

## Whose knowledge counts?

### Aligning Dutch aid with Syrian contexts

This report examines whether humanitarian decisions made in the Netherlands align with the priorities of Syrians on the ground, and how Dutch NGOs currently engage with (or overlook) contextual knowledge in their programmes.

It explores whether programme choices - from priorities to partnerships - are appropriate for the diversity of Syrian realities, and how far those choices are shaped by people with deep expertise of those contexts.

We selected the Netherlands and Syria as a case-study for two reasons. First, the fall of the infamous Assad regime created renewed opportunities for the international community to engage with Syrian civil society and rethink humanitarian responses. Second, while the Netherlands offers a specific lens, the dynamics explored here have broader relevance to international aid relationships, particularly between donor and recipient countries.

This report is guided by two central questions:

1. Is there a gap between professional recommendations developed from afar and those grounded in local knowledge?
2. Are the perspectives of those with contextual understanding meaningfully represented in decisions made by foreign actors?

These questions matter because aid decisions made from a distance can have unintended consequences, even when intentions are good.

Involving those with lived and contextual knowledge (socially, politically, or culturally) is not just a matter of fairness, but a practical necessity for effective, relevant, and sustainable outcomes. It helps derisk initiatives and can uncover better, more affordable, and more appropriate alternatives.

These concerns also connect to wider debates in the humanitarian sector about decolonisation, power, and representation; in particular, whose knowledge counts, and who shapes aid priorities in foreign-led interventions.

They are also central to why Acume was founded. Our aim is to help organisations better align their work with local needs and expectations by connecting them to trusted national experts - reducing the risks posed by foreign bias.

To explore whether this kind of support could add value, we examined how alignment plays out in practice. Using the case of Dutch-Syrian humanitarian engagement, we looked at how decisions are made, whose knowledge is prioritised, and where there may be room for improvement. The findings offer a multi-perspective account of how humanitarian efforts are shaped and experienced, with a particular focus on the interaction between Dutch NGOs and Syrian civil society.

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## Methodology

Primary data was gathered through fourteen in-depth, hour-long interviews with professionals working in both the Netherlands and the Syrian humanitarian aid sector, supplemented by additional interviews with academics. Participants were purposively selected to reflect a diversity of professional experience, geographic representation, and academic background.

The interviewees included:

- Six who identified as Syrian experts (five male, one female)
- Ten currently or formerly working as NGO professionals (seven male, three female)
- Seven academics with direct involvement in humanitarian research or practice (five male, two female)

Several of these participants belonged to more than one category. For example, one was both a Syrian expert and a humanitarian worker, with the overlap allowing for a layered and nuanced understanding of both perspectives.

Participants were selected based on their professional experience and roles, academic focus, and national identity. While their experiences varied, they shared a common engagement with the core

themes of this report: the role and use of experts, power dynamics in humanitarian action, and the nature of decision-making between donor and recipient actors.

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## Consequences of misalignment

A key issue in humanitarian partnerships is the risk of cultural misunderstandings, which experts can help alleviate. The geographic and cultural distance between humanitarian organisations and their local partners often leads to differences in value systems, belief systems, and other cultural sensitivities. These misconceptions can significantly negatively impact the effectiveness of aid and the relationships between organisations and communities.

Interviewees noted that good intentions alone are not enough. When communities are not consulted, programmes often fall short or even cause harm. For example, one interviewee shared a case where an NGO built a new town to accommodate individuals from two neighbouring towns, only to find out that the different groups did not want to live together. Another example involved a researcher who worked in the Democratic Republic of Congo and described how an NGO distributed rice to a community facing food scarcity, without realising that the community did not eat rice.

These examples illustrate how good intentions can fail to lead to effective aid due to a lack of cultural understanding. They also highlight the importance of dialogue and consultation, as recognising the priorities, customs, and cultural sensitivities of affected communities is essential for delivering appropriate and impactful aid.

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## How experts might support more relevant aid

Acume defines contextual experts as academics, professional researchers, and consultants who either belong to the community or have an extensive understanding of it. In humanitarian partnerships, these individuals can help bridge cultural gaps by contributing to decisions and providing contextually relevant knowledge to organisations.

In discussions with ten participants about the role of experts in humanitarian partnerships, all but one acknowledged their value. They agreed that experts are most effective when their role is clearly defined and integrated early in the process. Otherwise, their input risks being sidelined or misunderstood. Rather than being added at the end of a project or solely used to endorse pre-decided plans, experts need to be included from the outset and positioned to make their contributions meaningful.

Importantly, experts should not replace the voices from within communities but should instead complement them by addressing knowledge gaps that neither NGOs nor communities can fill alone. When utilised appropriately, their insights can improve project design, build trust, and enhance the effectiveness of aid.

One area where experts can provide significant value is in helping organisations navigate cultural misunderstandings. As one interviewee articulated, “There needs to be greater consultation, greater engagement, and greater sensitivity. This can be achieved through consulting and negotiating directly with the community and employing experts to help fill gaps in knowledge”. In this way, partnerships become more inclusive, better informed, and more sustainable.

A practical method suggested by several participants is the use of design workshops— inclusive and collaborative spaces where international and local actors can engage as equal partners. These workshops allow participants to learn from one another and collaborate on themes such as understanding power dynamics, risk analysis, and exploring alternate opportunities of engagement. Including experts with contextual knowledge in these workshops can help shift dynamics toward more equitable and locally attuned partnerships while also positively contributing to trust and relationship building. One participant positively recalled the impact of a team workshop where civil society actors from both North-East and North-West Syria were able to meet and engage in discussions.

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## Who has influence in decision-making?

While experts can help bridge gaps in understanding, their impact is largely dependent on whether individuals with contextual knowledge are genuinely

included in decision-making processes. Throughout the interviews, participants emphasised that many people best positioned to inform aid decisions are systematically excluded not only from programme design and strategic discussions, but also from leadership roles.

A shared concern among participants was the limited representation of Syrians in international spaces where decisions regarding their country and funding allocation are made. Four out of six Syrian nationals interviewed reported consistently being excluded from international meetings and conventions that determine actions in Syria. One participant noted, decisions are often made in European capitals without consulting those who understand the local context firsthand. Several NGO professionals proposed a practical solution: providing official invitations and financial support to enable local partners to attend these events and contribute their insights directly.

Beyond international forums, participants highlighted the lack of meaningful inclusion in programme governance. All NGO professionals interviewed agreed that foreign-led organisations headquartered outside Syria must do more to empower local partners in influencing funding decisions. One suggested approach was to hold regular joint (quarterly) meetings to evaluate ongoing collaboration, identify challenges, and enhance transparency in funding allocations.

Several participants also noted the potential of diaspora communities and newcomers in Europe to act as cultural brokers. With their deep cultural understanding and lived experience, these individuals are well-suited to support the development of more context-specific and appropriate project proposals. One recommendation was for NGOs to establish advisory boards composed of Syrian diaspora members and newcomers who could provide culturally grounded insights and advice on project design.

Concerns were also raised about the lack of Syrian leadership within Dutch NGO programs focused on Syria. While Syrians often contribute on the ground or via local partnerships, they are rarely in strategic roles within the large international organisations delivering aid. Barriers to inclusion are often practical, such as language requirements, as well as cultural, including limited outreach to Syrian professionals and rigid organisational norms. Suggested solutions included creating more accessible pathways into

NGO leadership, providing language support, and proactively seeking individuals with relevant lived experience.

In summary, these examples indicate that expertise and contextual understanding are often available but not always acknowledged, resourced, or included. To foster more equitable and effective partnerships, NGOs must consider not only whom they consult but also whom they empower to influence decisions.

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## Barriers to using the right experts

While participants recognised the value of experts with contextual knowledge, those with direct NGO experience discussed the practical difficulties of identifying and collaborating with the right individuals.

Of the ten interviewees involved in NGOs, six expressed concerns about current recruitment practices. These concerns focused on the challenges of evaluating deeper contextual factors, such as a candidate's values, professional networks, and affiliations, which are often critical, albeit difficult, to assess remotely. The remaining four interviewees were from organisations that did not engage external experts but rather hired directly from the civil society groups with which they partnered.

Participants highlighted the importance of understanding an expert's background before engagement. This process is essential not only to ensure alignment with the organisation's values and ethics but also to verify that the expert's qualifications are suitable for the task at hand. However, this vetting process can be resource-intensive, requiring substantial time and effort. Even after recruitment, experts might need additional training to ensure they align with the organisation's specific needs.

Some participants explained that due to the difficulty in finding suitable individuals, organisations often retain the same "perfect" consultant for extended periods. While this can provide consistency, it also introduces risks. Over time, decision-making may become overly influenced by one person's worldview or assumptions, limiting the range of perspectives considered and, in some cases, leading to programme choices that are less responsive to local variations or changes. Participants noted that some consultants overestimated their understanding of local dynamics, which meant errors were not prevented.

It was suggested that addressing the hiring and vetting of experts, could make their contributions instrumental in aligning humanitarian efforts more closely with local needs.

Two core recommendations emerged from these discussions. First, organisations should seek more diverse and more contextually accurate representations. For example, if suppose a project requires support for women's mental health in a specific region, a suitable expert might be a female social anthropologist from that area who specialises in mental health. Her proximity - both culturally and geographically - would allow her to provide better informed critical analysis of aid proposals. Such experts should be engaged on a short-term, project-specific basis.

Second, if a highly specific expert cannot be found, it may be more effective to consult a diverse pool of individuals rather than over-rely on a single person. A carefully selected group with varied backgrounds and perspectives can, through dialogue, help mitigate individual biases and contribute a more representative and balanced perspective and analysis.

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## Towards a more inclusive and representative humanitarian practice

This research exposed structural barriers that undermine the relevance of humanitarian aid - including power imbalances, cultural misunderstandings, and the exclusion of those with contextual knowledge from key decisions.

This study helped clarify when expert input is most valuable, what kind of expertise is needed, at what stages, and why existing systems often fall short. Many organisations struggle to find the right people, assess their contextual relevance, and involve them early enough to avoid costly missteps.

We undertook this research to better understand these shared challenges - and to refine how Acume can support more relevant, inclusive, and grounded decision-making.

Drawing from our findings, several practical lessons emerge that can help improve how humanitarian organisations engage expertise:



## KEY LEARNINGS

- ▶▶ Prioritise specificity over generalisation. Experts should have direct lived experience or deep contextual understanding of the exact region or community in question. For example, someone from northern Syria is unlikely to speak meaningfully about needs in the south unless they have spent significant time living or working there. Of course, this applies to communities outside of Syria.
- ▶▶ Avoid relying on a single perspective and consider using a small, diverse panel. No one expert can represent the full complexity of a context. Involving multiple individuals, with varied geographic, social, or disciplinary backgrounds, improves relevance and reduces the risk of bias or blind spots.
- ▶▶ Make expert input available on demand. When recruitment is slow or ad hoc, organisations often default to using one national expert. Having access to a diverse pool of pre-vetted experts reduces delays and broadens the range of perspectives considered.
- ▶▶ Engage early, not as an afterthought. Expert insight is most valuable during the design and planning phase - when it can shape direction, avoid common missteps, and ensure programmes are grounded in reality before decisions are locked in.
- ▶▶ Be intentional and structured. Expert engagement should be clearly defined and embedded in decision-making; not treated as a box-ticking step, a late-stage review, or based on assumptions about when input is needed. Many mistakes happen when too much is presumed to already be known.

These lessons are not theoretical. In response to the needs identified in this report, Acume is embedding them directly into our platform and expert service design. We are strengthening how experts are vetted, adding micro-level regional tagging, and streamlining how organisations access diverse, on-demand expertise. These changes are designed to help NGOs involve the right people earlier and more effectively - reducing risk, improving trust, and ensuring programmes are grounded in contextual realities.

While this study focused on Dutch–Syrian dynamics, the challenges it surfaced, including power imbalances, cultural misunderstandings, and the exclusion of local expertise, reflect patterns seen across many humanitarian contexts. Addressing these issues through more deliberate expert engagement and stronger recognition of contextual knowledge can improve the relevance and accountability of aid. More broadly, these shifts are essential for building equitable partnerships and advancing decolonised humanitarian practice.

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