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*Dr. Kamel Mohanna, was trained as a paediatrician in France. After graduating, he practiced in Dhojar for six months with vulnerable populations and then went on to work in Lebanon, at a time when his country was struggling with both civil war and Israeli occupation. It was during this time, in 1979, that he created the civil, non-sectarian association Amel, now an international NGO, of which he is currently the president. Amel manages 24 centers and 6 mobile units across Lebanon, with 800 staff and volunteers. Dr. Mohanna has worked for more than half a century in the humanitarian field, basing his action on positive thinking and permanent optimism. Dr. Mohanna's work and passion have been recognised by several prestigious awards, including officer of the Légion d'honneur. Dr. Mohanna leads both the Arab and Lebanese NGO networks' fight for a fairer and more humane world, through the collaboration of civil society of North and South as equal partners.*

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# 05

## National and international NGOs: equal partners?

International actors on the humanitarian scene don't always have all the answers, writes Dr. Kamel Mohanna. Involving in-country partners on a more equal footing would deliver better humanitarian results.

As the Syrian conflict enters its fifth year, the political resolve needed to end the violence is still a long way off, and the humanitarian needs are ever increasing. According to the latest figures, almost 220 000 Syrians have lost their lives to the fighting.<sup>1</sup> Nearly a third of Syria's population has been confined in areas under siege or internally displaced, whilst another 3.2 million have sought asylum outside of the country.<sup>2</sup>

Crossing the Lebanese border was relatively unrestricted for Syrians until January 2015.<sup>3</sup> The resulting influx of 1.2 million refugees has put Lebanon under huge economic and social strain, throwing Syria's neighbour into a catastrophic situation of its own.<sup>4</sup>

1/ <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4aea5cc4-f96a-11e4-ae65-00144feab7de.html#axzz3aU81yWMg>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

2/ [https://www.icrc.org/en/document/syria-2014-saw-escalating-human-cost-and-humanitarian-challenges#.VNYfifnF\\_iM](https://www.icrc.org/en/document/syria-2014-saw-escalating-human-cost-and-humanitarian-challenges#.VNYfifnF_iM). [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

3/ <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/flooded-refugees-lebanon-slaps-visas-syrians>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

4/ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].



The number of refugees at present represents approximately a third of Lebanon's population, and despite the work of the humanitarian community, a great many of their needs are still unmet. The effectiveness of humanitarian assistance has so far been challenged not only by the unprecedented nature of the conflict (i.e. the deliberate targeting of civilians and humanitarian actors, and the proliferation and fragmentation of armed groups) but also by political deadlock and an insufficient level of international solidarity.

Despite the urgency of the situation, the lack of support and solidarity from both governments and civil society within the international community is being keenly felt by Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey – the countries bearing the primary burden of sheltering and providing for an “unrelenting” flow of Syrian refugees.<sup>5</sup> An equivalent of less than 2% of the number of Syrian refugees found in these five countries has been resettled elsewhere in the international community, with many Gulf countries being the least willing to offer asylum.<sup>6</sup> The reluctance of the international community to share the responsibility increases the

pressure on the main host countries to provide a competent humanitarian response. In addition, increasing financial constraints (the Regional Response Plan to the Syrian crisis was 67% funded in 2014, but only 24% by June 2015<sup>7</sup>) make accountable interventions challenging to say the least.<sup>8</sup> The integrity of the entire humanitarian response in Lebanon must therefore be reconsidered, to ensure that a genuine commitment to accountability drives the humanitarian response. Given their dynamic interaction with all stakeholders and the value that this adds, national NGOs should play a key role in suggesting improvements centred on the well-being of the most vulnerable.

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The current situation, that sees funding flowing to INGOs rather than to national humanitarian organisations, is largely driven by the unwillingness of donors to handle a large amount of partners. They also have an interest in delegating grant-related risk management to UN agencies or INGOs. It has however not necessarily resulted in the most appropriate or cost-effective responses on the ground. To take the case of Lebanon, amongst approximately 100 actors involved in assessing needs and identifying response mechanisms, only 16 were national NGOs.<sup>9</sup> This is not new. The influx of international NGOs that started in the early 1990s changed the face of humanitarianism in Lebanon. The development of the “Charity Business”, the proliferation of ‘BONGOs’ (business-orientated NGOs) and the use of an increasingly bureaucratic, technocratic and compliance-orientated approach to programming by international actors has moved the focus of the response away from our substantive mission and sidelined the incredible value national NGOs deliver through their daily human interactions at the grassroots level.

5/ <http://www.unhcr.org/525fe3e59.pdf>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

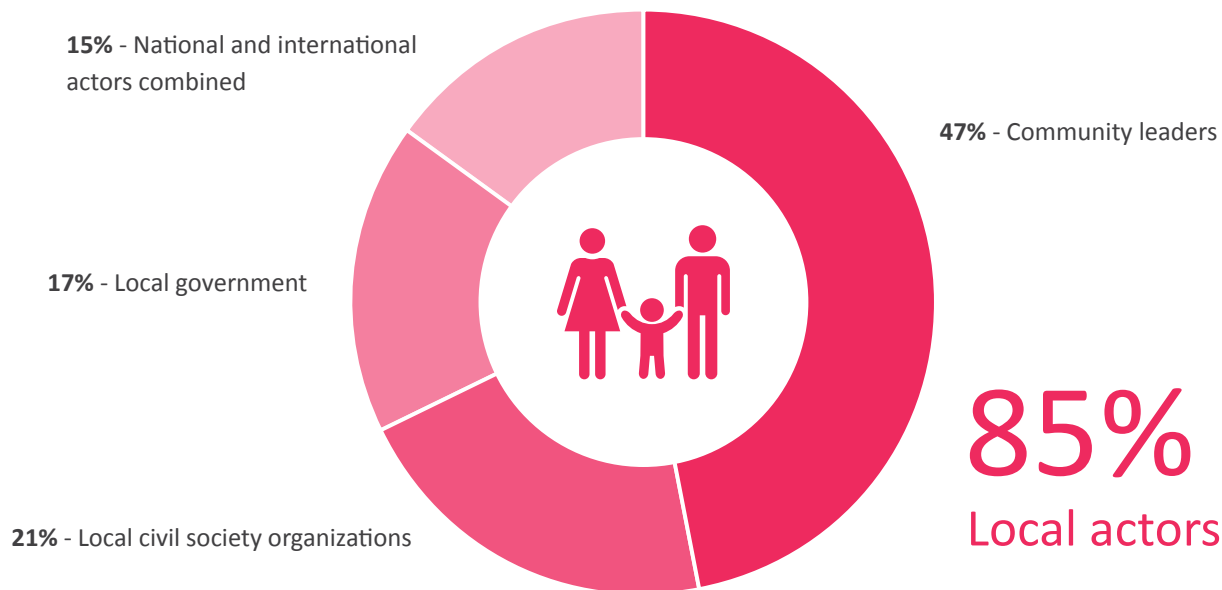
6/ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/articles/news/2014/12/facts-figures-syria-refugee-crisis-international-resettlement/>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

7/ For 2014 figures, see: [http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/GHA\\_crisis-briefing\\_Syria\\_March-2015\\_31-March.pdf](http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/GHA_crisis-briefing_Syria_March-2015_31-March.pdf). [Accessed: 24 June 2015]. For 2015 figures, see: <https://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=special-syriancrisis>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

8/ <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2014-09-30-SYRIASituation2014Contributions-RRP.pdf>

9/ <http://www.unhcr.org/syriarrp6/docs/Syria-rrp6-full-report.pdf>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

Figure 5.2: During a conflict situation, who understands the needs of your community the most?



When community members in North and South-East Asia were asked who understood their needs the most in conflict situations, 85% of responses pointed towards local actors, while only 15% pointed to national and international actors. Results likely have a strong correlation with national development levels.

World Humanitarian Summit, Regional Consultation for North and South-East Asia, 2014, p.46.

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As external organisations and agencies have started to work in Lebanon, local expertise and knowledge have been increasingly overlooked,<sup>10</sup> with humanitarian intervention adapted to conform to the standards of international organisations. The expertise and resources that INGOs commonly bring must of course be acknowledged. But while logical frameworks, performance indicators and other evaluation tools are essential for transparent action, national NGOs have found that these often undermine rather than support the contextual relevance of interventions. Evaluation

mechanisms are necessary, particularly when it comes to donor accountability, but do they actually support accountability to beneficiaries as well? The results of consultations leading up to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) indicate that there are indeed obstacles to effective humanitarian response that relate to the insufficient role national actors are allowed to play in the system.<sup>11</sup>

If we are to deliver principled and effective humanitarian action, there need to be more equal partnerships between organisations from North and South, which value and balance what both national and international NGOs have to offer. We all know what needs to be done, and international stakeholders have committed to the equal partnership agenda in 2007.<sup>12</sup> Now we need to move from rhetoric to practice. A stronger combination of local knowledge and technical expertise is needed to ensure the needs and dignity of those we assist are met.

Contributing to values of integrity and commitment within the humanitarian sector, the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) determines the essential elements for carrying out quality

humanitarian action. Amel has worked for years along the lines of the HAP Standard and considers its successor, the CHS, to be equally relevant to its work. This chapter looks at examples of how they have already been used in the field, and discusses the kind of relationship needed between national and international NGOs for these standards to be more effectively incorporated into humanitarian action in Lebanon. We will consider in particular the links between national NGOs and local communities, project sustainability, use of local knowledge and staff, the importance of collaboration and communication between actors, and access to funding.

## Strong links with local communities: a foundation to understanding needs

The outcome the CHS expects from humanitarian organisations is **well-timed assistance that is appropriate and relevant**

10/ <http://cskc.daleel-madani.org/paper/international-aid-community-and-local-actors>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

11/ These obstacles include the following: a) The international humanitarian system does not take sufficient account of national actors, and should change to ensure it does so; b) National actors are not effectively represented in governance mechanisms of the humanitarian system; c) Direct international funding for national NGOs is insufficient, and overly complex procedures and aversion to risk prevents local NGOs from receiving direct funding; d) Funding for capacity-building in civil society is limited and approaches to capacity-building have not always been effective; and e) National NGO networks receive only limited support. See: 'Good humanitarian action is led by the state and builds on local response capacities wherever possible' (Global Forum Briefing Paper 4). ALNAP. 2015. Available at: <http://www.alnap.org/resource/20243>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

12/ See for example the widely endorsed 'Principles of Partnership', available at: <https://icvnetwork.org/system/files/versions/Principles%20of%20Partnership%20English.pdf>. [Accessed: 17 June 2015].



Figure 5.1: Perceptions of HCT openness to local actors.



Members of Humanitarian Country Teams (Response from HCTs) and Disaster Management Teams (Response from DMTs) consider themselves significantly more open than Civil Society Organisations' (Response from CSOs) own perception.

World Humanitarian Summit, Regional Consultation for North and South-East Asia, 2014, p.9.

to needs.<sup>13</sup> That is to say, ensuring that programmes respond to needs and take account of risk assessments in their design. The evolution of the response to the Syrian crisis on Lebanese soil requires an ongoing revision process to ensure that programmes continue to be relevant to the changing situation. Given the strong relationships that national NGOs have with beneficiaries and other stakeholders, founded on a long-standing, reliable presence, and an intimate understanding of context and culture, national actors are well positioned to gather relevant information from different sources. Such trust, developed over time through “tightknit community relations”<sup>14</sup> and proximity, gives national NGOs privileged access to vulnerable community members and the ability to quickly and efficiently identify their needs. This is a feature that large international NGOs recently arrived in the region struggle to deliver swiftly. It follows therefore that the grassroots experience and legitimacy of national NGOs should be given more value by the international community.

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Through committed and passionate individuals, we can ensure that humanitarian assistance is constantly improved, lessons are learned, programmes are adjusted, complaints are acknowledged and dealt with and, ultimately, that assistance is constantly improved instead of being defined only by an initial needs assessment. In this respect, the role of national NGOs can and should be reinforced when planning, conducting and updating needs assessments.

## Local knowledge and staff: a basis for sustainability and programme continuity<sup>15</sup>

Another important feature of the CHS resides in the importance it gives to **measuring the impact of humanitarian action, ensuring that local capacities are strengthened and preventing negative effects.** The Syrian crisis is no longer solely a humanitarian but now also a development issue. A response to the crisis cannot be based only on short-term projects, but should also plan for the day when international organisations will have left the scene. This means, in particular for national NGOs, advocating for improved governmental protection and service provision, designing empowering projects that do not create aid-dependent communities, and delivering positive impacts from interventions.

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There are a number of reasons why local NGOs are central to sustainable humanitarian and development action: they predominantly employ local staff who – often in contrast to expatriates – are able to communicate in local languages, understand the culture, stay longer with organisations and are less expensive (i.e. in terms of salaries, per diems and other benefits). These professionals provide much-needed continuity and are also better placed to avoid interventions that create negative impacts, due to their familiarity with the context and the probability that they will remain in the country, supporting projects after international staff have moved on.

Cooperation between international and national organisations is key to running effective projects. However, this partnership must build and protect the capacity of individuals and organisations who will continue their work long after international organisations have left, so that vulnerable communities can be supported on the way to post-conflict transition. National NGOs must be viewed as the stable humanitarian presence through which change happens.

Given the importance of local staff to national NGOs, the institutional knowledge they possess, and the time and resources

13/ <http://www.corehumanitarianstandard.org/files/files/Core%20Humanitarian%20Standard%20-%20English.pdf>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

14/ <http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/758/ONTRAC-53-Transparent-accountable-legitimate-credible-NGO-responses-to-scrutiny.pdf>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

15/ <http://www.corehumanitarianstandard.org/files/files/Core%20Humanitarian%20Standard%20-%20English.pdf>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

Lebanese NGOs have invested in them, it is worrying (though understandable) to see many of them moving into better paid jobs with international organisations. When this happens, not only is the sustainability and capacity of national NGOs undermined, but also the accountability of the 'implementing partners' of international organisations, because they are often one and the same.

We have already discussed the long-term positive impacts of building local capacity and retaining local staff. To achieve this, we must ensure respect for the salary scales and capacities of smaller NGOs, so that the humanitarian ecosystem continues to include small but strong and healthy national NGOs. Maybe, as suggested later on in this publication, international organisations should reflect on their often stated commitment to the development of national capacity, and find a way to fairly compensate the damage they inflict on national NGOs when they poach their staff.

## Forums for dialogue: ensuring comprehensive service provision

### Communication and coordination are essential for an effective intervention.

The CHS states that communities and people affected by crisis should have access to information, know their rights and entitlements, and participate in decisions that affect them, within a context where assistance is coordinated and complementary.

Feedback received in a recent stakeholder analysis in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region highlighted that participants were often confused over which organisation was providing which service, and noted duplication in certain areas.<sup>16</sup> The UN cluster approach is intended to avoid such duplication and gaps in service provision, yet does not always succeed, not least because of the

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variation in funding of the various components of the response plan. For example, WASH programmes received 128% of requested funding in the last month of 2014, whilst the sector of Social Cohesion and Livelihoods, a domain particularly important to the Lebanese context, received just 10% of its target for employment assistance, income generation and business development projects, and 32% for technical training, literacy initiatives and life-skills training.<sup>17</sup> Does the funding landscape reflect the priorities of communities or the interest of donors for specific sectors?

Ensuring that the work of national and local authorities as well as other humanitarian organisations is coordinated and complementary is one of the keys to effective interventions. To achieve that, the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis cannot be led solely by international organisations, while ignoring the value national actors can bring. This is not to deny the value and technical expertise international organisations provide, but rather acknowledge and use existing capacities. For example, national networks, such as the Lebanese NGOs Network, can allow for in-depth mapping of well-rooted, stable services that can act as a basis for responsible and sustainable referral systems. It is positive that Amel, a Lebanese NGO, is as a member of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT)

and other national and international forums. There is however still a long way to go to full acknowledgement that the humanitarian community cannot use the same model of coordination and delivery on every continent,<sup>18</sup> and local capacities, where they exist, should be recognised and empowered.

Communication and collaboration is not only essential between humanitarian actors themselves, but between NGOs and their beneficiaries as well. Techniques to communicate effectively with beneficiaries have of course been developed by the international humanitarian community, but the key to their success is often dependent on understanding of culture and context, and use of appropriate language and dialects. National NGOs are better equipped than international organisations to ensure this is true for field staff and senior management alike. When senior managers don't have to rely on translators to follow the news or communicate with local communities and refugees, they are more likely to interact with the communities they intend to serve and make impartial, well-informed decisions.

## The importance of focused and accessible funding

### Responsible use and management

**of resources** is essential in reaching a balance between quality, cost and effectiveness at all stages of the response. Communities and people affected by crisis should expect that organisations assisting them manage resources effectively, efficiently and ethically.



16/ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=8664>.

17/ See 'Responding to changing needs?', ALNAP, 2014, p. 28, for a description of different approaches to coordination based on context. <http://www.alnap.org/node/19332.aspx>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

18/ <http://www.wvi.org/syria-crisis/pressrelease/humanitarian-ngos-fund-syria-response-now-it%E2%80%99s-too-late>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

Discussions, conferences, seminars and other humanitarian meetings are moments of necessary exchange and reflection. Nevertheless, they are not an end in themselves and the resources which they require must be minimised if we want funds to be primarily used for the benefit of the most vulnerable. Astronomical sums are often spent by international agencies on administration, coordination and security, or for managing the funds that allow national NGOs to implement programmes. This significantly reduces the funds that directly benefit affected communities, and creates an expensive culture of high per diems and 'humanitarian tourism'. In order to avoid falling further into this habit, we must all strive to ensure that civil society from North and South work together towards international solidarity and commitment, distancing itself from 'Charity Business' and an increasingly bureaucratic system that undermines real and just engagement. An alternative approach needs to be developed – one which balances professionalism and commitment, fosters respect and trust between international and national NGOs, and supports mutual information-sharing as well as service provision on an equal footing.

A further challenge in ensuring the responsible use and management of resources within the Lebanese context is the difficulty that local organisations have accessing funding from international donors, for example because of delays in receiving formal registrations. On occasion, international institutions offer funding but it often comes with unreasonable obstacles. This triggered the Syrian INGOs Regional Forum to state that donors "must not allow bureaucratic impediments which delay or hinder the delivery of aid, and that the allocation of funding must be done on an impartial basis and through a variety of channels."<sup>19</sup>

Constraints imposed by donors can take the focus away from the end goal, and/or advance the preference of donors for large-scale interventions. According to Development Initiatives, between 2009 and 2013 only 1.6% of all humanitarian assistance went directly to national NGOs, even though they end up implementing a much larger proportion of humanitarian programmes.<sup>20</sup> If a strong collaboration between international and national organisations truly existed, the preference for large-scale interventions would not be so prevalent. The reality is that international agencies often see collaboration with national entities as a constraint, and regularly make the choice to rule out local actors or work

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on the basis of unequal partnerships. Large portions of funding are channelled through UN agencies – take for example the US\$15 million pledged to Syria and neighbouring countries by the Finnish government, of which the majority will be delivered through UN agencies;<sup>21</sup> or the pledges by Kuwait that have also been largely channelled through UN agencies and international NGOs.<sup>22</sup> The difficulties smaller, national NGOs face to directly access funds and their reliance on project funding make their survival yet more of a struggle. Amel is fortunate enough to be in a position where 53% of its funds are derived from the participation of beneficiaries, revenues from its property, and its bi-annual gala dinners. This situation allows Amel to make independent choices for its organisation, its choice of programmes and its ability to act specifically where needs are not covered. Many other national NGOs are not so fortunate. Amel believes that every organisation, regardless of size or capacity, should be able to access funding without jeopardising its ability to act neutrally, and that funds received should not compromise an organisation's independence. Indeed, funding often represents an extension of a foreign policy and power, placing conditions on how the funding is spent – stipulating, for example, which products an organisation must buy, and from where.<sup>23</sup> This largely influences the development of a project and the effectiveness of the use of resources. Obstacles imposed on access to funding should be reduced to ensure that the needs of vulnerable communities are prioritised. Without addressing this imbalance, true progress, with fair input from national and international organisations, will be difficult to achieve.

## Conclusions

Humanitarian action should steer its delivery model towards equal, strategic and long-lasting partnerships based on humanitarian principles. It is with these types of partnerships that humanitarian actors can apply an approach

Amel believes in: "our principles define our position, which can then be put into practice." It is in light of these principles, and the arguments presented in this article, that we take position in favour of the following actions:

- When appropriate, needs assessments and their revision should be contracted to national NGOs, given their privileged knowledge of and connection to local communities.
- Rules of cooperation and collaboration between international organisations and national NGOs, inspired by the Principles of Partnership, should be enforced. They should result in an open dialogue, and joint project development, where international NGOs bring external expertise and financial resources, and national NGOs bring local knowledge and beneficiary communication techniques.
- A certain amount of funding<sup>24</sup> should be directed to national NGOs, either directly or through pooled funds.
- International organisations should suggest a mechanism to offset the costs incurred when staff are poached from national NGOs.
- Cluster meetings and documents should be systematically translated into the local language and documents relevant to beneficiary communities communicated in an appropriate and understandable manner.
- Programmes should concentrate on effectiveness, not just visibility. In the same vein, attributed project funds should reach beneficiaries, rather than simply covering administrative costs.

The CHS is a tool that supports the vision of a humanitarian response that promotes dignity for everyone, not just a privileged few. Equal partnership must not only become a universal principle, but also a position that is translated into practice by the international community, allocating equal responsibility to and demanding equal accountability from national and international actors. In order to ensure these attitudes prevail within the sector, the international humanitarian community must allow national NGOs to play a more important role in humanitarian response. By adopting the above recommendations, Amel believes that we can achieve just this.

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19/ <http://www.wvi.org/syria-crisis/pressrelease/humanitarian-ngos-fund-syria-response-now-it%E2%80%99s-too-late>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

20/ 'Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2014' Development Initiatives. p.64.

<http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/GHA-Report-2014-interactive.pdf>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

21/ <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/finland-pledged-eur-15-million-victims-crisis-syria>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

22/ <http://www.ipsnews.net/2015/03/cash-strapped-u-n-to-look-for-funds-for-syria-at-pledging-conference-in-kuwait/>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

23/ <http://www.globalissues.org/article/35/foreign-aid-development-assistance#AidMoneyOftenTiedtoVariousRestrictiveConditions>. [Accessed: 24 June 2015].

24/ Christian Aid and Act Alliance suggested a minimum of 15%. See 'Making the World Humanitarian Summit worth the climb'. Available at: <https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/file/471236/download/513450>. [Accessed: 17 June 2015].