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Scottish Government Humanitarian Emergency Fund

Winter Shelter crisis in North West Syria
October 2019



Mattresses being distributed by Islamic Relief Worldwide, SCIAF's local partner in North West Syria

Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF)



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HEF impact in Winter in North West Syria



£100,000 to SCIAF to provide bedding and other materials for IDPs fleeing government siege of Idlib and Aleppo



6725 people received a combination of blankets, mattresses and plastic sheets paid via a voucher system

1. Executive Summary

This activation and the release of £100,000 from the Humanitarian Emergency Fund was triggered by a rapid movement of a huge number of people from an intense bombardment in and around the city of Idleb in North West Syria.

Three proposals were considered for this response from Mercy Corps, the British Red Cross and SCIAF. All three proposals were strong and of a high quality. The SCIAF project was chosen as it offered additional benefits to beneficiaries through a choice of support to increased dignity as well as supporting the local economy.

11 camps and 6 villages in Idleb and Aleppo Governorates were supported with 6,700 people (1,244 families - 33 more than initially proposed) receiving blankets, mattresses and plastic sheets. Nearly 700 people with disabilities were supported. Nearly 80% of the beneficiaries said the support received was 'very good.'

The actions met part of the needs of those affected by the ongoing crisis; many had been left without any belongings and very limited employment opportunities, put at extreme risk during the cold winter weather.

2. Context

Increased military action by the Russian backed Syrian government forces against opposition groups in North-Western Syria (NWS) in and around the strategic city of Idleb in the late Summer of 2019 led to an additional internal displacement of nearly 700,000 people (IDPs), taking the total number in the area to more than 1.3 million. With Winter approaching and freezing weather expected, there was an urgent need to provide better shelter, heating and insulation for huge numbers of people out in the elements.

3. SCIAF Project – Plan and Impact

3a: Project Plan

SCIAF responded through its international network, Catholic Aid FOD (CAFOD) and its joint Syria Programme with local implementing partner Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW). The latter was able to respond in non-government controlled areas where IDP populations were arriving. A gap analysis to avoid duplication with other agencies, suggested non-food items (NFIs) would meet some of the most pressing needs during the cold winter period.

The areas identified included the Dana and Atareb sub-districts of Idlib and Aleppo. The main target group were newly displaced families living in inadequate shelters (camps, informal settlements, unfinished buildings and collective centres) who had not received support from other organisations up until that point.

Vulnerable households were prioritised - those headed by women, minors or those over sixty along with those with other needs or vulnerabilities. This approach was also conflict sensitive as it helped to avoid an increase in social tensions during beneficiary selection.

A single voucher worth approximately £65 was given to each family to be used to buy items on a list of NFIs including blankets, mattresses and plastic sheets. This approach supports the local economy and target beneficiaries are given a degree of choice in support of their dignity.

3b: Project Impact

The project successfully over-achieved against its targets, reaching more families and beneficiaries than had been planned whilst also achieving a higher than planned satisfaction rate. In one camp and six villages, a total of 1,244 families (33 more than planned) participated, with a total 6,725 individuals benefitting (3,260 male and 3,465 female).

The targeted families included 696 people with special needs (disabilities). Post distribution monitoring found 79% respondents saying the quality of items was very good, and 21% reported they were good. (Target 75% satisfaction.)

4. Project Approach

IRW has been responding to the Syria crisis since 2012 with support from donors including OCHA, UNICEF, WFP, SIDA¹, the German Foreign Ministry and the DEC. Through this, strong relationships have been formed with local councils, local coordination groups and camps' management. IRW is also an active member within the North West Syria Shelter/NFI sector, participating in monthly cluster meetings to update on its interventions, areas covered and target population, to avoid duplication, identify delivery gaps, target the most vulnerable groups, improve security, ensure neutrality and avoid aid diversion. IRW also reports to the UN-Financial Tracking System (FTS). The SCIAF/CAFOD partnership with IR also supports robust due diligence and anti-terrorism legislation checks to be carried out for these interventions.

¹ OCHA – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. UNICEF – United Nations' Children's Fund. WFP – United Nations World Food Programme. SIDA – Swedish International Development Cooperation Association

Technical and programmatic support was provided by SCIAF and CAFOD working together with IRW, with the indirect costs shared in the ratio 25:25:50 respectively between the agencies. This example of inter-faith working has proved effective and efficient.

The project was designed and implemented in line with cluster guidelines and assessments, and Sphere and CHS standards. The project was clearly introduced to key stakeholders along with a feedback/complaints mechanism through phones/e-mails/WhatsApp along with posters/banners at shops and distribution points along with complaint boxes at all project sites. This ensured that the complaints/feedback system was equally accessible for both women and men.

In the beneficiary selection process, community representatives were consulted to identify the correct recipients of the intervention. The contents of NFI items was based on the cluster recommendations and lessons learnt from previous similar projects. The ideas and feedback from previous similar projects were also considered while finalising the NFI supplies - one example is the specification of the blanket which was best suited for these circumstances.

Protection and gender were cross-cutting themes in the intervention. Priority was given to children and women who are generally the most vulnerable in conflict or displaced situations. Gender-disaggregated data was collected before distribution to help ensure that women and men could access services equally and the goods provided would be appropriate and relevant for both. If possible, and where necessary, the extremely vulnerable were provided support at their place of shelter.

5. Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL)

SCIAF and CAFOD monitored the project through a joint programme manager, based in Beirut, who made regular visits to Syria. As signatories to the Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS) - all three organisations followed comprehensive MEAL systems.

With dedicated staff in Syria, data was collected in a range of ways, including direct reporting by project staff and consultations with project beneficiaries and participants. Post-distribution monitoring was also carried out monthly to see how the vouchers were used. There were also random visits by M&E staff to verify reports, check beneficiary experience as well as the availability and prices of items. At the end of the project, an internal learning workshop was organised and beneficiary satisfaction was gauged through a final survey.

During the project implementation, no formal complaints were received from the beneficiaries. 79% of respondents reported the quality of provided items was very good, and 21% rated them good. The main feedback was a request for continued assistance due to the

extreme ongoing vulnerability of the affected families. These requests were noted and referred to other relevant humanitarian actors operational in the area.

6. Key Challenges

There were no significant changes to the project plan during implementation despite the ongoing violence and displacement in Idlib and Aleppo governorates throughout the project period. This had a significant impact on the project team, with 90% forced to relocate with their families. Despite this the team continued the project as planned.

Despite the positive feedback, there was some concern about the quality of the blankets supplied, with some saying those of better quality would be longer lasting. The feedback was noted and will be considered when designing future projects. On one occasion, the supplied blankets did not match the approved samples so they were refused with the supplier asked to replace them.

7. Finance

IRW's standard procurement procedures were used to ensure the quality and value for money. Project efficiency was maximised by on time procurement and distribution, as well as cost sharing with other projects.

Support and operational costs were minimised by making use of existing staff, offices, vehicles and delivery mechanisms. The use of shared resources maximises value for money and can improve safety.

Forex fluctuations were the principle cause of budget variances in NFIs, in-country locally engaged staff, in-country expatriate staff, and communications.

There was an overall small underspend of less than less than £500 by IRW which they could not re-assign. SCIAF has asked that this money is reimbursed so they can pass it on to other implementing partners in the Idlib area.

8. Conclusions

This was another highly successful HEF activation in another very hostile environment. SCIAF managed to reach even more beneficiaries than initially projected due to strong partnership working and extensive knowledge of the operating environment.

Nearly 7,000 people were given vital support to improve their very difficult living conditions through the Winter. Women and vulnerable groups were targeted and nearly 700 people with disabilities were helped, with strong positive feedback from beneficiaries.

The project was part of a wider response to reach 46,500 people in NWS. This multi-team approach with shared resources and cross-learning enables support in these most difficult projects, through shared experience and resources to drive project efficiency and effectiveness.

Case Studies



One beneficiary of the project, a 65 year-old man recounted how he had had to flee the Idlib countryside after intense shelling with rockets and artillery. He moved with his family of seven to the northern countryside of Aleppo and stayed for several days in a collective shelter until he secured a private tent for himself and his family.

“Life in the public shelter is very difficult. I cannot always see my children and my family because of the separation of men and women in groups.”

“Islamic Relief provided us with the much needed blankets, mattresses, and plastic sheets to make us better able to cope with the cold weather.”

“Thank to Allah. We were very happy after we got the required items. I can sit with my family again and take care of my family.”

“I am very grateful to everyone who contributes in alleviating our suffering. We really need humanitarian assistance for the severity of the waves of displacement in Northern Syria and because of the poverty and tragedy we live in.”

Note that for security reasons SCIAF and CAFOD required that publicity materials for the project did not include SCIAF or CAFOD logos. As a result the banners in the pictures below show only the logo of Islamic Relief and the Scottish Government.

