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POLICY PAPER

Challenges of Slovak nonprofits in Providing Humanitarian Aid in the Middle East Region

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Challenges of Slovak nonprofits in Providing Humanitarian Aid in the Middle East Region

The presented document follows up on the previous political document from the Ambrela workshop entitled 'Development and Humanitarian Activities of the Slovak Republic in the Middle East in response to the Syrian Crisis,'¹ which described the approach and possible scenarios for the growth of Slovak development and humanitarian aid in the Middle East countries.

This document already deals with the specific activities of Slovak non-governmental organizations in the region and their current challenges in providing humanitarian assistance and development assistance to the population, and proposals for improving the system of project implementation (for donors and other stakeholders). It was created as output and summary of the results of Ambrela's research carried out under the "Global Goals and Migration" project and supported by EU resources under the DEAR program. The information contained in this document is based on the outputs of (i) the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) of 16 July 2020 entitled 'Adaptation of Slovak NGOs and their Partners operating in the Middle East to the COVID-19 situation'², (ii) from a questionnaire sent to Ambrela's member organizations on 11 March 2021 and (iii) from four interviews conducted with representatives of Slovak non-governmental organizations on 16-19 March 2021.

The presence of Slovak NGOs in the region

There are approximately ten Slovak non-governmental organizations and one university in the Middle East region, seven of which are members of the Platform of Development Organizations – Ambrela³. These are primarily active in Lebanon^{4,5} and to a lesser extent in Iraq and Syria⁶.

1 Kaba, 2021

2 Ambrela: FGD, 2020

3 ADRA Slovakia, People in need Slovakia, Habitat for Humanity, Magna, Integra foundation, Caritas Slovakia, St. Elizabeth university

4 Markovič Baluchová, 2020

5 Markovič Baluchová, 2021

6 Caritas Slovakia, 2019



The impact of the Syrian crisis on housing and infrastructure in the country. Photo: UNHCR

Compared to other humanitarian crises in the world, Slovak entities are most involved in helping in the Syrian crisis. Although official assistance to the Slovak Republic is not implemented only through the non-governmental sector, this tool contributes significantly not only to increasing the knowledge of the experience of the development assistance system, but also to the awareness of the Slovak public and contributes to greater visibility of the SlovakAid brand abroad.

Apart from some exceptions, it is difficult for Slovak organizations, especially from a financial point of view, to operate for a long time in other than SlovakAid priority countries.

For some organizations, their finances from SlovakAid represent up to 40-90% of their income in the specific intervention region.

Slovak subjects differ significantly in the function model, while the regulations from the desk of the leading donor SlovakAid (the eligibility and amount of costs, the way of reporting, etc.) are the same for them and do not make them higher adaptation to their model possible.

Some of them have teams of doctors⁷ and their staff (for example, MAGNA and the Health Care University of St. Elisabeth (VŠ zdravotníctva a sociálnej práce Sv. Alžbety), or have started their branch and accentuate on the presence of their project manager and building the capacity of the local partner⁸ (People in Need Slovakia). They work with their long-term local partner⁹ or are part of an international network (Caritas Slovakia, ADRA Slovakia, Integra foundation, UNICEF Slovakia) while cooperating on the survey needs, on the design of projects, monitoring. Others leave the implementation itself primarily on the local organization and they help with the reporting and the monitoring towards donors. Finally, others work mainly in fundraising and public information with no ambitions to solve issues operationally in the area.

7 Magna, 2021

8 People in Need Slovakia, 2021

9 ADRA Slovakia, 2021

Obstacles and challenges in assisting in the region

Several attendants of the focus team (within the research carried out by Ambrela) have agreed that it is more challenging to fundraise for the assisting activities in this region when compared to other projects, for example, in Africa. From their statements follows that, to some extent, this may be due to public perceptions, in which this region is connected to terrorism, migration, oil riches, or maybe to inability of the local governments to solve the long-term conflicts.

It could help the situation if the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs paid more attention to humanitarian topics while communicating with the public. In addition, the so-called “matching funds” come into consideration, when, in order to create a synergetic effect and greater impact, the public collections of non-governmental organizations will also be supported in by the state administration.

The biggest obstacles to effective action in the field since the outbreak of the pandemic cited by the NGOs are (i) the pandemic restrictions (ii) rapidly changing needs (the need to provide food aid, ensure livelihoods, prevent deteriorating families, respond sensitively to inter-community tensions, etc.) and (iii) the changing conditions for assisting (impaired access to target sites – need to apply for permits, limited opportunities during a pandemic). Furthermore, mass protests and related restrictions on offices’ working hours (issuance of building permits, etc.) and road blocking. A significant obstacle was financial transfers to the local partner due to currency devaluation, collapse of the economy and consequent constraints on the Lebanese banking system. The explosion at the port of Beirut also had implications for the projects. Particularly, Lebanon has undergone considerable changes in a short time, including the time between project preparation and approval of SlovakAid projects.

The focus group¹⁰ shows that *“However, the pandemic brought difficulties not only to project beneficiaries but also to the activities of non-governmental organizations, the mental well-being of their employees and communication with donors. All participants pointed to the increased effort and workload, which was often done with equal pay or no pay at all while seeing less visible results of their work.”* (Focus group participant).

Participating organizations have demonstrated resilience and flexibility, set up hotlines to keep in touch with beneficiaries and provide information, provide medical supplies, online education and psychosocial support, and other types of emergency interventions. However, long-term activities such as digging wells, parental planning or training have been postponed or stopped.

10 Ambrela: FGD, 2020



Človek v ohrození (People in Need association) provides education in Iraq. Photo: Tomáš Halász

Lessons learned and suggestions for improvement: Flexibility due to the covid-19 pandemic

Regarding lessons learned and suggestions for improvement (as outputs from Ambrela's research) in this area, participants emphasized the importance of keeping in touch with beneficiaries as the ultimate goal and the need to be flexible in responding to the constant changes determined by the pandemic. Furthermore, about the prevention of violence, it is vital to continuously support refugees and local people in need affected by the covid-19 and the financial crisis (the case of Lebanon); otherwise there is a risk of the tension escalation¹¹.

In addition, due to the need to increase the budget for humanitarian aid in the Slovak Republic, respondents from NGOs propose in case of emergency (outside the announced calls) to activate above mentioned system of 'matching funds' for individual NGOs or their consortia, publish grant applicants evaluations of their projects to increase their quality in the future or to determine the exact time for the auditor to process the final project settlement, because, in some cases, waiting three months – without specific information – is difficult, especially for a humanitarian project and for partner organizations with limited resources to pre-finance the last instalment and wait for reimbursement.

¹¹ Ambrela: FGD, 2020

For so called COVID-19 project proposal calls last year, there was a record short time to approve applications, but the approval of the final report was in some cases extended to several months. Among the proposals are also to cancel the need for the statutory to sign requests for changes to a humanitarian project, as this takes time (the statutory may not be available to sign immediately when changes are made, but these must be approved as soon as possible to take place in time). To eliminate the requirement for a stamp, “Copy agrees with the original” because it requires printing many documents (because we have scans from the partner), stamping and subsequent scanning. They also mentioned the need to simplify project forms (for example, through a limited number of words in some sections).

Among the proposals was also shortening the mandatory minimal duration of the project¹² (currently twelve months, which is a very long time for relatively small SlovakAid grants from SAIDC in some cases), simplifying budgets so that small items do not have to be broken down in the budget plan, but larger group items are introduced.

A separate chapter is the proposal to introduce “Cash -for-health interventions” and “Cash transfers interventions” as a standard way of humanitarian aid taking into account current trends and international standards of humanitarian aid.

Adaptation of SlovakAid projects to the current situation in the field

The need to build the internal capacity of organizations, especially from the point of view of employee care, prevention against burnout syndrome, the safety of personnel in the field, but also from the perspective of economic and logistical support, is essential (from the statements in the Ambrella research). SAIDC projects¹³ should be adapted to this. Non-governmental organizations positively evaluate the willingness of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs donor and its SAIDC agency (SlovakAid) during COVID-19 pandemic to solve the “ad hoc” situations/complications of projects (transfers within the budget, communication with the embassy, etc.) and helpfulness regarding changes in projects.

The added value of Slovak operation is seen by representatives of non-governmental organizations, for example, in an individual approach, emphasis on equal partnership with a local partner and mutual growth or ability to fill gaps of Slovak interventions (sectoral, geographical, etc.) where the needs are not covered by large donors.

From the point of view of humanitarian aid, the Middle East region is significant for Slovak entities. At the same time, their statements suggest that official humanitarian aid to the region should be better strategic, more effective and financially strengthened.

One of the respondents of the focus group, FGD¹⁴, offered an interesting view when she stated that *“The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs could reconsider whether, e.g. the education sector (especially children) does not want to support in another, more strategic way. Personally, it seems unethical to us to make visibility with classes full of children, if they are not in school for a year because the project is over. Some donors have a specific profile for education; others have removed it from their priorities*

¹² SlovakAid, 2021

¹³ SlovakAid, 2021

¹⁴ Ambrella: FGD, 2020



Provision of drinking water for the municipalities of Bashik and Bahzan in Iraqi Kurdistan. Photo: Caritas Slovakia

because they could not ensure its continuity. Both are perfectly fine, but trying to be somewhere in the middle seems more to me than a choice for selfish rather than humanitarian reasons. “

The same respondent further states that *“if (education) is among the other sectors, it comes to a halt in times of crisis (when living conditions deteriorate, health and livelihood projects are prioritized). However, continuity is needed in education the most of all sectors. It would make sense to support longer projects (e.g. 2- to 3-year) and to target the call on education. In a current way, it is most often the competition of one-year projects (because it is inefficient to stretch the project for 200,000 for two years, for example), which will help educators to some extent (if they win in competition with infrastructure, health and employment projects), but whereas they have no continuity, their results are not sustainable.”¹⁵*

According to the focus group, it would be helpful to know the intention of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic / SAIDC regarding the continuation of the geographical focus of subsidy grant calls for humanitarian aid, i.e. j. for how many years (e.g. five to ten) the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic is willing to “commit” to support the region so that implementers know that they can develop their network and expertise in the area for a long time, and therefore not wait every year for wording / focus new grant call.

¹⁵ Ambrela: FGD, 2020

Possible development of providing official development assistance to the Slovak Republic

The current humanitarian interventions of the Slovak Republic can be viewed in such a way that the interest to operate in several countries, without sector specification, in partnership with a large number of different international organizations, without a clear identification of Slovakia's comparative advantage may be a sign of replicating the approach of some significant donors, or vice versa, about a weak strategic setting.

However, it is clear that the strategy of a small donor such as the Slovak Republic cannot be the same as that of large countries operating in the field with substantial financial resources, know-how, political pressure and historical ties, including robust capacities of their established NGOs.

There is an increasing need for a regular, structured dialogue between the state administration, civil society and other actors, which should lead to recommendations and subsequent changes in the relevant documents and their implementation, not only at the level of SAIDC project management but also at strategic-political level, at the level of Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and other decision-makers. This dialogue, which can also be conducted against the background of four scenarios of further development of ODA SR towards the countries of the Middle East mentioned in the previous document¹⁶, should also be affected by the preparation of the historically first humanitarian strategy of the SR.

The organization of Ambrela's "How Slovakia helps address and mitigate the consequences of the Syrian crisis in the world" online discussion¹⁷ can be seen as an inputs to this dialogue. It was there that members, observers of Ambrela (and the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs as a donor) presented the perception of the current situation in Syria and its surrounding states and showed specific examples of how Slovak organizations can also make even with small contribution to solving or alleviating the humanitarian situation in the region. This was followed by a journalists trip to Lebanon organized by Ambrela in July 2021, aimed at raising awareness of Slovak public on this issue.

The members of Ambrela, not only the participating organizations in the mentioned focus group on the topic, are ready to contribute to sharing experiences and lessons from the field and forming the necessary and the long-awaited humanitarian strategy.

Note: The opinions expressed are those of the author only and should not be considered as representative of the European Commission, Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, SAIDC or Ambrela official position.

¹⁶ Kaba, 2021

¹⁷ Ambrela, 2021

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