



# Learning Brief

**Findings from a Project Level Risk Assessment for Safe,  
Accountable & Inclusive Programming**

**Lessons from GOAL Syria**

**Date:** June 2022

**Title:** GOAL Syria  
Project level Risk  
Assessment - Findings

**Country/  
Region:** Syria

**Sector:** Safe,  
Accountable, and  
Inclusive Programming  
(SAIP)

**Intervention  
Dates:** From Nov '21  
to Jan '22

### Persons Consulted:

- 55 GOAL staff across multiple departments
- 152 programme participants across multiple sectors
- 14 key informants (including camp managers, local councils, and bakery owners)
- Partners

## Executive Summary

This brief outlines lessons learnt on how GOAL Syria took a preventative approach towards protection, safeguarding, inclusion, and gender-related risks to ensure safe, accountable, and inclusive programming (SAIP). This was achieved by conducting a project level risk assessment carried out by the GOAL Syria's Safeguarding & Protection Team and Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Adviser between November 2021 and January 2022. The assessment identified situations, processes, and other factors that may cause harm to or exclusion of different stakeholders, particularly GOAL programme participants and staff. After these risks were identified, a full risk analysis and evaluation on the likelihood and severity of each risk was determined and mitigation measures were agreed. This assessment was undertaken on the basis that identifying risks and ways of preventing them will strengthen GOAL programming and programme quality. This is because it enables GOAL to take a preventive approach to risks before they happen, rather than responding after they happen.

## Background

GOAL is an international humanitarian and development organisation that works to relieve the suffering of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. GOAL has worked in Syria since 2013, providing thousands of people in conflict-affected host and displaced communities with food assistance, potable piped water, and emergency relief. With several field offices in Idleb and Aleppo governorates, GOAL currently delivers Food Security, WASH, Emergency Response, Shelter, Nutrition and Economic Recovery and Market Strengthening (ERMS) programmes across the northwest of Syria, operating with an annual budget of more than \$80 million.

In late 2021, in preparation for its upcoming RESTORE III grant, GOAL Syria conducted a thorough assessment to identify protection, gender, inclusion, and safeguarding-related risks by adapting and piloting a risk assessment tool for SAIP along with tools adapted from Empowered Aid kit<sup>1</sup>. This formed part of GOAL Syria's Safeguarding, Protection and GESI action planning.

In total 55 staff, 152 programme participants (including 76 female and male youths and 76 women), and 14 key informants (including three women) were consulted, with a total of 16 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The scale of the assessment was comprehensive, covering eight modalities (Vouchers & Markets, Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance (MPCA), Bakeries & Food Kits, Emergency & Winterisation, Shelter, WASH, Nutrition, ERMS and graduation approach) focusing on fourteen areas per modality. The assessment was designed to inform the following questions:

- What are the main protection, safeguarding, inclusion, and gender-related risks associated with each modality?
- What are the main measures taken currently or planned to mitigate each risk?
- What is the likelihood, impact, and overall score for each risk?

This risk assessment was carried out over three months, focusing on GOAL and RESTORE III partner areas of operation in Idleb and Aleppo, and in community, formal, and informal settlements. GOAL used a stakeholder analysis tool to identify stakeholders for consultation such as those that influence or are influenced by specific protection, safeguarding, inclusion, and gender activities to identify key risks and develop mitigation measures against them.

The project level risk assessment was facilitated jointly by the Safeguarding and Protection Team, GESI Adviser, and Accountability Team who undertook key informant interviews (KIIs) and FGDs.

'Risk owners' were accountable for and expected to take responsibility and ownership for their own areas, with support in facilitation and coordination by the Safeguarding and Protection Team, GESI Adviser, and Accountability Team. Partners were consulted and provided written feedback to inform the risk analysis. Data analysis was conducted by the Safeguarding and Protection Team and GESI Adviser with support from other members of the Programme Quality Department.

The assessments included discussions with women, men, girls, boys, persons with disabilities, older people, youth, host community and internally displaced people, and other groups, including women heads of households. Data was collected considering all data privacy concerns in line with GOAL's Data Protection Policies.

Scores and mitigations for each risk were developed with a consolidated Risk Matrix developed. GOAL Syria will focus on the Top 5 risks as priority, based on their risk scores.



Focus Group Discussion with mutli-purpose cash assistance participants. Idleb, Harim District. Dec 2021

<sup>1</sup> <https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/empowered-aid>



Interview with shop owner. Aleppo, Azaz District. Dec 2021



Interview with shop owner. Idleb, Maaret Misrin District. Dec 2021

## Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned around the process of carrying out the project level risk assessment included:

- **Adapting tools:** There was a need to contextualise the project level risk assessment tool and adapt it to suit the needs of GOAL Syria. Adaptations included adjusting the placement of the safeguarding questions within the tool, changing and tweaking several questions to suit the country context, and adapting the process of conducting the activity, with a comprehensive plan and a clear schedule.
- **Consider scale:** In addition to adapting the tools, consideration should be given to the scale of the project(s) being assessed and how this will affect the size and output, as well as the time it will take. This risk assessment was beyond the scale of just one project but applied to the breadth of GOAL's Syria's work - one of the largest bodies of work in GOAL. Therefore, while it would normally be a one-day exercise, this was undertaken over several months. Additionally, it was decided to assign the tool separately for each sector resulting in over 300 identified risks, some of which were overlapping and repeated across sectors. Consolidating eliminated overlap and was found to be more efficient. Safety & security related risks were extracted and shared with GOAL Syria's safety team for their consideration and assessment.
- **Holistic and efficient approach:** While similar assessments have been conducted by GOAL Syria before, including one conducted in 2020; this assessment featured a significantly broadened lens, including a focus on GESI, Safeguarding, and accountability. The benefits of conducting a more holistic risk assessment included more efficiency as multiple assessments did not have to be conducted. This saved significant resources, time, and budget.
- **Engagement is important:** This more holistic risk assessment required a new way of thinking of what constitutes risks, and a deeper analysis of who is impacted or at risk. This assessment showed that more engagement by the GESI, Protection/Safeguarding and Accountability functions with the involved parties would be helpful to better understand and be able to identify when and why some participants may face different types of risks.
- **Communicating Scope:** This risk assessment's scope was much broader than previously undertaken. It was noted that it was sometimes difficult for participants to understand the type of risks being looked for. Brainstorming generated a very long list, some of which were beyond the scope of SAIP. In future assessments, clearly communicating the scope and expectations before the discussions take place will save much time and effort.
- **Allocating ample time:** Discussions were organised with GOAL Syria sector coordinators to identify risks related to programme activities. To ensure that field staff perspectives were also included, these discussions were in most cases done as a small group discussion with the coordinators and 1-3 team members. However, the time set aside for these discussions (1.5 hrs) was not sufficient and often did not allow for discussion around the safeguarding questions at the end. In these cases, the coordinators provided written feedback on these risks, missing the opportunity for further discussion with and facilitator prompting.
- **Remaining focused:** With many different stakeholders inputting, the list of risks became very long with risks that were outside the scope of the exercise (including security risks). It is important that the team organising the assessment also 'cleans the data' and removes risks that are outside the scope of the exercise (some of these could be communicated to other departments, e.g., security/access team, if deemed relevant).
- **Scoring:** Previous risk assessments included agreeing risks and mitigations, but they did not include scores for each risk.
- **Influencing programme design:** The learnings from the risk assessment were used to help design RESTORE III, with the mitigation measures emanating from this assessment included in the programme proposal. Other learnings included the need for robust referral mechanisms to support individuals at risk and the need for capacity strengthening for staff to conduct referrals. This assessment therefore was critical in designing programmes, with in-built safeguarding, accountability, and inclusion measures.
- **Self-awareness:** This assessment allowed for risk owners to reconsider risk in the context of their work, understanding the importance of mitigation measures. Previously, risk was considered the responsibility of the Safeguarding and Protection Team. Now risk owners themselves started reaching out to the Protection and

## Safe, Accountable & Inclusive Project Risk Assessments

A safe, accountable, and inclusive project risk assessment is an activity designed to assist teams in identifying key risks that may arise in a project and develop related mitigation measures. GOAL's risk assessment activity is supported by a tool that covers risks related to Protection, Gender, Inclusion, and Safeguarding.



Focus Group Discussion with WASH participants. Idleb, Harim District. Dec 2021



Focus Group Discussion with Nutrition programme participants - December 2021-Aleppo, Azaz Mukavema Camp

Safeguarding Department requesting information and advice on risks. The assessment thus raised the self-awareness level within GOAL Syria around risk and sent a clear message to everyone that Safeguarding, GESI, accountability and Protection are all essential components of programme design.

Lessons Learned with assessing, designing, and implementing mitigation measures resulting from the assessment included:

- Allocating resources: Human resources versus high needs in staff capacity strengthening, designing, and implementing prevention and response related activities was one of the main challenges.
  - Therefore, it was decided to request extra staff and budget to cover the growing needs for safeguarding and protection within GOAL's activities under RESTORE II and RESTORE III grants. (This decision was not only based on the risk assessment)
- Ensuring ownership: The level of engagement by GOAL, partners, and other stakeholders in implementing mitigation measures is important and needs to be owned.
  - To ensure this, GOAL Syria launched a Safeguarding Steering Committee, made up of heads of different departments to oversee the effectiveness of safeguarding interventions across all GOAL operational areas and support teams to adopt systematic and comprehensive approaches in their action. Additionally, GOAL Syria's SAIP Working Group will support the findings of the risk assessment.
- Ensuring a sensitive approach: Due to the sensitivity of topics and cultural norms, initially there was some level of resistance by staff when designing the risk assessment tool.
  - To overcome this the Protection Team conducted FGDs to identify appropriate training, resources, and visibility materials to address topics on sexual exploitation and abuse, gender-based violence and child protection.
  - Regular meetings were held with Senior Management Team, field management and other key staff that encouraged dialogue around sensitive topics.

Approval was obtained to implement activities from relevant authorities, such as the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), Camp Management, and Local Councils.

- Broad similarity in risk identification across stakeholders: The assessment found that across the stakeholders, there was generally broad similarity in risks identified. Some differences included Risk Owners thinking more about operational risks such as in designing activities, while programme participants focused on risks in terms of accessing and reaching activities (distribution points being far from home, etc.). In general, participants agreed that there are risks associated with children and persons with disabilities. There were also differences in the perception of likelihood of risk between stakeholders. In terms of sexual exploitation and abuse, within GOAL different perceptions of likelihood was noted between departments. While the above can be considered subjective based on who was around the table at the time of the exercise, this highlights the need for standardised approach for raising risks. This process and tool are one element of standardising the approach, helping to put a framework on something that can be subjective.
  - One learning from this could be to first identify key risks and then have a discussion with key GOAL and partner staff to assess the likelihood and impact together (and note why it might be different in different areas or sectors).

## Recommendations and Conclusion

- In planning for the upcoming RESTORE III grant, GOAL Syria will utilise the results of the risk assessment to enhance protection and safeguarding, strengthen gender and inclusion considerations, and reduce risks. Programme participants' feedback will be included in project design and implementation to improve current and planned programme activities. Additionally, the scope of safeguarding and protection awareness raising will be expanded using customised training packages and targeted at more programme participants as well as other stakeholders such as partners, suppliers, and contractors.

## Recommendations

Recommended areas for future risk assessment and mitigation activities include:

- Conduct participatory action research based on the Empowered Aid methodology. GOAL used this methodology when conducting FGDs with RESTORE II programme participants in each sector to include their views around challenges and difficulties as well as the limitations they are facing when accessing GOAL services.
- It is important to include other stakeholders such as Partners, Local Councils and camp management as further risks maybe identified.
- Agree on a clear accountability framework and decide who will be responsible for implementing the mitigations and ensure budget is available to address these accordingly. Have a vision of 'maintenance' of the risk assessment, with periodic checks and updates. This will ensure that the purpose of the assessment is truly for programme quality and not only as part of the proposal development process.
- Some stakeholders focused on mitigation measures that were already in place, and there wasn't universal understanding on whether additional ones should be identified (i.e., to think outside what we are currently doing). In future, this should be agreed by the team organising the assessment and communicated to the participating parties. Before finalisation, internal discussions should be organised to decide what's feasible to put in place and if there are any potential budget implications.
- The risk assessment was a time-consuming exercise, especially the compiling of data, which meant that there was limited time for analysis and inputs from reviewers. A solution to this could be to directly input to one document (for example, the SAIP assessment template). That would minimise the risk of duplication of risks and minimise the time compiling the inputs.
- Learning from previous risk assessments improved and changed the approach in how this risk assessment was conducted. For example, the previous risk assessment focused on Protection whilst not fully incorporating the key areas of gender, inclusion, accountability, and Safeguarding. This new Risk Assessment Tool brings together SAIP all in one exercise as opposed to conducting three separate assessments. This saves time and resources and allows for a holistic approach towards identifying risks. However, noting the point above that all stakeholders should input their data in one live document to save time.
- This should not be thought of as a 'one-off' exercise. A project level risk assessment needs to be part of Protection and Safeguarding action planning, maintained as a 'live' document with an accountability framework as discussed above.
- Communicate scope: Have a meeting before the assessment to introduce the scope to stakeholders and participants, present the aims and comprehensive plan which has been developed, agree on stages, tasks, and timeframe.
- Consider how Safeguarding, GESI, and Accountability Focal Points should work with staff who write and/or design proposals to ensure that risks and mitigation measures inform new programme designs.

## Conclusion

This project level risk assessment was conducted to support GOAL Syria's programme priorities on SAIP. GOAL's safeguarding and protection strategy and response was designed and implemented following a result-based approach. Therefore, this assessment along with related global objectives will inform the 2022 Protection and Safeguarding Action Plan that aims to inform GOAL's Safeguarding, Protection, and GESI mainstreaming across various sectors and programme phases, and the design of prevention and response activities. It will also inform GOAL Syria's SAIP Framework and the focus of the SAIP working group. GOAL Syria found this to be a useful exercise and may undertake similar exercises for other projects in the future. The risk assessment highlighted the importance of collaboration between the areas of Accountability, GESI, Protection & Safeguarding, ensuring a more holistic approach to SAIP and its inclusion in programme design. Finally, while this was a very in-depth exercise, reflecting the scale and complexity of the programme and resources of the team, it is recognised that a 'lighter' approach could also be (and indeed has been) used effectively for other country programmes and in different contexts.



Focus Group Discussion with WASH participants. Idleb, Idleb District. Dec 2021



Interview with shop owner. Aleppo, Azaz District. Dec 2021

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