Letter from five Syrian relief organizations to Stephen O’Brien, U.N. undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator

December 30, 2015

Foreign Policy

https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/2693023/HRP-2016-a-Letter-From-Syrian-Networks-20151230.txt

Gaziantep, Turkey

Dear Mr. O’Brien,

We write to express critical concerns with regards to the final stages and final product of

the 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) process.

The Whole of Syria (WoS) process that led to the 2016 HRP is notable in that it included

wider and more substantive NGO participation than ever across multiple operational hubs.

The Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) was comprehensive and inclusive, and the

resulting HRP reflected that in the scope and nature of the projects included. It also

represented a huge step in de-anonymization of projects, with all that implies for aid

accountability and effective coordination.

That said, we have very significant concerns with the way the finalization process was

concluded, both in terms of the process itself, and in terms of concessions made to one

party to the conflict.

Key Concerns:

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We are alarmed that the 2016 humanitarian strategy was negotiated with the

Government of Syria and feel that this sets an unacceptable precedent. While we

recognize the need to engage the Government of Syria, they should be treated as a

party to the conflict and should not exert any greater influence over the

humanitarian response than any other party;

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We object strongly to the removal of references to violations of IHL by all parties of

the conflict and to besieged areas. The removal of this language downplays the

severity of the violations and the humanitarian conditions in the country;

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We are gravely concerned that the humanitarian leadership agreed to the demands

of the Government of Syria to remove references to mine clearance programmes

from the strategy, and the implicit validation of the GoS position that mine action

activities constitute military action, in spite of the clear articulation of the

humanitarian nature of mine action within International Humanitarian Law. The

implied threat against humanitarian personnel and projects is unacceptable;

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We are deeply concerned about the de-legitimization of NGO programmes and

cross-border humanitarian efforts implicit in the elimination of all reference to these

activities in the text of the HRP;

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We are also deeply concerned about the elimination of language asserting the

humanitarian nature and contribution of Syrian organizations not based in

Damascus;

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Finally, we are outraged that the humanitarian leadership agreed to major changes

in the HRP document without engaging - or even informing - key partners, and

without following the agreed SSG sign-off procedure.

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The mishandling of this situation has precipitated a major breakdown of the trust that had

been so painstakingly built over the past year. As such, we are anxious to understand the

logic that justified these decisions and concessions, and to see immediate steps taken to

ensure that this level of engagement with and deference to the Government of Syria does

not become norm for humanitarian planning in this country.

We ask the following;

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An immediate explanation as to how you will ensure that the Government of Syria

has no greater influence over humanitarian action than any other party to the

conflict, and is not given the scope to negotiate the humanitarian strategy in this

country in future;

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A full explanation as to the circumstances that precipitated this negotiation, and the

logic that justified decisions to change the text and – in particular – eliminate key

IHL and protection references from the 2016 strategy;

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An explanation as to why key partners were not involved in, or even informed of,

these discussions as they were occurring;

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And the immediate initiation of a review of the WoS structure, in order to increase

clarity of roles and responsibility, define clear humanitarian leadership and

accountability, and explore the de-centralization of decision-making authority and

empowerment of the hubs in decision making processes.

We look forward to your response, and to continuing engagement between the

humanitarian NGOs and the UN humanitarian leadership in order to ensure that the

humanitarian response in Syria is designed to best address the needs to Syrian civilians,

independent of the preferences of parties to the conflict.

Sincerely,

Syrian NGO Alliance

Syria Relief Network

Syrian Civil Coalition

Union of Syrian Civil Society organizations

Syrian General Union

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