Notes on Humanitarian Relief for Syria

I. The Problem:
The humanitarian problem caused by the Syrian conflict continues to deepen, with the international community seemingly powerless to manage even the worst aspects of its consequences. The situation in the Camps, such as Zaatari, is, however, probably better than that for those displaced and trapped by the fighting inside Syria. This should be the most urgent priority. Inside Syria needs and problems are, however, very different in different areas.

Access is more a problem than actual availability of amounts of aid. In government controlled areas government authorization to operate is crucial; in non-controlled areas, the problems of insecurity in certain areas or control by radical groups are the problems. The list of government approved organizations needs expanding in order to get access to wider areas.

Corruption is a major problem, with aid diverted into the warlord economy or officials taking cuts.

The militarization of access is a main issue, as the government uses starvation and blockade and the opposition uses populations as “human shields” or water for the guerrilla “fish.”

II. Agency:
The UN and Red Cross/Crescent are the two major relief organizations with international credentials and legitimacy that are also recognized by the Syrian government as the main logical coordinators of relief.

Local knowledge, facilities of volunteers, and their inherent ability to access, advocate and communicate with communities are important. Capacities for these have already been identified during the humanitarian response over the past 3 years, with a limited
number working in an officially approved capacity inside Syria, but with a much larger number working unofficially in both government-controlled and opposition-held areas. Skills, motives and affiliations are very diverse, and so a process of legitimation needs to be extended and approved, which might include formalisation of confidence-building measures through mosques, churches, awqaf etc. Also Syrians outside the country have networks inside that could be used to facilitate access.

It is advisable to prioritize recruitment of local partners from 1) established churches and Islamic charities with a long pre-conflict track record (so as to by-pass profiteering and politicization) 2) with womens’ organizations, both the official ones and non-official ones, including Kurdish ones active in Kurdish areas.

Government recognition is needed so local partners ought to be part of the government approved network; these would include the local red crescent but also churches, Islamic charities and awqaf which are active. There is a risk for relief people working outside this framework in areas not government controlled.

III. Possible Initiatives

1. Macro Political Level:
A strengthening of the statements provided in UN Security Council Resolution 2139 (19 February, 2014) might be pursued in order to widen access to local partners, and set out terms of reference and a framework that legitimized and gave protection to these, and enabled the inclusion of the local coordinating committees in non-government controlled areas and allowed for monitoring.

A new resolution would require bringing both the Syrian government and opposition to adhere to the principles of International Humanitarian Law and would engage the cooperation of all intervening powers, and the regional capacities of Iran, Turkey and the Gulf States. Country-based institutions, such as the church, mosques and the Red Crescent Societies could be asked to urge their respective governments to reach agreement on a resolution.

Access could be built on promotion of durable local ceasefires. These have already been demonstrated as a first step toward relief of besieged populations. However, note should be taken of the concerns expressed by the President of the ICRC that such informally brokered ceasefires or ‘pauses in conflict’ are not a substitute for the formal adherence to obligations of access and protection, in accordance with International Humanitarian Law

Pursuant to the above, DFID might be interested to take the lead in backing the UN Under-Secretary-General’s call for greater support to political initiatives in the strengthening of IHL. A more inclusive scope can be extended towards support to the development of ongoing initiatives in ‘Disaster Law’ being promoted through the IFRC, and which includes the engagement of a broad range of government ministries, and the
2. Micro Ground Level
More creative approaches to self-sustained relief could include the strengthening of local capacity-building and income-generating initiatives, such as the micro-finance schemes that have proven successful in places like Bangladesh and India, which enable (re)generation of an inclusive community-based recovery. DFID has already made a commitment to supporting these kind of programmes and is implementing cash-based livelihoods projects to assist women and children in refugee camps and internally displaced communities. The grass-roots microcredit and savings schemes offered through structures pioneered by organisations such as the Grameen Bank might lead to longer-term and more sustainable developments in these small-scale projects.

Successful long-term projects financed by similar schemes might include initiatives with a positive environmental impact, such as the recycling of materials into clothes and footwear, and waste products into energy-generating programmes.

Such programmes can engage the private-sector, and if properly sustained and monitored, rising incomes and social status can mitigate the ‘brain-drain’ syndrome (where the most talented in affected communities and in IDP/refugee camp placements leave to join businesses or international organisations in urban centres and overseas).

Conclusion:
Given that no resolution of the Syrian crisis is in sight, with the seeming failure of Geneva II, and that millions of lives and livelihoods are, therefore, at risk of long term disruption, a more robust international relief effort is more important than ever.