

# **NGO's Team Empowerment: the case of Syria Relief**

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- **Four Traps that can Lead to Project Failure**, published in PM4NGOs website, in July 2020
- **Participatory Methods during Project Identification**, published in PM4NGOs website, in July 2020
- **Vouchers Project for Syrians Under Siege**, published in Logistics and Transport Focus Magazine, Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT-UK), Feb 2020, Pg 44/45.

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## Introduction

This article aims to describe the team empowerment and development that Syria Relief, a UK based Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) which has a primary focus on the Syrian Conflict, has made. Although there are several reasons for forming Civil Society Organisations (CSO), such as social recognition, Public Relations, social interaction, employment or even to enhance the egos of its participants, but more-often than not, the motivation of a CSO's founders are altruism (Hudson, 2017). Syria Relief was officially established in September 2011 in response to the then-growing crisis in Syria that emerged from the brutal suppression of the Syrian Revolution, which had begun in March of the same year. Shocked by the humanitarian catastrophe hastily unfolding in Syria, a group of British-Syrian professionals, mainly doctors, came together at that beginning of the crisis to act to provide emergency relief assistance to the affected civilians (Syria Relief, 2019).

Syria Relief's founding boards members created the NGO through initial interventions within the medical sector, as many of them are medical professionals; it shortly became clear that the Syrian conflict would be protracted and long-term assistance was needed (Syria Relief, 2020).

The funds raised by Syria Relief increased and the areas of humanitarian interventions they could conduct increased in correlation with the needs of the Syrian people, the knowledge, experience and commitments from the board members, the improvements in governance, systems and internal controls as well as the capacity development and empowerment of its staff. Syria Relief managed to implement more than £22 million worth of different humanitarian interventions such as education, food security, livelihood, water and sanitation, health and nutrition in addition to protection by the end of 2018 (BDO, 2019).

The case of Syria Relief is not an exception amongst Syrian NGOs that were established as a result of the Syrian crisis. It was selected to be carefully reviewed as it has been the employer of the author since September 2016 and an implementational partner for two other International NGOs that the author has worked with. With the institutional memory and the available documents, this report will provide a critical review of the development efforts that were made within the

organisation that led to the empowerment of the team and the strengthening of internal systems. The report will state the core issue that forced the change to occur, the stakeholders that were engaged with this problem, with classification of the drivers and constrainers for that change and the pros and cons for the proposed change. Then there will be an assessment of the change, incorporating relevant theories and literature reviews. Finally, an evaluation of the change will conclude the report.

## Change Overview

### Problem Statement

Founders of charities are similar to private sector entrepreneurs, both begin through multitasking duties and considerable time and effort spent on setting up the organisation to ensure longevity (The Guardian, 2017). Whilst this is needed at the start of an organisation's life, be it for profit or not, it should not last forever and, once established the founts should take a step back and revert to the board of trustees, to avoid them becoming the main barrier to potential growth, aka.

“Founder Syndrome” (McNamara and Poderis, 2013). In the early days, the board of Syria Relief were performing almost all of the charity's day-to-day activities, from raising funds, which at that time were no more than few thousand pounds, through to building extensive contacts within the Syrian community in the UK and beyond (Syria Relief, 2017), and onto the operational tasks through the procurement of aid and it's distribution to vulnerable Syrians (Alhousseiny, 2019).

Dr Ayman Jundi, Syria Relief current chairman and one of the founders, did not predict that Syria Relief would become the NGO it is now at the beginning in 2011, the aim was originally to collect a few thousand pounds to support the people displaced by the conflict (Alhousseiny, 2019).

Two years after establishing the organisation, the founders started transferring operational duties to a new CEO assisted by an Acting Head of Mission (Riley Moss Audit, 2014). This was followed by the recruitment of additional expatriates within the organisation, i.e. the country director and the programmes manager (Riley Moss Audit, 2015). Those recruitments allowed the Syria Relief board to step aside from day-to-day activities and focus on strategy and monitoring the performance of the executive team. But this alone is not enough to empower staff and ensure strong foundations internally.

The core problem can be simplified as how the transfer of power to staff and investment in the organisational systems can be conducted in a manner that allows the organisation to grow from a small local charity that was run by the enthusiasm and motivation of its board members into a well-structured, governed and highly reputable NGO with reliable foundational and internal controls

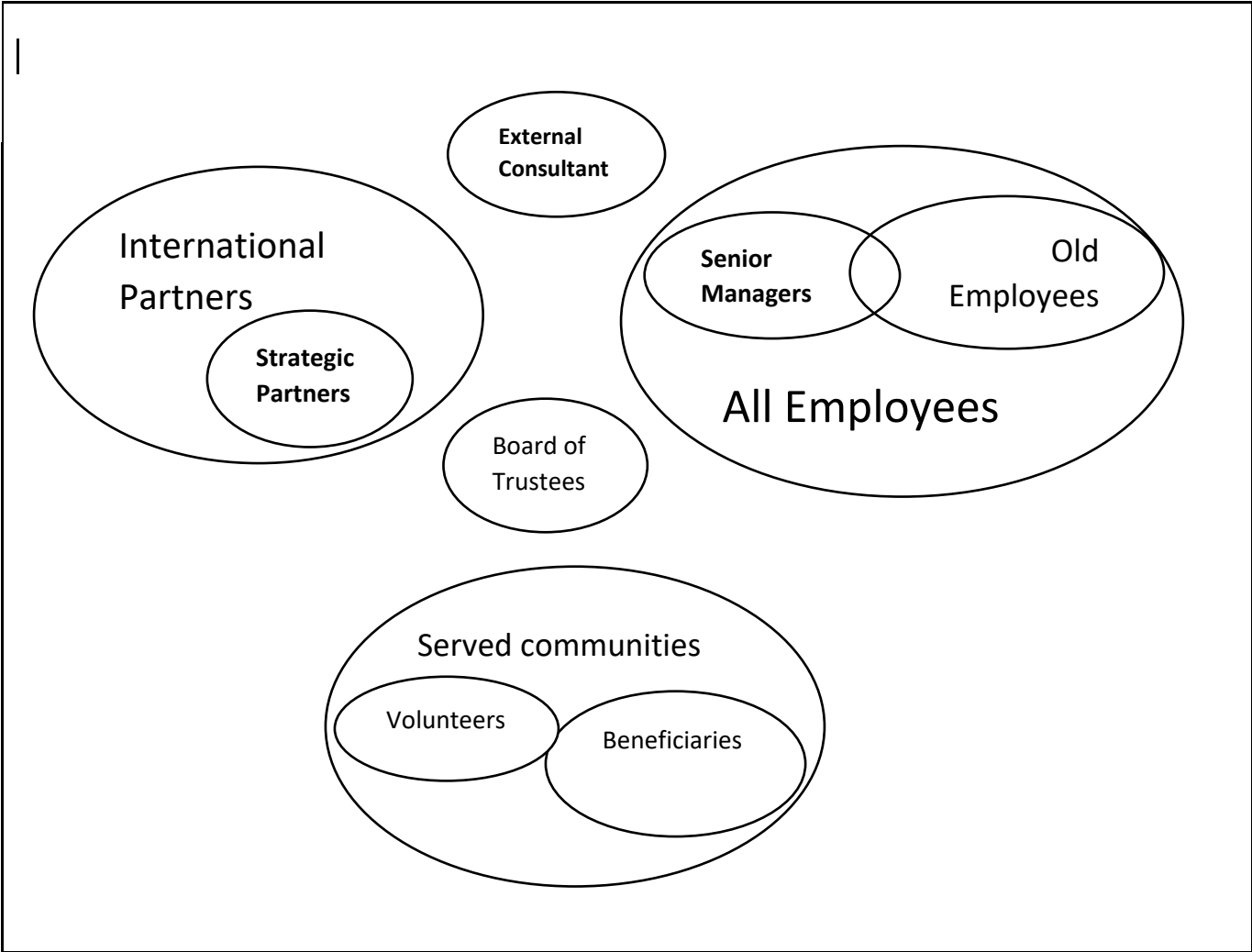
## Stakeholder Analysis

Stakeholders are those that are affected by and can affect an organisation and the decision it makes (Reed, et al., 2009). They need to be engaged with at the very beginning of a change initiative through sharing the proposed activities, receiving their thoughts and feedback, and asking for their support to ensure the success of that change (Reed, et al., 2009). The process for this engagement should start with identification of the stakeholders whilst categorising them, then understanding their influence and power so that they can be prioritised and finally ensuring close communication throughout with the relevant stakeholders (Reed, et al., 2009).

To identify and categorise the potential stakeholders within a change initiative, CASOLO – an abbreviation for Clients, Actors, Sponsors, Owners, Legitimisers and Opinion Leaders - tool can be used (Bocij, Greasley and Hickie, 2015). The first category “clients” includes the beneficiaries from the change initiative. In this case it, it may include the employees of Syria Relief, the beneficiaries from the services that Syria Relief provides as well as the communities that they belong to. “Actors” may include the employees and volunteers as well as the board members of Syria Relief as they are conducting the activities. “Sponsors” may include the donors and international partners of Syria Relief, as they are the ones that are covering the costs of the change initiatives. “Owners” may include the senior managers and board members of Syria Relief, as they are the leaders for the implementation of change. “Legitimisers” includes the board members and old employees that established Syria Relief as they try to protect the values and norms of the organisation from any change that might affect the rationale of the establishment. And finally, the last category of “opinion leaders” includes those that are influential on Syria Relief as strategic partners, board members, senior managers and external consultants that were used to provide advice regularly. To be accurate with our analysis, the need to review each individual’s power and influence separately is a must as not all of the board members, or senior employees might be within the same level of agreement on the change

importance. However, it is virtually impossible to have access to the thoughts of each individual within Syria Relief from the establishment until today to collect their position on the change, as the organisation has employed more than one-hundred full-time employees and thousands of volunteers during its peak operations and a number of those employees and volunteers have already left the organisation. Thus, an assumption of the generalisation for each category will be made on the stakeholders within it.

To prioritise those stakeholders, a Venn diagram can be used (PM4NGOs, 2020). Each one of the stakeholders is scaled for the power and influence that they have which is represented by the size of the circle and the relationships between themselves by the connections of the circles (PM4NGOs).



Those that have high power and strong influence need to be prioritised above those that have low power and are least influenced by the change in the engagement plan. It is important to mention that the scaling is not constant, the measurement against the two dimensions varied with time as the power and influence of the board of directors were both top high at the establishment phase of Syria Relief, but with time and after several transformational changes their scale decreased to allow other categories to be raised such as employees and beneficiaries.

### Change Drivers and Constraints

It is not only the internal stakeholders that might affect the organisational change, but there are also external factors that can either drive or restrict the change from being implemented. PEST or PESTLE Analysis is a tool that helps to identify and classify external factors (Mullins, 2016). Its name is the abbreviation of the following factors Political, Economic, Social, and Technological, with some other factors that were added later on to expand the tool such as the Legal and Environmental. To understand the external factors that were either initiate or constraint the change within Syria Relief, the PESTLE analysis needs to be used. The political factors were countless, but mainly the political tensions occurred between the countries that were supporting the Syrian Opposition, due to the weakening power of the opposition armed groups whilst there was an increase of direct intervention from the pro-government allies which resulted in a change of power dynamics on the ground and Syria Relief's area of operations shrinking. The main economic factors were the inflation of the local markets in Syria as well as countries nearby, the donor fatigue due to the long duration of the conflict and other regional changes in the economies of some influential countries. The most critical social or socio-cultural factors were the change of treatment from the host communities towards displaced people, whether in the countries near to Syria, Europe or other western countries. The technological factors were mainly the deterioration of infrastructure in Syria in almost all sectors such as electricity, telecommunications, water and sewage, in addition to the health and education systems. For the legal factors, the change of laws on NGOs from countries nearby as well as the rigorism of the counter-terrorism laws against the international humanitarian law were the most crucial impacts. And finally, the desertification in some areas of Syria, the pollution resulted from the illegal oil refinery and the extreme freezing weather during winter have all formed the environmental factors.



## Cost/Benefit Analysis

The change initiatives to empower the employees and strengthen the internal control systems were analysed by reviewing the costs against the benefits of taking the drivers and constraints into consideration as well.

For each initiative, a budget was developed to understand thoroughly the costs for the required resources to implement that initiative. From 2016 until the end of 2018, three main initiatives were implemented by Syria Relief at an approximate cost of 10,000 US Dollars each.

To identify who from those external forces and stakeholders were drivers for the change and who were constraints, the force field analysis model or Kurt Lewin's Field theory is recommended to be used (Burnes, 2004).

Change Drivers	Change Constraints
Some Employees —————→	Old Employees ←—————
Donors' rules and regulations —————→	Donor fatigue ←—————
Partners' compliances —————→	Shrink in the operational areas ←—————
Consultants' support —————→	Inflation of local markets ←—————
The increase of funds after a change —————→	Governing procedures on NGOs ←—————
Enhanced performance —————→	Cost of change ←—————
	Redundancy of unqualified employees ←—————

## Change Assessment

As mentioned above that the founders of the organisation tried their best to institutionalise Syria Relief by the recruitment of expatriates as senior managers for the organisation and transfer the

operational duties to them. This change in a management role has opened the opportunity for Syria Relief to grow from being a small charity striving to improve governance and become a more structured organisation, but this was not enough to institutionalise the organisation and to be recognised as a leading agency responding to the Syrian conflict.

The expatriates that Syria Relief recruited to join the senior management team in the organisation supported their local colleagues and expanded the limits of transformational change. They believed in the capacities of their local colleagues, shared their enthusiasm and strengthened the trust (Haden-Pawlowski, 2016). And this is exactly what is needed before any transformational change process.

The Change model that fitted the needs and goals of Syria Relief was the 'planned change'. For Boonstra (2004) planned change is the use of scientific knowledge to enhance the human system operations. The planned change model is used in line with the three steps for change by Kurt Lewin: unfreezing, change and freezing (Burnes, 2004). It starts with confirming the existence for the change needs, identifying the problem, then planning, implementing and evaluating the proposed change initiatives, and finally refreeze the situation of the organisation.

The planned change is led by senior management and has less space for participation from the employees (Boonstra, 2004). This is why this approach is more hierarchal and not horizontal. Planned change is more useful in situations where the problem is well known, and the solution has been experienced in similar environments. Planned change is divided into several stages: entering, diagnosing, managing the change, then evaluating (Asumeng and Osae-Larbi, 2015). The entering stage consists of assigning the change consultant, the agreement and the data gathering. The second stage consists of analysing the gathered data to diagnose and identify the problem and the initiatives that are needed to change the current situation. While the third stage is the most intensive phase, which consist of planning the process of change, assigning the required resources and implementing the initiatives. The last stage consists of an evaluation of the change made to ensure that it is effective, efficient and based upon the needs.

For Syria Relief, the same steps of the planned change were used. The engaging phase was limited to the assignment of myself in 2016 as change champion, defining the role through a specific term of reference. During the second phase, all of the senior managers of Syria Relief were tasked with assessing the capacity of the organisation in a holistic, detailed and well-

structured Organisational Capacity Assessment Tool (OCAT) that was recommended by several of Syria Relief's strategic partners. The OCAT allowed Syria Relief to know its strengths and weaknesses in various departments and levels, i.e. strategic vision, governance, programmes, finance, supply chain, project management, monitoring & evaluation, safety & security, human resource and external communications genuinely. This was done through a detailed list of questions that were answered by each head of the department and verified by the change consultant.

Then an Organisational Capacity Development (OCD) plan was designed by senior management and the change consultant. The OCD plan aided in forecasting all of the necessary change initiatives needed to cover the gaps and weaknesses discovered through the OCAT. Within the OCD plan, the prioritisation for the initiatives was essential as change is time and resource-consuming and cannot implement all of the suggested initiatives within the same time. Thus, agreement on the prioritisation among the senior management was completed and followed by estimating the resources required for the initiatives that were prioritised and the time frame required for the implementation. The senior management of Syria Relief had agreed on the following three main initiatives to be implemented from 2016 till 2018: The first initiative was used to train staff on the institutional donors' rules and regulations as well as developing the organisational monitoring and evaluation systems. The second initiative was used to conduct training on three advanced topics in human resource management, monitoring and evaluation management and grants management. The third initiative was to develop Syria Relief strategy plan that can drive the organisation for the next three years (Save the Children, 2019).

At the beginning of the implementation for each initiative, external experts were selected through announcements of comprehensive terms of reference that detailed the requested service with the capabilities needed to provide their advice, knowledge and supports for the selected scope. After the contracting with each external expert, the provision of the service was monitored closely whether it was a training course, developing policy and procedures, or facilitating a workshop. This monitoring activity aimed to ensure that the service provided by that expert was for the best of the organisation within the most effective and useful methods.

For the first change initiative, two external experts were contracted. The first expert worked on raising the awareness of Syria Relief senior staff on the standards of the strictest institutional

donors. USAID, to review and improve the policies and procedures related to finance, and supply chain to match with USAID's compliances. The other expert reviewed the monitoring and evaluation activities that Syria Relief were then implementing, compared them with the international standards (e.g. the Core Humanitarian Standard) and develop a manual with a set of tools tailored to Syria Relief.

For the second change initiative, three experts were recruited. The first expert trained Syria Relief staff on the advanced management skills needed to carry on the human resource operations such as performance evaluation, and capacity enhancement. The second expert trained the staff on the new monitoring and evaluation manual that was developed before in the first initiative, including how to use the tools in the best methods. While the third expert trained Syria Relief staff on managing the granted funds according to the donors' rules and regulations, e.g. DFID, ECHO, USAID.

For the last change initiative, only one expert was assigned. This initiative was the most important of all as it aimed to draft the strategic view of the organisation for the coming three years. Syria Relief strived to ensure strong participation of employees from various positions and offices in this change initiative. This was done by asking the inputs of the staff based in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and UK offices on the vision that they thought that Syria Relief should be leading on as well as the programmes and area of interventions. The assigned expert was oriented by the senior managers of Syria Relief (i.e. CEO and Country Director) on the establishment and development of the organisation in order to design the workshop. Then a workshop that included the chairman, other board members, the executive team led by the CEO and Country Directors and other managers was facilitated by the consultant. During that workshop, several tools were used to encourage the participation of the audience and helped in drafting the strategic view of the organisation such as PESTEL and SWOT, as well as open discussions. This supported the task of revisiting the values, vision and mission of the organisation in addition to the goals, objectives, programmes and area of operations to match with the changes in Syria (Syria Relief, 2019). When the strategic plan was drafted, it was reviewed by the participants to ensure their ideas were incorporated, which then helped in finalising the strategic plan for the organisation.

## Evaluation

There is no doubt that the three change initiatives have opened the opportunity to access more institutional funds in the following years as the total funds managed in 2016 was 12.8 million GBP, whilst in 2017 was 20.8 million GBP and in 2018 was 22 million GBP (Charity Commission, 2020). This was because the internal systems were developed to match the donors' requirements. The result of this first initiative was that the operational policies and procedures that Syria Relief has developed matched with the compliances of almost all of the donors in the finance, supply chain and monitoring and evaluation. The result of the second initiative was that the employees in the relevant departments were skilled and knowledgeable enough in their field of expertise to enhance their duties and responsibilities. And the result for the third initiative was to ensure that the NGO is more needs-driven and focused in its area of expertise, whilst maintaining its identity. For the cost-benefit analysis that was started prior to processed, costed the initiative at around 30,000 US Dollars, but it allowed the organisation to acquire exponentially more in funding. However, there are other costs than the financial figures that need to be taken into consideration.

When addressing the core problem, which was to transfer staff empowerment and reliable foundational and internal control systems, there are clear results of the change initiatives that the policies, procedures and systems that govern the operational transactions within the organisation were enhanced to a higher level, that pleased donors and partners. This had also helped in the structuring of the team. Perhaps, the next set of questions would be: has the change taken into consideration the human part of the organisation, what was the impact of those change initiatives on the staff?

Unintentionally, those change initiatives in addition to other external factors related to the Syrian context and the host country's regulations has exhausted the staff of Syria Relief even though the change was meant to empower them. In my opinion, the change was too much for the staff to consume, which lead to disorientation, stress and burn out. Syria Relief's turnover rate was so limited until the change initiatives were completed, that more than a third of the staff including managers had left the organisation and some of the remaining staff were looking for other opportunities. Some of those that have left the organisation failed to match the new performance level of the organisational standard while others did not see the organisation as it was before.

As a change champion, I can confirm that the change initiatives were more process-centred than human-centred even though the change was targeting the employees directly through training, capacity development and system enhancement. The usage of the planned change model was structured and heavily process-focused, with the intention of expanding the financial budgets of the organisation with a better quality of programmes' implementation. But this planned change model was top-down, which lost the participation, contribution and engagement of the non-senior staff members from the beginning.

Two recommendations that can be concluded are a combination between planned change and emergent/generative change and the focus on the inter-organisational behaviour and working environment. The integration between the planned and the emergent/generative change models allow the participation of the staff, share their views, adapt based upon experiments, and change ownership by the employees. While the focus on the working environment will maintain the professional bonds between the employees during the harsh conditions.

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