

Intersections

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Each year, MCC responds to dozens of disasters and crises around the world that displace tens of thousands of people. In many cases, those in need of assistance have been displaced by conflict. In its most recent global trends report on forced displacement, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported a record number of persons displaced from their homes at the end of 2018 as a result of persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations, including 25.9 million refugees and 41.3 million internally displaced, with 37,000 new displacements each day. This context of violence informs not only the type of response that MCC supports, but also the way in which the response is undertaken.

MCC's relief work adheres to the Core Humanitarian Standard (2014) on quality and accountability that seeks to keep communities and people affected by crisis at the center of any response. Based on the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, the CHS sets out nine commitments that agencies carrying out humanitarian responses should follow to improve the assistance they provide:

Cover: Alberto Mosquera, traveling by boat in this March 2018 photo, is a farmer in the Lower San Juan region of Chocó, Colombia. Mosquera is a participant in a cacao project run by MCC partner Weaving Hope Agricultural Foundation (FAGROTES/ Fundación Agropecuaria Tejiendo Esperanza). Through the project, Mosquera received technical assistance in cultivating and processing cacao. (MCC photo/Alex Morse)

1. Communities and people affected by crisis receive assistance appropriate and relevant to their needs.
2. Communities and people affected by crisis have access to the humanitarian assistance they need at the right time.
3. Communities and people affected by crisis are not negatively affected and are more prepared, resilient and less at-risk as a result of humanitarian action.
4. Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them.
5. Communities and people affected by crisis have access to safe and responsive mechanisms to handle complaints.
6. Communities and people affected by crisis receive coordinated, complementary assistance.
7. Communities and people affected by crisis can expect delivery of improved assistance as organizations learn from experience and reflection.
8. Communities and people affected by crisis receive the assistance they require from competent and well-managed staff and volunteers.
9. Communities and people affected by crisis can expect that the organizations assisting them are managing resources effectively, efficiently and ethically.

It is not enough simply to distribute sufficient food or ship the needed number of blankets. Authentic consultation with affected communities is essential to ensuring that humanitarian response is appropriate and relevant, effective and timely, strengthens local capacities and accounts for community feedback. MCC's response in situations of conflict must consider the physical safety and security of participants and staff and access to affected populations. Projects not only respond to tangible needs such as food and shelter but also address the very real psychosocial needs that arise from the trauma of displacement, violence and destruction of homes and communities. Humanitarian assistance in these contexts requires good conflict analysis to ensure that the provision of assistance does not exacerbate conflict and cause more harm than good.

The articles in this issue of *Intersections* explore the ways in which MCC, together with its local partners, has been navigating these complexities in providing humanitarian assistance amid conflict in contexts as varied as Colombia, Nigeria, South Sudan, Lebanon and Syria. Each case examined in these articles contributes to MCC's ongoing learning for the sake of improving its future work, offering lessons about maintaining the impartiality of humanitarian response, analyzing different types of diversion of humanitarian assistance, garnering support from men for humanitarian interventions aimed at women, integrating conflict sensitivity into humanitarian response, building on local capacities for peace and strengthening the sustainability of humanitarian assistance projects.

Stephanie Dyck is MCC Lebanon and Syria's external grants program coordinator.



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Core Humanitarian Standard:
corehumanitarianstandard.org

Responding to natural hazards in a conflict zone: MCC's experience in Colombia

Over the years, MCC Colombia has found that the most reliable way to respond to natural disasters in conflict zones is through respected local church groups with deep experience and a long-standing presence in conflicted regions.

For over 70 years, Mennonite Brethren communities have lived, worked and worshipped along the rivers of Colombia's Chocó region, principally the San Juan, but also along smaller tributaries, and, more recently, the great Atrato. The Chocó region is the second-rainiest place in the world, and as the rain falls, the region's rivers swell and slowly flow out into both the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Chocó's population is clustered along the rivers, which have long served as main transportation routes, sources of sustenance and the orienting social force. But they are also the source of frequent flooding, flooding exacerbated by climate change and changes in the riverbed brought on by industrial-scale dredge mining.

As the severity and frequency of flooding has increased, the Mennonite Brethren church has developed expertise in emergency response. MCC has supported the Colombian Mennonite Brethren church in Chocó in these efforts for three main reasons. First, since Mennonite Brethren communities in the region have often been affected by the flooding, they have become adept at conducting very accurate situation assessments. Secondly, the Colombian state has minimal presence in these communities, and any assistance arriving through international aid organizations or the state only reaches more urban areas and often gets corrupted by local politics. Finally, despite the 2016 peace accords between the Colombian state and the FARC guerrillas, the armed conflict and presence of active armed groups remains an intractable reality in Chocó, making outside humanitarian relief efforts extremely difficult.

In this context, the Mennonite Brethren of Chocó have become experts at providing humanitarian relief in a conflict zone. Many of their strategies and practices mirror best practices for humanitarian relief operations more generally: the difference is simply that the stakes are raised in a conflict zone.

Through collaboration and cooperation with the Mennonite Brethren, MCC Colombia has found several practices to be crucial. First, it has been important to utilize local resources and supply chains, rather than bringing in goods from outside the region. By using local resources, the humanitarian response benefits the community in multiple ways, both by providing needed relief and by patronizing local merchants and vendors. This has helped to guarantee the cultural appropriateness of the aid being distributed, as well as to strengthen relational networks in the affected region. In a few cases, it was necessary to purchase the relief items in a larger urban area and transport them to the communities affected by the flooding, but the Mennonite Brethren have never brought in resources from outside the department or disconnected from the churches. Especially in a region where the social fabric has been significantly frayed by the armed conflict, purchasing aid items from local merchants builds trust and relational collateral, rather than inviting suspicion by bringing in outside aid.

“ Especially in a region where the social fabric has been significantly frayed by the armed conflict, purchasing aid items from local merchants builds trust and relational collateral, rather than inviting suspicion by bringing in outside aid.”

A second strategy employed by the Mennonite Brethren has been to maintain clear communication with local municipal authorities, while simultaneously remaining independent of them in the distribution of aid. As is considered best practice, the Mennonite Brethren always clarify with municipal authorities which populations have received state aid and what further plans the municipality has for responding to the flooding. But rather than directly coordinating their response through the municipality, the Mennonite Brethren independently implement their emergency response. In this way, they have avoided having portions of their aid redirected along local patronage lines or used as a payout to different groups. This has been an especially important practice during election seasons. Because the Mennonite Brethren are committed to the region long-term and hold a distinct faith identity, they are extremely careful about associating their activities with any temporal political entity. This allows them to maintain a posture of non-collusion and independence that ultimately serves as a form of protection for both the church and its disaster response.

Third, in any conflict zone there will be long-term effects from the trauma experienced by the population, in addition to the trauma and stress generated by the natural disaster itself. The Mennonite Brethren recognize this dynamic and have tried to include psychosocial support and pastoral counseling as part of their disaster relief efforts. Traveling in Chocó, particularly in the rural regions, is both expensive and risky; it would be difficult to sustain a trauma support program that had the same geographic reach and scope as the humanitarian relief efforts have. By coupling trauma support with relief efforts, the church can address the emotional needs of far more communities than if they were to attempt a similar effort apart from a humanitarian response.

Finally, and most crucially, emergency response in conflict zones cannot be done without clear communication and relationships with local community actors. This is true for both the situation assessment and implementation stages of humanitarian response. In the context of Chocó, main transportation routes are controlled and monitored by both the state and illegal armed groups. Moving large amounts of food and non-food aid along these routes requires that proper permission is obtained, that communities have approved the arrival of aid and that the local partner distributing the aid—in this case, the Mennonite Brethren Church—be respected and known by all local actors. In Chocó, for example, the Mennonite Brethren insist on clear communication, but in a way that emphasizes their neutrality as a religious, faith-based group. So, in order to transport fertilizer beyond a certain point, the church must have clearance from the government, because it is considered a monitored substance, due to its use in coca production. Other times, the church has had to register their boats with the government, along with the aid they transport, as a humanitarian mission. But the church has consistently refused military escorts for their humanitarian missions, because then they would no longer be seen as a neutral, pacifist group. Instead, they communicate directly with community leaders who can confirm when it would be safe to travel and deliver the humanitarian aid.

If a community leader advises the Mennonite Brethren not travel at the proposed time, they will respect the recommendation and postpone their visit.

All of this is possible only because the Mennonite Brethren Church in Chocó has developed and nurtured an historic and consistent testimony in the region. By consistently presenting a peace witness, working for the benefit



The Mennonite Brethren have consistently refused military escorts for their humanitarian missions, because then the illegal armed groups would no longer recognize them as a neutral, pacifist group.”

and well-being of the communities to which they belong and abstaining from open affiliations with armed groups, the military or local governments, the Mennonite Brethren adeptly and prudently respond to natural disasters and humanitarian crises within their region. It has been an honor for MCC Colombia to learn from and work alongside them.

Elizabeth Miller is MCC Colombia representative and lives in Bogotá.

Diversions and humanitarian assistance in South Sudan

The positive and negative impacts of humanitarian assistance can be viewed through two primary lenses: first, the direct impact from the transfer of aid in meeting basic human needs; and second, the ethical message conveyed in the provision of assistance. In this article, I examine a key factor that humanitarian agencies in conflict settings that plan food assistance interventions must consider, namely, diversion. My discussion of diversion builds on MCC's experience in supporting food assistance projects implemented by a South Sudanese church relief organization among famine-affected internally displaced peoples in the part of South Sudan formerly known as Unity State (in 2015, the South Sudanese government divided Unity State into the three new states of Ruweng, Northern Liech and Southern Liech).

Diversion in humanitarian assistance refers to actions that, by altering the intended distribution of relief items, results in humanitarian assistance being reduced, not reaching or being delayed in reaching intended beneficiaries, or being used for something other than its intended purpose. One type of diversion involves actions by political officials or by armed groups (such as the police, the military or non-state actors) to intercept and divert humanitarian assistance away from the intended beneficiaries. Another type of diversion, however, happens when project participants themselves use humanitarian assistance they receive for something other than the planned-for purpose. Selling food assistance is a classic example of such diversion. Another type of diversion happens when beneficiaries share assistance they receive with family, friends and neighbors. My focus in this article will be on this latter type of diversion of humanitarian assistance by project participants.

Targeting in food assistance programming aims to ensure that food aid is distributed based on the needs and vulnerabilities of the intended recipients and endeavors to prevent harm by limiting any negative impact of food aid. Targeting also seeks to maximize the efficient and effective use of resources to aid the most vulnerable members of a community. Food aid is geographically targeted to meet needs in an affected area, with further targeting then based on vulnerability and needs within that geographical area at the individual, household or group level. Humanitarian agencies and churches make plans that target specific individuals and households based on these needs and vulnerability criteria. These plans, however, must be flexible in the face of diversion by beneficiaries who share resources they receive with others.

A concrete example will help clarify the issues at stake in diversion. In December 2018, staff with the Episcopal Church for South Sudan-South Sudanese Development and Relief Agency (ECSS-SUDRA) conducted a survey of internally displaced peoples (IDPs) in the former Unity State who



Nyang Jawu Nyanpiu is one of more than 1,000 households that received food items such as sorghum, beans, cooking oil and salt in South Sudan's Rubkona, Pariang and Bentiu counties.

Nyanpiu, who is in her early 70s, lost her family members during conflict in her home village and fled to the Pariang camp for IDPs where her only surviving son died of an unknown illness. (MCC Photo/Patrick Mulu)



Ubuntu is an ancient African worldview based on the primary values of humanness, caring, sharing, respect and compassion, values that help ensure happiness and well-being within family and community: within this worldview, sharing one's resources with family, friends and neighbors is a cultural imperative.

Learn more

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, South Sudan.

<https://www.unocha.org/south-sudan>

had received food assistance through a project implemented by ECSS-SUDRA with support from MCC and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB). The survey revealed that the supported beneficiaries had shared, sold and diverted part of the food they had received through the project, rather than keeping all of it for their household food needs (the intended purpose).

When ECSS-SUDRA staff asked why this diversion had happened, beneficiaries gave multiple responses. For many, diverting food assistance they had received represented a way to help relatives and friends who had newly arrived and settled in the camp. Conflict often separates members of extended and even nuclear families from one another. In contrast, stability and food in times of need bring family members together. Food aid recipients therefore sought to share this assistance with their extended relatives who also experienced need. Not only that, but the ECSS-SUDRA survey found that some food aid recipients also shared a portion of their food aid with newly arrived IDPs, both with IDPs coming from their home communities and with returnees from distant internal displacement camps and refugee settlements.

Another cause of diversion by beneficiaries was that some items in the distributed food parcels were not readily usable in the form provided. So, for example, beneficiaries reported that they lacked money to have the sorghum that came in the food package ground into flour: they therefore sold the sorghum for cash. Recipients who sold items from the food package reported doing so in order to meet other priority needs, such as the purchase of soap or meat or for covering medical expenses.

Still other recipients viewed the food assistance as an opportunity to start a business. In some cases, recipients sold food assistance to access startup capital. Others who already had access to some capital used those funds to grind the sorghum they received into flour for baking bread that they then sold, increasing household income.

The types of diversions described above are common when humanitarian agencies distribute food assistance in conflict situations. Humanitarian agencies like MCC might sometimes unreflectively assume that food is the primary, or even sole, need of IDPs and other vulnerable groups, yet such peoples, who may have no regular sources of income, have other basic needs, including health, hygiene and education. Diversion in these instances represents a creative attempt by beneficiaries to meet multiple needs through food aid which had originally been intended to meet only basic nutritional and diet diversity needs.

When the number of people who end up benefiting from humanitarian assistance surpasses the originally planned scope of the project, one reasonably deduces that diversion by beneficiaries has occurred. So, for example, ECSS-SUDRA found through its survey that the household sizes reported at the end of the project varied from what was originally projected, resulting in the project reaching more households than anticipated in the initial plan. Households expanded as IDPs welcomed members of their extended families. Also, the number of overall beneficiaries of the project expanded as recipients shared and consumed food aid with their friends and relatives.

Humanitarian agencies like MCC and ECSS-SUDRA seek to ensure that the amount of food aid distributed is appropriate and effective for the size of

the households receiving the assistance. Yet, in *bantu* contexts like the areas where ECSS-SUDRA operate, people hold strongly to the communal value of *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is an ancient African worldview based on the primary values of humanness, caring, sharing, respect and compassion, values that help ensure happiness and well-being within family and community: within this worldview, sharing one's resources with family, friends and neighbors is a cultural imperative. *Ubuntu* calls on people to show basic respect and compassion for others, based on a recognition of how people are defined by communal relations: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." One's neighbor's survival is a precondition of one's own survival: sharing the food one has, including food assistance one has received, is a duty. One is not separate from family members who have also had to run away from their homes and villages, nor is one separate from friends and neighbors, including new neighbors in an IDP camp. *Ubuntu* calls people to extend food and brotherly embrace. While humanitarian assistance project plans may give clear instructions about beneficiary selection, the communal value of *ubuntu* disrupts these plans through its spirit of sharing.

There are several steps that can be taken to minimize negative types of diversion in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. These include improved planning, needs assessments, regular monitoring, integration of priority needs into holistic assistance packages, provision of assistance that can have long-term benefits and empowerment of and coordination with local actors to prevent duplication of support. Yet, as the ECSS-SUDRA experience in South Sudan shows, not all forms of diversion by beneficiaries are harmful. Indeed, when recipients of food aid share those resources with extended families and social networks, they extend the benefit of food assistance and help foster social cohesion, even if these benefits were not part of the original project planning.

Amos Okello is MCC representative for South Sudan and Sudan.

Peacebuilding and social cohesion in humanitarian response in Nigeria

MCC Nigeria and its partners, the Emergency Preparedness and Response Teams (EPRT) and the Ekklesiya Yan'uwa A Nijeriya (EYN, or the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria), have found that integrating conflict sensitivity into humanitarian assistance initiatives is critical for the success of these projects and for promoting social cohesion within societies torn apart by violent conflict. Conducting a careful conflict analysis during the project design phase and then building on local capacities for peace during project implementation help the project avoid exacerbating tensions within the pluralistic Nigerian context in which intercommunal relationships have deteriorated and in which suspicion between groups allows mutual mistrust and even hatred and enmity to flourish, leading to violence.

In the last two decades, violent conflicts in and around Jos, Nigeria (where MCC Nigeria's office is located), have increased, resulting in devastating losses of life and destruction of property. These conflicts primarily stem from battles for control of and access to resources, even as different identities (such as religious and ethnic identities) are mobilized to enflame these conflicts. Nearly two decades ago, MCC worked with Nigerian leaders in the Jos area to establish an organization, EPRT, committed to nonviolent conflict prevention. A network of Nigerian Muslim and Christian leaders in and around Jos, EPRT undertakes proactive action to mitigate conflicts amongst peoples of

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differing faiths and ethnic groups. EPRT also carries out humanitarian assistance in Jos's religiously and ethnically mixed context. In carrying out these emergency humanitarian initiatives, EPRT has achieved success by incorporating numerous conflict sensitivity practices into its humanitarian initiatives, such as: interfaith and inter-agency collaboration, which creates a conducive environment for program delivery and which minimizes suspicion across religious lines; inclusion of women as part of emergency response teams, thus helping to ensure that women in affected communities speak into project design and that the needs of women and children are thus considered at all stages of the project cycle; and using community-based volunteers who represent different faiths. These strategies have decisively contributed to the success of EPRT's work.

In developing interventions in complex crisis situations, humanitarian actors must consider *dividers* (actions we want to stop or attitudes we want to change) and *connectors* (actions and attitudes we want to encourage). Humanitarian interventions in a conflictual context become part of that context, making it essential for humanitarian organizations to commit to a Do No Harm approach in their distribution of relief aid. In planning its humanitarian interventions, EPRT first analyzes dividers that drive intercommunal conflict and potential connectors that can help mitigate such conflict and then integrates that analysis in the design of its humanitarian responses so that they do not heighten interreligious or intergroup tension but rather create room for peaceful coexistence.

EPRT collaborates with 11 Nigerian organizations, with a balance of Christian and Muslim organizations and of organizations led by women and men. This diverse network of program partnerships strengthens EPRT's efforts to reduce violent emergencies in Nigeria's Plateau State where Jos is located. EPRT's activities include the establishment of peace clubs in schools, leading Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) workshops, conducting needs assessments and environmental impact assessments, distributing humanitarian relief and maintaining an early warning system that mobilizes Nigerian religious leaders and peacebuilders to proactively respond early on in preventing intercommunal tensions from turning violent.

A recent relief distribution carried out by EPRT with MCC support in four informal camps for displaced Nigerians as well as in the surrounding host communities of Rawuru, Kworos, Barkin-Ladi and Kassa used participatory approaches during the design process, so that beneficiaries were involved in all aspects of the response. Beneficiaries actively joined in identifying family and community strengths and capacities, prioritizing household and community needs, securing logistical and planning support, implementing project activities (with implementation carried out by gender-balanced, interfaith teams) and monitoring the distribution of relief items. EPRT invests time and efforts to secure the support of various religious and community leaders, given the fact that these critical stakeholders have tremendous social power and capital that can be used to help or hinder humanitarian responses. By involving beneficiaries and local leaders in project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, EPRT enhances local ownership and acceptance of the project. This local ownership also means that EPRT receives timely and candid feedback from beneficiaries and local leaders about the strengths and weaknesses of its humanitarian responses. EPRT's humanitarian interventions not only meet the needs of displaced persons and vulnerable members of host communities, but also seek to strengthen interreligious tolerance and build common ground by creating shared safe spaces for relationship-building across ethno-religious



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The Do No Harm Project.

The *“Do No Harm” Framework for Analyzing the Impact of Assistance on Conflict: A Handbook*. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2004. Available at: <https://www.cdacollaborative.org/publication/the-do-no-harm-framework-for-analyzing-the-impact-of-assistance-on-conflict-a-handbook/>

lines. Although the violent crises that had erupted in the Jos area were perceived by Nigerian Christians as being driven by Muslims, EPRT based its relief distributions on need, not on religion, creed or social status, recognizing that impartial aid distributions have the potential to build social cohesion in a context in which some actors seek to create and widen divisions along religious lines.

An experience of an attempted relief distribution in Gurku camp by a Muslim organization offers a second example of the importance of a conflict sensitivity approach in planning the distribution of relief items in an interfaith context. This Muslim group had planned to distribute relief assistance only to Muslims during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan within a formal camp setting that included Muslims and Christians. Given that the households in the camp were from different faith groups, the Muslim camp officials refused the relief items, insisting that until all IDPs in the camp benefited regardless of religious affiliation, the distribution could not take place. Camp leaders had participated in workshops organized by EYN on the Healing and Rebuilding our Communities (HROC) approach from Rwanda, which had emphasized the importance of considering conflict drivers and connectors when developing humanitarian responses and thus prepared community leaders to ask critical questions about humanitarian initiatives like this one proposed by a Muslim organization that would have had negative consequences in fracturing social cohesion.

Humanitarian actors may have worthy goals and seek to meet basic human needs, but if they do not incorporate conflict sensitivity into project planning and implementation, serious harms can materialize for project participants. Care must be taken to ensure that cultural norms and religious doctrines do not disrupt the distribution of humanitarian assistance and that the project does not create more conflict by ignoring cultural norms.

For decades, MCC in Nigeria has worked alongside partners like EPRT and EYN to meet basic human needs, address injustices and rebuild communities that were previously segregated along religious lines. Through these efforts, MCC and its partners have discovered that integrating conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding into the heart of every project, promoting social cohesion across differences and building interreligious capacities for peace are essential for the success of humanitarian interventions.

Hyeladzira Balami is administrative and finance assistant for MCC Nigeria.



Issa Chung, a local Emergency Preparedness and Response Team (EPRT) member in the Bukuru community of Jos, Nigeria, presents at a meeting in March 2018. Local EPRT teams, a collaboration between MCC and JDPC (Justice Development and Peace CARITAS) seek to build and promote sustainable peace, resulting in the reduction of election violence, community conflict and emergencies/ crises in Plateau State, creating a culture of harmony and acceptance among secondary school age children throughout the state. (MCC Photo/ Allan Reesor-McDowell)

MCC's humanitarian response to conflict in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan

In its largest humanitarian response since World War II, MCC has programmed more than US\$63.4 million to respond to conflict and displacement in Syria since 2012 and Iraq since 2014. MCC's response programming spans four countries—both Syria and Iraq, along with neighboring Lebanon and Jordan, who host large refugee populations relative to their national size. In these countries, MCC works in close partnership with church relief organizations, Islamic charitable societies, national non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations.

Through these partnerships, MCC responds to urgent and ongoing humanitarian needs of refugees and internally displaced people, including food and cash assistance, shelter rehabilitation, rent support and provision of essential household and hygiene items. While most items are purchased locally, MCC also ships in-kind hygiene items, blankets and other humanitarian assistance from Canada, the U.S. and Europe to be distributed as part of its response. Over the past seven years, MCC has shipped humanitarian aid valued at over US\$11 million.

MCC and its partners also address the needs of people impacted by conflict beyond the provision of food and other humanitarian support.

Staff of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) unloaded a humanitarian aid shipment that was sent in October 2018 from the West Europe Mennonite Regional Conference and MCC to MECC's warehouse in Dara'a, Syria. The shipment included 368 quilts, 800 relief buckets and 4,976 school kits, along with children's clothing and other blankets. Names not provided for security reasons. (Photo courtesy of Middle East Council of Churches)



Summary of MCC Syria-Iraq Crisis Response*

2,878
individuals attended a non-formal education support program

23,796
households received a heater and/or heating fuel program

7,451
individuals attended improved hygiene practices education sessions

1,187
children attended K-12 or early childhood education programs

39,406
individuals received financial support (cash allowances, rent assistance)

113,063
individuals received clean water for household use, were connected to an improved water supply system or had access to improved water at school.

183,624
individuals received emergency food assistance (including food baskets, cash vouchers)

5,826
individuals attended health and nutrition sessions

*Based on end-of-project reporting received between 2012 and August 31, 2019, for MCC's humanitarian projects in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan

As displacement interrupts or limits access to education for children and youth, MCC provides support for formal and remedial education programs. MCC also promotes positive relationships between host and displaced communities and between different ethnic and religious groups in order to prevent intercommunal tension and to promote peace. In recognition of the immense trauma experienced by conflict-affected families, MCC programs provide trauma healing support and psychological care, along with building the skills of partners to respond to psychological needs. As the nature of the conflict in Syria and Iraq and the circumstances of affected people change, MCC adjusts its programming to better address the evolving needs and situations on the ground. Now as some displaced families begin returning to their homes, MCC explores ways to provide empowering and sustainable humanitarian assistance.

As evident from several of the articles within this issue of Intersections, large-scale and long-term humanitarian response to conflict in Syria and Iraq has challenged MCC and its partners to develop skills for effectively responding to the differing needs of women, children and men within difficult circumstances. Although the needs continue to be immense and resources are limited, MCC's response in Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon has reached hundreds of thousands of people impacted by conflict, political instability and displacement—all in the name of Christ.

Amy Martens is an MCC humanitarian assistance coordinator, based in Winnipeg.

Children, ages 3-5, enjoy the magician's rabbit trick during a magic show at their school. This is one of the schools in southern Lebanon that MCC funds through partner Popular Aid for Relief and Development (PARL). MCC staff collaborated with school staff to invite the magician to perform at all the MCC-supported schools as an extension to MCC's kindergarten education project which includes psychosocial training. PARL has worked many years in Palestinian areas in southern Lebanon and began including psychosocial activities to give Syrian and Palestinian refugees tools to address trauma and an opportunity to express themselves and grow in confidence. Names are withheld for security reasons. (Photo courtesy of PARL)



104 humanitarian relief shipments

4,842

individuals attended peacebuilding or conflict resolution training

3,353

individuals attended trauma awareness and healing training

832

individuals received vocational, employment or livelihoods skills training

212,628

blankets

219,369

hygiene kits

70,000

relief kits

388,689

school kits

34,403

infant care kits

Additional items like teachers' supplies, toothpaste, sewing kits, medical equipment and dried soup.



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Inter-agency Standing Committee. “The Grand Bargain.” Available at <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

Pavanello, Sara with Larissa Fast and Eva Svoboda. “Fostering Local Partnerships in Remote Management and High-Threat Settings.” Report commissioned by the Humanitarian Policy Group. July 2018. Available at <http://odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12302.pdf>

Supporting local humanitarian response in Syria

Access, local capacity, managing tensions with host communities and security—these are just a few of many areas to consider when operating in complex humanitarian environments. MCC’s local partnership approach to its work globally often provides a comparative advantage when responding to crises, particularly in cases such as Syria, where active conflict and issues of security and access make it difficult for other actors, such as international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) involved in direct implementation, from easily coordinating a response. The international community has also formally recognized the need to increase support by donor governments, the United Nations and INGOs to local organizations in an agreement known as the Grand Bargain, launched in 2016 as a commitment to improving the “effectiveness and efficiency” of humanitarian action. While many other INGOs scrambled to find local partners to work with to respond to the Syrian war, MCC already had long-established partnerships in place, some established more than 20 years before the start of the war. While this has enabled MCC to respond to the basic needs of many Syrian households and communities over the past nine years, this opportunity to respond has not been without its own learning and challenges.

Since its work began in Syria in 1991, MCC’s partners have been churches or church agencies whose primary work was in education, support for persons with disabilities and agricultural, social service and humanitarian relief initiatives. What changed with the beginning of the war was not their desire to respond to the needs of their communities, but the needs of those communities. A large part of MCC’s work with its partners in the initial period of the response was to build their capacity and provide training on how to distribute food parcels, non-food items and cash allowances according to international humanitarian principles and standards. For smaller local Syrian groups and organizations, the funds made available for humanitarian response by donor countries and organizations were new and carried with them expectations and accountability mechanisms with which they had no previous experience. With time, many MCC partners have been able to access new sources of donor funding since their response to the conflict began, thanks to having gained proficiency in programming and reporting on humanitarian assistance in a way that meets global best practice standards and donor expectations.

Working with existing partners also dictates, to a certain extent, the locations where MCC’s response will be focused, as MCC’s access is limited to the access partners already have or are able to acquire. This does not mean that the assistance is not targeted to the most vulnerable within a community. However, the fact that the project areas inside Syria during the war have been limited to where MCC’s church partners can operate freely has necessarily left some parts of the country outside of MCC’s ability to respond. This has included besieged areas where access has been difficult for all actors as well as areas under the control of groups with whom MCC and its partners cannot obtain guarantees for safe access. Despite these restrictions, the areas available to MCC partners have nevertheless included a majority of Syria’s governorates and many communities that host internally displaced households from all corners of the country. The depth of knowledge and trust that local partners have in these communities

has allowed MCC-supported projects to bridge divides between people of different religious beliefs as well as between displaced and host community households.

International organizations also need to take seriously the security risks that are passed on to local partners in complex operating environments such as Syria. Local partner staff assume significant security risks on top of working to mitigate the risks to those receiving assistance. The choice of distribution locations, whether to distribute cash or in-kind assistance, the specific needs of those with limited mobility, access to areas for monitoring visits—all need to be considered and managed by local staff and volunteers. While international donors require that partners participate in and share information with official aid coordination structures, this can also carry risks when the provision of assistance might include households from areas previously outside of government control. MCC and the donor agencies from which it receives funds for the response in Syria must take seriously the duty of care that comes with working in a volatile context and be willing to allow for necessary exceptions to standard practices. MCC and donor agencies also need to fulfill their duty of care in helping partners build their capacity to manage risk and security effectively.

As MCC continues to respond to short- and longer-term humanitarian needs in Syria, these issues of access, capacity and security will remain and evolve. The lessons of the last nine years of supporting local partners in Syria will inform MCC's ongoing response in the country. As MCC grows in its understanding of the interplay of access, local partner capacity and security, the experience of the Syria crisis will also help it to more effectively respond to future humanitarian crises in the Middle East and other parts of the world.

Stephanie Dyck is external grants program coordinator for MCC Lebanon and Syria.

Integrating protection into psychosocial support for Syrian refugee and vulnerable Lebanese women

For the past three years, the Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training (LOST), in partnership with MCC, has been implementing one of its largest protection projects in the area of Baalbeck-Hermel. Entitled “She Matters,” this project aims at providing trauma and psychosocial support for Syrian refugee and vulnerable Lebanese women. LOST faced several challenges in introducing the project to the Baalbeck-Hermel area. In order to ensure the success of the project, LOST staff needed to address several protection-related concerns in order to ensure the safety of project staff and participants as well gain the trust of the communities to which the participants belonged.

The security situation in Baalbeck-Hermel can be very tense, with tribal conflicts arising at any moment alongside ongoing internal conflicts emerging from political tensions. LOST therefore took the necessary steps to ensure the safety of participants and staff at project sites near conflict zones, adjusting the schedule of activities to safer times and including transportation for beneficiaries. Additionally, in some areas project participants faced the risk of arrest while going to and from project activities

“ Local partner staff assume significant security risks on top of working to mitigate the risks of those receiving assistance. The choice of distribution locations, whether to distribute cash or in-kind assistance, the specific needs of those with limited mobility, access to areas for monitoring visits—all need to be considered and managed by local staff and volunteers.”

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Lebanese Organization for Studies
and Training:
<https://lostlb.org/>

“**The more men have
been involved, the
more the women benefited
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to improve the health and
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because they lacked proper registration in Lebanon. In this case, LOST contacted the Lebanese Security Forces in order to facilitate the movement of project participants, explaining the benefit of the project to the region as a whole and thus avoiding harm to project participants while also strengthening relationships with local authorities. LOST also created an organization-wide protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) policy that included confidential and private mechanisms by which project participants can raise concerns and submit complaints about the project and about the actions of LOST staff.

When LOST first introduced this psychosocial support project for Syrian refugee and vulnerable Lebanese women to the Baalbek-Hermel region, the husbands of potential project participants in most villages initially rejected the initiative. Men expressed strong discomfort with the idea of their spouses attending the sessions, fearing that the project would have a negative effect on their families. Based on the recommendations of female participants, LOST worked to include men in the project. In some cases, LOST provided incentives for participation, including integrating these men into other LOST projects, such as cash for work programs, food for training programs and other livelihood interventions. These proved to be beneficial to the men and they were then more accepting of their wives’ participation in the project activities. LOST mitigated the instances of men dropping out of activities in order to work by taking into consideration their schedules and conducting trainings on a day off or even after their return from day labor. LOST has also begun holding some awareness sessions for the spouses of female participants so that they also receive some of the same trauma and health awareness information as the women. The more men have been involved, the more the women have benefited from the trainings, as they use their new knowledge to improve the health and wellbeing of their families.

Through several mitigation actions, LOST was successfully able to overcome all the challenges that arose while implementing the “She Matters” project in Baalbek-Hermel. The project has been able to empower women by building their capacity to have better, safer and more honorable and dignified lives through workshops about safe health and hygiene practices, family planning, first aid and childcare. Through its psychosocial support activities, the project has shown that trauma healing is essential for regaining the composure needed to move forward in life. The results have included resiliency for Syrian refugee and vulnerable Lebanese women through improved and strengthened relationships within their families and the broader community.

Rabih Allam is a design, monitoring and evaluation coordinator with the Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training (LOST), an MCC partner.

Making humanitarian assistance sustainable: put women in charge

“I am not useless,” Mona relayed to the project coordinator (pseudonym used for security purposes). “I learned in this job that I can do many things for my children, and myself, without needing any help.” As the sole head of her household, Mona had few opportunities to support her family. After taking part in a sustainable humanitarian assistance project in Syria, Mona is now able to confidently provide for her children.

As the crisis in Syria continues into its ninth year, the MCC Lebanon and Syria team aims meet the high level of humanitarian need that continues to

exist in the country in a sustainable way. Though active fighting has recently decreased in most areas of Syria, 11.7 million people remain in need. Food security continues to be a main concern, as the crisis has severely disrupted the economy and people's economic well-being. As 6.5 million people remain food insecure, MCC identifies access to food as a significant concern.

Addressing access to food in a crisis setting can be approached from many angles. After evaluating a large food assistance project in Syria, MCC found that ensuring access to food frees income to be used for other basic services, such as medical needs and school uniforms. When families lack food, they are forced to resort to coping strategies such as restricting themselves to one daily meal. As access to basic services and goods decreases, the severity of coping strategies increases. Displaced families and female-headed households are most at risk of resorting to severe coping strategies, as they lack security and stability.

War has devastating effects on individuals, families, communities and nations. Men are often recruited to fight or forced to flee, while women are left to care for their families. The number of single female-headed households in Syria has greatly increased since the Syrian crisis began. This has caused young women to take on responsibilities and tasks vital for community survival, giving them power and responsibility that they did not previously possess. Targeting women in humanitarian assistance interventions targets entire families, enhancing Syrian society overall. That is why an MCC partner, the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD), created a project with these women in mind.

FDCD is a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Beirut, Lebanon, with a long history of countering violent extremism, interfaith dialogue, peacebuilding and emergency response. FDCD's extensive network of partners and friends in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region allows it to accomplish meaningful work. Volunteers are based throughout Lebanon and Syria: this network of volunteers allows FDCD to directly implement projects within Syria. MCC thus partnered with FDCD to create a pilot project aimed at serving households headed by single women, addressing a humanitarian need while paired with a long-term focus on sustainable humanitarian assistance. From this emerged a small five-month project to provide training in food processing and business skills for Syrian women.

At the heart of this project was the question, "How do we make humanitarian assistance as sustainable as possible?" FDCD, with the help of MCC, restructured a previous food assistance-focused project to equip female-headed households with skills to produce something deeply needed in Syrian communities: food.

FDCD selected two locations for the project, with ten participants and one local coordinator per location. One trainer for both locations provided consistency in project implementation, traveling between the project sites to provide training in business skills. All project participants came from households led by single women, with children and other family members for whom they were solely responsible. When designing the project, the local coordinators spoke with women to determine an ideal start and end time for the work day, ensuring the project provided participants with the much-needed flexibility of working during the hours their children were at school. This project design eliminated the need for women to pay for childcare or force them to leave their children home alone.



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more

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Women gained not only confidence and new skills, but an income that they can carry with them now that the project is over."

The ten women gathered in their respective centers five days a week to attend classes in business skills and marketing, while also learning the art of *mouneh*. *Mouneh* is a process of canning food to last for a long period of time. The business training skills involved classes on everything from how to market one's products, how to set prices and best sanitation practices. Women gained not only confidence and new skills, but an income that they could carry with them upon the project's completion.

Though the project centered solely on equipping women with livelihoods skills, three different outcomes emerged. The first outcome was that the twenty women in the project learned how to produce *mouneh*, thus equipping them with a concrete skill to support their families. At the conclusion of the project, 23% of the women even reported finding formal training or contracts. The second outcome was increased food security for 300 Syrian families during the harsh winter months, as once the women learned how to make *mouneh*, FDCD distributed four kilograms of *mouneh* products to 300 vulnerable families during the early winter months. Lastly, the project contributed to social cohesion in Syria, as all the women participating in the project were internally displaced people, coming from diverse backgrounds and regions in Syria. Project coordinators reported that, as women gathered daily to learn from and teach each other, the barriers between them slowly faded into the background.

Project design does not need to be limited to one goal or outcome. Conflict settings are complex: addressing women's livelihoods in those settings will inevitably also be complex and challenging. Meeting basic needs through humanitarian assistance in turn raises questions about how women leading households on their own might be equipped to meet more of their families' needs. Going forward, MCC can build on lessons learned from this project as it seeks to expand its sustainable humanitarian efforts in Syria.

Hayley Schultz participated in MCC's Serving and Learning Together program in 2018-2019 as the peace and disaster response assistant for a local partner, the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue.

“When families lack food, they resort to coping strategies such as restricting themselves to one daily meal. As access to basic services and goods decreases, the severity of coping strategies increases. Displaced families and female-headed households are most at risk of resorting to severe coping strategies, as they lack security and stability”

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