Compounding Vulnerabilities in Syria

Prioritizing Locations for Humanitarian Assistance

INTRODUCTION

Over six years after the start of the conflict in Syria the war continues and civilians are becoming more vulnerable and isolated. While humanitarian aid is being directed to the conflict, it is becoming increasingly difficult for humanitarians to access civilians directly. This results in limited aid and protection for vulnerable communities. To maximize humanitarian assistance going into Syria during the conflict it is important to prioritize technologies that have longevity and can be used in a post-conflict Syria. By doing this humanitarian assistance can not only benefit those immediately in need, but also build-up infrastructure to aid vulnerable populations in the future. One such technology is early warning systems (EWS) that are currently being used to warn against attacks in Syria. These EWS are effective now, but they also will benefit cities with an extremely vulnerable population in the future.

Syria's conflict environment leaves people in severe need due to a variety of conditions that affect vulnerability including food security, access to healthcare, and limited shelters among others. These vulnerabilities are all exacerbated by the protracted conflict, which in turn escalates the severity of these vulnerable populations.

Prioritizing EWS for all communities affected by the war is not currently feasible. Therefore there should be a prioritization of the placement of EWS in areas that have particularly high levels of active conflict, coupled with extremely vulnerable populations. Additionally, the humanitarian community will be equipping the populations with technology that has a lifespan beyond the conflict, which builds up the services that are necessary for peacebuilding in a post-conflict society. In order to identify the most vulnerable sub-districts the following questions must be answered:

- What areas in Syria are experiencing the highest levels of conflict events?
- Which of these areas are also facing severe humanitarian needs?

Prioritizing humanitarian assistance, including EWS, in areas with compounding vulnerabilities ensures that the communities with the greatest need are receiving lifesaving assistance.

METHODOLOGY

In order to carry out this analysis I used vector data to first construct a vulnerability index with ten indicators for humanitarian vulnerability (listed below) ranking each indicator from 0-6 based on the severity of need for each sub-district. In order to calculate the total vulnerability score for each sub-district, I then combined the scores for all ten indicators to create a total score for each sub-district that ranks the areas by intensity of humanitarian vulnerability. Conflict intensity was created using a hotspot analysis by calculating the kernel density of data that included over 4,000 conflict events ranging from aerial attacks, clashes, location capture, IEDs and shelling.

In order to analyze the areas to prioritize I added the final humanitarian vulnerability scores to the conflict events, that were weighted by population estimates. This created data that depicts the sub-districts whose populations are most vulnerable and at greatest risk should they not receive humanitarian assistance.

RESULTS

The sub-districts that must be prioritized for immediate humanitarian assistance are, understandably, areas of high population that have recently been experiencing heavy violence. This can be seen in the areas surrounding Aleppo city, which was the recent site of a bloody siege. A noticeable trend seen is the lasting effect that past cycles of violence leave on the local population. Looking backwards, at dates prior to this analysis, it is clear that the areas that are currently experiencing the highest levels of humanitarian vulnerability were previously the areas experiencing heavy conflict, even if they are not today. This can be seen in the northeast territory that borders Turkey.

Unfortunately, many of the areas that require immediate assistance due to compounding vulnerabilities are also extremely difficult for humanitarian agencies to access, such as the Islamic State controlled territory of An-RAQA. This location is essentially completely cut off from outside humanitarian actors.

Besides the expected urban areas plagued with heavy conflict, the communities that need to be prioritized are those areas that are besieged and contain large populations without access to basic supplies like food and medical care. This is seen in Eastern Ghouta, an area east of Damascus that has been cut off from aid.

Finally, the results from this analysis show that many of the areas that should be prioritized due to heightened vulnerabilities are sub-districts that are located on or near both the Turkish and Jordanian borders. This allows humanitarian assistance, such as EWS, to be delivered with fewer barriers to access due to the proximity to outside actors. International agencies that operate in Jordan and Turkey are then able to procure and deliver supplies to high-risk areas without putting their own aid workers at greater risk by operating deep within Syria.

LIMITATIONS

Data in an active conflict environment will always come with limitations. The most pressing limitations that this analysis experienced was an absence of information.

First, while population estimates are included, the changes to these numbers are rapid and difficult for researchers to grasp accurately.

Secondly, and also pertaining to gaps in information, much of the conflict data cannot be precisely geotagged due to open source collection. Of the over 12,000 events recorded between May and December 2016 only 4,000+ had precise latitude and longitude attached. Therefore the data included in this analysis represents a random selection in order to show the general levels of conflict intensity during this time. Despite the relatively low number of conflict events included this does not misinform the analysis. This is because the majority of conflict events in Syria target the same location repeatedly over a short period of time when fighting is occurring on the ground. Because of this it is fair to estimate that the 4,000 events included is representative of both the locations and the density of violence occurring in the country.

CONCLUSION

Despite the myriad of challenges that face humanitarian actors in Syria, it is clear that compounding vulnerabilities are resulting in an escalation of high risk and increasingly vulnerable sub-districts. While providing supplies like early warning systems and other aid will not end the conflict, it is a necessary component of civilian protection that is not being provided for by the government. Increasing humanitarian aid should not occur instead of working towards a sustainable resolution, but it must be seen as a deliverable alongside a long-term solution to the current conflict.

Sources:

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- GADM, Global Administrative Areas, Downloaded 2009
- LIN Cartographic Section and UNOCHA, Syrian Administrative Boundaries, Updated 2017
- UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2017
- The Carter Center, Syria Conflict Data, May – December 2016

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