

Syria co-opting aid to entrench repressive policies: Report

Tuesday 2 July 2019, by [GADZO Mersiha](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [IBRAHIM Arwa](#) (Date first published: 28 June 2019).

Government's aid and reconstruction policies used to punish perceived opponents and reward supporters, HRW says.

The Syrian government is co-opting humanitarian aid and reconstruction assistance to entrench its repressive policies, Human Rights Watch ([HRW](#)) has said in a new [report](#).

Now that [Syria](#) is heading into a post-war phase - with the exception of rebel-controlled Idlib region - humanitarian and reconstruction needs for Syrians are immense.

However, because of the Syrian government's policies, distribution of humanitarian aid and reconstruction funds has shown to be based on political opinion, according to HRW's report, *Rigging the System*, that was published on Friday.

The New York-based rights group found the government restricts access of humanitarian organisations to communities in need of aid, approves aid projects selectively, and imposes requirements on groups to partner with security-vetted local actors.

This ensures aid is "siphoned through the abusive state apparatus to punish civilian populations it perceives as opponents, and reward those it perceives as loyal or who can serve its interests", the report said.

As aid organisations have little leverage in negotiating, they often accede to the government's demands for fear of losing access, compromising their ability to serve people in need.

Those faced with the task of reconstructing Syria face similar problems as they are restricted from accessing certain areas and are required to partner with individuals or organisations implicated in the abuse.

The new report is based on 33 interviews with current and former humanitarian workers, independent experts, 12 members of affected communities, three former Syrian government officials and two business professionals working in Syria.

"The state policies put in place make it incredibly easy for the Syrian government to co-opt almost all of the aid, with very little oversight and ability to resist this," Sara Kayyali, Syria researcher for HRW, told Al Jazeera.

"The policies essentially give the Syrian government a lot of power to determine who gets what aid, when and where. The Syrian government has used these powers, expanded them, and employed them in an abusive manner."

Punishing public opinion by denying projects

Humanitarian organisations require submitting projects to the government for approval, which often leads to a process of negotiations and failed projects.

“In Syria, you barter with the government for projects, everyone knows this,” an aid agency official told HRW.

“I say I will rehabilitate schools in this area. The government comes back and says how about these areas instead? Back and forth, until I commit to their areas to get approval for my projects.”

Interviewees told HRW aid is diverted from areas previously held by anti-government groups to areas where beneficiaries are considered loyal to the government.

For instance, Douma and Harasta - both towns in eastern Ghouta - have been treated differently in the distribution of aid and rehabilitation.

As of October 2018, Harasta had 629 people in need of aid, 384 of whom were internally displaced, according to the United Nations Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) 2019 data.

Douma has a population of 94,000 in need of aid, of whom at least 8,500 are internally displaced.

Yet Douma has only received a fraction of the aid that Harasta gets since the latter has a population that has mostly returned from pro-government areas, while in Douma most of the residents lived under Jaish al-Islam, an anti-government group, and refused to leave when evacuations occurred.

Visitors to Douma said there were no clear signs of aid aside from two ICRC-branded water tanks.

Two other interviewees told HRW between May and September 2018 they could not provide water and sanitation rehabilitation, nor rebuild a school since the areas in question were previously held by anti-government armed groups.

Ties to rights abusers

Humanitarians also expressed concern about the interference of security services, which compromises their work.

Syrian intelligence can make decisions on where aid is distributed, access beneficiary lists, confiscate aid supplies, and monitor implementation of projects - despite committing widespread rights abuses, including arbitrary detentions, torture, and killings.

Some local partners approved by the government have ties to rights abusers.

For instance, the UN's refugee agency (UNHCR) partnered with Syria's Ministry of Interior to raise public awareness about civil documentation and registration.

But the ministry was directly involved in the repression of civilians in 2011-2012 and was sanctioned by the European Union. It has also confiscated civil documentation of refugees and blocked internally displaced people from returning to their homes.

However, the reason why humanitarian groups partner with those with ties to abusive actors is because if they want to obtain access or implement projects they have no choice, the report noted.

Syria analyst Emma Beals told Al Jazeera the UN has a responsibility to ensure relief is delivered in full respect of humanitarian principles.

“This clearly isn’t happening so there’s a tension between these roles. The onus is on the UN to ensure they are able to do their work in line with the principles they are required to follow,” Beals said.

Rights abuse through urban planning

The government also passed several urban planning laws that allow it to create redevelopment zones and appropriate private property without due process, contravening international law, HRW found.

Additionally, the government is unlawfully preventing displaced residents from former anti-government areas from returning.

Seven Syrians told HRW they or their relatives were unable to return to their homes in 2018 in Darayya and Qaboun - two towns in the Damascus countryside announced as part of redevelopment zones.

They said in Darayya, local authorities imposed town-wide restrictions on access. In Qaboun, the government either restricted access to their neighbourhoods or demolished their property.

Since the government took over al-Qussayr in 2013, hundreds of displaced people have attempted to return, but state authorities blocked them, effectively stripping them of their property rights.

Returnees have also been blocked in Wadi Barada, parts of Douma, and Hamouriyeh in eastern Ghouta. In none of these cases did the government provide an explanation as to why access to the areas was restricted.

Despite this, humanitarian organisations and UN agencies are carrying out infrastructure rehabilitation and humanitarian projects in areas where the government is preventing residents from returning.

Due diligence

Donors must ensure they are not complicit in the government’s [human rights](#) violations, the report warned.

It recommended establishing a screening mechanism that would ensure human rights criteria are met and for donors to use their leverage to press the Syrian government to remove restrictions on aid and access.

“We know these aid organisations are operating in a very high-risk and difficult environment, but the answer is for them to be honest about the obstacles they are facing and to support the creation of a clear mechanism [to avoid] subjecting them to negotiations,” Kayyali said.

With all of the concerns that have been an “open secret” within the humanitarian community now made public, Beals said it’s difficult to see how the issues could be further ignored.

Beals suggested staff should be brought out of Damascus if they are unable to access information to conduct due diligence on partners, population and programming because of government restrictions.

Humanitarian organisations should also be working more closely to create a standardised mechanism but to date, this kind of collaboration has been absent, Beals told Al Jazeera.

“In fact, the competition between organisations has contributed to these problems as any

organisation that attempts to reform soon finds themselves thrown under the bus by another that is willing to ingratiate themselves to the government as they jostle for access and funding.

“In this respect, there is a lot more organisations could be doing to improve the situation, but they need to be willing to do so. With a bit of luck, this report will leave them no choice.”

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