Parliamentary Hearing on UK Aid in the Middle East

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1. Introduction: NRC and cooperation with DFID

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is an independent, humanitarian, non-profit, non-governmental organisation that provides assistance, protection and durable solutions to refugees and internally displaced persons worldwide. NRC promotes and protects the rights of people who have been forced to flee their countries, or their homes within their countries. NRC is the only Norwegian organisation that specialises in international efforts aimed at this target group. The majority of our approximately 3500 staff members are national employees in NRCs twenty programmes in Africa, Asia, America and Europe. NRC was established in 1946 under the name Aid to Europe, to assist refugees in Europe after World War II. Today NRC is organised as an independent, private foundation. We cooperate closely with the UN and other organisations, around the world as well as in Norway.

NRC received its first funding from DFID in 2000. In 2011, NRC was included in DFID’s three year Programme Partnership Agreement (PPA), through which we received a total of 2.5 million GBP for 2013-14. The agreement covers projects in eight countries (Colombia, DRC, Iraq, Myanmar, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Pakistan, Somalia, South Sudan). NRC was in January 2014 granted a two year extension of the PPA funding. In addition, NRC implements a range of stand-alone projects funded by DFID in some of the above mentioned countries, including the Syria response. In 2013 DFID became the fifth largest institutional donor for NRC.

NRC’s cooperation with DFID in the Middle East dates back to 2010, when DFID started co-funding NRC’s Information, Counseling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) programme in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. NRC is DFID’s only NGO partner in the OPT. The programme in question offers legal assistance to Palestinians who are evicted from their homes as part of land confiscations due to the separation wall construction and the expansion of settlements.

DFID is also an important contributor to NRC’s humanitarian response to the Syria crisis, where NRC currently implements project with a total budget of GBP 7 million funded by DFID. This equals 11 percent of NRC’s 2014 funding so far for the Syria response. With co-funding from DFID, NRC is undertaking large-scale shelter projects, water and sanitation, distribution and education, as well as support in the form of information, counselling and legal assistance. NRC’s Syria response also comprises northern Iraq, which is currently not funded by DFID.

2. The humanitarian response to the Syrian civil war

The level of Syrian displacement and overall human suffering is overwhelming for international donors and implementing agencies alike. Apart from the sheer magnitude of the humanitarian needs, one overall challenge has manifested itself in different forms across the region, namely humanitarian access. The humanitarian response of NRC and others has therefore not only been
shaped by the needs, but also on different set of conditions that has varied across the geographical locations we work in. In these settings it is paramount to adapt and show flexibility in order to ensure timely and relevant assistance. For NRC this has necessitated flexibility in project design and new ways of thinking. By way of example, NRC was unable to implement activities aimed at providing vocational training for Syrian refugee youth, due to the Government of Jordan’s concerns with regards to unemployment for its population and the potential integration of the refugees. NRC’s response has been to prove ourselves a capable and reliable large-scale service deliverer in the camp while we continued to push for the opportunity to provide vocational training to refugees living in host communities. In Lebanon we are facing the opposite situation. Due to the authorities’ rejection of camp solutions, we had to seek out refugees where they managed to settle. A natural response for NRC was to direct our response towards alternative shelter solutions, such as upgrading the homes of Lebanese host families and larger buildings that could be converted into collective centers for refugees.

In NRC’s experience, many donors – DFID included – have shown a high degree of flexibility to new ideas and designs. This has no doubt been facilitated by the presence of DFID’s technical experts on the ground and their close engagement with the implementing agencies. While acknowledging the wish to limit grants management to a relatively low number of large implementing agencies, NRC sees a need to ensure sufficient resources and staff to grants management so as to allow for broadening the donors’ scope of partnership and projects. NRC believes this could ultimately contribute to reach more people in need. NRC would furthermore welcome initiatives to assess the organizational effectiveness and efficiency of NGO partners.

3. The access challenge and implications

Back in February 2013, NRC was notified through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) that it was welcome by the authorities to work in Damascus. Since then, it took NRC until December 2013 to actually obtain visas. This may serve as an illustration of the political and bureaucratic obstacles to assistance inside Syria that deeply affects the work of the UN and international NGOs alike. As for the NRC, we are still exploring our options when it comes to contributing to the efforts of the UN and NGO colleagues in Damascus. This has not stopped us from pursuing other inroads for humanitarian assistance. For the last year, NRC has been running a substantial and growing programme in Syria, providing non-food items, shelter, water and sanitation and education support to people living in areas that are largely beyond the reach of the UN and other assistance administered from Damascus. With the international failure to secure increased humanitarian access through Damascus, cross border assistance from neighbouring countries is absolutely vital, even if currently nowhere near sufficient, in order to sustain livelihoods for millions of displaced and other vulnerable people in areas outside government control. Working in these areas comes with its own set of access challenges, related to security and level of acceptance among combatants. Kidnappings are rampant and certain armed groups our areas of operation are explicit in its threats against foreigners. Our ability to deploy non-Syrians staff in most of northern Syria has thus diminished rapidly. For NRC and colleagues in the field, this has fostered new approaches, with a higher degree of remote management and implementation through partners than would otherwise be the case. For NRC and other agencies, this has required necessitated increased emphasis on monitoring, partnership with local actors and remote management. This development is not entirely negative. All over Syria, people are gaining valuable experience in humanitarian work. Local relief committees and other community-based organizations are bolstered and thousands of people volunteer to help their fellow citizens. NRC also experience that the access challenges has brought NGO colleagues together and fostered close coordination and cooperation on the ground. That said, much of NRC’s work on shelter solutions, support to schools and distribution of non-food items takes place through direct implementation and we foresee that this will be the case also in the future. DFID is among the major humanitarian actors in this setting and has, according to NRC’s experience, provided very useful support to coordination structures and through raising access issues at political levels wherever possible.

The issue of humanitarian access is not confined to Syria only. Thousands of displaced Syrians are prevented from seeking protection and assistance in the neighbouring countries due to various
degrees of border control and regulations. Palestine refugees from Syria are a group of particular concerns, as the lack of citizenship is used as a pretext to treat them differently from their Syrian compatriots. In Lebanon, the reluctance of the authorities to sanction the establishment of large-scale tented settlements is a contributing factor to the overall challenge of maximizing the humanitarian outreach in a setting of truly massive displacement.

4. **Securing continued humanitarian support**

NRC foresees continued needs on a massive scale, both to Syria and the neighbouring countries, for the foreseeable future, even if hostilities were to end anytime soon. Close to half of the population has been displaced, and the level of destruction of physical infrastructure and livelihood opportunities in so many of the country’s cities and towns has made sure that a return to normal will be slow and painful even in the best of circumstances. While the international humanitarian community needs to remain on an emergency footing for the Syria crisis, it must not lose sight of the increasing need for development aid, as we have entered a situation of protracted conflict and displacement. For an organization like NRC this means, among other things, that while we continue to build temporary emergency shelters, we also need to address the huge need for education to Syria’s children and be prepared for long-term engagement in and around Syria. It also means that international donors should prepare themselves for the same and to the extent possible enter longer term partnership agreements and financial commitments with international as well as Syrian NGOs and governance structures. Given DFID’s position in the international humanitarian community and its constructive contributions to the Syria response, NRC hopes that DFID will be at the forefront of initiatives to enhance international coordination and ensure contributions from other countries and agencies.