

# Practical approaches to localisation in peacebuilding Syria

## SUMMARY

The Practical Approaches to Localisation project, funded by the Swedish Postcode Lottery Foundation and based in Lebanon, Syria, Kenya and Rwanda, documents local realities and voices on localisation and incorporates them into the international conversation around the topic.

The research in Syria was conducted by International Alert's partner, Mobaderoon. Data collection methods included world cafés, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Data was collected from 111 participants including community members in 11 areas, and representatives of local authorities, civil society organisations, and international non-governmental organisations (INGO).

## Syrian context

- Localisation is not new to Syria, but efforts have mainly focused on the humanitarian and development sectors, rather than peacebuilding.
- Syrian civil society has limited influence on international organisations in terms of their funding priorities, intervention planning and delivery, with peacebuilding as the sphere of least influence. This relates to the complexity of the conflict, the political interests of some local actors, and international agendas and interests.
- International NGOs valued highly the efforts of local peacebuilding entities in working on conflict, peace and social cohesion at a grassroots level, but local voices remain underrepresented in decision-making and peacebuilding platforms.
- Key characteristics of successful examples of localisation include collaboration and inclusion, familiarity with contexts and independence in decision-making.

## Findings

- Local community members believed that localisation was about the fulfilment of communities' needs. International NGOs were more focused on the decentralisation process, context-specific interventions and participation in international platforms.
- Transparency, goodwill, and working towards a higher good are essential traits of local actors to gain communities' trust.

- International NGOs valued highly the efforts of local peacebuilding entities in working on conflict, peace and social cohesion at a grassroots level, but local voices remain underrepresented in decision-making and peacebuilding platforms.
- Characteristics of successful localisation include collaboration and inclusion, familiarity with contexts and independence in decision-making.
- There are risks to localisation in Syria, such as increased divisions between geographical areas under the control of different authorities and politicisation.
- Barriers to localisation in Syria include economic deterioration, ongoing conflict, restrictions on movement and lack of independence in different areas, and imbalanced power dynamics with international actors.

## **Localisation in Syria**

- Localisation was generally perceived as a process, rather than an outcome.
- Local community members believed that localisation was about the fulfilment of communities' needs. International NGOs were more focused on the decentralisation process, context-specific interventions and Syria civil society participating in international platforms.
- Perceptions of local actors varied between areas. Actors deemed capable of impact were not necessarily trusted or did not have access at a community level.
- Ethical practices such as transparency, goodwill, and working towards a higher good were identified as essential traits of local actors.

## **Strengths of local civil society actors in Syria**

- Access to different geographical areas and groups in Syrian society.
- Ability to relate to the struggles of Syrians in their respective communities, thus better able to deal with sensitive issues.
- Strong relationships with and trusted by local communities developed through delivering services across Syria.
- Knowledge and experience in democracy, participation, dialogue and advocacy.
- Important role in the peace process facilitating negotiations, resisting political agendas that are contrary to the interests of local communities, and advocating for justice for human rights violations.

## **Barriers to localisation in Syria**

- Economic deterioration is affecting the whole country and absence of a local funding source to support civil society.
- The ongoing conflict is exacerbating social, economic, political and geographical divisions
- There is limited independence, freedom and communication between areas due to the dominance of different authorities.
- Restrictions on the movement of Syrians limit the access of activists to international platforms
- Migration and asylum-seeking impacts the connection between Syrians in the diaspora and those located inside Syria leading to disagreements in defining priorities, and a lack of understanding of the 'other's' perspectives.
- Imbalanced power dynamics due to the concentration of resources, knowledge, and information in the Global North.
- International governments' political interests influencing funding to international NGOs for peace and development work in Syria.

- Lack of communication between international and local entities.
- Lack of shared ethical code and robust systems for Syrian civil society.

## **Potential risks of localisation in Syria**

- Localisation in Syria risks increasing divisions between geographical areas under the control of different authorities.
- Due to unresolved conflict and different authorities supported by international parties, there is a significant risk of localisation being used politically.
- Applying localisation with no national plan for collaboration could enhance social divisions.
- Localisation might contribute to the dominance of personal economic powers due to the absence of institutional and national economic contributions.

## **Recommendations**

### **For Syrian civil society**

- Enhance economic partnerships and alliances built on a shared purpose of national recovery between civil society entities across areas and conflict lines.
- Build an ethical code for civil society in Syria.

### **For national-level players in Syria**

- Promote citizenship and democracy at the grassroots level to renew active citizenship.
- Find a political solution to the conflict to enhance peacebuilding opportunities.

### **For international civil society**

- Support ongoing capacity-building and empowerment of Syria's civil society.
- Stabilise financial support to allow local organisations to grow, build capacity and increase international compliance.
- Change international attitudes towards Syrian civil society to see organisations as genuine partners and experts in their context.

Read the full learning paper **here**.

Find out more about the project: <https://bit.ly/localisation-IA>