



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
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**Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC**

**Water
and
Sanitation**

Swiss Cooperation Programme Middle East

From small hands-on jobs to
shaping the bigger picture.

Swiss Cooperation Programme Middle East

Since 2011, Switzerland has provided over **CHF 500 million** (approx. CHF 50 million per year) for the affected population in the region. Switzerland is actively responding to the significant and continuous humanitarian needs and is working to strengthen the resilience of the people of Syria and in the whole region. It is engaged in four priority areas:

- Protection and Migration;
- Education and Income
- Conflict prevention and Peace promotion
- **Water and Sanitation**

To date, **Switzerland has deployed 51 experts** to Syria and other countries in the Middle East where they support international efforts to ensure access **to drinking water, sanitation and shelter, and provide cash assistance and protection** for the most affected and disadvantaged population groups, including children and young people

December 2020 - Patrick Galli has just returned to Qamishli after a well-deserved break in Switzerland. During the interview, which was done via Skype, Patrick is sitting in his simple but well-equipped flat which is on the United Nations compound. "My way to work is really short," he tells me. "I simply go down the stairs, around the building and up the other side to reach my desk. But it's probably farther than most people walk to their home offices in Switzerland at the moment," he says referring to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Patrick started his secondment with United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in January 2020, just a few weeks before COVID-19 gripped the world. The war in Syria had been going on for nine years, 11 million people were and are still in need of humanitarian assistance and more than 6.2 million have been internally displaced. The war-ravaged country has been extremely challenged for almost a decade, and the pandemic has put an extra burden on people's lives as well as humanitarian work. When COVID-19 first arrived in Syria, the Syrian government and the Kurdish Self-Administration, which controls large parts of north-eastern Syria, imposed some temporary lockdown and movement restriction measures, which could also be felt in Qamishli, a city of around 180,000 people.

"The population is very much aware of the pandemic. Like in Europe, people wear masks in the streets and partial lockdowns have been imposed," Patrick explains. "My job has also been affected as I have not been able to go to the field as often as I would have liked and needed to," he says emphasising that working close to the people in need is very important to him.



Patrick's work involves everything from small hands-on jobs, like checking the boreholes that provide the four official camps in northeast Syria with drinking water, to working on the bigger picture such as organising WASH coordination meetings and drafting strategies for more efficient and durable solutions for the camps' water supply and sanitation. "As there is no suitable groundwater in two of the major camps, the drinking water has to be collected from boreholes, which are 30 to 40km away, and brought to the camps by trucks."

One of the four camps UNICEF supplies WASH services to is 'Al Hol', Syria's largest formal camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. The population stands at 65,000, 10,000 of whom are the suspected wives and children of

international ISIS combatants who went to Syria to fight; 30,000 are Iraqi refugees; and 25,000 are displaced persons from within Syria. The vast majority of the camp's population are women and children. "We provide 30 litres of drinking water per person per day, which means our daily water delivery amounts to more than two million litres of water. This is not a sustainable solution, but unfortunately the only possible option so far," he muses.

Patrick's contribution to shaping the bigger picture of the camps' water supply and sanitation has already borne fruit. UNICEF and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) are in the process of building two desalination plants for the Al Hol

camp. "By the beginning of 2021, these plants should provide around 50 percent of the camp's drinking water which will significantly reduce water trucking."

Challenges of secondments

Secondments can sometimes be challenging for Swiss experts as they join an organisation on a temporary basis and are not part of the core team. Patrick, who has been seconded to UN agencies in countries like Kenya, Sudan, Niger, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Greece and Jordan, has always fitted in quite well. "My colleagues and senior management here in Syria consider me as a full part of the team. And even though it takes a few months to understand the context, the situation as well as the particularities of the location and the job, I believe Swiss experts can make a significant difference to the humanitarian work on the ground."

For the most part of his assignment Patrick supports the UNICEF WASH team as well as his other colleagues in the Qamishli field office. "I step in to do the jobs they cannot perform either because they lack the expertise, or they do not have time," he explains. "If it's skill-related, I share my experience and knowledge which I hope makes a long-lasting difference to the WASH activities here." But sometimes Patrick's contribution goes beyond providing WASH-related advice. "As speaking up is uncommon in Syrian culture, I motivate my colleagues to stand up for themselves, make suggestions and provide constructive criticism



as this is the best way forward."

At the same time, secondments are a two-way street. Patrick's in-depth understanding of the context helps informing the broader Swiss humanitarian programming and contributes to Switzerland's ability to monitor implementing partners' projects and check whether they make a difference and reach the people in need. "I also love going to the field to meet the people we assist, the locals and government officials. I feel very privileged to call the field my office, which is wonderful for an outdoor and practical and solutions-oriented person like myself."

Due to his current tasks and priorities as well as COVID-19-related restrictions, direct contact with the camp population has been limited, however, building up good relations with other humanitarian actors as well as government counterparts is also a



¹ UNICEF delivers critical humanitarian assistance, such as vaccines and other health and nutrition items across the country, including accessing hard-to-reach areas. Meanwhile, UNICEF and partners are improving school facilities, training teachers and repairing water and sanitation facilities.

very important aspect of Patrick's work. "We are all in the same boat and pull the same strings which fosters the good relationship between Switzerland, UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs)," he explains.

As far as living in Qamishli is concerned, Patrick is content with what he has. "We have running water and central heating which works much better than in other countries I have lived in. In DRC, for example, I had no hot and very little running water and limited electricity. There is nothing to complain about," he says adding that

Qamishli does not see much violence these days. "There might be the occasional shooting near the checkpoints, but it's rare and on a very small scale," he says. "Of course, we have to be vigilant. Sometimes, there are agitations in the camps, especially when water deliveries are not sufficient or when there are community or personal issues amongst the camp residents, but I feel safe and am not worried here.



Patrick Galli, WASH expert for the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit (SHA), has lived and worked in Qamishli, a city in the north-eastern corner of Syria for almost one year. He is a so-called 'Secondee', which means SHA has 'lent' him to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) to support their Water, Sanitation and Hygiene promotion (WASH) activities with his experience and know-how. However, his work often goes beyond water and sanitation.



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