



JOINT NGO BRIEFING

BRUSSELS SYRIA CONFERENCE

The undersigned international and national NGOs and respective NGO coordination fora welcome the fact that the international community, under the impetus of the EU, is convening in Brussels to address and respond to the Syria crisis.

The conference is an urgent and vital opportunity for states to: reiterate their commitments to upholding the right for civilians fleeing Syria to seek asylum and international protection; ensure Syrians can access assistance throughout the country; reiterate the need to protect Syrian humanitarian workers and their operations; fulfill and build upon commitments made at the London Conference in 2016; and support sectors which have been particularly damaged by the conflict.

Today more than ever, the international community must share responsibility and stand firmly in support of Syria's civilian population. It is clear however that the aid response, as vital as it is, will only go so far and cannot fully address the needs of Syrian communities to be free from violence and the violations of international human rights (IHRL) and humanitarian law (IHL) that characterize the conflict. To this end, we call on all members of the international community, in particular permanent members of the UN Security Council and the EU and EU member states who are discussing post-agreement planning, to insist on the full implementation of relevant UN Security Council resolutions on Syria that relate to respect for IHL and IHRL, as well as implementation of the Geneva Communiqué of 2012.

The Brussels conference should also set the foundation for inclusive and meaningful participation of Syrian NGOs and civil society, including youth and women's groups, as key partners in ensuring effective post-agreement planning that captures the needs and desires of the people of Syria and supports local community rebuilding and resilience.

Upholding the right for civilians fleeing Syria to seek asylum and international protection

Syria is not a safe place for millions of refugees to return to. The prevailing conditions which caused people to flee in the first place still exist in the country, and any returns that are not voluntary or safe run contrary to international law. Attempting to make specific areas inside Syria “safe” could potentially lead to further security and protection risks to civilians. Therefore, under no circumstances should such actions be used to compel refugees to return to Syria.

Instead of considering possible returns of refugees which could be involuntary or unsafe, the conference participants should take action to ensure those trapped inside Syria can seek asylum. All neighboring countries to Syria have effectively closed their borders to asylum seekers and, as a result, hundreds of thousands of Syrians are unable to flee. The US, European and other governments must reverse recent measures that limit refugees’ right to asylum and international protection and commit to responsibility sharing, including through increasing pledges to resettle vulnerable refugees.

Governments attending the conference must:

- I. **Recommit to the right to seek asylum** and affirm that there remains an international legal obligation to allow those fleeing violence and persecution to cross international borders to safety. The broader international community must support neighboring countries to enable them to meet this obligation.
- II. State clearly that **conditions are currently not met** for the voluntary and safe return of refugees to Syria.
- III. **Pledge to increase refugee resettlement to wealthy countries to at least 10 percent of the refugee population from Syria** by the end of 2017.
- IV. **Ensure that any discussions or planning for the future reconstruction of Syria at the Brussels conference and beyond clearly respect the “Do No Harm” principle** and that these efforts do not incentivize the premature or forced return of refugees.

Ensuring Syrians can access assistance throughout the country

The border closures by neighboring countries have, to varying degrees, impacted aid workers' ability to reach populations in need in a timely manner and with appropriate goods and services. Some NGOs operating in countries neighboring Syria have at times faced overly bureaucratic, sometimes opaque, and often politicized, registration requirements, leading to difficulties in obtaining work visas for humanitarian staff in-country, the opening of bank accounts, or procurement of goods and services in-country. All countries neighboring Syria have heavily restricted the movement of Syrian aid workers out of Syria, including those who work for registered international NGOs. Restrictions placed on cross border and cross line assistance mean that Syrians in desperate need are being denied assistance unnecessarily.

Donors and neighboring countries attending the conference should:

- I. Reaffirm the importance of utilizing the most effective routes, whether cross border or cross line assistance, to meet the needs of the most vulnerable people in Syria** as called for UN Security Council Resolution 2139 (2014) and subsequent resolutions. This should be emphasized in the communiqué and outcomes of the Brussels conference.
- II. Facilitate cross border assistance** by ensuring humanitarian staff can move easily across borders, the process to register international and Syrian organizations is eased, and Syrian national staff of NGOs can exit Syria for trainings and other operational reasons.
- III. Support humanitarian organizations to respond to critical humanitarian needs in all parts of the country, regardless of the line of control.** Assistance should be based on need, rather than access or political prerogatives.

Protecting Syrian humanitarian workers and their operations

Syrian humanitarian workers provide the majority of the humanitarian response inside Syria, at great personal risk to themselves and their families. As frontlines continue to shift in the conflict, these workers, particularly those working for non-registered organizations, face increased threats to their safety and are often forced to decide whether they would rather be forcibly displaced or stay in their communities and face potential detention or conscription. In addition to the immediate threats to individual Syrian humanitarian workers, removing these non-registered organizations from areas where they have previously worked for years negatively impacts these communities, removing the local expertise and program knowledge that these organizations possess.

Co-chairs of the conference should:

- I. Emphasize the need for protections for Syrian aid workers, including non-registered organizations in the Conference communiqué.** Syrian humanitarian and civic organizations, both registered and unregistered with the Syrian government, are crucial for aid delivery in Syria. Aid workers should not be targeted or forced to leave or be evicted when areas of control change.



A girl plays with other kids in an ITS in Zahle, Lebanon. January 2017. Photo by: Mais Salman / DRC

Following up on and expanding London Conference commitments

In February 2016, donors and host governments at the “Supporting Syria and the region” conference in London agreed to a “comprehensive new approach” to address the Syria refugee crisis through financial pledges and policy changes for the benefit of both refugee and host communities. The Helsinki conference in January 2017 provided an opportunity to review progress towards these commitments,¹ showing that, one year on, the funding committed for 2016 exceeded pledges by %5, and host governments – Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey – have made some significant policy changes to improve access to education and economic opportunities for refugees from Syria. Yet, much remains to be achieved, and the Helsinki conference failed to galvanize concrete actionable measures to fully implement the “new approach” of the London conference. As the international community meets to discuss how to address the regional crisis, governments must show a renewed political will to respond to the needs of Syrian refugees and host communities, by ensuring that Syrian refugees’ right to legal stay and other protections are respected as well as supporting education and economic opportunities of refugees and host communities alike.

Donors and neighboring country governments attending the Conference must:

- I. **Address jointly the issues of refugee protection, education and livelihoods when following through on the new approach outlined at the London Conference.**
- II. **Take action to ensure refugees from Syria have the right to legal stay and protection** by setting up clear, accessible and affordable procedures to obtain and maintain valid documentation, residency and registration. State should also reiterate that legal protection is a prerequisite to improving access to livelihoods, education and other basic services.
- III. **Remove barriers preventing adult refugees from accessing decent work and economic opportunities**, by addressing exploitation in the workplace, removing restrictions on legal stay and freedom of movement, scaling-up efforts to support the development of micro, small and medium sized enterprises, and expanding initiatives to create jobs for both refugees and host communities.
- IV. **Achieve their commitment to get all children in school by the end of the school year 2016/17** by continuing to open new places in public schools, placing more emphasis on ensuring retention and learning outcomes, addressing the worst forms of child labor, fulfilling the funding pledge of at least \$1.4 billion a year, and providing sufficient opportunities for certified non-formal education with civil society support.
- V. **Share responsibility and follow through on multi-year, predictable aid funding at the same level as 2016** and continue **to extend and expand bilateral and multilateral support to host governments** to implement the wide-reaching policy framework agreed at the 2016 London Conference.

¹ See Joint Agency report, Stand and Deliver <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/stand-and-deliver-urgent-action-needed-on-commitments-made-at-the-london-confer620180->

Supporting sectors which have been particularly damaged by the conflict

An estimated 12.8 million Syrians are in need of medical assistance, an increase of 1.3 million compared to 2016, and 3.1 million school-aged children in Syria are either no longer in school or at risk of dropping out. Repeated attacks against health and education facilities, with confirmed reports of 338 attacks on health facilities in 2016 and more than 4,000 attacks on schools since the beginning of the war are impeding the delivery of medical assistance and children's access to education. More than half of healthcare workers and around 150,000 education personnel, including teachers, have fled the country. The consequences will be long-lasting on the national health and education systems as the training for new healthcare workers is severely disrupted and one in three schools are now out of use due to conflict damage, use as makeshift shelters for displaced families or use for military purposes. As the conflict continues, mental health needs are growing across Syria, but services to address these needs are scarce. It is estimated that one Syrian out of five has mental health issues and one out of thirty is at risk of developing severe mental health issues. A recent study found that millions of children have been so consistently exposed to "toxic stress" that their chances of recovering fully are dwindling by the day.²

Donors and UN member states attending the conference must:

- I. **Increase funding for programming to address health needs, including sexual and reproductive health, mental health and psychosocial needs inside Syria.** Additionally, funding and support is necessary to help rebuild the Syrian medical workforce through the provision of training and other educational opportunities.
- II. **Fully fund education and child protection programming as part of the HRP 2017,** and support education programming by training teachers and school personnel in conflict-sensitive approaches to education, including how to keep children safe while in school.
- III. **State clearly that parties to the conflict responsible for violations of IHL relating to the targeting of schools, medical units, and aid workers will be held accountable,** by ensuring the 'International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011' and the UN Commission of Inquiry are supported and able to effectively carry out their respective mandates.

² Invisible Wounds. Save the Children. March 2017. <https://i.stci.uk/sites/default/files/Invisible20%Wounds20%March202017%.pdf>

These recommendations have been developed by the following international and local organizations and coordination fora:

Individual agencies

ABAAD - Resource Center for Gender Equality, Lebanon

ACF

Bihar Relief Organisation

CAFOD

CARE International

DanChurchAid

Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

Dawlaty

Hand in Hand for Syria

Humedica

International Rescue Committee (IRC)

Intersos

Lutheran World Federation (LWF)

Mercy Corps

Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)

Oxfam

Save the Children

SAWA for Development and Aid

SAWA Foundation

SCIAF

Secours Islamique France

SEMA

Solidarites International

Syria Relief and Development

Syria Relief Network

TDH-Italia

Women Now for Development

World Vision

Fora

Jordan INGO Forum (JIF)

Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum (LHIF)

Syria INGO Regional Forum (SIRF)