Practical approaches to localisation in peacebuilding

Syria

Contents

Introduction

This paper was produced as part of the Practical Approaches to Localisation research project, funded by the Swedish Postcode Lottery Foundation. The project, based in Lebanon, Syria, Kenya and Rwanda, aims to ensure that local realities and voices on localisation are included in international debates on the topic.

The paper aims to identify issues and dynamics that can inform practical approaches to localisation in peacebuilding in Syria. It starts by defining localisation and identifying local actors in Syria, then it discusses the benefits of localisation, current successful practices, and examines the challenges and risks that localisation might encounter or create. The paper concludes with recommendations for successful localisation in Syria.

As discussed below, participants saw localisation as a process, rather than an end state, possibly because the end state was hard to envision in their context. This is represented in how localisation is addressed in this paper. Although the paper focuses specifically on localisation in peacebuilding, many of the findings are also relevant to development and humanitarian assistance. Given that efforts towards localisation are most advanced in the humanitarian sector, participants often drew examples from these initiatives.

Methodology

The research applies a participatory, qualitative approach, whereby key informants construct their understanding of their reality.[1] The research draws conclusions by exploring themes emerging from the data provided by participants, rather than based on previously structured theories.[2] The research in Syria was conducted by International Alert's partner organisation Mobaderoon. Various methods were used to collect data, including world cafés,[3] semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Data was collected in three phases, starting with community members in 11 areas, moving on to representatives of local authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs), and concluding with representatives of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs).

Overall, the research sample consisted of 111 participants (45% male and 55% female) from local communities, and local actors (including diaspora) in Damascus, rural Damascus, Quneitra, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Tartous, Latakia, Alsweidaa, Northeast Syria (NES), Northwest Syria (NWS), Turkey, Lebanon, Germany and the Netherlands. The research sample also included representatives from four INGOs (three women and one man).

The thematic analysis employed an open-coding technique to define concepts and categorise them into themes. This approach was important to mitigate power distribution between the researcher and the participants.[4]

Limitations of the data

Local communities were unfamiliar with the concept of localisation, which created the challenge of finding a common definition of what is 'local'. Access to governmental bodies such as ministries and municipalities, identified by participants as local actors, was limited due to the sensitivity of the research in areas under government control. Furthermore, most local NGOs work on peacebuilding at grassroots levels and are not exposed to international donors' decision-making or the international power dynamics that affect the peace process, which limited the collection of comprehensive data. This was further complicated by the participants from Europe who work only with local NGOs in NES and NWS, which limited their interpretation to those contexts with few reflections on the wider situation.

Context

The development of Syrian civil society

Syrian civil society in its present form started to emerge in response to the conflict post-2011. Prior to that, between 1960 and 2000, the centralisation of power and political polarisation limited the existence and participation of civil society organisations (CSOs) to charities.[5] While most of today's CSOs were established to respond to needs emerging from the conflict, it is important to acknowledge that the interest of international bodies to directly fund local groups with certain political orientations or geographical dominance has influenced the types of interventions and internal structures of NGOs.[6]

The organisations operating in areas under government control are challenged by safety and security issues, restrictive government legislation and few funding opportunities from international actors.[7] Geopolitics and the involvement of a range of foreign states in the Syria conflict has complicated the work on humanitarian issues, development issues, and peace.[8] Focus has been on humanitarian interventions offering lifesaving services such as healthcare, prioritising the displaced and people below the poverty line.[9]

CSOs evolved quickly due to internal and external factors. Internal development was mostly due to members' education and existing skillsets in other professional fields.[10] External factors included established networks with community members, key actors, international funders and the diaspora, which influenced CSO outreach.[11]

Previous efforts at localisation

During the conflict, local entities that were not registered with the Ministry of Local Affairs emerged intuitively in response to the needs of communities and based on their understanding of the humanitarian context. Despite little previous experience, these entities had a significant impact. On

a larger scale, the Citizens Engagement Program, the Civil Society Room, the National Agenda for the Future of Syria and the Women's Advisory Board were programmes and platforms that aimed to engage representatives from local communities in decision-making and to use their input to direct work in Syria to meet people's needs.[12] These examples were not fully realised attempts to implement localisation, especially in peacebuilding, because they still prioritised partnership over ownership, and INGOs still acted as channels to distribute funds in the areas under or outside government control.[13]

Challenges to localisation

Local authorities and CSOs face a number of challenges in the precarious context of Syria. Firstly, the laws enacted by the government consider direct international funding illegal.[14] This has limited direct funds to areas outside government control. The implications of sanctions and vetoes have also limited the ability of United Nations (UN) agencies to financially support local CSOs.[15] The connection between certain actors and armed groups also created an ethical dilemma for funders and made supporting local actors problematic.[16] Secondly, international actors' limited understanding of the specifics of the context and the roles of different actors alongside differences in the priorities of international and local actors has affected the direction of funding and intervention design.[17] Thirdly, CSOs face several internal challenges. Their level of experience, governance and capacity affect quality and efficiency in the delivery of interventions.[18] The small amounts of funds and short-term projects covering minimal core costs make it difficult for local entities to improve internal systems to meet international requirements.[19] The administrative burden of managing the different formats of financial reporting and methodologies of monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) requested by international organisations is another obstacle for CSOs, pushing them to hand the lead to INGOs as intermediaries.[20]

Key findings

Defining localisation in the Syrian context

Participants in each of the three phases of the research were asked to share a definition for localisation in the Syrian context, but most attempts described preconditions for localisation such as citizenship, fair allocation of resources, and independence of civil society. Phase 1 participants, who were members of local communities, indicated that localisation occurs when the communities' needs are fulfilled. In comparison, activists and international NGO representatives focused more on the decentralisation of processes, the context-specific tailoring of interventions, and the representation of Syrian civil society on international platforms. The differences in these attempts to define localisation probably result from different experiences and exposure to the concept, and their knowledge of the possible ways in which it can be implemented. Most participants declared that a clear vision of localisation was not yet present. However, localisation was generally perceived as a process, rather than an outcome.
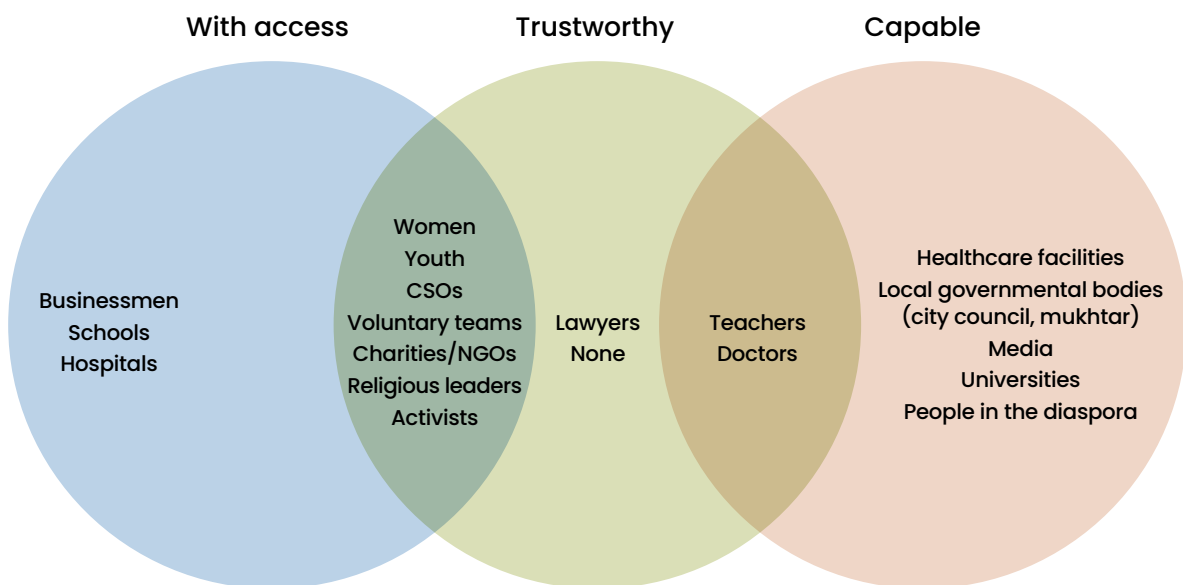
Characterisation of local actors

To navigate the ambiguity surrounding the definition of local actors, three main criteria for what constitutes a local actor were used to structure the brainstorming sessions with participants:

- **trustworthy:** local actors that communities trust to serve their needs and work with them to achieve their aspirations;
- **with access:** local actors who have access to communities and the ability to engage with the community directly, understand their needs and concerns, and represent them; and
- **capable:** local actors who can create a positive impact.

The brainstorming sessions revealed several actors who met all three criteria, while others lacked one or two of the criteria. In some cases, participants from the same area held contradictory opinions about the trustworthiness and capability of certain actors. There were also noticeable differences between areas in terms of who the local actors in the area were. The differences were mainly driven by experience, context and culture. The following diagram presents in detail the characterisation of local actors by participants according to the research criteria.

Figure 1: Characterisation of local actors by participants in brainstorming sessions

| With access | Trustworthy | Capable |

Businessmen
Schools
Hospitals

Women
Youth
CSOs
Voluntary teams
Charities/NGOs
Religious leaders
Activists

Lawyers
None

Teachers
Doctors

Healthcare facilities
Local governmental bodies
(city council, mukhtar)
Media
Universities
People in the diaspora

Identification of local actors in different areas

Location played a key role in how local actors were perceived. Key differences could be observed across the different research locations:

- **Areas under government control:** The identification of local actors in these areas was similar. Responses included local CSOs, youth and women, activists, doctors, teachers, and local

authorities. Participants also agreed that having religious leaders identified as local actors was critical due to their role in increasing division between communities in the previous years and the politicisation of the role of religion to serve political agendas.

- **Areas outside government control (NES and NWS), Turkey and Lebanon:** Local authorities and government facilities in the health and education sectors were not identified as local actors by Syrians in the northeast and northwest of the country, Turkey, and Lebanon. This is related to the fact that NES and NWS are not under the government's control. There are other authorities in these locations such as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which offer education and health services. One notable response to being asked to identify local actors was "no one". This response was heard in Lebanon and NWS where participants declared that they could only rely on their families and close social circles. This response was provoked by disappointment in political leaders and unmet expectations, the bitterness of people's experiences as refugees, and the lack of services provided to them, especially in Lebanon. By contrast, participants in NWS, Turkey, and Lebanon identified NGOs as trustworthy local actors because they have provided them with the services that they need in the absence of other actors.

Participants in all areas agreed that ethical practices such as transparency, goodwill, and working towards a higher good are essential traits of local actors and should be reflected through their behaviour for communities to trust them.

Analysing the data in figure 1, there is a clear distinction between the actors that are trusted by the communities and those actors who have access and capability. For example, in the areas under government control, participants named teachers and doctors as trustworthy actors, but these actors do not have the required access to fulfil communities' needs. In addition, local NGOs and voluntary teams are trusted by communities but were not identified as actors who have the required resources to fulfil communities' needs in the long term. This observation could be further explored and might be used as an opportunity to increase trust or access between communities and actors to increase the effectiveness of localisation.

The current status of localisation

Localisation is not new to the Syrian context. Some INGOs described Syrians as 'pioneers' in localisation practices, and local actors and communities throughout the research were capable of identifying localised actions. Localisation efforts in Syria have, however, been focused mainly on the humanitarian and development sectors and have featured less in peacebuilding.

Local civil society actors and INGOs agreed on the limited influence that Syrian civil society has on international organisations in terms of their thematic or geographic funding priorities, intervention planning, and delivery. They noted differences, however, in the degree of influence according to the type of intervention. In humanitarian interventions, the influence of local civil society actors was deemed to be more substantial because needs assessments are clear and there is less need to push against political agendas compared with development and peacebuilding interventions. In addition, they were aware that the strategies of most humanitarian programmes followed a unified approach worldwide and were directed by UN agencies.

"The relationship is patriarchal. We are still crawling in this field, there is a need for funding, training and guidance. Due to the many needs and the absence of a vision and plan in Syrian civil society, we have come to agree to any policy of the global civil society. Our role is to implement without participating in planning." – Research participant

Participants noted that local actors have some influence on implementing development programmes where local civil entities lead the implementation and can intervene to change some approaches. Participants provided examples of adaptation including in outreach mechanism design and adjusting the number and timing of sessions to suit participants. These modifications aimed to make the service more accessible to people according to their contexts.

Participants stated, however, that local civil entities have very little contribution in setting strategic plans for development and that the selection of targeted social categories is reactive to donors' agendas and requirements to ensure funding. For example, the drive towards working on sexual and gender-based violence, climate change and entrepreneurship is motivated by INGOs and international aspirations, while participants indicated that working on education and poverty reduction in the areas under government control, and on health in areas outside the control zone, were higher priority. This indicates the urgency of moving towards intersectional interventions that respond to the immediate priorities of communities (as defined by the communities themselves) while responding to complementary development or peacebuilding outcomes or integrating holistic approaches.

Peacebuilding was identified as the field in which local civil entities have the least influence. Participants explained that this comes down to the complexity of the conflict, the political interests of some local civil society actors, and the international agendas and interests of other countries. On

the other hand, participants from INGOs valued highly the efforts of local peacebuilding entities in working on conflict, peace and social cohesion at a grassroots level.

It is important to note that participants from the local community in phase 1 of the research were unable to provide any examples of localisation in peacebuilding. This shows a probable gap in the community's knowledge of the work of the civil sector in peacebuilding. On the other hand, participants in phase 2, who were activists and working on the peace agenda, showed clear frustration in their own inability to influence the peace process. From their perspective, local NGOs working on peace are well structured and governed, their staff are knowledgeable and well-equipped, and they have good local knowledge.

Local NGOs across Syria, and in Turkey and Lebanon, play an essential role in building the capacity of communities, especially young people, in areas that contribute to building peace at a grassroots level, such as political participation, citizenship, identity, conflict, and positive communication. The progress made locally, however, could not be translated to higher levels of decision-making or action because of the failure of peace negotiations and the fact that local grassroots voices are still under-represented in decision-making platforms.

International political agendas, including the presence of three international powers on Syrian land, make it very difficult to reach an effective solution for the conflict. Research participants indicated that despite the efforts of the 'Civil Society Room' – one of the CSO platforms that engaged civil society in decision-making – there are disagreements amongst CSOs due to complexity of the actors' stakes in the conflict and the international support each party receives to accomplish personal and international strategic interests. In addition, the lack of local actors' influence in peacebuilding was linked to the general lack of representation of local actors in international peacebuilding platforms. Local NGOs in the areas under government control face difficulties in accessing international platforms and expressing opinions freely. The intense political polarisation within Syrian civil society, resulting in their inability to unify their requests and agenda, has decreased their ability to influence peacebuilding in Syria.

Benefits of localisation in the Syrian context

Greater impact

The research showed that communities are more willing to be part of services that are delivered by actors from their local communities. One of the successful examples highlighted was the design of a sexual and gender-based violence awareness programme in Aleppo, where the staff were from the local community and contributed to the design of the programme to include reproductive health education and awareness raising of the risks of early marriage. The programme partnered with the *mukhtar* (village headman) and religious leaders, which made it more acceptable to the conservative community. Participants stated that this programme was more successful than previous programming due to its effectiveness in creating change, which was achieved through the inclusion of diverse actors in designing, planning and implementing the programme.

Responding to communities' needs

The research highlighted that a process of documented needs assessment and the inclusion of local people in intervention planning and implementation mean that funding is used more efficiently. Participants felt that these approaches (needs assessment and co-production) were more likely to happen if programmes were localised. These approaches reduce unnecessary expenditure on inadequate outreach, and superfluous or irrelevant interventions. Including local people in these processes reduces the knowledge gap for international organisations about local contexts and traditions. This also increases trust by local communities because the communities themselves become the leaders of the work and have more influence over how it is done.

> *"Localisation will increase ownership of the communities and local civil society. This is essential to create deeper impact."* – Research participant

> *"Localisation will allow responding to the communities' needs according to their priorities. It will minimise ineffective interventions and limit the harm resulting from ignorance of the sensitivity of contexts."* – Research participant

Expanding the role of civil society

Research participants saw the potential of localisation to increase the independence of Syrian civil society, if this involved civil society diversifying its funding and becoming less financially dependent on international donors, and therefore less heavily influenced by international actors' agendas. Participants in the areas under government control, and Turkey and Lebanon, all identified independence of civil society entities from local, national and international political agendas as critical for localisation.

Participants also believed that localisation would bring more stable human and financial resources to local actors, and that this would improve the capacity and performance of Syrian civil society. This will gradually introduce civil society as a reliable and trusted power recognised by communities, governmental bodies, and international parties.

> *"Localisation, if applied correctly, will enhance the role of civil entities as their interventions will be sustainable, their structures will be more robust, and they can act as a main player rather than a follower."* – Research participant

In addition to these benefits, participants also identified potential risks of localisation, such as it being misused and transitioning procedures being manipulated or poorly designed.

Strengths of local actors and opportunities for localisation

The following strengths and opportunities were identified by both local actors and INGOs working with Syrians across the research locations.

Relevance

Syrian civil society's distribution means it has access to different areas and social categories (such as sex, age, occupation, religion). Civil society actors can relate to the struggles of Syrians in their respective communities, which means they are better able to deal with sensitive issues and strengthens the trust between them and local communities.

> *"We have a cause that motivates us to do what we do. We are part of the community and can understand their struggles."* – Research participant

For example, in NWS, there is a need to work on literacy for women and girls, while returning-to-school programmes are more essential for areas under government control, especially in rural Damascus and Aleppo. Local NGOs in more conservative areas of Syria, under or outside government control, tend to work on reproductive health as an entry point to work on sexual and gender-based violence, gender and women's rights. In terms of soft skills, local NGO staff are better able to communicate with the communities in their respective areas because they are familiar with local struggles, such as those of mothers who have lost children serving in the Syrian military or other armed groups, or people who have lost their home, family members and their past and are now refugees.

Relationships and connections

Syrian civil society has built strong relationships with local communities, gaining their trust through delivering services across Syria. It has also formed good relationships with international parties and created a civic narrative that is inclusive of the different perspectives of Syrians during the ongoing conflict. Civil entities have contributed to the survival of Syrians through relief work, in the face of the static state of political efforts and the failure of dialogues and negotiations. An example of the relationships between CSOs and communities is found in the communities' willingness to be part of activities related to development, especially among young people who felt supported and developed a sense of belonging to these civil spaces.

Local community members and local actors described the increase in trust in the ability of local NGOs and youth groups to provide relief services in health and poverty reduction. The example mentioned most was the response to the 2023 earthquake when the speed of local actors' response and their professionalism were highly valued. In terms of peacebuilding, participants in phase 2 of the research reported that civil society representatives were trusted to mediate negotiations and facilitate dialogue between the opposition parties and the Syrian authority.

Increased capacity and knowledge

Participants felt that Syrian civil society had built knowledge and experience in democracy, participation, dialogue and advocacy. Its governance and structures have improved to become more just and trustworthy. The last 13 years have allowed Syrian civil society to play a vital role at the strategic level in peacebuilding, development and relief work, when the political environment allows.

Although the paralysis of the conflict does not leave much space for action by civil society, activists believe that conflict transformation is necessary and that their contribution can make the process of building peace more inclusive and sustainable. In addition, they believe that their strategic contribution to establishing civic values is of great importance. Participants from local civil entities
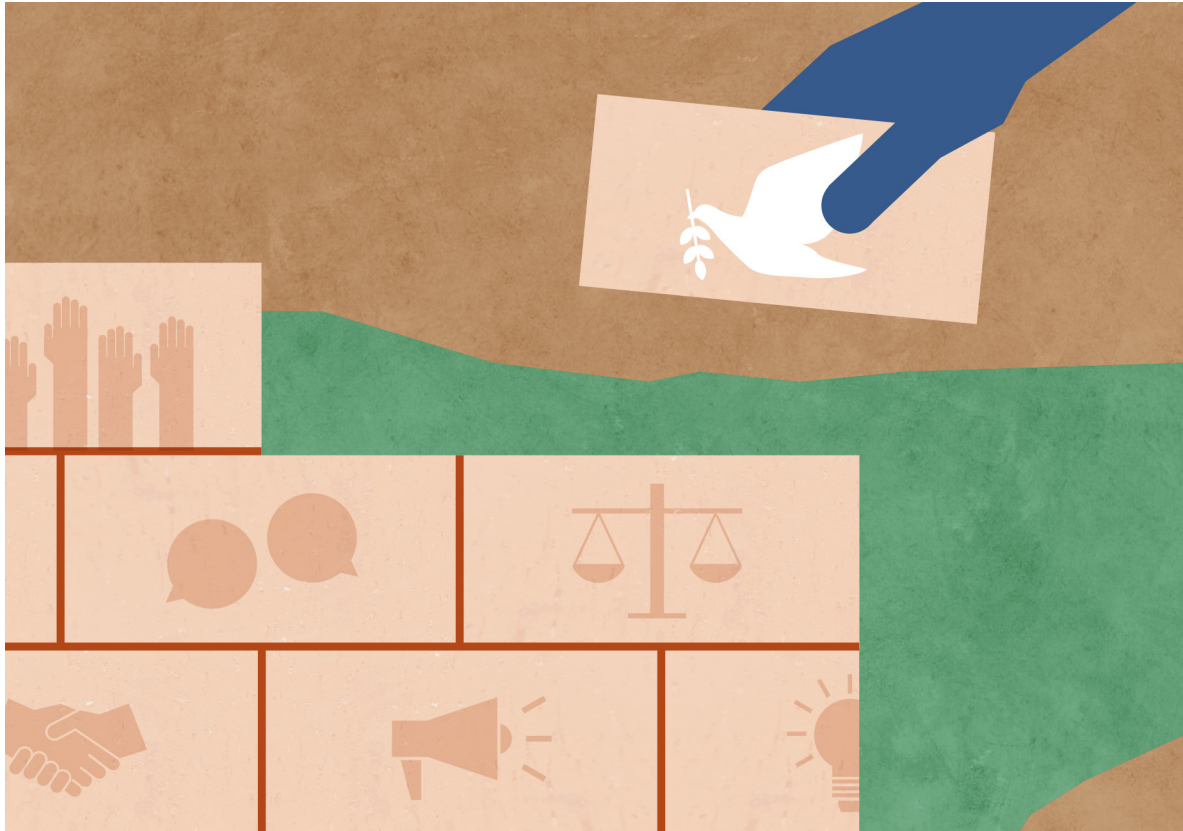
indicated that peacebuilding organisations are more structured and better governed in comparison to local development and relief organisations due to their international interactions and the nature of their mission – although, due to other barriers detailed in this report, this has not meant that they have achieved more influence.

> *"We responded to communities' needs, which contributed to building trust in times when other structures were absent. We developed our performance and increased our professionalism and knowledge about civil work in a short amount of time, which encouraged international organisations to cooperate with us."* – Research participant

External factors

Syrian governmental authorities are currently supporting the decentralisation of procedures through Law 107[21], stressing the importance of localised decision-making to better respond to communities' needs. Generally, research participants saw this as a positive factor that would support localisation in government-controlled areas.

On an international level, there is a clear decline in the amount of funding dedicated to Syria due to changing priorities, which may lead donors to support localisation as a perceived exit strategy to long-term, expensive commitments to international organisations operating in Syria. Although the decrease in funding will affect the quality and reach of services, if managed well it can facilitate a shift to funding local actors directly to maximise efficiency.

Successful examples of localisation

The field of humanitarian relief was highlighted by participants as providing the most examples of successful, locally led initiatives. This is likely linked to the fact that humanitarian aid is needed by most of the Syrian population in all areas and the 2023 earthquake disaster, which created a recent example of localised efforts.

Case study: the 2023 earthquake disaster response

Local communities and local civil society identified the response to the earthquake as the most successful example of localised action. Local organisations in Aleppo and Latakia conducted needs assessments in shelters. They considered gender and conflict sensitivity by developing mechanisms to ensure equity in resource distribution, respecting the cultures and traditions of each context, and making sure that women's needs were catered for. They used their networks to communicate information, in addition to other platforms such as Facebook. They acted as channels to distribute donations because local communities and Syrians in the diaspora trusted them to receive funds through informal channels. They were able to reach areas that were largely inaccessible to international funds such as Latakia and Idlib.

On an international level, civil society organisations advocated for sanctions and restrictions to be tightened for areas under government control and challenged the refusal of Syrian authorities for relief to enter areas such as Idlib.

The severity of need and the disaster itself lightened the usual legal barriers to donations. Immediate needs were met through local efforts before international and regional actions had been implemented.

The research revealed minimal examples of localised peacebuilding efforts. This is related to participants' limited involvement and knowledge in this area, the lack of civil society inclusion in peacebuilding platforms, and the sensitivity of the topic in the Syrian context. Some participants involved in peacebuilding efforts highlighted the importance of the role of Syrian civil society in the peace process in facilitating negotiations, resisting political agendas that are contrary to the interests of local Syrian communities, and advocating for measures against perpetrators of human rights violations.

Examples shared by participants identified characteristics that contributed to their success, such as:

- **collaboration and inclusion:** alliances based on shared values and trust between civil society entities and local actors across conflict lines, and the inclusion of local communities in need assessments and the design of interventions, including collaboration with private and public sectors; most of the successful examples include the financial support of people in the diaspora and activism by members of local communities;
- **familiarity with contexts:** local actors in these examples were experts in their respective contexts, having a deep understanding of people's needs, access points, and the communities' cultures and traditions; and

- **independence in decision-making:** this applies mostly to examples in humanitarian and development sectors where actors were given the space to decide on suitable procedures and had unconditional financial support. This increased their ownership of the process and the success of the interventions.

"The speed in which the Syrian civil society acted to respond to the earthquake disaster was remarkable. Civil entities between areas and conflict lines connected to offer help. Local communities and Syrians in the diaspora contributed to donations. All authorities within different regions cooperated. Most needs were fulfilled before the international community started their response." – Research participant

Barriers to localisation in Syria

Socio-economic and political context in Syria

Participants identified the following obstacles to localisation resulting from the conflict. These are barriers that apply to localisation across all sectors including peacebuilding:

- **The absence of a local source of funding to support and foster Syrian civil society:** Local civil society must rely on international funds, which can compromise its independence and sustainability. Participants believed that localisation was difficult without a national development plan that is agreed, inclusive and locally funded. In addition, if local civil society is unstable and dependent on international funds due to the absence of local funding, its contribution to national goals will be limited.
- **The ongoing conflict is exacerbating social, economic, political and geographical divisions:** This is paralysing development and peacebuilding work to a significant extent and creates a loop of continuous humanitarian response.
- **Limited independence and freedom due to the dominance of authorities:** This challenge applies to NES and NWS, as well as to areas under the control of the government. It applies mainly to development and peacebuilding work.
- **The absence of a solution to the Syrian conflict led by Syrians:** The international intervention in the Syrian conflict, with military, political, and economic support for certain parties, has delayed serious progress toward conflict resolution leaving Syrian civil society in a state of fatigue.
- **The restrictions on the movement of Syrians limiting the access of activists to international platforms:** These restrictions, as well as the economic sanctions in Syria, and the restrictions applied to Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Turkey, have limited Syrian civil society entities' access to funds. These factors have increased corruption and lack of financial transparency, and the underdeveloped state of Syrian civil society.
- **The absence of communication between geographical areas due to the dominance of different powers:** Different authorities have amplified rules, laws, agendas and strategies, which complicates localisation processes.
- **Migration and asylum-seeking:** More than 7 million Syrians have migrated or left the country, which raises questions about how localisation can be applied with minimum connection between those who are in the diaspora and others located inside Syria.
- **Economic deterioration:** This has severely influenced the success of development and peacebuilding interventions. The economic situation in Syria has also threatened the existence of local civil society and limited their access to communities.

Socio-economic and political contexts internationally

- Imbalanced power dynamics due to the concentration of resources, knowledge, and information in the Global North, reducing the ability of the Global South to actively participate in decision-making platforms.
- The influence of the political interests of international governments' funding to INGOs for peace and development work in Syria in terms of amounts of the funds, the geographic areas covered, and the type of interventions to be funded.

"The new power struggle is about data and resources. This is influencing most political alliances and interests on the international level. These elements make localisation impossible. They contradict with its main principles and increase power struggles."
– Research participant

The state of Syrian civil society

- The fact that Syrian civil society was required to develop quickly to meet needs during the conflict meant it did not have the time or experience to develop a shared ethical code of conduct or robust systems. These factors contributed to incidents of corruption, especially in the years between 2014 and 2018, affecting its reputation with international donors and its relationships with local communities. In addition, the political interests and alliances of some civil entities with the Syrian authorities, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and Qasad pose questions regarding their civic interest.
- During the conflict, a cycle of response to immediate needs was created, which has consumed the energy and resources of Syrian civil society, limiting its role in development, peace and policy-making, and constricting its structures and capacities.

"We can't deny the fact that the civil society in Syria was only activated after the conflict. It had modest knowledge and experience. It was the only party working to serve communities in areas where usually governments intervene. The severity of needs was bigger than its capacity and it still mainly concentrates on relief." – Research participant

- Participants identified that Syrian civil society needs civic education, legal awareness in terms of the legitimisation of their work, and greater ability to use needs assessment findings in strategic planning.
- The lack of financial independence makes covering wide geographic areas difficult for CSOs.
- Youth migration has affected the stability of Syrian civil entities' structures since young people form a large proportion of the staff.

The state of international civil society

- Participants from local organisations and INGOs claimed that rigidity in the mindset and procedures of international civil society is an obstacle to moving towards localisation. This is seen in the way needs assessments are conducted, intervention design and monitoring, and administrative requirements that are inappropriate to the Syrian context. Lack of flexibility prevents local civil society from finding solutions to the financial and outreach challenges mentioned earlier.

- Participants from local civil entities indicated that the lack of effective communication between international and local entities increases the difficulty in creating impact due to duplication of interventions in the same areas.

"From our experience, INGOs have limited knowledge of the context and tendency to operate without coordination with other parties. Substantial waste of money and efforts result from applying the same intervention in the same area from different INGOs, especially in relief and development." – Research participant

Potential risks of localisation in Syria

Division

Localisation in Syria at this stage risks increasing divisions between geographical areas under the control of different authorities. All participants interviewed for this research expressed this fear regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds. Unequal distribution of resources between areas could enhance divisions, contributing to inequalities and becoming a source of competition.

Politicisation

Due to the absence of a solution to the conflict and the existence of different authorities supported by international parties, there is a significant risk of localisation being used politically. There is a risk that certain social categories such as youth and women might be excluded and some political parties weakened.

Decrease in acceptance and social cohesion

Diversity is a valued component in the Syrian context. Civil society activists expressed concern that applying localisation with no national plan for collaboration will enhance social divisions, causing people to cluster in their social groups and exacerbating factors that contributed to the conflict, such as lack of social cohesion and separate collective identities.

Economic dominance

Localisation might contribute to the dominance of personal economic powers due to the absence of institutional and national economic contributions. This also risks enhancing social and economic inequalities between regions with different levels of resources, disturbing local power dynamics, and creating a centralised economic structure within a decentralised political framework. These effects would demolish the positive impact that localisation is intended to create.

Limiting the role of civil society

Syrian civil society could be influenced by international and governmental bodies to focus on relief and development in specific areas if a strategic national plan is not part of localisation. This external influence would stand in the way of civil society taking a strategic role in national strategic planning for social change and exclude it from national peace efforts and policy-making. Without national

planning and building national institutions, localisation might be an obstacle to national recovery after the conflict.

> *"In the current circumstances and the conflict, localisation might lead to enhanced division, increase illegal authorities, and create inequalities in providing services. It might cause exclusion and more racism according to individual and group identities over the national identity. Localisation without collaboration will limit the strategic view; in addition, the absence of financial support will increase the burdens of civil society."* – Research participant

Recommendations

It is important to note that each recommendation contributes to the success of the other recommendations. They are expected to elevate and mitigate challenges and risks and create a suitable environment to apply localisation in Syria with minimum harm.

For Syrian civil society

Strengthen alliances and cooperation

Enhance economic partnerships and alliances built on a shared purpose of national recovery between civil society entities across areas and conflict lines to achieve greater impact and be able to advocate for local communities' issues. This will contribute to a change in the role of civil society from a service provider to a contributor to strategic policy-making; enhance civil society's relationship with local communities; and decrease financial dependency on international organisations. This will contribute to the formation of a comprehensive narrative with clear requirements from international civil society.

> *"Working together is a must. We have to create power through unity so our voices can be heard internationally."* – Research participant

Build an ethical code for civil society in Syria

Shared ethics across Syrian civil society will protect it from drifting to fill political or governmental roles, allow it to commit to social change, enhance its role in solving local issues through the lens of national benefits, and ensure equity in resource distribution across different areas. All local actors from different areas (those under government control, NES, NWS, Turkey and Lebanon) who participated in the research agreed with this recommendation.

> *"An ethical code is a must. It will build a ground of practices that are sensitive to causing harm and will increase accountability."* – Research participant

This process is expected to be the result of dialogue spaces bringing together civil society leaders from different areas. It aims to elevate assumptions and highlight shared struggles, despite the

differences between areas, to reduce the influence of the political ideology of CSOs and increase civic interest.

For national-level actors in Syria

Promote citizenship and democracy

These elements were identified by local communities, local actors, and INGOs in areas under government control, NES and NWS as essential preconditions to moving to localisation. They will increase awareness within communities about roles and responsibilities, enhance freedom of expression, clarify and activate the role of the civil society, and activate accountability and transparency procedures.

> *"It is important for people to be aware of their roles as citizens and their ability to offer services and create change."* – Research participant

> *"The civil society must have a minimum level of freedom and independence and must be accountable to act according to reasonable laws to gain legitimacy of representing communities."* – Research participant

Work to promote citizenship and democracy should take place at the grassroots level to renew active citizenship within communities through programmes that enhance knowledge about citizenship and provide a space for the active practice of these concepts. Participants noted, however, that for these programmes to be effective, a transformative movement giving people their rights to practice accountability should be implemented.

Find a political solution to the conflict

A political solution will enhance peacebuilding opportunities at a local level, create an enabling environment for development, and provoke changes in laws and legitimisation criteria of civil entities, which would enable them to take the lead in their work and operate independently. Moving towards a political solution requires agreements between Syrians and international parties with different political interests. This opinion was mostly present in NES, NWS and Europe, with fewer voices from the areas under government control.

> *"Finding internal mechanisms for the political solution is critical at this stage. Otherwise, civil society will shatter, and people will be oriented to work in politics or economics. [Un]til now, there's no room for a Syrian solution to the conflict. The interference of political parties is dominant, and the security council still works with external powers to find a solution."*
> – Research participant

For international civil society

Support ongoing capacity-building and empowerment

Support Syrian civil society's knowledge of economic, political, social, international and public affairs to minimise political manipulation. Work to enhance good governance, staff capacity, and programme design skills to be inclusive and respond to communities' needs. Participants suggested that a transition period is necessary when INGOs invest in empowering local Syrian civil entities. Capacity-building programmes should include civic education for NGOs to enable them to have a more robust position in the international civic community and in their local communities.

Stabilise financial support for local entities

Stable financial support enables local organisations to grow, build the capacity of their staff, and increase international compliance. On the other hand, the compliance requirements imposed by funders should be scaled down to suit initiatives and voluntary teams while still reducing the risk of corruption. This support also includes the commitment to needs-based, capacity-building interventions and the decolonisation of knowledge in the field of civil activism.

"International bodies have to recognise the importance of their support to contribute to building the Syrian civil society. The fatigue of administrative work through the years is not to be compared to the efforts Syrians are putting in for recovery. They are required to support the work of INGOs." – Research participant

"To be able to move to localisation, taking into consideration the economic crisis, INGOs should offer core funding to ensure the stability of the work of local NGOs and break the loop of continuous need for capacity-building." – Research participant

Change the mentality towards Syrian civil society

International civil society must look at Syrian civil society as genuine partners and experts in their context, which will transform their role to one of consultation rather than just implementing international decisions. Clear communication platforms and channels should be established to ensure the inclusion of local entities and direct links between locals and international decision-makers.

"The Global North and Global South division has to come to an end. This requires change of mentality and decolonisation of knowledge. It demands to believe that all people are equal in rights wherever they are." – Research participant

Participants highlighted that a change in the mentality of INGOs is also needed regarding flexibility in their procedures. Current procedures and frameworks do not allow local NGOs to adapt to the needs of different contexts and adjust to the instability of the frozen or post-conflict phases. This requires trusting local NGOs to adjust plans, reallocate budgets, and establish suitable criteria for financial auditing that are appropriate given the challenging circumstances.

Endnotes

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