis did not feature significantly in the Syria response until 2014, when DFID published its 'Smart Rules', which embed value for money into the department's programme management processes. In response, the Syria team began to track cost drivers in its programme and to conduct value for money assessments in programme completion reports. For its 2016 funding round, it required INGO partners and some multilaterals to provide a detailed value for money 'offer', detailing administrative costs and the unit costs of the key commodities that they will purchase throughout their programming, such as food and shelter components. The proposals also set out how they will ensure economy, efficiency and effectiveness over the programme cycle. Most partners report on value for money and unit costs every six months. In addition, DFID has undertaken a separate value for money assessment on several multilateral partners.

4.78 Despite these efforts to strengthen value for money reporting, we were not offered any examples of DFID making use of this additional unit cost data to achieve savings or efficiencies, although a few individual delivery partners provided examples of how they had done so internally. DFID Syria appointed a commercial adviser in September 2017 to strengthen its focus on value for money.

4.79 Tracking unit costs may be sufficient for straightforward humanitarian operations. But as DFID builds up its programming on livelihoods and protection, it will need a more sophisticated approach to value for money that includes assessments of how to achieve outcomes cost-effectively.

#### **Conclusion on efficiency**

4.80 The early phase of the Syria operation was not managed efficiently. As the crisis became protracted and humanitarian operations were scaled up, DFID was slow to staff its Syria team appropriately. While the team was eventually expanded, its capacity lagged behind the increasing scale and complexity of

the response, putting it under great pressure. A more structured decision-making process about when to move beyond an emergency mode of operating, based on objective criteria, would have facilitated a more timely response.

- 4.81 However, from 2014, DFID began to move out of emergency response mode and build the capacity required to run its Syria operation more efficiently. Increased staffing levels supported improvements in partner selection and management. The Risk and Results Team developed standard monitoring tools and an online reporting system, which enhanced portfolio management. Beginning in 2016, DFID significantly improved its approach to managing fiduciary risks, including enhanced due diligence and more constructive dialogue with partners on how to protect aid funds. While safeguarding was not a focus of our review, we note that it has not been an explicit focus of DFID's funding arrangements. DFID Syria has only recently begun to introduce safeguarding requirements in a systematic way. Delivery chain mapping is helping DFID to have better oversight of delivery risks, but will need further development.
- 4.82 The shift to individual business cases and multi-annual funding brought the benefits of longer-term planning and greater flexibility to both DFID and its INGO partners. However, these benefits have not necessarily been passed on to either downstream partners or multilateral organisations. Third-party monitoring plays a useful role by giving DFID more confidence in its partners' monitoring and reporting practices. However, we find that the level of field monitoring is not commensurate with the scale and level of risk of the portfolio.
- 4.83 Overall, we find that DFID successfully built suitable management systems and capacities for its Syria operation, meriting a **green-amber** rating for efficiency, while noting that DFID needs to maintain the positive direction of travel to implement improvements effectively and address the remaining shortcomings.

## Learning: How well has DFID learned from this crisis response?

- 4.84 This section assesses how well DFID has adapted and learned from its experience in responding to the Syria crisis to improve its ability to respond effectively both in Syria and in future humanitarian crises. We explore how well DFID has invested in research and evidence collection, and whether there are structured processes in place to document lessons and share good practices.

### DFID Syria's research efforts have been limited and unsystematic

- 4.85 DFID's five-year strategic plan in Syria seeks to ensure that the response is "underpinned by evidence and pursuing continuous improvement in the response based on as robust as possible understanding of the context, needs and impact of our work".<sup>48</sup> However, DFID has not set out an explicit learning strategy for Syria and its research and learning activities to date, although relevant, have been small in scale, unsystematic and not widely shared. While the fluid nature of the conflict makes it difficult to plan too far in advance, it also makes it important to use the available learning resources in a targeted way.
- 4.86 We noted two types of research and evidence-collection activity. First, the Syria Independent Monitoring programme (see paragraph 4.71) has a limited budget to produce thematic research reports. To guide this research, in 2017 the Risk and Results Team produced for the first time an analysis of evidence gaps in several sectors, including livelihoods, health, education and cash transfers, and identified some useful research questions.<sup>49</sup> At the time of our assessment, the programme had completed one research report, on the use of mobile technology, and was undertaking two more. One examines factors that underpin local markets in Idlib and Hassekah, while the other is looking at the targeting of healthcare workers by combatants.
- 4.87 Syria Independent Monitoring staff conducted a workshop on its first research output, which some delivery partners attended, but this was not part of an overall dissemination strategy. In our interviews, only two delivery partner staff members mentioned the workshop when asked to provide examples

48. *Syria 5-Year Strategic Plan*, DFID, 2016, unpublished.

49. *Key Evidence Questions*, DFID, 2017, unpublished.

of learning across the portfolio. Interviews with staff from DFID and the Syria Independent Monitoring team indicated that no dissemination or learning processes were planned for the two ongoing research products. DFID informed us subsequently that the Syria Independent Monitoring team had held dissemination events on the market drivers research and that similar events are planned for the research on health workers.

- 4.88 DFID has undertaken some internal research and commissioned work from research organisations and think tanks. The products include a December 2016 DFID Middle East and North Africa Division report examining the use of social media for research, monitoring and evaluation in the Middle East, using the World Food Programme as a case study. In 2017, DFID funded the Brookings Institution to prepare a series of papers focusing on transition and stabilisation programming, while the International Committee on Transitional Justice researched Syrian refugees in Lebanon. A member of DFID's Disability Team conducted an investigation in April 2017 that highlighted areas where DFID could better support people with disabilities in Syria. None of these research outputs were mentioned in interviews, raising doubts about the uptake and use of their findings. DFID staff indicated in one case that the sensitive nature of the research meant they did not disseminate it widely. The absence of plans for disseminating research and learning suggests that DFID Syria is not getting the best value from its research investments, as its uptake and use across the team and delivery partners appears limited.
- 4.89 We did not find any examples of DFID programme evaluations carried out before 2016. We identified several evaluations of multilateral delivery partners' work between 2014 and 2016. Most were commissioned and published by the organisations themselves, while one was an external review of the value for money offered by multilaterals. Under its current business cases, DFID now requires delivery partners to conduct mid-term and final evaluations. It has produced an evaluation guidance note and provides delivery partners with in-person briefings from the Risk and Results Team to explain it. This is an improvement that will give DFID much greater insight into outcomes from its programmes, particularly in more complex areas such as protection and livelihoods.

### Feedback from recipients has led to some concrete operational improvements

- 4.90 Soliciting feedback from aid recipients is important for ensuring that humanitarian assistance is relevant to their needs and the local context. Involving people in decisions about the support gives them greater dignity and helps to build their resilience. The Grand Bargain signatories have therefore committed to "include people receiving aid in making the decisions which affect their lives".<sup>50</sup> Real-time feedback also supports learning and adaptation within programmes. DFID has encouraged delivery partners to expand their use of feedback and began requiring partners to report on feedback-related targets in their quarterly reporting requirements from 2016.
- 4.91 We found that these mechanisms are not used consistently across the portfolio. Some partners had well-established processes while others had only recently introduced them. Most of DFID's delivery partners work remotely through downstream partners, which therefore manage the feedback mechanisms. As a result, DFID and its delivery partners have limited oversight and control over the process. One stakeholder mentioned the risk that downstream partners might conceal negative feedback.
- 4.92 Within our review sample, the mechanisms in place were primarily complaint mechanisms, where aid recipients are left to initiate the feedback. Several partners provide complaint boxes during the aid delivery process. A few are more sophisticated, using WhatsApp chat groups and hotlines, although their utility depends on internet and phone access, which is patchy. From our interviews with recipients in Syria, 11% had provided feedback on the assistance they received, with significant variations across the governorates and sectors (see Figure 10).

50. The Grand Bargain Goal 6, September 2016, [link](#).

- 4.93 Partners report receiving feedback on the relevance of items in relief kits and requests to add or remove people from beneficiary lists. They have worked to address such issues quickly and adapt accordingly. Where they receive requests for assistance from members of the public who do not meet the vulnerability criteria, they respond with information about the selection process.
- 4.94 While feedback mechanisms have led to the resolution of delivery issues as they arose, there is no evidence to suggest that partners use this information to inform wider programme design. Nor are DFID or its delivery partners using these mechanisms to support wider learning across the portfolio. The current type and level of engagement with the feedback from aid recipients therefore falls short of the Grand Bargain objective of including aid recipients in decision-making about the aid they receive.

#### DFID has adapted in response to operational challenges, but innovation is constrained by contextual factors

- 4.95 One of our sub-questions for this review was to assess how innovative DFID has been in its Syria humanitarian response. We found many examples of innovation at the management level, which are described in the previous section. Tools such as the Cascade online reporting system and related uniform reporting templates are themselves innovative and worthy of replication in future crises. DFID also established an Emergency Response Mechanism, which helped it respond quickly to spikes in need due to shifts in the conflict or new crises (see paragraph 4.13).
- 4.96 We saw less evidence of innovation in programming. DFID's thinking on innovation is articulated in its 2014-17 Syria humanitarian strategy, which calls for "[a] response that tests innovative and new models of delivery". DFID is putting mechanisms in place to build innovation into its Syria portfolio more strategically.<sup>52</sup> An internal document from April 2017 outlines plans to invest in innovation to improve targeting, achieve the Grand Bargain commitments and address the needs of women and girls.<sup>53</sup>
- 4.97 DFID allocated £8 million of its Syria budget in 2017 to innovation spend.<sup>54</sup> It also introduced 'innovation' as an assessment criterion for funding

#### Figure 10: Use of feedback mechanisms

Percentage (%) of respondents who answered **YES** to the question: *Have you ever provided feedback about the assistance you received?*

**Total (35/329 respondents)<sup>51</sup>**

**11%**

**Female (13/155)**

**8%**

**Male (22/174)**

**13%**

##### Breakdown by governorate

**Aleppo (24/106 respondents)**

**23%**

**Der'a (4/64 respondents)**

**6%**

**Idlib (7/159 respondents)**

**4%**

##### Breakdown by sector

**Child protection (6/18)**

**33%**

**Agriculture (3/15)**

**20%**

**Livelihood (4/31)**

**13%**

**Food (13/107)**

**12%**

**Health (7/111)**

**6%**

**WASH (2/33)**

**6%**

**Non-food items (0/14)**

**0%**

##### Breakdown by partner

**INGO 1 (18/100)**

**18%**

**INGO 2 (3/23)**

**13%**

**UNICEF (8/70)**

**11%**

**WHO (4/69)**

**6%**

**WFP (2/67)**

**3%**

51. One blank response not included in the calculation.

52. Interview with DFID Syria humanitarian adviser.

53. *Operationalising the strategy* – note, DFID Syria, April 2017, unpublished.

54. *Operationalising the strategy* – note, DFID Syria, April 2017, unpublished.



proposals. The DFID Syria team now includes a humanitarian adviser responsible for mainstreaming innovation across the Syria response. Nonetheless, our interviews with DFID staff and delivery partners suggested a lack of shared understanding of what innovation meant in the Syrian context. Some of the options proposed – such as the use of e-vouchers and cash – are no longer considered particularly innovative in the humanitarian sector. Ideas of technology-based innovations, such as the use of unmanned air vehicles to deliver aid to besieged areas, proved impractical in the Syrian context.<sup>55</sup> As a result, most of the proposed innovations are of a procedural nature.

- 4.98 We acknowledge that the acutely difficult circumstances that DFID encountered in Syria have not lent themselves to innovative approaches. Innovations in delivery and technology that might work well in other contexts are constrained by the lack of widespread mobile network and internet coverage. In an ongoing conflict, asking community members to use mobile phones or cameras to monitor aid delivery may endanger their security. Sanctions, anti-terrorism laws and an unregulated informal cash transfer system limit innovation in cash-based programming. These circumstances suggest that focusing on improving basic delivery was a legitimate choice. However, as the situation evolves, we would expect to see a clearer articulation of DFID's approach to innovation.

### DFID lacks a structured approach to sharing learning from Syria

- 4.99 DFID has taken some steps to encourage knowledge sharing at the central level between the Syria team and other teams working in crisis areas. These include working groups and bilateral interactions on specific aspects of the response. DFID Syria staff participate in the Five Crises Working Group, which is a forum established in 2017 that facilitates knowledge sharing between DFID teams working on the five most urgent humanitarian crises.<sup>56</sup> DFID Nigeria is also working with the Syria Risk and Results Team to adapt the Cascade system. There is knowledge sharing within different practice groups too: CHASE's humanitarian cadre and Protracted Crisis Hub on specific issues, the statistics practice group and members of the Risk and Results Team, and some technical advisers in their relevant sectors.
- 4.100 We found, however, that there has been no structured uptake at the central level of practical solutions, tools and approaches developed during DFID's Syria response. In 2015, DFID commissioned a process evaluation of its Syria response and underwent an audit by the National Audit Office during the first phase of the response in 2015. Since then, there is no evidence that DFID has conducted similar exercises that would capture the improvements in practice.
- 4.101 CHASE's Protracted Crisis Hub recently produced a discussion paper on protracted crisis, to which the Syria team contributed – although there is little reference to the Syrian experience in the report.<sup>57</sup> The paper proposes a set of principles that would have been relevant and useful to the Syrian response, including:
- Assume that conflicts will become protracted and plan accordingly.
  - Programme through development channels where possible, and through humanitarian ones only where necessary.
  - Support systems, institutions and markets, not just individuals.
  - Plan humanitarian responses that enable transition to long-term approaches (such as through the use of cash, to form the basis for social protection systems).
  - Establish multi-disciplinary teams from the outset of a crisis.
- 4.102 While the Syria crisis has been uniquely challenging in many respects, it is likely that future humanitarian responses will occur in similarly complex environments. Drawing on the Syria experience, it would be useful for DFID to develop these principles into a set of doctrines, processes and tools for managing its response to complex emergencies.
- 4.103 The DFID Syria team has expended significant human and financial resources to develop a structure

<sup>55.</sup> DFID led an effort to pilot the use of UAVs in besieged areas. The initiative did not move forward due to lack of authorisation from the Jordanian authorities and the inability to fly into spaces controlled by some armed groups.

<sup>56.</sup> These are Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

<sup>57.</sup> *Delivering differently in Protracted Conflict and Refugee Crises: A Discussion paper by DFID's Protracted Crises Hub*, DFID, October 2017, unpublished.

and mechanisms that enable it to manage a complex response across operational hubs in multiple countries. DFID needs to ensure at a central level that this institutional memory is captured and informs its approach to future crises.

### Conclusion on learning

4.104 Unlike DFID's evolution in other aspects of its response, its engagement with learning, both within the Syria team and at a central level, has remained small-scale and largely ad hoc, and has not been commensurate with the scale or difficulty of the response. There is some evidence that feedback from recipients, one element of adaption and learning, has informed immediate operational delivery, but it has not contributed to wider learning. DFID's limited research activities are not well disseminated. There has been limited use of programme evaluation, although this has now been made a requirement in DFID's more recent programmes. While DFID Syria has adapted at a managerial level throughout the response, we have little assurance that DFID at a central level has internalised the lessons to inform future responses. We therefore give DFID an **amber-red** rating for learning.



# 5 Conclusions & recommendations

## Conclusions

- 5.1 We have rated DFID's humanitarian response in Syria an overall **green-amber** in recognition of the work it has done to overcome practical challenges and constraints and ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches millions of people in need. We find that DFID made significant investment, in collaboration with other humanitarian actors, in strengthening needs assessment and aid coordination processes. It built up an independent delivery capacity, enabling it to target communities in severe need across the territory. This resulted in substantial improvements in the effectiveness of the response over the review period.
- 5.2 DFID took some time to adjust to the complexity and nature of the Syria crisis. Once it did, it adapted its management processes and tools to meet the significant challenges of delivering its largest-ever humanitarian response in an acutely difficult operating context. However, there remain some areas where its management systems still need improvement.
- 5.3 While DFID Syria has adapted its response to overcome specific challenges, we find that, after several years, learning processes across the portfolio remain underdeveloped. We also find little evidence that DFID has internalised the lessons and best practice from the Syria response at the central level, to enable it to address similar crises in the future.
- 5.4 The following recommendations are intended to address the gaps this review identified, with the aim to strengthen the Syrian response and inform future efforts.

## Recommendations for the Syria operation

**Recommendation 1:** As conditions allow, DFID Syria should prioritise livelihoods programming and supporting local markets, to strengthen community self-reliance.

### Problem statements

- DFID has been slow to move from emergency assistance to livelihoods support.
- Some of DFID's delivery partners need encouragement and support to develop their knowledge and expertise on livelihoods programming.
- Aid recipients and local leaders indicate a desire for more livelihoods programming.

**Recommendation 2:** DFID Syria should strengthen its third-party monitoring approach to provide a higher level of independent verification of aid delivery, and continue to explore ways of extending it into government-controlled areas.

### Problem statements

- The current third-party monitoring approach is centred on mutual learning but elements of the design lack sufficient focus on assurance and accountability, given the scale and level of risk in the Syria operations.
- The monitoring system relies heavily on partners for the selection of communities for monitoring visits, which introduces the possibility of bias.
- Monitoring visits only last for one day, allowing the monitors to interview only ten to 12 people and limiting the information collected.
- Until recently, monitoring visits were only in opposition-controlled areas. Monitoring in government-controlled areas has been limited by practical and security-related constraints.

**Recommendation 3:** DFID Syria should support and encourage its partners to expand their community consultation and feedback processes and ensure that community input informs learning and the design of future humanitarian interventions.

#### Problem statements

- The complaints mechanisms in current projects are necessary and useful but are not adequate to meet DFID's commitment to greater participation of and accountability to affected populations in its humanitarian support.
- Feedback from communities is not being collated and analysed to inform learning and the design of new activities.

**Recommendation 4:** DFID Syria should identify ways to support the capacity development of Syrian non-governmental organisations to enable them to take on a more direct role in the humanitarian response.

#### Problem statements

- DFID does not yet directly support Syrian partners, despite Grand Bargain commitments to do so.
- Syrian organisations submitted proposals for the latest round of funding; only one was selected, but it did not pass DFID's due diligence process.
- Nearly all of the Syrian partners have been established since the beginning of the crisis; they are unfamiliar with donor requirements and policies and have limited administrative capacity.
- While some delivery partners are helping to build the capacity of their downstream partners, short contract cycles do not facilitate their organisational development.

**Recommendation 5:** DFID Syria should develop a dynamic research and learning strategy that includes an assessment of learning needs across the international humanitarian response in Syria and a dissemination strategy.

#### Problem statements

- DFID's Syria-related research activities are not guided by an overarching strategy.
- Dissemination activities for research activities are limited to one-off events and are not part of a cross-portfolio learning process.

### Recommendations for future operations

**Recommendation 6:** DFID should ensure that lessons and best practice from the Syria response are collected and documented, and used to inform both ongoing and future crisis responses.

#### Problem statements

- Learning from the Syria team's experience largely involves individual engagement and is not systematised or centrally driven.
- Learning from forums like the Five Crises Working Group does not appear to be formalised and widely available, particularly to incoming team members.
- While CHASE leads on thematic learning, DFID lacks a central repository for lessons learned on programme and portfolio management in crisis situations.

**Recommendation 7:** In complex crises, DFID should plan for the possibility of lengthy engagement from an early stage, with trigger points to guide decisions on when to move beyond emergency funding instruments and staffing arrangements.

#### **Problem statements**

- DFID's Syria response suffered from the lack of a clear doctrine for how to engage in complex crises that are likely to be protracted in nature, including clear decision points for when to move beyond short-term funding instruments and staffing arrangements.
- DFID's planning for the Syrian response remained on an emergency footing even after the crisis had become protracted.
- In the early phase of the response, DFID's Syria team was understaffed and lacked cross-disciplinary advisory support.

**Recommendation 8:** Building on DFID Syria's reporting system, DFID should invest in reporting and data management systems that can be readily adapted to complex humanitarian operations.

#### **Problem statements**

- The Syria experience suggests that DFID lacks a set of data management and reporting tools that can be readily adapted to the needs of complex humanitarian operations.
- While there is some exchange of experience between DFID country offices, tools such as Cascade and associated reporting templates are not in standard use across the department.

# Annex 1 List and description of delivery partner case studies

The following table contains details of the organisations included in our review as delivery partner case studies. The four INGO partners have been anonymised for security reasons. Budget figures represent DFID funding for assistance within Syria that had been publicly announced by UK ministers at the time of this review. For details of our sampling approach, see our approach paper: [link](#).

Partner	Budget	Years	Type of Programming
INGO 1	£58.9 million	2014-20	Cash, Food, Livelihoods, Non-food items (NFI), Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)
Outputs (2016-20)		Expected Outcome and Impact (2016-20)	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emergency food assistance is provided to conflict-affected populations.</li> <li>NFI – relief packages (containing NFI) are provided to conflict-affected populations.</li> <li>Protection – staff, partners and communities increase their awareness of core protection principles, standards and services available.</li> <li>Livelihoods – as economic systems are strengthened, targeted vulnerable individuals are provided with agricultural and livelihoods support.</li> <li>Capacity building – local and international organisations have better information and analysis to support a coordinated, locally led 'Whole of Syria' response.</li> </ol>		<p><b>Outcome:</b> Conflict-affected individuals, households, communities, local partners and economic systems have strengthened capacity to cope with shocks and effects of conflict and are less exposed to harm as a result of life-saving assistance.</p> <p><b>Impact:</b> Lives saved, civilians protected, suffering reduced and resilience built.</p>	
Partner	Budget	Years	Type of Programming
INGO 2	£55.9 million	2012-20	Health, Livelihoods, Protection
Outputs (2016-20)		Expected Outcome and Impact (2016-20)	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conflict-affected people within Syria access immediate protection services with a particular emphasis on the specific needs of children, adolescent girls and women.</li> <li>Conflict-affected people within Syria access resources to cover basic needs in a manner that supports local markets, resilience and dignity.</li> <li>Conflict-affected people within Syria access health services, with an emphasis on supporting primary and reproductive health delivery and structures.</li> <li>Conflict-affected children in Syria access integration education/No Lost Generation Initiative services.</li> </ol>		<p><b>Outcome:</b> Conflict-affected individuals and institutions in Syria are better prepared to cope with and mitigate the risk of shock.</p> <p><b>Impact:</b> Lives saved, civilians protected, suffering reduced and resilience built.</p>	
Partner	Budget	Years	Type of Programming
INGO 3	£27.9 million	2014-20	Livelihoods, NFI, Protection, Shelter, WASH
Outputs (2016-20)		Expected Outcome and Impact (2016-20)	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provision of NFI to displaced and conflict-affected individuals to help them meet some of their basic needs, including during winter.</li> <li>Rehabilitation of targeted communal shelters and upgrades to unfinished buildings.</li> </ol>		<p><b>Outcome:</b> To provide life-saving protection and enhancement of the capabilities of conflict-affected populations to prevent and mitigate shocks and stresses and enhance self-reliance.</p> <p><b>Impact:</b> Lives saved, civilians protected, suffering reduced and resilience built.</p>	

3.	Provision of protection-focused support and community services to vulnerable individuals, including psychosocial support, counselling and legal assistance.		
4.	Rehabilitation of damaged schools and provision of education support to teachers and vulnerable children.		
5.	Provision of livelihoods-focused support to vulnerable adults and youth, including training, work placements and start-up grants.		
6.	Delivery of technical and operational capacity-building packages to local partners.		
7.	Monitoring and evaluation activities conducted and learning incorporated into the implementation of the programme.		
Partner	Budget	Years	Type of Programming
INGO 4	£34 million	2012-20	Protection
Outputs (2015-17)		Expected Outcome and Impact (2015-17)	
1.	Capacity building of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.	<b>Outcome:</b> Critical humanitarian needs alleviated among conflict-affected Syrians. <b>Impact:</b> The most urgent humanitarian needs of affected populations met, lives saved, dignity maintained and livelihoods protected.	
2.	Food assistance to meet emergency needs of vulnerable populations.		
3.	Winter assistance for vulnerable populations.		
4.	Protection and relief mandate fulfilled.		
Partner	Budget	Years	Type of Programming
UNICEF	£101.1 million	2012-17	Education, Health, NFI, Nutrition, Protection, Sectoral Coordination, Technical Assistance, WASH
Outputs (2015-16)		Expected Outcome and Impact (2015-16)	
1.	Essential services provided in Syria.	<b>Outcome:</b> Critical humanitarian needs alleviated among conflict-affected persons. <b>Impact:</b> Lives saved, suffering reduced, dignity maintained and resilience promoted.	
Partner	Budget	Years	Type of Programming
WFP	£174.7 million	2012-20	Food, Livelihoods, Nutrition, Resilience
Outputs (2016-20)		Expected Outcome and Impact (2016-20)	
1.	5.5 million vulnerable Syrians provided with general food assistance.	<b>Outcome:</b> Critical food needs alleviated among conflict-affected individuals in Syria. <b>Impact:</b> Lives saved, civilians protected, suffering reduced and resilience built.	
2.	375,000 malnourished children and pregnant and lactating women provided with food assistance and food vouchers.		
3.	840,000 people provided with livelihood support, such as training and food for participating in the rehabilitation and creation of community and public infrastructure.		
Partner	Budget	Years	Type of Programming
WHO	£37.1 million	2015-20	Health
Outputs (2016-20)		Expected Outcome and Impact (2016-20)	
1.	Improved primary health care and outreach health services.	<b>Outcome:</b> Improved access to and availability of health services for the Syrian population.	

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Secondary care services strengthened.</li> <li>3. Early Warning, Alert and Response System/Network for improved public health surveillance/monitoring priority public health diseases is strengthened.</li> <li>4. The health information system for emergency for regular, timely and accurate collection and dissemination of data is further strengthened.</li> <li>5. Ameliorated service provision to people in need of mental health and psychosocial services.</li> <li>6. Strengthen the level of preparedness for and management of trauma including physical rehabilitation.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Impact:</b> Lives saved, civilians protected, suffering reduced and resilience built.</p>
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