



ENSURING CONTEXTUAL AWARENESS AND FLEXIBLE PARTNERSHIP IN SOUTH AND CENTRAL SYRIA

CASE IN BRIEF

The South and Central Syria program supports local NGOs and community-based organizations that respond to changing humanitarian needs in the midst of a war. Implemented by Mercy Corps with funding from three donors, the program leverages an in-house team of conflict analysts to inform response activities and forecast future needs. Critical to adaptive management have been the program's flexible compliance procedures to match partner capacity, and the autonomy to evolve team structure as needed. Donor approval processes remain a challenge. Early isolation from Mercy Corps' headquarters hampered access to internal support and learning from other programs, but is being addressed as the program moves forward.

BACKGROUND

CONTEXT

The humanitarian consequences of the Syrian war have been far-reaching. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates there are 13.5 million people in need of assistance, including 4.8 million refugees and 6.6 million displaced within Syria. Now in its sixth year, the war has had a dramatic effect on service provision, with health facilities, schools, and other essential services across the country closed or operating at reduced capacity. Spiraling food and fuel prices, a deep economic recession, sanctions, fluctuating national currency, and disrupted markets have worsened vulnerability. The use of sieges – cutting civilian populations off from food and humanitarian assistance – by the Syrian government and other forces have exacerbated malnutrition and the lack of access to essential services.

In response to the war, nascent civil society and community-based organizations have had to rapidly develop the capacity to partner with international NGOs to deliver aid. However, their staff face a constant threat of being detained, tortured, or killed by the government or other parties to the conflict who seek to control delivery of aid and services. Receiving funds from international partners is further complicated by the financial infrastructure, embargoes on Syria, counterterrorism regulations, and the regulations of the surrounding countries where many international NGOs base their relief operations.

PROGRAM

Mercy Corps maintained a presence in Damascus until 2014, when it moved its operational base outside Syria. Since then, the South and Central Syria (SCS) program has worked with

partners inside Syria to provide food assistance; non-food items (NFIs); water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); livelihoods support; and limited activities in child protection and education.

The SCS program has always taken a partner-led approach, whereby partners propose projects based on their local knowledge of needs and what is possible. However, certain aspects of this approach have evolved over time. Mercy Corps has moved from working largely through umbrella groups and international NGOs that were still able to work within Syria to working more directly through smaller community-based organizations. Current program partners range from relatively well established local NGOs to more informal networks of activists and volunteers. In addition, the SCS team has come to recognize that many partners do not consider methods beyond in-kind distributions. Mercy Corps has started to offer more strategic guidance to help partners think through alternative approaches, such as livelihoods activities and pre-positioning.



You can't cut short this process as it's all based on relationships and trust. We couldn't do it without the partners. They have access and understand the communities. Partnership is not just a thing. It's the thing."

Humanitarian Director

In 2015, the SCS program reached 847,179 people in some of Syria's hardest to reach areas. It is funded by grants from the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the US

Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), and Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development (DFATD—now called Global Affairs Canada).¹

ADAPTIVE CAPABILITIES AND ENABLERS



INTERNAL CAPACITY TO PROVIDE CONTEXT ANALYSIS AND FORECASTING

The SCS program has deliberately built its internal capacity to understand the context, analyze conflict dynamics, and forecast future events in order to support a more agile and strategic response. The core of this capacity is a five-person “Humanitarian Access Team”, which draws on informant networks within Syria, social media reports, the knowledge of Syrian staff on the team, observations of implementing partners, and experience gained over the last two years of analyzing the Syrian conflict. The team invests heavily in report writing, mapping skills, and a website for information sharing, though the use of their information hinges more on personal connections and a team that work closely together.



Within two months of the Humanitarian Access Team, I learned more about Syria than I knew in the whole year before.”

Program Director

This team's analysis has supported a shift away from the reactive model typical of humanitarian aid, toward a more anticipatory approach that prepares for likely scenarios. This has been particularly important as the number and severity of sieges has increased, with humanitarian aid often arriving too late. Forecasting has allowed the SCS program to pre-position food baskets while access is still possible, ensuring aid is ready for release when certain triggers occur.

Having a detailed understanding of the Syrian context also makes the SCS program a better partner. It increases the feasibility of the requests Mercy Corps makes of partners and improves communication. The team has also been able to offer more strategic advice to partners, exploring alternatives to in-kind assistance (food baskets or NFIs) such as providing vouchers or supporting localized livelihoods strategies alongside emergency activities.

In a striking example, the Humanitarian Access Team's knowledge of a local court system in northern Homs helped the SCS program advise a local partner who was encountering problems with armed groups stopping shipments of aid. The partner had sought extra funding to hire armed security for their distributions – a request which Mercy Corps felt could further fuel a cycle of violence. Knowing that the local court system was fairly well-functioning and respected by

communities, Mercy Corps suggested that the partner raise the issue with the court and ask for mediation support. Within a week, the court came down in favor of the partner and aid reached the besieged area.



Partners don't have the ability to analyze and forecast these things, even if they have the information. We're shifting a bit more to giving them a framework for what they should be doing. It will always be owned by them, but shifting in a good way where we're actually giving a bit of advice.”

Program Director

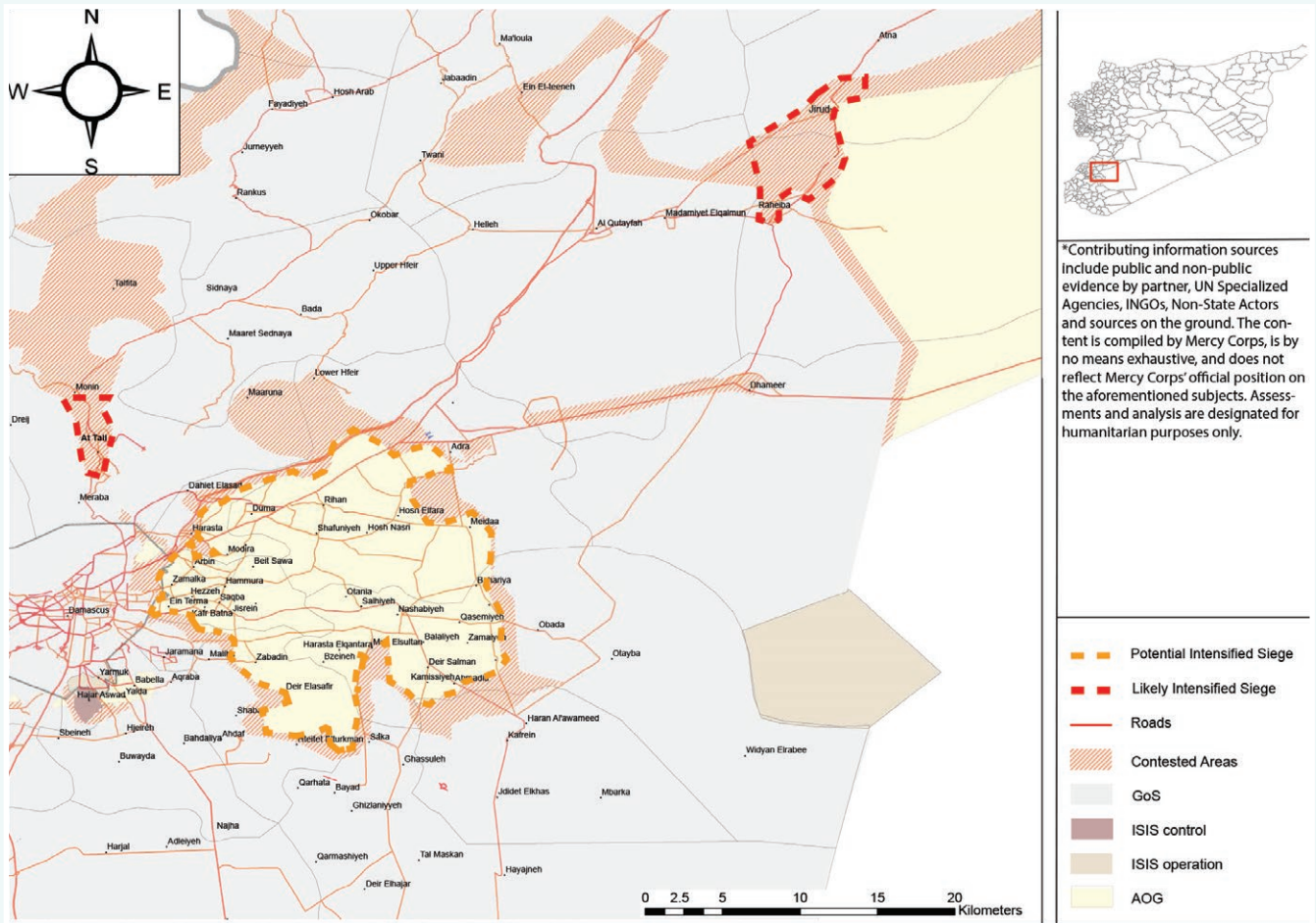
The capacity for this contextual awareness took a long time to develop. The Humanitarian Access Team was initially formed as a security team. It was given space to learn during its first six months, developing an in-depth understanding of the dynamics in Syria and producing conflict analyses. However, it was not expected to provide any value for programmatic decision making during this period. Separated from program activities, the team struggled to understand programs and present information whose form or content could be easily used by the program team.

Mercy Corps also struggled with large amounts of potentially unreliable data. Vast amounts of secondary information on humanitarian needs in Syria proved a huge burden for information management and analysis. Investments made in analyzing this information have proven to have limited returns: the data is often too late, inaccurate, or simply irrelevant for programmatic decisions. Having information available but not transformed into actionable analysis is a missed opportunity.

Since late 2015, the products of the Humanitarian Access Team have become much more usable, driven by a new leader of the SCS program who emphasized greater cross-team collaboration. The team has been working with the Information Management Team to overlay humanitarian data with conflict analysis. Reports increasingly incorporate scenario forecasting and recommendations. Even simple presentation changes, such as the use of bullet points, have helped programs teams to make better use of the analysis.

Finally, the very presence of a team focused on context analysis and “big picture” understanding of the conflict has been influencing strategic debates and decisions. Prompted by the Humanitarian Access Team, the SCS team is now planning to investigate how private actors are supported or undercut by local power structures in the conflict. This political economy analysis could potentially inform the team's future efforts to work with non-traditional partners, such as business communities, which may have the strongest capacity to address localized needs.

¹ An \$11m grant from DFID (July 2014 - June 2016) for food assistance, WASH, NFIs and livelihoods; a \$3.5m grant from OFDA (October 2015 - September 2016) for WASH and NFIs; and a \$1.4m grant from DFATD (March 2014 - February 2016) covering child protection and education.



Likely Intensified Siege Areas: Qalamoun/Eastern Ghouta (14 January 2016): Example of map produced by Humanitarian Access Team helps program teams foresee siege areas.



There is a logic to conflict. If you can figure that out, you can change how you work.”

Humanitarian Access Team Leader

CREATIVE COMPLIANCE TO MATCH PARTNER CAPACITY

The SCS team's work has required a nuanced understanding of each partner's capacities, the ability to respond to differences in capacity and the operating environment, and strong relationships of reciprocal trust.

The ability to respond to the contextual nuance started with an early recognition that Mercy Corps' standard compliance procedures were often unworkable in the Syrian context. For example, requirements like collecting three quotations for procurements over a certain value are impossible to satisfy where there are limited suppliers and where partners could be put at risk holding or transferring such documentation. Early partners might say they could provide certain documentation, only to reveal later that it was impossible to obtain.

This led the SCS program to adapt financial and compliance processes, and develop robust alternatives such as a matrix

of supporting documentation. Finance and compliance staff use this tool in working with partners to identify what is feasible. Basing requirements on what is feasible has helped create a more honest relationship between Mercy Corps and its partners.

The willingness to be flexible with financial documentation requirements is accompanied by an expectation of improvement. Capacity development, always a core focus of SCS, has shifted from one-off trainings to regular coaching, facilitation support and peer meetings. This has proved to be more effective and appreciated by partners.

The SCS team has encouraged awareness of its partnership approach and alternative compliance procedures within Mercy Corps' headquarters and among donors, helping to build trust in the approach. This creates space for the team to work in ways appropriate to the context, quickly responding to partner needs with clear answers, while understanding when and how to escalate issues for headquarters or donor approval. The team's clear understanding of its decision making authority in turn helps the partners understand their own latitude for rapidly responding to context shifts and emerging needs.

ENABLING RAPID PARTNER RESPONSES

One of the SCS program's longest standing partners saw the strength of the flexible approval process when an emergency started in northern Homs. Observing the widespread displacement that was underway, the partner requested permission to move activities into a new area. Mercy Corps rapidly gave permission, first communicating it informally so that activities could start, and then following up with a formal approval process.

This nimble reaction was only possible due to the relationship of mutual trust that had been built between the partner and Mercy Corps. Over the prior one and a half years, the SCS team had invested considerable time in supporting the partner's organizational development, with a staff member visiting the partner's offices twice a week during a particularly intensive period of support. This extensive engagement gave Mercy Corps confidence in allowing the partner greater freedom in decision making and flexibility within budget lines.

This stands in contrast to the partner's relationships with other international NGOs, which often request that quotations for every activity are sent first to their office and then onwards to the headquarters for approval. Minor procurements such as purchasing a water pump can take a week. Given the difficulty in predicting in advance exactly what support will be required in a specific location, Mercy Corps' flexibility allows the team inside Syria to react rapidly.



Promptness and speed is vital, as access to besieged areas can close quickly.”

Partner representative



This takes more time at the beginning but it saves a lot of time later.... It used to take six months to close financial reports but now it can be done in one month.... Compared to other INGOs we do a lot of follow up, which builds trust. In this line of work, you really need to be able to trust our partners.... Through regular contact you learn more about what they really do.

Partnership Finance Coordinator



A lot of the enabling solutions and drive comes from the partners themselves. We're really responding to partners' creativity and innovation.”

Compliance Advisor



PROGRAM AUTONOMY TO GROW THE TEAM ORGANICALLY

The SCS program's adaptations were possible as a result of a dynamic team with an evolving structure, driven and protected by strong leadership at the program and regional level. Significant autonomy from external interference during the first year and a half gave the program time to experiment, make mistakes, and improve.

Departments have grown organically and roles have evolved in response to emerging needs. For example, the finance and compliance team grew from two staff to seven (out of a total

team of 22 staff). This large size reflects the unusual level of effort devoted to building partners' finance capacity. Such growth is unlikely to occur in programs that design rigid org-charts at inception.

The team also recruited an Operations Manager – a potentially unnecessary position given that Mercy Corps is not directly implementing program activities. In this case, the role was filled by someone who brought an inquisitive mindset and years of experience with Mercy Corps systems. He took on mentorship with the team and strategic problem solving for the program. For example, he developed a way to allow Mercy Corps to hire Syrians, despite a regulatory environment that sought to prevent this. Careful recruitment, including a conscious drive to hire more Syrians, has led to a team composed of people with diverse and complementary skills who are willing to try doing things differently.

CONSTRAINTS AND INHIBITORS ON ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT



DONOR APPROVAL DELAYS

The SCS program's donors have largely supported its partnership approach, but certain OFDA requirements have reduced Mercy Corps' and its partners' abilities to respond to the volatility that characterizes the Syrian conflict. Notably, OFDA must approve all new partners and sub-grants, with a process that can take up to five weeks. The burdens and delays imposed by the process prevent the SCS program's partners from initiating new activities in a timely manner.

Separately, an exhaustive waiver process is required for the procurement of any vehicles made outside the United States, with partners putting themselves at risk to collect some of the required information; adding to the frustration,

waivers only last for 180 days. Finally, OFDA only supports a limited number of sectors: it is unable to fund food aid due to departmental barriers within USAID, so the program's OFDA grant only covers WASH and NFI distributions. This has inhibited the program's ability to initiate new food-focused sub-grants, even in cases when access to food has been identified as the primary humanitarian need.

In contrast to OFDA's regulations, DFID allows for notification, rather than approval, of new partners and sub-grants. The result is nimbler responses to developments within Syria.

Challenges to rapid responses are ongoing. In February 2016, the Humanitarian Access Team shed light on a worsening situation in Dar'a as Russian airstrikes intensified and armed opposition groups initiated a new campaign to repel government forces. While the SCS program was aware of the escalating emergency, it was unable to respond in a timely way: not enough funding remained under their DFID grant, and OFDA's partner pre-approval would not have moved quickly enough.

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND CONNECTION TO HQ

The inception of the SCS program was somewhat clandestine. Given general fears that sharing information might put partners and activities inside Syria at risk, and specific issues related to the legal status of cross-border activities, very little was communicated about the SCS program both within Mercy Corps and externally. This secrecy, combined with the fact that many of the early SCS team members were new to Mercy Corps, contributed to the separation of the program from headquarters, which helped it craft a different way of working.

Unfortunately, these factors also isolated the program from headquarters' resources and prevented cross-learning with Mercy Corps programs elsewhere. Mercy Corps is an organization that relies heavily on informal networks and internal relationships to access the support and quick approvals that can enable adaptive management. This isolation has constrained the program's ability to make requests to headquarters, resulting in missed opportunities to deal with issues related to technical areas, compliance, and donor relations. More recently, key staff visits to Mercy Corps headquarters and the addition of a Humanitarian Director with significant Mercy Corps experience have fostered better internal relationships and connections.

KEY REFLECTIONS

The SCS program's three adaptive capabilities – the internal analytical capacity provided by the Humanitarian Access Team, creative compliance methods to match partner capacity, and program autonomy to grow the team organically – all combine to support one another in various ways. The context analysis guides specific partner engagements, partners provide information for that analysis, the organic team growth has allowed both the evolution of the operations team to support partner capacity and also the development of the program's analytical capacity, and the analysis helps to make the case for the program's autonomy.

This mix of capabilities has not been enough to eliminate the constraints on adaptive management, but it has mitigated them. The result is a program approach that enables the flexible and adaptive work of its partners. The move to pre-positioning and livelihoods programming in conflict zones also marks an important shift from reactive to anticipatory and nuanced humanitarian work. This would not have been possible without the program's investments in contextual understanding.