



# **The Impact of Operational Planning on Organizational Development to deliver Cash and Voucher Assistance to the Affected Beneficiaries**

**Prepared by Mohammad Nahas**

**In collaboration with MENA Cash Center of Excellence**

**2024**



## Contents

1- Background/Rationale:.....	4
2- Define Operational Plan and Link with the Cash and Voucher Assistance:.....	5
3- Goals & Objectives for the Research Paper: .....	6
4- Methodology (Who, Where, How, What, When): .....	7
-5 Discussion: Challenges and future references .....	21
6- Conclusion: .....	22
Appendix A. SARC Structured OP Template .....	24



## Abbreviation table:

CEA	Community engagement and accountability
CVA	Cash and Voucher Assistance
CWG	Cash Working Group
FGD	Focus group discussion
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MPCA	Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance
OP	Operational Plan
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent

## 1- Background/Rationale:

Humanitarian organizations face a complex and ever-changing landscape. Responding effectively to crises requires agility and well-defined strategies. However, operational challenges often hinder Assistance delivery, impacting the lives of vulnerable populations.

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) provides a concrete example of the challenges and potential solutions in this landscape. Recognizing operational hurdles, SARC began utilizing cash and voucher assistance (CVA) in late 2019. This shift towards CVA demonstrates a proactive approach to improve service delivery. By empowering beneficiaries with choices and control over their needs, SARC aims to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in reaching vulnerable populations within Syria.

**The goal of this concept paper is to explore the effectiveness of Operational Plans in enhancing the efficiency of cash assistance programs during humanitarian crises.**

Traditionally, humanitarian response has been reactive, leading to inefficiencies and gaps in service provision.

Operational planning offers a proactive approach, ensuring resources are allocated effectively, and activities align with the needs of beneficiaries.

It helps organizations achieve greater efficiency by streamlining processes, minimizing waste, and maximizing resource utilization. Additionally, operational planning fosters effectiveness by aligning actions with strategic goals and ensuring interventions address the most pressing needs.

Triple Right:

Ultimately, this translates to improved assistance quality, reaching the right beneficiaries with the right assistance at the right time.

## 2- Define Operational Plan and Link with the Cash and Voucher Assistance:

An Operational Plan is a crucial tool for bringing order and focus to the often-chaotic environment of a humanitarian crisis. Imagine a situation like a natural disaster or armed conflict where there's widespread damage, people are displaced, and there's a desperate need for help.

As a cash team in the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), a well-defined Operational Plan is essential to ensure an efficient response. It serves as a roadmap, guiding the practical execution of relief and development efforts and fostering a shared understanding among all humanitarian workers and partners.

This plan will clearly outline roles, responsibilities, reporting structures, resource allocation (including budget), and the timeline for achieving our main objective: an efficient response.

For instance, the Operational Plan (OP) helps to identify the most urgent needs first by priority, coordination, and communication as follows:

- Is it food, shelter, medical care, or education...? An operational plan allocates resources towards those critical areas.
- The plan ensures everyone is working together efficiently, avoiding duplication of efforts and gaps in assistance.
- The plan outlines how aid will be delivered – where it needs to go, who will transport or transfer it, and how it will be distributed. This prevents confusion and ensures aid gets to those who need it most.
- The plan establishes clear communication channels between humanitarian worker partners and affected communities. This allows everyone to stay informed and adjust the response as needed.

By participating in the development or implementation of Operational Plan, the cash team can gain valuable experiences by learning how to identify and prioritize the most critical needs of affected

Communities in a crisis, then develop skills in allocating and managing financial resources (cash assistance) and activities effectively within the operational plan.

Also, gain experience in collaborating effectively with diverse stakeholders (other organizations, partners, communities) and fostering clear communication channels, and learning about monitoring and evaluation techniques to assess the effectiveness of the cash assistance program outlined in the Operational Plan.

### **3- Goals & Objectives for the Research Paper:**

#### **SARC Strategic Goals:**

The goal of this concept paper is to explore the effectiveness of Operational Plans in enhancing the efficiency of cash assistance programs during humanitarian crises.

Objective 1: Enhancing Program Efficiency and Effectiveness

Objective 2: Fostering Collaboration and Accountability

Objective 3: Strengthening Organizational Development

Analyze how operational plans can improve targeting, resource allocation, and program design within cash assistance programs. and how operational plans facilitate needs assessment and prioritization, investigate their impact on resource management, and assess their contribution to monitoring and evaluation processes.

The ultimate aim is to understand how operational plans can contribute to delivering the right assistance to the right people, at the right time, while maximizing resource utilization.

Evaluate the role of operational plans in promoting collaboration and communication among humanitarian stakeholders involved in cash assistance delivery in Syria. This will help transparent and well-defined operational plans that can build trust with donors and beneficiaries, demonstrating SARC's commitment to responsible resource management.

By addressing these objectives, this research will provide valuable insights for SARC and other humanitarian organizations on how to leverage operational plans to optimize cash assistance programs in conflict zones, ultimately leading to a more impactful and efficient response to humanitarian crises.

#### 4- Methodology (Who, Where, How, What, When):

This can be summarized as follows:

5W	Question	Answer
1W: Who?	Who will be involved in the research?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SARC Staff</li> <li>• Beneficiaries</li> <li>• Government</li> <li>• Other Humanitarian Agencies Staff</li> </ul>
2W: Where?	Where will data be collected?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing SARC Documents</li> <li>• Field Visits and Needs Assessments</li> <li>• Interviews with SARC Cash Team Members</li> </ul>
3W: What?	How will data be collected?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document Review</li> <li>• FGD - Interviews.</li> <li>• Data Management and Analysis</li> </ul>
4W: Why?	Why are a qualitative approach chosen?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate &amp; prioritization.</li> <li>• Foster collaboration and communication</li> <li>• Resource allocation</li> <li>• Monitoring and evaluation</li> </ul>
5W: When?	When will the research take place?	<p>Develop a research timeline with specific phases for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• -Participant recruitment</li> <li>• -Data collection</li> <li>• -Data analysis</li> <li>• Report writing.</li> </ul>

## 1. W: Who

To ensure achieving these objectives we used a qualitative approach since it allows for a deeper understanding of how Operational Plans function in real-world settings and their impact on the focus areas identified by the cash team.

As a unit responsible for Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA), we ensure our goals and objectives are aligned with SARC's strategic and operational plans.

The CVA unit makes sure their work directly contributes to the overall objectives and strategies of SARC since it is a tool used by all departments.

Then ensures everyone within SARC is working towards the same goals and avoids situations where different units might be working in isolation or even contradicting each other's efforts, after that a close coordinate with all mentioned involving parties should be done.

In general, the key participants involved in the operational planning for cash assistance programs would be:

### 1- Syrian Arab red Crescent Staff:

- Managers: who have oversight and decision-making responsibilities for the program's operations.
  - Coordinators: SARC's cash assistance program coordinators, who are responsible for the day-to-day planning, implementation, and monitoring of the program, would be essential participants in the research.
  - Volunteers: The frontline staff, such as field officers and distribution teams, who are directly involved in the delivery of cash assistance to the beneficiaries, would also provide valuable insights.
- 2- Representatives from Beneficiary Communities: such as local leaders, community-based organizations, and a diverse sample of cash assistance recipients, since involving them are



crucial to understanding the needs, challenges, and impact of the cash assistance program from the recipient's point of view.

- 3- Government and Authorities: Relevant government agencies and local authorities who may have a role in the implementation or oversight of the cash assistance program.

All activities should align with government Policy and Regulatory Framework.

Government often plays a key role in coordinating the efforts of different humanitarian and development actors involved in cash assistance programs. provide or facilitate access to critical infrastructure, such as financial services, identification systems, and digital payment platforms, which are essential for the effective delivery of cash assistance beside Sustainability and Transition.

- 4- Staff from Collaborating Humanitarian Organizations how used cash or vouchers could provide comparative insights, lessons learned, and best practices from their own operational planning approaches, which could inform the research and contribute to the development of a more comprehensive framework.

## 2. 2W: Where:

To ensure comprehensive data collection from all stakeholders, the research will employ a multi-pronged approach:

- Review of Existing SARC Documents: SARC's existing documents related to Operational Plans, program reports, and monitoring data will be reviewed to provide context and background information.
- Field Visits and Needs Assessments: Data will be collected directly from beneficiaries in communities receiving cash assistance programs through field visits and needs assessments. This allows for in-depth understanding of their experiences.
-

- Interviews with SARC Cash Team Members: Interviews with SARC Cash Team members (managers, coordinators, implementers) will gather insights into Operational Plan development, implementation, and challenges encountered.

### 3. 3W: What:

Building on the multi-pronged approach mentioned earlier, here are the specific data collection methods to be used:

- ✓ Document Review: We will review existing SARC documents related to Operational Plans for cash assistance programs. it may include:
  - Operational Plan documents themselves
  - Program reports and evaluations.
  - Monitoring data (including beneficiary feedback)
  - Relevant SARC policies and procedures
- ✓ Field Visits and Needs Assessments: We will conduct field visits to communities receiving cash assistance in Syria. During these visits, we will use a combination of methods to gather data:
  - Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): This will involve gathering beneficiaries together for facilitated discussions about their experiences with the cash assistance program, their perception of the Operational Plan's effectiveness, and any challenges they face.
  - Semi-structured Interviews: We will conduct individual interviews with key stakeholders such as: SARC Cash Team members (managers, coordinators, Volunteers), Local community leaders Representatives from beneficiary households, Staff from collaborating humanitarian organizations (if applicable).
  - Direct observation: Researchers will observe the cash assistance distribution process and interact with beneficiaries and SARC staff to gain a deeper understanding of the program's execution.

- ✓ Data Management and Analysis: All collected data will be carefully documented, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. This will involve identifying recurring themes and patterns across interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews.

#### 4. 4W: Why:

Thematic analysis will be used to identify key themes and patterns in the collected data.

This analysis will focus on how Operational Plans:

- Facilitate needs assessment and prioritization within cash assistance programs.
- Foster collaboration and communication among humanitarian stakeholders.
- Impact resource allocation and management within cash assistance programs.
- Contribute to monitoring and evaluation processes.

#### 5. W: When A detailed research timeline will be developed with specific phases for:

Phase	Activity	Duration
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop research instruments (interview guides, focus group discussion guides) for collecting rich, relevant data, should be tailored to the different stakeholder groups should have a mix of open-ended and more structured questions. (3 days)</li> <li>• Obtain approvals. (3 Days)</li> <li>• Secure access to research sites. (1 Day)</li> <li>• Recruit participants (SARC Cash Team, beneficiaries, collaborating organizations). (2 days)</li> </ul>	9 Days
Data Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Conduct document review (SARC documents). (1 Day)</li> <li>-Organize and conduct field visits. (2 days)</li> <li>-Facilitate focus group discussions. (2 Days)</li> <li>-Conduct semi-structured interviews. (2 Days)</li> <li>-Collect observational data (if applicable)</li> <li>Maintain detailed field notes</li> </ul>	7 Days
Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Transcribe interviews and focus groups. (2 days)</li> <li>-Organize and code data (thematic analysis). (1 Day)</li> <li>-Identify and refine key themes. (1 Day)</li> <li>Conduct preliminary analysis of themes. (1 Day)</li> </ul>	5 Days
Report Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Draft research report (introduction, methodology, findings, discussion, recommendations, conclusion, limitations). (1 Day)</li> <li>• Edit and finalize report. (1 Day)</li> <li>• Prepare visual aids (optional)</li> </ul>	2 Days
<b>Total</b>		<b>23 Days</b>

## Findings (Importance, Gaps, Capacities, and contributions etc.)

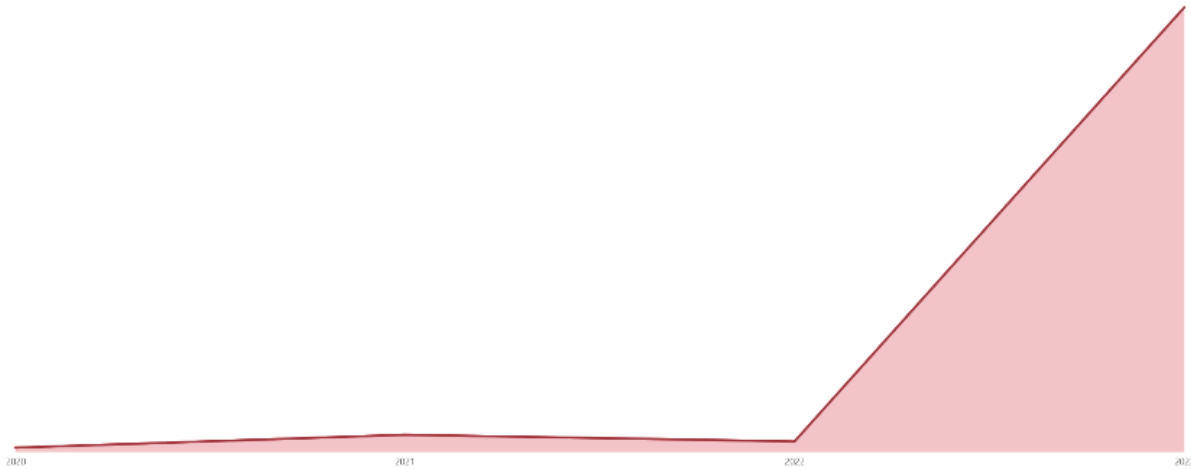
The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) is a critical provider of cash assistance to vulnerable populations affected by the ongoing Syrian conflict. Recognizing the importance of program effectiveness and sustainability, SARC has focused on understanding the operational plans that underpin its cash assistance programs since late 2019.

This shift stems from the successful execution of numerous projects across diverse modalities and sectors between late 2019 and 2023. These experiences showcased the value of strong control over all activities to ensure project goals are achieved.

Therefore, SARC prioritizes understanding how cash assistance programs are designed and implemented on the ground. This in-depth analysis is crucial for assessing program effectiveness, identifying implementation challenges, and determining factors influencing outcomes.

SARC's experience in delivering cash assistance within the complex Syrian conflict offers valuable lessons for the broader humanitarian sector. Analyzing SARC's operational plans can identify best practices, common challenges, and innovative approaches applicable to cash-based interventions in other conflict zones or disaster-prone regions. Sharing these insights can contribute to developing more effective and efficient humanitarian aid delivery models globally.

The figures below show how cash and voucher evolved in Syria.

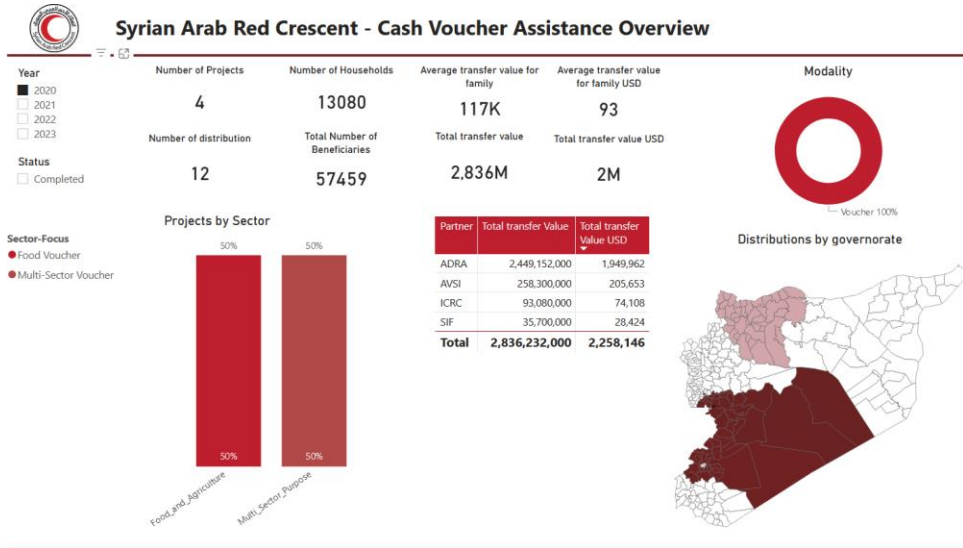


SARC began laying the groundwork for cash assistance programs in mid-2019.

This critical phase involved developing a comprehensive operational plan that outlined program design, implementation strategies, targeting criteria, and monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

The first implementation occurred in early 2020, utilizing vouchers to target over 5,000 households in previously hard-to-reach areas of northern rural Syria, thereby improving accessibility.

All projects in this year served as pilots, allowing SARC to gain valuable knowledge and inform future program design. The implemented modalities included Value Vouchers, Commodity Vouchers, and Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance (MPCA)

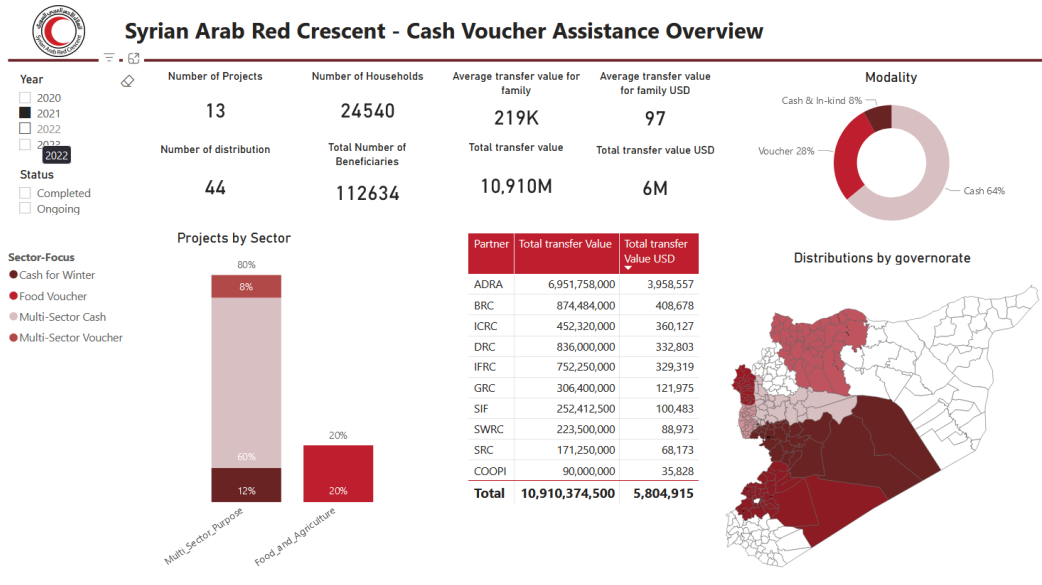


### SARC - Cash and Voucher Assistance Overview 2020

Then, SARC and collaborating NGOs significantly expanded their cash voucher assistance (CVA) programs in 2021.

This shift towards mainstreaming CVA involved using all applicable modalities to address the needs of a broader population across all governorates in Syria.

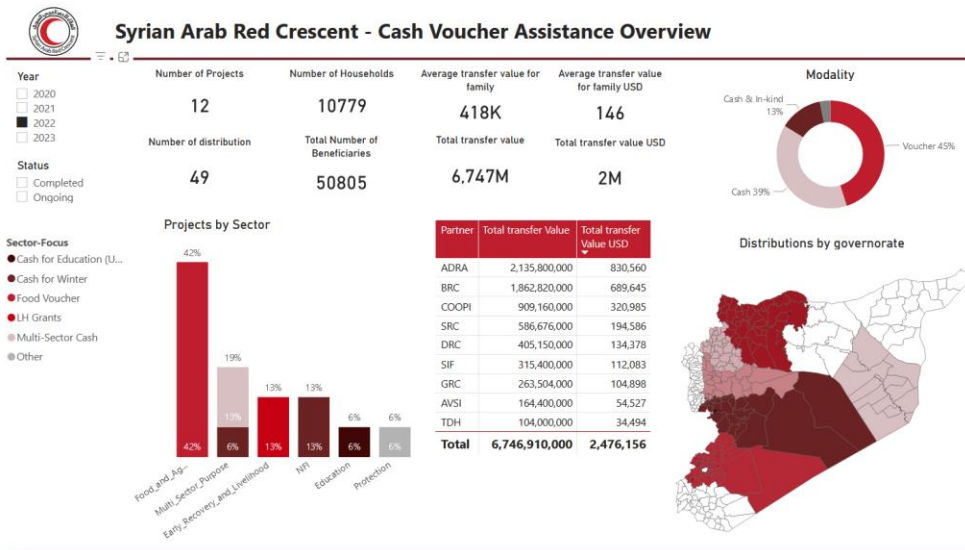
As shown in the graph, the overall intervention in 2021 consisted of approximately 72% cash assistance and 28% voucher assistance



## SARC - Cash and Voucher Assistance Overview 2021

In 2022, SARC's cash assistance program continued to play a significant role in supporting vulnerable populations across Syria. The data suggests an increase in the total number of households reached compared to 2021.

This expansion likely reflects the ongoing refinement of SARC's operational plan based on learnings from previous years. The iterative approach of implementing, monitoring, and adapting the plan has likely contributed to its effectiveness in reaching a wider population in 2022.



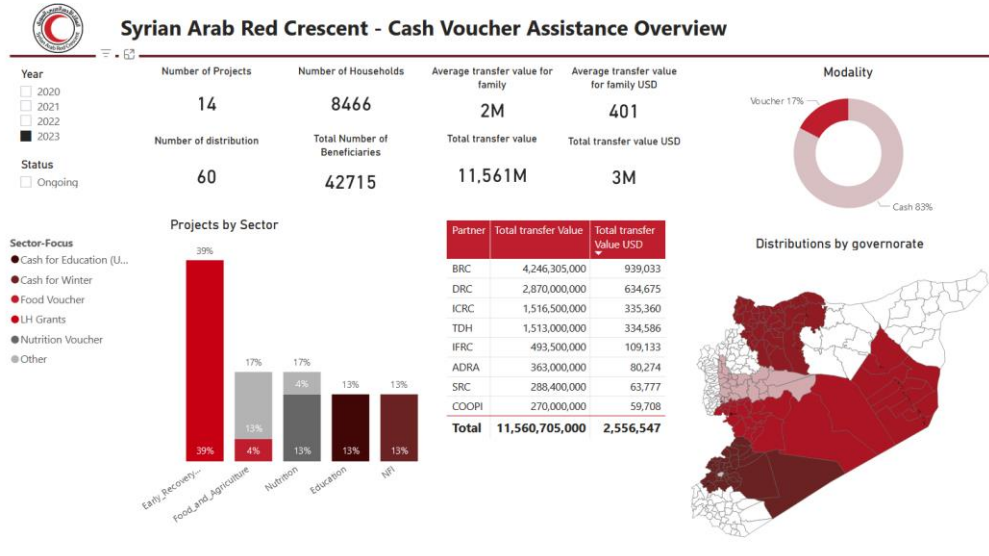
## SARC - Cash and Voucher Assistance Overview 2022

In 2023, which was significantly impacted by the devastating earthquake, SARC's cash assistance program played a critical role in supporting the response efforts.

Here are some potential adaptations SARC's cash assistance program might have implemented in 2023:

- **Targeted Assistance:** The program likely prioritized households who lost homes or livelihoods due to the earthquake, ensuring they received financial support to meet their basic needs.
- **Increased Focus on Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance (MPCA):** MPCA offers recipients flexibility in purchasing essential goods and services, potentially becoming a more prominent modality in the post-earthquake context.
- **Standardized Assistance Levels (CWG):** SARC might have collaborated with other NGOs to unify the value of cash assistance provided across different organizations. This would ensure consistency and avoid creating disparities in support for earthquake-affected populations





## SARC - Cash and Voucher Assistance Overview 2023

The Syrian Situation has presented a challenging environment for delivering humanitarian assistance. Limited resources coupled with a complex and ever-evolving situation necessitate maximizing efficiency in cash assistance programs.

Operational plans should be built on a thorough understanding of the specific needs and vulnerabilities of beneficiary communities in Syria.

As cash team implement some steps and tailoring them to the specific challenges of the Syrian situation and make our operational plans a powerful tool for enhancing efficiency and ensuring the maximum impact of cash assistance programs in reaching those most in need.

### A. Deepen Community Engagement:

- Making sure of Community Engagement (CEA) in all activities like defining the items included in vouchers, store's location, and date of redemption.
- Focus on Protection and Gender Inclusion (PGI) & Disaggregated Data

## B. Leverage Technology and Streamline Administration

- Utilizing mobile technology to gather data.
- Streamlined Administration: Utilizing digital registration and verification processes where feasible to reduce administrative burdens and expedite assistance delivery.
- Chose digital transfer modality and e-voucher mechanism.

## C. Invest in Local Capacity Building

- Continuous Building Local Capacity by providing Training Programs and Knowledge Transfer.

## D. Foster Collaboration and Coordination:

## E. Prioritize Robust Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

- Establishing mechanisms and clear indicators to track program performance and ensure assistance reaches its intended beneficiaries.

As a cash team always keen to focus on the following issues during implement CVA programs to make sure that we are always on the track and Alignment with Cash Team Priorities:

- **Improving Efficiency:** The research will explore how operational plans can streamline processes, minimize waste, and maximize resource utilization for efficient assistance delivery.
- **Enhancing Effectiveness:** The research will examine how operational plans ensure interventions align with strategic goals and beneficiary needs, achieving the desired impact.
- **Strengthening Organizational Development:** The research will explore how operational plans contribute to improved coordination, accountability, and the overall adaptability of SARC within the Syrian context.
- **Enhancing Assistance Delivery:** The research will investigate how well designed operational plans lead to improved assistance quality, ensuring timely and appropriate aid reaches beneficiaries.

And here are some studies that have shown the importance of OP in delivering assistance to affected people and can provide a strong evidence-based foundation for understanding how operational planning can support the key objectives:

## 1. Improving Efficiency:

- Studies have shown that operational planning can help humanitarian organizations streamline their processes and minimize waste, leading to greater efficiency. For example, a study by the Overseas Development Institute found that operational planning enabled NGOs to better allocate resources, reduce duplication of efforts, and optimize logistics, resulting in cost savings of up to 20%.
- Research by the CaLP network (Cash Learning Partnership) has demonstrated that operational planning for cash and voucher assistance programs can improve the timeliness, cost-effectiveness, and scalability of humanitarian aid delivery.
- A case study on the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) highlighted how their operational planning approach allowed them to rapidly scale up their response during the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, maximizing the use of existing resources.

## 2. Enhancing Effectiveness:

- A study published in the Disasters journal found that operational planning enabled humanitarian organizations to better align their activities with the needs of affected populations, leading to more relevant and impactful interventions.
- Research by the Humanitarian Outcomes organization has shown that operational planning can help humanitarian actors identify and prioritize the most critical needs; ensuring resources are directed towards the areas of greatest impact.
- A case study on the World Food Programme's operational planning for emergency response highlighted how it enabled them to tailor their assistance to the specific requirements of crisis-affected communities, resulting in higher satisfaction and improved outcomes.

### 3. Strengthening Organizational Development:

- A report by the Humanitarian Policy Group emphasized how operational planning can enhance coordination and communication within humanitarian organizations, fostering a more coherent and adaptive organizational culture.
- Studies have found that the process of developing and implementing an operational plan can improve accountability, transparency, and the overall decision-making capabilities of humanitarian organizations.
- Research by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) has demonstrated that operational planning can strengthen an organization's ability to learn from past experiences and continuously improve its practices.

### 4. Enhancing Service Delivery:

- A case study on the Norwegian Refugee Council's operational planning for cash-based interventions showed how it enabled them to deliver assistance more quickly, accurately, and with greater responsiveness to beneficiary needs.
- Research by the Cash Learning Partnership has highlighted how operational planning for cash and voucher assistance programs can improve the timeliness, reliability, and dignity of humanitarian aid delivery.
- A study published in the Journal of Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management found that operational planning helped humanitarian organizations better coordinate their supply chains, leading to more reliable and equitable distribution of essential supplies to affected populations.

## 5- Discussion: Challenges and future references

When implementing operational planning in cash assistance programs, organizations may face several potential challenges which differ from context to another like:

### 1. Resource Constraints:

**Fund reduction:** can force program cuts, limiting the scope and reach of cash assistance programs. This can necessitate difficult decisions during the operational planning stage, requiring prioritization of activities and beneficiaries.

It's a significant challenge faced SARC in 2024, and it can significantly impact operational planning for cash assistance programs like narrow the targeting criteria and scaling down the entire cash assistance program.

**Unforeseen Expenses:** The dynamic nature of humanitarian crises can lead to unforeseen expenses, such as responding to a sudden displacement event. Operational plans need to be flexible enough to adapt to these situations and ensure resources can be re-allocated as needed.

So As SARC maybe we could Allocate a small portion of the budget as a reserve fund can provide some flexibility to address minor unforeseen expenses, establishing efficient needs assessment mechanisms and using Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance to meet the needs.

### 2. Coordination Challenges:

- **Lack of Coordination:** a lack of coordination among different humanitarian organizations can lead to duplication of efforts and inefficient resource allocation.
- **Competing Priorities:** Different humanitarian organizations may have varying priorities. Operational plans need to be clear on SARC's specific objectives and how they align with the broader humanitarian response in Syria to avoid conflicting agendas.

### 3. Contextual Challenges:

- **Security Concerns:** Operating in a conflict zone presents unique security challenges. Operational plans need to factor in these risks and outline strategies for safe program implementation and staff protection.
- **Limited Access:** Operational plans need to consider alternative delivery mechanisms and contingency plans to ensure assistance reaches vulnerable populations even in hard-to-reach areas.
- **Rapidly Evolving Needs:** Needs on the ground can change rapidly in a conflict zone. Operational plans should be adaptable and allow for adjustments based on real-time monitoring and feedback from beneficiaries.

### 6- Conclusion:

The Syrian Crises has highlighted the critical role of cash assistance programs in alleviating the suffering of vulnerable populations. However, the effectiveness of these programs hinges on robust operational planning.

This concept paper has explored the potential of well-designed operational plans to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of cash assistance programs implemented by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC).

By analyzing specific objectives like improved program targeting, strengthened collaboration, and efficient resource allocation, mitigate the possible challenges faced in operational planning; the research aims to provide valuable insights for SARC.

## References

- **The Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP):** <https://www.calpnetwork.org/community/>
- **The Sphere Project:** <https://spherestandards.org/>
- **Overseas Development Institute (ODI):** <https://odi.org/>
- **United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) - Syria:**  
<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-2023-humanitarian-needs-overview-december-2022-enar>
- **The Syria Needs Assessment Project (SNAP):** <https://www.acaps.org/en/countries/syria>

## Appendix A. SARC Structured OP Template

This Structured OP serves to introduce the SARC Structures Operational Plan for delivering cash assistance in emergency situations.

This plan outlines a comprehensive framework to ensure the efficient and transparent distribution of cash to the affected beneficiaries during times of crisis.

Leverages the expertise and coordination of all SARC departments to ensure the efficient and transparent distribution.