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NATIONAL SOCIETY PREPAREDNESS CASE STUDY SYRIA

Background

Syria's population reached 18.2 million in 2021, which is 2.8 million less than in 2011. Syria's Human Development Index (HDI) value declined from 0.644 in 2010 to 0.567 in 2020 and Syria is now ranked in the low human development category as the 151st country out of 189.

The Syrian crisis is now on its 11th year. Around 6.7 million people remain internally displaced and 5.6 million people have fled the country.¹ A decade of protracted crisis and economic collapse has left more than 13.4 million people in need of some form of humanitarian assistance. Crucial civilian infrastructure, such as schools, water supply systems, health facilities, and housing infrastructure, has sustained extensive damage and much of it remains unrestored or in disrepair in most of the governorates. In areas where

hostilities have subsided, families are struggling to access basic services such as drinking water, food, health care services, and livelihood opportunities.

The current economic crisis is the worst in the history of Syria. Ongoing hostilities, international sanctions, and COVID-19 are continuing to accelerate the economic crisis pushing an increasing number of people into poverty. Furthermore, the regional economic downturn, especially the deteriorating economic and political situation in neighbouring Lebanon, has reduced the estimated remittances of US\$1.6 billion sent to Syria each year by nearly 50%. Up to 90% of the population is estimated to live under the poverty line, which represents a 10% increase from the previous year.²

1 UN OCHA (March 2021). *Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic*.

2 UN OCHA (March 2021). *Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic*.



Further compounding the humanitarian crisis is the current drought in the North and North-east of the country, resulting from a series of interlinked climatic and man-made factors. The water shortage crisis is extremely concerning, given that nearly 4.5 million people in Syria's northeast rely on the Euphrates and its subsidiaries for drinking water and agriculture irrigation. In that same northeast region, in the Al-Hassakeh governorate, there were heavy rains and flooding in 2019. Additionally, recent wildfires in the western Homs province, eastern Tartous, and the Northern Lattakia in October 2020 demonstrate the impact of climate change in Syria's already fragile humanitarian infrastructure.

Insufficient resources and limited access are worsened by an uncertain conflict environment, the worsening of economic crises, and a devastated public infrastructure. People in Syria continue to suffer from localised hostilities, which uproot families from their homes, claim civilian lives, damage and destroy basic infrastructure, and limits access to basic services.

Syrian Arab Red Crescent profile

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) was founded in 1942 and was recognized by the ICRC in 1946. Headquartered in Damascus, the National Society has a network of 14 branches across all of Syria's governorates, as well as 73 active sub-branches manned by 10,627 active volunteers and 5,389 staff members working across headquarters, branches, and sub-branches.

As auxiliary to the public authorities, the SARC serves as the lead humanitarian agency in the country, as agreed upon by the Movement's partners in a signed Letter of Understanding in 2012, as well as by Syria's national coordinator for humanitarian aid, mandated by the Government of Syria in 2008.

The SARC is well recognised by the authorities and is one of the key members of the national Humanitarian and Disaster Response Committees both at national as well as provincial levels. As the lead humanitarian actor in Syria, the SARC is working closely with the line ministries of the government, including with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Ministry

of Local Administration and Environment, and Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reforms, to name a few.

Since 2011, the SARC has faced, and responded to, unprecedented demands on its human and technical resources in the face of one of the world's worst humanitarian crises of recent decades. Through its network of staff and volunteers, and presence across most of the country, the SARC remains the largest national provider of humanitarian services in Syria, providing humanitarian assistance to more than five million internally displaced people, affected host communities and returnees per year.

Together with the Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement, United Nations (UN) partners, and several International and local Non-Governmental Organisation partners, the SARC's operational capacity has expanded exponentially in a short span of time. In the first half of 2021, for instance, the SARC provided life-saving and life-sustaining health services to more than one million patients across a network of 229 health facilities both static and mobile-based. The SARC is also able to reach 80 percent of the Syrian population with safe water through treatment and maintenance of damaged water infrastructure.

Securing humanitarian access and the ability to provide relief and recovery support to all places in the country, while ensuring the uninterrupted delivery of impartial and needs-based humanitarian aid, is crucial. But in a highly fluid security and political context, it is becoming increasingly difficult. Therefore, strengthening the SARC's capacities is ever more important to meet the country's humanitarian needs.

Overview of the SARC's Preparedness for the Effective Response process

The [National Society Preparedness for Effective Response \(PER\)](#) is a systematic and evidence-based process designed to increase the NS response preparedness over time, through orienting, assessing, prioritizing, analyzing, and developing a work-plan in line with other Movement processes and initiatives on NS capacity strengthening (Organizational Capacity Assessment and Certification, Safer Access Framework, Cash preparedness and Forecast-based Financing, among others).

Initial PER discussions with the SARC started in 2019 through several online and face-to-face orientation sessions by the Disaster, Climate and Crises Unit of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). After reviewing several options, the SARC determined that PER was best suited for moving forward with both branch and institutional development centred on preparedness response. After that, the SARC established in the Branch Development Steering Committee, which included members from all departments and units in the SARC working to determine the characteristics of a well-functioning branch. The PER approach strongly contributes to overall National Society development and, therefore, is appropriately led by the Organisational Development and Strategic Planning Unit as a focal point, given that it emphasises interconnectivity among both headquarters and branches. By placing PER in this unit, it retained an institutional focus, as PER is often seen as only a disaster management department matter.



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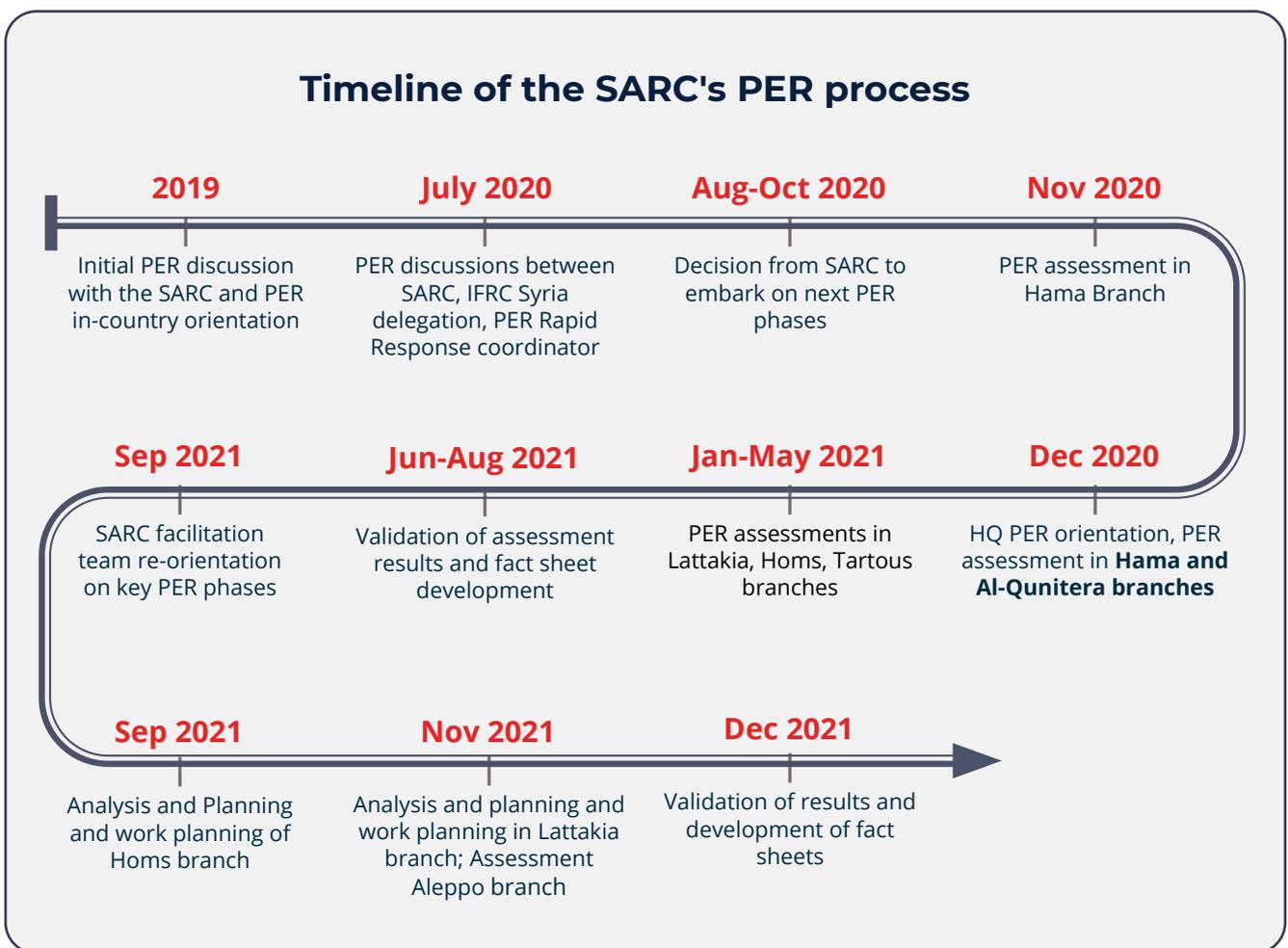
The SARC has improved its understanding and ownership of the PER process over time, particularly the National Disaster Preparedness and Response Mechanism, with its 5 PER areas and components, and its connections with Organisation Development aspects and Safer Access. The following timeline provides key events within the SARC's PER process. A MS Teams site was created to ensure that the team could collaborate across documents and share materials.

The SARC had several key analytical documents already approved: The Branch D Roadmap and the Strategic Plan 2020-2022. These documents were mapped according to PER's response mechanism components and, as a result, existing priorities surfaced that were common to both strategic documents. The SARC Branches Development Steering Committee has identified focus components related to the roadmap

and the characteristics of a well-functioning branch, held several internal discussions, and identified focus components for the in-depth evidence gathering at HQ and branches.

Moving forward, the SARC envisions to identify response capacity strengths and gaps in all the branches, whilst addressing quick wins and collecting common challenges and learnings for the development of the SARC HQ operational plan.

As is the case with other National Societies in the world during the COVID-19 pandemic, the restriction measures affected the work and resulted in delays on some NS activities, including moving to the next steps in the PER process, given that the SARC is still working under strict COVID-19 measures. For more information, please consult the COVID-19 operation section on the IFRC Go platform.



Enabling environment of the PER process in the SARC context

Existing strategic vision and roadmap to strengthen the capacities of the SARC's HQ and branches, in line with the PER approach

The SARC 2020-2022 Strategy reflects the complexities of the humanitarian landscape in the country. It was designed to enable the SARC to respond within the humanitarian-development nexus across the disaster risk management continuum. The strategic goal of the SARC is “to maintain the SARC’s position as a key and relevant player in the humanitarian field in Syria, to address the needs of the most vulnerable people in times of crises and their aftermath, and to foster a healthy, safe, and resilient population”. SARC branches play key role in strengthening disaster preparedness and community-level resilience to prevent and/or mitigate the risks of disasters and crises.

The SARC's Strategy 2020 - 2022 has 5 focus areas:

a. Integrated emergency response with a focus on improved and well-coordinated response planning, contingency planning, developing standard operating procedures, and funding mechanisms.

- b. Early recovery with a focus on integrated multi-sector programming driven by community participation.
- c. Resilience with a focus on community engagement and participatory engagement of communities in assessment, planning, and implementation, as well as capacity development.
- d. Protection with a focus on programming that considers the dignity, safety, and legal support of people in need.
- e. Strengthening of the SARC’s foundation with a focus on organisational development vis-à-vis creating more robust operational support systems.

In addition, branch development of roadmaps with the goal of strengthening branch leadership motivated and committed staff and volunteers with a clear structure and competencies to improve systems and procedures to impactfully build community resilience and effectively respond to emergencies.



Set up of the cross-departmental PER structure across technical and management levels within the National Society

Among the critical factors for a stronger ownership of the PER process at the SARC are the Steering Committee and the Facilitation team. At the management level, the Steering Committee leads the consistency and accountability of the process; it is made up of the Deputy Under Secretary General, and the heads of units and departments from Finance, Human Resources, Disaster Management, and PPSD. At the operational level, the implementation of the PER process is led by the National Society Development and Planning Strategic Unit, in close coordination and cooperation with SARC DM and with technical support from the IFRC DRM team.

The facilitation team emphasised that cross-departmental set up at different levels enables cohesion during the PER process' implementation, on one hand, ensuring a smooth operational and logistical environment for PER assessments, analysis, and development of plans of action with branches. On the other hand, this set-up provides a common ground where the facilitation team can validate branch capacity assessment results, as well as address quick actions deriving from the assessment process, for instance, sharing the relevant templates that are requested by the branches.

Strong coordination of stakeholders resulting in informed decisions and agile allocation of resources

Since the initial discussions to ensure collective efforts towards NS capacity strengthening, the SARC has strategically involved key stakeholders. Relying on the IFRC's technical expertise, orientation on Movement approaches and tools were presented to arrive at informed decisions based on current needs and context. Based on such discussions, the SARC has internally conducted a comparative analysis on what methodology to be considered and for what purpose. After analysing the complementarities of methodologies and purposes of Organisational Capacity Assessment and Certification, Branch Organisational Capacity Assessment, and Preparedness for an Effective Response, the SARC has chosen the PER approach, as it serves the purpose of having one flexible, adaptable, scalable approach to utilise within the HQ as well as in branches, aligned with the SARC strategic plan, and operationalizing the Branch Development roadmap.

PER also complements the SARC's overall Safer Access Framework implementation in coordination with the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC), which has also been supporting branch development. Therefore, through the PER process, the SARC was able to bring together different Movement actors with the common goal to strengthen branch capacities to effectively respond to disasters and crises whilst improving systems, procedures, and internal protocols. The SARC's efforts to gauge branch strengths and gaps based on common criteria and evidence will be key to mobilise technical and financial support from Movement Partners. Though the details of the results are confidential to the SARC, fact sheets to communicate high-level results without disclosing sensitive information are being developed.



Results and impact

1. Improved Headquarters-Branch coordination

In line with the SARC Branch development roadmap, the PER process offers a practical and adaptable solution to assessing, analysing and planning for improving branch capacities. Frequent visits from headquarters to conduct the PER process' systematic phases led headquarters to have further follow-up meetings and calls. During the process, headquarters and branches were able to collectively discuss the SARC's disaster risk management strategies, existing preparedness, response, and recovery plans/procedures, and the critical role of support services in times of emergencies. Through such discussions, various organisational development aspects were brought up, for instance, around the recruitment processes that require multiple approvals at branch and headquarters, which may constrain the branch's operational capacity. Therefore, the facilitation team could take these matters up to management at headquarters. The continuous process will support the SARC headquarters to identify critical gaps across the branches to better support the branch development process and reflect the outcomes in the next strategic planning of the SARC as a whole.

2. Identification of quick wins to strengthen branch procedures to improve response and functioning

Given that globally there are not many experiences of using the PER approach at NS branches, there is no concrete set of timelines on when the phases need to be completed. Therefore, immediately after the assessment, the facilitation team could utilise the results back at headquarters with the relevant technical units to take actions and/or connect with the relevant stakeholders at headquarters. One of such examples includes internal communication and information sharing between headquarters and branches: through validation with the technical units at headquarters, it was determined that some of the templates related to information management, examples of job descriptions, or the Emergency Operations Centre manual, were not shared and would be beneficial for the branches. Such templates and guidelines were disseminated for a better branch response and functioning, and several trainings were conducted for the branches' HR, finance, team leadership, and strategic planning units, to enable branch development.



3. Work-planning of the Preparedness for Effective Response process incorporated and supported planning of different thematic and technical units

For a NS to respond effectively and in quality, incorporating various thematic and cross-cutting elements such as Protection, Gender and Inclusion, Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) is essential. PER highlights and connects such areas under the response mechanism. For the SARC, the PER process facilitated the introduction to systematic CEA. To this end, the branches that have conducted the PER assessments could utilise the results on response quality and accountability, planning, reporting and monitoring, needs assessments, and other relevant findings to gauge their CEA capacities, in order to improve, institutionalise, and further strengthen the CEA elements within emergency operations, as well as in branch activities and projects. In addition, the PER work-planning process could facilitate CEA planning together with the relevant stakeholders from headquarters and branches to be incorporated under one plan at the branch. It is essential to foster such connections and linkages to avoid duplication of efforts, as well as to capture strategic opportunities to strengthen branches.

4. Preparedness for Effective Response is a continuous learning process to ensure a holistic understanding and improvement of a National Society response

In the last decade the SARC has been responding to multiple compounding risks and hazards, from floods and wildfires to conflicts. As the humanitarian situation evolves, the PER process supports taking stock of how the SARC has been responding and where the gaps to mitigate and adapt to the volatile humanitarian landscape in Syria are. Going through the different PER phases, the SARC facilitation team, in coordination with the NSD&SP Unit, stated that it has been a learning process at headquarters as well as at the branches, about how the organisation has been functioning and responding up to date. The process provides common ground for a systematic discussion, with pertinent evidence, together with the SARC staff and volunteers from branches, while learning from new global standards, revised guidelines and tools such as the Emergency Operations Centre manual, National Response Teams, globally harmonised standards, and training packages, to name a few. These were then communicated to the branches.

5. Identifying emergency response skills and practices, with the need to document and institutionalise

Through the PER process, branches could determine best operational practices, which could be capitalised for peer-to-peer exchanges. Each branch has certain expertise within the response mechanism across the PER mechanism. The Homs branch of the SARC has a strong Emergency Needs Assessment structure and a focal point. In the work-planning stage it was noted that more volunteers need to be trained on existing templates and tools, at the same time advancing the Emergency Needs Assessment to the humanitarian analysis, and advancing data collection tools for an informed operational decision-making. The facilitation team can advocate for peer-to-peer exchanges with other branches to learn from the needs assessment experience of the Homs branch, in order to institutionalise best practices. There are other operational protocols and internal communications conducted on a rather ad-hoc basis, therefore, it was deemed of high importance to document such procedures to increase ownership.

Lessons learned

Planning flexibility is essential given the volatile security and operational environment in-country

Initially, the SARC was planning to finalise conducting assessments for all the fourteen branches by the end of 2022, however, given the several operations ongoing this year, including droughts in north-eastern Syria, COVID-19 response, and escalations in Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah, limited the access to some of the branches and impacted the progress of different phases of the PER process as planned initially. Therefore, future implementation needs to take into consideration security and operational constraints.

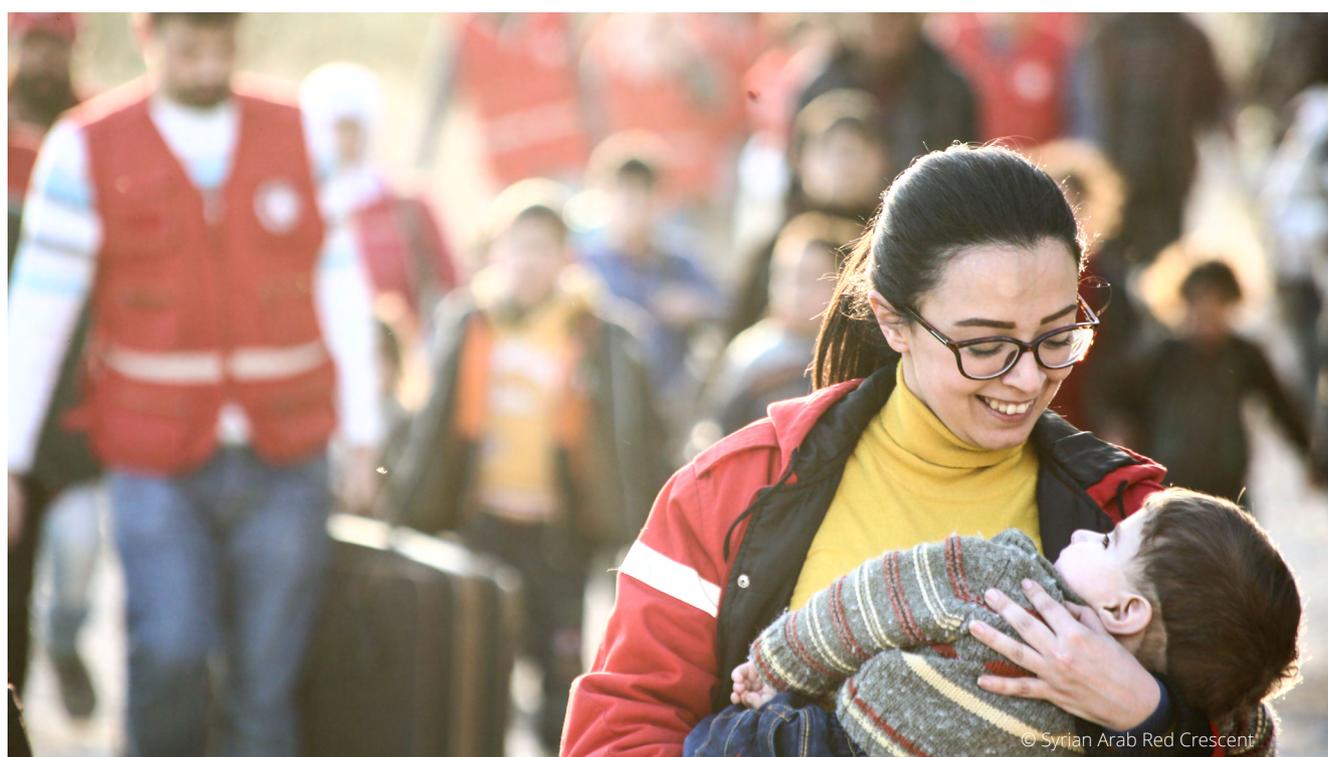
Adaptation of benchmarks for branches depending on the capacity, services provided and risks/hazards in the given governorate

PER has a set of thirty-seven (37) components and pertinent benchmarks that systematise NS response elements. For the SARC, in line with the branch development roadmap, around 17 components were selected to operationalise the roadmap, including RCRC auxiliary role and mandate, disaster risk management strategy, policy, and law, quality and accountability, preparedness plans and budgets, emergency response procedures, emergency needs assessments, finance & admin policy & emergency procedures, staff and volunteer management, and safety and security management, among others. Oftentimes, the relevant benchmarks were applicable to the branches.

For instance, although the RCRC auxiliary role and mandate describe a legal act establishing the SARC's role and mandate in disaster management by the national authorities, within the branches it reflected agreements or documents clarifying a SARC's branch role in the local governorate. The selected components will be addressed by all the SARC branches; however, it is still worth considering focusing on the most relevant components. For example, if the branch has not responded often to emergencies and has more social activities and projects, then the areas related to analysis and planning (risk/hazard analysis, contingency planning), as well as operations support (HR, admin, finance, logistics, volunteer management) could be further prioritised for the work-planning. This demonstrates that it is crucial for facilitators to understand each branch's operational context and risk environment well.

Need for improvement of translations of reference materials

Though majority of the MENA region uses Arabic, there are certain nuances in each country which cannot be fully addressed, hence, technical concepts and terminologies across the PER reference materials need further improvement. To this end, the IFRC and the SARC have been exploring the secondment of staff from a NS to provide technical reviewing services, which are much needed not only for the PER reference materials, but also across the wider disaster risk management reference materials in Arabic.





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This case study was led by HDCC unit in MENA together with the SARC PER facilitation team. For more information on the PER process in the SARC, please contact the SARC PPSD department.

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