CASE STUDY # SYRIAN ARAB REP. 2017–2018 / CONFLICT
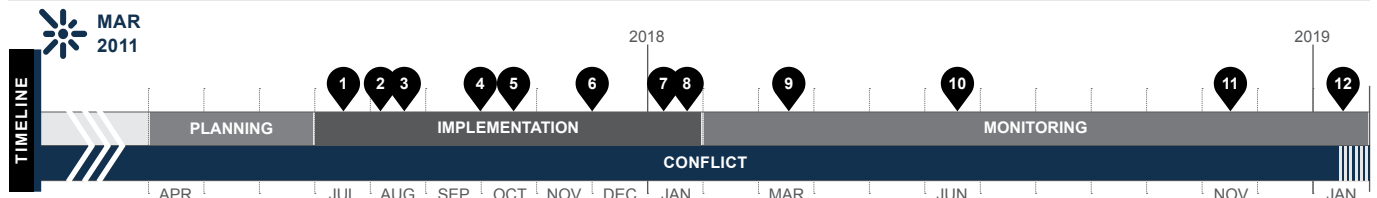
KEYWORDS: Shelter rehabilitation, Remote management, Security of tenure / HLP

CRISIS	**Syrian conflict, 2011–onwards**
TOTAL PEOPLE IN NEED*	**13.1 million** (5.6 million in acute need)
TOTAL PEOPLE DISPLACED*	**6.1 million** internally displaced
TOTAL SHELTER NEEDS*	**4.2 million** individuals within the country
PROJECT LOCATIONS	Dara and Quneitra governorates
PROJECT BENEFICIARIES	**124 households** (629 individuals, 43% host community)
PROJECT OUTPUTS	**124 housing units rehabilitated**
OUTCOME INDICATORS	**81%** of housing units occupied **83%** satisfaction rate **100%** reported improved privacy and security
SHELTER SIZE	**52.5m²**
SHELTER DENSITY	**6.3m²** per person
MATERIALS COST	**USD 1,550** per household
PROJECT COST	**USD 1,716** per household

PROJECT AREAS

TURKEY

LEBANON

DAMASCUS

QUNEITRA
DARA

IRAQ

JORDAN

This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the Global Shelter Cluster.

PROJECT SUMMARY

This project provided shelter, WASH and HLP rights assistance to rehabilitate 124 housing units, targeting both long-term displaced and host community members in urban and peri-urban areas. Through a process of verification of ownership and usage rights, all tenants signed a certificate of occupancy for a 12-month rent-free period, while owners signed a donation certificate. The project team was involved in managing and resolving any potential disputes. Owing to access constraints, the project was managed remotely from Amman.

* Figures as of December 2017. Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview 2018.

TIMELINE

MAR 2011 — APR — PLANNING — JUL AUG SEP OCT NOV DEC — IMPLEMENTATION — 2018 — JAN — MONITORING — MAR — JUN — NOV — 2019 — JAN

CONFLICT

1 Jul 2017: **Signing of project implementation agreements with local partners.**

2 Jul–Aug 2017: **Targeting of locations and community-level HLP due diligence assessment.**

3 Jul–Aug 2017: **Vulnerability and technical assessment.**

4 Sep–Oct 2017: **Household-level HLP due diligence assessment.**

5 Oct 2017: **MoUs signed between the local partner and landlords.**

6 Nov–Dec 2017: **Rehabilitation of the housing units.**

7 Jan 2018: **Verification and monitoring.**

8 Jan 2018: **Handover and signing of Certificate of Occupancy (free of charge).**

9 Mar 2018: **Post-implementation monitoring.**

10 Jun 2018: **A shift in control of project locations affects the access of both the organization and the implementing partner.**

11 Nov 2018: **Planned discussion of potential future hosting arrangements after the rent-free period cannot take place due to access constraints.**

12 Jan 2019: **End of rent-free period. Loss of access to project areas does not allow to monitor any further.**

STRENGTHS

+ Local labour and materials supported the local economy.
+ Solar panels helped reduce households' expenditure.
+ Protection mainstreaming and disability inclusion.
+ HLP issues were addressed and local stakeholders strengthened.
+ The hotline was effective in obtaining regular feedback.
+ The project improved living conditions.

WEAKNESSES

- Limited engagement and cooperation with the local council.
- Low construction quality.
- The HLP due diligence process was time consuming.
- Households that did not meet HLP requirements were not assisted.
- Information flows between different project teams were not smooth.
- The project had a very small scale.
- Some families decided to leave the house or the area.

CONTEXT

For more information on the crisis and regional response, see A.29 in Shelter Projects 2015-2016.

Prior to the crisis, the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) was witnessing a trend of urbanization and a growth of informal settlements in major cities. This increased after the start of the crisis, due to the escalation in violence and the subsequent displacement of populations from rural to urban areas, ultimately weakening urban infrastructure.

As of 2018, about 4.2 million individuals required shelter assistance across Syria. Shelter options were mostly inadequate and lacked access to livelihoods, education and health services. Host communities were the primary provider of shelter for displaced populations. Rent was a major component of households' expenditure and, with rental prices escalating since the beginning of the crisis, the inability to pay rent was often the cause of multiple displacement. Housing Land and Property (HLP) issues were very common, such as disputes over ownership, rental and hosting arrangements.[1]

[1] Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) 2017 and 2018.

HLP CHALLENGES IN SYRIA

1. Lack of tenure security is one of the many reasons for displacement. Multiple waves of displacement involve different claimants of the same plot of land;

2. Destruction of land registries means that reliable land records are often unavailable;

3. Most landlords do not want to enter into formal rental agreements. Preference to verbal arrangements was also common prior to the crisis;

4. Many HLP transactions are not recorded in the statutory system, and there are often overlapping claims;

5. Disputes around rent, payment of utilities and property occupied by armed groups are very common;

6. Women face additional challenges, as their access to HLP is usually linked to their relationship with a man. Inheritance disputes are also very common, which are exacerbated by the lack of necessary documents;

7. HLP documents are often destroyed, lost, left behind or confiscated at checkpoints. Many existing documents are incomplete, inaccurate or of uncertain legal standing.

Adapted from "HLP in the Syrian Arab Republic", NRC, May 2016.

The project integrated a due diligence approach (at community and household levels) to uncover HLP issues, which are common in Syria (photo: Damascus).

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The project was managed from Amman and implemented by a local partner in southern Syria in areas not controlled by the Syrian government. The project team was composed of nine staff of the international organization and 22 of the local partner. Both organizations had two main teams working in synergy (shelter/WASH and legal assistance), plus support staff.

The programming was an extension of a set of procedures – integrating shelter and HLP throughout the programme cycle – which was already well established by the organization and had supported thousands of households in other parts of the region. Tools and implementation modalities were adapted to this project, taking into account that it was managed remotely.

The project aim was to provide non-structural rehabilitation of occupied, sub-standard shelters to improve climatic protection, physical safety and privacy for vulnerable households.

The project targeted conflict-damaged buildings with light rehabilitations or upgrades, depending on the technical assessments conducted by the local partner's field engineers. Both beneficiaries and property owners were consulted about their needs and shelter priorities, against the minimum standards defined by Shelter Technical Working Group and the scope of the intervention. Where required, rehabilitations included household-level water and sanitation facilities. Local contractors conducted the works, which included maintenance and installation of doors and windows, treatment of mould, tiling, repairing WASH facilities, installation of solar panels, etc.

Third-party monitors conducted regular visits to all rehabilitated properties to assess progress, submitting narrative reports, verified Bills of Quantities, photographs and videos.

Post-implementation monitoring was carried out through household visits by local partner staff immediately and three months after handover, as well as remotely, via WhatsApp and phone calls.

TARGETING

This project targeted vulnerable conflict-affected households living in substandard conditions in urban and peri-urban areas, regardless of displacement status. Households were selected based on two sets of criteria: socio-economic vulnerabilities and housing conditions (both technical and HLP-related).

Project locations were identified in collaboration with the local partner's field staff, based on a combination of access, context and security risk analysis, and severity and scale of needs. Following the pre-identification of potential communities, the local partner's legal team conducted a community-level assessment that looked at safety, accessibility and number of IDPs in the community, along with the HLP due diligence process outlined below. Approval from both the shelter and legal teams was required to confirm the communities' eligibility for the project. To avoid any social tensions, the organization chose villages where all houses could be assessed.
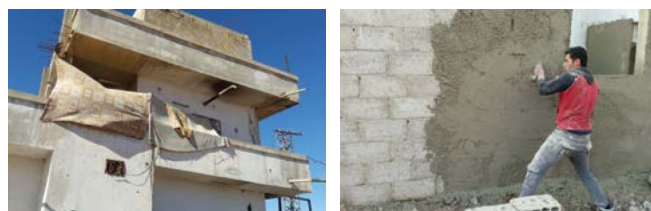
The legal team assessed each building and confirmed if works could be conducted. While this ensured HLP issues were mitigated, it also meant that some households had to be left without assistance.

HLP DUE DILIGENCE PROCESS

An HLP due diligence process was followed to inform decisions and reduce the risk of doing harm to either members of the displaced or host community. The process aimed to achieve as much certainty as possible about the ownership and usage rights of targeted buildings, given time and resource constraints. It included two main steps:

First, a community-level process was designed to understand the highly varied HLP situation and stakeholder dynamics within the target locations and decide whether to move forward with the intervention. In areas outside the control of the Syrian government, the de-facto authorities had taken up normal governance roles. This stage looked at which law was applied in the area; how HLP rights were acquired; which HLP documentation was available; whether HLP disputes were prevalent; and whether and how these were resolved.

Secondly, a household-level exercise was carried out for each selected building or shelter unit, to verify ownership and usage rights, in order to reduce the risk of eviction and disputes. This included identifying the lawful person who owned the property and could authorize the use of the building, understanding the history of the building's ownership and use, and determining whether the building had been, was or was likely to be involved in any dispute. The process comprised interviews with the landlords or property owners and with the tenants or users of the property. The data collected was evaluated by the legal team, who then gave their recommendation whether there was enough certainty to proceed.

Many landowners were not able to provide documented proof of ownership of their property. However, the organization managed to apply community verification mechanisms to ensure that vulnerable individuals, including those without HLP documents, were included in the project.

For tenants, the rehabilitation works were completed in exchange for a 12-month rent-free period. Where the landlord threatened to end the tenancy during the lease agreement, the organization examined the case and resolved it – for example, through mediation between the household and the landlord, or by identifying an alternative shelter within the same sub-district.

COORDINATION AND REMOTE MANAGEMENT

As gaining acceptance from the local community was difficult working remotely, it was essential to build good relations with the local authorities through the local partner. In opposition-controlled areas, the local councils had overall responsibility for the humanitarian response, but did not have the required skills and experience, nor an understanding of key principles such as impartiality. They often tried to interfere with the beneficiary selection and other phases of the project. Therefore, the selection criteria and project steps and goals had to be clearly explained to the community and its leaders.

As the organization did not have direct access to the project locations, there were monitoring, logistics and communication issues. Good relations with the local partner and remote feedback mechanisms were essential to mitigate the impact of these challenges. To support remote implementation, a mobile application was downloaded on staff's phones to collect data from the field digitally and allow the organization to access and analyse it throughout the implementation process. A WhatsApp feedback mechanism was established to supplement other systems (e.g. phone calls), based on a study of available communication options.

PROTECTION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Selection criteria were explained to the communities to reduce the likelihood of complaints during implementation.

The specific priorities, needs and concerns relating to age, gender or disability were considered through vulnerability-based targeting, community consultation, tailored interventions based on beneficiaries' inputs, mixed-gender teams with technical and social skillsets, regular monitoring and feedback mechanisms. Additional items such as disabled-friendly toilets, ramps and handles were included in the assistance package, to help address specific mobility issues within the shelter.

The legal team provided collaborative dispute resolution services on a case-by-case basis, when conflicts between property owners and the tenants arose.

SECURITY CHALLENGES

Apart from remote management challenges, the project had to adapt to a highly dynamic and unpredictable environment, where operational plans were based on most-likely scenarios and continuously updated based on context analysis. Additionally, working in southern Syria had exceptionally high risks. For this reason, the organization worked with the local partner to insure local staff through third parties and to establish duty-of-care policies and procedures.

MATERIALS AND SUPPLY

All materials and labour were sourced locally by the implementing partner. The material supplier was selected using a closed tender process (owing to visibility restrictions in southern Syria), with three quotations sought from different suppliers. The supplier was selected based on a combination of unit costs, quality, vetting, proximity to targeted communities and stock-levels.

HANDOVER PHASE

After the rehabilitation works were completed, a handover certificate was signed with the property owner and an occupancy certificate was signed between the property owner and the tenant. This occupancy certificate outlined the responsibilities and obligations of both parties.

WIDER IMPACTS

The project represented a step towards durable solutions and allowed the organization to scale up its response in various locations across Syria. Despite the enormous challenge of working remotely in such a volatile context, the organization successfully recruited, trained and provided the local partner staff with the necessary tools and methodologies required throughout the project cycle. This built their capacity to implement additional projects in the future.

Rehabilitation works were conducted using local labour and materials.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Where required, works included rehabilitation of household-level water and sanitation systems.
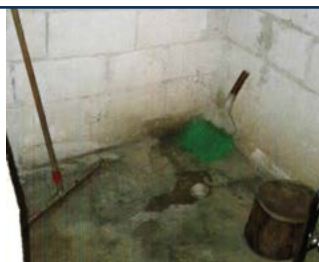
The project considered the needs of persons with disabilities.

STRENGTHS

+ Using locally available labour and materials helped support the local economy in the project area through providing new income opportunities and improving the status of local vendors.

+ Installing solar panels for households with no electrical connection helped reduce their expenditure and provided a constant source of electricity in areas with very limited power supply.

+ The specific needs of persons with disabilities and elderly were considered in the intervention, by ensuring protection mainstreaming throughout the activities and enhancing the accessibility within the shelters.

+ HLP issues were considered and addressed, reducing the threat of eviction. The project uncovered important information about the power dynamics in the targeted villages and **strengthened the role of local stakeholders,** such as councils and community leaders in dealing with HLP issues, including dispute resolution. This was particularly relevant as the areas were outside of the Syrian government control.

+ The hotline mechanism was effective in obtaining regular feedback from the beneficiaries, which led to improvements in the project.

+ The project improved living conditions by increasing protection from harsh weather conditions, enhancing physical security and overall privacy of affected households, as confirmed by the post-implementation monitoring.

WEAKNESSES

- Limited engagement and cooperation with the local council (specially in handing over the beneficiary list), and capacity and understanding of humanitarian principles. This should have been anticipated and addressed from the outset.

- Low construction quality. Managing the project remotely made it more difficult to conduct proper monitoring and inspection of the quality of the works carried out by the local partner. Seventeen per cent of surveyed households were not satisfied with the assistance, and 78 per cent stated that their properties needed further rehabilitation.

- The HLP due diligence process was time-consuming, particularly for the complexity of understanding HLP rights in a conflict zone and the lack of ownership documents.

- Households that did not meet the requirements of the HLP due diligence process were not compensated with another form of assistance, although their needs were high. Most of the shelters assessed were in poor conditions and needed rehabilitation, but the organization could not proceed in cases where the owners were not identified.

- Information flows between the shelter/WASH and the legal teams were challenging at the beginning, causing confusion during the implementation. In addition, for most households the two teams conducted separate visits as part of the selection and due diligence processes. Instead, **all assessments should have been undertaken at once,** to save time and avoid multiple visits to the same family.

- The project was very small in scale compared to the needs in the country, as well as in the target areas.

- Some families decided to leave the house or the area, which resulted in about 19 per cent rehabilitated houses not being used (14.6% empty, 4.2% occupied by other families). This should have been identified in the selection process – to avoid wasting time – by asking more detailed questions about the intention of the family to relocate, or the risk of eviction.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Registration should have occurred directly** through the organization's staff, without any interference from the local council or local partner. This would have been possible remotely via calling the organization's hotline or filling a survey via WhatsApp.

- **Only a few households did not meet the requirements of the due diligence process,** which shows that the team was able to balance the need for legal certainty with the situation on the ground and the lack of HLP documents.

- **Developing a database between Shelter/WASH and HLP assessment teams** would have improved the communication flow and documentation.

- **A community verification mechanism should be developed for households without any documentation** to prove HLP rights (i.e. a landlord who does not have any property document).