A Roadmap for the EU Engagement with Syrian Civil Society

Final Report - February 2022

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List of abbreviations

CBO	Community Based Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSS	Virtual Civil Society Space
CSSR	Civil Society Support Room
DG-Near	Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations
ECSM	Ethical Charter for Syrian Media
EU	European Union
EUD	European Union Delegation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GHA	Government held area
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GmbH)
GONGO	Government Owned Non-Governmental Organisation
GoS	Government of Syria
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Outlook Document
HR	Human Rights
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
HTS	Hay'at Tahir al-Sham
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
LC	Logos Civicus, the consultant developing this report
LI	Local Initiative
KII	Key Informant Interview
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MR	Minority Rights
NE	North-East of Syria
NFI	Non-food items
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NW	North-West of Syria
OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Development Assistance Committee
OHA	Opposition held area
OSE	Office of the Special Envoy for Syria
RM	Road Map for the Engagement of Civil Society
SAHA	Self-administration held area
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SCS	Syrian Civil Society
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organisation
UK	United Kingdom
WAB	Women's Advisory Board to the Special Envoy of Syria
WR	Women's Rights

Executive summary

This report represents an outline of a Roadmap for the EU engagement with civil society in Syria. It presents an extended analysis of an extensive body of secondary literature and analyses the findings of 27 key informant interviews (KIIs), 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) with local experts from the Syrian civil society (SCS) reflecting the diversity of Syrian CSOs in all fields and work locations, and 6 KIIs with international experts from the EU, EU member states, non-EU states, and UN agencies. The aim of the report is to present a holistic strategy of the EU's future engagement with Syrian civic actors and CSOs based on a deep understanding of the ecosystem of the Syrian civil society, its interrelationships as well as its relationships and communication channels with donors, de- facto powers, and the community at large. Normative definitions of civil society are hardly applicable under the current conflict situation. Different modalities of civic agency were considered to ensure the broadest possible understanding of the eco-system where civic actors operate and function. The report starts with a brief historical introduction looking at the early formations of the civic space in Syria, then considers the new status of the SCS and its typologies. It then looks at the capacity of Syrian civil society actors. It looks closely at the existing modalities of EU engagement in the sector and proposes an outline for shifting the approach in the future. In the end it presents a set of priorities and principles to guide the relationship of the EU with the SCS actors in the future.

The main findings of the report could be summarised as follows:

<u>The ecosystem</u>

- Syria's civil society has a long historic trajectory of evolution, however, the most defining milestone in shaping CSOs today dates to 2011. New social forces and expression of civic engagement were born and shaped by the episodes of violences and unrest that ensued since then. Moving past this episode of violence, fragmentation, mistrust and past agonies will be required to build a strong unified civil society.
- Civil society work creates legitimacy for the CSOs. The work of CSOs was vital to stabilisation and creating trust with communities. Therefore, it is highly contested as it brings credibility and legitimacy to de-facto actors who want to channel this legitimacy for themselves.
- The legal framework in all parts of Syria is very restrictive, but civic actors have learned to manoeuvre around restrictions by focusing on building their relevance to communities. CSOs adopted different tactics of shifting their relationship with authorities and de-facto powers from formal laws and regulations to the realm of practical approaches to sustaining civilian populations. This did not prevent occasional infringements on the civic space but has created a general level of moral acceptance for the role civic actors play. In the immediate future, expanding the civic space is related to protecting this moral role played by civic actors than to focus solely on the legal frameworks governing their work.
- Small CSOs, in all geographies are disadvantaged when it comes to registration. If they do not formalise and register their CSOs they will not access funding, and if they do, they will come under closer scrutiny by the de-facto authorities and powers. Putting them under the tutelage of larger NGOs may have presented some level of protection but it created a layer of intermediaries hampering their prospects for growth.
- With the exception of a few larger NGOs, the relationship of most CSOs inside Syria with donors is happening through UN, INGOs and larger Syrian CSO intermediaries. As a result, most CSOs have a poor understanding of how different donors work and comprehending their motives and priorities. Generally, CSOs look at donors as a singular mysterious entity. Intermediaries often justify changes in funding processes by pointing to changing "donor regulations and priorities". While the EU is making important entry points to talk to CSOs directly, the bulk of the CSOs are in need of better understanding of EU priorities, operating procedures and institutional structures.
- EU and other donors' "red lines" and vetting procedures in Syria are perceived as another form of restriction that civic actors have to manoeuvre around. In their ecosystem, the expansion or shrinking of civic space is about their ability to work with their communities. Restrictions on access to different communities are restrictions no matter who issues them.
- One of the most complicated factors affecting the work of CSOs is the relationship with de-facto powers. Although most CSOs have a negative perspective toward these authorities, coordinating with them is inevitable. Their space for intervention is clearly defined by the territory open to them as the result of the expansion and shrinkage of the areas under the control of the de-facto powers.
- CSOs should be strengthened to manage their complex eco-systems and donors need to be more flexible to allow the civic space to do so. CSOs need more flexibility regarding which geographic areas

they can work in to reach out to communities in need. They also need more expedient vetting processes with clear parameters on how to manage their partnerships on the ground to allow them to deal with local partners.

Relations with the community

- There are broad discrepancies about what constitutes community and the role of civil society actors within societies. The current general mode of intervening and supporting programming to work with communities is still mainly top-down and supply sided focusing on NGOs as a special category of civil society. This does not empower communities, support their own agency nor encourage their connectivity. Instead, it may have contributed to fragmentation and dependency. The road map should aim to be inclusive and to help the elaboration of broad definition of civic actors and to work with them from the bottom-up.
- However, bottom-up approaches also entail risks of accepting the de-facto division of the country. Most civil society actors are concerned that a lack of perspective on the whole of Syria may lead to gradual normalization of the status quo and would effectively lead to the division of the country.
- The EU is leading in scoping for alternative modalities of aid that would empower communities and not just serve their basic needs. Modalities, however, are still embryonic and require a considerable redefinition of the partnership between the EU and civil society actors to create sustainable, development-oriented interventions that are owned by the communities and their local institutions.
- CSOs are struggling to shift the timeframe of their operations from short-term funding mostly related to emergency relief to long-term strategies that require longer commitments of funds. Both community essential needs as well as topics such as transitional justice, accountability, and democratisation would benefit from having a strong horizon for their work though sustained funding, accumulation of knowledge and retention of human resources.

Networking and building up a collective orientation for the civil society

- Competition is fierce among CSOs. Lacking a unifying drive, they tend to function along dividing lines that are not necessarily related to the geographic demarcations of the ongoing conflict. The unhealthy competition between outside and inside, between registered and unregistered, as well as between small CSOs and intermediaries should be tackled by donor's policies; donors should not put registration (or un-registration) as a criterion for partnership. While the EU has been very flexible in this regard, its vetting processes are still limiting. Many of the smaller CSOs still feel alienated from the end donor. Supporting partnerships between CSOs outside and inside, using sensitive models of linking large and small CSO to work together (and not just to divide grant money among them) is essential to ease this tension and create complementarities. Such approaches can benefit from the knowledge of large CSOs and their access to donors on the one hand, and from local CSOs to community, hence impact, on the other.
- The smaller CSOs desire more partnership and participation at all project stages, from needs assessment to implementation, whereas big ones fear that a shift towards smaller organisations inside the country may miss on their accumulated knowledge and undermine their legacies and impact.
- The relationship between civil society in the three geographies of control is complex. There is a negative perception in every geography of the other two. While CSOs are coming to understand that they have strong opportunities for complementarity, they have not found ways to instrumentalise it. Calls to build networks across the divided geographies are desired by the majority of CSOs. Donors may have contributed to such trends by encouraging CSOs to network. Informal networks linking actors across the geographies are starting to emerge but there are no formal commitments to challenge the dividing lines.
- While donors, such as the EU, are attempting to incentivise CSOs to network across the dividing lines, some member states still have high restrictions and/or scepticism to engage CSOs in some geographic areas. CSOs often fail to see the difference between the policies of the EU and the EU member states.
- It is important to support cross geography networks to improve knowledge transfer, resource sharing, advocacy prospects, and hence ensure solidarity among Syrian civil society actors. Currently, various informal networks are attempting to bridge the divide, they focus mainly on humanitarian issues, where actors in one geography reach out to counterparts in other geographies to coordinate the of sharing resources, exchange of expertise and even to move material aid across the lines. Many of these networks emerged as actors started meeting each other informally in different international platforms such as the CSSR and the Brussels conference.
- There is a growing interest on the part of some donors to expand incentives for collaboration and networking to increase knowledge exchange and build capacities beyond the humanitarian field. However, for the most part non-humanitarian actors have had a hard time to agree on advocacy approaches and messages. One very rare cross-geography network not focused on humanitarian issues is the Syrian

Charter for Ethical Media ECSM, which has members from all geographies. The lesson learned from their experience is that donors should provide more incentives for operational collaborations and exchange of know-how, and these would gradually create possibilities to develop a shared advocacy position.

- Shifting from encouraging the evolution of small networks to creating an awareness of the role of the civil society sector as a whole remains a distant objective. The current approach of the EU of launching new calls for proposals and expecting CSOs to shift direction is not sufficient. More dialogue on the benefits and risks involved in such shifts is needed between the CSOs and the EU to break the barriers of mistrust and advance common positions. Risks differ greatly from one area to the next and from one sector to the next. As it stands, there is lack of clarity and appreciation on the risks each side is undertaking and their ability to manage risks.
- The diversity of distribution of CSOs is both a challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge as it lacks fairness in distributing resources among civil society actors across regions. At the same time, it is an opportunity, as it may encourage complementarity between actors if designed to do so. The EU can address these obstacles directly through adjusting its policies and indirectly through capacity building of civil society. However, classical capacity building modules are not very effective Donors should incentivise opportunities to work together, share knowledge and enhance co-creation.

Capacities

- Some CSOs have managed to build strong capacities for themselves and have accumulated experiences. Some areas like the Northwest are perceived to have acquired more knowledge resources than others. But CSOs in the NW see that the lack of a sustained approach to building skills in their area is putting all their learning and skills at risk. CSOs should be encouraged to learn from each other rather than engage in grievances about donors' favouritism.
- Skills are often accumulated with individuals within the CSOs. Institutional capacities are constantly under threat as there is a high turnover of individuals. A brain-drain from small CSOs to the large ones, from inside the country to the outside and from the Syrian CSOs to INGOs and the UN prohibit the accumulation of capacities. Retaining human resources may be more critical than any other resource at the disposal of CSOs.
- Donors grant packages to CSOs often exclude important human resource development instruments such as insurance, benefits, maternity leaves, end of service benefits, etc. Small CSOs are disadvantaged to retain skills among their staff.
- The EU and other donors (the UK and Germany as main examples) are starting to launch specific lines of funding to support institutional development among CSOs, but this is only focused on a selected partner organisations and is not reaching to the sector at large. The donors' valuation (formally stated or implied) of skills related to project management and due diligence are biasing aid towards the large NGOs. Small CSOs on the ground have important skills working with communities that should also be recognised when valuing skills needed for projects. The EU could enhance capacity development by incentivising links between CSOs beyond the sharing of funds. Encouraging the development of complementarity, co-creation and co-implementation will enhance the transfer of skills.

Knowledge and communication

- Focusing on short-term project cycles left little room for learning, and institutional growth as CSOs are focused on reporting and have no resources to develop their own institutional learning. Knowledge is dissipating with high personnel turnover. Donors need to change their modalities of aid to focus on the global impacts of their aid if that aid is to contribute to the rise of civil society and not just to deliver basic services. While this is a stated objective of the EU, the operating and M&E procedures are neither well- funded nor robust enough to support such an objective.
- The EU and other donors are opening up new channels to communicate with Syrian actors collectively and not just on specific projects. But there is still no clear articulation of objectives, sustainability of focus, and aggregation of impacts. Creating a civic space needs "reverse engineering" to ensure that funds are contributing to more than their immediate intended uses and creating multipliers to support civil society over the long run to forge a democratic civic space out of the current modest experiments in "civicness"[1].

1 - The term "civicness" was coined by the LSE's Conflict Research Program to describe the actions of civic actors to provide a countermeasure to the impact of conflicts and civil wars. Intractable conflicts will generate political marketplaces and war economy conditions that will tend to perpetuate them. Civic actors can gradually introduce small civic initiatives to improve livelihoods, create pressure to uphold human rights, tamper conflict drivers and gradually shift the market balance of political power into a more pluralistic dynamic. The approach to support "civicness" provides both a normative aspirational drive to end conflicts and advance more democratic outcomes as well as a

- Both donors and civil society actors are still lacking strategic communication and advocacy platforms. However, the EU's Brussels conference and virtual civil space are promising communication platforms that should be further developed to bring them to a more strategic level to help intercommunication and connect civil society to the donor community and policymakers. Other channels of engagement like the WAB and the CSSR are important entry-points in that regards. Many CSO's however still feel they are excluded from these spaces and their governance.
- The Virtual Civil Society Space in particular could play an important role to link these spaces and enhance the Syrian ownership over them. To, improve its structure to expand participation and enhance ownership Syrian civil society needs to have a say in the structure, agenda, knowledge products, and the way to expand participation. Currently, there is a sense of fatigue among participants and a feeling that the platform is not delivering anything beyond dialogue. Encouraging actors to create their own breakout rooms, research projects, and even joint projects could provide an incentive to re-invigorate the space. One of the options is to create a cross-geography advisory board that consists of networks' members to advise the platform. It is essential that this remains at the advisory level for some time to test such a model.
- The media has not always had a positive role in explaining and promoting civil society. Often the focus is on the shortfalls rather than the progress and the collective learning. NW areas that have had better access to funding and have witnessed greater achievements of civic actors are subject to more critical media reviews.

Building a collective impact

- Monitoring and evaluation systems are mostly done on a project-by-project basis, and few resources are allocated to conducting broader assessments and cumulative impacts. The collective impact of the SCS and its ability to affect change in the future is not sustained by solid evidence and is currently defined by heuristics about the good intentions of civil society.
- The existing M&E processes are symptomatic of supply-side thinking and cannot capture key issues like gaps, opportunity costs, relevance, efficiency, efficacy, and sustainability beyond the individual projects. This has led to short-sighted project cycles and a non-systematic understanding of longer-term impacts and externalities.
- Focus on doing good in Syria has limited the understanding of the harms that could be created as a result of changing the shape of existing solidarity networks and trust-based social capital channels within society. A global understanding of doing-no-harm needs to extend beyond one-on-one project evaluations to assessments on the level of the sector at large.
- Individual CSOs should not be posited to prove collective impact or to avoid negative trends. Instead, the donors should incentivize them and to afford them resources to work together to develop mechanisms for collective assessment. Civil society observatory and monitoring facilities are needed not only to monitor impact but to help CSOs to benchmark their progress and develop their skills, and hence to enhance their accreditation.
- CSOs feel excluded from the process of assessing the collective impact of their work and, as a result, feel they are excluded from contributing to the understanding of donor objectives. There is a strong communication gap between donors and CSOs regarding the purpose of aid in Syria. This is leaving CSOs feeling that they are being betrayed by donors every time donor priorities change.
- Women empowerment programmes have often enabled the emergence of strong leadership and knowledge, however, that knowledge has often been compartmentalised outside other civil society programming. This has created sense of exclusion and missed on important opportunities for capitalizing on women and their skills and knowledge in other sectors. Women empowerment programming needs to be mainstreamed into all fields of civic engagement to maximise their impact and reduce possibilities of social tensions.
- Likewise, the youth and the disabled programming should be expanded and mainstreamed to enhance their agency and integrate them into all aspects of civil society work in the future.

pragmatic approach to alleviate the impacts of the conflict. See for instance: Kaldor, Mary and Radice, Henry (2022) *Introduction: Civicness in Conflict. Journal of Civil Society, 18 (2) PP. 125-141.*

Four priority areas:

Based on the above analysis four priority areas were defined. Each of the priority areas is outlined in detail in this report. They follow the four principles for articulating the different roles and mandates of civil society at large as defined by the most commonly accepted international literature and adopted by the EU. Each one of these priorities has its own logic, long-term strategies, inputs, outputs and outcomes that can be monitored and verified. At the end of the report, these priorities are outlined in detail in matrix format. However, as the internationally recognised parameters for defining the mandates of civil society are hardly applicable in a conflict situation such as in Syria, the recommendation is to adopt a realistic approach gradually building up on the limitations of the existing situation to reach more normative definitions of civil society roles in the future. Gender issues were mainstreamed into the four priority areas as one of the main findings of the analysis was that focusing on women's empowerment as a separate sub-sector was missing important opportunities to mainstream gender issues into all the civil society priorities and mandates. The definition of four priorities should lead to complementarity among these priorities and not to compartmentalizing funding in the future into four categories. The four priority areas are therefore to be seen as a framework for supporting all programming in the future.

A synopsis of the four priority areas is given below:

- Priority 1: The Representation of Civil Society: Supporting the Development of an Effective and Participatory Civic Space Capable of Leveraging Bottom-Up Community Initiatives: Most normative standards for measuring civic space are inapplicable in the case of a war-torn country. The mere issuing of laws and regulations is not likely to help CSOs manage the complex and hostile environment surrounding them; neither is it likely to provide them with security and safety to foster their presence and their ability to represent Syrians at large. The strategy should focus on mapping the presence of effective civic agency in all its expressions and forms and to create incentives to protect and expand its "civicness". Empowerment strategies must be created from the bottom-up, enhancing the linkages of CSOs to the communities they serve and ensuring that CSOs are creating shared spaces and networks to strengthen their collective presence and legitimacy. Efforts should be made to ensure a fair and equitable access to resources, but rather than dividing the grant money among participants, the approach should be to develop synergies and complementarity. Fair access for women should be expanded and mainstreamed into all projects and sectors and not be limited to women empowerment projects important as they are. Recipients of aid should be looked at as assets and agents of change and not mere beneficiaries; this includes the youth and the disabled. Ensuring that all members of society are incorporated into collective community-based objectives will help create synergies and reduce social tensions. Global indicators and data should be harvested and aggregated to understand the collective progress towards a more civic space and in the reverse direction ensure that funding is not creating unsurmountable harm such as dependency on donor aid and de-facto division of the country.

- Priority 2: Deliberative Democracy: Supporting the Evolution of Common Visions for the Syrian Civil Society and Its Role in the Future of Syria: During the conflict most governance indicators regressed in Syria well below the already low levels they exhibited before the conflict. Rule of law and channels to expand democratic rights including those of women have virtually dissipated. Demands and advocacy for reform is falling on deaf ears as the conflict drivers are well beyond the reach of civic actors, although some civic actors are inadvertently contributing to the divisive discourses dividing the Syrian society today. Supporting civil society to push for democratisation runs against major challenges including the fact that conflict is still ongoing and that many of the grievances related to violence, the fate of the detainees, kidnapped and missing persons are still highly contentious issues. Working towards building peace and ending violence is often juxtaposed against the priority of ensuring that the final outcomes of any peace deal should lead to a more democratic outcome; sequencing the process is still highly contentious as most civic actors are vehemently concerned that accepting the status quo would lead to the de-facto division of the country. Human rights including women's basic rights are under constant threat. Upholding them has not been a priority of the belligerents in the conflict. To promote a peace and justice agenda would require that civil society in Syria collaborates across the political divides to create common visions, practical solutions, local peace infrastructure. Without this basic infrastructure no peace at the track 1 is likely to provide for better governance and true reconciliation. The role of women leaders in this regard is indispensable. They should be a key element in the integration and linkages between the track 2 and track 3 diplomacy and that of the track 1. They have already devised important entry points to the political process; supporting them further would be important to securing that outcomes of the political process are gender mainstreamed, but at the same time, the platforms they have already created are important peace assets that should be further expanded to help transform

the conflict. The role of the youth is also essential in this regard. Ensuring a more just and democratic outcome to the conflict will take years of social and political engagement on their part. They should be in the forefront of defining their own future.

- Priority 3: Public Wellbeing: Supporting Civic Actors to Work with Their Communities to Develop Local Capacities for Future Recovery and Sustainable Development: Despite tremendous efforts by donors to provide humanitarian aid to Syrians in need, the overwhelming majority of the population has slipped into poverty and many of the remaining sources of resilience are disappearing. Young people are migrating, further depriving the country of its human resources and sustainable opportunities for recovery in the future. Women and girls are bearing the brunt of the impact of the conflict. The country is gradually losing decades worth of investments in its human development, economic growth and infrastructure. A generation of young people, especially girls are deprived of basic education, as many can no longer afford to send their children to school. Humanitarian aid cannot cover the needs, and the gap between what resources are available and what communities need to survive is tremendous. A transition towards more sustainable approaches based on empowering CSOs to work with their communities to leverage local resources and recreate basic support for community survival and not just for delivering individual aid packages is essential to help communities regain their footing. The EU funding should shift its focus from short term humanitarian responses to more sustainable developmental approaches. But this should be done carefully not to disrupt the protection of the most vulnerable people affected by the conflict. Standard operating procedures for assessing projects must include bottom-up planning approaches, leveraging local community resources, a focus on creating multipliers (jobs and financial) to grow and sustain their impacts, and creating sustainable supply and value chains. Monitoring and evaluation of projects must be agreed with CSOs to adopt new sets of criteria and indicators as part of longer life cycles for project management. Women and youth should be at the core of this transformation, to move from being recipient of aid to being part of the value creation for their communities. Sectoral allocation of funds needs to be counterbalanced by area-based approaches and CSOs should be part of the planning and implementation of such a transition. Some of the EU's procedures need to be re-examined such as the vetting of recipients of aid, working around banking over-compliance with the sanctions, easing the ability of local CSOs to work closer with local governance bodies.

- Priority 4: Self Constitution: Support the Innate Capacity of CSOs in a Sustainable Manner to Develop Equitable Partnerships and Knowledge Exchanges to Heighten the Voice and Effectiveness of CSOs: CSOs in Syria have a long and tumultuous history. However, the majority were born after 2011 because of the newly developed challenges and opportunities. Many lacked the experience and resources, and their initial enthusiasm was not sufficient to sustain their operations. High turnover in the sector remains a big challenge as CSOs have unreliable access to resources; a high turnover has afflicted their rank-and-file volunteers and staff. The difference in salary scales and other benefits pushed qualified staff away from the field and created unsustainable brain drains. A high dependency on donor funds was created and this forces CSOs to align their internal procedures to donors vetting processes and selection criteria. It also created relationships of asymmetrical power between larger CSOs based outside the country and those operating inside. Knowledge was often valued if it is relevant to donors' due diligence requirements; local knowledge was undervalued. Gained knowledge from the last eleven years of operation was not aggregated nor mainstreamed, especially knowledge created to empower women, and to enhance their roles within their communities and the civil society in general. The EU expanded dialogue to reverse the situation and to help CSOs to develop their capacities more sustainably. But it cannot do that on the level of individual CSOs. It needs to incentivise CSOs to work together to promote co-creation and co-learning processes and to expand existing platforms such as the Brussels Conference and the Virtual Civil Society Platform to encourage synergies and collaboration on knowledge creation among CSOs. Transforming the vetting process is key to transforming the behaviour of CSOs.2 Encouraging CSOs to carry out voluntary self-assessments to measure impacts and enhance their accreditation before donors, even when they are not formally registered, is essential to enabling them to access more sustainable and advanced funding streams. This could be an entry point to support CSOs develop their own normative standards based on their local conditions. Gender mainstreaming knowledge in the sector cannot happen by small funding for women led and women focused CSOs away from the rest of the sector. Focus should also be on the youth to ensure the sustainability of human resources. Close attention should be given to empower dialogue among CSOs on these issues to bridge their differences.

2 - The parameters of the vetting process will directly and indirectly influence what types of CSOs will likely receive EU funds. CSOs working in fields or geographical areas with high reputational risk to the EU are inevitably disadvantaged. At the same time applying the same stringent vetting processes to everyone is complicating the ability of smaller CSOs to navigate the complex vetting processes.

Postscript after the February 6th 2023 earthquake

The main research that led to this document was conducted in the months from April to October 2022. Data analysis was conducted and the Roadmap's validation process took place before the disastrous turn of events on February the 6th, 2023. It would be presumptuous to assume that conditions for Syrian civil society would remain the same afterwards. However, the main lessons learned from the past should not be forgotten. At the time of sending this document for publication, the magnitude of the damage left behind by the earthquake are still hard to assess. The dynamics that will unfold are also hard to predict. While the immediate response is to ensure that the flow of humanitarian aid to all parts of Syria is expedited in the most direct and efficient manner to save lives and shelter the victims of the earthquake safely, the long-term prospects of communities returning to normalcy would require different mechanisms than the initial humanitarian responses. Civil society is likely to play an important role in the response to the disaster and to support community healing. However, there are already strong signs that de-facto powers are going to strive to control the role played by civic actors as this will have direct implications on their legitimacy and power. This will render the dialogue between donors like the EU and the Syrian civil society ever more necessary. Resources for Syria are likely to compete with aid to other affected countries and to other hotspots in the world like Ukraine. Ensuring that aid is dispensed in an efficient manner to support community resilience and bottom-up healing processes will be critical to avoid the inefficient supply-side approaches adopted in the past. Many of the recommendations proposed in this report will require years to materialize to transform the modalities of engagement with civil society. Some of the proposed priorities may be more readily applicable than others, but this should not deter from setting the relationship between the EU and the Syrian civil society on more transparent and efficient grounds as soon as the initial humanitarian priorities subside a few weeks after the earthquake.

1- Introduction and methodology

Syrian civil society (SCS) has a long and rich history. For a few decades, its energy and role were severely curbed by the State. However, the widespread protests that broke out in March 2011 gave SCS new momentum; it grew in numbers and diversity, reaching a high level of maturity despite its challenging operational conditions. Different factors contributed to this achievement, including extensive training, commitment from the SCS, and great support from donors and partner NGOs. Naturally, one of the biggest partners to the SCS is the EU.

The EU has been a critical partner for the SCS as it has supported many sorts of NGOs, CBOs, initiatives, and CSOs in all regions of the divided Syrian geography regardless of the de-facto powers controlling the territory. The EU was one of the first donors to support SCS organisations, developing innovative approaches and funding instruments to reach out to SCS directly without international intermediaries leading to further enhancement in their general capacity. The EU was also at the forefront of opening constant channels of dialogue to multiple forms of civic actors taking into consideration the diversity of legal, political, social and economic conditions in the different parts of Syria and in the Diaspora.

Although the EU and the Syrian SCOs have strengthened their partnership over the timespan of the conflict, the EU still wants to further improve its engagement with the SCS at large and to reach out to the broadest possible range of actors across the Syrian territory and the concerned Diaspora still engaged with Syria. For this purpose, the EU is proposing the use of a well-known tool known as the "Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society (RM)." The RM process has proven to be instrumental in other regions as it provided guidance to EU Delegations (EUDs), fostered collaboration between EUDs, member states, and international players, and helped several delegations to promote greater mainstreaming of support to Civil Society in all relevant aspects of policy dialogue and grassroots operations. In the reverse direction the RM process is used to make sure that the priorities of civil society partners are recognised, and that a dialogue between the EU and its civil society partners is taking place in a transparent and sustainable manner. The RM process was delayed in Syria due to the ongoing conflict and this report is a first edition of this process which will be further refined in the years to come.

To develop this RM, the EUD for Syria commissioned a consultant to carry out the process of consultations with the broadest possible spectrum of SCS. The consultant carried out an extensive literature review, and conducted 27 key informant interviews (KIIs), 12 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with local experts from the SCS, and 6 KII with international experts from the EU, EU member states, non-EU states, and UN agencies. In total, discussions were held with 110 people (52 Women and 58 men) in 45 conversations. 1200 questions were asked. On average, each participant was asked 11 questions. Participants from SCS from all regions were contacted, with a balanced distribution between government-held areas (GHAs), Opposition-held areas (OHAs), Self-administration held areas (SAHAs in the NE), neighbouring countries, and the Diaspora. FGDs were administered by the facilitators of the EU sponsored virtual civil society platform, whereas KIIs were conducted by a team of researchers working with the commissioned consultants.

While the questions for the KIIs and the FGDs were meant to be complimentary, respondents chose to put different emphasis on different aspects during the discussions. The KIIs focused more on individual experiences, such as security concerns, unhealthy competition within and across geographies, and internal challenges. In contrast, FGDs focused more on issues representing common challenges amongst themselves and their relationships with donors. While the objective of the meeting was clearly identified as a discussion towards setting a roadmap for the EU's engagement with SCS, the structure of the questions did not single out the EU as donor. The facilitators were requested not to lead participants towards a specific assessment of the EU, but to allow them to identify their own experiences and perceptions. Data from interviews were coded into the MAXQDA software to improve the analysis quality. Hundreds of codes were developed to fine tune correlations and identify specific trends and concerns. The research team summarised these trends in this final report and supported their findings by using sample quotations and statements made by respondents. The selected quotations were specifically chosen to represent strong trends and not just individual opinions.

The analysis of results enabled a comprehensive understanding of the eco-system surrounding the work of CSOs in all geographies and sectors. The report delineates differences in the conditions faced by civil society actors. However, the priorities that were included in the end reflect the most common considerations that were raised by civic actors in all geographies. Naturally, different individual CSOs have different grievances

and priorities, and the implementation of the recommendations of this report will have to consider the specificities of their conditions. But this report is meant an overall flexible framework to guide the EU's interventions and is not meant as an operational manual. The four priority areas identified in the process are meant to be complimentary and are not to further compartmentalize aid packages. Expanding the dialogue between the EU and civil society will in time lead to more operational models. But a strong log framework for moving along these four priorities is presented in the annexes to narrow down the discussions. The findings presented in this report were discussed in four validations workshops with another batch of civil society participants coming from all parts of Syria. Many clarifications were required as the gap in understanding key concepts still require further definition to gain local currency. But in this final format, the report can be looked at as the stepping stone for a sustained partnership between the EU and Syrian civil society actors.

The analysis output was structured along the same general outline of RMs as defined by the EU[3], which guided the research questions and questionnaires. The research questions were:

- What is the status of the SCS actors? How and why did it develop this way?
- What internal and external factors affect the eco-system in which CSOs are operating today?
- What are the roles played by SCOs, and what roles will they play in the future?
- What are the capacities of the Syrian CSOs?
- What is the current EU engagement with Syrian civic actors, specifically CSOs? How can it improve in the future?

Given the lack of a normative definition of civil society organisations in Syria, it is hard to use classical definitions of civil society. Normative definitions do not apply as they many of them imply a relationship between State and society with specific roles and responsibilities, a relationship that at the time is very problematic and is not unified across the terrain. Defining what is meant by civil society is critical in the Syrian context, as it plays different roles in different regions and has different attitudes and behaviours toward the State and/or de-facto powers. Many civic actors are not legally registered and /or are not easily recognised entities with clear legal and moral boundaries separating them from other social and institutional bodies. This theoretical and practical problem will be addressed in detail further in this report.

However, from the outset, it is worth setting some basic definitions. The report uses the term Syrian Civil Society (SCS) as a broad description of the middle space between the State, private individuals, and the private sector. It is a term that does not imply a specific type of agency but reflects social energies and dynamics operating in a complex ecosystem. The report will use the term Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) as the formal and informal entities with substantive characteristics of incorporation (declared purpose and self-definition, institutional structure, internal rules, and procedures). CSOs can be registered and have legal status as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). But this definition applies only when a "government" regulates their work. In Syria, this is not always the case. Therefore, the report will use the term very carefully and only when it applies. Instead, the term CSOs will be used across the report for both registered and unregistered actors. As a subcategory of CSOs, a distinction is made for local entities that are born out of local communities' self-organisations as Community-Based Organisations (CBO's). The term will be specifically used when discussing the local level of civic work focusing on local priorities and themes, knowing all too well that the boundaries between the local and the universal concerns of CSOs in Syria as elsewhere are blurry. Finally, the report will refer to civic actors as a broad category of civil society actors including formal and non-formal CSOs, short term and more sustainable initiatives, as well as actors who may operate as individuals with strong agency to promote civic and communal values. The term civic actors will be used only to describe the broadest possible definition of actors within the civil society space.

Another key theoretical challenge in addition to defining what is "Civil Society" involves clarity on what is meant by "Syrian" civil society? The emphasis being on "Syrian". Many "Syrian" CSOs are not registered in Syria, are registered with non-formal State de-facto authorities inside the country, are not registered at all, or have removed from their mission statements any reference to Syria to avoid banking complications given the fact of the banks' over-compliance on Syrian sanctions. Moreover, several organisations started their operations focusing on Syria and are now operating in other countries. Many of the Syrian organisations

3 - https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/public-governance-civilsociety/
last access 01.08.2022

include boards that are majority Syrians, but in some cases that may not be the case. This makes it hard to track and map the "Syrianess" of CSOs with any level of accuracy. For the analysis the report authors opted to keep the definitions as broad as possible to understand the full spectrum of actors and factors that impacted the civil society eco-system after the eruption of popular protests in 2011. For defining the engagement of the EU with Syrian civil society, the report will propose some key ideas related to the accreditation of civic actors and the development of Syrian based normative definitions of CSOs.

To ensure that the research covers the full spectrum of civic actors, the research team looked at sectoral and geographical perspectives. By sectoral, effort was made to understand the views of CSOs in different sectors. These sectors range from development, humanitarian, advocacy for human rights, democratisation, and/or multiple sectors. i.e., working in two or more of the sectors mentioned above. By geographical perspectives, the team looked at matters from the point of view of different geographies of control. Civil society challenges, roles, modalities of participation in the public space, typologies, interaction with donors, capacities, etc., vary drastically from region to region. They also vary between CSOs working outside Syria and actors operating on the inside. Hence, the team tried to analyse these perspectives to find commonalities and differences to understand the optimal intervention mechanisms for the EU in every region to reduce fragmentation and uphold the do-no-harm principle.

After a critical review of the history of Syrian civil society, the rest of the report is structured as follows: First, it starts with the status of SCS, defining the different typologies of actors shaping the SCS. Second, it discusses the SCS ecosystem, trying to understand the interrelationships among CSOs in and across geography and their relationship with de-facto powers and communities. Third, it delves into capacities found in the SCS, trying to identify current and potential resources, as well as monitoring and evaluating (M&E) instruments. Then, the report explores current support from the EU to the SCS, focusing on threats, opportunities, and gaps. In the final section the report presents priorities in the form of a dashboard to map the way forward for the engagement of the EU with SCS.

2- Historical introduction

The bulk of the participants in the interviews and focus groups looked at 2011 as a pivotal year in the history of civil society in Syria. By far, 2011 is referenced more frequently than any other year before or after. It is often believed that Syria did not have an active civil society before the popular demonstrations began in earnest in March of 2011. This perception may not be too far-fetched when talking about specific forms of civic engagement and certain roles CSOs play as middle ground institutions mediating between state and society. Yet, this perspective falls short of understanding deeply ingrained structural conditions and cultural traits that define state-society relations in modern time Syria. In this section, the report will provide a broad sketch of the history of Syrian civil society understood in its broadest Gramscian definition as the space mitigating the hegemonic tendencies of the State into private lives, yet at the same time asserting the legitimacy of the State in the process.

It is often problematic to talk about civil society in the context of countries that have not completed their transition from pre-modern to post-modern state-society relationships. Syria is no exception. The literature on civil society often confuses civic with civil. Whereas the latter is mainly a relatively recent phenomenon in Syria, a product of the introduction of modern state regulatory and administrative functions to shape society along top down ideologies of statecraft, the former has a long history born of social horizontal interrelationships among different interests (economic, religious and social elites), and different (often competing modalities of interaction with the a State that had a specific ideological understanding of its role within society.

The following historical narrative attempts to avoid an a priori definition of what is and what is not civil society and tries to map the forces and interests that created the conditions and long-term trends at play today. While the gist of the report is to focus on the current status of civil society today after 12 years of devastating conflict and war, this initial section will attempt to shed light on how we got here and explain the historical factors that shaped the present.

a. Into the twentieth century

The territories that would become the modern day Syria witnessed the role of many pre-modern social solidarity networks including a variety of different types of formal and informal networks with different modalities of incorporation or assembly such as professional brotherhoods (naqabat al kar), religious (mainly Sufi schools and orders "tariqa"), social networks (such as the "nakabat al-ashraf" or the order of the descendants of the prophet), wealth accumulation networks (in the form of "waqf zarri" or private endowments), charities (in the form of "waqf khayri" or charitable endowments), business associations (in the form of informal solidarities of the caravansary tenants), neighbourhood watch and protection committees (the "futuwa" and the "zu'ur") and many other types of informal networks (like tribal alliances, water right committees, etc.). The institutional thickness of these civic actors was not negligible, if anything, it was the main guarantor of social stability and balancing act in a society that had little recourse to standardise legal institutions and formal governance norms[4].

BY the late 19th century, the Ottoman State initiated broad reforms often known as the "tanzimat". A formal law regulating the work of NGOs did not emerge till the early 20th century (1909), regulating all forms of non-state incorporations such as charities and political parties under the guise of associations (jam'iyah). However, associations emerged well before the law was promulgated. Various charities, cultural associations and local notable associations acting as quasi municipalities bringing basic infrastructure for cities were common in many cities.[5] For the most part, they were socio-political entities aiming at the grand reform of society. The

4 - See for example:
Marcus, Abraham. (1989). *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity.* New York: Columbia University Press.
Lapidus, Ira. (1967). *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

5 - Sharif, Malek. (2014). *Imperial Norms and Local Realities: The Ottoman Municipal Laws and the Municipality of Beirut (1860-*

attempt of the state to curb and regulate their political impact and to bring them under its direct control faced many challenges, not least of which is the weak ability of the State to provide alternative models of welfare to a wide spectrum of the society.[6] ***By the early 20th century there was a confluence between the civic nature of these new formations and their role in defending and representing the local elites' political aspirations. Many "associations" created in Syria in the early 20th century were actually nuclei for political activism and for different ideological articulations of the new elites and their competing interests***.[7] The reformist social agenda of the "associations" created new social dynamics that had lasting impact on the evolution of civil society well into today.

During the French mandate many of the informal forms of social solidarity persisted. Professional guilds and the various social Naqabat continued to operate. Initially the French authorities were not keen on challenging the Ottoman codes. However, the growing economic troubles of the late 1920's and early 1930's encouraged these forms of "corporations", as the French authorities defined them, to go on strikes. These protests, while having economic concerns at their core, were also occasions to assert a nationalist agenda. Additionally, starting from the late 1920, many of the trade guilds were leaning towards leftist and Marxist inspired leaderships and modes of organising.[8]

The French mandate authorities fearing that the trade guilds and the nationalists would aggregate their efforts into a singular national movement, tried to drive a wedge between them. They issued the legislative decree 152 of 1935 to regulate professional associations separately from the other forms of charities and cultural/political associations headed by the nationalist bourgeois elites (these continued to operate according to the Ottoman law). ***Playing on class differences, the mandate authorities tried to separate the National Block leading the demand for independence from the trade associations demanding better pay and more rights in workplaces often owned by those elites. The de-politicisation of the associations was a primary objective of the mandate authorities***.[9] The schism that was created was to play heavily after the nationalist struggle culminated in independence.

The main characteristic of this period could be summarised as follows:

- The tensions between modern elites' self-representation and traditional solidarity networks: This dynamic is often ignored in the Syrian and Arab nationalist discourses. The role of the elite associations in expressing new forms of nationalism is given prominence in the literature, at the expense of the traditional social solidarity networks that are often represented as clientelist networks for the old Ottoman order.
- The interlinking of liberal civic forms of association with western cultural and economic dominance: the nascent modern "associations" in their ability to attract and represent liberal elites in Syria were closely connected to Western cultural models and ideologies. At times, they coincided in their aspirations for independence from the Ottomans and self-rule with western colonial projects for the region.[10] The stigma that was to follow the engagement of many local elite leaders with Western interests and values would cast long shadows on the work of "associations" until today.
- The inability to aggregate local civil action into national organisational bodies: The early manifestations of civil society shared broad ideological commonalities that brought the elites of the major cities together

1908). Beirut: The Orient Institute. P. 34 ff.

6 - Şiviloğlu, Murat R. (2018). *The emergence of Public Opinion: State and Society in the Late Ottoman Empire.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press. P. 73 ff.

7 - See for instance:

كوثراني، وجيه. (2017). السلطة والمجتمع والعمل السياسي العربي في أواخر العهد العثماني: وسائط السلطة في بلاد الشام. الدوحة: المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات. ص. 133 وما بعدها.

8 - Schad, Geoffry D. (2005). "Colonial Corporatism in the French Mandate: Labor Capital, the Mandatory Power and the 1935 Syrian Law of Associations". *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée.* 105-106/2005.

9 -Ibid.

10 - See:
كوثراني. ص. 262 وما بعد.

to express their identity as social leaders of the new State. However, their economic interests and their personal patronage networks competed for political power and prevented the creation of nation-wide civil organisations. Elite coalitions were short-sighted and focused on immediate electoral gains. Much of the dis-trust between regions, and the inability of actors to bridge their differences today have deep roots and are not just by-products of the Ba'ath taking overpower in 1963.

- The silent climbing of new social forces: New social forces challenged the dominance of the elites over both the state and civil society, mainly the syndicalist movement, and the leftist political parties as well as their social solidarity networks. They went unnoticed by the top elites and their intra-struggles for power.

b. Post-colonial development and missed opportunities

The period immediately after independence in 1946 witnessed many dramatic events that had a tremendous impact on the trajectory of civil society in Syria. On the one hand, the normative power of the State was gradually asserted to reign in informal social activism, while on the other hand, the space for political action was opened for a few years (from 1946-1958), and it did not need the cover of "civic associations" to hide behind. "Associations" turned into pure charitable functions mainly as patronage networks for prominent politicians. Therefore, the competition among the elite political figures discouraged collective action on the part of their charitable associations and their members. The exception to the general rule was associations working on empowering women. Despite finding their origins as charitable organisations run by the wives and daughters of prominent political leaders, they gradually aggregated their efforts to form a considerable lobby for obtaining political suffrage in 1949 and formed strong partnerships with feminist networks across the Arab world. This greatly facilitated the formation of the Women Union when the Baath took power in 1963.[11]

The State's efforts to control and redefine the role of civic actors went through ebbs and flows, but it was a general tendency for both democratic governments as well as ones controlled by the army after a series of military coups starting in 1949. ***The trend to impose the "reason d'état" on the social and civic space was part of a modernist epistemology beyond the individual ideologies of the political parties at the helm of the State***.

In 1949, under the powerful authoritarian rule of general Husni al-Za'im, the civil code was adapted from the Egyptian code. The civil code contained a special section on "associations and foundations".[12] While the original draft of the civil code was quite liberal in its definition of the legal personality of civic organisations, it represents a strong imperative for the State to regulate these organisations with scrutiny. Simultaneously, the State also imposed its will on many of the informal religious networks. Mainly by issuing the law of charitable endowments in 1949, the State obliterated the independence of charitable "waqf's", aggregated their properties under a unified management and deprived religious networks of one of their main assets to retain their patronage networks.[13] Shortly after, the State abolished private endowments and deprived their beneficiaries of their collective power. Major enterprises that were run with a collective purpose were fragmented, and their ability to affect local economic realities was reduced.[14]

Other forms of civic engagements began to formalise during that period. Informal professional associations, such as that of the Association of Syrian Engineers, was given permission to become the Syndicate "Naqabah" of Engineers in 1950.[15] In effect syndication was both a way to allow social and civic actors a recognised space in the social order but were also mechanisms for ensuring that the State could regulate, impose its will,

11 - Meininghaus, Esther. (2016). *Creating Consent in Ba'thist Syria: Women and Welfare in a Totalitarian State.* London: I. B. Tauris. P. 34-68.

12 - Articles 56-82 of the civil code, legislative decree 84/1949.

13 - Law 128/1949.

14 - Law 174/1949.

15 - Legislative decree 19/1950.

and force civic organisations to follow certain organisational models[16]. This paved the way later when the State started to enforce its hidden hand such as when NGOs were encouraged to "voluntarily" aggregate their associations into federations that could be more effectively controlled by the State (the Damascus Charitable Federation was established in 1957 and that of Aleppo was established in 1961).

Religious charities were formalised and joined voluntarily in the charitable federations. However, ***the religious clergy retained a great deal of informal networks, both within Syria and across the dividing lines with other Arab and Muslim societies. The formal political representation of these networks (the Muslim Brotherhood) was the political flagship behind which a very complex and often contradictory web of networks functioned away from the regulatory powers of the State***. However, indirectly they built strong connections and networks into the formal associations dealing with culture, sports and charities.[17] Many of the conservative civil society formations that emerged after 2011, owe their roots and ideology to that heritage.

Other informal social networks started to re-group to fend for the interests of their constituencies. For instance, tribal federations took an active role in advocating for their interests without being formally incorporated into "associations". They built on traditional norms or "irf" to assert tenure over pastoral lands and to even demand the formation of new territorial and administrative realities for their areas.[18]

To conclude the main trends in this period:

- The disconnect between the formal and the informal networks of civil society: The immediate post-colonial period is often described as Syria's democratic years.[19] The thrust towards building strong state institutions in the post-colonial period created a positivist ideology and a strong belief in the role of the State to regulate not only the political and the economic but also the social sphere. This created an unspoken schism between the formal and the informal civic networks.
- The absence of a collective civil space: "Associations' had a great deal of freedom to operate, and many new forms of civic engagement were able to attract the social praxis of emerging middle classes. Yet, these nascent bodies operated separately and focused on narrow social interests. Moreover, the evolution of new forms of civic activities was often at odds with traditional modes of organising society. On the one hand, the liberal elites tried to usurp their control over the formality of the State to impose their vision of modernity. On the other hand, conservative social networks looked at them with great suspicion. This schism had lasting effects when different civil society actors failed to present a unified front after 2011.
- The steady rise of working-class-led civic entities at odds with both traditional and modern bourgeois civic bodies: A third new force was emerging in the shadow of the all too public and well-advertised debate between the liberals and the conservatives. The leftist parties were organising nascent modern labour in the guise of labour unions; they were also going to the rural areas and organising farmers and agricultural labour. While most of their civic action was underground, they were able to capitalise on the positivist ideology of the State to lobby for important rights that were enshrined in the 1950 constitution. When the Ba'ath was to take power in 1963, these civic actors were ready to aggregate their forces and presence alongside the State while the liberal and the traditionalist civic actors were divided and in competition.

16 - Hanafi, Sari. (1997). *La Syrie des ingénieurs: une perspective comparée avec l'Egypte.* Paris: Karthala. P. 38 ff.

17 - For more information on the formation of religious associations brokered by the founder of the MB in Syria, Mustafa al-Sibai'i, and the reticence of many religious actors to join or be part of the movement prefering to have their own independent positions and networks, please refer to:

سعد الدين، عدنان. (2010). الإخوان المسلمون في سورية: مذكرات وذكريات. القاهرة: مكتبة مدبولي. الجزء الأول. ص. 109 ومابعد.

18 - Ababsa, Myriam. (2009). *Raqqa: territoires et pratiques sociales d'une ville syrienne.* Beyrouth: Presse de l'IFPO. P. 68 ff.

19 - See for instance:
Martin, Kevin, W. (2015). *Syria's Democratic Years: Citizens, Experts and Media in the 1950's.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

c. The State tightens its grip on the civic space

The inability of the democratically elected government of 1954 to reign in the affairs of the state led to a rushed decision to seek union with Jamal Abdul Nasser's Egypt. Nasser was weary of the open political space of Syria and would only accept union if all Syrian political parties would dissolve themselves. Moreover, the positivist ideological push to put the State at the helm of society and to impose the modernist moral order on the population became the order of the day.[20] But the ideological alignment between State and modern style" associations" would not live long. Soon after the union was ratified by both the Syrian and Egyptian parliaments, the civil code was amended. The paragraphs defining the legal personality of "association and foundations" were removed. Syria was to follow the Egyptian law issued by Nasser in 1958 to control NGOs. A special decree was issued to homogenise the governance of the sector in the Union.[21]

This law, still in effect in Syria even after more than sixty years after the secession of Syria from the union with Egypt, has had a great impact on defining the State-civil society relationship. It has among other things limited the work of "associations" to areas not covered by state sponsored social enterprises, complicated the registration process for new NGOs almost to the point of making it impossible to establish new ones, imposed a-priori approval on the activities of NGOs, and allowed the designated ministry almost exclusive rights to sanction the boards of NGOs and to replace them without recourse to the courts. Though many of the political institutions introduced during the union with Egypt were revoked after the secession, the infamous Decree 93 was retained.

Soon after, the Ba'ath party took power in 1963, the law was activated afresh and many of the typical civic social functions of NGOs were set aside exclusively for a new generation of government owned NGOs or (GONGOs). The embryonic unions and syndicates of the 1950's were encouraged to formalise their incorporation and were given special status under special laws. The youth union, the women's union, the general federation of workers and the general federation of farmers were given special status as organs of the Ba'ath party. ***The Ba'ath wanted to dismantle the local patronage networks of previous elites and to establish new forms of networks based on the workplace***.

By ensuring that access to State resources and patronage networks are channelled through the unions and the GONGOs the Ba'ath was able to create a very active local political demand for its favours, this allowed the State to act as arbiter of local interests. ***The Ba'ath was able to incorporate major sections of society into its direct political patronage, creating a broad-based pyramid of social dependency among the population. By some accounts, between a third and a half of the population was linked to some form of State-sponsored job, cooperative, union, or other GONGOs***. Housing cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, agrarian cooperatives, and other forms of mechanisms to distribute State subsidised goods proliferated, and with them the ability of the Ba'ath to mobilise social forces.

However, despite its best effort to dismantle traditional and religious informal networks, the Ba'ath was unable to make a real dent within conservative and traditional civic circles. The back-door access of the religious clergy and their formal and informal CSOs and networks to the State and its resources were cut off. Yet, these networks resisted every step of the way as had happened in Hama in 1964 after the launch of the first Ba'ath interim constitution and culminated in further demonstrations in the preparation for the permanent constitution of 1973. The violence that was to come after each one of these events and the subsequent arrests and disappearance of key activists pushed the political and social activism of the conservative forces into the underground. While the formal presence of the religious clergy was restricted to some areas of religious education still tolerated by the State up till the late 1970's, the hold of the conservative forces on some of the charitable associations and their ability to infiltrate into the liberal professional syndicates and unions proved a major challenge to the State by the end of the decade.[22]

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20 - Abdelrahman, Maha. M. (2004). *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt.* London: I. B. Tauris. P. 128 ff.

21 - Decree 93/1958 of the United Arab Republic

22 - Pierret, Thomas. (2011). *Baas et Islam en Syrie : la dynastie Assad face aux oulémas.* Paris : Presses Universitaires de France. P. 73-84.

The confrontation from 1979-1982 between the Ba'ath and various components of the Syrian population not incorporated into the Ba'ath's instruments of patronage and social management was a very serious test to the legitimacy of the Ba'ath and its power base. However, the failure of the forces opposing the Ba'ath to create a unified front proved to what extent the Ba'ath's social and civic networks were at work. ***By the end of the confrontation in 1982, the Ba'ath was in full control. It usurped the last remaining independence left in the professional syndicates and small trade unions; it finally managed to grasp all the national resources needed to sustain its social patronage networks***.

The period could be characterised by the following traits:

- An expansion of State control over the social order: This was manifested not only in curbing NGOs, but on infiltrating all aspects of social life through GONGOs.
- Tensions between formal State visions and traditional values in different parts of the country: The control of the representation of society became the subject of direct violent confrontation with many of the traditional civic networks challenging the State and its ideology. While this tension was still mitigated through back door negotiations in the past, this time it was not possible to reconcile the two. It took the violent repression of the popular movements in 1981 for the State to complete its takeover of the civic space.
- Those that did not want to engage and play by the rule of the game, were driven underground or abroad: These could have been religious networks as well as secular ones. Pushing many of these networks underground created a culture of mistrust, fragmentation and poor communication, that left civic actors suspicious of each other and unable to form a critical mass to resist the reason d'état of the Ba'ath. But more importantly not able to aggregate themselves when the popular demonstrations took to the street a second time in 2011.
- The persistence of the Ba'ath social networks: many observers and civil society activists expected the popular demonstrations of 2011 would bring down the Ba'ath's deep state hold on power. However, it seems that after 12 years of conflict the Ba'ath's social controls were not as fragile as some had expected.

d. The neo-liberal turn

By the mid 1980's Syria was facing a complex economic recession. The impact of western sanctions, the cost of the war in Lebanon, internal strife within the top-ranking Syrian decision makers, halted support payments from the Gulf states to Syria to support its war efforts with Israel, decline of oil prices and the failure of many of the State-led economic enterprises fostered a rapid decline of the value of the Syrian pound, major inflation and the rapid accumulation of national debt. Syria continued to finance major State-run investments through deficit, printing paper money with no assets to cover it, and borrowing heavily from the eastern bloc countries. The country could no longer sustain many of the welfare programs that the Ba'ath used to consolidate its various networks of patronage.[23]

By the end of the decade, the authorities were well aware of the limitations of their economic policies and discussions on reforming the economy were seriously under discussion even before the issuing of the famous law 10 of 1990 introducing a wide range of opportunities for investment in the country.[24] However, initial economic opening "infitah" proved of little impact and there was substantive discussion on the need to have some relaxation of the State's tight grips on the political and social institutions[25]. The need to open up the State patronage networks to new clients from outside the existing support base of the government was eminent.[26]

23 - Perthes, Volker. (1997). *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad.* London: I. B. Tauris. P. 120 ff.

24 - Kienle, Eberhard (1998). "Beyond the Lion's Share: External Factors and Domestic Change in Syria". In Volker Perthes, ed. *Scenarios for Syria: Socio-Economic and Political Choices.* Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlasgesellschaft. P. 23-40.

25 - Ibid.

26 - Perthes (1997). P. 250 ff.

Initial economic reforms created new opportunities for engaging with a new class of private sector actors. New networks of patronage were being forged as the role of private enterprises grew from being a sub-contractor for government owned enterprises to a powerful player in its own right. Patron-client relations with crony enterprises opened the way to new forms of investment. Reforms proved to be of limited impact on the economic reform, as many of the investments taking place were directed to real estate, and other types of low labour creating projects with little economic multipliers. Yet, these new networks started to generate their own affiliated expressions of their presence and role.[27]

Naturally, this came at the expense of shifting weight in the political arena from State enterprises to private ones. ***State sponsored wealth distribution and patronage networks could no longer muster sufficient resources to keep the strong support of working-class unions and GONGOs going.[28] However, the State could not completely abandon its core system of support in the State bureaucracy and the Ba'ath-party-affiliated GONGOs***. Yet, these institutions had to compete for political attention and resources.

Opening up for foreign investments forced Syria to start negotiations with external donors, either through the negotiations with the EU regarding the Euro-Mediterranean partnership or bilaterally with member states and donors from outside the EU. Many of Syria's debt programs had to be re-negotiated, but more importantly, Syria had to demonstrate some level of opening up politically. Incremental reforms were introduced on the political level. But many programs were created to support emerging forms of civil society.[29] These varied from ones geared at supporting the individual civic actors to build their capacity and implement programs and those geared at supporting the sector at large. Indeed, there was little policy indication on which theory of change was adopted by donors to support reforms.

Yet, authorities in Damascus managed to usurp many of these reform initiatives. In the past, authorities coerced critical voices, and used criticism of some aspects of the political system to reinforce the legitimacy of the core role of the system.[30] By selectively providing political green light and approval for some types of civic activism, while arbitrarily denying others, new channels of patronage were created. The initial steps were shy, but the window was opened slightly more after 2005. The initial tensions between authorities in Damascus and a burgeoning effort of civil society activities in 2000-2002 (known as the Damascus Spring) led to a careful re-examination of the initial optimistic opportunities for reform.[31] By 2005, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour was being pushed by the presidential office to expand the permits issued to new "associations".

The presidential office indirectly supported a wide range of new civic experimentations, providing them with access to public institutions, green light for foreign and domestic funding and some access to media. But the most visible experimentation was the creation of "civic institutions" sponsored by the First Lady (personally or through her office). Dozens of such NGOs were created and chaired either directly by Asma al-Assad or by notable new business leaders that emerged as a result of the economic liberation after 2000. However, the list also included some local NGOs with regular citizens and people who were selectively chosen to test out new forms of civic activities.

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27 - Haddad, Bassam. (2012). *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience.* Stanford: Stanford University Press. P. 140 ff.

28 - Hinnebusch, Raymond. (2009). "Syria Under the Ba'th: The Political Economy of Populist Authoritarianism". In Raymond Hinnebusch ed. *The State and the Political Economy of Reform in Syria.* Fife, Scotland: The University of St. Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies. P. 17.

29 - Spitz, Rene. (2014). *State-Civil Society Relations in Syria: EU Good Governance Assistance in an Authoritarian State.* Saarbruken, Germany. P. 184.

30 - for more information, please refer to:
Cooke, Miriam. (2007). *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official.* Durham: Duke University Press.

31 - For more information refer to the special edition of Confluences Méditerarnée:
Ghalioun, Bourhan and Mardam-Bey, Farouk, eds. (2003). " Un Printemps syrien : dossier". Confluence Méditerranée. No. 44. Winter 2002-2003.

In 2007, the four largest initiatives were aggregated into a single entity called the "Syria Trust for Development". The Trust boasted a professional staff of roughly 200-250 employees and was undertaking a very visible role in introducing different innovations in the sector. However, many critics saw in this initiative, yet another form by the Syrian authority to recreate itself and legitimise its new form of neo-liberal turn.[32] Yet, others view that despite its launch as a major GONGO, the Trust had important indirect consequences and those should not be underestimated as a gateway for change in an authoritarian system.[33]

While new forms of civic activism were allowed and even encouraged, other forms of societal organisation were essential to keep the balance. Religious institutions were given more of a leeway to operate. Famous members of the clergy were allowed to operate different forms of charitable associations.[34] Some space was also created for different informal civic initiatives. However, that space was often closed down when civic engagement took on challenging and visible roles.[35] Tensions between conservative and secular civic social agendas needed careful balancing.[36] The presidential office was often the ultimate arbiter in tensions created by the different social agendas, many of which were induced indirectly by competing security institutions.[37] ***While on the overall, there was a gradual opening of space, and new gateways for different civic actors to operate, these gates were closely monitored and were opened and closed regularly for everyone to understand that they could not operate without the full patronage of the central State. The nascent civil society needed the protection and patronage of the authorities, in return they provided indirect forms of legitimacy to the State as the arbiter among competing social agendas***.

Attempts to reform the legal framework governing the work of civil society came to a dead end after many versions and deliberations on the text of a new law for non-governmental organisations. Early drafts were initiated as early as 2008 with the encouragement of donors (such as the EU and the UK). Subsequent versions of the text copied the model of the "Charitable Association" of the UK: a middle ground between government and civil society to supervise and regulate the sector. The text kept going through different iterations as a result of strong resistance from both State bureaucrats as well as, GONGOS and many charitable associations that were working within a comfort zone afforded by the State after 1981. The last version of the law that was deliberated widely with a broad participation from CSOs in Damascus and many other cities was shelved at the end of 2012.[38]

By early 2011 and just before the advent of public protest and the initiation of violence in Syria, the status of civil society in Syria could be described as follows:

- The State diversified its social patronage networks: to include new forms of civil society actors. NGOs working on diverse issues other than charitable causes were given permission to operate after close vetting.
- The balancing role of the State: The advent of new models of liberal and development oriented civic actors created competition and tensions that could only be resolved by reverting to the central function

32 - Fiorini, Claudia. (2011). "Le Syria Trust for Development: Un cas d'auto-reproduction du régime". In Caroline Abou Sada and Benoit Challand. *Le développement, une affaire d'ONG ? Associations, États et bailleurs dans le monde arabe.* Paris: Karthala. P. 69-94.

33 - Kawakibi, Salam. (2013). "The Paradox of Government-Organised Civil Activism in Syria". In Paul AArts and Francesco Cavatorta, eds. *Civil Society in Syria and Iran: Activism in Authoritarian Contexts.* Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers. P. 169-188.

34 - Pierret, Thomas. (2013). "Les oulémas : une hégémonie religieuse ébranlée par la révolution». In François Burgat and Bruno Paoli, *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie : les clés pour comprendre les acteurs et les défis de la crise 2011-2013.* Paris : La Découverte. P. 93.

35 - Donati, Caroline. (2013). "Les chababs de Daraya, genèse et filiation du Mouvement Syrien pour la non-violence". In François Burgat and Bruno Paoli, *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie : les clés pour comprendre les acteurs et les défis de la crise 2011-2013.* Paris: La Découverte. P. 107 ff.

36 - Pierret. (2011). P. 261ff.

37 - Ibid.

38 - One of the authors of this report was on the committee that worked on the subsequent drafts.

of the presidency to balance between them. This new balancing role of the centre created a renewed source of legitimacy and allowed the centre to constantly lean on one side only to shift later.

- Attempts by western donors to engage in the sector were confused and lacked strategic direction: Donors were happy to use any opportunity for engagement without a clear objective. Two competing theories of change were at play. On the one hand, there was a focus on reform from the top, by supporting efforts to improve the legal and institutional ecosystem. On the other hand, there was an attempt at fostering individual NGOs and their capacity to create entry points into the civic space; this was a favoured approach by many member states through their development cooperation funding instruments. While in principle, the approaches are not incompatible, they often involved competitive donor agendas and lacked coordination.

3- The status of civil society today

After the eruption of popular protests in 2011, there was a euphoria of civic action in Syria. Social energies were high and civic actors undertook a multitude of roles, either to provide for community needs no longer covered by the State, or to express ideas and needs that were suppressed in the past. Thousands of new initiatives emerged in all parts of the country. However, the promising initial expansion in the field proved to have its limits. The number of sustainable civic structures shrank, but in return their work became more focused and institutionalised.

In this section, the report shall focus on the typologies of actors that have managed to assert their roles in the civic space since 2011, their main activities, geographical distribution and patterns of work. This is a daunting task as reliable data to cover the whole field was scarce. The report writers used three main data sources to map the terrain:

- Qualitative data gathered from KII interviews and focus groups discussions.
- Quantitative data gathered from published sources (OCHA's assessment of humanitarian NGOs and IMPACT's 2022 quantitative survey.
- Secondary and tertiary data collected from news sites and published reports to assess the public awareness and understanding of CSOs' work around Syria.

These three sources of data reveal a great deal of discrepancy between the perception of the civic actors of their situation and the perception from the outside as to their work and impact. This part of the report will focus on the supply side of the issue, i.e. the way the CSOs define their own footprint on the ground. Yet, the authors of the report sill strive to juxtapose this self-perception with other perceptions to understand the ecosystem more completely.

a. What is Syrian Civil Society?

The theoretical underpinnings of "civil society" are contested and a definition of a "Syrian civil society" is not a straightforward task under the best of circumstances. In Syria, as it was presented above, the historical trajectory of civil society defies classical definitions. After 2011, it became even more difficult to present a coherent definition as the country descended into a major conflict. Civil society can be formal or informal, organised or spontaneous, civic or communitarian. It may have blurry boundaries with both de-facto powers and private sector actors, and it can present both liberal civic and anti-civic values and practices.

A major task for proposing a RM for engagement with civil society is to present a common definition of this civil society. The EU's main definition of civil society is focused on civil society organisations (CSOs). While this definition is sufficiently broad it is not all inclusive and does not match the realities on the ground for many civic actors in Syria today. In its formal literature the EU states:

"The EU considers CSOs to include all non-State, not-for-profit structures, non-partisan and nonviolent, through which people organise to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic. Operating from the local to the national, regional, and international levels, they comprise urban and rural, formal and informal organisations. The EU values CSOs' diversity and specificities; it engages with accountable and transparent CSOs which share its commitment to social progress and to the fundamental values of peace, freedom, equal rights, and human dignity."[39]

This definition cannot be easily applied in a Syrian context for several reasons:

First, this definition assumes there is a government and a functioning state, a political society represented by political parties, and civil society that operates between them, on the one hand, the private sector, and private individuals on the other. That definition implies a centre ground, where CSOs are a mitigating influence, both

39 - https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52012DC0492&from=SL
Last visited January 15th, 2022.

protecting society from the hegemony of the State but simultaneously legitimising the liberal political order of the State. In Syria the State has an elusive role and its manifestation in the different geographies varies to a great extent.

In opposition-held areas (OHAs), and Self-Administration held areas (SAHAs), there is no one single recognised government or a set of hierarchical state institutions. The political order in those areas lacks legitimacy locally, nationally and internationally. This means that it is practically difficult to distinguish a CSO from a quasi-governmental institution as both are performing part of what normally is considered state functions. Take the Syrian Civil Defence AKA White Helmets, or the Idlib Health Directorate for example. They both perform State services and/or regulatory functions. However, they do not belong to any government and operate rather like a CSO. Both are self-constituted, and they are even registered as a CSO in Turkey. "You have civil society actors, local authorities and armed militias doing overlapping things," said one participant, "a local authority distributing food baskets and a militia collecting taxes, and a CSO working on protection issues".

On the other hand, in government-held areas (GHAs), many registered CSOs are heavily controlled by the State. They depend on the State or the Baath party for directives, funding, and legitimacy. Some would describe them as GONGOs, while many of the unions and Syndicates are mandated by law to perform regulatory roles. The line between CSOs and the State is very blurry. A participant in one of the focus groups said: "the situation is such that each de-facto power today has CSOs affiliated with it…We have seen this reflected in the composition of the constitutional committee's middle third: you have one group to the left and one group to the right."

This confusing situation is likely to persist into the future. One participant from the NW reflected on this in the following manner: "CSOs today have the largest and most reliable sets of data on all public affairs including health and education. If the State was to come in the future to carry these services, they would have to rely on the CSOs. This means the CSOs have a political presence in the future." Others confirmed the growing role of CSOs to cover State functions not only in OHAs, but also in SAHAs and GHAs despite the presence of some "State institutions" there.

For the purpose of understanding the civil society sphere in Syria, this report adopts the broadest possible lens to tracking activities that represent a collective will of individuals and communities. The type of agency created through association (recognised by the State or not) is considered as part of the civic space, with the hope of understanding the different dynamics at play in shaping the role of civic actors across Syria. This does not mean that the RM engages all these actors in the future, but ***without clarity about the trends and dynamics that are affecting civil society in general, it would be impossible to steer support and engagement with civic actors who are truly playing a middle role in protecting society, warding off the hegemony of the State and contributing to the long-term peace and reconstitution of democratic and legitimate state functions***.

Second, it is not easy to decide what makes a CSO Syrian. Usually, an organisation's identity is verified through its registration. Most of the Syrian CSOs are either not registered, registered by a Quasi-State actor, registered in a neighbouring country, or registered elsewhere in the world. Normally the Consultants would have suggested looking at the self-definition of the CSO in its published literature. However, in the Syrian case, many organisations have erased any mention of Syria from their published literature or websites, as this is causing major transactional problems with the banks' overcompliance with the sanctions. Moreover, many Syrian organisations have shifted their operations recently in light of shrinking funding and donor fatigue to other countries, retaining only a small part of their operations focused on Syria. Some have acquired an INGO status and are treated by most donors as such.

Here again, the report suggests adopting the broadest possible definition of "Syrian" for the purpose of mapping the different agents operating in the Syrian eco-system. The different operational prerogatives for labelling particular CSOs as Syrian do not negate the fact that they are affecting the eco-system in multiple ways such as: competing for funds and contributing with funds, competing for human resources and providing expertise, challenging each other's legitimacy and creating new forms of collective agency and legitimacy. This broad definition cannot be without parameters. The CSO must have a substantive portion of its associative members from or originating from Syria, it must have a substantive part of its operations in Syria or supporting Syrian people in other locations, and it must be critically seen as part of the public sphere and public debate on Syria.

But the problem does not stop there. Many participants in the dialogues were questioning the very possibility of Syria to begin with. "Funding of donors was directed to different areas of the country in diverse and contradictory ways, which codified and consecrated the division of the country," said one participant from the Diaspora. "Everyone is focusing on their regions, and no one is focusing on Syria," said another participant. Syria is not just hard to locate logistically; it is becoming difficult to define in moral terms.

This moral division is growing more intensely between actors operating inside the country and those operating outside. Differences in access to funds, degrees of freedom to operate, access to knowledge, salary scales etc., are creating major schisms and exchanges of accusations of profiteering and not caring for Syria and its people. Here again, the authors of the report found that it is hard to define what is inside and what is outside. A big number of the SCOs have registration outside the country, such as Turkey and/or Europe, although they fully operate inside the country. To that extent this report considers the organisation inside the country if its leadership is residing inside (leadership refers to board and executive team). But this definition was not as clear in the minds of participants in the different dialogues. The analysis of the transcriptions of these dialogues could not discern an agreed definition. The issue is one of perception rather than specific criteria. Organisations that have a strong base outside Syria (senior staff) with strong links to donors and policy centres are frequently referred to as "outside organisations" in the NE and NW. However, in government-controlled areas the perception is that "inside Syria" is mainly government-controlled areas. Anything outside those areas is often referred to as "outside Syria".

Third, there is the question of whether CSOs are for profit or not. Most participants abhorred the idea that some CSOs have become indirect channels for personal gain, operating almost like the "private sector" as one participant described them. However, the general condemnation of such profiteering demonstrates to what extent the phenomenon has become evident in the ecosystem. It is spoiling community trust with CSOs and, triggering more severe due-diligence practices on the part of donors, and discouraging the emergence of collective efforts among CSOs to work together unless they could share resources upfront as opposed to working together on projects. Most KIIs conducted with donors pointed to a primary pre-occupation with the issues of due diligence and duplication of funds. Member state interlocutors focused particularly on these concerns and wished that the EU would play a better coordination role to prevent duplication of resources.

Many participants pointed to the fact that even though the CSOs work as non-profit, many of the workers that work for them have become professional bureaucrats. "Working for an NGO has become a career," said one participant. People interviewed were lamenting the fact that human resources were misallocated, because funds were very specific for some types of work and not to support existing social needs. One participant said: "A doctor should work as a doctor and volunteer in an NGO working in another field. What we have instead is him becoming a professional CSO employee working in yet another field." This blurring of the boundary between for-profit and not-for-profit is not happening at the legal level of incorporation; it is filtering to the very culture of civil society. It is a risk that most participants were quick to identify, but very few had direct solutions on how to circumvent it.

Finally, there is the dilemma of the political neutrality of civil society. "There was a very strong confusion between civil society and revolution and the two were inseparable in peoples' minds," said one activist, "it confused things, and we were not able to agree on anything." On the reverse side, there are many CSOs operating in the humanitarian sector. They are mandated by their humanitarian missions and by their donors to maintain "neutrality". They perceive that "the EU has imposed on them this neutrality" as one participant said. These actors cannot understand how a CSO could have a political advocacy role. Nonetheless, despite the confusion, most civic actors were quick to agree that whether CSOs are political today or not, they will have a major political role to play in the future. They have access to knowledge and data, they have social networks, access to media and international interlocutors, and they are well organised. One participant in a focus group from the NW said: ***"I think in the future there are only two trajectories for civil society, either they become the middle space between State and society, or they become political movements as has happened in Tunisia." That political horizon is not far from the initial steps that the Syrian society witnessed in the beginning of the 20th century as many CSOs became the nuclei for political parties afterwards.***

b. What are the main typologies of civic actors?

Civil society organisations could be classified using different criteria. One distinction is operational vs. advocacy. Operational organisations could include all humanitarian and development organisations; and advocacy NGOs include rights-based organisations such as human rights, women rights, minority rights, and children's rights organisations. Before 2011, the main registered NGOs were operational CSOs active at the local level, mostly providing charitable aid to local communities. These were mainly CBOs and more often than not, they were faith based or conservative-leaning entities, operating under a tacit alliance between the authorities in Damascus with the local urban elites mainly in Damascus city and Aleppo and to a lesser extent in other urban areas. Some new forms of operational NGOs were created after 2000, but those were limited in number and scope (economic, environmental, cultural etc.). The remaining few CSOs that operated underground or without a license but with the State turning their eyes on their activities were advocacy groups. They were mainly opposition-leaning, with their activities subject to strong scrutiny from the authorities.

As has been described in the historic background above, the presidency in the figure of the first lady fostered many NGOs, such as the Syria Trust and the Junior Chamber International JCI, which focused on development and youth in general. ***After 2011, many CSOs were established. On the one hand, there were the CSOs inspired by the revolution, while on the other hand, many initiatives were encouraged by the State as a response to the revolutionary zeal and a way to muster popular support among its base constituencies. Almost all CSOs were political in spirit. This included those who wanted to "topple the regime", as well as those who declared their support to the government against the "conspiracy of the west". Both camps had their humanitarian missions but fundamentally they professed opposing political worldviews***.

This schism started to intensify with the transformation of the situation into an armed conflict ripping the country into separate geographies of control. CSOs operating in OHAs (many were also in GHAs but working secretly), were opposition-leaning, and acting with the ultimate aim to "topple the regime." Their humanitarian operations like their advocacy work were geared to countering the government and its allies. On the other hand, CSOs operating in GHAs were either supporting the government outright or helping communities "withstand the attack of the terrorists." A similar scene emerged in the Eastern part of the country, where Kurdish organisations were also political in nature with focus on Kurdish national rights. Only a few CSOs maintained some level of neutrality in their work, but the possibility of maintaining some level of neutrality was gradually squeezed out. Mistrust among CSOs deepened in the first few years after 2011.

In all geographies one can see advocacy CSOs focusing mainly on women rights (WR), human rights (HR), and very few on minority rights (MR) and children rights. Operational CSOs focused their efforts on humanitarian aid mainly until 2017 (even those that were not originally designated as charitable organisations). Since then, some CSOs started to shift towards development as a primary or secondary focus for their work as some development themes became acceptable nomenclature for a few donors (often as successor to stabilisation and livelihood support programmes initiated by the US and Western donors previously). Today, most of the operational organisations are doing some combination of development and relief, and very few focus on one aspect only, albeit the humanitarian dimension of their work is by far larger than their other operations. Furthermore, many of the projects delivered under the guise of stabilisation and development are not designed in a sustainable manner with multiplier effects in mind. In effect most of the development work is being delivered with a humanitarian logic and using humanitarian instruments and M&E functions. It is noteworthy that organisations in opposition-held areas cover the entire spectrum including all types of advocacy and humanitarian organisations, whereas the perception among actors in the NE is that CSOs there are more focused on advocacy, with special focus on MR, and WR.

In government-held areas, the bulk of the work is still limited to a mixture of development work with a humanitarian undertone. A few CSOs are working on advocacy mainly on WR. The state is heavily controlling of all civic activities. While in theory many CSOs are allowed to carry work independently on development and/or humanitarian issues, their access to funding is under scrutiny. Only a few CSOs were granted the right to receive aid from international organisations and the UN. The largest portion of funding going to GHAs is humanitarian in nature because of donor red lines. Even when the funds from the UN are directed to some limited developmental issues such as improving livelihoods, the CSOs are generally still operating under a humanitarian logic and a humanitarian M&E framework. The State ensures total control over that field either directly or through trusted NGOs. One participant from the GHAs said: "the authorities know everything about our finances." As humanitarian funds can be leveraged for social and political patronage, ensuring that these funds are closely monitored is a top priority. In this very restrictive environment, there are still some CSOs

focusing on HR, but their work is limited.

Other classifications of CSOs could focus on the size of the civic actors. Such classification could include grassroots and small initiatives, individual CSOs, networks, and network of networks. The majority of the small initiatives are inside Syria, whereas big CSOs and NGOs as well as their networks are either in the Diaspora or in neighbouring countries. Small networks of civil society activists were possible inside Syria, but often informally, where individuals from the CSOs would join the network without implicating the whole group. Local initiatives (LI) are small in nature, either at the level of village, city, or governorate, although very few might cross these boundaries. Most of the LIs in OHAs were established later in the process, perhaps after 2015, whereas around the start of the uprising people jumped straight to form CSOs with broad civic missions. The situation was the reverse in GHAs civic actors opted for informal LIs and only later incorporated them into more formal bodies or registered them as NGOs. This has led to a difference in capacity as well as a difference in perception and self-image.

The schism between LIs and NGOs was very clear in the interviews. LI activists see themselves as closer to the ground and to the needs of communities; they look at formalised NGOs as too focused on their funding and their relations with the donors and INGOs. In the reverse direction, they envy the knowledge at the disposal of NGOs and their ability to attract qualified personnel with higher salaries and opportunities for career development. This is perhaps because NGOs operating in the NW benefited from the UNSC resolution for cross-border aid to enhance their access to funds and improve their technical and logistical capacities.

On the other hand, LIs have little capacity as compared to NGOs. For the most part, they are not registered by the Syrian government or any other government for that matter. They are closer to their communities and are generally positively perceived by the society. But they have little ability to prepare a proper project proposal according to donor standards, though they may actually have a better chance of managing it on the ground than NGOS located outside Syria. Some interviewees mentioned GIZ- Takamol fund as a counter example to how proposals work against the LI and local CBOs. One participant said: "The CSOs located abroad cannot manage the work well compared to the organisations located inside. Therefore, the GIZ project is good, as it connects a registered organisation in Turkey with a registered initiative or a volunteer group inside Syria. Each two organisations present one project proposal. This has contributed to improving the relationship between civil society and the local community on the one hand, and between civil society inside and outside Syria on the other hand." However, the situation is not always the case. Many LIs feel that they were separated from the donors "through intermediaries" as one LI activist put it. In that regard, small LIs have little ability to distinguish between donors and their priorities, operating procedures and M&E requirements, while these are generally very clear to the larger NGOs.

Donors play an important and perhaps essential role in affording stability and growth to organisations. This chance is often offered to large Syrian organisations, in order to sustain them. But, in doing so, donors follow a dangerous policy, as the criteria for lending support are not transparent and shift arbitrarily between focus on large organisations and sudden reversion to supporting small ones leaving large entities struggling to maintain their structures. One participant from NW said: "So [suddenly] we stop supporting large organisations and go to support small emerging organisations…If this [uncertainty] continues it will destroy the role of organisations and will create undue competition led by the donors' pitting organisations against each other."

The schism between NGOs and LIs takes on many distinctive markers. NGOs have formal registration while LIs do not, and that means they have no access to bank accounts or formal ways to receive funds. LIs that are not registered view with envy those that are. The situation is more pronounced between LIs in OHAs and those in GHAs. While in OHAs some modus operandi exists between CSOs registered outside and those LIs operating inside, in GHA, the LIs have no working relations with external partners. Indeed, they are often looked at with suspicion as "collaborators with the regime". Though more recently, the unregistered LIs in GHAs are being approached by NGOs from outside the country. However, rather than bringing LIs closer together across the dividing lines, this phenomenon is creating competition among LIs and giving registered NGOs outside the country an upper hand in deciding how funds would be trickled to the local level.

Networks are also more common abroad. Networks like the Syrian NGO Alliance SNA in the humanitarian field, the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media ECSM in the media sector operate out of Turkey. The "We Exist" alliance is in Europe, and Syrian Charities and Associations Network SCAN UK is in the UK. Very few networks are inside the country, and fewer are those who have members from across the divide-lines. Those that are inside GHAs are sector-focused, such as Coalition of Syrian Women for Democracy (WR mainly in Damascus)

and South Echo "Sada Aljanoub" (mainly in Sweidaa and Deraa with focus on media). More on the role of networks will be presented in a subsequent section of this report.

Consequently, one can summarise the discussion on typologies as per the following:

- It is very difficult, although important, to create partnerships across the dividing lines. Operational CSOs could be more ready for such collaborations. Also, WR organisations might play a pivotal role in connecting their efforts.
- Except for UN agencies, the perception among CSOs is that very few INGOs or donors, with the exception of the EU and Scandinavian donors, have sought to support local operational CSOs in NE and GHAs. This general perception is very strong and reflects some degree of reality. It is recommended that donors work closely with all types of CSOs in all regions. The knowledge of CSOs in NW could be transferred to those in NE and GHAs in order to create complementarity and close the gap amongst civil society organisations.
- Although the EU and some other donors are supporting networks, this is still limited to certain geographies, like the humanitarian and human rights-based networks operating in the NW and in Turkey and Europe. It is quite important to support cross geography networks (such as ECSM) to improve knowledge transfer, resource sharing, advocacy prospects, and hence unity among Syrian civil society. Some initial informal networks are on the rise across geographies. Some have been promoted in previous EU funding. Others were supported by less present donors like Norway and Finland. But funding for many of these networks is comparatively small compared to networks working mainly in the opposition sphere.
- The unhealthy competition between outside and inside, and between registered and unregistered could be mitigated should donor policies move from putting registered NGOs at the helm of partnerships and look at CSOs partnerships as a partnership between equals.
- While CSOs and LIs operating inside Syria are not as experienced as CSOs registered outside in terms of meeting donor requirements for funding, they have better access on the ground and a better assessment of local conditions. Incentivising partnerships between the two types need to be calibrated carefully. Otherwise, the larger CSOs operating outside will instrumentalise the local ones. Local LIs need to be empowered to understand the donor ecosystem better and larger CSOs need to be nudged to develop stronger relations with the grass roots.

c. Sectoral and geographical perspectives

Three factors play a role in identifying why CSOs are active in certain sectors in any of the three geographies. These are donor policies, de-facto power interventions, and the nature of their accumulated experience.

Donors' policies clearly impact in which sectors civil society operates. For example, it is apparent that the US is willing to support education in NE, as a strategy to counter terrorism. However, education is hardly supported in OHAs, as it is not on most donors' priorities, especially after the fall of Idlib in the hands of HTS. Strong collaboration is taking place between the US companies that support SCS in NE with de-facto power in this region, allowing more funding for civil society actors working on media, NFI, health, and education. Another example is the support for local governance, which was a main focus until 2018, but declined drastically after many donors, including the EU, backed off, when de-facto powers started to control some of the local administration units in the NW. Further examples include Sweidaa, which is attracting interest from donors as of late. Sweidaa has become the new Gaziantep (a hub for civil society) as mentioned by a recent article[40]. Many donors started to support initiatives in this governorate given its relative autonomy from the central government. Donors in this region vary between Western donors operating indirectly through intermediaries, as well as some Russian and pro-Iranian charities working directly with local groups. This led to envy from actors in other governorates, especially Deraa, the neighbouring governorate, which was mostly abandoned by donors after it was taken back by the central State in 2018.

The second factor is the intervention (planned or impromptu) of de-facto powers. For example, the Syrian government opposes interventions by civil society in the education sector considering it a sovereign function of the State. Similarly, the education sector in NW, is affected by de-facto powers. The Salvation Government, (a front for HTS a group on the international terrorists' lists), strongly interfered in education and this led

40 - https://www.sot-sy.com/article/458
Last visited September 7th, 2022.

donors to withdraw their funding. Likewise, media organisations are strongly present in NW and NE, and almost absent from GHAs, except for Sweidaa, which enjoys relative autonomy. This reflects the degree of tolerance accorded by de-facto powers to the issue in those areas.

The third factor is accumulated experience that was gained by the CSOs and their abilities and knowledge in specific sectors and fields. As mentioned above, a large number of humanitarian CSOs operating in NE have moved from NW toward the East, and very few are from the region. The traditional focus of the CSOs from this region, especially Kurdish CSOs, was traditionally on HR and MR as this is their main area of expertise. Humanitarian CSOs in the NE, such as those operating in health, need technical knowledge that is lacking in their area, which was the most underdeveloped area in Syria before the war. This has opened doors for health CSOs from other areas to move in, especially as funding in the NW for health dwindled. Very few CSOs were found to change their focus to new issues in a dramatic manner. Instead, it was noted that some CSOs started to incorporate different types of programming (humanitarian and development) but generally in the same sector, transferring their knowledge and contacts from one way of implementing projects to another but not changing the theme of their work.

It was hard to map with any degree of accuracy the overall number of CSOs working in the different geographies. A comprehensive mapping of CSOs in Syria is being undertaken by different entities and will be discussed in more detail later in the report. However, an initial reading of the available data suggests a great discrepancy in the numbers of CSOs working in different sectors across the geography. The distribution of CSOs is uneven from both sectoral and geographical perspectives.

To conclude:

- The uneven pattern of distribution of CSOs across sectors and geographies is both a challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge as it reflects the uneven distribution of resources among CSOs in the different regions. Yet, it is an opportunity, as it creates possibilities for incentivising complementarity between actors across the dividing lines. For example, health NGOs moving from NW to NE are bridging between two polarised communities. The EU is already promoting cross-geography collaborations, but these approaches are still timid and are not born out of an articulated demand by CSOs. The EU is already testing some modality by encouraging knowledge exchange, but other donors seem to be risk averse (some member-states are more comfortable working with CSOs with clear oppositional positioning).
- ***Donors can address questions of fairness in distribution by adjusting policies and relaxing red lines on work in all geographies using expedited vetting procedures less focused on donors' reputational risks and more focused on supporting CSOs to expand access and to allow them a larger room of manoeuvre around local actors***. Objectives for empowering civil society and not just for delivery of basic aid must be set with clear indicators to be monitored across the geography in all of Syria.
- ***Adjusting policies should lead to a more needs-based approach, where funding goes to address needs rather than looking at ease of access, or approaches designed to distance donors from de-facto powers to avoid reputational risks***. Informal ways of engaging local officials need to be explored and expanded. Interfaces between the public functions and spaces and their use by CSOs could be leveraged to activate community control over commons, reduce costs and to informally reach out to local officials and institutions and avoid antagonising them.

4- Participation and roles

On the eve of the first popular demonstrations that eventually erupted into a full-scale conflict in 2011, there was a complex ecosystem surrounding civic actors. The first section of the report provided an initial understanding of that ecosystem, with some implications on its impact after 2011. This section will focus on how that ecosystem was shaped since.

An ecosystem is a complex dynamic that affects and is affected by the actors that populate it. Various factors are at play, and the different stakeholders must constantly adjust their positioning to deal with changing dynamics. It is therefore rather impossible to have a universal statement or analysis about an ecosystem. Instead, the approach will be focused on understanding the type of civic actors that formed during the conflict and define the relationships they must maintain with other types of actors (other civic actors, public institutions, de-facto powers, donors, private sector, etc.). In turn, these networks are affected by a variety of factors (economic, social, legal, cultural, etc.).

Networks are multi-layered. But in war-torn Syria they are not clearly segregated into public, private and civic spheres as the classic analysis of civil society is done. Indeed, the interviews indicated how civic actors' networks intertwined with other networks, making the definition of what is civil and what is not a daunting task. Having explored the status of CSOs in the previous section including their typology and distribution, the focus in this section will be on understanding their embeddedness in complex networks and the environment in which they function. The analysis will try to map the modalities of connection and their quality (formal and informal norms governing connectivity). Subsequently, it would be possible to define how the civic space is emerging in Syria and what roles are civic actors playing in it.

a. Interrelationships between civil society actors

The distribution of civic actors across Syria is by no means homogeneous, yet, the emergence of civic actors was evident in all geographies. However, most of these actors were working in small islands without a visible collective impact beyond their individual projects. Participants in the focus groups and KII's were showing an increased interest in networking, despite suspicions that were occasionally evident in the KII interviews. Key areas of concern were lack of trust in the political affiliation of other CSOs, their reliability as a partner in an ecosystem where reputational risks are high, and to a lesser extent the fear of competition over resources.

When analysing available quantitative data on networking among Syrian civil society organisations, it was clear that NGOs with ongoing cooperation programs with other NGOs were often concentrated in non-government-controlled areas with minor exceptions in the main cities of Damascus, Aleppo and Hama and to a lesser extent in smaller towns in Salamiyeh, Sweidaa and Dara'a.[41] In the NW a substantive portion of the operating CSOs indicated they were part of CSO networks; in the NE the issue is even more common. Unfortunately, little data is available on the quality of the networks, their size and effectiveness.

An ICVA/UNDP report noted that most initial big networks were tending to reduce the number of their members to be more effective.[42] The study focused mainly on networks aggregating actors working in the humanitarian sectors. Most relief networks were initially focused on coordinating aid, sharing information about needs' assessment and coordinating distribution. More recently some networks have been involved in advocacy for humanitarian operations. The study pointed to a high level of coordination between many of these networks with donors and UN organisations, especially networks focused on supporting women. Unfortunately, the

41 - Tokmanjian, Armanek. (2021). *Hubs and Bubbles: Syrian Civil Society after a Decade of Conflict*. Impact: Berlin. as well as updated data sets provided courtesy of IMPACT 2022.

42 - Nimer, Maysam and Mahmud, Basem. (2021). *The Evolution of Syrian NGO Networks: Their Role in Humanitarian Response and Long-Term Prospects.* The International Council of Voluntary Agencies: Geneva.

study did not tackle informal networks, nor networks working on non-humanitarian issues.

While many other networks working on a variety of human rights issues do exist, they have not been the subject of systematic research. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many informal networks have emerged either as practical coordination bodies or as temporary alliances. However, these initiatives often go under the radar as they do not have formal and permanent structures. Participants in the interviews indicated that being informal is a disadvantage to being visible to donors. While some donors (like the EU and the German government) do recognise the presence of informal networks and informal members of formal networks, they channel the bulk of their funds and support through formal bodies. Lacking a deeper analysis on the breadth and scope of civil society networks have biased funding and reduced access to smaller and more informal civic initiatives. For the latter category of civic actors talking about networking is seen as wishful thinking without tangible parameters for future realization if donor resources did not support catalysing such efforts.

Despite the absence of concrete data on networking and CSO-to-CSO cooperation, all existing indicators point to a gradually expanding trend. This was reflected in the survey, where participants indicated that collaboration is becoming more common. But they stressed that most collaboration efforts are happening with organisations from other cities often in the same geographical area of control and less frequently from other geographic areas. Collaboration in that sense entailed some division of funds, and cooperation on knowledge sharing and exchange of experience but no close coordination over implementation on the ground. The negative competition between civic actors' limits collaboration on specific projects in the same area. Lack of trust was given as a common reason for not engaging in the implementation of shared projects. This was highlighted on security grounds, fear of incompatible accounting and administrative procedures, and inability to manage reputational risks and benefits. Some participants stressed the role of the donors in discouraging networking in the beginning by "supporting one area and excluding other areas which created in the period from 2011 to 2017 a feel of exclusivity and division and discouraged people to link to each other" as was indicated by a participant in one of the focus groups.

From the donor side, there was a clear understanding that the old way of supporting NGOs was not sustainable and was not delivering a broader impact. Most donors' KIIs indicated an awareness that previous modalities of collaboration with civil actors on a project-by-project basis were not only creating harmful competition but were not able to feedback into a collective strategy to aggregate impact. The need to shift towards supporting networks and collective action is becoming more urgent to limit duplication of resources and deliver capacity-building programs on a broader scale to a wider pool of recipients. The fear of duplication of efforts was a very strong sentiment across the board among donors, especially EU member States.

The focus on the due diligence of humanitarian aid did not prioritise support to NGO networks as a bridge between the divided territories of Syria and as a tool to support an emerging collective civic society. In effect, ***efforts to support networking are currently still in the realm of sectoral economies of scale as well as exchange of knowledge and experience rather than a strategic option to support the civic space as a whole.*** In turn, the Syrian civic actors are starting to pick up clues from the donors about a new trend in funding and are willing to explore it. But they remain hesitant as to the full potential of the trend.

Despite the lack of trust and the fear of competition, the trend to move towards more networking is evident. The mistrust in the politics of other CSOs notwithstanding, CSOs working in other geographies are more trusted than those from within the same operational space. Collaboration and networking are still mainly seen in the context of sharing funds, knowledge exchange and co-learning rather than developing solid implementation platforms and possibly merging CSOs into more effective robust entities. As one of the participants said: "In the last two years we have seen donors move towards encouraging partnerships and collaborations among NGOs. This is neither good nor bad. You have to see it in light of who is collaborating with whom. You may see two organisations, one from Damascus and one from Sweidaa, working together. But you do not see two organisations really working together in the same city such as Duma"; implying that collaboration was still at the level of creating parallel projects and not joint ones.

While some donors, mainly the EU, have started to support collective work among NGOs (this was evident and appreciated by many participants), it was noted that the UN prefers to support individual initiatives and NGOs. The net result is capping the growth capacity of civic actors. One of the main hindrances to supporting networks is that the legal status of organisations differs in the different parts of the country, even in the same political geography of control. To avoid having to deal with informal CSOs, the UN delivering donor funds in many parts of Syria have "put the smaller and more informal organisations in an unbalanced relationship of power with the more established and bigger NGOs," as one participant expressed.

One participant in a focus group said, "networking and the formation of NGO federations require some level of a homogenised legal status, this is very difficult, each organisation is sitting in a different place, and they each have a different legal status." Different donors also have different legal definitions of networks. The vetting of recipient NGOs is conducted on a one-by-one basis. This is generally straightforward and follows clear guidelines that may differ from one donor to the next. Going into broad networks that may be supported collectively or individually by different donors poses significant legal and due process challenges.

The need to network for advocacy and policy purposes was less prominent in the discussions, where visibility with donors is the highest. Coordinating efforts for advocacy in such platforms as the Brussels conference is opening new ways of collaboration on sectoral issues of the humanitarian field. However, competition for advocacy messages is at the same time, competition for funding. Here again, the smaller and more informal actors (noting that many of the actors inside Syria in all geographies have limited possibilities of formalising their status) are disadvantaged. ***Advocacy in other non-humanitarian civic areas is still highly contentious as it borders on political messaging where CSOs have diverging views***.

Participants in the KIIs and the FGDs from the civil society, tend to put the blame for the lack of coordination among themselves on the donors. They see that the donors' financial modalities and vetting procedures tended to discourage collaboration. Also, the fact that many donors were hesitant to fund work directly in Government held areas meant that networking in those areas was weaker until recently. Many donors on the other hand, are starting to realise the importance of networking and some (like the EU, some EU member states and the UK) are taking active roles to change into new modes of funding that encourage networking, however, their perception is that the Syrian CSOs themselves are reticent to collaborate despite their best effort in the recent past to change modalities of funding.

The good opportunity that was tracked in both Syrian CSOs and donors' responses is a willingness to move in a new direction towards supporting more networking and an appreciation that it is an important way to scale up and diversify operations, transfer know-how, and create legitimacy. The EU is perceived as a key potential convener. Many participants see the need for the EU to break the ice among them and to encourage more collaboration both across the geographies but also within the same geography.

The role of the EU as a convener for broader networking was also noted by other donors and EU member states. The EU's recent effort to create convening places for Syrian civil society such as the civil society virtual platforms and the Brussels conference were noted highly among other donors (EU member states and other regular donors participating in the conference alike). The need to avoid duplication of resources is a problematic concern for many donors. Rationalising the use of resources and maximising the understanding of the terrain are of high relevance to other donors. The EU was generally perceived as a pioneer for any new trend towards more networking and collaboration that would help in that regard.

However, despite the understanding of the need to engage in more networking and collaboration, few had any practical ideas on how it could be done. Most of the proposals for advancing collaboration focused on developing streamlined money transfer channels to the different parts of the network, an effort that often runs into various logistical obstacles. Indeed, ***setting up practical money transfer channels that could work with the banking over-compliance with transfers of funds to different parts of Syria may be one way where the EU can provide an important entry-point to incentivise Syrian CSOs to collaborate***. But on the other hand, this may send the reverse message where collaboration is often restricted to more formalised NGOs who have access to banking services outside Syria and use informal cash transfers to move resources to their partners

on the ground. The smaller actors and the non-formal civic actors wanted to see opportunities where the collaboration with larger CSOs is focused on creating more trust and space for them to work and access funds in a more direct manner. In either case, the EU's reputation and potential role is perceived positively as a potential catalyst for new forms of collaboration.

Key takeaways from this section are:

- There is a growing interest on the part of both civic actors and many donors to expand incentives for collaboration and networking.
- The current focus on networking as a way to increase knowledge exchange and building capacities is a good entry point. But it should be complemented with more incentives for operational collaborations and possibilities to develop a shared advocacy position for the role of the civil society as a whole.
- Many donors expressed interested in supporting more collaboration among CSOs. Their main need is to avoid duplication of resources, but also to rationalise the use of resources and scale up impacts. However, few donors understand networking and collaboration as clear objectives in their own right beyond the limitations of immediate targeted deliverables.
- The EU is positioned to play a major role as leader to support new trends for collaboration and networking. The will is there. However, the EU is concerned not to lead from the front. It is awaiting signals from civic actors themselves to move more energetically in this direction. The signals were coming from the respondents. ***The EU should consider more proactive policy to support networking across and within geographies, on operational issues as well as advocacy. Creating channels for transferring funds safely between the geographies and circumventing banking overcompliance could be a good entry point to enhance the EU role as a broker for civil society networks.***

b. Relationships with the local community

There is a general confusion among the respondents as to the definition of community and society. This is also reflected in their definition of civil society. However, there is an agreement that this confusion is limiting the work of civil society in general and affecting the CSOs' relationship to the communities they try to represent and serve. The experience of most civic actors working with communities is recent and subject to the urgency of responding to a crisis situation that has continued to evolve very rapidly over the last 12 years.

This lack of agreement on the role of civil society within its wider societal context is posing serious existential questions in the last two years. Most conflict lines have frozen, leaving communities fragmented, dispersed and uncertain about the social ties that held these communities together in the past or may hold them together in the future. One participant in a focus group expressed this in the following manner: "There is a persistent gap between civil society and local communities. The general feeling is that civil society is more concerned with the funding sources than the communities". Even when participants expressed a positive relationship to communities, they could not define what it entails. Comments were often general such as: "We have learned to engage with local communities and bring them on board in our work". But there is no agreement on what it means to work with communities.

The way the relationship is defined between civic actors and communities is indicative of two types of trends. On the one hand, there is a degree of separation, in which civic actors talk about communities as a "them" not as a "we". Thus, statements such as "we are engaging them" and "they are accepting and understanding our role" are very common. This creates a feeling that communities are composed of groups of beneficiaries such as "youth" or "women". One participant from Raqqa expressed it this way: "civil society organisations had a lot of resources to provide humanitarian services to communities and this tilted the balance of power in their favour in the eyes of local communities, they started to be perceived as a form of authority". Few participants presented their work with society in the present voice of the community. One notable exception are informal organisations that were born directly out of local community needs and had little access to donor funds. "At first, no one intervened and came to us to ask what we are doing as a community group; we saw opportunities and moved forward," said one activist from a small CBO. Other participants had a more distant

relationship to local opportunities. They complained that they either have to follow donor-driven agendas, or at best have to conduct needs assessments following donor mandated formats. They complained that "donor-led processes did not consider real local community needs".

On the other hand, the question of "needs" reduced communities into passive receivers of aid. There is no recognition of communities' innate resources and local networks and processes, and the complex (and often contradictory) composition of local communities is reduced to a limited set of parameters of basic needs. The multi-layers of social networks and institutions, from the local to the national, are absent from the discourse. The larger social context was described as "highly fragmented because we can no longer access other areas". This means the social is reduced to the local, and a very narrow definition of the local at that. The institutional thickness of society is not on the radar. Institutions are more often understood as competing with civil actors rather than acting as representatives of the communal agency.

Indeed, if anything, there is a recognition that society has "lost its orientation after 2011". There was a lot of hope that expanding civil society actors would provide new forms of organising and representing society. But this did not materialise. Instead, there was a period of chaos driven by the changing dynamics and the need to act quickly in response to dire new needs on the ground. Only recently have some actors understood the gap that existed. They realised that "it takes time to understand the role of civil society in the society at large."

For Civil society actors, the donors are often to blame for this dichotomy between civic actors and their communities. Their focus on supply-side delivery of aid and shunning away from supporting long-term development meant that many civic actors were transformed into "delivery operators not different from the private sector," as one participant put it. Some spoke of the difference it makes when funding is made flexible to have a "developmental focus". This would allow for longer-term engagement with local actors and engaging them in developing ideas and implementing them. In essence a step beyond the classic view of community participation as a linear process of needs assessment, contribution to the delivery of pre-defined plans, and at best, contribution to monitoring and evaluation efforts. However, bottom-up approaches focused on the local level was also perceived as a precursor to dividing the country over the long-run. Important as it is to focus on the local level and to engage local actors in decentralized manner, civil society actors want to keep a strong focus on the whole of Syria and on ensuring that facts on the ground would not hamper the political process and lead to de-facto fragmentation.

There was, on the other hand, a willingness on the part of some donors to shift the modality of aid to be responsive to putting communities at the helm. But there was also a concern as to how demand-side aid would work and how to ensure due diligence for such work. Implicitly some donors are also concerned that "development aid" may infringe on red lines preventing them from engaging in "reconstruction" in Syria before a political transition is achieved. One key recent trend is in the way some international organisations have started to test new approaches to aid in Syria in the form of area-based programming. This is opening possibilities to look at communities as partners and not as recipients of aid; partners capable of mustering their own resources and contributing to their own development and recovery efforts. This new trend, promising as it is, is still not on the radar of most civil society actors, and there was no evidence from the interviews that donors have started to communicate with CSOs about it. The few pilots run by the UN, may have changed the internal tone between some UN bodies and the donors, but it has not been transformed into a visible policy that can guide future work.

To sum up:

- There is a general confusion of what constitutes community and the role of civil society actors within the social order.
- The current general mode of intervening and supporting programming to work with communities is still mainly top-down and supply sided.
- The impact of aid on communities is not empowering to expand the institutional thickness and connectivity of communities. Instead, it may have contributed to fragmentation and dependency.
- The awareness to move to demand-side approaches from the bottom-up is evident in the language of both civic actors and donors. Modalities are still embryonic and require considerable redefinition

of the partnership between donor and civil society actors to create sustainable, development-oriented interventions that are owned by the communities and their local institutions.

- The EU is launching new calls for proposal with this idea in mind. However, in depth dialogue is still needed to define how bottom-up demand side projects would be conceptualised, implemented and monitored.

c. Dealing with de-facto powers

Different de-facto powers have different approaches to dealing with civil society. However, all de-facto authorities perceive CSOs negatively and see them as competitors or as challengers to their legitimacy. Yet, civil society actors have become indispensable in the running of community affairs; de-facto powers have come to learn that they have to deal with the phenomenon. That is, de-facto powers, including some State institutions, have developed the means to monitor and usurp civil society. They can claim the results of their work and build legitimacy off it. To that extent, they still see their interest in allowing some space for civil society actors to operate, although they might change this at any moment, should this interest disappear or the balance of legitimacy with CSOs becomes tilted in favour of the CSOs.

De-facto powers can utilise CSOs to help fill gaps in service provision. This could be seen clearly in NWS and NES, and to a lesser extent in GHAs. The Syrian government, for example, is unable to provide enough humanitarian relief and understands that in some cases it has to let aid go through channels acceptable to donors, so it is allowing CBOs to provide services under the umbrella of SARC and the Syria Trust, in order to keep its grip over these organisations. NW and NE authorities are still far away from being able to provide humanitarian or developmental services, including education and health, and hence they are allowing NGOs to operate in these areas. Consequently, civil society becomes part of legitimising these authorities as they help in stabilising these areas.

For most de-facto authorities, CSOs are a critical but indirect channel of communication with the donor community and the Western powers specifically. Authorities in all regions look at CSOs as a way to show goodwill towards the West and an indirect channel of negotiations, whether current or future. "The strategy that local authorities use aims to penetrate this civil space for their interests, in order to show that there is a democratic experience," said a participant from the NE. Yet, in the reverse direction, these CSOs are perceived as instruments of soft power for Western donors and must be closely watched, and occasionally cracked down to also send messages to the Western donors.

This mixed relationship between de-facto powers and CSOs poses a threat and opportunity at the same time. On the one hand, the need for humanitarian aid can facilitate CSOs' access to all regions and can be used as leverage for creating more space for other types of CSOs like the ones working on civic values, youth political awareness, and women political participation. Partnerships between humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding organisations, under the "triple nexus" theme could be an entry point for support. "The intervention of the de-facto authorities is a constant reality, and this will inevitably affect the future of civil work. Although there are things that could be exploited. By closely monitoring changes in the de-facto authorities. These authorities are in a state of constant change and there is always a way to deal with them in the end," said one participant from the Idleb region.

CSOs bring in new ideas and ideologies that counter the de-facto powers' narratives and hegemony on society. For example, CSOs working on issues related to political awareness, HR, and democratisation are looked at with suspicion especially in NW and GHAs. CSOs working in the NW on issues like empowering youth and political participation, or gender equality (to be distinguished from work on strengthening women capacities and rights that are less in direct confrontation with traditional Muslim values) are seen as competitors to the narrative of the de-facto powers. Thus, they perceive that CSOs are becoming a power that tries to delegitimise them and disrupt their relationship with their constituencies. "Legitimacy is under constant challenge, you build legitimacy through service delivery to communities, and this undermines the legitimacy of the authorities," said one participant in a focus group.

Moreover, CSOs working on documenting human rights violations are seen as direct enemies to the de-facto power. One human rights activist said: "de-facto powers see civil society as an enemy that is trying to expose them…In the NE currently, there is clear discomfort and dissatisfaction with our work in the discourse of the Autonomous Administration, as a result of our work on a report in the past period on cases of torture in the Autonomous Administration". But in all parts of Syria, the work on HR is perceived by the de-facto powers as a challenge to their legitimacy given the CSOs' links to the international public opinion.

On the other hand, CSOs are also seen by authorities and de-facto powers as a way to bring in hard currency and fuel the devastated economy. Moreover, CSOs can provide employment opportunities and are constantly pressured to hire people close to these powers. One participant in the NE said: "There is a lot of corruption and indirect interference in the hiring policies and the distribution of aid. We have managed to ward that off in the health sector as it is specialised, but in other sectors we see that the situation is very dire". In all areas, the authorities often impose direct and indirect approval processes on staffing. "The role of civil society and even basic volunteerism will remain limited if relations with Security Forces and approvals are the norm?" said a participant in a focus group from GHAs.

On the reverse side, CSOs have considerably better salary scales than local authorities and in many parts of the country, this is causing a brain drain towards CSOs. One participant from the NE said: "people are abandoning a secure fixed job with the local authorities to take employment with the CSOs". This brain drain then continues further as the salary scale of UN, INGOs and NGOs working outside Syria is even higher. Over the long run, the country is losing all qualified human resources. But indirectly, this is acceptable to many de-facto authorities as those who leave are sending remittances and contributing to the local economy indirectly.

An important entry point to mitigate the relationship with de-facto powers is to exploit how these actors are in need for contacts with the West as well as for legitimacy and economic support. The civic space can be slowly expanded through direct and indirect negotiations with de-facto powers. "There is a need to devise solutions with the Syrian authorities...I would like to talk about the experience of [my organisation] who worked on media and social responsibility but presented it in the name of countering hate speech. If we had said that this project talks about the ethics of the press, the authorities would have rejected it," said one participant from GHAs. Working on journalism or media is a prohibited subject in that area, while social responsibility is not. They added:

> "*This is a detour. It is possible for civil society organisations to use these tactics to bypass usual minefields of working under this authority…The European donors have possibilities; they can step forward and open a line with the regime to negotiate on civil society and development issues, just as the United Nations did with its humanitarian interventions. Damascus is certainly interested and has an interest in pumping the money into the country. Of course, this requires creative boldness from the European Union and negotiation skills so as to fund development without being partners in restricting civil society. They should avoid that the government imposes its conditions on them in absolute terms.*"

To conclude:

- De-facto powers see CSOs as challengers to their legitimacy, ideologies and ability to control their constituencies. Yet, these powers need CSOs to deliver aid and services.
- CSOs have devised different tactics to mitigate the situation and manoeuvre around the political, security and corruption risks of dealing with de-facto powers by playing on the moral role of serving the needs of their communities.
- The EU could open more dialogue with CSOs on how to strengthen their bargaining power with de-facto powers and enhance their protection. This should be done carefully not to put CSOs under more harm and scrutiny but thinking about the "triple nexus" of humanitarian, development and peace building work could be an important entry point.

d. The civic space

There is no agreed definition of what constitutes a civic space. The spectrum of ideas ranges between two ends. On the one hand, there is the Gramscian conceptualisation of the vital forces of society to mitigate between individuals and the State, a space that shields society from the infiltration of the State but is implicitly implicated in legitimising the hegemony of the State[43]. In this conceptualisation, the civic space is neither good nor bad, its density will reflect the full spectrum of the social order and that density should be its most important safeguard. On the other hand, there is the more liberal definition focusing on the formalisation of that space as an essential element of a democratic system. In this latter approach, normative values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights take precedence in defining what is civic and what is not.

The term "civic space" itself is a recent conceptualisation of ideas circulating for the last two centuries. In its most recent usage, it reflects not only the degree of restrictions imposed on civic actors (protection), but on the enabling environment that surrounds them (promotion). The OECD's definition of the civic space stands on four pillars:

- Civic freedoms: reflecting the protection of civil rights and the safeguards for access to knowledge and information.
- Participation: reflecting the bottom-up inclusion of citizens and CSOs in critical decisions, which also involves their access to resources to participate.
- The enabling environment: reflects the ability of CSOs to access funding and tax breaks, capacity development opportunities, etc.
- Media and digital rights: which was expanded greatly in recent years to focus on personal freedoms and privacy on the net as well as access to technology.

These pillars collectively will need to be enshrined in laws, policies, institutions and practices. In essence creating a broad network of normative instruments to protect and promote civic actors.[44] However, ***the normative formulation of civic space reflects Western liberal biases focused on idealised definitions of CSOs as NGOs. It would be hard to apply these norms in the case of a country experiencing conflict and the breakdown of the institutional and regulatory order. In this latter case "civicness" must be defined in more practical ways focusing on the ability of civilians to provide services to ensure societal survival and mitigation the impact of conflicts***. Sometimes, it may even evolve chances of peace building.[45]

While there are various internationally recognised methodologies to measure the civic space in any given country, such as the OECD's universal periodic review,[46] and the Civicus Monitor[47], these approaches are normative and do not reflect the local understanding and constraints in war torn countries. Instead, the report authors opted to use the civic actor's own understanding of the "civic space" in which they operate. Conditions for a viable civic space are dismal in most parts of Syria (this was established a priori based on an extensive secondary literature review), most approaches to measuring civic spaces would have returned what was already very well known. We felt that it would be more important to track how civic actors manoeuvre in their ecosystem, mitigate the risks and restrictions, and develop their own resources and enabling conditions. In essence the approach used was to map the key defining elements of local "civicness" that exist on the ground, instead of adopting a normative scale that would assert the vanishing civic space in a country ravished by conflict.

The participants in the KII's and focus groups reflected the confusion of defining the role of civil space in Syria. Many leaned on the more liberal definition of civil society. They considered that the civic space

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43 - Gramsci, Antonio. (1988). *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935.* Edited by David Forcacs. Schoken Books: New York. P. 306 ff.

44 - https://www.oecd.org/fr/gov/gouvernement-ouvert/civic-space.htm
Last visited 8/27/2022

45 - De Waal, Alex, et al. (2020). *A Theory of Change for Violent Political Marketplaces.* London School of Economics, Conflict Research Programme: London.

46 - https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/civic-space.htm
Last visited 8/27/2022

47 - https://monitor.civicus.org/
Last visited 8/27/2022

that existed between State and individual citizens prior to 2011 to be non-civil. They stressed that the State harnessed local community allegiances through CBOs or what is dubbed in the Syrian official description of NGOs as "mujtama'a 'ahli". They acknowledge that the initial urgency to fulfil social roles monopolised by the State before 2011, led to an unprecedented situation with many positive and negative trends.

They also recognise the confusion that accompanied that initial euphoria. While this opinion is dominant among activists in non-government-controlled areas and in the Diaspora, it was also present among many actors operating in government-controlled areas. One participant from the GHAs said: "We did not have civil society in Syria. We have individuals and initiatives…Even today we still lack a real civic space". Civic actors today have a critical assessment of confining civil society to an intellectual elite as has happened in the Damascus spring (2000-2001). One participant said: "We made mistakes and we learned; we trust that society as whole will learn from its mistakes and adjust, civil society is about the whole of society" reflecting on a general trend in the FGDs. The confusion over the definition of civil society and civic space was a critical factor in dividing civic actors at first, but today they are more willing to let aside a priori definitions and focus on the impact of civic practices.

Many of the State institutions and de-facto powers have learned to usurp the impact of the work of civic actors to enhance their legitimacy. But they open and close the space at will to assert their presence and to ensure that any social benefits provided by civic actors are contributing to the legitimisation of the political authority that controls the opening and closing of the civic space. Civic actors understand that equation very well and have learned to mitigate it. While they see a potential role to play in the future as a collective civic force on both political and social grounds, they strive at the moment to keep the space available to them open. A participant in one of the focus groups from the GHAs expressed the sentiment in the following manner: "Civil society organisations need to be visionary; we need to look at the future and do the reverse engineering. We need to pick up on all signals, be it weak or strong, use them to draw approaches that can progressively supersede our current predicament if we want to move to the future."

To understand "civicness" in a conflict context one cannot count on the legal framework to provide protection but must look at how civic actors manoeuvre around legal restrictions to expand the space available to them. The law for associations and foundations is the product of a highly centralised State policy issued during the union with Egypt in 1958. The law has not changed ever since but the space available under this highly restrictive law changed considerably, as has been noted in the historical introduction. Likewise, the new legal frameworks that emerged in non-government-controlled areas are either limited in their vision of the role of civic institutions or express fear of an emerging civic voice to challenge de-facto powers.

In all geographies of control, the legal framework is mainly concerned with controlling the flow of resources to civic actors. In dire economic conditions where the official and quasi-official institutions are limited in their ability to distribute services and goods, the emergence of an actor with substantive resources that may establish an independent source of legitimacy and patronage is worrisome to de-facto powers. Currently the largest flows of funds are going to humanitarian CSOs. The legal frameworks have been primarily twisted to ensure de-facto powers are in the know if not actually commanding the distribution of aid. They issued permanent and makeshift legal ordinance focusing on charitable organisations, demanding high scrutiny of their work.

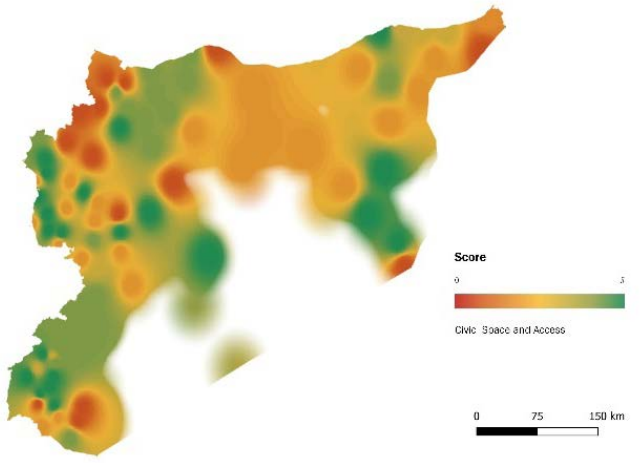
Non-charitable causes are not clearly defined by new legal ordinances, but de-facto formal and informal powers are aware and controlling of actors working on such causes. There is no clear legal status for HR organisations, development organisations, WR groups, peace building initiatives, cultural foundations, policy watch dogs, etc.; most operate on the ground with the assumption that their work is likely to trigger occasional objections, and more serios threats. "If we are no longer relevant for the delivery of aid, we are either expelled or assassinated" said a participant from NW.

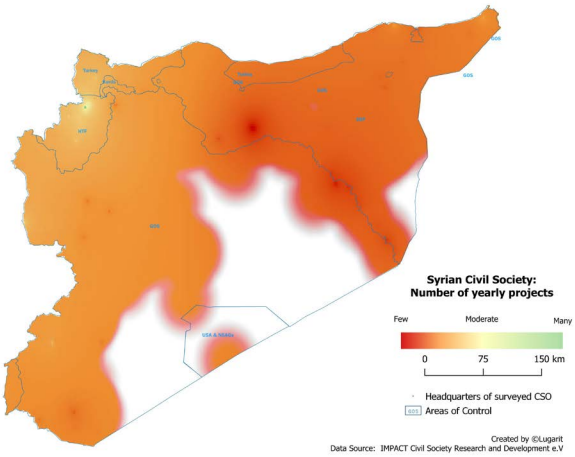
Yet, despite the lack of a protective legal environment, CSOs have coped. In GHAs they have come to accept working under more powerful GONGOs or State approved organisations like the Syria Trust or the SARC. They have been able to forge new grounds to operate officially or semi-officially provided they are careful about the existing red lines and ensure they do not show too many funds at their disposal. "The authorities will track the money at our disposal," said one participant.

Another area of concern is for civic actors to be perceived as a form of soft power for Western intervention in Syria. One participant from GHAs said: "the authorities see us as a Trojan horse for the West to infiltrate Syria". Yet, the absence of a protective laws does not negate the ability to manoeuvre around restrictions. One respondent said: "We do not have a formal way to coordinate with the State, they do not take us seriously, so we work without their assistance, they pretend that we do not exist as long as we keep a low profile, and

they are informed of what we do…The lack of clear legal definition of civil society certainly limits our ability to work as civil society, but we work with the hope that one day we can forge a more enabling environment."

This is still a risky operation, but civic actors understand the risks involved. Secondary literature reviews are full of anecdotes showing how the legal framework is often manipulated. In a comparative manner in terms of handling non-charitable causes, the space available for actors in government-controlled areas can often supersede many of the non-governmental controlled areas. (See Figure1). Focusing on strictly normative definitions of the legal framework often misses this type of "civicness."





Media perception of civic space and access for CSOs to work. Hundreds of media posts were reviewed and a grade from 1-5 was given for news emanating from about 110 cities and towns in Syria to assess the openness of the civic space as perceived in the media.

The carrying capacity of CSOs represented by the number of projects per year carried by CSOs. Data was extracted from the IMPACT data set.

Figure 1: The normative understanding of restrictions facing civil society are interpreted differently on the ground in the different geographies. CSOs find ways to evolve their access despite restrictions. The areas of the country with the largest number of projects carried by CSOs every year (NW) show the lowest degree of access! Definitions of access are subjective, and a closer examination of civic space is needed to understand how CSOs forge access despite restrictions.

In non-government-controlled areas, there is a feeling of competition with the legitimacy of the de-facto powers. One participant said: "you cannot go to hungry people and talk to them about civil society and raise awareness about rights". For civic actors to invoke the values of civil society they have to match it with practical benefits. The authorities in the NW have understood the constraint and are often competing by "directly distributing food baskets while the civil actors are doing awareness programs," said one participant. De-facto powers are increasingly pressuring to register CSOs working in their areas. In many cases, NGOs have to allocate a percentage of their services to de-facto authorities to distribute as part of their patronage process.

In the NE, the authorities have issued a form of regulation for charities. It is highly controlling. But many other forms of non-charitable organisations have continued to defy the restrictions. However, although many of them are still operational, "quite a few have reduced their operations and only the shell of their previous operations is still there" said one activist from the area. Organisations from outside the area are not given permissions, which means they must "work in secret there the same as in government-controlled areas," said one activist. While local organisations are tolerated and given some space, the restrictions on access to funding mean that most organisations are having difficulty retaining their staff.

Access to funding is the reverse side of the legal framework. Donors often use their funding to impose red lines on work in certain areas. "We cannot work in areas controlled by terrorists; we cannot work in areas controlled by Turkey because some donors do not want to legitimise its presence in Syria; where do they want us to work?" said one activist. The dependency of NGOs on Western donors has indirectly imposed a different type of restrictions as donors often impose red lines to ensure that funds are not legitimising certain actors like the government of Syria or certain de-facto powers.

Restrictions on the part of some donors end up sending ripple effects to discourage CSOs from engaging other donor funds in these areas. The EU is one of the bigger donors in the NW. ***If the EU signalled red lines on a particular topic or area, most CSOs would consider this as a sign against seeking funds on such projects even with other donors for fear of losing EU funding. This is often perceived by civic actors as another form of restriction. From the perspective of civic actors red lines by donors are a form of restriction***. One activist from government-controlled areas framed it as such: "If the EU wants us to operate more proactively, they should remove their legal restrictions on us and allow us to cover the cost of the fuel that is essential for our operation even though we buy it from the government, we have no way around that". The sentiment is similar in other areas. "Donors prohibit us from dealing with certain de-facto powers, and then we see them going directly to these powers and negotiating with them," said one activist from the NW. The imposition of red lines is perceived to be an arbitrary restriction not different from the arbitrary restrictions imposed by de-facto authorities.

However, the "civicness" of a space is not only defined by the legal framework alone. Another factor contributing to the strength of the civic space is its ability to present itself as relevant. Relevance to society is key to protecting civic actors. "Many times, they wanted to control us," said an activist from the NW, "but we were delivering such vital services to the community, we had the community behind us, and they had to back down." Yet, the issue is not only about delivering services as the respondent continued to say: "If you do not work with the community and respect its values you do not get its support, many organisations were delivering services, but they never earned that respect, as a result they could never sustain their presence."

In the NE, the situation is no different. Activists asserted that the de-facto powers tried to earn the respect of communities through creating some level of democratic reforms (elections and communes), but communities needed more direct presence and civil society provided a more engaged form of participation. "People are more understanding of the language of civil society and more accepting of its role in a democratic transformation," said one activist, but then stressed: "Despite the fact that there is still a gap between NGOs and local communities, people can tell when an NGO is truly civic or is there simply to access funding."

While the same condition is not translated to government-controlled areas, civil society has come to be such an essential part of survival for communities; this has created a relatively general level of protection to the role played by these actors. One activist reflected on this: "Our relationship to the government is not defined by a legal code, but by a moral one". The value of civic actors for the survival of communities is not something authorities can easily negate. Authorities may go after one person here or another group there, but the space as a whole is now important to the State.

Civic actors have also contributed to the wellbeing of society in most areas of Syria. Their performance was not always homogenous and certainly not without its problems and mistakes are acknowledged by activists from all parts of Syria. They have provided employment (either directly as CSO staff or indirectly in the projects they have created). However, their impact could have been much bigger. A great deal of restriction on the work of civil society in Syria is defined by the donors' risk averseness to avoid reputational risks. Project cycles are short, unsustainable and many times donors cut funding just before projects reached maturity. Changing donor priorities, focusing on relief rather than local development, supply side thinking, have all contributed to limiting the impact of civil society work in Syria. Aid in Syria rarely creates sustainable economic multipliers or positive externalities.

The aid funds that go through Syrian civil society hands (either directly to support their projects and work, or indirectly as delivery structures for humanitarian aid) is substantive. Yet***, no donor interviewed was able to provide an accurate estimation of how much of their aid goes to civil society actors. So, it was impossible to articulate a guestimate of their collective impact, and therefore their collective power. Donors in general were quite aware of how aid to civil society might have an impact on the relevance of the civic space now and in the future. But that awareness did not translate into a clear theory of change with measurable indicators***. Donors interviewed often spoke of the expansion or shrinking of civic space in Syria as personal reflections based on heuristic observations but could not define the objective criteria or instruments they rely upon in their assessments.

Many donors have the empowerment of civil society as a clear objective in their strategies on Syria. The EU, in particular, is very forward on stating its objective to support civil society. However, the interpretation of what that means was not often very clear or well-articulated to the Syrian civil society. "Donor aid is trendy," said one activist, reflecting the sentiment of most respondents. Civil society actors lament that they are not involved in the "planning and strategizing of aid." The Brussels process is a first step towards reversing that relationship. But many participants feel that information flows in one direction only. One participant said: "We

do not have a true partnership…we feel that the conference was to collect information about the ground, but we do not know how that information is analysed and used."

In short when discussing the civic space in Syria the following points are key:

- Standard definitions of civic space based on normative models (focusing on protection and promotion) will not be able to capture the nuances of how civic actors survive in a war-torn country. Focusing on how "civicness" emerges, survives and gradually opens up spaces for itself might be more useful.
- The legal framework in all parts of Syria is very restrictive, but civic actors learned to manoeuvre around restrictions, by focusing on building their relevance to communities. By creating a moral force within their communities some CSOs were better at forging space for themselves. Shifting from dealing with authorities and de-facto powers on legal terms to the realm of moral values have not prevented occasional infringements on the civic space but have created a general level of acceptability for the role played by civic actors.
- EU and other donors' red lines in Syria are perceived as another form of legal restriction that civic actors have to manoeuvre around. In their ecosystem, the expansion or shrinking of civic space is about their ability to work with their communities. Restrictions are restrictions no matter who issues them.
- The EU and other donors are opening up new channels to communicate with Syrian actors collectively. But there is still no clear articulation of objectives, sustainability of focus and aggregation of impacts. The creation of a civic space needs "reverse engineering" to ensure that funds are contributing to more than their immediate intended uses and creating multipliers to support civil society over the long run to forge a democratic civic space out of the current timid experiments in "civicness".

5- The capacity of civil society

As with everything else related to civil society in Syria, the standard definitions of capacity in the third sector hardly apply. Various surveys have been conducted by IMPACT through its regular mapping of CSOs in Syria.[48] Their latest survey has important references on the size and internal structure of a pool of almost 800 NGOs. The bulk of these has an average of 6-10 members working full time. Only about 20% had more than 30 members. However, it is very hard to distinguish between volunteer and professional members. The inclusion of women seems to be problematic across the board; smaller organisations tend to be less accessible to women. Most indicated having the essential administrative and accounting departments, but few have other functions related to development, managing volunteers or M&E.

While many respondents were ready to admit that they have only started to focus on institutional capacity, many had a perception that their capacity is linked primarily to funding. Many donors, on the other hand, seemed worried that Syrian NGOs have an unrealistic understanding of their capacity and ability to absorb funds. New trends in donor thinking are starting to emerge focused on capacity building for Syrian civil society. This section of the report will focus on the main aspects of the capacity question: access to resources, knowledge capacity, M&E, advocacy and communication.

a. What resources do civil society actors have?

When talking about resources, most participants focused on funding. The IMPACT survey found that most NGOs in government-controlled areas receive their funding primarily from UN bodies, while many in non-government-controlled areas receive their funding through intermediary INGOs. In either case, access to funding seemed problematic. Big CSOs were lamenting the scaling back of funding, the smaller CSOs were lamenting that the big NGOs get the lion share of funding, and everyone was concerned that the Syrian CSOs have a hard time with the logistics of accessing funds.

The problem of sanctions, access to banking and ability to transfer resources to their operations was getting more difficult. Anecdotal stories about transfer of funds are increasingly more subject to evidence-based research.[49] The issue is on the radar of most donors, but no clarity on what to do about it is being developed either by the donors or by Syrian civil society actors. Transferring of funds is risky, non-transparent and subject to different types of transactional costs. Many of the solutions proposed by donors and participant civil society actors still revolve around procedural technicalities. The EU like most donors assesses risks on a case-by-case basis and CSOs are still looking for informal ways to handle money transfers. The collapse of the Lebanese banking sector has greatly diminished the possibilities of moving funds informally from Lebanon.

However, the issue of funding is not limited to the question of access to funding channels. Another persistent issue was the question of the unpredictability of funding cycles. Working on short project cycles prevented Syrian civil society actors from thinking long term about their programs and this was detrimental to the sustainability of their work. Most participants pointed to the problem of retaining good staff when they are not able to give them minimum safety of employment. "We have lost a great deal of our core staff, they are leaving," was a statement made by one participant echoing a general trend.

Short term project cycles also prevent CSOs from developing new and creative ideas. Little funding can be diverted for R&D and capacity building. Funding often is earmarked for delivery of specific outputs. This has left many organisations feeling that they were reduced to contractors. "NGOs are forced to behave like private

48 - Tokmanjian, Armanek. (2021). *Hubs and Bubbles: Syrian Civil Society after a Decade of Conflict*. Impact: Berlin.

49 - See for instance:
Daher, Joseph. (2020). *Invisible Sanctions: How Over-compliance Limits Humanitarian Work on Syria.* Impact: Berlin.

sector contractors" was also echoed across the board. Donor KIIs revealed that most donors are increasingly aware of the problem. They are trying to figure out creative ways to support core funding to NGOs. But for many among them the issue is still not fully developed; allocated funds for that purpose are still minimal and not often looked at favourably in policy making centres. Though the trend to move to longer project life cycles seems to have gained more currency in donor circles. It is certainly evident in the new approaches of the EU, the UK, Germany and to a lesser extent by other EU member states. The United States funding is for the most part earmarked and restricted to specific uses, making diversion of resources to support the core missions of CSOs more rigid.

Syria is allocated substantial donor funds each year. The EU and other donors put several billions of Euros for supporting humanitarian and other causes inside Syria and in surrounding countries. However, there is no clarity as to how much of these funds are actually channelled through CSOs intermediaries. The IMPACT study found that CSOs receive only a very small percentage of that basket of funds, though the study could not be sure of the exact numbers but perhaps no more than 50-70 million USD,[50] a figure that probably constitutes no more than 1.5% of the aid destined to Syria and Syrians. The interviewed donors, on the other hand, pointed to a larger proportion. Many of the interviewees pointed to figures in the range of 25% of their portfolios for Syria. The problem is that no one can actually point to clear stated references. As a result, it is almost impossible to develop a global figure, for policy purposes, on the absorption capacity of Syrian CSOs to handle funds.

However, the more troubling aspect of the resource question seems to be that donor funds occupy such a large part of the band width of both donors and civic actors, that little focus is given to other sources of funds. Some CSOs have indicated that they receive other forms of donations than donors' funds. We have little understanding of where these funds are coming, though for the most part they come from private donors (often local). Yet, nowhere in the discussion did participants reflect on their communities as a resource. ***In kind resources, volunteer human resources, community assets, etc. are not on the radar. They do not get into the accounting of most NGOs because most NGOs report their finances on a project-by-project basis to their donors***. M&E is also primarily done on a project-by-project basis and many donors are more concerned with due diligence for the accounting of their funds than with the opportunity costs of spending these funds.

This has created a sense of supply-side thinking in the civil society sector to reflect the supply thinking of most donors. Civil society actors are very aware of the magnitude of needs. Working with donors has introduced them to different methodologies of assessing needs to justify applying for funds. However, hardly anyone works on the basis of opportunity costs. While some donors have introduced more strict levels of due diligence related to assessing alternative options (business case analysis required for UK funding), the actual use of funds is rarely structured around leveraging local resources.

Furthermore, it seems that most donors are concerned with "double dipping" and the redundancy of funding. Therefore, basket funding of big projects is often dropped from the menu of options for funding NGOs. "The EU may have longer project cycles, and that is good, but because we have to deal with the project cycles of other donors like the Norwegians, the French and the Germans, it is impossible for us to steer funding into a common objective and achieve impact," said one participant in a focus group from the NE.

To summarise:

- Donor funds have come to define the main source of funding for many Syrian CSOs. While many have other sources of funding like local donors and their own resources, the fact remains that Western donor funds play a major role in the survival of CSOs.
- Most of the funding streams are based on short term project cycles conceived in a supply-side logic. This does not allow for long term planning, accumulation of impacts, building up internal capacity of civic actors, nor consideration for opportunity costs. Indeed, the donors are felt to control the agenda, even though many of them are trying to break the cycle and are concerned that CSOs have no absorption capacity to move to the next level of funding modalities.

50 - Tokmajian.

- Smaller and informal groups are disadvantaged since aid is mainly delivered through more formal and substantive channels. This has created tensions and sensitivities that reflect on the lack of trust among CSOs.
- Some donors with the EU in the lead are becoming aware of the need to provide core support to CSOs to build their internal capacities, but there are no clear policies yet to define the new trend. Supporting CSOs as such is now a critical objective for many donors, but this has not translated into clear budgetary and administrative procedures. The actual share of CSOs in the donors' portfolios is not well established. As such the ability for planning long term strategies and assessing their impact is not yet possible.
- Donors need more coordination among themselves not only to eliminate duplication of aid and to cut redundancies, but to advance harmonious approaches to supporting CSOs. The EU stands to play a major role in that regard as it seems to have high credibility in the donor circles to lead on this issue.

b. What knowledge resources do civil society actors have?

Civil society boasts about the knowledge, skills, and competencies it has acquired since the beginning of the conflict. Most of the organisations operating from neighbouring countries and the Diaspora have gone through a great deal of training and capacity building exercises. In addition to the direct training, CSOs have gained a lot of experience from the heavy formal and informal interaction with donors, UN agencies, and INGOs. However, this knowledge is not fairly distributed throughout the geographies of control. One of the main reasons behind that is that many donors focused on supporting those CSOs who are in Turkey, KRG, and Lebanon, and saw those who are inside as being a risk for indirect association with the Syrian government, HTS, or SDF depending on the geography. Those who operate in NE have been generally excluded from capacity building programs and from meeting with donors as they are surrounded by the GoS, Turkey, and KRG in Erbil. One can easily see the difference in knowledge between those who operate from Gaziantep as compared to those in Idlib and Northern Aleppo; Beirut as compared to GHAs, and NE as compared to everyone else.

This divide has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, as those who were able to come to Beirut or Gaziantep lost this opportunity. Turkish and to some extent Lebanese authorities, started to hinder crossing of CSOs representatives from inside the country. KRG is even harder when it comes to receiving people from the NE.

This has created two-tier "classes" of CSOs. Those who are inside, who are deprived of training, meet virtually and rarely with the donors, and who are fully dependent on those who are outside. This divide added another schism to the already existing divides in the Syrian civil society, mainly between those who "know" and those who "don't' know". Those who know are seen by those living inside the country as the ones who monopolise knowledge, have big salaries, and access to donors. Those who are outside look at those inside as the ones who still do not know how to work, do not speak English, and might be also linked to de-facto authorities.

However, despite the fact that the pandemic has prevented people from traveling to neighbouring countries, it has opened doors for some innovative virtual solutions to conduct capacity building programs. These online solutions, though not comparable to face-to-face trainings, have helped in closing the knowledge gap between outside and inside. In addition to that, after the pandemic, almost all donors started to resort to virtual solutions to meet many who were excluded for years from any sort of communication with donors. The EU has elevated these encounters to a visible level though the Brussels conference and the virtual civil society platform. Even the Civil Society Support Room CSSR, the Women Advisory Board, and the Brussels track started to use virtual tools to reach out to broader civic networks. This led to more inclusivity by adding people from small CBOs and LIs from inside Syria and from all geographies.

It is clear however, that the knowledge gap risks could be utilised as an opportunity. Once knowledge resources are no longer defined as knowledge to access and manage donor funds, and inclusive of important knowledge on working with and accessing local communities, the knowledge gap could be equalised. If those who operate outside, whether in neighbouring countries or in Europe have access to funds, and knowledge, and those who live inside have access to communities, then the two sides form a perfect match to overcome

challenges and go beyond the constraints of negative competition towards integration and collaboration.

This needs full support from donors, who can design their funds to allow knowledge transfer from outside to the inside and allow partnerships that can help those who are outside to access communities circumventing restrictive red lines.

to conclude:

- CSOs operating outside the country have had better access to knowledge and capacity building. Those inside particularly in the NE have had considerably less chances.
- The knowledge gap is reinforcing the divide between CSOs.
- Digital tools have compensated partially but are no substitute for more direct co-learning and experience sharing through collaboration.
- Donors should not only consider the knowledge capacity of CSOs in terms of skills to write proposals and reports; they should mandate criteria for knowledge to work with and access communities. This can help to close the knowledge gap and equalise the gap between those outside and those inside. The EU has a good opportunity to expand its current initiatives in this regard and to scale them up.

c. Monitoring and evaluation systems

A great deal of focus on the part of both donors and CSOs was centred around the supply side of aid. Ensuring due diligence, non-duplication of funds, transparent resourcing, and developing human resources were at the core of discussions. To a lesser extent were the considerations of outputs and the unintended consequences of aid (through do-no-harm studies). Projects are often automatically monitored and evaluated on a project-by-project basis. The IMPACT study reflected that only a small fraction of the mapped NGOs has an M&E department. Small CSOs report to donors because it is an essential part of due diligence but do not capitalise on M&E for learning. There was little evidence in the discussions of both donors and recipients about outcomes and impacts. This is typical of supply-side logic.

The volatile conditions on the ground required a high degree of flexibility from both CSOs and donors. CSOs stressed this considerably in their discussions and the EU as well as many donors were willing to indulge this realistic need. As one participant from the NE said in a focus group: “The situation on the ground required a degree of flexibility and the response of [donors] was very high.” This meant that rigid logical frameworks may not apply, and the focus of the M&E was mainly on the good use of funds and the delivery of programs with the hope that the good intentions of these programs would be sufficient to justify them. “We need to go back to the ground,” said one activist, “the EU has supported the creation of many NGOs for various purposes, but we need to go back and ask communities about what they really need…we need to build that knowledge afresh and have the information necessary for that.”

Lacking from the chain of evidence to track impact, is the logical link between outputs and the stated global long-term objectives of both donors and CSOs. This has spurred complaints about donor funds being “trendy” as CSOs were clear to point out. This in turn, casts a strong shadow of doubt on the relevance of their work. One participant in a focus group that brought participants from all parts of Syria said: “With apologies to the EU and the great efforts they have put over ten years in Syria, they have no relevance and no weight in Syria… There is a need to engage the local communities to define their priorities be it livelihoods, social cohesion, or anything else. This is the only way to build trust”.

There is no cumulative assessment of outcomes across projects, opportunity costs, nor assessment of the gap between needs and results to develop cost-benefit indicators. To that extent it is also very difficult to develop comprehensive assessments based on the OECD-DAC criteria of relevance, impact, efficiency, efficacy, and sustainability. These criteria may be used in the M&E of individual projects but there are no global indicators to assess progress towards stated objectives for the sector at large. One participant said: “There is no real data, reports reflect donors’ political perceptions.” Another participant stressed the same

point: “We are living in an environment where the big poles controlling the Security Council push and pull us in all directions. This is why you will not find an NGO with a complete understanding of the situation, just individual project reports”.

Without a global assessment of the impact of aid there is also no clear assessment of progress towards stated objectives. Outcomes are occasionally harvested from the individual reports of projects. Donors are often conducting their own assessments without a transparent participation of civil society. “It is good they listen to us in Brussels” said one participant, who had participated in the Brussels conference, “but we feel that they collect data from us, and we do not know how that data is assessed.” Many donors, including the EU, in their interviews pointed to various internal mechanisms for aggregating their reports to their headquarters. But there was little systemic approach beyond a qualitative review of the situation.

The lack of global monitoring and evaluation processes beyond individual projects also means the lack of a systemic learning process. Participants pointed to growing experience and knowledge, mainly derived from individual assessments of what worked and what did not work on the ground. “We had to learn, it is only natural, we were new to this,” said one participant. But knowledge is not systematically harvested and assessed. It is mainly acquired by individuals working in the CSOs, not the CSOs as institutions. But these individuals eventually leave either to pursue a better life, or because the funding streams are not sustained, or because they are lured to bigger NGOs who have better funding, or for fear for their lives. The knowledge they have gained goes with them. Most donors are aware of this, and some like the EU, Norway, the UK, Germany and to a lesser extent other EU member states are starting to react by creating allowances in their budgets for long term partner NGOs to build internal capacities and develop their institutional learning. But this is not a dominant trend yet and is not accessible to smaller CSOs. The UN working with different donor funds have its own objectives to support civic actors. However, many CSOs considered the UN approach to be too narrow, and participants from outside the government held areas felt that the UN is not engaging them sufficiently on that level.

The inability to accumulate knowledge is also reflected in the CSOs’ inability to assess the current political changes around them and to change their instruments, tools, and narratives accordingly. Quick resilient responses to changing needs left little time to reflect on strategic issues. Many CSOs got stuck on certain narratives and perceptions that the donors were willing to support at first. They are hard pressed today to understand why donors are no longer supporting some of these priorities and they see it as a regression in the commitment of EU and other donors to their causes. “They tell us not to deal with one de-facto power or another, and then they go and deal with them directly” lamented one participant. The feeling of being abandoned is a perception issue that needs to be further explored between donors, especially the EU, and CSOs, as it is the result not only of donors changing priorities but also of the failure of CSOs themselves to develop more complex analysis and reading of the political context around them.

In short:

- Monitoring and evaluation systems are done on a project-by-project basis, and little resources are allocated to conducting broader assessments and cumulative impacts.
- The existing M&E processes are symptomatic of supply-side thinking and are not able to capture key issues like the gap between needs and outputs, opportunity costs, relevance, efficiency, efficacy, sustainability beyond the individual projects.
- This has led to short-sighted project cycles and a non-systematic understanding of longer-term impacts and externalities.
- CSOs feel excluded from the process of assessing the collective impact of their work and feel they are excluded from contributing to the understanding of donor objectives. There is a strong gap or communication between donors and CSOs as to the purpose of aid in Syria. This is leaving CSOs feeling that they are being betrayed by donors. The EU efforts to expand dialogue with CSOs is viewed positively in this regard, however, many participants expressed that the engagement is mainly unidirectional with the EU extracting information from them but not engaging in a two-way dialogue.
- The focus on short term project cycles left little room for learning and for institutional growth as CSOs are focused on reporting and have no resources to develop their own institutional learning. Knowledge is

dissipating with high personnel turnover. Donors need to change their modalities of aid to focus on the global impacts of their aid if that aid was to contribute to the rise of civil society and not just to deliver basic services.

d. Communication

Syrian Civil Society actors operate in a complex ecosystem with many stakeholders and constantly changing dynamics surrounding them (mostly hostile.) To that extent CSOs are expected to have strong communication strategies and functions. However, this remains far from reality. Although, some organisations have established functions or departments focusing on communication, advocacy, and media, this remains confined to big organisations in neighbouring countries and the Diaspora. Such functions are for the most part missing from small and medium organisations in general, and almost completely missing in CSOs operating in NE and GHAs. Moreover, and with a few notable exceptions, those that do have such functions, often use it in a non-strategic manner.

Syrian civic actors have for the most part linked their messaging to their a priori positions on the Syrian conflict. While some have developed advanced messaging techniques their messaging in general remains non-strategic and incapable to adapt to changing circumstances and evolving contexts. One participant working in the media field commented: "We see the same approach and the same people convening all the time, this may be some sort of laziness on the part of the CSOs, but when they go back to their communities, they are the same, because they are meeting the same people everywhere they go, this is very dangerous [for communication]". Poor messaging leads to poor advocacy plans. Some donors have also noted that most the advocacy they get is repetitive and does not bring new information. The last Brussels conference was sub optimal both in terms of the advocacy messaging of CSOs and the feedback they got from the EU in the reverse direction.

While some CSOs have sophisticated targeting techniques addressing each major stakeholder specifically, the rest of the CSOs use generic undifferentiated messaging. They are often reacting to stakeholders rather than anticipating their moves and preparing adequate messaging in a strategic and proactive manner. CSOs anticipate that donors and international officials have a full understanding of the Syrian situation and are often surprised when they meet or reach out to these officials only to discover that these people "are not omnipresent nor have a full understanding of the situation" as one respondent from the EU said.

For many CSOs communication is something they do to promote their projects. Their focus is often to keep the donors in the know of their work to ensure more funding in the future. "Many activities are meant to keep the donors happy rather than build true bridges to society," said one civil society activist in a focus group. The use of communication to build long term relations of trust with communities and to articulate community voices and empower them to reach out to the world is often absent. "We are constantly trying to finish one project cycle to start another, we do not have time to consult with communities," said one participant. And even when CSOs communicate with communities they communicate from above rather than build sustainable communication channels where the voices of the community are at the helm. Participants often use the language of "us" and "them" when talking about communities.

Building a communication strategy to define a strong "we" and to empower a broad definition of the collective identity is often missing. For many CSOs operating in the Diaspora and in the NW, there is an adherence to an ideal revolutionary value system that brings them together. But very often there is a tendency to doubt the revolutionary credentials of the others. "We have linked opposition to the revolution and CSOs to the revolution, and we have divided ourselves on that issue, the NE have their different brand of this," said one participant from the NE in a focus group. Recently, many CSOs are starting to develop a broader vision as to their collective role as civil society. ***Moving from project related messaging to promoting the civil space is still not on the radar for many CSOs' communication plans, but at the moral level there is some understanding of the need to aggregate efforts***.

Internal communication is another area where CSOs face problems. Many participants indicated that knowledge creation and communication inside the organisations is not systemic and is more related to individuals within the CSOs structure as opposed to building up knowledge and communicating it as an institution. "I see that there are individuals and activists with a strong moral sense of purpose or mission,

but their influence is limited to their individual efforts." Said an activist from the GHAs in a focus group. Another one added: "There is no true project to create a civil society, that idea is still constrained." Some CSOs are building impressive data sets and are trying to forge systemic approaches to communicating their knowledge, as knowledge. But with a very high personnel turnover, the institutional memories are being lost and with it, the ability to sustain internal communication and learning.

Of course, many of the shortfalls for the civil society in terms of communication are related to the fact that the SCS is still young and functions such as advocacy and communication are rather new to civic actors. Many other CSO management and internal steering functions are also new: Finance, auditing, project management, etc., require specialised skills when working in the non-governmental not-for-profit sector. But such skills were available in other fields and skilled professionals could be trained or qualified rather easily to carry those functions. Communication and advocacy were unheard of in Syria before. Even basic marketing and media studies were closely constrained in a country that was barely emerging from the centralised State planned economy. Qualifying professionals in this field remains a challenge.

Another critical issue with communication is related to how the media focuses on CSOs' work in Syria. In general, the media tends to focus on the negative aspects of civil society. They tend to downplay success and over emphasise the gaps and shortfalls. The areas of the country with the largest presence of CSOs ae the areas of the country with most degree of freedoms for the media to act. Ironically these areas are the ones that tend to show the most negative images of the CSOs, mainly in the NW. Other areas where CSOs' work is more scarce or new and where the media actors have less access tend to present a more favoured image of CSOs. (See figure 1.)

However, the communication gap is not only due to deficiency among CSOs' personnel. ***Donors seem to have a hard time communicating their strategies, priorities, norms and constraints. Participants in the interviews and FGDs constantly complained about their inability to understand why donors do things the way they do***. The Brussels conference is only marginally offsetting that deficiency. Spending more resources on building communication channels in a strategic manner could be of use for both donors and CSOs alike. If CSOs are to become the true voices of their communities and if they were to build scalable channels to promote peoples' needs and support democratisation and HR, then more attention and focus should be given to develop skills, instruments, and resources.

Consequently, the EU and other donors should help CSOs in overcoming this major weakness through:

- Creating knowledge sharing exercises around the function of advocacy and communication to allow Syrian CSOs to learn from each other.
- Support this function at network level to allow CSOs to share this rather scarce resource. For example, the Syrian NGO Alliance SNA has a very strong advocacy position and experience that could benefit more than 20 NGOs under this network. Similar functions could be supported in other networks.
- Create advanced capacity building programs in advocacy and communication.
- The media has not always a positive role in explaining and promoting civil society. Often the focus is on the shortfalls rather than the progress and the collective learning. NW areas that have had better access to funding and have witnessed greater achievements of civic actors are subject to more critical media reviews. Building communication channels between CSOs and the Media could help in explaining the work of CSOs to the general public.
- Develop two-way communication channels with the widest possible spectrum of CSOs and not just the ones currently being funded by donors. "Two-way communications" are the key words. SCS actors have strong feelings that the existing channels are only working one way to collect information and not to induce dialogue.

6- Current engagement with the EU

Donors form an integral part of the complex eco-system surrounding Syrian civil society today. Civic actors who participated in the KII's and FGDs attributed to donors the largest space in their reflections on opportunities, constraints and risks. Trends in donor funding frustrated many civic actors, some of whom have become wholly dependent on donors' funds for survival. But more than the impact of donors funding on specific CSOs and sectors, the participants were concerned with the collective impact of the donors on the whole civil society space. Donors often set in motion not just funding trends, but political ones as well, and this has implications for many CSOs even those who do not directly receive donor funds. The externalities of donors' actions and positioning are impactful on the civic space in general.

Donors set the tone for a culture of dependency, which makes it hard for CSOs receiving donor funds to cooperate instead of competing with each other. "There are no standards for delivery," said one participant, "this makes it hard to agree on moral standards for what is a good project." Different donors are willing to fund different types of expenditures at different rates. The issue of salaries was one clear example of how donors created unfair competition between CSOs and caused brain drain from the public sector to CSOs inside Syria, and from CSOs inside Syria to CSOs outside Syria, and from Syrian CSOs to INGOs and UN organisations. Funds for certain types of services have lower marginal costs than others which favoured certain sectors over others. One participant in a focus group expressed this issue in the following manner: "We are victims of donor trends, they first promote certain types of training and capacity building modules, naturally, these themes become favoured and enforce a certain priority for the rest of the programming."

In this section, the report will focus on the role of donors in shaping the civil society eco-system.

a. Major trends in donor-civil society relationship

Donors have different priorities and red lines to what they are willing to fund in Syria. They also have different funding modalities, mechanisms to ensure due diligence, assess risks and define delivery structures. It is virtually impossible to provide a collective reading of how donors approach their aid to SCS. However, most funding to Syrian CSOs takes place according to one of two logical frameworks:

- Support earmarked to civil society organisations as such. This is a type of funding designated to support themes relevant to civil society organisations and using modalities that are specifically defined to empower civic actors. Most of these funds are earmarked to individual civic actors, though recently donors have moved to support networks of civil society with the stated target of providing resources to encourage the aggregation of their efforts and to enhance their ability to communicate and develop collective competencies. This aid is often linked to some stated or implicit political agenda or a priori positioning of the donors. Within the EU, funding for this aim often is provided by DG-Near.
- Support to humanitarian causes partially depending on civic actors as part of the delivery structures for humanitarian aid. Different donors have different preferences for sub-granting some of their aid through CSOs. This aid must follow strict humanitarian principles of neutrality. Within the EU this aid is mainly carried by ECHO. However, aid delivered through CSOs is often confused with aid to CSOs. Donors in this case use the delivery of aid to indirectly build capacities of civic actors with the aim of developing new types of agency in society that can be evolved at a later stage as part of wider civil society.

Donors often have stated objectives to empower civil society. In the case of the EU this is clearly enshrined in its successive strategic papers on Syria. However, donors' budgets are not clear on how much of their funds serves that objective. The confusion of the two processes have reflected on confusion among civic actors. Confusion happens at two main levels. First, there is the dichotomy between politicised and neutral civil society. One participant stated it directly: "Why does the EU not want us to be involved in politics?" This has created moral competition and mutual denunciation between the civic actors funded through the first approach listed above vs. those funded through the second one. Second, there is the dichotomy between

geographies where the first modality is active alongside the second one and the geographies where only the second modality is being predominantly funded (mainly government-controlled areas). In this latter case aid is often delivered indirectly by UN organisations and INGOs, thus the relationship with donors has two-degrees of separation, and civic actors have little formal contacts to donors to understand their motives and priorities. One participant reflected on this saying: ***"It is hard for me to understand the EU, because we deal with them via intermediaries, and even the intermediaries have a hard time to understand what the donor wants. Will the modalities of granting be continued and to what extent?"***

Indeed, the UN intermediaries themselves must manoeuvre around a complex set of donor red lines. Their work in government-controlled areas is particularly fraught with risks. Some donors see support by the UN to some registered CSOs as an indirect infringement on their red lines. Some donors interpret the recovery agenda differently than others. The UN interviewees were aware that donors' restrictions around issues of reconstruction are clear but the interpretation of what is allowed under the rubric of humanitarian and early recovery is elastic. On the other hand, the donors have serious concerns about how the UN is managing their funds in Syria and the allegations of inefficient use and in some cases the misuse of funds as well as indirect channelling of resources to entities on the sanctions' lists are serious concerns that are not fully communicated in public. Some donors including the EU are willing to test the waters with more flexible interpretations, but then some of them may pull back without justification. This leaves the UN mandate to support CSOs in constant ebb and flow. In turn, UN organisations have a hard time communicating to CSOs what is possible and what is not possible through their grants. For instance, there is strong evidence that CSOs in non-government-controlled areas are aware of the new trend towards supporting networks and collective capacity building to CSOs, while in government-controlled areas there is still a feeling that the UN is the main hurdle standing against such a direction because of its vetting and sub-granting procedures.

A great deal of time and energy is consumed in obtaining donor approvals and clarifying what falls under donors' red lines. The general strategy is to have a multi-layer approach ranging from the operational at the lower level, to the capacity building at the mezzo level, to the gradual opening of the civic space and creating a more enabling environment for CSOs. However, donors often treat all three layers with one lens of concern and funding streams undergo the same vetting and due-diligence process, rendering any move to support CSOs at any level confusing and at times seemingly arbitrary. In non-government-controlled areas the funding to CSOs empowered them vis-à-vis de-facto powers and local authorities. In government-controlled areas this approach is not immediately possible and requires careful and gradual manoeuvring. But it seems most donors are not willing to invest the time and political risks to develop the upper layers of the process in a sustainable manner. A vicious cycle of donors' restrictions produces aid modalities akin to humanitarian delivery work which in turn, restrict demand by CSOs to these types of grants and reinforces the donors' perception that nothing else is possible.

This dilemma is now very clear to all. Donors (and especially the EU) are wanting to test alternative modalities of funding but are cautious not to take undue risks, the UN is aware of the need to move from humanitarian to development work if the work is to have any impact or long-term relevance, and CSOs are keen to try approaches for community engagement they have seen in other areas. The need to test new approaches, as has happened early on in non-government-controlled areas, is evident, but how to circumvent the vicious circle of humanitarianism is still a major impediment.

In addition to their focus on specific humanitarian priorities, donors have other priorities related to non-humanitarian topics such as human rights, women's empowerment, youth, democratisation, etc. Donors came to understand very quickly the need to coordinate to avoid duplication of efforts. But that coordination remains at a high level. ***There is no or little coordination on mainstreaming the modalities of aid. Donors are very attentive to each other's approaches and there is strong evidence that they learn from each other at some level, but this is not systemic and is driven more by concerns of avoiding risks rather than testing the ground for new approaches. Thus, current efforts of coordination are contributing to a culture of risk aversion and not to proactive thinking***. Donors do not share a great deal of information about their M&E systems. Thus, what gets to be shared are the stories of problems related to skipping red lines and not the stories of success for discovering new modalities that can expand aid to CSOs. The EU stands to play a very important lead role to break this vicious cycle as it has a high level of credibility to convene other donors.

To sum it up:

- The duality of aid modality to CSOs between humanitarian delivery and direct aid aimed at empowering civic actors is creating confusing dichotomies. These dichotomies are driving an ethical and operational wedge between Syrian CSOs working in the humanitarian sectors requiring them to be neutral and those working on other themes such as HR, transitional justice and democratisation, requiring them to take active roles with explicit or implicit political positions. This confusion is further exacerbated when aid is going through UN intermediaries, who have their own risks to consider.
- While donors (especially the EU) are aware of the need to shift beyond their initial aid modalities and develop funding facilities to explore greater impact in all geographies, there is still a culture of risk aversion, reinforced by peer pressure among the donor community and poor communication among them. Donors observe each other work and are often inclined to focus on the negative lessons learned to avoid risks themselves. But some donors (including some EU member states) are more inclined to push for some political agendas than others. The same schism discussed in the above bullet point that exist among Syrian CSOs also exists among donors. Donors and their partner CSOs inadvertently are supporting the same culture of peer pressure.

b. The EU positioning among other donors

The EU holds a very prominent and recognised role among donors in Syria. This was evident in the appreciation of its approach among Syrian civic actors as well as among other donors and international organisations. Syrian participants were appreciative of the EU's long-term thinking and quick response to changing conditions on the ground. Most of them were also aware of the EU's efforts to engage them through the Brussels conference and the online digital platform. The EU is seen by many in the NW and Diaspora as a main influencer of the donor community. One participant from the NW said: "They [the EU] have been more constant and persistent with their aid over the long-run; this is not always the case with other donors…but the most important thing is their ability to adapt to new conditions, they have been really good at being flexible."

However, this is less the case in the NE and in GHAs. In the latter case, participants felt that they had to deal with the EU through intermediaries, and therefore the decisions of the EU were not always clear to them. Whether such intermediaries are needed for the protection of the CSOs in those areas or to create a degree of separation to reduce the risks on the donors, there is a general feeling in the NE and the GHAs more than in other areas that decisions of the EU are not born out of real needs; they struggle to understand why the EU has decided to fund certain type of projects and not others when the intermediaries tell them that this was the decision of the EU. They also lament that funding in their areas is not geared to support their learning and growth like it is perceived by them to be the case in other areas. One respondent said: "We need more programmes to improve our capacities and develop true civil bodies, as Syrians we want to be more engaged, we have not been supported inside Syria like others outside have been."

Working through intermediaries has another negative side effect. The CSOs on the ground cannot discern what is the real will of the donors. They hear that some projects are supported by the EU while other projects are supported by other donors. But ***in reality, the only donor they know is the intermediary that is providing them with the funds. Donors are often lump summed by CSOs because the intermediaries fail to explain and communicate donor policies***. There is a feeling among CSOs on the ground that "donors" is a distant actor that they cannot comprehend, so there is a natural inclination to lump donors into an "other" or "they" category. Perhaps one of the main issues to be considered is how to explain the donor eco-system to CSOs. This could be done by helping them to map the donors, understand their priorities and objectives, and to establish regular contacts between the EU, other donors, intermediaries such as INGOs and the UN, as well as Syrian CSOs.

Other donors and UN organisations have a great reverence to the EU's role as a leader in exploring new venues for supporting CSOs in Syria. They appreciate the opportunities afforded by the EU to share knowledge and information and to create occasions for advocacy and solidarity among donors (the Brussels conference). They also feel the EU is providing leadership on defining the context and setting up standards and targets.

While not everyone sees eye to eye on the type of operations supported by the EU in Syria on non-humanitarian recovery, development, HR) issues, there is considerable appreciation for the humanitarian scope of work. Some divergence was noted between the EU's position and that of member states regarding the applicability of non-humanitarian agendas in all parts of Syria.

However, the focus on humanitarianism is now being questioned by many CSOs, donors and international organisations. The gap between funding and need is huge and many are questioning the utility of humanitarianism as the main type of aid. A great deal of need is the result of collapsing institutional and community assets and processes. Humanitarianism can hardly make a dent. A participant from NW said: "We have been working on humanitarian issues, and little attention was given to education; we are going to have a generation without education." Another one from the NW said: "People want jobs, unfortunately that is not what the donors are willing to fund." Another one said in a focus group: "The donors want to fund women programs, but no one is funding programmes for the youth, they are unable to find work and they are migrating to find work somewhere else."

UN organisations working in Syria understand the problem all too well. They see the failure of all institutional and economic functions and they directly know the impact of that failure on people's livelihoods and wellbeing. They also know from other countries that when these functions cease to exist, they will not be easily restored after the conflict is over. They have been warning that funding should be diversified to support not only strict humanitarianism but the recovery of basic institutional and economic functions. ***"Going beyond humanitarianism" was a strong message sent from many international actors operating in and around the Syrian aid eco-system. They are particularly concerned that Syria is losing ground on many of its past progress on development, be it economic or social. The degradation of education, the regression in the status of women (especially women heading households alone), the collapse of small and medium enterprises and the loss of agriculture and environmental degradation, as well as the migration of young people who cannot find jobs are things that cannot be reversed nor recuperated easily with or without a political solution for Syria***. They have strong hopes that the EU would take the lead to explore options and financial instruments that would have impact on the long-term development prospects for Syria both for their relevance for the future but also for their capacity to prevent people from slipping further into poverty today.

On all levels, the EU is looked up to as an active role model and as trendsetter. EU member states have their own visions and priorities, but they take their cues from the EU on general policy. They also consider the EU as a good convener for their shared approaches, risk assessment and understanding the local context. They see the potential of the EU to develop an aggregated facility to assess impact and disseminate strategic feedback on programming to enrich and develop programming over the long run. Many non-EU donors and UN bodies similarly see such potential. This does not immediately transcribe into a hierarchical leadership role for the EU but a clear trust that the EU can be a solid partner.

In short, the following observations can be noted:

- The EU is appreciated by many donors and UN bodies working in and on Syria as a solid partner with potential to be a trendsetter not only on programming and engagement with Syrian CSOs but also on sharing knowledge, mapping risks, harvesting aggregated outcomes and impacts.
- Demands for a transformation of the role of the EU from supporting mainly humanitarian interventions to supporting development work and more sustainable approaches are emerging from both Syrian CSOs as well as UN organisations. While the EU does support a range of non-humanitarian causes (including some livelihoods, early recovery and development causes), the bulk of the funding goes to the humanitarians. The need to go "beyond humanitarianism" is slowly emerging among other donor circles. The EU has an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in exploring new options.
- Different parts of the country receive different types of aid, which renders the EU reputation among CSOs very diversified. In GHAs, CSOs feel the EU is distant and they only feel its presence through intermediaries. CSOs in non-government-controlled areas have experienced the EU directly and have high respect for its approach, but many are now requesting to move to more sustainable bottom-up approaches to defining needs and meeting them through sustainable development

programs.

- The EU itself is aware of these trends and is generally transforming its aid accordingly, however, a communication gap still exists between the formal language of the EU as expressed in the EU strategic documents on Syria and the perception of it on the ground. In its official policy the EU has clear political objectives (one of which focuses on supporting civil society) as well as humanitarian (through ECHO) and non-humanitarian (through DG Near and FPI) objectives. These humanitarian objectives envision close collaboration with local humanitarian actors and CSOs in all parts of Syria. Collaboration with non-humanitarian actors is diversified in the different geographies as they involve different types of risks. These different mandates were not clear to most of the Syrian CSOs with whom the research team talked.

c. The aggregated impact of support to civil society

A great deal of progress has been achieved in terms of empowering civil society in Syria. New actors have emerged on the scene handling a variety of issues that were hitherto unheard of in the Syrian context. Civic actors have managed to circumvent many hurdles to gain the trust of their communities, each other, and the donors. Leadership in the civic space is stronger than ever before. While major gaps still exist, the progress is substantive given the short time lapse and limitation of access and resources. Many of the shortfalls are typical of the evolution of civil society in the wake of conflicts and political transformations.

Some of the key pointers to assess progress are:

- Self-awareness among civic actors of the value of their current work in the service of their communities and society at large, and the potential of their collective role to contribute to the future of Syria's economy, human resource development, political pluralism, democratic reforms, recovery, and reconstruction.
- Shared perception of the role of civic space as a cement that holds society together and contributes to social peace, despite differences. While political values may differ, there is a recognition of the core value of the civic space as a guarantor of social cohesion and as a space to mitigate differences (the magnitude of these differences is indeed very significant).
- A core of experiences and understanding of the terrain has emerged beyond the early naïve discourses that reduced Syrian society into binary dichotomies. This level of complex thinking is gradually enabling civic actors to think and act in a systemic and rationalised manner.
- Lines of communication and connectivity are gradually emerging. While formal networks lag behind, Syrian civic actors seem to have evolved informal channels of contacts to cover the whole territory and to establish possibilities for future collaborations.
- Trust between donors and CSOs is uneven and often disrupted. Some donors have strong preferences for specific types of CSOs working in specific sectors and geographies. Yet donors often make changes of direction that are incomprehensible to the CSOs. The EU has sponsored important channels that bring CSOs and donors together beyond the concerns of individual projects. Other donors are trying to follow suite, but they are mainly reliant on a set of "gate keepers", "intermediaries" or "usual suspects" to launch their dialogues. But ***the space for dialogue is expanding, nonetheless. Moreover, historically speaking, CSOs trust the EU as one of the very few donors to understand their needs, and that it has a more objective position than others***.

However, despite qualitative and anecdotal evidence, there is no systemic and evidence-based aggregation of the evolution of the civic space at large. Existing research is either too generalised or too case specific to be able, with any degree of reliability, to make statements about the strength and thickness of the civic space in Syria. Most of the classic measurement tools are not applicable, and data is not collected in a manner to construct the necessary barometers to assess progress.

CSOs at best have some reflections on their own size and capacity, but a trusted assessment of impact and capacity for the whole sector does not exist. Donors have the necessary tools to monitor and evaluate individual projects, their direct outputs, and immediate externalities, but no collective tools have been evidenced in the research to assess the global status of civil society actors. Many donors thought the civic space was shrinking after an initial optimistic period in 2011. However, other donors feel that the initial bubble was fictitious and that the real space for civil society is only now opening up. There is no agreed framework

for assessment, no agreed indicators, and no shared objectives to measure progress against.

CSOs and donors alike operate on the basic principle that civil society is good. There is no agreement however, on how to assess that good. Nor is there any possibility to assess the harm done on a global level beyond individual projects. What are the opportunity costs forgone in supporting civic actors, what modes of negative social capital have emerged as new patterns of solidarity and trust have transformed old ones, which actors have been empowered with the new forms of connectivity that were created? These questions are not being asked systematically. Many donors insist on do-no harm studies but there was no evidence as to a global assessment on the harm that may have been created in the process.

The negative push factors that are still hindering the progress towards a more normalised civic space can be summarised in the following manner:

- Differentials in presence, experience and political objectives are high, the division of the territory is reflected in structural divisions among the civic actors operating in each geography. While informal networks and channels are emerging, the political dividing lines are hardening as a result of the political stalemate. Operational and practical collaborations are on the rise, but the CSOs have still not been able to develop collective advocacy for their civic space jointly.
- The boundaries, between what is civic and what is not, are not very clear. While from a theoretical point of view most interviewed actors could set clear boundaries and definitions, the practice on the ground reflects blurred categories, especially in the relation between civic actors and de-facto powers who control the terrain. There are hardly ethical codes defining how CSOs approach the powerful actors on the ground, and the parameters of such engagement are not shared or understood by all.
- There are no strategic objectives and principles guiding the work of CSOs beyond the mandates of their individual programmes and projects. Donor wishes would seem to dominate the agenda and dependency on donors is still very high. While it is unrealistic to expect that CSOs can become independent and reliant on local resources in the future, there is no evidence it is heading in that direction at the moment.
- There is no understanding of opportunity costs, externalities and harm done in the work of CSOs. Supply side thinking controls the logical framework of most projects and programs. But logical frameworks for the most part lack a shared understanding of a theory of change. Results of individual projects are not aggregated. Consequently, it is not possible to advance a gap analysis nor a cost benefit analysis on the investments in the sector.

d. The status of EU engagement with civil society

Syrian Civil Society actors have many platforms and communications channels to communicate with each other, with donors and with international community members with influence on the Syrian scene. The most well-known and referenced among these channels were the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), the Women's Advisory Board to the Office of the Special Envoy (WAB), the Brussels Conference, and the virtual platform known as the EU Civil Society Space (CSS). ***Each of these platforms has its own outreach network, protocols and set of topical discussions. However, they all share the fact that they are established for their benefit from the outside and therefore they are subject to donors' and UN interests in expanding them and or defining their purpose***. The EU is a direct sponsor of most of these platforms as well as a regular participant in and supporter of the others.

In addition to these channels there are many informal mechanisms for the Syrian CSOs to communicate with the EU. Many CSOs and CSO networks have strong access to EU decision-making circles. Some have even developed a sophisticated understanding of the EU's decision-making structures and institutional hierarchies. But this is rather the exception than the norm. The bulk of the participants that were interviewed were unable to distinguish between different EU funding instruments and political bodies, while this distinction is clearer among the UN organisations and INGOs working on Syria. Thus, for the most part Syrian CSOs have little understanding on how and why donor funds go to them, which operating procedures are applied, as well as what value systems and political mandates influence the actions of the EU.

Nonetheless, the aforementioned platforms have been instrumental to opening dialogue, even if each has its own limitations and drawbacks. The CSSR held different types of meetings with hundreds of CSOs from all regions, but it valued inclusivity more than the accumulation of knowledge. Civic voices are heard, but the platform, as such, has not been able to provide sustainable, cumulative knowledge and strategic messaging since there is a high turnover of participants, and regular change of focus on topics. Furthermore, the CSSR is under the control of the Office of the Special Envoy OSE, which has the ultimate say on identifying participants, setting the agenda, and gathering outcomes. Additionally, the Syrian leadership or coordination mechanism that can set a strategic direction for the Room has not been fully empowered.

The WAB, on the other hand, is a stable structure with clear governance agreed between the OSE and its members. However, the body is far from inclusive, and its products remain inside and within the OSE, as it is intended as a discretionary advisory body. It tackles specific issues related to women's rights and mainstreaming these rights into the political process as well as contributing to backdoor meditations. The WAB has strong advocacy access and messaging to donors and international actors but its connection to the wider SCS is limited to the activities and networks of its members individually. The WAB has been in regular engagement with the EUD and has a privileged access to Brussels.

The Brussels conference is not a structure as such, but provides a unique platform for strategic messaging, where representatives from civil society from all geographies meet the donors directly to advance their advocacy. Over the years, this platform has gained momentum and established some sort of a procedural norm. However, preparations for the event are often done quickly, without significant contribution from the civil society. The SCS day of dialogue on the side of the main event creates great interest among Syrian CSO, but only a few of them have the resources to advance strategic messaging. For the most part messaging is shallow and unidirectional.

Initially, the Day of Dialogue allowed for interesting opportunities on the side lines of rich discussions, but those opportunities were only open to an elite crop of CSOs. Other CSOs felt they were excluded from the process. Since the creation of the civil society virtual platform an opportunity was opened up to expand engagement after COVID, the level of engagement increased and the addition of newcomers into the platform was higher, but those that were engaged physically in the Brussels conference felt that the quality of the discussions was reduced. One participant living in the Diaspora said in one of the focus groups:

> *"At the Brussels conference, the same recommendations and problems are repeated. Perhaps last year it was better in some regard, as it added people at the core of each subject of discussion. This year it regressed, as it was a hybrid mode of participation, and one of the fears that I talked about was that there would be discrimination, and the conversation was controlled by people [present physically] in Brussels. The Covid pandemic had a role in allowing more people to attend and reach the conference through the online feature. However, there is still a problem of giving more advantages and monopoly of access to people who have travel visas or who reside in [Europe]."*

Newcomers are still appreciative of the opportunity to have that channel, though they are suspicious of how it works and its ultimate purpose. They feel that the discussions were lacking in direction, with people preparing messages for the EU, but without subsequent dialogue with them. For one participant the Brussels conference was providing the Europeans with vital information about the situation on the ground, but they felt that they got little in return: "They collect information from us, but we have no idea how that information is processed," said some participants.

In response to the intense interaction at the Brussels conference, the EU supported the emergence the virtual CSS. The platform meets regularly and brings together a very wide range of CBOs and LIs and a variety of informal civic actors in addition to the more established NGOs together. It often tackles topics in a systemic manner and those topics are then reflected in the Brussels conference. The space is facilitated by Syrians, and the agendas are coordinated between the facilitators and the EU. ***The Virtual CSS is one of the most promising platforms as it is constantly evolving and expanding, without losing focus and thematic depth. Most of the participants in the KIIs and FGDs who mentioned the CSS praised it as an inclusive structure***

that can allow for more participation. However, many are also lamenting that it is not two-directional. The aggregation of messages from this space to the Brussels conference is still a bit of an enigma for them. One participant said: "I think that it is necessary to review and allocate sessions for the civil space [Day of Dialogue] and to review channels to achieve effective civil society participation."

The initial excitement over the CSS is slowly diminishing. Many questions were raised among participants on how to energise it. The following points may need to be taken into consideration:

- The CSS should learn from CSSR that a dynamic, inclusive structure is good for improved participation and inclusivity. However, this does not create ownership. Syrian civil society needs to have a say in the structure, agenda, knowledge products, and even participation. One way to do that is to include networks in a separate track that can support agenda setting and oversight. Representatives of networks from all geographies might be a stable structure that can help in setting the direction for the platform in coordination with the EU, of course.
- The platform must learn from the WAB experience by providing deep knowledge products but make sure to make them available to the public. That is, the platform's knowledge remains with the EU, and little reaches the participants themselves and even less for the civil society in its wider form. Should the platform start to produce knowledge products such as newsletters, flyers, policy papers (especially if produced by some of its members), social media posts, or even websites, then this knowledge will be able to reach a wider audience and engender more feedback and ownership.

The virtual platform should be structured to compliment the Brussels conference through direct preparation and priority setting. But the platform has a separate and more enduring role to develop strategic messaging beyond the temporary focus of the conference. Currently, the platform offers indirect ways for such contribution, but the link is rather loose. The Brussels conference may gain more importance and hence a structured link between the CSS and the conference maybe critical to energise the dialogue with CSS. On the other hand, the Brussels conference should not be the ultimate objective for expanding the virtual platform. The Virtual platform has a far more strategic role to support ongoing dialogue among CSOs and between them and the EU.

7- Conclusions, lessons learned and the way forward

a. The relevance of civil society today

Despite the great polemics about the successes and failures of civil society actors to deal with the complexity and contradictions of the Syrian conflict, these actors position themselves as an essential building block for a brighter future for the war-torn country. They cover vital functions for their communities' survival; have developed tremendous experience and understanding of the terrain; have evolved strong core values to support democratisation and human rights; constructed tools and networks covering all parts of the country (albeit not homogenously); and have become indispensable in the calculus of all or any discussions on resilience, recovery, and future reconstruction.

However, to assess their relevance more accurately, it is important to consider the following questions:

- Do civil society actors produce results that are relevant to their communities?

  While there is strong evidence that civil society actors have contributed greatly to topics and issues of relevance to their communities, there is little evidence that the way they implemented their projects and work has led to results which effectively addressed these needs. ***There is no evidence that civic actors will be able to escape the cycle of dependency if they continue to focus on inputs and do not exploit the outcomes of their work as future inputs. In the absence of such a development, their work will not be able to scale up to meet future needs of their communities***. Many voices were heard in the interviews (the EU, other donors, UN organisations, and CSOs) arguing for the need to shift to development work. Development work is not only about focusing on education and basic livelihood support. It is about re-establishing economic cycles and creating new value chains to circulate surplus values back into community support. Yet, despite the strong evidence of the limitation of humanitarian work, there is a certain status-quo no one seems to want to challenge despite the changing dynamics of the eco-system.

The EU should work with CSOs to explore alternative approaches to move from supply-side input-based project conceptualisation towards demand-based results-oriented approaches. Only by incorporating the long-term development vision of the communities could the process truly be relevant.

- Are opportunity costs too high, are civil society actors neglecting important needs and using their resources in the wrong arenas?

  Most of the sectors covered by the CSOs (as was evidenced in the mapping exercise and the literature review) were focused on primary functions and needs that are truly relevant to the expectations of different Syrian communities. However, there was no way to track if other needs were left uncovered and unaddressed. There was no evidence of a clear process to understand where gaps remain. Are these gaps more relevant, and /or more scalable? Currently, both donors and CSOs are operating on basic heuristics that some functions are essential for the survival of their communities and the protection of their rights and wellbeing. Linking these heuristics to clear result chains is often happening on a case-by-case basis, but there is no cumulative analysis to ensure that global needs are met. One of the key gaps in this regard is the absence of evidence linking CSOs' work to community demands (to be clearly distinguished from needs). Community resources and assets are rarely taken into consideration in project planning; therefore, the way communities would have clearly demonstrated priorities is absent from the calculus. Needs are assumed either through simple heuristics or based on top-down assessments after quick consultations with the communities. But communities are not empowered to take action into their own hands, to build their own resources and to set their own priorities. ***Mapping where communal resources are currently invested and directing aid to complement their resources rather than substituting their agency is critical in transforming the***

theory of change. The virtual civil society platform is a powerful tool to reach out to communities and to involve them directly in the needs' assessment and programme design, although this has to be built carefully and gradually not to put too much pressure on the platform.

The supply side approach to community needs should be re-aligned towards the demand side. The difference between need and demand is critical. ***Focusing on needs alone is pointing donors and civic actors towards generic delivery modules that may or may not be relevant to beneficiaries. The EU should consider reversing its project cycle development to ensure community priorities are respected. The way to do that is to ensure community resources are part of the inputs into project design and to make them true partners and that their priorities and not just simple needs are met.***

This means tough bargaining and a transformation of the role of civil society actors from delivery channels for donor aid towards playing a mediating role to mitigate community priorities. It would also entail that community priorities are considered in a holistic manner and not on a sectoral basis; moving to area base thinking would require new types of partnership between CSOs and their communities. It would include closer mapping of local conditions, understanding the local eco-systems and developing new models of engagement with local authorities and stakeholders. In short new types of knowledge are essential for such a re-focusing of CSO work. This may encourage more equal partnerships between CBOs and LI on the one hand and NGOs in the Diaspora on the other.

The EU's recent calls for proposals are heading in that direction. This needs to be further elaborated with dialogue with CSOs on operationalising such a new direction. Different operational guidelines and M&E procedures will be needed. New types of reporting and baselines research will be needed. This process will not only empower communities but will also ensure that true leadership is generated within these communities. If one of the objectives of supporting civil society in Syria is to support the emergence of new forms of leadership to stir bottom-up demand for reforms, the current modality of aid is not contributing to this aim as well as it could.

To track the collective impact of SCS the EU could support the establishment of a SCS facility that would be able to collect data and develop indicators for the whole sector. Such a facility can be hosted with an alliance of CSOs, or it could be incentivised as a first of its kind in Syria to establish a voluntary process where CSOs would join to benchmark their performances against the needs and objectives of their society. [51] It would harvest key indicators from member CSOs and would return a collective vision of where they stand in terms of their individual and collective relevance to society. Donors could rely on such accreditation clubs to streamline vetting processes and to develop strong evidence for the impact and relevance of their work. Such processes normally require a level of trust among members. The EU, as has been noted in this report, is a trustworthy broker and may be able to leverage that trust to encourage collaboration among CSOs to move their work to the next level.

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51 - Accreditation clubs are voluntary gatherings that can be aggregated on the basis of shared interests among CSOs, complementarities of work in the same sector of geographical areas, etc.; they can be small or large. The key issue to encourage their members to enhance their viability and trust by creating periodic reviews of their processes and their impacts. CSOs can create collective trust in their work and reduce the need for donors to engage in strenuous individual vetting processes. In countries of strong and democratic regulatory frameworks, these clubs can create an added layer of trust in the work of CSOs and enhance their advocacy and image. In countries of weak regulatory frameworks or undemocratic governance processes, these clubs can create a critical mass of solidarity and trust and facilitate the access of their members to donor funds by making accreditation processes accessible to smaller NGO's and engaging their communities in the process. The key to their success is to ensure that they are happening on a totally voluntary basis to ensure that the larger CSOs are not acting as gate keepers to the small ones. Indeed, the idea is the antithesis of gatekeeping processes often indirectly created by rigid vetting processes. For more information refer to:
Gugerty, Mary. And Prakash, A. eds. (2010). *Voluntary Regulation of NOGs and Nonprofits: An Accountability Club Framework.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Callamard, Agnes. (2007). "NGO Accountability and the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership: Towards a Transformative Agenda". In Lisa Jordan and Peter Van Tuijl eds. *NGO Accountability: Politics, Principles and Innovations.* London: Earthscan.

In the past Syrian CSOs have complained that the regulatory powers of the State under the guise of accountability was actually detrimental to their work. Creating new models for accreditation could provide the impetus for a more democratic and CSO friendly accountability instruments.

- Are they producing more harm than good?

A great deal of good has been created as a result of CSOs' work in Syria, this is evident on all fronts. Donors sometimes mandate a do-no-harm study on a project-by-project basis. However, there is no clear indication what are the global harms that have been created inadvertently because of the current mode of supporting civil society. Most donors interviewed for this study indicated their worry that their funding to CSOs may have created some level of dependency on their funds and have thus codified unsustainable conditions for CSOs in the future. However, other types of harm are less easy to identify.

Civic actors themselves were worried that inadvertently they have blurred the lines between civil society and government. "There should be a complementarity between the work of public institutions and CSOs, said one participant in a focus group from NE, "but what we have is competition and this is not healthy". CSOs were also keen to point out repeatedly how the current mode of dispensing aid is contributing to the division of the country and the consolidation of the demarcation lines between the different geographies of control. One participant in the focus groups bringing actors from all the geographies together said: "We have consolidated the idea of the division between the different regions, this is terrible, we have one civil society for each area, and we have stopped to think about Syria as a whole". This comment resonated in many other interventions. The divisions are not only among the geographies of control but even within the same geography. Another respondent from NE said: "CSOs have been established on the basis of narrow communal identities, we have in the Jazirah region Arab CSOs, Kurdish CSOs, church affiliated CSOs working only among people from that group, this is not a healthy situation for civil society." The EU should work with Syrian civil society to identify these risks in a systemic way. The risk calculus is not very transparent to the partner CSOs. They do not understand what harms are considered by the EU and the EU is not working closely with them to assess the global risks they face. ***Conducting a global do-no-harm approach (not just on a project-by-project basis) should be part of any future road map for the EU engagement in Syria***.

Such a no-harm-study needs to have critical thinking behind it. It would need to map essential barometers reflecting different conflict drivers; it would also need to understand the correlation between different conflict drivers and to track them over time. A onetime do-no-harm study will not suffice. Instead, by supporting the establishment of a CSO facility to map impacts and create voluntary accreditation, the EU could also support the harvesting of data related to indirect negative impacts and externalities.

- Does their work lay important foundations for the future, in other words, will their current work be relevant for the future?

The urgency of CSO work in Syria has forced everyone to operate according to immediate priorities and along short project cycles. Projects normally fulfil their declared objectives, otherwise donors will not repeat their funding. Project-by-project monitoring and evaluation are standard parts of the project cycle. Both internal and third-party monitoring operations are common practices and are required by the donors as part of their due diligence procedures. But there is no indication of long-term evidence-based collective assessment of progress towards clear objectives. There are no serious attempts at defining a theory of change and to set milestones to benchmark progress. There is no logical link that the current achievement of civil society will contribute to the future of the country. Indeed, if anything, there is an attempt to disguise objectives.

Donors often have strategic papers highlighting their objectives for working in Syria. In the case of the EU this is a widely published document, while for some other donors these documents are not disseminated as widely. These objectives are often divided into political objectives, humanitarian ones and civil society is either implied in both and/or are allocated a special objective on their own, often in

the form of a generic sentence about "strengthening civil society organisations". It is, therefore, hard to anticipate the commitment, the rationale for supporting civic actors and the value for money for doing so. This renders the tracking of long-term progress rather ambiguous and haphazard not say contested as CSOs are hard pressed to understand how the donors assess the context and not just their individual projects.

The EU should translate its objectives for work with civil society in Syria into clearly defined priorities, following some logical framework for change (albeit cautious not to over impose itself or be seen as intervening in the internal affairs of another country), but to rationalise its interventions. ***The current heuristics about CSOs being essential for the future democratisation of the country, the protection of rights and the contribution to an inclusive recovery and reconstruction process when the time comes should be substantiated by reasonably well-defined indicators on the basis of well-defined theory of change.*** The experience from many other countries have pointed to misguided approaches and to results that often contradicted the intentions of both donors and CSOs.[52]

b. Trajectories for the future (the Roadmap)

The current standoff on Syria is likely to be a prolonged one given the critical geopolitical positioning of all major forces operating on the global scale. Therefore, any ambitious plans to scale up civil society work and to transform it into the next logical level are likely to run against major political, fiscal and social constraints. Progress in the evolution of civil society will likely happen as a result of small and incremental transformations as opposed to major changes: a gradual paradigm shift, as opposed to instantaneous changes. This requires the laying down of solid foundations for the future for the change to happen. The CSOs and the donors will need to agree to a new framework for cooperation, but that shift in approach must be gradual to ensure all resources are redirected in a synergetic manner towards collective goals; it must be clearly communicated to ensure that everyone is onboard; and it must be based on solid evidence to ensure that all partners are getting out of the process what they need. The needed transformations will constitute the backbone of the Roadmap for the EU engagement with civil society. The Key parameters of a future Roadmap can be summarised under the following points:

- Defining mutual objectives and priorities for the Roadmap: While donors are not likely to agree on one set of specific objectives among themselves and while the Syrian CSOs have divergent political affiliations and contradictory visions and objectives, the EU can still lead the way in defining objectives and rendering a new framework for aggregating impacts. The process will not entail erasing political differences but looking ahead to the needs of the country in the future and setting up the mechanisms to mitigate differences as opposed to deepening them. To move from the current chaotic conditions on the ground towards a more democratic, normative and transparent work for the SCS, it would be worth focusing on four essential functions of civil society:
    - The representation Principle: Enhancing the participation and representation of Syrian communities in all process affecting their lives. SCS will have to play an important role to ensure that the voices of the broadest spectrum of individuals and communities are heard and respected.
    - The deliberation principle: Consolidating the role and capacity of civil society actors to mitigate social conflicts and to enhance social cohesion both at the local as well as the national level. It also describes the role of civil society in developing the dialogue and foundations for a democratic future for the country.
    - The public good principle: Mobilising resources in an effective and efficient manner to enhance

52 - For more information about the failure of externally driven CSO support programmes to achieve their intended objectives as well as achieve independence and sustainability, please refer to:
Dhundale, Lis and Andersen, Erik Andre eds. (2004). *Revisiting the Role of Civil Society in the Promotion of Human Rights.* Copenhagen: The Danish Institute for Human Rights.
McMahon, Patrice C. (2017). *The NGO Game: Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in the Balkans and Beyond.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Abdelrahman, Maha M. (2004). *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt.* London: I. B. Tauris.
Abu-Sada, Caroline and Challand, Benoit, eds. (2007). *Le développement, une affaire d'ONG? Associations, Etats et bailleurs dans le monde arabe.* Paris : Karthala.
غربي، محمد، مرسي، مشري و فوكة، سفيان محررون (7102). المجتمع المدني العربي في ظل العولمة: من الإقليمية إلى العالمية. الجزائر: ابن النديم للنشر والتوزيع.

the wellbeing of communities and to ensure that recovery and re-development processes are fair, inclusive, and sustainable. Syrian development indicators have regressed, and decades of developmental progress were wiped out. There will be no simple reconstruction of damaged physical assets in Syria if not accompanied by work to regain lost institutional and human resources. Syria will have a long way to re-develop to the level it was before the conflict as a lower middle-income country.

- The self-constitution principle: to strengthen civil society inner capacities, financial and human resource base, communication as well as advocacy competencies. If civil society is to play the role of a middling space between the State and other de-facto powers on the one hand, and individuals on the other hand, to protect rights and safeguard communal interests, it needs to think for the long term on developing the necessary assets, homegrown normative principles and critical infrastructure.
- These four objective and priority areas cannot be imported in their western model to Syria. They must be considered in their local context and in transitioning a war-torn country towards a more peaceful and democratic outcome. The proposed approach provided in full detail in the annex highlights a logical framework for moving on each one of these priority areas focusing on al long-term logic to guide direct the process. The tables in the annex provide a summary of challenges mapped in this report for each priority area, then the grand logic of intervention is outlined with considerations to how this logic could be operationalised and propose a range of activities and or transformations to current modality of work. The tables are organised to map outputs (areas under the direct control of the EU and the CSOS), outcomes (areas under their influence) and impact (areas of indirect influence). For each of these levels indicators and means of verification are also proposed). However, these four priorities are not meant as sperate sectors of work. Priorities reinforce each other and are meant to be mainstreamed across programmatic considerations of aid in the future. Naturally some elements of these four priorities will be more readily possible than others. However, the aim is to advance in parallel on all fronts to close the gap between the realities on the ground in a war-torn country and a future where civil society could play more normative roles.

- Gender mainstreaming the Roadmap: One of the critical observations found by the authors of the report is that CSOs have not often led to acceptable levels of women empowerment, representation and presence in the civil society. Indeed, a critical finding was that efforts to empower women were singled out as separate functions and not mainstreamed into the full range of work of CSOs. Gender mainstreaming the Road map should no repeat that segregation between regular CSO work and women empowerment projects. The authors of the report opted to include gender as a cross cutting issue into all pillars of the roadmap. The tables in the annex reflect the needs of gender mainstreaming every aspect of the work. It looks at reasonable entry points to encourage the initial success to work on women empowerment as a separate category or sub-sector of civil society into all layers of the roadmap. It also proposes special transformations, indicators and means of verification.
- A shift in the modality of work: The Roadmap cannot rely on standard operating procedures from the past. The transformations in the relationship between the EU and the CSOs are not a matter of quantity but one of quality. The spirit of the road map should be guided by the following transformations in the modality of work:

  - *Shifting the scope of work from supply-side to demand side-funding:* This would entail a gradual shift in the financial instruments used by the EU. Shifting from supply to demand side funding will require major cultural adjustments in the current relationship between donors and CSOs. This will not happen in the short term. It will require testing the ground with a few pilots to assess possibilities and to ensure that new modalities of funding are properly evaluated and to reduce the harm that might ensue from such a transformation. Nonetheless, the EU could start encouraging CSOs to produce evidence to engaging communities in designing projects and significantly contributing to their implementation, including the M&E processes. One key element in that transition is to ensure that communal assets (both tangible and intangible) are accounted for when designing projects.
  - *Solidification of networks across the Syrian geography:* The EU should expand its current thinking about support to networks, but this does not only entail direct support to networks, but also to develop new financial tools to incentivise collaborative efforts between CSOs across the geography. Current funding aiming at supporting collaboration has not produced true collaborative efforts. Most CSOs see such funding primarily as a formula for dividing grants among partners and then each doing their own projects. This should be re-evaluated, and financial tools should not be the

only incentive for such collaborations. Knowledge sharing, co-learning, co-implementation, access to advocacy platforms, and collective reporting are part and parcel of this initial transformation. Key in this regard is to capitalise on the resources of small CBOs and their local knowledge and larger NGOs with their technical and sectoral knowledge.

- *Sharing knowledge and opening the communication field:* The EU is a respected convener for knowledge sharing and dialogue. Syrian CSOs and other donors feel that the EU could step up its role to expand existing platforms, develop more formal ways to disseminate knowledge and build a critical consensus towards future directions in Syria. Without this, the Brussels conference and the online virtual CSS will be losing momentum. They need to be energised by making them two-way communication channels and spaces for dialogue and not just information sharing.
- *Mitigating risks and minimising harm:* While agreeing what is good and what is bad is highly debated in the Syrian context, it might be worth defining harms that need to be tracked collectively across the portfolios. A suggested list of risks is proposed below:
  - Contributing to the division of the country and the fragmentation of the territory.
  - Hampering community resilience, devaluation of local resources and assets and creating dependency on donor aid.
  - Providing platforms for hate speech and disrupting social cohesion and peace.
  - Contributing to a culture of corruption.
  - Legitimising gatekeepers, local warlords, and war profiteers.
  - Strengthening patriarchal social controls and social norms that disenfranchise women.
  - Destabilising State institutions that are essential for the survival of communities by diverting human and financial resources away from institutions, depriving them of community trust and legitimacy
  - Supporting poor governance practices and delegitimising democratic prospects.
  - Derailing prospects for community healing including possibilities of conciliation and accountability.

- *Scalability and maximisation of resources:* The EU was a leader in testing new approaches on the ground. Pilots in different domains are constantly being advanced and evaluated, be it in the humanitarian field, or non-humanitarian ones. The EU tested the ground in the different geographies and within multiple sectors. Different modalities of direct and indirect support to CSOs were constantly being tested, such as media and health. However, this dynamic approach is not often properly communicated which leaves a feeling with many CSOs that this is a haphazard approach. The criteria for testing and the resources needed for such pilots are not properly communicated. Pilots should be designed with an eye not only of their innovation and ability to break new grounds, but also in terms of their future scalability. Any approaches that will not stand a chance to be scaled and/or where opportunity costs are too high should be avoided. Creating multipliers should be a criterion in designing new projects. The RM should be able, at the end of the day, to develop a global calculus on the cost-benefit of interventions not only on the level of individual projects, but also on the level of sectoral and cross-sectoral approaches.

- Anchoring the Roadmap on a strong evidence based and accountability framework: Key to the success or failure of the RM is to have and agreed mechanism to track progress, assess impacts, map challenges and work around them to stay on track. This critical aspect of the RM must be transparent to CSOs, and they need to be able to co-own it. It is strongly proposed to consider setting up a special CSO facility to serve at least four critical functions:
  - Conduct periodic review of the Roadmap. Though the Roadmap as proposed in this report will have clear indicators (see the annexes later), reviewing it will not be a mechanical review of the indicators. A dialogue about the nature of progress, short- and long-term impacts, the risks and the opportunities will be needed as part of the assessment process. The facility that will be managed by CSOs could facilitate these dialogues, prepare the ground for them and support them with evidence based data from the field.
  - Test different accountability frameworks and propose models for a future *vetting* and accreditation of CSO not only on the basis of their matching of donor due diligence criteria but also their relevance and impact. This could be the nucleus of a future accreditation process. It could start as a voluntary accreditation club (see above). Where members would voluntarily provide their data and knowledge to benchmark their own progress towards the stated objectives of the RM as well as their own sectoral achievements in a comparative manner. The facility could also help in knowledge exchange and as a meeting place to broker partnerships among CSOs.

- Building critical barometers and indicators to assess the new trends and progress in the sector and to map the impact and relevance of CSO work on a national level. This could also be related to provide a global read on the civic space and the capacity of the whole civil society sector to absorb aid and to assess the value for money for investments in the sector.
- Create a collective tool among CSOs to assess risks and map externalities. Understanding the negative as well as negative aspects of CSO work needs strong antennas to the ground and the collective efforts of CSOs to track evidence for such risks. This may help them define early warnings concerning their work and would enable the EU to track global harm and avoid larger ethical dilemmas for the future.

The proposed outline in the annex brings all these factors into a single logical framework to guide the Roadmap in the future. The Roadmap will remain a living document. It will learn from further dialogue between the EU and CSOs and will be reviewed periodically to assess new trends, risks and opportunities.

Annex: Priority areas of the Roadmap

Priority 1: The Representation of Civil Society: Supporting the Development of an Effective and Participatory Civic Space Capable of Leveraging Bottom-Up Community Initiatives:

Summary: *Most normative standards for measuring civic space are inapplicable in the case of a war-torn country. The mere issuing of laws and regulations is not likely to help CSOs manage the complex and hostile environment surrounding them; neither is it likely to provide them with security and safety to foster their presence and their ability to represent Syrians at large. The strategy should focus on mapping the presence of effective civic agency in all its expressions and forms and to create incentives to protect and expand its "civicness". Empowerment strategies must be created from the bottom-up, enhancing the linkages of CSOs to the communities they serve and ensuring that CSOs are creating shared spaces and networks to strengthen their collective presence and legitimacy. Efforts should be made to ensure a fair and equitable access to resources, but rather than dividing the grant money among participants, the approach should be to develop synergies and complementarity. Fair access for women should be expanded and mainstreamed into all projects and sectors and not be limited to women empowerment projects important as they are. Recipients of aid should be looked at as assets and agents of change and not mere beneficiaries; this includes the youth and the disabled. Ensuring that all members of society are incorporated into collective community-based objectives will help create synergies and reduce social tensions. Global indicators and data should be harvested and aggregated to understand the collective progress towards a more civic space and in the reverse direction ensure that funding is not creating unsurmountable harm such as dependency on donor aid and de-facto division of the country.*

Challenges:

Key Challenges	**Hostile conflict environment**	The conflict in Syria has virtually divided the country into separate areas of control. De-facto powers on the ground are hostile towards any actors that may challenge their legitimacy and their ability to assert control. At the same time de-facto actors need the resources of the CSOs and they use them to alleviate the burden of serving local communities. This puts pressure on civic actor to toe the line of de-facto powers. Global legal frameworks to enhance the eco-system and operational environment of CSOs are useless to protect them. De-facto powers constantly change the way they deal with CSOs. Unspoken rules are more relevant than published legal texts (which are not enabling to begin with). Civil actors have to constantly adjust to survive. Donors policies can sometimes endanger CSOs rather than provide them with protection.	**Global challenges facing the Civil society at large**
	Legitimacy with local communities	A schism is created between NGOs operating outside the country and local CSOs. The local CSOs that have direct contact and legitimacy with local communities have limited access to financial and knowledge resources. The ones on the outside have better access but are generally disconnected from the ground. While networking is encouraged by donors, many challenges exist preventing effective networking: Competition over resources, access to difficult geographies and the divided situation on the ground have created schism between the geographies. The civic actors have not been able to present a solid front in support of communities. The communication gap with communities have not enhanced the transparency of CSOs towards local communities. Moreover, as a result of donor administrative and accounting procedures, local communities are not integrated in the resourcing of projects, such as projects co-funded by local communities. Communities are often perceived as "beneficiaries" and not as partners. This has limited the leveraging of local community resources in the process and have created a culture of dependency and therefore resentment among local communities.	

	Donors' policies are contributing to culture of uncertainty	While donors have extended a lifeline to a wide variety of large number of CSOs, their policies have often been contradictory and unpredictable. Changes in policy are poorly communicated to CSOs especially that donors' funds are often coming through intermediaries (the UN, INGOs and the larger Syrian NGOs). Moreover, the donors have mixed and often divergent "red lines" on where to work and with whom. In the absence of a clear and enabling environment where CSOs have clarity about access to resources, donors' "red lines" are often perceived as further constraints in an already inhospitable environment.	
	Gaps in the representation of women	While the scaling up of funding to women led and women focused CSOs has led to a great leap in the representation of women in the civic space the gap is still very large. The numbers of women may have increased in the ranks of many CSOs, but they are still limited within the leadership layers of these organisations. Moreover, funding focused on empowering women has led to a segregation of women focused CSOs rather than to enhance gender mainstreaming in the civic space.	

Logic of interventions and indicators:

	Intervention logic	**Indicators**	**Possible sources of information/ verification**	
Overall objective: Impact	**To support Syrian civic actors in forging a civic space where they can operate safely and contribute to the legitimisation of their role as a collective social force. Expanding the presence of "civicness" within the hostile conflict environment as a precursor to restoring rule of law and normative definitions of civic space.**	**An emerging Civic Space** - *CSOs forge alliances and networks across the political and social divides to improve and protect their collective role and image, legitimise their work and empower civic actors and civilians to forge alternatives to the chaotic conditions imposed by the de-facto powers.* **Possible Indicators:** - Density and diversity of CSO networks. Measured through network analysis. - Public percepWtion of CSOs is harmonised and enhanced across the terrain.	- Network mapping. - Periodic review of perception of CSOs through primary and secondary means. - An EU funded facility to support the collection and analysis of CSO data.	**EU & beneficiaries' indirect influence**

Specific objective(s):	**To enhance support to CSO networks ensuring complementarity of resources among them and inclusion of local communities in resourcing and planning their collective projects**	**CSO networks** - *Expand support to CSOs in a manner to ensure that larger NGOs and local CBOs are collaborating on project planning and implementation and complementing each other's resources.* *Promote CSO owned and managed accreditation systems, which helps CSOs in accessing donor funds directly, that would bring different CSOs from different geographies to work with each other, share knowledge and data, and create collective advocacy for issues of relevance to all. These self-evaluation mechanisms will be needed to offset the donor centred vetting processes by assessing areas of collective interests for the CSOs and their communities.* *Progress on this front needs to be coordinated carefully to ensure the protection of civic actors.* **Possible Indicators:** - Number of CSO networks that bring Syrians civic actors from across the different geographies to work together. - Equalisation of resource distribution among the different geographies and between the small and large CSOs. - The emergence of collective platforms that produce data on the status of CSOs in the different geographies and sectors.	- HNO and HRP reports to be disaggregated to identify CSO roles and shares of the plan in each geography. - Various UN country team reports. - An EU funded facility to support the collection and analysis of CSO data. - Harvesting data from individual project reports.	**EU & beneficiaries' sphere of direct influence**

		Communities integrated into resourcing and planning of collective projects - *Relaxing red lines that limit the CSOs work in certain communities and ensuring that red lines are communicated properly (their extent, their limitations and their reasons) not only to intermediaries but also to the Syrian CSOs at large.* - *Community resources integrated into project conceptualisation and accounting. Material and immaterial community resources needed to be incorporated into project planning and accounting frameworks. This means that projects must by definition demonstrate how they are integrating communities into their work as active agents and not just as beneficiaries.* - *Evidence for community integration into project management.* - *Minimising harm and negative externalities.* **Possible Indicators:** - Share of project funding obtained from community resources. - Multipliers created through the work of CSOs. - Approval rating of CSOs among beneficiaries. (360 degree project evaluation).	- An EU funded facility to support the collection and analysis of CSO data. - Global do no harm studies to map the impact of aid across projects. - Harvesting data from individual project reports. - Third party monitoring reports.	
		Mainstreaming women and youth empowerment into different sectoral networks and initiatives - *Mainstream women and youth empowerment funding across the different sectors.* - *Support to the creation of networks for women and youth leaders across the different geographies and sectors.* - *Mainstreaming gender as part of project cycle management.* **Possible Indicators:** - Percent of women among management boards and Executives of CSOs. - Percentage of women and youth beneficiaries of projects. - Adoption of bylaws stipulating zero tolerance for sexual harassment within CSOs.	- An EU funded facility to support the collection and analysis of CSO data and aggregating research and indicators on the role of women in the civic space. - Harvesting data from individual project reports. - Third party monitoring reports.	

Outputs	**To build into project life cycles mechanisms for integrating communities and mainstreaming women empowerment and ensure that feedback from projects is aggregated to map impacts of funding on the performance of the Syrian civil society at large.**	**A global strategy for empowerment** - *Revising funding guidelines to ensure clear integration of planning, implementation and reporting on community engagement and women empowerment. This would require the design of a dashboard for different projects to feed into to aggregate data.* - *Supporting the creation of an independent CSO facility(ties) to help CSOs in developing a global understanding of their impact, the externalities they create. The facility can take the shape of an accreditation club, where individual project results can be aggregated into global indicators and CSOs can measure their performance against these indicators. The EU can also provide funding to networks of CSOs to encourage them to work together to develop such data.* - *Commission independent do-no-harm studies to reflect on the impact of funding on society at large.* - *Funding to networks should focus on complementarity of functions and collective implementation (especially projects that can cross geographical divides). The previous mode of funding networks, where recipients received funds through their networks and then went to work in a parallel and unconnected manner should be transformed to incentivise members of the networks to implement projects together and evolve collective learning from the process.* - *Publish global data on the EU's funding to CSOs highlighting the aggregated impact as well as break down by sectors, geographies, types of beneficiaries (especially women), funds leveraged from local community resources, multiplier effects, etc.*	- Reports issued by EU-funded projects/ programmes - Reports by an EU funded independent CSO facility on the global impact of EU aid to civil society. - Independent third-party reporting on global impact and do-no-harm.	

Priority 2: Deliberative Democracy: Supporting the Evolution of Common Visions for the Syrian Civil Society and Its Role in the Future of Syria:

Summary: *During the conflict most governance indicators regressed in Syria well below the already low levels they exhibited before the conflict. Rule of law and channels to expand democratic rights including those of women have virtually dissipated. Demands and advocacy for reform is falling on deaf ears as the conflict drivers are well beyond the reach of civic actors, although some civic actors are inadvertently contributing to the divisive discourses dividing the Syrian society today. Supporting civil society to push for democratisation runs against major challenges including the fact that conflict is still ongoing and that many of the grievances related to violence, the fate of the detainees, kidnapped and missing persons are still highly contentious issues. Working towards building peace and ending violence is often juxtaposed against the priority of ensuring that the final outcomes of any peace deal should lead to a more democratic outcome; sequencing the process is still highly contentious as most civic actors are vehemently concerned that accepting the status quo would lead to the de-facto division of the country. Human rights including women's basic rights are under constant threat. Upholding them has not been a priority of the belligerents in the conflict. To promote a peace and justice agenda would require that civil society in Syria collaborates across the political divides to create common visions, practical solutions, local peace infrastructure. Without this basic infrastructure no peace at the track 1 is likely to provide for better governance and true reconciliation. The role of women leaders in this regard is indispensable. They should be a key element in the integration and linkages between the track 2 and track 3 diplomacy and that of the track 1. They have already devised important entry points to the political process; supporting them further would be important to securing that outcomes of the political process are gender mainstreamed, but at the same time, the platforms they have already created are important peace assets that should be further expanded to help transform the conflict. The role of the youth is also essential in this regard. Ensuring a more just and democratic outcome to the conflict will take years of social and political engagement on their part. They should be in the forefront of defining their own future.*

Challenges:

Key Challenges	**Divided Geography**	Syrian civic actors are divided into different geographies with different political and security concerns. Civic actors have adopted adversary narratives about the other geographies, and negative stereotypes of each other are preventing collective work and collective narratives and strategies for ending the conflict. Some of the most established CSOs are contributing inadvertently to narratives that are fuelling the conflict. Civic actors that are promoting peace and reconciliation are looked at with suspicion. The political divide does not only involve actors within Syria. Indeed, one of the biggest divides that have emerged during the conflict is between actors operating inside the country and those operating from the Diaspora. The fact that the conflict violence persists as well as the endurance of issues like the detainees, kidnapped and disappeared are still unresolved prevent many CSOs from moving beyond these issues to consider long-term solutions and approaches for democratization.	**Global challenges facing the Civil society at large**
	Limited channels for influencing reforms and democratisation processes	Most political process concerned with peace building and reform are controlled by de-facto powers and their supporters among the international and regional actors. In some limited cases the Civil society actors were allowed a symbolic access to some of the international platforms sponsored by the UN. However, civic actors have no real presence to influence decision making in these processes. The main tools available for civic actors to promote reforms and democratisation are advocacy tools. However, lacking agreement on a political vision for the country, CSOs focused on highly normative approaches towards change and reform often distancing them from the real negotiation processes that they are supposed to influence. This is especially concerning as demands for deep reforms are running contrary to the logic of ending the conflict and brokering deals among the de-facto powers.	

	Divided advocacy	The conflict trajectory has divided Syrian Society; civic actors were divided both physically into different areas of control and morally into opposing political and ideological camps. While some CSOs are trying to bridge the gap and build networks across the divide, the bulk are still not able nor willing to seek a collective presence as civic actors. This has led to divergent, contradictory and often opposing messages and dissipation of the presence of Syrian Civil Society as collective social force that is capable to defend and advocate for itself and for a collective vision for the future.	
	Scattered participation of women	While many of the platforms that were created to manage the conflict have accepted some limited level of participation of women in them, women are still not allowed full access. Women civic activists have been divided in their approach towards the peace and political negotiation processes. Donors have encouraged schisms in the women movement rather than trying to bridge the gap and present a strong voice for women. Other than the typical divides separating civic actors in general, women have activism is facing challenging dichotomies: Realpolitik women who believe in forging gradual entry points into the political arena vs. the women demanding immediate full integration; feminists who advocate for full equality and demand the transformation of biased legal frameworks as an a priori to the political solution vs. women who see that reforms should be respectful of local customs and traditions and that peace is a pre-condition to advocating for more women's rights. These dichotomies have scattered efforts to empower women and have caused dissipated the political capital of donors to support more entry points for women into the political arena to demand their rights.	

Logic of interventions and indicators:

	Intervention logic	Indicators	Possible sources of information/ verification	
Overall objective: Impact	**To support Syrian civic actors to work together to expand spaces for dialogue and to devise practical approaches to conflict resolution and establishing entry points and common visions for democratic reforms**	**Conflict Transformation** - *CSOs work together across the dividing lines to develop common visions and practical approaches to transform the conflict towards peaceful outcomes that meet the need for deep democratic transformations.* **Possible Indicators:** - Outcomes of political negotiations include agreed inputs by civil society networks. - Women leaders emerge in local and national elections and political appointments. - The youth voices and agency are empowered to participate in debate over the future of the country. - Levels of violence in the country, including GBV are reduced. - Over the long run, the different indictors for political voice and democracy have improved. - Freedom of expression measure (UNESCO). - SDG 16	- World Bank indicators on political voice. - World Bank governance indicators. - UN OCHA Reports on violence in Syria (including reports on GBV). - Minutes of the Constitutional Committee. - Independent research on women Status in Syria (UNWomen). - Independent report by civil society networks on the outcomes of the political process. - Shadow reporting on SDG 16 similar to many of the shadow reports that were done regarding many of the reports on international conventions.	**EU & beneficiaries' indirect influence**

Specific objective(s):	**To ensure that funding and grant design to Civil Society networks is inclusive and linking CSOs from the different geographies, inside and outside, large and small to create incentives to bridge over the different divides and to present broad consensus of civic voices in the different political processes and layers of conflict resolution in the country. Political empowerment of women should be mainstreamed into all initiatives related to democratisation and peace building.**	**CSO peace, justice and reconciliation networks** - *Expand support to CSOs in a manner to ensure that different and divergent political and ideological groups have platforms to deliberate and devise common solutions to problems.* - *Link track 2 and 3 dialogues to the track 1, directly and effectively by supporting different CSO platforms in the political process (the CSSR, the WAB and the Middle Third of the Constitutional Committee) and ensuing resources are available to aggregate their voices across the political divide. Support should focus on helping civic actors to access the track 1 through collective advocacy.* - *Promote mutually agreed local solutions to difficult political problems to support practical approaches with direct impact on peoples' lives.* **Possible Indicators:** - Diversity and network coherence indicators. - Relevance analysis of track 2 diplomacy.	- An EU funded facility to support the collection and analysis of CSO data. - Harvesting data from individual project reports. - Independent reports on the role of Civil Society actors in the political process.	**EU & beneficiaries' sphere of direct influence**
		Civil peace infrastructure - *Linking different peace initiatives and helping them to aggregate their work on the ground.* - *Provide seed funding for peace asset networks to lay the foundation of the peace infrastructure needed to sustain and monitor any political deal that may emerge in the country.* - *Support to early warning systems for monitoring different types of violence including GBV.* - *Ensure that funding to CSOs is not creating indirect harm on a global level hindering the territorial integrity of the country, contributing to new layers of violence, creating intractable moral and political divides.* **Possible Indicators:** - Devising a complex index on conflict intensity by measuring different barometers to track conflict drivers. - GBV monitoring.	- An EU funded facility to support the collection and analysis of CSO data. - Global do no harm studies to map conflict transformations and to study the impact of aid on conflict drivers. - Harvesting data from individual project reports. - OCHA supported reported on GBV.	

		Strengthening the support base of women political leaders - *Supporting the emergence of women leaders in all sectors and all geographies.* - *Supporting the networking of women political leaders across the political and ideological divides.* - *Linking local women leaders to formal platforms representing civil society and women in the political process.* - *Widening the debate between different women empowerment networks and encouraging closer collaboration among them.* **Possible Indicators:** - The percentage of women in the different political bodies involved in the political process. - The percentage of women in the leadership of any bodies and institutions that may emerge from the political process. - The outcomes of political agreements have incorporated inputs with wide consensus advocated by women empowerment networks and platforms.	- UN Women reports - Until a verifiable data is made available for typical global indicators on women political empowerment (such as the OECD or the Global Gender Gap Report) are made available, the EU could consider launching independent research on the political status of women.	
Outputs	**To support civil society to forge collective bottom-up approaches to conflict mitigation, peace building and advocacy for democratic reforms and to lend support to linking their efforts to the track 1 political negotiations.**	**Laying the infrastructure for peace and democracy** - *Continue and expand support to civil-society-based monitoring of violence and abuse in Syria but ensure that reporting is aggregated and developed into nation-wide indicators.* - *Support to initiatives promoting the role of women as local leaders.* - *Mainstreaming women political empowerment into different peace and reconciliation networks and ensuring that women leaders are integrated into efforts to link track 2 and track 1 diplomacy.* - *Broaden the linkages of track 2 and track 3 actors to the track 1.* - *Commission independent do-no-harm studies to reflect on the impact of funding on conflict drivers.* - *Funding to networks should focus on bridging political and ideological divides.* - *Supporting the development of shadow reporting on SDG 16*	- Reports issued by EU-funded projects/ programmes - Reports by an EU funded independent CSO facility on the global impact of EU aid to civil society. - Independent third-party reporting on global impact and do-no-harm. - UN women reports	**EU & beneficiaries' sphere of control**

Priority 3: Public Wellbeing: Supporting Civic Actors to Work with Their Communities to Develop Local Capacities for Future Recovery and Sustainable Development:

Summary: *Despite tremendous efforts by donors to provide humanitarian aid to Syrians in need, the overwhelming majority of the population has slipped into poverty and many of the remaining sources of resilience are disappearing. Young people are migrating, further depriving the country of its human resources and sustainable opportunities for recovery in the future. Women and girls are bearing the brunt of the impact of the conflict. The country is gradually losing decades worth of investments in its human development, economic growth and infrastructure. A generation of young people, especially girls are deprived of basic education, as many can no longer afford to send their children to school. Humanitarian aid cannot cover the needs, and the gap between what resources are available and what communities need to survive is tremendous. A transition towards more sustainable approaches based on empowering CSOs to work with their communities to leverage local resources and recreate basic support for community survival and not just for delivering individual aid packages is essential to help communities regain their footing. The EU funding should shift its focus from short term humanitarian responses to more sustainable developmental approaches. But this should be done carefully not to disrupt the protection of the most vulnerable people affected by the conflict. Standard operating procedures for assessing projects must include bottom-up planning approaches, leveraging local community resources, a focus on creating multipliers (jobs and financial) to grow and sustain their impacts, and creating sustainable supply and value chains. Monitoring and evaluation of projects must be agreed with CSOs to adopt new sets of criteria and indicators as part of longer life cycles for project management. Women and youth should be at the core of this transformation, to move from being recipient of aid to being part of the value creation for their communities. Sectoral allocation of funds needs to be counterbalanced by area-based approaches and CSOs should be part of the planning and implementation of such a transition. Some of the EU's procedures need to be re-examined such as the vetting of recipients of aid, working around banking over-compliance with the sanctions, easing the ability of local CSOs to work closer with local governance bodies.*

Challenges:

Key Challenges	**Competition over humanitarian resources**	The level of humanitarian needs in Syria is staggering and no amount of humanitarian aid is likely to cover all needs. While many people in need are still affected adversely by conditions of displacement and are immediate victims of targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure during the conflict, there is an increasing level of need emanating from the deteriorating economic conditions across all geographies. Conflicting parties are competing over resources and to ensure aid is distributed through channels under their control to assert their legitimacy. This is threatening the neutrality of humanitarian actors. As other humanitarian priorities are competing globally for donor funds, the resources available for Syria are likely to dwindle even further. Competition over access to aid is likely to increase, and this may cause new layers of violence in the future.	**Global challenges facing the Civil society at large**
	Loss of community resilience	Communities across the board are affected as a direct or indirect result of the conflict and the different political constraints imposed by external stakeholders on Syria. Value chains are disrupted, war profiteering and corruption has squeezed out viable legitimate economic activities. Many of the economically active citizens have left or are leaving the country reducing local resilience and the ability of communities to survive. Aid to support resilience of communities and the viability of the remaining non-conflict related economic activities is constrained by stringent red lines and vetting procedures imposed by donors to ensure aid is not inadvertently being diverted to sanctioned actors. Exemptions from the sanctions cover only basic humanitarian needs. Supporting viable local resilience runs against a staggering set of challenges such as the corrupt control of de-facto actors, complicated vetting processes to reach donors' aid, diminishing local markets, banking overcompliance with the sanctions, deterioration of basic infrastructure, lack of energy to support basic economic activities, etc. Gradually, the last remnants of communal resilience are dissipating, and people are going deeper into poverty or are having to sell their belongings and migrate. Civil society actors have dwindling resources and many CSOs are losing their staff. As they are forced to work with short project life cycles without the ability to plan ahead for developing their own capacities.	

	Women and girls are bearing the brunt of the conflict	While most of the death that was generated by the conflict was inflicted on male fighters, the economic, social, and humanitarian impact of the conflict was mainly felt by women and girls. They are disproportionately represented among the displaced in refugee and IDP camps, and often having to head households emptied of the traditional breadwinners without sufficient resources and access to livelihoods. They are the victims of silent forms of violence often unnoticed in the different statistics on the conflict. Domestic violence and GBV are on the rise but there are no reliable measures to how, where, and why they are happening. Women have a hard time to access the job market even though they constitute a majority of the population today. Yet women have been struggling very hard to cope with their predicaments and many have shown extreme resilience in the face of all challenges, yet aid programmes are often ill-equipped to handle their needs.	

Logic of interventions and indicators:

	Intervention logic	**Indicators**	**Possible sources of information/ verification**	
Overall objective: Impact	**To enable civic actors to work with their communities to focus more on supporting local solutions, creating multipliers, recovering their resilience and vitality to withstand the impact of the conflict; as well as to support the emergence of local agency (especially for women) for future recovery and sustainable development.**	**Recovering Community Resilience** - *Expanding the humanitarian aid to Syria to include more focus on local resilience and development enabling local communities to incorporate their own resources and energy and to create economic multipliers that would reduce their dependency on humanitarian aid and regain local agency for their wellbeing.* **Possible Indicators:** - Percentage of population living in poverty. - Multi-dimensional poverty index. - Dropout rate from schools (especially for girls). - Life expectancy for women and men. - SDGs especially SDG 5	- UN reporting on poverty in Syria - Syrian official and shadow reporting on the SDGs. - UN Women reports.	**EU & beneficiaries' indirect influence**

Specific objective(s):	**To gradually expand the scope of humanitarian aid to include more focus on resilience, recovery and re-development, to leverage local resources and to create local economic multipliers, and to empower Syrian CSOs to establish local agency and not be entirely dependent on aid delivery fluctuations.**	**New modalities for aid** - *Humanitarian aid needs to be better rationalised, monitored and justified.* - *New modalities of aid need to be tested and evaluated. The current modalities of delivering aid are not suitable to handle projects focused on community resilience, recovery and development. The main channels for aid delivery (UN and INGO channels) are not currently geared to conceive, plan nor effectively monitor such projects. New operating procedures with project cycle management focused on the longer term, vetting processes, human resources and administrative structures are needed. These cannot be created overnight; they need to be tested and adjusted. A gradual process of transforming aid may take years before new modalities are in place, but that process needs to start today if it is to happen down the line.* **Possible Indicators:** - Finely granulated reporting on HNO and HRP delivery in Syria. - Percentage of aid delivered through CSOs. - Percentage of aid focusing on local resilience, recovery and development.	- UN Reports - Harvesting data from individual project reports.	**EU & beneficiaries' sphere of direct influence**

		Supporting communities and not just individuals in need - *Interventions for both humanitarian and recovery purposes need to be assessed based on the short, intermediate and long term needs of communities. Better planning and forecasting tools are needed and this requires project life cycles with long term perspectives.* - *Aid programmes must present more precise case analysis for identifying community needs, identifying risks and harm and calculating multipliers and opportunity costs.* - *Local tangible and intangible community resources need to be leveraged in project design. Impact should be calculated on the basis of multipliers created in local community resources to assess the sustainability of projects.* - *Aid programmes should aim to strengthen community linkages to other communities and to encourage different communities to work together and to create economies of scale.* - *Supply and value chains should be supported to create and retain local value added in the communities.* - *Working with the disabled should extend to fully integrate the disabled in the mainstream of civil society work whenever is possible.* **Possible Indicators:** - Cumulative multipliers (jobs and financial) created through the EU aid in Syria. - Cumulative value of community inputs to match EU funds. - Pilot multi-level poverty index in select targeted communities.	- An EU funded facility to support the collection and analysis of CSO data. - Harvesting data from individual project reports.	

		Women as active agents of local recovery, resilience and community wellbeing - *Supporting women as active agents of change and not just as victims and people in need.* - *Providing resources for women led projects both (financial and business development know how).* - *Supporting women networks and professional associations.* - *Promoting the economic empowerment of women as a cross cutting issue in all recovery and resilience programming.* - *Ensure women empowerment programmes are carefully linked to other community-based programming in a socially sensitive manner.* **Possible Indicators:** - The percentage of women and girls as beneficiaries of economic and recovery programmes. - The share of EU funding going to support women. - Sustainable jobs created for women. - Average years of education for females vs. males.	- UN Women reports - Aggregating data from project reports. - An EU funded facility to support the collection and analysis of CSO data.	

Outputs	**New modalities for distributing aid are needed to encourage local synergies, leverage local resources sustainably and provide more accountability on the impact of aid.**	**The primacy of community in project design, implementation and evaluation** - *Consult with CSOs to develop new standard processes for appraising and monitoring projects incorporating better analysis of community demands and not just needs, leveraging local resources, understanding how value will be created and sustained for local communities, developing clear indicators for assessing impact, and incorporating all of the above into new project life cycle design.* - *Piloting new approaches where CSOs are challenged to work with other local actors and expand the support base for projects.* - *Pilot the creation of cross geography value chains and collaboration on project implementation using collective resources and not just dividing aid money among different CSOs.* - *Pilot experiments to assess the impact of local recovery and resilience work on the war economy and the transition towards sustainable local initiatives embedded withing their local economic, social and governance eco-systems.* - *Focus funding on mainstreaming women economic and social empowerment into community resilience and recovery projects.* - *Increase the share of resilience and recovery programming as part of the total package of aid to Syria.* - *Undertake case study review of sectoral programmes to assess the multipliers they create.* - *Increase support to area-based programming and pressure the to the UN engage CSOs in the planning, implementation and evaluation of area-based programmes.*	- Reports issued by EU-funded projects/ programmes - Reports by an EU funded independent CSO facility on the global impact of EU aid to civil society. - Independent third-party reporting on global impact and do-no-harm. - UN women reports.	**EU & beneficiaries' sphere of control**

Priority 4: Self Constitution: Support the Innate Capacity of CSOs in a Sustainable Manner to Develop Equitable Partnerships and Knowledge Exchanges to Heighten the Voice and Effectiveness of CSOs:

Summary: *CSOs in Syria have a long and tumultuous history. However, the majority were born after 2011 because of the newly developed challenges and opportunities. Many lacked the experience and resources, and their initial enthusiasm was not sufficient to sustain their operations. High turnover in the sector remains a big challenge as CSOs have unreliable access to resources; a high turnover has afflicted their rank-and-file volunteers and staff. The difference in salary scales and other benefits pushed qualified staff away from the field and created unsustainable brain drains. A high dependency on donor funds was created and this forces CSOs to align their internal procedures to donors vetting processes and selection criteria. It also created relationships of asymmetrical power between larger CSOs based outside the country and those operating inside. Knowledge was often valued if it is relevant to donors' due diligence requirements; local knowledge was undervalued. Gained knowledge from the last eleven years of operation was not aggregated nor mainstreamed, especially knowledge created to empower women, and to enhance their roles within their communities and the civil society in general. The EU expanded dialogue to reverse the situation and to help CSOs to develop their capacities more sustainably. But it cannot do that on the level of individual CSOs. It needs to incentivise CSOs to work together to promote co-creation and co-learning processes and to expand existing platforms such as the Brussels Conference and the Virtual Civil Society Platform to encourage synergies and collaboration on knowledge creation among CSOs. Transforming the vetting process is key to transforming the behaviour of CSOs. Encouraging CSOs to carry out voluntary self-assessments to measure impacts and enhance their accreditation before donors, even when they are not formally registered, is essential to enabling them to access more sustainable and advanced funding streams. This could be an entry point to support CSOs develop their own normative standards based on their local conditions. Gender mainstreaming knowledge in the sector cannot happen by small funding for women led and women focused CSOs away from the rest of the sector. Focus should also be on the youth to ensure the sustainability of human resources. Close attention should be given to empower dialogue among CSOs on these issues to bridge their differences.*

Challenges:

Key Challenges	**Dependency on donor funds**	Most of the CSOs in operation today are new civic expressions that were formed or emerged to the surface after 2011. Many were enthusiastic civic initiatives that reflected the needs and expressions of different Syrian communities and their aspirations. However, the initial euphoria was severely hampered by many factors including the limited access to resources. A high turnover in the composition of CSOs resulted from the inability of many of the initial groups to sustain themselves. Donors stepped in and provided vital resources for many CSOs. But in doing so they moulded the recipient CSOs to perform their operations according to standardised procedures that matched the different donors vetting and funding requirements. Donors' requirements were diverse, often contradictory, and constantly changing. This left many of the recipient CSOs dependent on processes that were often outside their control. Many of the smaller CSOs received funds indirectly via intermediaries, and many more were left outside the funding circles but looked at those who received funds with envy and or suspicion. Ultimately the third sector in Syria has no strong normative traditions to guide its operations; no local resource base to rely on and is generally dependent on donors to set the tone for future projects.	**Global challenges facing the Civil society at large**

	Weak governance models	There is no normative regulatory model for CSO governance that covers all of Syria. Most CSOs have had to adapt to whatever regulatory frameworks existed in the territories or countries from where they function. Most also have had to adopt models required by donors to receive funds. A plethora of internal governance models exist even in the same geography. There is also a divergence in the governance capacity of the different CSOs and this has had a direct impact on who gets to receive funds and who does not. But in the overall, most CSOs are new and have little governance traditions to fall back to. Many also have had to improvise and juggle their basic governance models to match the requirements of different donors. Capacities for internal governance vary considerably, with most CSOs compensating for good governance with good intentions and over assessment of their ability to absorb larger resources. While this is causing a problem of credibility for the CSOs involved, over the long run it will create a major challenge of credibility for the whole sector, not to mention it will render the re-integration of CSOs into a national regulatory framework very difficult in the future should a political solution ever be reached in Syria.	
	Divergent levels of technical skills	Little resources were afforded by the donors for the long-term building of capacities within the CSOs. Most grants and donor funds are earmarked for specific project implementations objectives. CSOs for the most part have had to learn on the job and/or learn from each other. While donors recently have been more flexible to afford CSOs with core funds, this is still not a major trend. As a result, many CSOs have a hard time to retain core staff. The turnover in staff is very high. This is also the result of differentiated pay scales between smaller CSOs and larger ones, CSOs inside Syrian and those operating in neighbouring countries or in the Diaspora, and most importantly, between CSOs and UN and INGO pay scales. A constant brain drain is removing people from the field and away from their local communities. In turn this has created a gap with the larger CSOs in terms of understanding the transformations that are occurring on the ground with local communities. Larger CSOs operating outside Syria attract technical skills and hone them to meet donor management requirements but have little touch with communities on the ground. Little CSOs operating inside the country have more sensibilities to deal with the local communities but cannot retain skilled staff. A divergence of know how is splitting the sector inadvertently.	
	Women leadership in the civil society is confined to specific sub sectors	The presence of women leader in the civic movement has been very visible, however, it has not been widespread. Donors have tried to support women leaders in the civil society by focusing on women led and or women focused initiatives. This has enabled many women to emerge as leaders and to assume visible roles withing their organisations. However, in the overall, the presence of women leaders remains considerably disadvantaged. While many CSOs have a higher than proportional women staff and volunteers, they still have not managed to make room in their governance structures to have women assume leadership roles. Allocating funding for women leadership and women empowerment as a separate sub sector, has left many women out of the leadership of mainstream activities. Indeed, in some cases it has created token representation and some influential actors acting as gate keepers rather than enablers. Moreover, as western donors have favoured feminist women leaders with their funding, the women who advocate for more socially sensitive approaches to women empowerment were put at odds with the recipients of the bulk of donor funds. There is a clear lack of synergies between different initiatives as resources are limited and competition is high. Bridging the gap between different women led initiatives and between women led initiatives and other civic initiatives to mainstream the leadership of women in all aspect of civil society remains a strong challenge.	

Logic of interventions and indicators:

	Intervention logic	Indicators	Possible sources of information/ verification	
Overall objective: Impact	**To leverage internal resources within the civil society to work together and create synergies allowing civic actors to learn from each other and to develop new normative frameworks to empower knowledge creation and internal capacities for the third sector at large.**	**Institutional capacity of the civil society sector and not just of CSOs** - *To support civic actors to collaborate, share knowledge, create synergies and build new normative approaches based on their local experiences.* - *To support the creation and retention of knowledge in the civil society as an eco-system and not just within individual CSOs.* - *To help CSOs develop collective visions for new regulatory and governance models to guide their work in the future and to help them aggregate their presence as a unifying social force that can impact the future of the country.* **Possible Indicators:** - Share of the third sector in the national economy. - Numbers and turnover in the numbers of civil society organisations. - Percentage of women leaders on the boards and management teams of CSOs. - Number of CSOs with relevant accreditation.	- National Statistical Abstract. - An EU funded facility to support the collection and analysis of CSO data. - Harvesting data from individual project reports. - UNWomen reports.	**EU & beneficiaries' indirect influence**

Specific objective(s):	**To encourage CSOs to work together on developing solutions and**	**Transforming the vetting process** - *Matching the expectation of donors and CSOs must be lined up systematically beyond the individual vetting of individual projects.* - *CSOs should be encouraged their own self-assessment processes and to create verifiable indicators to assess their impact and to link inputs to outcomes and not just to direct project outputs and deliverables. Self-Assessments need to be framed under a collective accountability framework with communities engaged in them to ensure they over-inflate their impacts and focus on lessons learnt and not just on achievements of immediate project key performance indicators.* - *Different accreditation models could be tested including those of voluntary accreditation clubs. The EU should act as an enabler to allow Syrian CSOs reach transparent and verifiable accreditation standards.* - *Resources should made available to transform the M&E into MEA&L processes where learning is happening to benefit the CSOs and not just the donors' due diligence processes.* - *Encourage CSOs to report against global indicators of relevant to the sector as a whole (possibly along the four priorities defined in this roadmap and not just against project deliverables): Yearly report, contributions towards the SDGs etc.* **Possible Indicators:** - The number of Syrian CSOs with recognised international accreditation. - The SDGs.	- Harvesting data from individual project reports. - An EU funded facility to support the collection and analysis of CSO data. - Future Syrian accreditation clubs for CSOs. - Shadow reports on the SDGs in Syria	**EU & beneficiaries' sphere of direct influence**

		Incentivising synergies for knowledge creation and learning - *Increase the share of share of funding that goes into core support to CSOs and develop criteria to explain core overheads in a manner that would encourage CSOs to direct their attention to internal development.* - *Support CSOs to develop internal succession planning and to develop human resource management capacities and tools.* - *Encourage intra-sectoral exchanges among CSOs to learn from each other and to share knowledge and resources.* - *Develop the virtual platform for CSOs as place of exchange among CSOs and provide it with resources to create knowledge and learning.* - *Encouraging CSOs and CSO networks to create and publish knowledge products.* **Possible Indicators:** - The percentage of funding that goes into the R&D and personnel development budgets of CSOs. - Turnover of CSO staff. - Percentage of projects implemented through co-creation among CSOs.	- An EU funded facility to support the collection and analysis of CSO data. - Harvesting data from individual project reports. - Future Syrian accreditation clubs for CSOs.	
		Gender mainstreaming knowledge - *Incentivising CSOs to work closely with women led and women focused CSOs to generate relevant knowledge on women and to gender mainstream their outputs.* - *Incorporate women empowerment and gender sensitive succession planning into the vetting processes of CSOs.* - *Support women led and women focused CSOs to work together and develop dialogues among each other, support them to created synergies and to bridge their ideological differences.* **Possible Indicators:** - The share of EU funding going to support women. - The number of women in top leadership positions in CSOs. - Wage difference between men and women in the CS sector.	- UN Women reports - Aggregating data from project reports. - An EU funded facility to support the collection and analysis of CSO data.	

Outputs	**To mainstream CSO empowerment and internal development into project life cycle design**	**Leveraging internal resources to enhance collective learning** - *Increase core funding and focus it to support internal development, governance, R&D and human resource management.* - *Incentivising CSOs to work together, especially with women led and women focused CSOs to co-create knowledge.* - *Support the digital platform to become a leader in knowledge co-creation and knowledge exchange.* - *Work with other donors to harmonise core funding and to create value added and avoid duplication of resources.* - *Encourage the UN and INGOs to prioritise funding to empower Syrian CSOs and improve their performance and self-assessment.* - *Pilot initiatives to create an accreditation club and support voluntary membership and accessing international accreditation as a collective.* - *Support reporting against global indicators and not just individual project deliverables.* - *Continue to support the interaction of Syrian CSOs with other donors and international stakeholders (such as the Brussels conference).* - *Incentivise CSOs inside Syria and those in the diaspora to work together and to reverse the relationship of power between them to develop equal partnerships.*	- Reports issued by EU-funded projects/ programmes - EU funded independent CSO facility. - Harvesting data from individual project reports. - Reports of other donors.	**EU & beneficiaries' sphere of control**