

June 2020

Supporting Syrian CSOs

Addressing challenges faced and Promoting self-determination

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Executive Summary

CSOs active within Syria since 2011 have frequently had to shift their priorities and strategies in order to continue providing services to address the needs of local communities and populations within the country. While the various foreign actors engaged in the management of the Syrian conflict have continued to receive support and funding by governments, agencies and foundations despite their strategic shifts, Syrian CSOs have had to continually legitimise themselves to those same governments, agencies and foundations, their only significant source of funding. This can place a great deal of stress on local CSOs and distract from their primary mission of assisting in the development and capacity of Syrians in need.

Such stressors are often the result not of ill-will on the part of donors but complex bureaucratic procedures that promote a top-down approach to decision making, giving foreign donors power over the local actors they seek to nurture. This imbalance must be rectified if a relationship of trust and security is to thrive and in turn enable Syrian civil society to thrive.

Syrian CSOs are fledgling, having only established themselves in the past decade after a space of freedom opened up following the start of the revolution of 2011. That space has however been closing within Syria, with the regime regaining a great deal of territory over the past two years. If civil society is to continue to thrive, it will need continued support, not only in the form of funds but also guidance and knowledge, gained by donor countries in the decades that followed their own bloody conflicts. Collaboration, innovation and volunteerism have enabled civil society spaces globally to flourish and yet international donors often neglect these as priorities when making funding decisions, which has created a sense of rivalry between Syrian CSOs instead of the camaraderie that would support its sustainability.

Young, Syrian CSOs and their members have gained a great deal of insight and knowledge over the past decade. This must be nurtured and respected if they are to practice self-determination, a principle espoused or preached by many donor countries but too often forgotten when funding priorities are set following little, if any, consultation with the CSOs they seek to fund. While their capacity continues to need developmental support, Syrian CSOs are established and run by Syrians with decades of experience living under the autocratic regime and so their ability to identify the needs of local communities is far superior to foreign donors and must therefore be considered an essential asset in the portfolios of those setting funding priorities.

Objectives

Civil society is an important space for the engagement of citizens in discussions and activities that relate to societal and political issues that impact communities. CSOs both fill gaps in the provision of services by government and hold those in positions of power to account. Their contribution to democracy, citizen empowerment and self-determination are very important, particularly in countries governed by ill-equipped and/or authoritarian regimes. Unfortunately, it is in such countries that their effectiveness, influence and even their existence are most under threat.

In Europe, a number of government-associated institutions and private funds support civil society organisations. In war torn Syria, where the government has been fighting against large swaths of its own population, this has not been the case. Some funds have been instigated by Syrian benefactors, but by and large it has been foreign intervention in the support of Syrian civil society organisations over the past decade that has enabled CSOs to provide much needed services to Syrian communities both within Syria and in countries hosting Syrian refugees.

This paper aims to serve those with an interest in sustaining and supporting the Syrian civil society space that has flourished over the past decade remain effective and impactful, by identifying the challenges faced by CSOs active within all areas of Syria and putting forward recommendations regarding priorities and mechanisms for support.

Methodology

The data contained within these pages is primarily the result of direct engagement with Syrians active in CSOs within Syria. Third party roundtable discussions and a review of available literature on challenges faced by CSOs in general and those within Syria in particular also feed into this report.

A survey of questions exploring the challenges and needs of CSOs in Syria was sent out to individuals with experience working in them, 35 of whom responded. Respondents were based and have worked with CSOs in all geographic areas of Syria: that controlled by the regime, that controlled by Turkey and its allies and that controlled by the Kurdish authority. The survey was designed with a view to also act as a learning tool for fledgling CSOs by including lists of best practice approaches and capabilities, which respondents were asked to select or rank. The survey questions and an overview of median responses are listed in the annex.

Twelve semi-structured key informant interviews were also conducted with Syrian CSO representatives, allowing for more in-depth exploration of challenges, particularly in relation to funding. Interviewees were predominantly working in territories under regime control, as this is now the largest and most populated area of Syria and will have the biggest impact on whether and how Syrian CSOs can continue to operate.

The author also engaged in a series of round table discussions held by third parties that touched on the challenges faced by Syrian CSOs and gave their representatives opportunities to share their experiences and concerns. Papers produced by other organisations and institutions relating the civil society in general and Syrian CSOs in particular provided yet another source of information and insight were. They are listed at the end of this paper.

Civil Society Structures in Syria

It is difficult to determine the size of the civil society sector in Syria. 172 organisations based in Syria are registered on *Rawabet*, an online platform supported by KAS that is dedicated to civil society organisations working in and for Syria, while 137 self-identified Syrian NGOs active in Syria are members of the UNOCHO run Syrian CSO Platform, but these numbers are certainly not reflective of the size of civil society activity in Syria. There are no reliable statistics on the number of Syrian CSOs working within Syria. Accurately mapping such organisations is challenging due to a lack of (a) trust, (b) registration and (c) understanding of what constitutes a CSO.

Prior to the outbreak of the ongoing conflict that began in 2011, almost all civil society activity was umbrellaed under the Syria Trust for Development (STD), founded in 2007 and overseen by the first lady Asma Assad. It brought together regime-supported projects that had been established in 2001 and 2005 also under the command of the first lady. It claimed to be at the “forefront of the emerging NGO sector in Syria... fostering effective collaboration between NGOs”. As a government organized NGO, the Trust had almost exclusive access to government resources. It also engaged in all activities organised by foreign donors, preventing truly independent, especially dissident, associations from engaging, further perpetuating the regime’s power over the “independent” NGO sector.

In 2010, during the country’s first International Development Conference, hosted by STD, the first lady referred to a civil society law in the works, to replace the Associations Law of 1958, which in theory allowed registration of associations seeking to engage in civil society activities, though in practice licenses were granted almost exclusively to charitable organisations. While charitable organisations play an important role in resource redistribution, the role of civil society is far more expansive than that.

The CSOs that began to spring up during the early days of the ongoing conflict as informal groups could also be defined as charitable, focused on humanitarian support. However, as opposition-held territory expanded, so too did civil society activity in the fields of human rights and advocacy, previously impossible. As a result of the historical restrictions imposed by the authoritarian regime, these CSOs and the people who founded and engaged with them had little experience with such issues.

As International NGOs began to engage in Syria’s opposition-held areas, the capacity of Syrian CSO actors improved through on the job training so that by the time iNGOs abandoned their physical presence in the destabilising country,

cadres of Syrians were able to continue the civil society work with the continued financial support of international organisations.

iNGO funds were at first primarily focused on the humanitarian sector in response to the many millions displaced and in need, but as the war protracted, a new focus and support emerged for the need for capacity building, and those related to negotiation, media activism, and other such activities that sought to strengthen the ability of Syrians to manage the needs of local areas and to engage as part of the political dialogue.

During the early years of the war, opposition groups had more freedom than ever to engage in civil society activity, as they weren't being monitored by the regime, which had prior to the war heavily monitored and controlled any activity considered a threat to its dominance. Freedom of citizens to gather and engage independently in the development of their country was considered one such threat. However, just as the civil society space slowly grew during the early years of the war as Assad regime forces lost control of territories, so too did it shrink as regime forces reclaimed control.

Nine years after the first peaceful calls for regime change, The Syrian Armed Forces of the Assad regime control 64% of Syrian territories. In these areas two types of NGOs exist – those officially registered with government institutions and those working under the radar in informal – though often well organised - structures. Funding for registered NGOs in these areas comes primarily from international donors with a presence in Syria and passes through government channels. The Kurdish controlled Syrian Democratic Forces control 26% of territories, all in the north east bordering Iraq and Turkey. Turkey and its Syrian allies control almost 10% of territories, along the northern border.

Access to Funding

Access to international funding during the height of the war, between 2013 and 2015, was all but cut off to CSOs active in regime held areas. Today, CSOs active in the few remaining opposition-held areas are finding it very difficult to access effective funding.

Registered CSOs in areas held by regime forces (SAF) and predominantly Kurdish forces (SDF) – which constitute 89% of Syrian territories – have authorised access to funding by international donors with a presence in Syria. Registration of CSOs and iNGOs is however challenging and as such funds are susceptible to devaluation due to (a) corruption, (b) delivery - obligatory by law - in Syrian Pounds, which continues to devalue week by week, and (c) the use of exchange rates that are not in line with market value.

Moreover, while the regime may restrict CSO access to geographic areas it does not consider a priority, CSOs in the north east note that the Kurdish authorities prioritise civil society programmes that strengthen Kurdish dominance and communities, despite half the population of the territory they control being non-Kurdish. Additionally, foreign donors often specify or target specific minority groups to support, which further risks entrenching divisions between ethnic and religious groups.

International funding to CSOs active in the territories in the north-west under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, a coalition of forces including the organisation formerly known as al-Nusra) is not forthcoming because the international community has categorised them as a terrorist organisation and denied all funding to individuals and communities active in the territory. The people living in these areas suffer from a huge loss of education and health facilities that the controlling militias and authorities have not been able to rebuild. Education qualifications gained in these territories are not recognised by the Syrian regime. This lack of education risks putting those living under HTS control at a great disadvantage for many generations.

Unregistered CSOs have two primary means of accessing funding: through informal partnerships with a CSO registered in Syria, and by arrangement with a CSO registered outside the country. Many Syrian led CSOs registered in neighbouring or foreign countries take on the role of mediator, and with it some of the funding. While many are genuinely working to support the organisations inside, their cut of project funding can be disproportionately high as living expenses and average wages are higher outside of Syria than within it.

While civil society organisations in countries like the US rely heavily on funding from privately held foundations and businesses, most Syria based businesses are either affiliated with the regime or held by individuals or families who would not want to risk being black-listed by a regime that has no interest in a flourishing civil society space that would hold it to account and weaken its control. In other countries, such as Ireland and the Czech Republic, CSOs benefit a great deal from private and individual funding. While many Syrians within and particularly outside of Syria have established and donated to various programmes – most notably in education – the vast majority of Syrians in the country are struggling to make ends meet and so CSOs within the country are not likely to find themselves supported by contributions from individuals within local communities for quite some time.

As such, Syrian CSOs will likely continue to rely predominantly on funding by foreign iNGOs, who are perceived by almost half the survey respondents as being biased in their selection of beneficiary organisations. This appears to rest on the fact, or perception of fact, that the same organisations continue to receive funding while younger or smaller CSOs are denied funding. Some iNGOs have confirmed that they do indeed prefer to continue supporting existing beneficiaries who perform well in order to ensure success of future projects. While understandable, this limits opportunities for fledgling CSOs that are often formed to address the needs of underserved communities. It also risks putting the capital power in the hands of a select group of preferred, and therefore privileged, Syrian CSOs.

Not all donor organisations are however hampered by a bureaucracy or ideology that hinders their ability to diversify their investments and take a risk on small new and informal CSOs. Some actively seek them out to ensure they are included within the civil society space supported by grant schemes. While many international donor organisations shied away from supporting CSOs in areas regained by the government in and since 2018, a large number have come to understand that with the regime now controlling a majority of Syria's

geographic area and authorising only select registered CSOs to receive foreign funding, they must develop mechanisms to support informal civil society organisations and initiatives within those territories if they are to abide by their mandate to support the whole of Syrian society.

Project Design

71% of survey respondents ranked the needs of their target beneficiaries as a top factor in the design of their programmes. The second highest ranked factor was the needs of donors. Organisations committed to the betterment of their community would be expected to always consider local needs a primary factor in project design. In Syria however, where most international donors are adopting a top down approach to priority setting and locals are in need of incomes, not all activists can afford to prioritise the needs of their communities above their own needs. Given that respondents to the survey included both small and large organisations, it can be assumed that smaller less financially sustainable organisations prioritise external factors – such as donor priorities and availability of local facilities – over community needs at an even higher rate.

While lack of funding is the main challenge faced by CSOs surveyed and interviewed, other significant ones include lack of sustainability and lack of support by those with the capacity to collaborate. Donor funding is rarely long-term because donor priorities can shift and because continued support relies on the perceived quality of project proposals and completed project reports. While some CSOs are highly skilled at delivering projects, their skills at completing reports and proposals is limited, particularly when donors insist on them being in English. To fill this gap, small organisations may collaborate with more established or diverse ones, but such collaborations appear to be limited. A 2018 white paper by Sharq.Org on civil society collaboration in Lebanon cited a number of factors that impede collaboration between CSOs. Among them were competitiveness, lack of a relevant strategy, lack of initiatives to act as role models, and divergent visions and goals.

The lack of a network with other organisations and the lack of a clear, transparent and consistent vision and identity were ranked by many survey respondents as the primary weaknesses of their organisation. Diversity of skills among team members is another perceived major weakness. This suggests that many CSOs are formed without a strategic approach, based on passion rather than experience. This could be remedied through inter-organisation partnerships, but 77% had no or very rare experience applying for a grant as part of a cohort, while 70% rarely or never communicated or collaborated with other organisations.

As a result, it is no surprise that their project design process relies heavily on brainstorming with and surveying target beneficiary groups – their local community. While fledgling CSOs are proactive within their community, they have little experience with research and so few benefit from academic reports or end of project reports by other organisations when developing their projects.

Recommendations

Many international donors wish to continue supporting Syrian civil society organisations and are keen to do so in an effective manner that over time strengthens self-reliance and sustainability. As such, these recommendations are aimed at such donors, based on identified challenges and weaknesses.

1. Encourage and facilitate the design of collaborative pan-Syria initiatives

War, political rhetoric and mass internal displacement have created divisions between Syrians from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. So too has donor funding that selects beneficiaries based on gender, ethnicity or other demographic variables. One way to combat and reverse this division is to run pan-Syrian initiatives and projects that include localised initiatives within the context of a country wide project that creates a network through which CSOs and civil society actors share a vision, as well as data and support.

The existing lack of cooperation between Syrian CSOs can result in loss of potential effectiveness and impact, as well as in redundancy, due to the funding by different donors of projects with similar activities, goals and target beneficiaries. Encouraging a collaborative civil society space by supporting projects submitted by collectives will make Syria's civil society space more sustainable. As many smaller CSOs do not yet engage in a culture of collaboration, donors may consider taking on the role of matchmaker, bringing together complementary CSOs that have applied for funding and encouraging them to develop proposals together.

2. Support all CSOs, big and small

The prioritisation of larger, more established CSOs and the limited support for small and/or unregistered CSOs that often emerge to address recognised gaps in the civil society space - be it in terms of underserved communities or services, contributes to the create of pockets of underprivileged communities. Promoting the development of cooperatives that include both large and small CSOs can remedy this problem, as well as enhance a culture of cooperation and mentoring.

3. Support cooperatives long term

A lack of capacity and skills development within small CSOs is often the result of short-term funding modes that shift the focus of CSO actors from knowledge building and self-improvement within specialised service areas to the priorities and requirements of donors.

Moreover, shifts in donor priorities sometimes result in the indefensible cessation of programmes and activities that are in fact successfully supporting a certain community need, leading to a loss of community trust in implementing CSOs, which impacts their credibility and in turn their motivation.

While INGOs and donors rely on their wealth of resources and knowledge to set priorities on a cyclical basis, shifts must be gradual and based on a smooth

defensible transition from one priority to another. Moreover, local CSOs need to play a role at least as great as, if not greater than, donor priorities and trends in identifying needs and setting priorities, as well as designing programmes, if funding initiatives are to truly serve the people in need.

4. Incorporate capacity building into all projects

Donors rightly set high standards for the production of project plans and reports, but with limited experience and capacity, small local CSOs – those best positioned to undertake local grassroots activities – often lack the capacity to meet donor requirements and so do not receive as much support as the larger or more established CSOs. One way of addressing this challenge – which threatens to concentrate support among those with the resources to develop their skills in project design, proposal and report writing and English, is to support programmes that include sub-grants, encouraging skilled CSOs to mentor and support smaller CSOs in the development of proposals and implementation of activities. Another is for the donor to recruit a consultant to train and mentor the small CSOs they support that are well placed to implement projects but yet unable to meet donor requirements. The recruit may well be an experienced Syrian professional willing to give their time and expertise without remuneration. Building such networks of support and skills exchange enhances the sustainability of the civil society sector and promotes harmony.

5. Promote volunteering

In many countries, civil society organisations rely on volunteers to run and support projects. Foreign donors to Syrian CSOs have become vehicles of paid employment for many and volunteering – the backbone of a sustainable civil society space – has been all but forgotten. It is understandable that Syrians seek remuneration, particularly when employment opportunities are very limited. However, this model of paid participation is not sustainable and risks destroying the flourishing Syrian civil society should foreign funding cease. One way to promote volunteering is to insist that volunteers are always included in project implementation and to offer volunteers the opportunity to increase their capacity and enhance their skills through their engagement in projects.

Annex: Survey Questions and Responses

Questions posed and summary of responses

Name (optional)

24 responded, 8 of which provided only a first name

Name of CSO(s) worked for/with (optional)

A number of organisations were listed, including UN agencies, the Syrian Red Crescent and local CSOs

Type of work practiced by organisation (multiple)

Respondents selected an average of 2 sectors.

- a. Humanitarian 40%
- b. Human rights 20%
- c. Cultural 29%
- d. Livelihoods 29%
- e. Media 37%
- f. Development 49%

1. Have you face difficulty gaining funds?

- a. Yes 51%
- b. No 49%

2. If yes, what have the main difficulties been? (multiple)

- a. Donor bias in giving funding to one organization over another 44%
- b. Lack of transparency of donor organisations 33%
- c. Lack of experience and skill in our organisation 28%
- d. We didn't apply due to lack of knowledge about application opportunities 28%
- e. We did not succeed due to the lack of network 0%

3. Rank the factors that affect the design of your projects from most important to least important

The results indicate those who ranked a factor at either position 1 or 2

- a. The needs of the target group 23 (of 35) ranked this as the top priority
- b. The facilities provided by the local authority 11 ranked this as the top priority
- c. Local restrictions of power 6 ranked this as the top priority
- d. Priority of the international donors 12 ranked this as the top priority
- e. Skills available in the organisation 11 ranked this as the top priority
- f. Interests of organisation staff 7 ranked this as the top priority

4. Rank the type of challenges faced by the organisation (1 = most difficult, 3=least)

- a. Administrative 2.2 (median result)
- b. Financial 1.6 (median result)
- c. Logistical (Implementation) 2.2 (median result)

5. What administrative and strategic challenges does the organisation face? (multiple)

- a. Lack of sustainability 54%
- b. Fear of failure among the organisation's staff 29%
- c. Lack of interest/support by the organisation's board 6%
- d. Lack of a board 3%
- e. Lack of support by those with the capacity to collaborate with us 43%
- f. Lack of ability to source reliable funding 63%

6. Rate these statements as either always true (1), sometimes true (2), or never true (3), for your organisation

The median result is noted

- a. We have a strong and personal knowledge of our target groups (1.6)
- b. We communicate with similar organisations (1.8)
- c. We cooperate with similar organisations (1.9)
- d. We engage in training opportunities (1.8)
- e. We have strong relations with donors (1.5)
- f. We have experience applying w another organisation for a grant (2.2)

7. Rank these in order of your strengths (1 (strong) – 6 (weak))

The median result is noted

- a. Credibility with your targets groups (2.5)
- b. Network with other organisations (4.3)
- c. Donor support (2.8)
- d. Strong board of directors (3.4)
- e. Diversity of skills among team (3.8)
- f. Clear, transparent and consistent vision and identity (4.3)

8. What do you rely on when designing your projects? (multiple)

- a. Academic studies 29%
- b. End of project reports by other organisations 29%
- c. Brainstorming with beneficiary groups 71%
- d. Conducting surveys 77%
- e. Donor priorities 43%
- f. Review of work and projects of similar organisations 46%

9. Have you worked in areas no longer in conflict?

- a. Yes 54%
- b. No 46%

10. If yes, who were your beneficiaries?

- a. Children 75%
- b. Women 90%
- c. Adolescents / Youths 70%

11. If no, why?

- a. Lack of permission by authorities 60%
- b. Requires more resources and funding than we have 50%
- c. Fear of our volunteers to enter these areas 45%

12. Describe a primary problems faced by your organisation

Noteworthy responses include

- a. Failure to recognize the designation of "civil society" is an important and important reason that it restricts and supervises the work of the institution
- b. Study the target group and determine the best intervention for it; This is due to the lack of approval to conduct an evaluation and survey of areas, which leads to a weakness in the program design in terms of expecting a number of actual beneficiaries who need and also not specifying the most appropriate type of intervention

- c. Lack of transparency in financing programs and the lack of qualified personnel to work in their rightful place
- d. The head of the organization or the head of the pyramid and its dictatorship can be shed so that everyone who obstructs his plans or his interests and the interests of those who support him can be rejected and dismissed.
- e. Lack of a stable supportive base that protects and defends its goals and takes it into its hands to reach areas of making changes on the internal or external scale