# Youth development programme
## Blended delivery in northeast Syria

**Lessons learned**

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# Acknowledgements

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# Abbreviations

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| **AANES** | Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria |
| **CSO** | Civil society organisation |
| **FGD** | Focal group discussion |
| **GCAs** | Government-controlled areas |
| **IDP** | Internally displaced person |
| **ISIS** | Islamic State of Iraq and Syria |
| **KIIv** | Key informant interview |
| **MEL** | Monitoring, evaluation and learning |
| **NES** | Northeast Syria |
| **NGO** | Non-governmental organisation |
| **PYD** | Kurdish Democratic Union Party |
| **ToT** | Training of trainers |
| **VE** | Violent extremism |
| **YPG** | Kurdish People's Protection Units |

# 1. Executive summary

This research was commissioned by the British Council and conducted by International Alert with the aim of evaluating a youth development programme in northeast Syria (NES), analysing the impact that the intervention is having in the communities where it was implemented and reflecting on the effectiveness of the 'blended-learning methodology' used for the programme delivery.

The blended methodology combined in-person learning and training with online training. The methodology was run in two centres in Raqqa and Qamishli, each equipped with an internet connection, audio equipment and cameras to connect them to each other via internet. The participants from both areas were present physically in the centres with the facilitators and the trainers conducted the sessions remotely.

Following a high-level context and conflict analysis of NES, which includes the social, economic, political and military situation, this paper reflects on the successes and challenges of the programme, and identifies the main lessons to be learned from the implementation of the youth development programme's blended approach in the cities of Raqqa and Qamishli. In order to add nuance to the findings, this study includes a quick overview of the successes and challenges of a previous intervention in four government-controlled cities in the west of the country: Hama, Tartus, Homs and Latakia. Finally, the paper builds on other research findings and provides recommendations for future programming in NES.

The research involved a mix of literature review, analysis of existing project documents and primary data collection through focal group discussions (FGDs) and interviews with project stakeholders and actors living and implementing interventions in NES.

## Main findings

### Successes:

- There was a high level of interest and motivation among the target groups to participate in the project, develop themselves into active citizens and engage with people from different backgrounds. The high level of interest shown in the application process, as well as their willingness to acquire more in-depth knowledge of the concepts presented, shows that there are opportunities to work on similar initiatives with this target group in NES.
- Overall, the blended modality of the sessions was easily accessible for everyone, since the participants were physically present during the workshops, while the trainers conducted them remotely via Zoom with the support of facilitators and additional communication tools such as WhatsApp.
- Participants acquired knowledge and skills around active citizenship concepts, such as identity and accepting others, as well as developing new skills such as dialogue, active listening, and self-expression. Overall, participants were pleased by the opportunity to connect with different ethnic and religious groups. These are learnings that they can apply in their communities and in their lives more broadly and the community initiatives presented them with an opportunity to do so.

- The role and attitude of the trainers online and the facilitators who were physically present in the room were extremely important to create a comfortable and safe environment, keep participants engaged and enhance the interaction between all the stakeholders during the workshops. The creation of a safe space by the trainers and facilitators was a vital step in allowing the participants to share and discuss comfortably their thoughts and opinions. These safe spaces also provided an opportunity for participants with different point of views or from different backgrounds to come together and begin to overcome their dissimilarities.
- The use of additional tools to keep participants connected beyond the workshop sessions contributed positively to engagement across different backgrounds. The use of a WhatsApp group contributed to overcoming differences and allowing participants to share their cultures with each other.
- Working with local partners has helped the Mobaderoon[1] team to better understand the local context. The two partners (Malfa Arts in Qamishli and Youth Empowerment Organization in Raqqa) were essential to allow access to the areas and bring participants from different backgrounds together in the project, playing a central role in the delivery of the sessions, as well as in supporting conflict management when sensitivities arose between participants.

## Challenges:

- The lack of direct contact between participants/facilitators in the room and the trainers online affected the trust-building process between them. The position of the camera and poor quality of the images caused by poor internet connection meant that trainers could not see participants' faces and participants could not see the faces of their peers joining online from a different location.
- The duration of the sessions was shorter than expected. The blended sessions consumed more time than planned due to technical issues and the need to transition between different interlocutors during discussions.
- Many participants claimed to prefer in-person sessions because they believed the logistical obstacles posed during the workshops such as poor internet connection, electricity cuts and equipment malfunctions diminished their learning experience and hampered their ability to understand each other and build trust across the different communities present at the workshops.
- Sensitivities between the different target groups led to animosities between participants when discussing personal and context-specific examples related to the curriculum.
- There were challenges with working through local partners for the first time in a new area. These included the management of the partners' influence over the target group and during the submission of proposals for the community initiative, as well as the level of commitment of the facilitators who were also involved in other activities in the organisation.

# Key recommendations for future programming

- Consider further the sensitivities of the NES context and apply a conflict sensitivity lens while bringing in elements of social cohesion and gender, diversity and inclusion to the programme design, to address some of the underlying causes of conflict, prejudice and other unhealthy dynamics between the different communities living in the area.

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1 Mobaderoon is a civil institution that has been working since 2009 to implement the Active Citizenship programme in Syria with the British Council. Since then, they have been working to develop this programme according to the context and suit it more to the needs of the participants.

- Improve the blended learning experience by investing in capacity and resources that allow participants to navigate the learning journey in a way that fulfils their learning needs and allows them to engage in trusting relationships with people from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds.
- Build on the successes and lessons learned around project design, delivery and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) to improve coordination between the different stakeholders and project management as a whole, including by defining better roles and responsibilities across the project team, implementing partners and trainers/facilitators.

# 2. Introduction

Between October 2020 and December 2021, a youth development programme was implemented through a newly developed blended approach in different areas of Syria. These included the cities of Hama, Tartus, Homs and Latakia, which are under government control in the west, and the cities of Raqqa and Qamishli in the northeast of the country. The programme had the primary goal of building knowledge and skills among the participants on the concepts of dialogue, peacebuilding, citizenship and non-violence. In all locations the blended approach was used to deliver workshops, in which participants and facilitators were present physically in learning centres and brought together online with trainers and other participants joining from the different locations.

## Project background

In northeast Syria (NES), the main focus of this study, the programme was implemented for the first time through two local partner organisations. The project introduced a blended approach that was adapted to fit the security context in the area, while taking into account the new needs brought about by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In this blended approach, participants from each area were present physically in training centres, which were equipped with internet connection, audio equipment and cameras, which connected the two groups to each other virtually. Trainers joined the workshops remotely from outside Syria, connecting with participants via internet using platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp, while facilitators provided in-person support to the participants in each location. In order to achieve the project's goal, the team, trainers and facilitators went through a trust-building process to generate understanding between the participants and create a comfortable environment for those coming from different areas and backgrounds.

The project targeted participants aged between 22 and 35 years old who represented some of the different ethnic and religious communities that exist in the area. To achieve its goal, the project was implemented through different phases in Raqqa and Qamishli:

- Training and empowering were delivered through a joint, blended training of trainers (ToT) workshop and the opportunity to facilitate active citizenship workshops – five facilitators in both areas (two in Raqqa[2] and three in Qamishli).

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2    Three facilitators were trained in Raqqa, but one left the programme because they emigrated.

- Five workshops were conducted in both areas on concepts related to active citizenship; three were delivered through the blended-learning approach to participants in both Raqqa and Qamishli simultaneously, and one workshop was delivered entirely in person in each area by the facilitators only. The workshops were delivered by the trainers who joined online with the support of the previously trained facilitators who were present in person with each cohort.
- A total of 180 people signed up for the project, from which 111 participants were selected to attend the workshops (65 from Raqqa and 46 from Qamishli). The selection process was carried out by a panel based on criteria such as gender balance, background diversity, motivation and availability to commit to the sessions. Participants came from different ethnic and religious backgrounds: according to the selection panel, those in Raqqa were mostly Arabs and Muslims, while those in Qamishli were mostly Kurds with a mix of Muslim and Christian backgrounds. Of the participants, 74 were female and 37 were male. There were also two persons with disabilities among the participants.
- After attending the workshops, participants sent proposals for launching community initiatives, which were assessed by a committee according to pre-defined criteria. A total of 23 proposals were received, from which five initiatives were selected for funding, three in Raqqa and two in Qamishli.

# Methodology

This study was undertaken through a combination of desk research, including project documents and a literature review, and primary data collection and analysis.[3] The primary data collection comprised a mixture of questionnaires conducted after each workshop, several key informant interviews (KIIs), project stakeholder interviews and focus groups discussions (FGDs). The research was divided into two parts: a context analysis of NES and evaluation of the youth development programme.

For the analysis of the NES context, data was gathered through a desk-based review of open-source materials, including reports, papers and briefings produced by local and international organisations and think tanks, peer-reviewed articles and news coverage. KIIs were also conducted as part of the context analysis, with four KIIs carried out with informants living and working in Raqqa and Qamishli and two with staff of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on programming in NES. Questions in the context analysis KIIs were focused on five areas: the general context, NGO/civil society organisation (CSO) operations, and the social, economic and political dynamics in NES.

For the project's evaluation, data was gathered through a review of existing project documents, including participants' satisfaction questionnaires and the final report written by Mobaderoon, and primary data, collected through the following methods:

- In Raqqa, two FGDs were conducted in person by an MEL consultant, at which a total of 13 participants and two facilitators were present (five females and 10 males aged between 18 and 45 years old, all Arab Muslims).
- In Qamishli, two FGDs were conducted, at which a total of 10 participants were present (nine female and one male aged between 18 and 35 years old, including Kurdish and Arab Muslims). Additionally, due to the security situation in the area, three separate interviews were conducted with the facilitators (two female

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3    Guiding questions developed and used for FGDs and KIIs are shared as annexes of this report.

and one male aged between 26 and 45 years old, all Kurdish Muslims).[4]
- One online interview was conducted with Mobaderoon's project manager.
- One online interview was conducted with the two trainers.

The data collection during the FGDs with the participants and the interviews with the facilitators was guided primarily by the pre-established questions designed and shared by the British Council, which were adapted and expanded as needed for the purposes of this research. The guiding questions followed five broad categories: experience, change, strategy, participant learning journey and programme learning:

- Experience: These questions explore feelings, senses, experiences and behaviours. They impact on several of the intended outcomes of this programme including: confidence, motivation and commitment.
- Change: In the short term, what change is there as a result of this programme and why? Does the fact that this is a digital/distance training programme have a noticeable impact on what is changing? These questions are of secondary importance because the quality of the available evidence is weak.
- Strategy: These questions explore how the strategic context and the decisions made by the programme team and partners may have impacted on the delivery of this digital/at distance programme.
- Learning journey: These questions focus on the training itself, the apps, activities and the style of delivery.
- Programme learning: When the context and approach of a programme are new and unexplored, what is learned during delivery, how it is learned and what changes as a result can provide valuable insights for future initiatives.

There were some limitations in the process of collecting, gathering and analysing data for this study. Firstly, the post-workshop satisfaction questionnaires carried out by the implementing organisations were limited in terms of the nature of the questions asked, which had an impact on the quantitative analysis of the knowledge and skills acquired by the participants through the project. Secondly, the comparison drawn between the intervention in NES and the previous one carried out in the government-controlled area (GCA) was based on limited data about the GCA implementation. This included the project's final report, workshop reports and other project documents. No primary data collection was conducted for GCA as part of this study and the feedback presented here is only based on such documents. Finally, the in-country primary data collection in Raqqa and Qamishli (FGDs and interviews with participants and facilitators) was carried out by MEL consultants who had previous involvement in the project delivery and therefore had previous contact with participants. Due to the many sensitivities present in this context and since it is an area where the British Council and Mobaderoon had not operated before, the choice of the consultants was based on the level of access and trust they would have in regard to the target group as well as the short time available to carry out the research. Even though mitigation strategies were adopted during the process, these factors might have posed limitations for the data collection due to potential dynamics of power present between the consultants and the target group.

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4    Many challenges were faced in Qamishli to conduct the FGDs as they were planned during the same period as Kurdish forces and ISIS fighters confronted each other after the terrorist group attacked a prison in the city of Hassakeh. The attack was perceived as a sign of an ISIS resurgence in the area and the local residents were scared and unable to travel. As a result, the FGDs in Qamishli were postponed several times.

# 3. NES context and conflict analysis

The northeast of Syria constitutes a quarter of Syria's territory. It is home to the largest Kurdish population in Syria, but also to an ethnically diverse population comprising Arabs, Assyrians and smaller communities of Circassians, Yazidis, Turkmen and Armenians.

NES is primarily administered by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and its military arm, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF is a military unit established in 2015 to fight the Islamic State and other extremist forces in Syria. It is led by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) – the main Kurdish armed group in Syria and the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – and it was supported by the United States (US) during the fight against ISIS.

Although the SDF is still the main force on the ground in NES, there are many important areas within its territory controlled by other actors, including parts of Hassakeh and Qamishli cities, which remain controlled by the Syrian government, and the area between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn that has been occupied by Turkey since its latest offensive against the YPG.[5] Large parts of the region were also once controlled by ISIS, with the end of the so-called caliphate being officially declared in 2019 after the SDF regained the last stronghold from the jihadist group in a campaign supported by the US and the Global Coalition.[6]

## A brief conflict overview in NES

Despite the changing dynamics in the area, NES remains the largest area outside the control of the Syrian regime – with the exceptions mentioned above. Conflict lines in NES have largely held since 2019, when the US withdrew most of its troops in a surprise move that in effect cleared the path for the Turkish-led Operation Peace Spring in October 2019. The operation was met with outrage and condemnation by its European and NATO allies. An initial ceasefire deal between the SDF and Turkey, brokered by the US, resulted in the SDF being given 120 hours to pull back from the Turkish border by 30km. A second ceasefire agreement between Turkey and Russia provided a further 120 hours for the SDF to pull back, allowing Turkey to establish territorial control over a 30km-wide strip in the north and block territorial gains of the YPG near Turkey's southern border. After the second ceasefire agreement, Syrian regime border guards and Russian-Turkish forces were entrusted to patrol the border area to prevent the resumption of a potential military campaign. The ceasefire is, however, considered fragile in many ways because Turkey is seen to have achieved some but not all of its objectives in the area.[7]

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5    S. Erkmen et al, Security scenarios for Syria in 2021-2022, Syria Transition Challenges Project discussion paper 34, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2021, pp.4–5

6    The Global Coalition to Defeat DAESH/ISIS is a coalition of 84 countries formed in 2014 to tackle the Islamic terrorist group in all its fronts in a unified and coordinated manner. More on the Global Coalition can be found at: https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/; Islamic State group defeated as final territory lost, US-backed forces say, BBC News, 23 March 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-47678157

7    International Crisis Group, Syria: Shoring up Raqqa's shaky recovery, Middle East Report N° 229, 2021, p.i, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/229-syria-shoring-raqqas-shaky-recovery

Since then, the US military presence in Syria has been reduced to around 700 troops, mostly located in the eastern part of the country, where the AANES-administered oil and gas fields are situated. Despite being residual, the presence of US troops is still considered to be one of the main forces of conflict mitigation in the northeast, alongside Russia, and has been keeping the situation in the area relatively unchanged since the Turkish offensive.[8]

Even after losing all territorial control in NES, ISIS remains one of the most important players in the region. The UN estimates that there are still some 10,000 Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria, and the group and its affiliates still perpetrate attacks in the region with relative frequency.[9] These attacks have mostly been small in scale, until January 2022 when the siege of the Ghwaryan prison in the city of Hassakeh resulted in the biggest confrontation between ISIS and the SDF (with the support of the US and allies) since the fall of the so-called caliphate. The attack, over which the SDF declared victory, has been raising questions around a potential resurgence of the group.[10]

# Socio-political dynamics

The socio-political dynamics in NES are complex, characterised by tensions among the ruling parties and between the communities in the region. On the political side, a number of actors exert political and military control and have varying degrees of direct and indirect influence over the different areas and pockets of the region. Most of it, however, is under the control of the PYD-led umbrella organisation, Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), comprising Kurdish, Arab and Christian political parties that form the AANES. Despite motivation for a more unified Kurdish movement in Syria after the Kurdish uprisings in 2004, the different Kurdish parties in the country have grown increasingly fragmented[11] – with the Kurdish National Council becoming the umbrella coalition for the Kurdish opposition in Syria since 2011. The political-ideological differences between the two groups have traditionally stemmed from rivalries among their Kurdish patrons in Turkey and Iraq, but has been exacerbated in the past few years due to their divergent views on the Kurdish proposed governance model for NES.[12]

In general, the AANES is regarded as fairly open and inclusive compared with regime or opposition-controlled areas.[13] The advancement of women's rights and gender equality are considered a remarkable achievement in NES and there is an overall feeling of increased religious freedom since the Syrian regime's withdrawal from the area.[14] There have been, however, multiple reports of human rights violations being committed by members of the PYD since the group became the de facto authority in NES. Abuses have included arbitrary arrest of PYD political rivals, forced disappearances and killings and recruitment of children by the YPG – the PYD security

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8    S. Erkmen et al, 2021, Op. cit.

9    UN: Over 10,000 Islamic State fighters active in Iraq, Syria, The Washington Post, 24 August 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/un-over-10000-islamic-state-fighters-active-in-iraq-syria/2020/08/24/f1021ca0-e659-11ea-bf44-0d31c85838a5_story.html

10   ISIS, Thriving in unstable places, proves it's still a threat, The New York Times, 28 January 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/29/world/middleeast/isis-syria-iraq.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=styln-syria-prison&variant=show&region=MAIN_CONTENT_1&block=storyline_top_links_recirc

11   Z. Kizilkaya et al, The PYD/YPG in the Syrian conflict: Aspirations for autonomy in north-eastern syria, Brussels School of Governance Report July 2021, 2021, pp.5–15, https://brussels-school.be/sites/default/files/The%20PYD%3AYPG%20in%20the%20Syrian%20Conflict-%20Aspirations%20for%20Autonomy%20in%20North-eastern%20Syria.pdf

12   S. Kajjo, Prospects for Syrian Kurdish Unity: Assessing Local and Regional Dynamics, PN86, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2020, p.2

13   Z. Kizilkaya et al, 2021, Op. cit.

14   Online interview with area focal point in an international organisation in Hassakeh, December 2021

force.[15] Arab disempowerment in the areas under Kurdish administration is also apparent, especially in areas such as Raqqa and Deir Ezzor where the Arab population is the majority.[16] There is a feeling that decision-making within the AANES is not sufficiently inclusive nor that it allows enough Arab representation under its rule, and Arab communities often complain about heavy-handed treatment by SDF soldiers.[17] This, in turn, fuels feelings of animosity among Arabs towards Kurds.

In addition, the region suffers from high levels of mistrust between the communities that inhabit and control the different areas in the north and the east. An interviewee from Hassakeh reported that non-Arab communities still do not trust Arabs because of ISIS history; Kurds hold resentment towards Arabs because of historical mistreatment by the Arab nationalist government; and Arabs consider the Kurds to be stooges of the Syrian regime and "enemies of Syrian unity".[18] These dynamics have been fuelling conflict between the different communities, at the same time as opening a pathway for violent extremist (VE) organisations to exploit feelings of disenfranchisement.[19]

The most notorious of the VE groups in NES is still the Islamic State, which has recently carried out attacks in the city of Hassakeh, as well as a series of other sleeper-cell attacks in Syria and Iraq. Of particular concern are also the tens of thousands of ISIS fighters and their families (wives and children), who were either captured and sent to makeshift prisons in NES, or put in camps such as Al-Hol in Hassakeh alongside a large number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The condition of these facilities has often been considered inhumane by the UN and a number of human rights organisations,[20] and they are seen as a breeding ground for ISIS ideology and recruits.[21]

# Economic situation and humanitarian needs

The economic situation in NES is dire, with an estimated 98% of the population across the region's governorates living in poverty.[22] One interviewee from Hassakeh said that the region has been historically neglected by the Syrian regime, but flagged the economic sanctions against Syria as an exacerbating factor since the start of the war, alongside the closure of borders that traditionally allowed for trade and humanitarian aid influx.[23] Since last year, the economic crisis in NES has been aggravated by the increasing devaluation of the Syrian Pound and the ongoing water crisis.[24]

15   Under Kurdish rule: Abuses in PYD-run enclaves of Syria, Human Rights Watch, 19 June 2014, https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria

16   E. Tsurkov and E. Al-Hassan, Kurdish-Arab power struggle in Northeastern Syria, Sada Middle East Analysis, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79542

17   M. Sing et al, Syria Study Group final report, United States Institute of Peace, 2019, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20Study%20Group%20Final%20Report.pdf

18   Online interview with area focal point in an international organisation in Hassakeh, December 2021

19   E. Tsurkov and E. Al-Hassan, 2019, Op. cit.

20   Syria: Humanitarians 'very concerned' for thousands still living in Al Hol camp, UN News, 16 October 2020, https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1075632; Thousands of foreigners unlawfully held in NE Syria, Human Rights Watch, 23 March 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/23/thousands-foreigners-unlawfully-held-ne-syria

21   J. Saleh, The women of ISIS and the Al-Hol Camp, Policy analysis, Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2021, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/women-isis-and-al-hol-camp

22   Durable Solutions Platform, Syria solutions analysis: An assessment of durable solutions conditions in northeast Syria, 2021, p.47

23   Online interview with area focal point in an international organisation in Hassakeh, December 2021

24   Durable Solutions Platform, 2021, Op. cit., p.8

The impact of water scarcity has been posing a heavy burden on the Syrian population, but more directly for the populations in the northeast. Between 2020 and 2021, the rainy season in Syria was four months shorter than usual, and in the following summer, Syria faced its worst drought in 70 years, with crops in NES suffering severe damage and loss.[25] In addition, the water flow of the Euphrates River, Syria's longest river, presented "critically low" levels in 2021, according to the UN.[26] The situation is exacerbated by a reduction in water from the Euphrates arriving in Syria from Turkey. Syria's Kurds have accused Turkey of holding back more water than necessary in its dams, and during the summer of 2021 the Syrian government urged Turkey to increase the flow immediately.[27] The dynamics resulting from the issues around natural resource management add yet another layer of fragility to the conflict and have the potential to further exacerbate tensions and conflict between Syria and Turkey.

As a result of the ongoing crisis, access to drinking water, livelihoods and electricity has been severely hampered in NES since last year, and an estimated 63% of the population in the area are currently considered to be food insecure.[28] Interviewees in both Raqqa and Hassakeh governorates also reported high rates of unemployment, especially among youth, and a widespread inability to access basic needs and services.[29] Healthcare is mostly provided by international organisations operating in the area because health facilities were largely destroyed during the war and there is a lack of healthcare professionals, medical equipment and medicine.[30] The AANES administers the educational system in NES, but interviewees reported dissatisfaction among the local population with the quality of the education provided and lack of qualified teachers.[31] One interviewee from Qamishli suggested that the AANES should try to impose PYD's ideology through school curricula.[32]

The lack of and/or inequality in access to basic services and livelihoods is, alongside insecurity caused by ongoing fear of ISIS attacks and new escalations with Turkey, the main factor leading to displacement in northeast Syria.[33] As of July 2021, the region's population of three million included some 600,000 IDPs, 84% of whom have experienced years of prolonged displacement.[34] Migration has become a common coping mechanism for those in search of more stability in NES, and it has become increasingly common for families in the area to move to IDP camps because they cannot afford housing or to gain access to services and food.[35]

25   Water scarcity reaches crisis point in northern Syria, Al Jazeera, 12 November 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/12/water-scarcity-reaches-crisis-point-in-northern-syria

26   OCHA, Syrian Arab Republic: Euphrates water crisis & drought outlook (as of 17 June 2021), 2021, https://reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syrian%20Arab%20Republic%20-%20Euphrates%20water%20crisis%20and%20drought%20outlook%2C%20as%20of%2017%20June%202021.pdf

27   'Desert': drying Euphrates threatens disaster in Syria, France 24, 30 August 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210830-desert-drying-euphrates-threatens-disaster-in-syria

28   Durable Solutions Platform, 2021, Op. cit., p.43

29   Online interviews with KIIs from Raqqa and Hassakeh

30   Online interview with executive manager in a local organisation in Raqqa, December 2021

31   Ibid.

32   Online interview with area focal point in an international organisation in Hassakeh, December 2021

33   Durable Solutions Platform, 2021, Op. cit.; KIIs from Hassakeh

34   Durable Solutions Platform, 2021, Op. cit., p.8

35   The UN estimates that 630,000 people are displaced in the northeast; S. Mednick, Syrians return to camps seeking aid as economic crash bites, The New Humanitarian, 28 June 2021, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2021/6/28/syrians-return-to-camps-seeking-aid-as-economic-crash-bites

# NGO operational landscape

According to the KIIs, the work undertaken by international and local NGOs in NES tends to be more focused on the areas formerly controlled by ISIS, such as Raqqa, Deir el Zour and Al-Hawl. Interventions are focused on humanitarian aid, psychosocial support and rehabilitation, education and community cohesion/conflict resolution – with the latter also being done in Hassakeh and other areas of Kurdish majority to promote coexistence between Arabs and Kurds.[36]

Any organisation wishing to operate in the area needs to have the approval of the AANES, which an interviewee reported was simple to obtain.[37] Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) work is usually considered sensitive and associated with espionage, and organisations need to disclose full details of their work to the Kurdish-led self-administration to be able to perform M&E activities in that area.[38] As for financial operations, local organisations also face challenges to comply with donor policy and find transaction companies that are not on the US sanctions or terrorist list.[39] Overall, operating in the area is not complicated according to interviewees – as long as organisations are compliant and communicate their activities to the self-administration.

Due to the socio-political dynamics of the area, however, operating in NES can shed light on many of the sensitivities present in this context. For example, the fact that international NGO work is mostly concentrated in Arab-majority parts of NES generates resentment among those living in cities such as Qamishli and Hassakeh. One interviewee said that it was easier to work in Raqqa because the administration facilitated NGO operations in the city, adding that there was a feeling of "competition between the cities" and that "the local population in Qamishli and Hassakeh feel annoyed and disturbed by receiving such little support". They gave as an example: "The road is being torn up and potholed while we don't see any of these in Qamishli. The inequality of support given between the cities can create sensitivity between the population from different backgrounds."[40] Another interviewee said that, even though the educational system in Qamishli had deteriorated, educational interventions were mostly focused on areas such as Raqqa.[41] An informant also reported that Arabs in the city sometimes refuse to work with the Kurds because they see their presence as threatening and consider that "they are in a mission to occupy Raqqa".[42] These dynamics evidence the relative lack of conflict sensitivity within organisations operating in NES, which in many instances exacerbates existing conflicts.

As in other areas in the country and worldwide, organisations operating in NES faced many challenges when adapting their implementation to the needs and context created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewees reported that local organisations lacked the knowledge, resources and capacity to facilitate and deliver online activities, and that poor internet connection and electrical issues had been recurring problems because organisations did not have the resources to acquire the appropriate tools to shift to online implementation.[43] Additionally, organisations also had difficulty reaching senior participants as part of their projects because they were rarely familiar with online technology.[44] For all these reasons, many organisations decided to carry on

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36　Online interviews with KIIs from Raqqa, Hassakeh and Beirut

37　Online interview with area focal point in an international organisation in Hassakeh, December 2021

38　Ibid.

39　Ibid.

40　Online interview with consultant in a local organisation in Hassakeh, December 2021

41　Online interview with area focal point in an international organisation in Hassakeh, December 2021

42　Online interview with consultant in a local organisation in Hassakeh, December 2021

43　Online interviews with project manager in an international organisation in Beirut and Consultant in a local organisation in Hassakeh, December 2021

44　Online interview with area focal point in an international organisation in Hassakeh, December 2021

implementing face-to-face activities. An interviewee working with partners in the region shared that, once these challenges had been overcome, the opportunity to work remotely has allowed local CSOs to learn a new way of working, think outside the box and reach out to people within and outside Syria who they were not previously able to access.[45]

# 4. Programme implementation

This section assesses the main successes and challenges present during the project implementation and looks at the roles played by the project team, the design and management of the project and participants' interactions with the intervention and its stakeholders.

## Project team and roles

### Successes

**Participants were happy with the delivery of the sessions and felt comfortable in the presence of the trainers.** The participants in Raqqa described the trainers as "flexible", "highly experienced" and "familiar with the content and the concept of the sessions". All the participants reported that they were satisfied with the trainers, and they particularly liked the fact that the sessions were conducted by Syrian trainers living abroad because they were seen as "more experienced" than those inside Syria. The interaction between the participants and the trainers through online delivery was successful, and they never felt distracted or lost interest in the content. In Qamishli, one participant reported: "We learned a lot from the trainers through online engagement. When they asked us a question, they tried to simplify it as much as possible so we can be capable of answering to it." Another participant said: "We felt that we knew the trainers a long time ago, so we felt comfortable talking to them."

**The project team's communication, financial and administrative skills improved.** Managing and conducting the training sessions and workshops remotely required a high level of communication skills within the project team to communicate between themselves and the trainers/facilitators. According to the project manager, the remote modality of the work helped develop the team's communication skills: "[a good level of communication skills] is also required to gain the trust of someone who doesn't know me" and they succeeded in doing this. On the other hand, an unintended positive change appeared during the project and especially in Qamishli: the project manager had to coordinate financial and administrative capacity building for the team for both partner organisations, something that was not originally planned. "Those trainings will support and benefit the associations for a long term. It will also help them to cooperate and work with other donors, and gain the know-how for the future."

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45   Online interview with Project Manager in an international organisation in Beirut, December 2021

# Challenges

**Working through local partners was challenging given their previous involvement with the participants and potential influence in the areas.** Mobaderoon is not present in NES for security reasons and risks related to its direct presence. As a result, their work in the area is undertaken through partners working in the field, which has been a challenge for the implementation of the activities in this project. All the tasks performed by the Mobaderoon team were conducted online, and challenges were faced despite the overall success. For example, because the partner organisations were the ones who had direct access to participants and knew them from before the project, there was a concern that the organisations could influence participation, or that the groups attending the sessions would be homogenous and composed exclusively of participants close to the organisations, which would have compromised the diversity in the workshops. This challenge was specifically confronted in Qamishli. The project manager at Mobaderoon was able to overcome this challenge by intensifying the meetings with the partners and stressing the importance of reaching new participants from different backgrounds. For example, Mobaderoon proposed that the partners suggested five names from their network and another five participants living outside the cities and not connected directly to their organisation.

**Facilitators' roles in the workshops overlapped with other work in the partner organisations.** Especially in Qamishli the availability of facilitators to prepare the workshops, implement the activities and follow up on the evaluation was compromised by their other work commitments for the partner organisations. Because the facilitators were also committed to other work in their organisations, there was some overlap between their roles, which compromised time management and dedication to the programme.

**Trainers had limited knowledge of the local contexts.** Despite the positive feedback on the trainers, the participants and facilitators reported that the trainers had some gaps in their knowledge of the local context in Raqqa. Understanding the context of Raqqa was highly important to the implementation of the activities there; however, the local facilitators were able support the trainers during the implementation of the activities because they were more knowledgeable about Raqqa's context, which had a positive impact on the course of the sessions.

**Local partners might have influenced the proposal writing process for the community initiatives.** In Qamishli, one of the project stakeholders interviewed said that "the domination or the influence of the local organisation was obvious and had an unintended negative effect on the project". Indeed, the data shows that a number of initiatives seem to have been proposed by the local organisation and not by the participants. This can be seen as negative because participants were trained to write their own proposals and encouraged to do so based on their own views about the needs of the communities they live in, and the influence of the implementing partners on the process hindered the project's outcomes and impact. Some of the workshops' participants came from the association and "[it] dominates the initiatives proposed for their own interest and not for the community". Another stakeholder reported: "We had a feeling and, based on our analysis of the form and wording used, we concluded that the initiatives were written by the partner and were distributed to the participants so they can apply it to the project."[46]

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46   This issue was anonymously raised as part of the data collection for this research, and it was not flagged throughout the project by any of its stakeholders. It has, therefore, not been addressed during the project implementation and, as the analysis suggests, might have hindered some of the outcomes related to the community initiatives phase of the project.

# Project design and management

## Successes

**The project considered the different backgrounds of the participants by taking into account ethnic and religious differences as well as context particularities in its design.** Raqqa and Qamishli are sensitive areas since they both experience conflict, although in different ways. At the beginning of the workshops, the trainers and the participants discussed the 'workshop charter' to set and agree on the ground rules for the five-day meeting. The charter of rules respected the context of the two areas. By constantly referring back to the rules, such as respect for each other's opinions, the trainers helped to create positive dialogue between the participants in both areas.

**The trainers and facilitators were flexible and adapted the delivery of the sessions according to feedback and needs.** After receiving their training, the facilitators were the support system for the trainers in the room, filling in the gaps and keeping participants engaged especially when the internet connection dropped. Due to their knowledge of the local context, they also made suggestions about how to adapt the design of the sessions, which were taken on board by the trainers. In Raqqa, for example, they suggested adapting exercises to make them compatible with the reality and nature of the participants in that location. This led to an improvement in the delivery of the sessions and the participants seemed happy with the interaction and intervention of the facilitators during the training.

**Trainers employed effective techniques to manage the differences between the participants from different areas, except in a few cases.** The trainers were able to prevent conflict and promote coexistence between the participants by subtly challenging them, and reminding them of the agreed ground rules while allowing them to express themselves freely during discussions. Participants in both areas, despite the high sensitivity of the project, reported that overall the trainers had succeeded in establishing a comfortable space among them and had done their best to manage the conflict situations that arose: "They provided us with a very safe environment to share everything. They were always around to respond to any enquiry and question." Some other participants, however, claimed that during discussions related to the Kurdish cause and Kurdistan, the trainers cut the discussion short rather than encouraging more constructive discussions to settle the conflicts.

**The creation of the WhatsApp group by the project team has contributed to keeping participants engaged and creating positive interactions between the different groups.** The group was created to facilitate coordination between the different participants, and it ended up also helping in the trust-building process and encouraging openness in the groups. Their interactions in the chat were seen as extremely positive by the project team: "The interaction between the participants never stopped in the WhatsApp group. They were sharing songs whether in Arabic or Kurdish."

**The project design has contributed to its sustainability by empowering facilitators and encouraging the development of community initiatives.** Two initiatives in Qamishli and three in Raqqa were selected by a designated committee comprising the trainers and the project coordinator from Mobaderoon. The implementation of the initiatives was ongoing at the time of writing. One of the initiatives proposed is to equip a school playground. According to the project manager, "We can say 10 years from now that the playground of this school was implemented by the project." Another initiative is to make a garden more inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities. The idea was proposed by a local resident with disabilities; the project manager commented: "We can say also after a couple of years that this project made this happen." The initiatives that

have taken place reflect the needs of the community and can be considered a reflection of a change for the better. The initiatives promote active citizenship in society and show that the benefits of the project are likely to continue into the future.

## Challenges

**There were limitations resulting from a poor internet connection and low-quality digital tools.** The use of technology to support the workshops' logistics was a valuable element of the project, although unfortunately it presented more challenges than expected. The lack of an appropriate internet connection alongside difficulties in employing better technology in the project posed challenges when connecting the participants in the two areas, and the participants with the trainers via Zoom. The low quality of the audio-visual equipment had a negative impact on the workshop process because the participants could not hear or see each other well. The participants reported hearing other participants' voices coming from different areas when discussing a certain topic, but could not see their faces or interact with them because of the limitations of the tools. One of the participants in Qamishli complained about the microphone, which was constantly cutting out, preventing participants from hearing each other: "I was annoyed several times because of the microphone and its sound. It was always interrupting the sessions which cause a disturbing noise. We couldn't hear each other because of it."

**The language barrier posed obstacles for the Kurdish-speaking participants.** This was a challenge faced especially in Qamishli, a city that comprises a large Kurdish population who do not speak Arabic. The project was designed in Arabic, so Kurdish participants were worried that the Arabic-speaking participants would not understand them, that they would not be able to understand the workshops' objectives or fill in the assessment form because it was in Arabic. As a result, the implementing partner in Qamishli supported these participants by providing translation into Kurdish as required.

**M&E gaps created challenges for measuring the project's outcomes.** Some MEL gaps were identified during data collection for this evaluation, especially in terms of measuring the knowledge and skills acquired by participants as a result of the workshops. From a qualitative point of view, it was possible to conclude that the participants gained knowledge by looking at the 'next-day recap' during the workshop delivery and later through the FGDs conducted with the participants and the KIIs with trainers and facilitators; however, more quantitative, in-depth data was not collected to measure this important outcome.

# Project participants

## Successes

**Facilitators were equipped with knowledge and skills to use the programme's tools in the future.** In the first phase of the programme, a cohort of participants was trained to become facilitators and cascade their knowledge around active citizenship concepts to their communities, spreading the values of dialogue, peacebuilding, citizenship and non-violence. After supporting the trainers in the delivery of the workshops, these facilitators had the opportunity of delivering their own face-to-face workshops in each of the two locations, Raqqa and Qamishli. This has allowed them to develop practical facilitation skills and become well-equipped to conduct similar training in the future.

**Participants were satisfied with the workshop's organisation, content and the diversity of the cohorts.**
Most of the participants were satisfied overall with the sessions and recommended them to others. Two of the
participants reported that they registered for this workshop after their friends attended the previous session and
recommended it to them. Participants came from different backgrounds and the groups were mixed, comprising
Arabs, Kurds, Muslims and Christians, ensuring ethnic and religious diversity throughout the sessions. In
Qamishli, for example, participants praised the organisation and their ability to gather people from different
backgrounds in one group. Such diversity was viewed positively and openly accepted.

**Participants requested further learning for more in-depth knowledge and additional skills.** In Raqqa,
participants requested to continue the training with specific subjects that can complete the topics learned, for
example, by expanding active citizenship topics such as problem solving, managing emotions and communication
skills. Others also called for additional training on how to write proposals and how to implement projects in their
communities, because they found this part of the project particularly challenging.

**Participants gained knowledge and skills after attending the sessions.** The course material in the workshops
allowed all the participants to increase their knowledge and gain new skills on the concepts of dialogue,
peacebuilding, citizenship and non-violence. During the next morning recap in each workshop session, the
trainers felt that participants expressed their ideas well and clearly when summarising the previous sessions,
which gave them the impression that participants had gained knowledge. Additionally, through the feedback
received from the satisfaction questionnaires and the FGDs, it is noticeable that the participants were satisfied
regarding the content of the session and the way it was presented: in a clear understandable manner and
supported by concrete examples.

**Participants reported positive life changes and the ability to apply the knowledge and skills gained to their
families and communities.** The increase of participants' knowledge of concepts related to active citizenship
made a positive change in their life. The participants learned new information and gained new skills such as
dialogue from listening, respecting others, voicing their opinions openly – topics that broke fear barriers and
gave the participants the confidence to personally apply what they learned in their community. The participants
reported that the knowledge gained and skills acquired during the workshop led to change in their own lives
and/or in the lives of their families and communities. A participant from Raqqa reported: "I started applying
what I learn in my family, then spreading the knowledge I acquired with neighbours and relatives."[47] The topics
discussed in the workshops, such as dialogue, identity, accepting the other's opinion and avoiding prejudice,
had positive effects on participants' daily lives. In addition, the online mixing of the two groups from Raqqa and
Qamishli can be also seen as positive, despite some conflicts that arose, since the two areas became familiar
with different cultures and ideas.

**Participants were committed to the workshops and recommended them to others.** Participants were also very
committed to the workshops and highly motivated to learn. One participant said: "Despite the high temperature
that was reaching 50 degrees and the electricity cuts […], I was very enthusiastic attending the workshop during
those five days so I could learn more about active citizenship."[48] According to the project manager, after attending
the sessions, participants recommended them to others: "When we had newly enrolled participants, they used
to tell us that his/her friend recommended our training to them."[49] This evidences participants' interest in and
satisfaction with the content of the sessions.

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47   FGD in person wtih project participants in Raqqa, 15 January 2022
48   FGD in person wtih project participants in Qamishli, 25 January 2022
49   Online interview conducted with the project manager on 24 January 2022

**The programme has helped to foster new relationships among participants.** In Qamishli, participants reported gaining new friends by attending the workshops. "I loved attending the sessions, sharing and dialoguing with the others. I made many friends," said one participant.[50] Another participant reported, "I don't have many friends. I rely on myself a lot. However, this workshop changed my feelings and my vision about friendship and its concept in general. I found that there was a lot of good people and shared a good time with them."

## Challenges

**Participants from Raqqa felt less confident to share their views and ideas in the presence of Kurdish counterparts.** Although the project was designed and managed taking into consideration the sensitivity of the topics discussed during workshops, participants from Raqqa in particular, who were mostly Arabs, still felt less confident and uncomfortable when brought together with the participants from Qamishli, who were mostly Kurds. This was mainly due to the fact that participants from Raqqa associated their Kurdish peers with the ruling authority, and that sharing ideas related, for example, to Arab identity could pose a risk to them. One of the participants reported: "The lack of comfort and safety is due to the presence of the Kurdish component who is participating with us in the workshop. This component represents the ruling class in the region which made us feel uncomfortable and unsafe to discuss any idea especially the sensitive one such as the identity."[51] Another one added, "The presence of the other component – the Kurds – made me feel not confident to share my thoughts and ideas and put them forward, in order to prevent sensitivity. They are considered as part of the ruling authority."[52] Participants from Raqqa appear to have felt safer during group discussions when their microphones were muted and the participants from Qamishli could not hear the conversation, because some perceived the presence of the Kurdish participants as threatening.

**Some topics were more difficult to discuss because of how they related to participants' contexts and lived realities.** Raqqa is a city rooted in tribal and clan structures and therefore discussing topics such as 'identity' and 'decision-makers' alluded to participants' own experiences, for example, their tribal affiliation. One of the participants said: "Some topics made us feel less confident, such as the identity topic and its changing concept. In addition, some exercises within the workshop, such as the exercises of the decision-makers caused a loss of confidence in me. The cause behind this is our identity background and our belonging to the clan governed by certain customs and traditions."[53]

**Openness to different points of view varied between the different areas and participants.** Participants from Qamishli reported difficulties in voicing their points of view on sensitive issues because they were not well accepted by those in Raqqa. One of them said: "Some of the participants in Raqqa were surprised that we don't have the same principles and priorities. The participants or the discussion from Raqqa were always reminding us of the Arab nationalism and identity [...] At the end of the sessions, I went deep inside my mind trying to understand these ideas to which I do not belong to."[54] The participant added: "After three days of attending the workshop we saw that we started changing and trying to accept the other's opinion as we can see that the workshop had an impact on us. However, I didn't see the same in Raqqa."[55]

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50   FGD in person wtih project participants in Qamishli, 29 January 2022
51   FGD in person wtih project participants in Raqqa, 15 January 2022
52   Ibid.
53   Ibid.
54   Ibid.
55   Ibid.

**Conflicts arose between participants in the joint sessions due to discrimination and unsettled issues between the groups.** The historical tensions in the relationship between different groups of participants from Raqqa and Qamishli posed challenges to discussing certain topics during the joint workshops, as many participants joined the sessions with pre-existing assumptions and opinions about other ethnic and religious groups. This meant that, in some situations, participants behaved in a discriminatory way towards other groups. A participant from Raqqa reported that, at some point during the workshop, a participant from Qamishli offended the Islamic religion by suggesting that "any bearded man belongs to ISIS". After responding to them explaining that this was an assumption that has been spread by the SDF checkpoint soldiers who treated all bearded men as if they belonged to ISIS, the participant from Raqqa reported that he feared he could be arrested for sharing his own perspective, as an Arab Muslim, on the matter. Heated debates around the Kurdish cause, Arab nationalism and the AANES rule in NES were also present and generated conflicts in some instances between the different groups.

# 5. The effectiveness of the blended methodology

As explained, the youth development programme in NES was implemented through a recently developed blended methodology, in which participants came together physically in both Raqqa and Qamishli, accompanied by a facilitator in the room, while trainers joined them via Zoom, supported by the use of video cameras and microphones. Based on the reflections in the previous section about the main successes and challenges of the different aspects of the project, some conclusions can be drawn about the extent to which the blended methodology has helped or hindered the project's outcomes.

## Successes

**Blended interaction between participants and trainers/facilitators:** Despite some challenges faced during the delivery of online training, participants praised the blended-learning approach used by the organisations in both locations and most of them reported their satisfaction with how the online sessions had been conducted. The quality of the interaction between the participants present in the rooms and the online trainers was referred to positively, and the participants considered the mix of online learning and a physical presence during the sessions as successful and positive. In Qamishli, some of the participants compared this "successful modality" to a previous one attended in another programme, which they considered less successful: "We were sitting at home using Zoom and we got bored, whereas in this programme we liked the interactions of the participants in both areas and with the trainers, while the facilitators are present with us."[56] Another participant described the sessions as "more passionate in which we have to fully focus on everything – we weren't bored or distracted".[57] They continued, "We didn't feel that it was an online session. […] The presence of the trainers abroad and the

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56    FGD in person with project participants in Qamishli, 25 January 2022
57    Ibid.

cooperation between the facilitators in the sessions greatly enhanced the training and it became more powerful than having only one trainer present to run the workshop."[58]

The participants reported that the trainers were effective at listening and communicating with the participants via Zoom. Most of them reported that they were good listeners and knowledgeable in the topics discussed. The interaction between trainers online and the facilitators in the rooms was seen as highly positive throughout the workshops by themselves and the participants. The trainers took into consideration the facilitators' feedback on the programme in order to adapt the delivery to the local context. In Raqqa, for example, this was done through exercises and activities that took the participants' realities into account. Participants considered that the physical presence of facilitators was effective for the workshop.

**Trainers' and facilitators training skills:** In Raqqa, the participants reported that despite the connection issues, the trainers were able and succeeded in discussing the topics and communicating online. The effectiveness of the distance learning came from the strength of the trainers' personalities and their familiarity with the training material. In this workshop, there was effective coordination between the trainers on the screen and the facilitators on the ground, which led to productive delivery of the concepts. For example, when the internet went off, the facilitators were able to step in to support the trainers and continue the sessions with the participants. According to the facilitators: "One of the most important effects of the online implementation on the learning process is the amount of wasted time. For example, one question required a long time to be answered between the transition from the trainer who is online to the facilitators and the participants who are in the room in both Raqqa and Qamishli."[59] They added: "Despite this, we were able to conduct the sessions even when the internet went off because we were well trained."[60]

**Participants' empowerment:** The qualitative evidence suggests that the blended workshops helped to empower the participants to become active citizens. By joining a ToT session in the first phase of the project, the first cohort of participants became well equipped to cascade their knowledge on active citizenship concepts to their communities. They started this process by supporting the delivery of the workshops to a total of 111 participants, who gained knowledge and skills and proposed follow-up initiatives, which highlights the contribution of the project to their communities. A total of 23 social action proposals were submitted by the participants after the workshops, including 11 in Raqqa and 12 in Qamishli. Notwishstanding the influence of the local partners on the proposals submitted in Qamishli, the high number of proposals received can be considered as evidence of the positive impact that the project had on participants' motivation to create change in their communities and society, and their willingness to implement the knowledge and skills acquired in their daily lives.

# Challenges

**Internet connection and communication:** The online component presented many challenges, with poor internet connection being the main issue. This was evident when trainers tried to transmit messages to those in the room and whenever a question was asked: a long time was required to answer it and transition between the stakeholders joining from different locations. This also meant that a lot of time was consumed in communicating between interlocutors. A trainer reported: "We doubled our effort in conveying the message to the participants. We were always scared or unsure that the message wasn't properly sent to the participants because the sessions were online. We wanted to ensure that the message was clearly and appropriately received by the participants."

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58   Ibid.

59   Online interview conducted with trainers on 21 January 2022

60   Ibid.

Participants, especially the ones in Raqqa, agreed with the trainers' feedback about the challenges of using the online modality. Some of them said that they felt less confident to share their opinions with all the issues posed by the poor internet connection, since it hindered the communication between the two areas or with the trainers and made some participants hesitant to express themselves. According to one participant: "The training carried out remotely via Zoom and the presence of other participants from Qamishli made me hesitate to participate for fear that my information was weak or incorrect."[61] Another participant reported: "The connectivity issue had a negative effect on the learning process and the communication between Raqqa and Qamishli."[62]

**Duration of the sessions:** Participants reported their dissatisfaction regarding the duration of the sessions, which they claimed was insufficient to discuss the topics in the blended format. Although five days is the typical duration for the workshops in the youth development programme, the blended nature of the sessions created challenges such as internet connection and communication issues among participants in both locations, reducing the time available for meaningful discussions. In multiple workshops, participants considered the duration of sessions too short and said that more time or additional sessions would have allowed them to express themselves better.

**Trust building:** This was an essential aspect of the project, but was not fully achieved with the blended approach. "You lose the spirit of citizenship, which means that the trainers face a great challenge: building the trust with the participants via internet. […] Without exchanging a direct contact between the trainers and the participants can make the task very difficult as implementing such a sensitive project."[63] They added: "The trust in which the citizenship is built comes from the common ground and the dialogues between different groups. […] That's why it is better to conduct these types of the sessions physically so that the participants in both areas can interact properly between each other and live the citizenship experience as it is planned."[64]

For the trainers, the online elements were challenging and hard to implement in such a project. The faces of participants were not visible through the camera, which hampered the interaction and relationship building between them. According to one of the trainers: "We couldn't memorise the names of the participants because we couldn't see their faces. […] We couldn't see also their reactions. The participants in Raqqa couldn't see also the faces of the participants in Qamishli and vice-versa."[65] The trainer added: "In these circumstances in which we are living in terms of COVID and our inability to go to the area for security reason, the online response is very important. However, if we have a choice between the physical sessions and the online one, we definitely choose the physical sessions and not the online."[66]

In general, all the stakeholders including the participants, facilitators and trainers recommended physical sessions over online sessions. Dealing with sensitive topics, building trust between different groups comes from a physical interaction rather than an online one.

**General interaction between participants in different locations/from different backgrounds:** The interaction among the participants was seen as challenging and some differences between them were highlighted throughout the workshops. For the participants in Raqqa, the integration process was described as unsuccessful

61    FGD in person with project participants in Raqqa, 15 January 2022

62    Ibid.

63    Online interview conducted with trainers on 21 January 2022

64    Ibid.

65    Ibid.

66    Ibid.

and highlighted the sensitivities in the area. Barriers of mistrust were present and could not be tackled via the blended approach. There were several reasons for this:

- Feeling of victimisation: in Syria, Kurds have a history of feeling oppressed and inferior to the Arabs; however, most recently since the rule of the AANES in the area, the feeling of victimisation has been transmitted to the Arabs as a result of the practice from the ruling authority which is represented by the Kurds and based in Qamishli.
- Ethnic and intellectual sensitivity: the participants in Raqqa considered themselves as somewhat more religious because they belong to a tribal society whereas the Kurds often follow a Marxist mentality.
- The Arab participants had some security concerns during the workshops fearing persecution or being arrested by the ruling authority due to sharing their opinions on sensitive topics in the presence of Kurds from Qamishli.
- The challenges that the poor internet connection and lack of adequate technology posed to integration, trust building and general interaction between participants, who could not see or hear each other at times.

The participants in Qamishli were highly satisfied with the diversity of the participants in their area; however, some of them felt that the participants from Raqqa did not listen to their opinions despite all the efforts made by trainers. One of the participants, an Arab clan-member from Qamishli, said: "The participants in Qamishli are coming from different backgrounds – ethnical and religious. However, in Raqqa, all the participants are the children of tribes or clans. That's why the participants in Qamishli, and because of their diversities, respect more the different culture and the different opinion while those in Raqqa and during the workshop didn't accept other people's opinion or ideas."[67] Another participant said: "I felt that the participants from Raqqa didn't accept me because I am from a different religion."[68]

The analysis shows that the differences and mistrust among the participants in Raqqa and Qamishli persisted despite all the efforts made by the trainers because the sensitivity of the conflict in that area was high and had a direct impact on the interaction between the participants. Although certain tools such as WhatsApp were helpful in bringing people together despite all their differences, creating more levels of interaction between participants, there were still underlying issues of social cohesion and mistrust that could not be properly tackled via the blended approach in the context of this project.

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67    FGD in person wtih project participants in Qamishli, 25 January 2022
68    Ibid.

# 6. Lessons learned in NES programming

This section synthetises the findings of this research into lessons learned that can be attributed to some of the outputs and outcomes sought by the programme. These include the development of participants' knowledge and skills, the creation of trusting and comfortable dialogue spaces and the improvement of the use of the blended methodology for the learning journey.

## Building knowledge and skills

All participants and facilitators – who were also participants in the project at the earlier stages – reported that they gained the necessary knowledge and skills on the concepts of dialogue, peacebuilding, citizenship and non-violence to apply their learnings in their lives and communities. Through the workshops, the participants learned how to identify the needs of their communities and create initiatives that could tackle those issues accordingly.

Despite the challenges faced through the online delivery model, which are explored in further detail below, introducing the concepts of active citizenship to areas previously unfamiliar with them can be considered an important achievement. Participants were highly motivated in the process from its early stages, and showed a lot of interest in taking part in the sessions while actively recommending them to others.

As a result of the project, the participants who were trained to become facilitators became well equipped to cascade their knowledge within their communities, whereas the other participants acquired knowledge and skills on concepts related to active citizenship that can be applied to their daily lives.

## Building trust, understanding and comfort

The data suggests that participants had mixed feelings regarding the building of trust and understanding between themselves and other participants, as well as the extent to which they felt that the workshops provided them with a comfortable environment to voice their views and perspectives on the different issues under discussion.

On the one hand, the fact that the workshops were hosted by organisations which were well known in the area made participants feel comfortable and safe to attend the sessions. Indeed, the fact that participants from Kurdish and Arabic backgrounds agreed to attend workshops together can be considered a positive outcome achieved by the project and a first step to establishing constructive dialogue between the different groups. The atmosphere and conversational space created by the trainers allowed participants and facilitators to feel comfortable and develop trust between themselves and towards the trainers.

The workshops did, however, tackle some sensitive topics and despite feeling generally safe to participate and express themselves some participants from Raqqa felt uncomfortable during inter-group discussions between

the two areas, which may have contributed to some tensions among participants at certain moments of the workshops. Additionally, the poor internet connection and the low quality of the technology did not assist the interaction between the participants in the two different areas.

## Learning journey

The project was designed to attract participants from different backgrounds in Raqqa and Qamishli, cities marked by their ethnic and religious diversity. The project's content took this into consideration, and the trainers did not feel the need to adapt or exclude any topics for being considered taboo. As explained above, however, some conflicts did still emerge between participants due to the sensitivity of some examples raised during the discussions. After being trained, the facilitators were able to support the workshop delivery, especially when the trainers lost internet connection to participants in the room.

The adaptation of the training to a blended approach appears at first glance to have worked effectively. Participants reported that the opportunity of going through a learning process with Syrians who were living abroad (who are perceived to have more experience) was attractive and motivating during the workshop, which reflected positively in their engagement. The learning process was accessible for all the participants since they were present in the same room with the facilitators while the trainers were conducting the activities remotely.

The blended learning approach presented challenges given the sensitivity of the context in Raqqa and Qamishli (as across the whole of NES), with unsettled differences and conflicts being present between the different communities living in the two cities. The technology used for the online interactions was considered inefficient by participants and it was perceived to restrict the integration process between the participants of Raqqa and Qamishli. Slow internet speeds and inappropriate digital tools hampered the trust-building process and led to a considerable amount of time being wasted during the workshops, which participants complained about.

# 7. Government-controlled areas (GCA)

Previous to the NES implementation, between December 2020 and March 2021, the blended methodology was used by Mobaderoon to deliver the youth development programme in cities under government control in the west of Syria. These included the cities of Hama, Tartus, Homs and Latakia. Over the course of four months, one workshop was conducted each month where participants from the four areas met physically with one facilitator and online with participants from other areas to undertake activities simultaneously and jointly. This section explores the main commonalities and differences between the implementations in the GCA and NES, including successes and challenges.

Within the limited information received, we can see some similarities and challenges faced in both areas.

# Similarities

## Successes

- Participants in all four locations gained knowledge and skills on active citizenship, which they are able to apply within their communities.
- Gathering participants from different governorates enriched the discussions. Getting to know a new culture and interacting with others was considered to have had a positive impact on the outcomes of the projects.

## Challenges

- The distribution and management of the timing of the sessions was inadequate because some sessions were taking more time than the others.
- Poor internet connectivity was a challenge in all areas. The frequent problems with the internet were a major issue, which had a direct impact on the implementation of the blended-learning methodology.
- Challenges were also faced in using the equipment such as the microphone and laptop – request for better equipment.
- Despite the gain of knowledge and skills, some participants needed more exercises to apply what they had learned. For example, one participant reported: "When we discussed the concept of local and global citizen, I felt that I needed more time to understand this concept to be able to understand my role in each one of them."

# Differences

## Successes

- There have been no reports of conflicts emerging between participants from different locations and the online exchange was overall seen as positive across the workshops.

## Challenges

- There is a need to enhance the communication between the facilitators from the different areas.
- The facilitators need more training to be able to teach the technical content better. In that way they will also be able to respond to all the questions posed by the participants. The timing and logistics of the breaks were also an issue during the implementation in some areas, since the breaks were not at the same time in all the areas and participants reported that the lunch provisions took a long time to arrive. It is recommended to have better coordination in terms of logistics.

# 8. Final conclusions and recommendations

The blended-learning methodology has the potential to extend the reach of activities beyond the physical space through the use of digital technology, but it also posed many challenges. At first glance, blended learning appears to be the ideal approach as the world adapts to 'the new normal' and seeks innovative ways to enhance interaction and communication without necessarily having to bring all stakeholders together in the same physical space.

In the approach tested by the youth development programme in NES, the physical presence of the trainers was reduced and the process of instruction was streamlined through the use of technology from wherever the trainer was based in the world. Overall, the blended methodology implemented was sensitive to how the intervention could interact with the local conflict dynamics, and the programme was designed and delivered in a way that does not exacerbate conflict, but instead softens unsettled differences and strengthens dialogue between the different target groups. Since the early stages of the project, participants saw the possibility of meeting and exchanging with people from different backgrounds as a good opportunity. They also seemed to have gained knowledge and skills on the concepts introduced by the programme, showed commitment to the workshops throughout the sessions, and were overall very happy with the trainers.

The blended learning did, however, present challenges. This was especially true in complex environments such as in NES, where sensitivities, conflict and unsettled differences are present in many aspects of life. This, alongside technology issues that arose during the implementation, meant that the blended delivery approach for the youth development programme was not as effective as expected in this context and ended up exacerbating conflicts to which some participants were predisposed due to the power dynamics in the local area. This was true especially for Raqqa where the participants were mostly Arabs ruled by a Kurdish authority, which many see as threatening and unrepresentative of them, making them feel uncomfortable at times in the presence of their Kurdish peers. The poor internet connection and lack of appropriate digital technology created further barriers that prevented integration in this specific case.

Below are some recommendations for future interventions in NES:

- **Future programming should consider further the sensitivities of the NES context and be designed to address some of the underlying causes of conflict, prejudice and other unhealthy dynamics between the different communities living in the area.** This can be done by:

  – undertaking a more in-depth conflict sensitivity analysis as part of the project design to ensure that the intervention will not invertedly exacerbate any underlying conflicts between the targeted communities;
  – putting social cohesion approaches and conflict-management techniques at the core of programme design and delivery;
  – emphasising the learning on more sensitive topics before merging groups from different backgrounds together; this will allow participants first to acquire the necessary knowledge on such topics and be more prepared and open to discuss them with other groups;
  – continuing to work with the project participants since they have expressed the need to acquire

deeper knowledge on the concepts presented to them as well as additional peacebuilding-related topics; and

– targeting a wider range of age, ethnic and religious groups. Participants highlighted specifically the topic of 'dialogue', which they perceived to have influenced them and changed their perception over different cultures and views.

• **Future programming should improve the blended-learning experience to allow participants to fulfil their learning needs and engage in trusting relationships with people from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds.** This can be done by:

– recruiting dedicated IT staff with experience in online training delivery to support with the logistics of remote learning;

– acquiring higher-quality equipment such as microphones and cameras that allow all stakeholders to see and hear each other well;

– provide partners with reliable data packages to allow a more stable internet connection throughout the sessions; and

– explore other platforms and applications that can enhance the learning experience and encourage interaction between participants.

• **Future programming should build on the successes and lessons learned around project design, delivery and MEL to improve coordination between the different stakeholders and project management as a whole.** This can be done by:

– enhancing the role of facilitators by providing more in-depth explanation about the project's commitments and distinguishing the activities conducted in its context from other projects implemented by the partner organisations;

– improving the project's M&E to have a more accurate measurement of knowledge and skills gained by the participants – for example, by conducting an anonymous pre- and post-test for each workshop with technical questions alongside feedback collection from participants; and

– including elements of inclusivity in the project design such as developing materials in Kurdish and recruiting Kurdish-speaking trainers and facilitators.

# Annex 1: Guiding questions for FGDs and KIIs

## Questions for participants

### Experience (feelings, behaviours, sensory)

• What was your motivation for participating in the project?

• How did it feel participating in the project?

• Were there moments when you felt more confident and able to participate and learn? When?

• Were there moments when you felt less confident and able to participate and learn? When?

• Have you participated in digital/distance training before?

• How did the way the programme was delivered (online/at distance) influence your experience and learning?

• Did you feel safe and comfortable to talk openly and share your thoughts and ideas during the sessions? Please can you give us examples

*Note for facilitator: notice if the participants were uncomfortable during the sessions: due to the security conditions, 'taboo topics', different backgrounds or different cultural/social perspectives.*

### Change (impact, action, legacy)

• Are there any changes (large or small), for you or the community, which you believe this project has contributed to?

• Did you learn anything? What did you learn?

• Do you think the project has influenced the way you think or act in any way?

• Did the project help you to strengthen existing relationships or form new ones? Are you still in touch?

• Do you think there have been unintended negative or positive effects of this project? What are they?

- What, in your opinion, is the purpose of this project?

- In your opinion did the online/distance approach have an impact on your learning? And on your relationship with other group members and the facilitator?

- Do you think the benefits of this project are likely to continue in the future? Why?

- Do you think you will continue to apply or build on what you have learnt in the future?

- Do you have any plans for how you might put the learning into practice?

- In your opinion, how was the integration process between the participants from different backgrounds/groups during the sessions (Arabs and Kurds, men and women…)?

    – Was there a positive interaction between those of different background/gender/opinion/culture?
    – How has conflict sensitivity been considered in this stream of work?

- Do you intend to stay in touch with other participants in the future?

    – Will the participants in Raqqa stay in touch with the participants living in Qameshli and vice-versa?

- During the discussions about different topics, did you notice any conflict emerge between different groups over a specific topic and how in your opinion did the facilitator manage the differences between you? Please give examples.


## The learning journey (learning process, activities)

- How easy or difficult was it to attend the online training?

- How easy or difficult was it for you to participate in the whole training? Were there any challenges/barriers you experienced? If so, what were they?

    – Timing or duration of the sessions: was it enough time or was it challenging?
    – Training programme?
    – Exercises?
    – Language barriers: Kurdish and Arabic?

- In your opinion was the training sensitive to the different needs and backgrounds of the participants?

- How easy to access did you find the technology used during the training (i.e. Zoom…)?

- Would you change anything about the way the project was delivered for the future? What would you change?

## Project learning (monitoring, evaluation and learning)

• Did you feel you had any influence over how the training was delivered?

• What do you think we can do in the training sessions to help you achieve this? How to work with blended communities and how to create a situation in the society where we can attract people and let them see that this programme is for all and not for selective communities?

• Do you feel the facilitators were good at listening to the hopes or needs of you and the other participants? Why?

# Questions for the facilitators

## Conditions of the sessions and general observations

• How did the participants find the location? Did they find it safe to share their thoughts and ideas? Did anyone complain about the location, the room, or the online system?

• According to you, did the participants felt safe and comfortable to talk openly? Can you share with us some examples?

• During the discussions, did you need to adapt some topics or drop some because of the security conditions or some topics being 'taboo' from a cultural/social perspective?

• How was the atmosphere in the sessions?

  – Did the participants seem to be optimistic? Positive? Committed?

• Did you feel at the end of the sessions that the participants had gained enough information during the activities or that they requested more?

• Did the participants have enough time to discuss the content or did they need more time?

## Change (impact, action, legacy)

• In your opinion what's the most significant change for the participants or their communities that has emerged from this project?

• Do you think there have been unintended negative or positive effects from this project? What are they?

• What, in your opinion, is the purpose of this project?

- Based on your experience, do you believe the project will empower the participants as active citizens in their communities? Why?

- In your opinion did the online/distance-learning elements of the project have an impact on the learning of the participants? And on their relationships with each other?

- Did the participants meet face to face during the project? In your opinion how did this influence the outcomes of the project?

- Do you think the benefits of this project are likely to continue in the future? Why?

## The learning journey (learning process, activities)

- Do you feel the project was able to effectively respond to the different contexts/participants that it engaged? Why?

- In your opinion what helped and what undermined the ability of the project to adapt to different contexts and participants?

  – Was there a positive interaction between those of different background/gender/opinion/culture?
  – Did you feel any avoidance behaviour from participants in relation to certain topics discussed?

- During the discussions about the different topics, did you notice any conflict emerge between the participants or any discordance over a specific topic and how did you manage their differences?

## The strategy (theory of change, partnerships, timelines)

- In your opinion is the project conflict sensitive? Why and how has conflict sensitivity been considered in the stream of work? Please can you give examples?

## Project learning (monitoring, evaluation and learning)

- What did the programme team and facilitators learn during delivery?

  – What was the impact of the learning on the programme?
  – Did learning happen more through informal conversation and reflection with and between facilitators or participants or through formal learning spaces and tools? Can you give examples?
  – What learning strategies and tools existed at the start of delivery?
  – Were new strategies and tools integrated during the process?

- During the delivery of the programme, did the participants help you to learn more about what was working and what could be improved? How?

# Questions for the trainers

## Conditions of the sessions and general observation

• How did the participants find the location? Did they find it safe to share their thoughts and ideas? Did anyone complain about the location, the room, the online system?

• According to you, did the participants felt safe and comfortable to talk openly? Can you share with us some examples?

• During the discussions, did you need to adapt some topics or drop some because of the security conditions or some topics being 'taboo' from a cultural/social perspective?

• How was the atmosphere in the sessions? Did the participants seem to be optimistic? Positive? Committed?

• Did you feel at the end of the sessions that the participants had gained enough information during the activities or that they requested more?

• Did the participants have enough time to discuss the content or did they need more time?

## Change (impact, action, legacy)

• In your opinion what's the most significant change for the participants or their communities that has emerged from this project?

• Do you think there have been unintended negative or positive effects of this project? What are they?

• What, in your opinion, is the purpose of this project?

• Based on your experience, do you believe the project will empower the participants as active citizens in their communities? Why?

• In your opinion did the online/distance elements of the project have an impact on the learning of the participants? And on their relationships with each other?

• Did the participants meet face to face during the project? In your opinion how did this influence the outcomes of the project?

• Do you think the benefits of this project are likely to continue in the future? Why?

## The learning journey (learning process, activities)

• Do you feel the project was able to effectively respond to the different contexts/participants that it engaged? Why?

  – In your opinion what helped and what undermined the ability of the project to adapt to different contexts and participants?
  – Was there a positive interaction between those of different background/gender/opinion/culture?
  – Did you feel any avoidance behaviour from participants in relation to certain topics discussed?

• During the discussions about the different topics, did you notice any conflict emerge between the participants or any discordance over a specific topic and how did you manage their differences?

## The strategy (theory of change, partnerships, timelines)

• In your opinion is the project conflict sensitive? Why and how has conflict sensitivity been considered in the stream of work? Please can you give examples.

## Project learning (monitoring, evaluation and learning)

• What did the programme team and facilitators learn during delivery?

  – What was the impact of the learning on the programme?
  – Did learning happen more through informal conversation and reflection with and between facilitators or participants or through formal learning spaces and tools? Can you give examples?
  – What learning strategies and tools existed at the start of delivery?
  – Were new strategies and tools integrated during the process?

• During the delivery of the programme, did the participants help you to learn more about what was working and what could be improved? How?

# Questions for the manager

## Conditions of the sessions and general observation

• How did the participants find the location? Did they find it safe to share their thoughts and ideas? Did anyone complain about the location, the room, the online system?

• According to you, did the participants felt safe and comfortable to talk openly? Can you share with us some examples?

• During the discussions, did you need to adapt some topics or drop some because of the security conditions or some topics being 'taboo' from a cultural/social perspective?

• How was the atmosphere in the sessions? Did the participants seem to be optimistic? Positive? Committed?

• Did you feel at the end of the sessions that the participants had gained enough information during the activities or that they requested more?

• Did the participants have enough time to discuss the content or did they need more time?

## Change (impact, action, legacy)

• In your opinion what's the most significant change for the participants or their communities that has emerged from this project?

• Do you think there have been unintended negative or positive effects of this project? What are they?

• What, in your opinion, is the purpose of this project?

• Based on your experience, do you believe the project will empower the participants as active citizens in their communities? Why?

• In your opinion did the online/distance elements of the project have an impact on the learning of the participants? And on their relationships with each other?

• Did the participants meet face to face during the project? In your opinion how did this influence the outcomes of the project?

• Do you think the benefits of this project are likely to continue in the future? Why?

## The learning journey (learning process, activities)

• Do you feel the project was able to effectively respond to the different contexts/participants that it engaged? Why?

    – In your opinion what helped and what undermined the ability of the project to adapt to different contexts and participants?

    – Was there a positive interaction between those of different background/gender/opinion/culture?

    – Did you feel any avoidance behaviour from participants in relation to certain topics discussed?

• During the discussions about the different topics, did you notice any conflict emerge between the participants or any discordance over a specific topic and how did you manage their differences?

• What do you think changes for participants when they participate in a learning project online instead of face to face? How does it affect the outcomes of the programme?

## The strategy (theory of change, partnerships, timelines)

• Briefly describe in simple terms the context in which the project is working.

• Briefly describe in simple terms the strategy of the project.

• What changes when managing and delivering a learning project online instead of face to face? What impact do you think this has on the outcomes of the project?

• In your opinion is the project conflict sensitive? Why and how has conflict sensitivity been considered in the stream of work? Please give examples.

• Describe the relationship between the strategic partners and how it strengthened and/or weakened the success of this process.

• Were there other stakeholders outside of those directly involved in the project who influenced the impact of this project? Who were they and what impact did they have?

    – Do you have any suggestions for how to respond to the risks/opportunities that resulted from the influence of other stakeholders?

• If you were to design and deliver the project again, what are some of the things you would keep the same? Why? What are some of the things you would change? Why? Who needs to do what differently?

## Project learning (monitoring, evaluation and learning)

• What did the programme team and facilitators learn during delivery?

  – What was the impact of the learning on the programme?
  – Did learning happen more through informal conversation and reflection with and between facilitators or participants or through formal learning spaces and tools? Can you give examples?
  – What learning strategies and tools existed at the start of delivery?
  – Were new strategies and tools integrated during the process?

• Did you carry out needs or context assessments before delivering the training? Please describe.

• As a result of this programme, what evidence do we have about what we should do next in Qamishli and Raqqa?

• During the delivery of the programme did the participants help you to learn more about what was working and what could be improved? How?

# Annex 2: Questions used in the KIIs during the context analysis

The KIIs were structured around five components and the questions were distributed under each of them.

## General questions

• What are the main challenges faced in your area (in terms of education, health, pandemic, nutrition, livelihood, migration…)?

• What would you say are the main actors operating in the area (government, companies, NGOs, foreign powers, armed groups)? Do you have any impressions of how they interact with each other?

## NGOs

• From the beginning of the COVID crisis until now, were you involved in any specific projects planned by private sector organisations or NGOs in the area? If yes:

  – Which organisation?
  – What type of projects? What is the objective? Can you specify the activities?
  – In your area where are the projects specifically taking place and which groups are they targeting?
  – Do you have any idea of the duration of the projects?

• Do you have any collaboration with those NGOs, and if yes, what type of collaboration (working with them, trainees, attendees…)?

• What are some of the main challenges you face in operating in the area - COVID related and not COVID related?

• What opportunities have you found to operate in the area?

## Economic

• Which sectors currently represent people's main livelihoods in the area? Which sector is employing more people currently? (Difference between men and women?)

• What do you consider to be the main economic challenges in terms of securing livelihoods for the local population?

## Social

• How would you describe the interactions between the communities from different backgrounds and ethnicities (Arabs and Kurds)?

• How would you describe the relationship between the local population and the main actors?

## Political

• How would you describe the relationship between the community and the local government?

• In your opinion what could impact the security and stability of northeast Syria over the course of the next year?

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