



After 12 years of suffering in Syria, urgent action is needed to prevent further degradation of human living conditions and widening of inequalities and hunger

On 14-15 June 2023, representatives of donors, refugee-host states, UN agencies and NGOs meet for the seventh Brussels Conference on [“Supporting the future of Syria and the region”](#).

Caritas Internationalis, Caritas Europa and Caritas Middle East and North Africa (MONA) commends the efforts and commitments made by donors over the years in response to the Syrian crisis, which brought relief to millions of people. Notwithstanding the proliferation of humanitarian crises around the world, our collective efforts in support to Syrians in dire need are far from over. This calls for confirming commitments, scaling up resources and adjusting policies to proportionately and adequately respond to the humanitarian needs of the population in Syria and in the region. We believe that the Conference must send a strong message of hope and resilience to the Syrian people. We hope that those participating will seize the opportunity to do so.

In light of the above, all ministers, policymakers and donors participating in the seventh Brussels Conference should consider the following as priority policy recommendations:

1. Prioritise aid localisation strategies and their implementation at all levels by ensuring the empowerment, funding, capacity strengthening, and representation of civil society (local NGOs, including faith-based organisations) is present on the ground. Priorities raised by local Caritas member organisations include the importance of a systematic approach to cascading overhead costs support and flexible, multi-year funding to local organisations. In addition, donors, UN agencies, and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) should establish a regular and structured approach to dialogue about localisation priorities identified by local actors in each of the Hubs within Syria, as well as in Lebanon, Jordan and Türkiye. Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) or the equivalent high-level UN/NGO decision-making structures in each context should develop HCT Localisation Strategies (or Roadmaps) and the relevant donor coordination group should engage with this process to bring donor perspectives and influence to help catalyse change. Such HCT Localisation Strategies should establish measurable indicators to track progress in scaling-up good practices, addressing barriers and catalysing accountability across dimensions of equitable partnerships, access to funding, support for capacity-strengthening, and meaningful participation in decision-making. Likewise both individual donors and donor coordination groups should articulate their priorities.

2. Systematically integrate emergency interventions with early recovery programming (food security, health and livelihoods) to make them more sustainable and effective. Despite challenges, NGOs – including local faith-based organisations – are able to deliver programming that supports Syrian people to not just be dependent on basic hand-outs, but to undertake agricultural livelihoods, micro-enterprises, rehabilitate their homes and other approaches that support their dignity and resilience.

3. Continue to promote and strengthen protection programming to ensure protection mainstreaming, safeguarding and accountability to affected populations. In particular, donor governments and the international community should work with relevant UN agencies, host countries and Syrian local authorities to encourage and ensure that any returns of Syrian refugees are voluntary, informed, dignified and safe, and implemented in accordance with International Refugee Law and standards.

4. Encourage, support and take part in constructive dialogues to address the unintended

consequences unilateral sanctions have on timely and quality access of the population to humanitarian aid, including vital goods and services. This can happen by putting in place effective, transparent and simplified procedures to access effective standing humanitarian exemptions - and where standing exemptions do not exist, such as EU autonomous sanctions regimes, to put standing exemptions in place. Moreover, an independent assessment of the negative consequences of sanctions on the lives and dignity of civilians should be conducted to reduce their impact, and where possible, remove them. To ensure this, the EU Commission should address in the upcoming proposal for a Directive on the definition of criminal offences and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures a clear exemption of humanitarian activities, including all humanitarian actors and implementing partners, and specifically reference the UNSCR 2664. Finally, as the six-months humanitarian exemptions respectively introduced by the European Union, the United States of America and the United Kingdom are about to expire, we urge them to consider extending the humanitarian exemption for an indefinite period of time. Our experience shows that six months are insufficient to effectively remove longstanding sanctions-induced obstacles and impediments hindering adequate relief efforts following the catastrophic earthquake in February 2023.

5. Redouble and continue political efforts both to address the root causes of the ongoing violence and conflict in Syria and to avoid further suffering and degrading human living conditions. Respect of human rights and dignity of the Syrian population must be at the heart of this, and Syrian civil society must be supported to have a voice and meaningful participation in the decision-making political process. For example, the Jordanian initiative should be further developed in consultation with Syrian civil society actors with expertise in human rights and protection, and UN agencies such as UNHCR responsible for protection monitoring to inform decision-making on the return of IDPs and refugees inside Syria.

Background: More than twelve years into the conflict, Syria remains one of the most complex humanitarian and protection emergencies in the world. In this already extremely fragile and unstable context, in early February this year two major earthquakes hit Southern Türkiye and Northern Syria, followed by thousands of aftershocks, causing significant death and injuries, as well as severe damage to infrastructure and buildings. In the Syrian affected areas (Aleppo, Latakia, Hama, Idlib and Tartous) it is estimated that close to 9 million people have been heavily affected by the repercussions of the earthquakes. The damage is worse in the north-west, where more than 4.2 million people have been affected in Aleppo, and 3 million people have been affected in Idlib. More than 7,400 buildings have been completely or partially destroyed. The psychological and physical impacts of this catastrophe come on top of the existing exponential distress/trauma and extreme despair of Syrian people. Given the severe damage to civilian infrastructure and private property/homes, in addition to war/conflict-related destruction, extensive rehabilitation and recovery efforts are urgently required. Before the earthquakes, 5.7 million people were in need of shelter. The earthquakes exacerbated the already high humanitarian needs across Syria.

In the last years about 6.6 million Syrian refugees have sought safety outside of the country – mostly in neighbouring countries - and another 6.8 million people are internally displaced and living in harrowing conditions. The country still has the largest number of internally displaced people in the world. Women and girls are particularly affected by the crisis and over two thirds of those displaced today are women and children.

In 2022 before the earthquake 15.3 million people were in severe and acute need of humanitarian assistance, the highest number of people in need since the beginning of the crisis, and 90% of the households were unable to meet their basic needs. Increasingly, IDPs who had initially been displaced by the conflict report being displaced again in search of better livelihood opportunities and basic services. Refugee hosting contexts have also been impacted. This is evident in Lebanon, with continued depreciation of the local currency and rampant inflation.

Therefore, the geopolitical dynamics and push for refugees to return to Syria could have serious implications on needs across the country, as will the declared cholera outbreak and the recent earthquakes. The lack of livelihood opportunities, combined with the effects of the economic downturn on people's ability to provide for their families, are not securing and sustaining the conditions for a safe, voluntary, and

dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons. Women and girls continue to be disproportionately affected by various forms of gender-based violence.

Over 90% of Syrian people live below the world poverty line due to the global economic recession, sanctions, including unilateral coercive measures, the repercussions of this protracted crisis as well as the earthquake consequences. The purchasing power of the Syrian population has been eroded heavily with an increase in prices related to high inflation rates and currency depreciation. In 2022, even before the earthquake, prices of staple foods doubled and 60% of the population was estimated to be food insecure. Despite this, food rations have been reduced across Syria and malnutrition is worsening at alarming rates – particularly amongst children and pregnant and lactating women. Severe and acute malnutrition, left untreated, will have disastrous impacts for generations to come.

The deteriorating socio-economic conditions, poor infrastructure, lack of electricity and fuel as well as poor WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) conditions in health care facilities in Syria have also had a negative impact on people's health and their ability to access quality integrated basic primary and secondary health care services, emergency preparedness and response capacities. Destruction of healthcare infrastructure, brain drain of qualified medical staff, as well as the lack of essential medicines and medical equipment and supplies due to the impact of sanctions, have increased the pressure on humanitarian actors to fill the gap and provide healthcare services at a time when funding for Syria continues to decline. 4.2 million people in need are disabled, mostly as result of the violent conflict. Syria now has one of the highest disability rates globally.

Food insecurity and the water crises have also contributed to an increase in waterborne diseases. 2022 saw Cholera return to Syria for the first time in decades, and the impacts of the earthquake and degraded WASH facilities threaten the outbreak to worsen further. Before the earthquake, 13.6 million people needed WASH assistance, 67% of whom were in extreme or catastrophic need. At the moment, restoring the WASH sector functionality to pre-earthquake level to provide the minimum level of services to the population is one of the major needs. The lack of power supply remains one of the main barriers that affects the functionality of water systems and the distribution of water to households.

The above-mentioned worsening humanitarian needs in all sectors require a sustainable, holistic, inclusive, and resilient localised approach, to stem the root causes of this continuous increasing humanitarian crisis. Without long-term humanitarian, early recovery and rehabilitation funding, the Syrian people will not be able to cope and recover from these multiple disasters. Moreover, inadequate donor support to refugee hosting countries is contributing to political pressures, impacting on the asylum space for refugees.

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