

BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY THROUGH HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

The Importance of Capacity Building in Localization

Building Civil Society Through Humanitarian Assistance

The Investing in Syrian Humanitarian Action (ISHA) program is unique for its strong emphasis on strengthening local Syrian NGOs capacity to provide humanitarian assistance in the immediate term, and to continue civil society work in the long-term. As an externally evaluated pilot, funded by the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance; ISHA provides proof of concept for its novel approach which expands funding localization, to include capacity building components alongside equitable partnerships built on mutual trust.

ISHA operated from 2015-2019, and competitively selected local Syrian NGOs as sub-grantees to provide humanitarian assistance. Partners expressed that ISHA was the first international partner to engage in “real” capacity building that was multi-modal and holistic, and that targeted individuals within organizations and the entire organizational structure.

The results from ISHA are promising. We find that strong partnerships with local CSOs benefited aid recipients and strengthened civil society in a rapidly narrowing civil space. Local partners were uniquely integrated into affected communities, allowing them to understand and respond to humanitarian crises. Finally, investments in their capacity have long term implications as local NGOs represent a stable humanitarian presence.

Methodology

This findings in this brief are based on qualitative and quantitative assessments, including quasi-experimental designs. Data collection and analysis was primarily carried out by external evaluators.

Who did ISHA work with?

The ISHA model **engaged 22 Syrian civil society** organizations as direct implementers of humanitarian assistance. Partners were selected competitively, and each received multi-modal support, including training, coaching, ongoing, responsive feedback, and small support grants. This support was ongoing, throughout the implementation of their sub grants.

- 197 Syrian staff trained and coached
- Partners implemented programs reaching 378,188 participants



THE CORE OF PARTNERSHIP

The trust, respect, and dignity that formed the core of partners' relationships with ISHA staff was the bedrock for both the individual learning and the deeper changes in structural capabilities...

Key Finding: Capacity Building in Localization Matters

- ISHA benefited the resilience and efficacy of local Syrian NGOs through capacity building and imparting humanitarian values to operate in a complex conflict environment. Partners were better able to articulate and apply humanitarian principles. They also demonstrated increased organizational capacity to carry out assessments, manage stakeholder relationships, and adapt to a rapidly changing conflict environment.
- True partnership is rare in Syria's aid context. For all partners, ISHA was the first INGO partner to engage in prolonged capacity building that was multi-modal and holistic.
- The models requires commitment from the INGO and, crucially, donor support. ISHA built deep, two-way relationships of trust and respect *precisely* because staff were able to devote the time and attention needed for thoughtful feedback and communication to individuals and organizations working on the frontlines of a rapidly evolving conflict.



The vast majority of ISHA's partner organizations formally seek out and apply for further funding.

Two Identified Pathways to Change

Overall, this evaluation identified two main pathways through which ISHA shaped the development of Syrian humanitarian civil society: first, through building the **individual skills** of humanitarian workers and volunteers, and second through shaping the **structural capabilities** of civil society by transforming formal organizational processes and informal norms and values.

How Did ISHA Impact Partner Behavior?

These two pathways resulted in the following behavioral changes among ISHA partners:

- 1) *Shifted perceptions of the challenges facing humanitarian delivery*, increasing their awareness of INGOs as potential partners for pursuing direct funding
- 2) *Altered the balance of accountability towards donors and communities*, towards greater community accountability
- 3) *Shaped decision-making around risk and aid diversion*, through increased internalization of humanitarian values
- 4) *Helped organizations resist pressures that lead to mission drift*, by empowering them to in donor engagement

All the departments in our organization have improved thanks to ISHA. There were departments that never existed, but now we have them... In the future, if we get another project, we will be capable and ready to work.

- ISHA Partner

Local Partnerships Advance Donor Aims

Donors should support ISHA-like programs because there is evidence that this model...

- Provides high quality humanitarian assistance
- Aligns with the global call for investment in localized response
- Allows donors to diversify their portfolios and expand the pool of humanitarian actors
- Supports the development of civil society

Implications for Practice

- INGOs must not crowd out local CSOs.
Local NGOs are the humanitarian responders most likely to remain during long-term crises and support their development by supporting partnership projects that build local capacity.
- “Real” partnerships are locally driven, equitable, and respectful. INGOs must protect the voice and agency of their local partners and engage with them equitably. This requires intensive investment in capacity building.
- INGOs should experiment with new models for sub awards to local partners.
Creative solutions are necessary to address: 1) extended and unfunded project design phases, 2) lack of longer term, available core funding to local CSOs and, 3) limited project timeframes that do not enable real partnership throughout the full project lifecycle.
- Donor support is crucial for the success of holistic localization. With support from donors and implementing INGOs, holistic localization allows CSOs to deliver humanitarian aid while building sustainable, local capacity.



Implications for Donors

- Donors should allow LNGOs to pay salaries at the same level as INGOs This reduces market distortion and poaching practices.
- Donors should explore ways to ensure that local NGOs receive overhead costs that cover organizational needs. This is essential to support the capacity of organizations and may reduce fraudulent behavior.
- Donor support and flexibility is crucial for the success of holistic localization. With support from donors and implementing INGOs, holistic localization allows CSOs to deliver humanitarian aid while building sustainable, local capacity.
- Donors should support research, workshops, coordination mechanisms, and other fora that create a learning community for civil society development projects. This is especially true for programs that share ISHA partner-driven approach to partnership within localization.

About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

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