



Leading in crisis

Supporting Syria's emerging humanitarian leaders

How do you lead in the most exceptional circumstances?

The demands on humanitarian leaders in crisis situations are heavy. They navigate constantly shifting and volatile conditions while working alongside communities affected by violence and trauma. They make life-and-death decisions under pressure, balancing overwhelming needs, limited resources, and staff safety in deeply unstable environments. They do all of this while often being personally impacted by the conflict themselves.

Managing in this context requires resilience, adaptability, and strong crisis leadership. And yet, most leaders are expected to learn on the job. Funding for leadership development is often overlooked, under pressure

to use resources for more tangible support. This has a direct impact on effective and efficient aid delivery.

Investing in local humanitarian leadership

The Syria Crisis Leadership Project provides training for humanitarian leaders operating in volatile and rapidly changing environments. Run by the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership (CHL) and Syrian partner POINT, staff understand just how difficult leadership can be in contexts such as Syria. The project's manager, Perla Escalon, explains:

"In day-to-day normal circumstances, as a leader, you'll have time to plan, you'll

have clear resources and information. You know who does what and you have a clear role. Whereas in a crisis setting, all of that is blurred and all decisions have to be made very quickly with zero or incorrect or partial information."

Since the beginning of 2026, the Crisis Leadership Project has provided scenario-based training to 50 emerging leaders from a range of community and diaspora-led NGOs. Local trainers deliver the Syrian-adapted SEED and GROW leadership programmes, which also cover humanitarian principles, structures, coordination mechanisms and decision-making within complex settings.



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**Professor Max Kelly,
CHL Director of
Research and Learning**

A further 25 leaders have been trained as mentors so that emerging leaders can receive extra support when they need it. At the same time, social network analysis research provides evidence-based and actionable recommendations that will enable UN agencies, INGOs and others to better support local actors.

Maen Yazeji is a senior leader in Syria-based organisation POINT Organization. He explains how the training has changed his approach:

"The training really helped me to understand how to lead in difficult situations, especially when things are unclear and changing quickly. You know, most of us used to follow written plans as they were, without reviewing or questions, and then deal with problems only when they happened. Now we think ahead, adapt to the situation, and involve our teams more in decisions."

Transforming a humanitarian system

Professor Max Kelly, CHL

Director of Research and Learning, describes the difficulties faced by local leaders trying to influence decisions and resource allocation in a complex and fragmented humanitarian system:

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Maen and his team put their training into practice when they supported a community through small infrastructure work and cash-for-work activities. The families they worked with have lived through years of conflict. Many of them lost their homes or income, and some have only recently returned. Tensions in the area were high. Maen reflects:

"I remember feeling that the usual way of working was not enough. So, we tried something

different. We spent more time listening to the community and understanding their real needs, adjusting the plan as we moved forward. Because of this, things started to change. We were able to reach people who we think have been missed before, and we feel the support was delivered in a better way.

"The people we had newly reached were able to work again, even for a short time. Roads and buildings were repaired, making daily life a bit easier. You could see the difference — in the work and even in how people are, you can see it in their faces."

Targeted support that meets local needs

The Syria Crisis Leadership project is funded through the H2H network, which brings together organisations that provide specialist services essential for more effective and accountable humanitarian aid. These "humanitarian to humanitarian" (H2H) expert services help frontline agencies deliver quality aid and ensure affected communities, as

well as local and national leaders, are at the centre of humanitarian responses. Max explains the network's benefits:

"I think the H2H network is really powerful in that it has created a network of expert service providers, not the obvious frontline humanitarian response people, and that network is facilitating the things we really value – local, effective humanitarian response that actually makes the best of very scarce resources, and is equitable and accessible."

The H2H Fund is a unique mechanism that delivers rapid, targeted funding in humanitarian emergencies and protracted crises, where funding for foundational services is often limited and hard to access. By supporting technical expertise and critical services early in humanitarian responses, humanitarian actors can deliver assistance quickly, collaboratively, and effectively. Maen can testify to the fund's effectiveness:

"Other organisations should learn the importance of investing in leadership capacity alongside technical programming. I have the tools now and I feel more confident in managing when you're working in situations which are complex and uncertain. If adaptive risk management and humanitarian principles are integrated into all stages of the project, you can see how this enhances overall impact."

H2H Network member



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