Engaging with Syrian CSOs

How can the international community engage better with Syrian civil society organizations during the civil war?

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Contents

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Since the start of the revolution in Syria, the number and activities of Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs) have multiplied extraordinarily. Whereas before the revolution civil society barely existed, CSOs are now involved in (i) relief and recovery, (ii) peace-building, peacemaking and peacekeeping, and (iii) advocacy, evidence gathering, media and monitoring.

The international community is doing a lot to support Syrian CSOs. This paper benchmarks the Syrian CSO community and the international community's engagement with Syrian CSOs against best practices. It looks to assess the capacity of Syrian CSOs and how effectively international organizations are facilitating increased capacity. It looks at both normal CSOs and the Local Administrative Councils (LACs) as a form of omnibus CSO.

The benchmarking shows that typically CSOs are not strategic in their work, that they coordinate very little between one another, and that they lack reliable core funding. It finds that the ambiguous political status of LACs undermines their capacities; that CSOs and community leaders are, one the whole, ineffective at conflict management; that LACs and CSOs lack technical training in the provision of relief and recovery services; and that CSOs are unable to engage with international coordination structures.

Most prominently with regard to the international actors, the benchmarking shows that the support they provide is very poorly coordinated. Consequently, the overall support provided collectively by the international community is piecemeal and lacks clear strategic vision. Certainly, political actors do not involve CSOs in peacemaking in a systemic and strategic way. Additionally, the international community's support is not always directed at CSOs undertaking priority activities and capacity building is not uniformly delivered according to best practice.

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) partner with CSOs to deliver humanitarian aid in areas they cannot reach. However, the partnerships are often short-term, hierarchical and beset by mistrust, rather than collaborative and long-term.

And, although international actors provide funding to Syrian CSOs, this is almost always project-based with short time horizons. Rarely is core funding available – to pay salaries, attract professional staff and build their organizations in a sustainable way.

Recommendations

The protracted conflict in Syria has eroded the national provision of basic goods and services and only local institutions, partnered with international actors, can provide any semblance of good (or good-enough) governance in most of the country. International actors must work with these local institutions to build their capacity. A consensual, strategic and coordinated approach is needed to achieve this – short-term stop-gap aid and CSO programmes are insufficient.

Donor agencies, INGOs, subcontractors and Syrian CSO networks should form a coordination cluster and conduct a joint assessment of the capacity-building needs of CSOs across Syria. They should design a joint strategy to address these needs to ensure international support to Syrian CSOs is coherent and comprehensive – not piecemeal.

INGOs should follow best practice and hire partnership managers who assume responsibility (1) for building long-term, trusting relationships with Syrian CSOs, and (2) for coordinating their work with other INGOs.

International actors should offer support to Syrian NGO networks. International actors should offer to train the Syria-based staff of the networks to deliver consistent, *in situ* mentoring and support to their members. By building stronger and closer relationships with their members, NGO networks can better represent them at international fora.

Then, local institutions, supported by international actors will be better able to provide relief and recovery, peacebuilding, and transitional justice post-conflict.
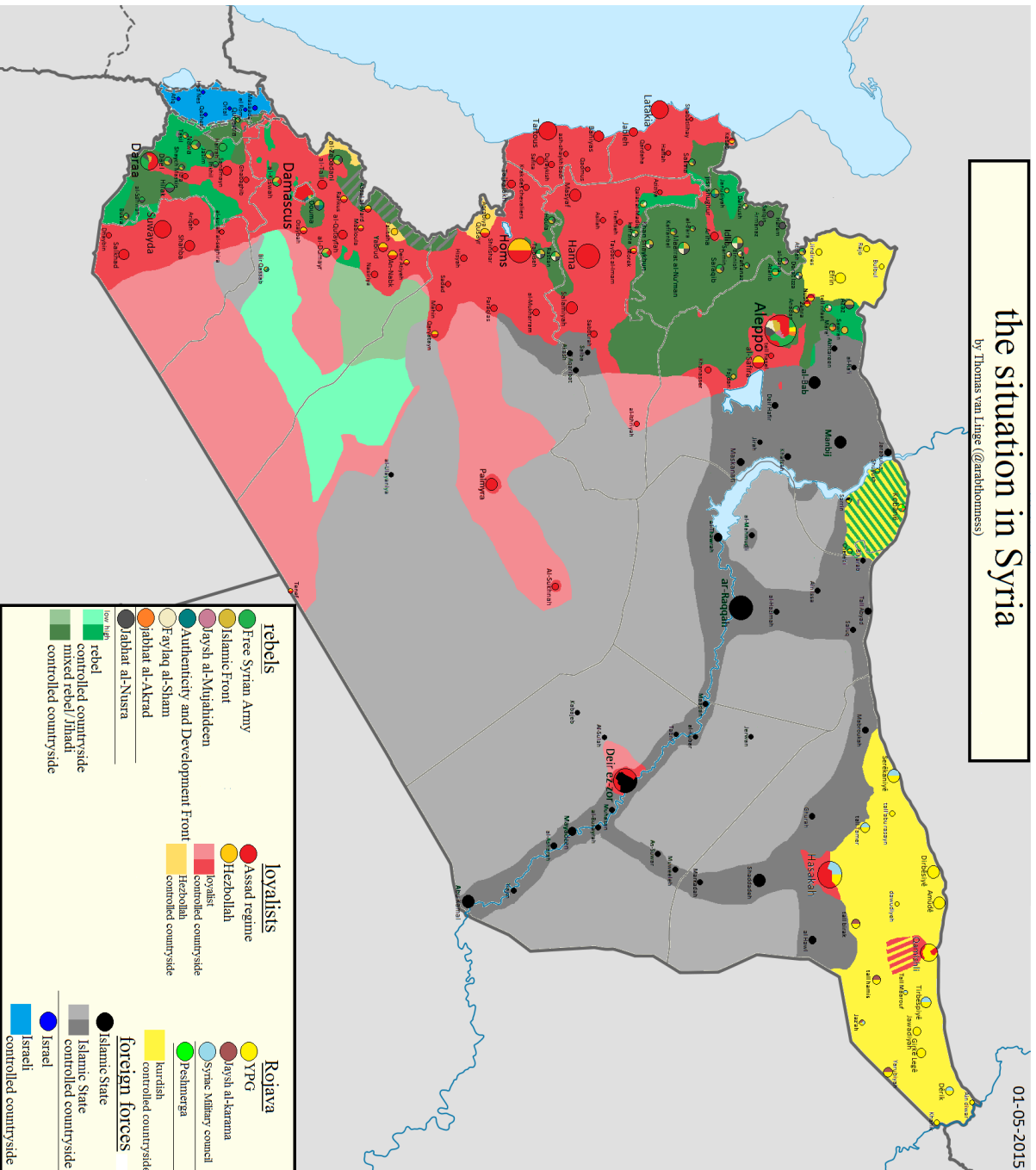
Figure 2. The Situation in Syria. Source: Thomas van Linge (http://ow.ly/MTagP)

1. Introduction

In the years to 2011, civil society in Syria barely existed. The level of oppression in the country was worse than almost anywhere else in the world (Freedom House, 2011). Before the revolution, a group of children and teen-agers organized a small project to plant trees in a neighbour-hood near Damascus. In response, the Security Service came and took away two boys for interrogation.[1] "Civil society" was the domain of the state, host only to a few religious foundations and government-oriented "non-governmental" organizations (GONGOs) such as the Syrian Trust for Development, patronized by First Lady Asma al-Assad (Kawakibi, 2012). But, in Spring 2011, civil society sprang to life. Inspired by events elsewhere in the Arab world, youths organized protests calling for democratic reform and political freedoms. The Government's attempts to put down the protests with force precipitated the descent into civil war.

The civil war has fragmented control of the country (see Figure 1). The government's strategy combines siege and indiscriminate bombing of areas under rebel or jihadist control. The regime restricts the entrance of food, water and medical supplies into these areas regardless of who is to receive them. It has become impossible for international aid organizations to operate on the ground in rebel-held territory. Likewise, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)[2] has control of much of the country and its violent persecution of minorities, suppression of local resistance and execution of foreign journalists and aid workers has prevented aid organizations from operating in its territory too. Other jihadist and other rebel groups also frustrate their work.

However, since 2011, the number of civil society organizations (CSOs) has multiplied and the range of functions they serve has widened. Many of the Local Coordination Committees that organized protests and civil resistance at the beginning of the revolution have evolved into Local Administrative Councils (LACs). LACs are 'omnibus institutions'[3] responsible for administration and service delivery in areas where the state is no longer present. Some 1385 LACs exist and a number of these receive support from the exiled political opposition.[4] They are different from normal CSOs which serve one or more specific functions – such as the provision of education or psychosocial support. LACs are hybrids: they perform the role of local government but are emergent from civil society and continue to resemble CSOs. Networks of LACs – Provincial Councils – have appeared in some areas as well.

Conventional CSOs also exist. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has a register of 600-700 Syrian NGOs of which they consider 143 genuinely active. These vary hugely in size and scope of their activities. Some exist at the level of single or village. Very few operate regionally or across the country. There is also a number of NGOs which operate in Syria but are run by Syrians living outside the country, known as diaspora organizations. Syrian civil society is "slowly consolidating itself into more stable entities, strengthening its ability to respond to the humanitarian crisis" (Serwer, 2014).

This paper looks at the international community's engagement with Syrian CSOs. It uses the term 'CSO' to include both conventional CSOs and this hybrid form of CSO – the Local Administrative Council. It excludes INGOs.

Engaging with CSOs is important for several reasons. First, it is widely recognized that a functional civil society is a desirable end in itself and international support can help develop it. Second, given the difficulties faced by INGOs and IGOs in providing relief and recovery, it is widely recognized that they must partner with CSOs to deliver aid. The better

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[1] Story from a former resident of Damascus
[2] Also known as 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' (ISIL) or, since June 2014, as 'Islamic State' (IS)

[3] Thanks to Dr Gregor Walter-Drop for this terminology
[4] Figures from the Ministry of Local Administration, Relief and Refugees of the Syrian Interim Government

their relationship, the more effective the provision of aid. Third, many believe that civil society offers the best hope of reducing conflict on a local and, ultimately, national level.

Fourth, the conflict in Syria has lasted four years already and looks likely to continue well into the future. The state no longer has the capacity or will to provide governance – in almost all of the country. A governance gap has emerged. In brief conflicts, INGOs and IGOs may be able to fill this governance gap with humanitarian relief. In protracted conflict like this, however, this is dangerous: it breeds dependency on aid and erodes local governance capacity. International actors should also look to local governance actors to fill the governance gap.

The aim of this paper is to identify how international actors can engage with Syrian CSOs better. It identifies, from existing liter-ature, benchmarks to assess the capacity of CSOs (Benchmarks 1 and 2) and benchmarks to assess the international community's engagement with CSOs (Benchmark 3). The paper does not measure the capacities of *individual* CSOs but rather aims to piece together a picture of the capacity of Syrian CSOs in general. This helps to evaluate whether international support is meeting their needs. Benchmark 3 allows us identify areas where international actors could improve what they are doing currently.

Section 2 defines important terms used in this paper. Section 3 explains the method-ology in more detail. Section 4 derives the benchmarks from existing literature. Section 5 compares the situation in Syria with benchmarks and, on the basis of these findings, Section 6 provides recommendations.

2. Definitions

There is no traditional definition of civil society organizations in the context of Syria or the Middle East. The term 'civil society' "has no direct translation in the Arabic language" (Al-Om, 2011) and civil society is underdeveloped throughout the region (USAID, 2012). Insofar as civil society exists, it comprises professional associations, trade unions, sports clubs, *waqfs* or religious endowments, family foundations, and "development or community-based associations that seek to supplement inadequate government services" (Kienle, 2011). This list of different Middle Eastern CSOs does not get us far.

As CSOs are so heterogeneous in nature, Paffenholz & Spurk (2006) propose a function-based definition. They set out seven main functions:
- Protection of citizens
- Monitoring for accountability
- Advocacy and public communication
- Socialization
- Building community
- Intermediation and facilitation between citizens and the state
- Service delivery

Performance of one of these functions is a necessary but not sufficient condition: governments and non-state armed actors also perform some of these functions but are never considered CSOs. Although Paffenholz & Spurk do not identify additional conditions, we might define CSOs as non-state, unarmed actors whose main function is one or more of these functions.

These seven functions are varieties of a single overarching function: the provision (or coordination of the provision of) collective goods. To focus on the provision of collective goods is useful. In Western political theory, providing or coordinating the provision of collective goods is usually the role of the state. However, in areas of conflict, the state's "monopoly over the means of violence [and] the means to make and enforce central political decisions" is severely curtailed (Risse, 2011). It is an area of limited statehood, according to the 'governance in areas of limited statehood' paradigm.

The central conceit of this paradigm is that "limited statehood does not equal the absence of governance". Areas of limited statehood are more prevalent in the world today than are traditional, "consolidated" states. But there is no correlation between how strong the state is (according to Risse's definition) and the provision of governance (Lee, Walter-Drop, & Wiesel, 2014). This is because local (often community-based) actors provide collective goods where the state does not do so. We should therefore think of CSOs as local governance actors whose purpose is to provide or coordinate the provision of collective goods that the state does not or cannot provide.

For the purpose of this paper, a specifically Syrian CSO is one which has close ties to Syrian society and operates mainly or exclusively in Syria.

The next section identifies the most important collective goods provided by CSOs in areas of conflict. In order to provide these goods, CSOs need the organizational capacity and operational capacity to do so. This paper defines organizational capacity as the structural capacity of CSOs to provide collective goods in general, and operational capacity as the capacity of CSOs to provide a particular collective good or set of collective goods. Benchmark 1 allows us to assess the first; Benchmark 2 allows us to assess the second.

3. Methodology

In order to identify how the international community can better engage with Syrian CSOs, this paper assesses both the capacities of Syrian CSO and the international community's engagement with them. By looking at the capacities of Syrian CSOs, we can establish the areas in which they need further support. By looking at how inter-national engagement with Syrian CSOs compares with best practices, we can identify ways in which international actors can improve what they are doing. However, insofar as this paper benchmarks CSO capacity and the international response, the situation is not measured against a single country of comparison (a single benchmark) but rather against an array of best practices.

Benchmark 1 offers a measure of the organizational capacity. Specifically, the paper draws on the benchmarking system used in USAID's CSO Sustainability Index. This index has been used to assess the capacity of CSOs in other Middle Eastern countries, including Lebanon. Lebanon neighbours Syria, bears demographic, cult-ural and historical resemblance to Syria and has undergone decades of conflict. Insofar as this benchmarking system is appropriate for assessing CSO capacity in Lebanon, it should be appropriate for assessing CSO capacity in Syria.

Benchmark 2 provides a measure of the operational capacity of Syrian CSOs, drawing on the activities of CSOs in other conflicts. This benchmark is constructed anew as no benchmark exists already. Comparisons here are inevitably imperfect: not only does one civil conflict differ vastly from the next but the state of civil society in these countries also contrasts markedly. Nevertheless, scholars have identified various functions frequently performed by CSOs in civil war and, where Syria would benefit from CSOs performing these functions, they serve as a useful benchmark.

Benchmark 3 affords a measure of the international community's engagement with Syrian CSOs, compared with needs and best practices. There is no one conflict in which international actors acted in an exemplary fashion and set the standard for engagement with civil society. However, international development and human-itarian aid literature have identified best practices across many prior conflicts. This paper uses those insights to compile a benchmark which can be used to identify ways in which international actors could improve their engagement with civil society.

To assess the situation in Syria against these benchmarks, this paper draws on expert interviews and existing literature on Syria – working papers, news reports and analyses. Interviewees fall into three categories: (i) they work on Syria CSO policy & programming; (ii) they engage directly with Syrian CSOs as part of international support projects; (iii) they have a good overview of Syrian CSOs and international support. Of this last category, two interviewees were themselves involved in Syrian CSOs. The list of organizations to which interviewees belong is available in Appendix 1. Due to the sensitivity of their work, in the context of a civil war, many interviewees asked that their comments be unattributed. Consequently, none of the information gained in interviews is attributed to any individual or organization.

3. Literature Review: Benchmarks

Benchmark 1: Organizational capacity

USAID, in its Civil Society Sustainability Reports (2012) prescribes a narrow definition of organizational capacity which includes only a CSO's internal management and support base: legal environment, financial viability, service provision, infrastructure, and public image are separate indicators. The benchmark here groups these together as, when assessing CSO capacity in conflict areas, we must paint in broader brushstrokes.

Internal structural factors

The internal governance, quality of staffing and sustainability of funding all have important consequences for the effectiveness of CSOs. An organization that is well governed with a clear strategy can make far better use of its staff and funds than a poorly governed organization.

External structural factors

In assessing the external structural factors, we look at both coordination between CSOs and the relationship between CSOs and other actors. This benchmark does not address lobbying in depth because, in times of conflict, the role of policy advocacy is less important.

The most important external structural factor is the existence of coordination and collaboration between CSOs. CSOs should co-ordinate to avoid duplication and working at cross-purposes; CSOs should collaborate to improve their collective effectiveness.

Box 1: Organizational Capacity

Infrastructure and management

- To what extent are CSOs governed capably and strategically? Do they set a clear mission, sensitive to the needs of their constituency, plan effectively and formulate appropriate programmes?

- How well equipped are CSOs – in terms of building facilities, office equipment, information and communications technology, machinery, internet access etc.?

- How well staffed are CSOs – in terms of number and their qualifications etc.? Are they able to retain their staff?

Finances

- How well financed are CSOs? How diverse are their sources of funding? How effective are CSOs at fundraising? How dependent are CSOs on project funding?

- How well managed are CSOs' finances and are they effective in applying for grants?

Relations with other CSOs

- To what extent do CSOs coordinate to avoid interfering with each other's activities?

- To what extent do CSOs share information and communicate best practices?

- To what extent do CSOs make efforts to co-operate/collaborate? Do they engage in joint projects? Are they developing and/or supporting CSO networks and coalitions?

Relations with other actors

- The state
  Are there legal obstacles to the existence or activities of CSOs? Does the state otherwise obstruct the activities of CSOs? Are CSOs able to work with the state? Do CSOs seek constructive relationships with the state?

- International actors
  Do CSOs seek the support of international actors? Do CSOs have good knowledge of international actors? Do CSOs seek to network, partner or work with INGOs etc.?

- Armed groups
  Do armed groups obstruct the work of CSOs? Do CSOs remain independent of armed groups? Are armed groups receptive to the representations of CSOs?

- Citizens and communities
  How positive is the general public's perception of CSOs? Do CSOs seek to build a local constituency? To what extent do citizens understand the motives and purposes of CSOs? To what extent does the media cover the activities of CSOs?

Benchmark 2: Operational capacity

This benchmark is concerned both with the capacity of CSOs to provide a collective good (normally reflected in their actual provision of this good), and the way in which they do so.

The activities of CSOs in the context of civil conflict can be divided into three categories: (2.i) relief and recovery, (2.ii) peacebuilding, peacemaking and peacekeeping, and (2.iii) advocacy, evidence gathering, media and monitoring. The categories incorporate all the seven civil society functions identified by Paffenholz & Spurk (2006) but make the following analysis simpler. Benchmark 2 is a measure of how able CSOs are to perform these functions and how well they perform them.

(2.i) Relief and recovery

Traditionally, in conflict zones, international aid organizations fill in for the state to provide relief and recovery: health, nutrition, protection, shelter, WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), camp coordination and camp management, education, emergency telecoms, food security, early recovery, and – in support of these other goods – logistics. However, CSOs may be involved in provision of any or all of these goods, especially in protracted conflicts.

(2.ii) Peacebuilding, peacemaking and peacekeeping

CSOs are most commonly involved in peacebuilding – activities intended to "restore a functioning society, state and economy and promote political change" so as to remove incentives to violence (Schweitzer, 2010). The World Bank (2006) specifically articulates seven civil society functions in peacebuilding: protection, monitoring and early warning, advocacy and public communication, socialization, social cohesion, intermediation and facilitation, and service provision. (Service provision is part of benchmark 2.i, and monitoring, advocacy and public communication are part of benchmark 2.iii. This section will only be concerned with protection, socialization, social cohesion, and intermediation and facilitation therefore.)

CSOs can also play a role in peacemaking, although this is traditionally the realm of Track I actors. Schweitzer (2010) and Inclusive Security (2013) both offer examples of CSOs involved effectively in peacemaking. CSOs can undertake grassroots peacemaking and dispute resolution between armed groups, communities and individuals. In the past, CSOs have also participated in Track I negotiations – either with direct representation, as mediator, in a consultative role or as observers. In other cases, CSOs have initiated Track II negotiations as means of preparing the ground for successful Track I negotiations. CSOs have acted as go-betweens for parties to the conflict, have pushed them towards negotiations, and have created "safe spaces" for dialogue between them. CSOs have also protested against external intervention in some cases and called for the support of external actors in others.

Schweitzer (2010) recognizes that there are "very few examples" of CSO involvement in peacekeeping. Where CSOs have attempted peacekeeping, it is typically INGOs that have undertaken this work. Nevertheless, Schweitzer records that, during the Balkan Wars, CSOs placed observers at the scene of potential flashpoints and incidents, undertook protective activities such as escorting high-profile individuals who were at risk, and interpositioned themselves between parties to the conflict by organizing projects such as peace marches.

However, conflicts are extremely heterogeneous in nature so different peace activities will be appropriate in different contexts. What is more, the activities appropriate in a given conflict may differ from one locality to the next and from one month to the next. Good CSOs will therefore be undertaking peace activities appropriate to the conflict.

They must be careful not to aggravate tensions (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2012); their projects should be inclusive and locally owned (van der Leest, Kolarova, & Mécréant, 2010; Interpeace, n.d.); they must observe human rights and human security; and they must mainstream gender (van der Leest, Kolarova,

& Mécréant, 2010). CSOs must undertake peacebuilding and peacemaking in a strategic (not in a sporadic) way. Many projects, such as socialization, will only be effective if they reach a genuinely large number of people (World Bank, 2006).

(2.iii) Advocacy, evidence gathering, media and monitoring

This benchmark groups activities concerned with information. Advocacy is concerned with using information to persuade others; evidence-gathering is concerned with gathering information for the purposes of prosecuting war crimes or for post-conflict transitional justice programmes; media is concerned with broadcasting information; monitoring is concerned with recording incidents, trends and so on. The integrity of CSOs engaged in all of these activities is dependent on the accuracy and completeness of that information and the impartiality of their activities (except, perhaps, for advocacy activities).

Box 2: Operational Capacity

Relief and recovery
- To what proportion of those in need can CSOs provide relief and recovery?

- How well equipped are CSOs for relief and recovery in terms of physical resources?

- What level of expertise – skills and knowledge – do CSOs have in relief, recovery and service-delivery (including in M&E of their activities)?

- To what extent do CSOs provide relief and recovery in accordance with the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality, neutrality and humanity?

Peace activities
- To what extent do CSOs undertake peace activities in a strategic way? On what scale do they undertake these activities?

- To what extent do CSOs observe best practices of inclusiveness, local ownership, respect for human rights and mainstreaming gender?

- To what extent do CSOs approach peace in a holistic way, considering peacemaking and peacekeeping work as well as peacebuilding activities?

- What level of expertise – skills and knowledge – do CSOs have in peace activities?

Advocacy, evidence gathering, media and monitoring
- To what extent are CSOs undertaking advocacy, evidence gathering, media, and monitoring?

- To what extent do CSOs abide by the principles of accuracy, completeness and impartiality in this work?

What level of expertise – skills and knowledge – do CSOs have in these areas of work?

Benchmark 3: International engagement

Section 3 identifies numerous ways in which international actors can engage positively with CSOs in areas of conflict. For CSOs providing relief and recovery, international engagement may include partnerships, capacity building and funding. With respect to peace activities, international actors may not only provide funding and capacity building to CSOs but also involve civil society actors in their own peace activities. Where CSOs are involved in advocacy, evidence gathering, media, and monitoring, international actors may offer funding and capacity building. They can also support efforts at coordinating CSOs and offer visible, political support to them.

Strategic and Coordinated Approach

The need for international actors to coordinate their humanitarian assistance to a country and develop a joint strategy to meet humanitarian needs is universally recognized (if poorly implemented). The need for inter-

national actors to coordinate their engagement with CSOs in a strategic way is only very partially recognized. Although individual donors have strategies for engagement with CSOs, including those in fragile states, there are few examples of multilateral country strategies (although, see ECO, 2012).

In theory, engagement with CSOs could be coordinated in the same way that humanitarian aid is coordinated. Just as the UN Humanitarian Country Team conducts a humanitarian needs assessment and develops an appropriate strategic plan to meet these needs (with donors agencies, IGOs and INGOs bidding for projects within that response), so a strategic and coordinated approach towards CSOs in a country could ensure effective and efficient engagement (Leader & Colenso, 2005; Poskitt & Dufranc, 2011).

International actors must coordinate on several levels. At a minimum, they must coordinate to prevent duplication and avoid working at cross-purposes. They should also coordinate to ensure that their projects do not inadvertently harm Syrian CSOs – for example, if multiple INGOs are working with the same partner organization, they should avoid overburdening the CSOs with excessive projects, funds and reporting requirements. At best, international actors should collaborate to ensure maximum impact.

INGOs may not have the expertise to provide capacity building to their partner organizations. They must therefore cooperate to share their expertise and work with each other to ensure CSOs can access the kinds of training they need.

To do all of this, international actors must share information about their activities and best practices; they must share their knowledge of CSOs; they must coordinate their use of funds; and they should work to ensure that collectively their support covers as many needs as possible. In order to do this, they should develop platforms for coordination as needed.

Capacity building

Capacity building should be targeted at both organizational capacity and operational capacity. When it comes to providing relief services, CSOs need expertise to deliver health, WASH and emergency telecoms, and international actors can provide the oper-ational capacity building that develops this expertise. For all CSOs, training in financial management can be extremely valuable: it not only helps improve efficiency but also in the long-term may contribute to their autonomy and equality of status with INGOs (Christoplos, 2005).

International actors should reflect best practice in their capacity-building prog-rammes. CSOs will benefit most from long-term mentoring rather than occasional workshops or "trainings", which local actors often perceive as exercises in cultural imperialism (De Vos, 2015; Stephan, Lakhani, & Naviwala, 2015; World Bank, 2005; Christoplos, 2005). Best practice prescribes training-of-trainers (ToT) programmes (Ster-land, 2006). Locals are trained (typically *ex situ*) to deliver capacity-building training and are then returned to the field to deliver capacity-building advice and mentoring *in situ*, over an extended period of time. This is especially applicable when the country is inaccessible to external actors: the reach of such programmes is greater and it has the positive side effect of developing local expertise. Most importantly, delivery-mechanisms must be appropriate for both the context and content.

International actors must properly assess local capacities before designing capacity-building programmes, (Tukker & van Poelje, 2010) and listen carefully to what CSOs identify as their needs and preferences.

Funding and equipping
International actors typically play a major role in funding the activities of CSOs in areas of civil conflict. Depending upon the priorities of donor agencies, funding may be directed at CSOs engaged in relief and recovery, peace-building or advocacy, evidence gath-ering, media and monitoring activities.

It will likely be impossible to satisfy traditional accountability and evaluation demands. Donors must be flexible and reporting proce-

dures must be simplified (Poskitt & Dufranc, 2011). Furthermore, in deciding whom to fund, donors and subcontractors disbursing grants must conduct thorough assessments of CSOs.

There is a tendency among donors and international organizations to provide only project funding to CSOs. This is because it is easier to justify and easier to trace. However, donors need provide core funding so that CSOs can build their capacity (Poskitt & Dufranc, 2011; Howe, Stites, & Chudacoff, 2015).

Partnerships

The value of partnerships with local CSOs as a means of delivering humanitarian and recovery aid, especially in remote management settings,[5] is more widely recognized than ever (Svoboda & Pantuliano, 2015; De Vos, 2015). Evaluations and scholarly work have highlighted several critical considerations and best practices for INGOs working in this way.

Partnerships work best when they are conducted on the basis of mutual respect, equality, transparency, complementarity and the development of trust: CSOs should not be treated as their subcontractors. INGOs should demonstrate a long-term commitment to their partner CSOs and not only work with them to deliver projects but also assist them to develop their own organizational and oper-ational capacity (Christoplos, 2005; Poskitt & Dufranc, 2011; UNDP, 2012b; Nightingale, 2012). This is important both for effective delivery of services, for legitimacy and for putting CSOs in a better position to respond to future needs.

Best practice in partnerships demands that INGOs have a dedicated partnership manager on their country team (Nightingale, 2012; Howe, Stites, & Chudacoff, 2015). Ensuring that CSOs regularly deal with the same staff member is a valuable way of building trust between the two organizations, as it affords the CSO some stability in the relationship and helps the INGOs build a stronger understanding of the CSO and its staff. Additionally, INGOs' partnership managers should conduct

a thorough assessment of CSOs before partnering with them (Poskitt & Dufranc, 2011).

In order to demonstrate respect for their partners, INGOs should involve their partner organizations in programme design and grant applications, and work with the CSOs to define their respective roles clearly. Likewise, INGOs must make efforts to build CSOs' trust. Face-to-face meetings and actively seeking CSOs' feedback and reflections are important.

In most conflict zones, INGOs are present on the ground alongside local partners and may either take on the burden of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) themselves or require CSOs to follow standard M&E procedures. Where a conflict forces INGOs to manage projects remotely, M&E is more difficult. For CSOs operating these environments, it may be very risky to follow standard M&E procedures and to keep paper-based accounts of supplies, funds, recipients, journeys and activities. INGOs must be sensitive to the safety of CSO staff and their ability to provide detailed, proven accounts of their activities. Various alternatives exist (Howe, Stites, & Chudacoff, 2015).

Support for coordination between CSOs

International actors have good reason to support and facilitate coordination between CSOs but, in doing so, they must take care. International actors must be careful not to upset the legitimacy of alliances and networks as "excessive encouragement or even pressure for establishment of such platforms leads to accusations that they are donor-driven and undermines ownership and the credibility of civil society" (UNDP, 2012a).

Political support

Support to CSOs can take many forms and it is often valuable for international actors simply to voice their support for CSOs and their activities: it tells CSOs that their work is recognized and appreciated.[6] The Council for a Community of Democracies (2008) has identify numerous ways in which international actors – diplomats in particular – may offer political support to CSOs. For example, international actors can vocalize their support for

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[5] 'Remote management settings' are geographical areas where people and communities in need are generally inaccessible to international actors.

[6] This point was also made in interviews.

civil society activities in news media and speeches. Likewise, where international actors have access to the government, they may advocate on behalf of CSOs or call for restrictions on their activities to be removed. However, international actors must be sensitive to the legitimacy of CSOs in the eyes of their constituents and not taint them with unwanted support.

Engaging CSOs in Peace Projects

International political actors engaged in peacemaking should engage with CSOs in a "systematic, substantial, and strategic" way and not in an *ad hoc*, symbolic fashion (CSAG to the UN, 2010). International actors should pursue a systems approach to peacemaking, fully involving CSOs (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2012). The aim of this approach is "to understand how the dynamics of… phenomena [such as poverty, disasters, crime, intergroup relations and gender dynamics] interact, adapt, change and sustain the broader conflict system. Systems thinking helps practitioners and policymakers design more effective, adaptable programs that can shift key interactions in the system and contribute to macro-level change" (Alliance for Peacebuilding, n.d.). International actors can work with CSOs both to identify those key interactions and to address them.

Harms to avoid

Mary Anderson famously articulated the principle of 'Do No Harm' (1996), and this principle is of paramount importance when engaging with CSOs in conflict areas. International actors must be very careful to avoid increasing security risks for the CSOs they support – either by changing their constituents' positive perceptions of them, by incentivising them to undertake unreasonably risky activities, or by otherwise putting them in danger.

International actors who provide capacity building and funding, must also be careful not to incentivize the creation of CSOs just because there is money available (Schweitzer, 2010). Not only is this wasteful but such CSOs can do harm and worsen other international actors' impressions and constituents' impressions of CSOs.

Likewise, INGOs and private sector grantees must take care not to distort the local labour market. Offering locals higher salaries than local organizations can pay may draw local staff away from CSOs and deplete their capacities (Christoplos, 2005; Schweitzer, 2010), although international actors do need local knowledge and CSO staff should be free to choose whichever career paths are open to them.

Box 3: International Engagement

International coordination
- How effectively do donors collaborate and work together to produce a strategy on the basis of joint needs assessments?

- To what extent do donors coordinate to avoid gaps and/or duplication in their engagement with CSOs?

- To what extent do donors coordinate to avoid imposing excessive administrative burden on local civic actors?

Support for CSO coordination
- To what extent do international actors actively encourage and support coordination between CSOs, advise on best practices and fund platforms for coordination?

Capacity building
- To what extent do international actors conduct a proper assessment of CSOs' capacity building needs , and are they appropriately sensitive to the preferences of the CSOs?

- To what extent do international actors provide adequate and appropriate organizational capacity building?

- To what extent do international actors provide adequate and appropriate operational capacity building?

- To what extent are the delivery mechanisms for capacity building appropriate to the content, the recipients and the context?

Funding and equipping

- How sufficient is international funding to CSOs? And, where funds are limited, to what extent do international actors allocate funding to CSOs appropriately – both in terms of the amount received by individual CSOs and in terms of the overall number of CSOs funded?

- How flexible are donors and organizations responsible for sub-grants in disbursing funds?

- How sensitive to the context are international actors in imposing financial reporting procedures?

- Are international actors providing CSOs with sufficient core funding?

- Are international actors helping CSOs to procure the equipment they need?

Partnerships

- How thorough are INGOs' assessments of potential partners?

- How sensitive are INGOs' M&E requirements to the context and the capacity of their partners?

- Do INGOs have appropriate structures and staff in place to manage their partnerships?

- To what extent do partnerships between INGOs and local actors reflect mutual respect, equality, transparency, complementarity and trust – by involving local actors in programme design, evaluation, etc.?

Political support

- To what extent do international actors provide appropriate and sensitive political support to CSOs?

Engagement in peace projects

- To what extent do international actors engage CSOs in peace processes in a "systematic, substantial and strategic" way, and are they careful to preserve CSOs' legitimacy in the eyes of their constituents?

Harms to avoid

- To what extent do international actors take care to preserve the legitimacy of local actors (where it exists)?

- To what extent do international actors take care not to incentivize CSOs to act in unproductive ways?

- To what extent do international actors take care not to distort the local labour market?

5. Situation Now

In this section, all information derives from interviews unless otherwise indicated.

Several hundred CSOs have formed in Syria since 2011. The vast majority of these are extremely local and operate on the level of just a street, neighbourhood or village. A smaller number of CSOs operate across a group of villages or in a town. Larger, regional NGOs are very rare: those that do exist on a larger scale are involved in non-political work such as psychosocial support. According to one interviewee, 10% of these CSOs do 90% of the work. Hence, OCHA counts 143 NGOs as genuinely active in Syria, of which 120 are engaged in humanitarian work and 23 are involved in either peace activities or advocacy, evidence gathering, media or monitoring. Of the organizations involved in relief and recovery, 30-40 are diaspora NGOs.

Increasingly, local NGOs are registering in neighbouring countries. Syrian CSOs differ greatly in size and activity, and they work across very varied contexts. It is therefore no surprise that their organizational and operational capacities differ enormously.

Organizational Capacity of Syrian CSOs
The organizational capacity of Syrian CSOs is generally very limited. Goodwill among staff is their most valuable resource.

Neither LACs nor CSOs are strategic in their work. Their choice of projects is determined in part by new funding opportunities (provided by INGOs and other donors or partners) and in part by new demands from their communities. Typically, they do not identify long-term and medium-term goals and programme accordingly, designing projects according to the resources available. The result of this deficiency in strategic governance is that LACs and CSOs often promise more than they can achieve.

The staffs of both conventional CSOs and LACs lack experience and expertise. The LACs need to employ professionals with expertise in, for example, water management, electricity transmission and engineering; they struggle to do so, however, because they have limited ability to pay these professionals and the professionals are afraid of becoming associated with political entities. Additionally, recruitment is often based more on trust than suitability for the job, especially amongst LACs. This results in LACs employing individuals who are underqualified but are known to those in charge – either though family, business or friendship. Indeed, some LACs look mafia-like, according to one interviewee.

The staff of conventional CSOs are similarly inexperienced as CSOs are still new to Syria: they are learning on the job. Moreover, the level of education of staff varies significantly from one province to the next and this affects both LACs and conventional CSOs. For instance, the illiteracy rate in Aleppo, Al-Hasakah, Ar-Raqqah ad Deir ez-Zor governorates is between 20 and 30%, whereas in Damascus, Rif Dimashq, As-Suweida and Homs governates, illiteracy is between 5 and 10% (Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2010).

In terms of equipment, Syrian CSOs have the bare minimum. Everything is needed (*Interviews*; also Serwer, 2014). Although most have internet access, CSOs lack comm-unications hardware in general. The use of electronic equipment is restricted by frequent interruptions to electricity supply. Additionally, equipment is sometimes stolen or misused but it is widely felt that some loss of equipment and money is unavoidable.

CSOs are able to access funding for specific projects but are typically short of core funding. Funding from the Syrian diaspora in Western and Gulf states is drying up. Conventional CSOs are increasingly dependent upon international donors and partners for funding. Some LACs previously received funding and resources for projects from the Assistance Co-ordination Unit (ACU) of the Syrian National Coalition, and other funds from the Local Administration Councils Unit (now the Ministry

for Local Administration, Relief and Refugees of the Syrian Interim Government). However, funding from these sources is decreasing. CSOs are typically too small to receive grants from major international donors but small grants from separate funds or institutions offer the prospect of better small-scale funding in the near future.

Coordination between Syrian CSOs is extremely limited but also difficult. There are a number of fledgling CSO networks, defined by sector or political affiliation, but on the whole coordination is *ad hoc* and dependent on both the personalities involved and the CSOs' locations. With this *ad hoc* coordination, trust is again an issue.

Amongst relief and recovery organizations, there is little cross-regional cooperation. At least five relief-oriented NGO networks exist, of which two are fairly organized, two are little more than loose networks, and one is somewhere in between. The two more functional networks are dominated by international and diaspora NGOs – not local CSOs. Where alliances do exist, they typically have little experience, their purposes are only loosely defined and their membership criteria are unclear. It is not clear how these organizations should fit into humanitarian coordination structures.

Coordination is stronger amongst advocacy, evidence gathering, media, and monitoring CSOs. The Transitional Justice Coordination group, with seventeen members, is responsible for coordinating its members' work and building up a macroscopic image of violations in the country. The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network is responsible for coordinating technical-capacity building for transitional justice CSOs. However, almost no coordination exists between CSOs undertaking peacebuilding, peacemaking and peacekeeping.

The Ministry of Local Administration, Relief and Refugees of the Syrian Interim Government (formerly LACU) has attempted to impose a structure on LACs but with limited success. The Ministry's aim is to have Governorate Committees which design programmes of service delivery for their region and set budgets for these programmes, and Executive Councils which supervise these programmes. LACs under this structure are Operational Offices staffed by professionals who implement projects in their locality. All of this would be monitored by a representative General Committee.

The greatest threat to CSOs' work is the absence of basic security (*Interviews*; Svoboda & Pantuliano, 2015; Serwer, 2014). The threat is twofold. First, there is the direct threat from war – from bombs, sieges and face-to-face fighting. Second, there is the threat posed to CSOs by armed groups and armed individuals who oppose their work, who may either obstruct it or use violence against the CSOs' staff. The first threat affects all CSOs similarly. The second threat is different for different types of CSOs.

For LACs and CSOs involved in delivering projects that pose no possible threat, such as psychosocial work, armed groups are not usually a problem. The armed groups do not have the capacity to deliver relief and recovery services, so LACs and CSOs are typically permitted to deliver services – under varying restrictions. If an armed group is local to the community, it is typically more accommodating of the work of LACs and CSOs. Groups with fighters from outside the community and, especially, jihadist groups with foreign fighters, impose greater restrictions. Nevertheless, relief and recovery work is usually possible, even under such circumstances. The level of restriction is far greater in ISIS-controlled territory. LACs and CSOs are involved in the delivery of relief and recovery services there but under the strict control of ISIS.

In contrast, conventional CSOs are the "most affected by physical threats and uncertain legal space, especially in contested or Damascus government-controlled [i.e. regime-controlled] areas" (CCSDS et al, 2014). The activities these CSOs undertake – in advocacy, evidence gathering, media and monitoring, and in peace activities – pose more of a challenge to armed groups. There is a tendency amongst these organizations (but amongst other types of CSOs as well) to retreat and resurge with changes in control of territory.

In any case, CSOs' relationships with armed groups and the permissions armed groups give them are not systematic or stable.

In government-controlled territory, LACs and CSOs are less developed and perform fewer functions because (i) the government still pays some public sector employees to deliver services, (ii) INGOs are more able to operate in these areas, especially the Syrian Arab Red Cross, and (iii) the government's legislation still stifles the existence of civil society. However, the capacity of the government to provide these services and to exert control over civil society in its territory is shrinking as its financial resources run short.

Interviews offered very little information on the relationship between CSOs and communities. The conclusion was that CSOs are generally but not universally supported by the communities they seek to serve, and that citizen participation in CSOs is too little. In the field of justice and the rule of law, the organizations "which are most closely linked to the [geographical] interior [of Syria] and which have the longest established record of service provision are the most legitimate", according to a report by Integrity Research and Consultancy (2014 ii). Justice is particularly vulnerable to accusations of illegitimacy so it is not possible to infer reliably to CSOs serving other functions. Nevertheless, interviewees felt that Syrian organizations generally enjoy greater legitimacy than international actors.

LACs previously lacked legitimacy as they were set up with little community involvement and

BOX 4

Organizational capacity: Key findings

- **CSOs are not strategic in their work**

- **CSOs coordinate very little**

- **CSOs lack reliable core funding**

- **CSOs face major physical insecurity**

multiple LACs would exist in the same area, competing with on another. However, "many of the legitimacy issues have been improved, and this is certainly a major achievement of the LAS over the last two years of their existence" (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2014).

Operational Capacity of Syrian CSOs

Syrian CSOs are involved in all three areas of activity set out in Section 4 – relief and recovery, peace activities, and advocacy, evidence gathering, media and monitoring. However, there are also numero+us CSOs that instead run small community-oriented projects that do little to reduce human suffering in Syria.

Relief and recovery

It is beyond the scope of this paper to measure effectively the reach of CSOs in relief and recovery. However, humanitarian needs far outstrip the capacity of local and international actors to respond. The organizations involved include LACs, Syrian NGOs, community-based organizations and religious institutions.

LACs provide a wide range of collective goods although their activities differ from one LAC to the next. They are variously involved in health provision, clearing debris, waste management, restoring water and electricity infrastructure, agriculture and numerous other services. Some interviewees considered attempts at restoring infrastructure and recovery to be hopeless whilst indiscriminate government airstrikes continue. These activities are also hindered by a severe lack of technical expertise due to difficulties in recruiting former civil servants, as outlined above (see also Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2014). Services requiring less technical capacity are more successful.

Conventional CSOs are involved in the provision of more simple collective goods such as food, shelter, medical treatment and education. Although they are generally effective within the scope of their activities, they lack humanitarian and institutional know-how. This constrains the scope of their activities. In addition, when working with INGOs as partner organizations, CSOs are typically unaware of

their rights and do not know what they are entitled to ask of their partners.

Syrian CSOs are rarely present at meetings with international actors and if they are, this does not necessarily indicate that they have a good presence on the ground. Often the organizations that are present on the ground and are good at implementation lack the capacity to attend international meetings. Networks of these latter organizations would help ensure their voice is heard at international forums. Nevertheless, an increasing number of CSOs now have an understanding of international coordination mechanisms and the UN system following efforts by OCHA and other international actors to improve this.

CSOs typically do observe international humanitarian principles (Svoboda & Pantuliano, 2015). Everyone affected by the Syrian conflict has a political position on the Assad regime, on the opposition in exile, on rebel groups, on ISIS and on the actions of foreign states (especially the USA, Russia and Iran). Nevertheless, CSOs generally do abide by the principle of neutrality in their work: they do "not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature".[7]

Many consider LACs to be in breach of the principle of independence. There are two reasons for this. First, the LACs are performing a function which resembles the role of local government and so they are perceived sometimes as a threat to the sovereignty of the Syrian state. Second, the Syrian National Coalition and Interim Government have attempted to build the capacity of LACs and impose a structure for their coordination: both efforts are necessary to improve the effective delivery of relief and recovery in these areas but the LACs are politically tainted as a result.

Peace activities
In 2014, two important reports were published on local peacebuilding and peacemaking – the 'Hungry for Peace' report by Turkmani et al, and 'Building Peace within Syr-

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[7] Definition of neutrality from the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and adopted by OCHA.

ian Communities' by the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria and the Peaceful Change Initiative. However, there is not much research on protection, early warning, socialization or social cohesion. A proper study of these activities is required elsewhere.

Amongst CSOs undertaking peace activities, socialization and social-cohesion activities are most common. A number of CSOs run coexistence initiatives, and several have set up cultural centres. Youth groups in particular are involved in these activities (Hallaj, 2014). However, these are localized, piecemeal projects and there is little evidence of their effectiveness.

Some CSOs and communities have organized protection activities. In early March 2015, for example, residents of the Damascus neighbourhoods of Beit Sahem and Babila protested against infighting between the armed groups Jabhat al-Nusra and Jaysh al-Islam. As a result, Jabhat al-Nusra withdrew from the area. Similarly, in February 2015, residents of Al-Atareb protested against infighting between Jabhat al-Nusra and Harakat Hazm, although this failed to stop the violence. These interpositioning activities are only occasional and vary in their success. CSOs have been more successful in helping evacuate civilians from front-line areas, such as Homs (Turkmani et al, 2014). Few CSOs have undertaken alternative protection activities such as educating armed groups about international humanitarian law although, framed in terms of Islamic values and Sharia law, there is considerable potential for CSOs to work on projects promoting international humanitarian law.

CSOs have attempted to play the role of intermediaries in Syria but with little success. It is typically community leaders who assume the role of mediator or negotiator, seeking ceasefires, the release of prisoners or return of the bodies of deceased combatants. These community leaders are typically well-educated individuals such as doctors who command the respect of their communities. However, they typically "lack formal training in conflict resolution and are often not prepared for negotiating issues of life-or-death importance on behalf of their community" (CCSDS et al,

2014). As a result, truces between armed groups mediated by CSOs or community leaders are beset by numerous failings. First, the truce terms are "vague, contested or verbal only; were not signed by both parties; and generally did not specify coordination and implementation modalities or agreed roles and responsibilities for stakeholders" (Integrity Research & Consultancy, 2014 i). Second, mediators have failed to build confidence between the parties; and third, they have to put in place observers to ensure adherence to agreements (Turkmani et al, 2014). Truces have often collapsed. The failures are partly due to a lack of resources and partly due to a lack of expertise. As the CCSDS report states, "with the right support, community leaders could focus more on preventative confidence building between community groups, or on early warning". There is little evidence of CSOs engaging in any early warning activities.

In recent months, an alliance of Syrian and international NGOs – The Syria Campaign – has attempted to exert political pressure on international actors, launching a petition and encouraging individuals around the world to campaign for a no-fly zone in Syria. Although this is yet to achieve its stated objective, it demonstrates the developing capacity of Syrian CSOs, supported by individuals overseas.

Overall, CSOs and civic actors are not strategic in their peacebuilding and peacemaking. "The actions of community leaders typically lead to temporary solutions that: (a) do not address the drivers of conflict; and (b) may incentivise violence in the long-term" (CCSDS et al, 2014).

Advocacy, evidence gathering, media and monitoring

Syrian CSOs have been most successful in evidence gathering, media and monitoring activities (less so in advocacy). CSOs serving these functions typically work on a larger scale than others do. A range of projects exists including community radio stations, opinion-polling and data-gathering organizations, think tanks, online media and local print media, and organizations documenting human rights abuses. Journalists and analysts monitoring the conflict from outside Syria have become highly dependent upon Syrians do this work.

In 2013, The Syrian Observer conducted a study of documentation groups working in Syria. This study found that they (i) lacked coordination, (ii) rarely categorized and compiled evidence according to legal principles, (iii) were inconsistent in their standards of verification, (iv) underreported sexual violence, and (v) did not uniformly embrace the use of technology in reporting. A separate study is necessary to establish fully the current state of these organizations however it is clear from the output of these organizations and from interviews that the standards of evidence gathering and reporting have improved. There are three organizations documenting violations nation-wide and at least 14 working at a local level. Coordination amongst these groups is improving.

Organizations involved in broadcast and print media have also developed over the course of the conflict. Nevertheless, the government and armed groups frequently detain activists and disrupt their work. Freedom House in 2014 reported that, "dozens of publications currently operate outside the purview of the regime's censorship apparatus, but some do face threats from radical Islamist factions".

For all of these CSOs, satellite devices are important for accessing the internet and for telephone communications – "a method which is protected against regime-enforced blackouts" (Freedom House, 2014) – but like all equipment, there is a shortage amongst CSOs.

BOX 5

Operational capacity: Key findings

- **The ambiguous political status of LACs undermines their capacities;**

- **CSOs and community leaders are typically ineffective in their efforts at conflict management;**

- **LACs and CSOs lack technical training in the provision of relief and recovery services;**

- **CSOs are unable to engage with international coordination structures;**

International Engagement with Syrian CSOs

International engagement with Syrian CSOs has changed a lot over the past few months and even more so over the past two years. This is the result of two changes. First, the prospects of a nationwide peace, negotiated by Track I actors, are not good, and so international actors are looking instead to encourage peace at a local level. Second, INGOs have faced diminishing access to people in need inside Syria and have had to work through local organizations, especially in rebel-held areas (see p.1). At first, INGOs treated CSOs as subcontractors or mere implementers of the projects INGOs had planned. However, this is improving, slowly.

International actors interact much less with Syrian CSOs in government-controlled areas, with the exception of the Syrian Arab Red Cross as INGOs typically disburse aid themselves in these areas. There are restrictions on which organizations UN agencies can work with: they must be registered as NGOs either in Syria or in another country (*Interviews*; Stoianova, 2014).

Capacity building

Capacity building works in two main ways in Syria. The first type of capacity building is delivered by organizations contracted by donor states for the sole purpose of delivering capacity building (and, occasionally, small grants). This type of capacity building is received by CSOs of all types and by LACs. The second type of capacity building is delivered *ad hoc* in the course of partnerships between INGOs and CSOs involved in relief and recovery. Neither is perceived very positively.

The first type of capacity building is typically delivered through workshops hosted in neighbouring countries, especially Turkey. Interviewees found that these workshops were usually ineffective: they were described variously as "group therapy" and as a "smokescreen" intended to make it seem as if international actors were providing support. More specifically, it seems that some subcontractors delivering capacity building programmes have been concerned more with outputs (the number of workshops held or the number people attending workshops) than

with outcomes. The result of this is, for example, that subcontractors deliver similar workshops to the same audience repeatedly, in fulfilment of their outputs targets. The content of workshops was also criticized for not reflecting the needs of Syrian CSOs. There was particular criticism of for-profit subcontractors. Several interviewees made the criticism that donors were contracting for-profit organizations to run projects which could equally well be organized by not-for-profit organizations, run preferably by Syrians.

Some subcontractors are delivering capacity building in better ways – for instance, by training of trainers. However, the use of this delivery mechanism is often half-hearted. Some ToT programmes merely involve holding a brief training workshop outside Syria and then send participants back into Syria to repeat the workshop they just received. This is inadequate as a means of supporting CSOs. The trainers sent back into Syria should be capable of mentoring a number of CSOs within Syria, and be able genuinely to assist them in their attempts to build their CSOs into organizations that meet community needs. Nevertheless, there are some programmes which do exactly this.

Furthermore, training and mentoring is sometimes directed towards CSOs that run low impact projects such as planting flowers. Donors and their subcontractors must ensure capacity building is directed at CSOs that are working towards peace, transitional justice, and humanitarian and development needs. LACs (which are filling in for the state and providing vital public services) are in particular need of support. The scope of capacity building is also very limited. Only a fraction of the 600-700 CSOs (of which 143 are deemed active and are on OCHA's register) and the 1385 LACs are receiving this kind of support.

Capacity building delivered as part of partnerships between INGOs and Syrian CSOs is *ad hoc* and project-focused. It is typically reactive and is provided to a CSO when the partner INGO has identified a particular area of concern, such as in financial management. However, there is awareness of the weakness of this approach and some INGOs are now talk-

ing to their partners about what they would find useful and are beginning to develop training plans.

Most INGOs have the financial resources to do this – often donors earmark a proportion of grants to INGOs for capacity building or allow a training budget – however not all INGOs have the necessary expertise in capacity building. There is increasing cooperation between aid organizations on the issue of capacity building. Currently this too is *ad hoc* in nature but in mid-2014, these organizations established the Partnership Initiative. This initiative promises more structured coordination of capacity building, although it appears to be in development still: there is no public information about it at present.

The central weakness of capacity building efforts is that there has been no overarching, collaborative assessment of capacity building needs across Syrian civil society, including LACs. Existing needs assessments look only at humanitarian needs across the country (for example, the 2014 Multisectoral Needs Assessment) and do not look at either local governance needs or organizational needs, despite the fact that in a context such as Syria these are the main delivery mechanisms for humanitarian aid. By mapping the needs of Syrian civil society, it would be possible for donors, subcontractors and INGOs to collaborate in developing a strategy which would meet these needs, and divide its delivery up between them.

Partnerships

In recent months, two excellent reports have been published on partnerships between INGOs and Syrian CSOs: *Breaking the Hourglass* by Howe, Stites and Chudacoff of the Feinstein Center, released in February; and *International and local/diaspora actors in the Syria response* by Svoboda and Pantuliano of the Overseas Development Institute, released in March. Although further information was gathered in course of interviews for this paper, one should read these reports for a fuller assessment of partnerships.

INGOs generally select the CSOs with whom they partner in one of three ways. (1) The CSO wants funding for a project and either contacts the INGO directly or contacts a donor or UN agency which then passes the CSO along to the INGO. (2) The INGO seeks a CSO with whom to work and either seeks the recommendations of other INGOs or utilizes informal staff networks to identify possible partners. (3) The INGO and CSO become acquainted at events where INGOs and CSOs can network.

Although this is not a particularly structured approach, there was – until recently – no register of CSOs working in Syria. However, the next step (of deciding whether to work with the CSO) is more rigorous and typically involves assessing whether they have the organizational capacity to handle the money, the technical expertise for a given project and a sufficient presence in the target area, and to what extent they abide by international humanitarian principles.

In the past, INGOs worked primarily with diaspora organizations – simply because it was easier to do so. Diaspora organizations had better access to donor and UN agencies (Channel 1); they are better connected to INGO staff (Channel 2); and they have the confidence, language skills and staff capacity to attend events with INGOs (Channel 3). However, this pattern has changed and INGOs now work with local, Syria-based CSOs as well.

INGOs working from Turkey have partnered more often with small Syrian CSOs than have INGOs working across other borders as the Turkish border is extremely porous, allowing small organizations to cross it with relative ease. However, these CSOs have not been treated as equals and partners: they have been treated more as subcontractors or implementers. Although relationships with diaspora organizations also lack equality, this is more severe with small CSOs and the result is that there are now many small organizations in the north of Syria which have lost interest in partnerships. They want instead to do their own programme, receive funding and work unimpeded.

In addition, INGOs previously overloaded CSOs. This was not the fault of INGOs alone as Syrian CSOs overpromised or overestimated

their capacity to deliver projects; however, INGOs collectively were working with too few CSOs, meaning that a handful of organizations were struggling to deliver on projects which could and should have been delivered by many more.

A tension remains between the logistical difficulties of operating in Syria and the way INGOs prefer to work. In order to minimize the risk of their funds being used for nefarious purposes by armed groups (particularly those proscribed by Western terror laws), INGOs are reluctant to provide CSOs with cash. However, the logistical difficulties of moving across lines of control – with government and rebel forces redirecting supplies to their own territory – demand that CSOs move with cash instead and use this cash to buy supplies locally (Svoboda & Pantuliano, 2015).

Most INGOs are moving towards more collaborative partnerships but some organizations still refer to Syrian CSOs as "downstream" partners or "implementers". In some INGOs, this is a matter of institutional culture (Howe, Stites, & Chudacoff, 2015). To develop more collaborative partnerships, some INGOs already have partnership managers and some have created these positions recently. It is, however, difficult to find partnership managers who speak Arabic and have a good knowledge of Syria. Additionally, partnerships between INGOs and CSOs are not usually long-term.

Effective monitoring is also important and INGOs have found means of doing this using a combination of third party monitoring and direct grantee reports with photos and videos. One interviewee suggested that third party monitoring undermined trust but limited options are available.

Funding and equipping
National donor agencies cannot disburse funds to Syrian CSO directly as their grants are typically too large for Syrian CSOs to manage. Instead, the money gets to Syrian CSOs via a number of alternative instruments. Some CSOs working in relief and recovery are able to access smaller grants from the UN-administered Humanitarian Pooled Fund and

Emergency Response Fund. However, Syrian CSOs are only able to access these funds if they are registered as NGOs in Syria or another country. Otherwise, CSOs and LACs access funds for relief and recovery through partnerships with INGOs (which receive funds from national donor agencies and pooled funds themselves). CSOs working in advocacy, evidence gathering, media and monitoring or peace activities are, under certain conditions, able to access grants from the EU's Madad and Tahdir funds. Subcontractors carrying out civil society projects on behalf of national donor agencies also have funds to disburse, again in small amounts. LAC funds come from the Syrian Interim Government, the Assistance Coordination Unit and some subcontractors.

With multilateral instruments – UN and EU administered funds – the funding process is very slow (*Interviews*; Stoianova, 2014). For instance, it takes five to eight months for a grant application to the ERF from a Syrian NGOs to be processed. This is similar for applications to EU instruments. The slowness of the process is problematic for many organizations, especially those working in relief and recovery where needs are immediate. *ICVA's Review of NGO's Experience with the Syria-Related Pooled Funds* (Stoianova, 2014) reports that, "Limitations on funding speed and eligibility were felt by both INGOs and NNGOs [National NGOs]… NNGOs' inability to prefinance activities led them to be more severely affected by delays in the allocation process." Nevertheless, the report goes on to say that the ERF "has reportedly played the role of 'seed money' for NNGOs, empowering them to participate in coordination and decision-making structures as well as increasing their access to other sources of direct funding." Svoboda & Pantuliano (2015) also reported that there was insufficient flexibility in the grants given to Syrian NGOs and that, as a consequence, they could not adapt their projects to reflect changed circumstances.

In the past, INGOs have flooded LACs with funding. This had three negative consequences – as well as some positive humanitarian consequences. First, the funding undermined attempts to coordinate LACs' activities as they instead pursued projects for which they could

receive international funding. Second, humanitarian funding drew them away from delivering other services, enticing them to become pure humanitarian organizations rather than local governance actors. Third, excess funding facilitated bad practice amongst LACs – as it has for other CSOs too. However, alternative sources of LAC funding from the Syrian Interim Government and ACU are increasingly limited.

The small grants available for CSOs involved in peace activities and advocacy, evidence gathering, media and monitoring, are typically short-term funds, directed at project work. This undermines attempts by these organizations to develop long-term strategic programmes. Likewise, in every case listed above, only project funding is available. There is a severe lack of core funding to Syrian CSOs. This undermines their stability and staffing as they cannot provide the salaries they need to attract skilled professionals.

Finally, legislative restrictions on the movement of money into Syria and caution about anti-terror laws amongst Western banks have prevented transfers of money into the bank accounts of CSOs in Syria. This has stifled the flow of money from Syrians living abroad to organizations working inside Syria.

Besides funding, there is some provision of equipment to CSOs through foreign assistance programmes – especially to LACs. However, organizations providing CSOs with such equipment face frustrating legal obstacles, particularly from US legislation. If a CSO needs equipment which uses US technology, that piece of equipment usually cannot be bought inside Syria with money from US aid programmes as to do so is illegal under the current sanctions regime. Instead, the equipment must be bought outside Syria and then transferred into the country, which logistically is very difficult. This hamstrings the very infrastructure projects that the international community seeks to support.

Engagement in politics and peacemaking
Although CSOs were involved to some extent in the Geneva Conferences in 2012 and 2014, engagement of CSOs in Track I peacemaking has been minimal. Since his appointment in July 2014, UN Envoy Staffan de Mistura has had little contact with local actors, except for with a few high profile individuals who often lack legitimacy themselves. Although de Mistura pursued a policy of local "freeze zones", this strategy was not borne of systematic, substantial and strategic engagement of local actors. The failure of de Mistura's policy and his perceived closeness to the Assad regime have now rendered him illegitimate in the eyes of Syrian civil society. Likewise, political actors have done little to voice support for the work of CSOs.

Avoiding harm
The major harm caused by current international engagement with Syrian CSOs is to draw skilled individuals away from Syrian CSOs by employing them in INGOs and, especially, for-profit subcontractors (*Inter-views*; Svoboda & Pantuliano, 2015). Given the youth of the CSO sector in Syria and the lack of core funding mentioned above, this is particular damaging to the organizational capacity of local NGOs and LACs.

Coordination
The most frequent observation in interviews concerned the lack of coordination between international actors in their support for Syrian CSOs.

Coordination of aid organizations' engagement with Syrian CSOs takes three main forms. First, INGOs undertake informal, bilateral co-ordination with one another when they are working in partnership with the same Syrian CSO. It allows them to share information and resolve logistical issues. Second, INGOs coordinate to share capacity-building expertise to help meet the needs of partner CSOs. According to interviewees, INGOs can still make better use of both these informal means for coordination. Third (as mentioned above), there are now structured attempts to co-ordinate engagement with Syrian CSOs, such as through the Partnership Initiative – although this appears not to be fully operational yet.

The major obstacle to better coordination between aid organizations is a lack of human resources, according to interviewees. More-

over, although aid organizations coordinate with each other, they do not interact with the non-humanitarian organizations that work with Syrian CSOs.

Coordination is weaker between organizations which engage with Syrian CSOs outside the framework of INGO-CSO partnerships. Where it exists, coordination takes two forms. The first is the informal, *ad hoc* coordination that takes place between the subcontractors who are running CSO support projects (such as between the various organizations working for the same donor agency). The second is the limited information sharing that takes places between closely allied donors. As the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria reports (2014), "Programmes that strengthen the conflict resolutions skills of peace resources, that mentor them, and that provide a space for more long-term thinking and planning, are essential for maximising their impact. While several organisations are already working to provide this kind of support, it is not as yet strongly coordinated".

There are various obstacles to coordination between these programmes. First, they have no culture of coordination. Second, the policies of some donor agencies require that both they and their subcontractors keep information about their programmes confidential. What is more, in some countries, there is even a lack of coordination between departments responsible for foreign policy, humanitarian aid and development assistance. This leads to gaps in policy where, for instance, humanitarian aid organizations are unable to address issues of local governance and development agencies are unable to work in countries experiencing ongoing conflict.

The result of this lack of coordination is that support to Syrian CSOs is piecemeal and that the collective efforts of the international community have no real strategic direction, doing too little to meet Syrian needs.

Coordination also falls short between those international actors who aim to build up the capacity of LACs and those actors who are only funding LACs to deliver humanitarian aid. The aim of the first approach is to build up

LACs to fill the governance gaps that exist in areas where the Syrian state is no longer present. This strategy is pursued with a view to advancing the medium-term, institutionalized provision of collective goods in these areas. However, this project has been politicized by its absorption into the Interim Government's Ministry for Local Administration, Relief and Refugees. The second approach to LACs is to reject the idea of institutionalized provision of collective goods and instead to focus on the delivery of humanitarian aid. As noted on p.40, this has enticed LACs away from working within the first strategy, and so the lack of a common approach has resulted in international actors working at cross-purposes.

There are four reasons why improved coordination would be beneficial. First, the needs of the Syrian people will be best met if international actors work collaboratively (and with Syrian organizations) to develop a strategy to meet the medium term relief and recovery needs of Syrian communities. Second, in order to meet relief and recovery needs, it will be necessary to build the capacity of Syrian CSOs; to do this effectively, international actors should map out the capacity-building needs of all the actors involved and develop a strategy to meet these specific needs. Third, to address the operational-capacity needs of LACs – in terms of training to delivery certain relief and recovery projects – the expertise of aid organizations would be invaluable. Fourth, CSOs across the country have similar organizational capacity-building needs – regardless of their area of activity and whether they partner with INGOs. "There has been a lack of imagination [amongst local and international actors] and information [given to CSOs] and so there has been a failure to realize what they can do" (CCSDS et al, 2014). Proper international coordination could lead to a realization of what CSOs really can do.

It is also important to programme in advance. The current level of engagement between international actors and Syrian CSOs has come about too slowly. International actors should plan for future developments.

BOX 6

International engagement: Key findings

- **Support is not always directed at CSOs undertaking priority activities;**

- **International actors do not uniformly deliver capacity building according to best practice;**

- **INGOs do not all work towards collaborative, long-term partnerships with CSOs;**

- **International actors do not provide consistent funding, including core funding, to CSOs;**

- **Political actors do not involve CSOs in peacemaking in a systemic and strategic way;**

- **International engagement with Syrian CSOs lacks coordination; there is no assessment of the needs of CSOs; and there is no overall strategy to support CSOs.**

6. Better Engagement

Section 5 demonstrates the need for improvements to the international community's engagement with Syrian CSOs are required. This section sets out seven key recommendations.

There are two major imperatives. First, all international actors must grapple with the need to facilitate the development of local institutions during protracted conflicts like that in Syria. Local institutions can separate the local provision of collective goods from questions of national politics, can survive changes in political/military control of their area, and in this way should not be perceived as threat to the state or other organizations exerting political control. In any case, the state no longer has the means to provide these collective goods in much, if not most, of Syria. Crucially, facilitating the development of local institutions now will be greatly beneficial for the emergence of functional civil society and local politics post conflict.

Second, although it is commonplace to call for better coordination amongst aid actors – in both humanitarian and development aid – there is rarely the political will to bring the many and diverse actors together. In Syria, international actors must use the dire humanitarian situation as a spur to action. Donors, aid agencies and NGOs should work together to devise a comprehensive strategy which will address the needs of Syrian CSOs more effectively.

1. 'Civic Coordination and Capacity' Cluster

Section 5 identified a clear need for coordination between international actors. For this purpose, international actors should establish a 'Civic Coordination and Capacity Cluster', either within the existing humanitarian architecture or independently. Both international actors (donors, their subcontractors and INGOs) and Syrian NGO networks should participate. The cluster must also involve LACs. A UN agency should participate as either a full participant or an observer.

This cluster should lead an assessment of the capacity-building needs of all Syrian CSOs (including LACs). Each UN humanitarian cluster should identify the needs in their operational field and contribute this to the assessment. Syrian NGO networks should identify the needs of their members, with the support of international partners and subcontractors. Once a needs assessment is complete, the cluster should work to design a strategy to meet these needs and members should bid for responsibility to implement a section of the strategy.

2. Depoliticize the LACs

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2014) advises the depoliticization of the LACs "in order to facilitate the return of technical capacities and then support horizontal and vertical accountability… this would allow local civil society groups to maintain a space for political activism in opposition held areas, but it would also restrict local administration to service provision and civil administration." This measure was also recommended in interviews. By separating the LACs from the political opposition, the problem of independence and neutrality could be resolved. It would be more politically palatable to support their institutionalization and to assist with building their capacity.

However, such a separation will be difficult. Although the coordination structure devised for the LACs by LACU is bottom-up in design, a non-political actor would have to take responsibility for building up this structure. A separate trust or foundation might be est-ablished, employing a Syrian staff without strong political affiliations.

3. Work with Syrian CSO networks to improve capacity building

In order to both strengthen Syrian CSO networks and provide effective capacity building, international actors should train the Syria-based staff of these networks (*ex situ*) to deliver consistent, *in situ* mentoring and support

to their members. Doing so should incentivize CSOs to participate in these net-works and strengthen the relationships between the network and its members, helping them to represent their members better within international coordination mechanisms. This should be done at arms-length without obvious national branding to avoid undermining the legitimacy of these networks.

However, donors and subcontractors should ensure that networks deliver capacity-building support impartially to CSOs which work towards genuine alleviation of human suffering in Syria and sustainable improvements in local governance.

4. Improve partnership management by INGOs

INGOs should follow best practice and ensure they have dedicated partnership managers who can speak Arabic and have a good knowledge of Syria. The partnership manager should hold face-to-face meetings with partners to help build trust between them. The partnership manager should also have responsibility for coordinating with other international organizations. In addition, INGOs should set out to develop long-term relation-ships with their partner CSOs and collaborate with them to build their confidence and capacity as an organization.

Donors should take into account best practice partnership management when awarding grants to INGOs. Donors could offer grants which encourage INGOs and CSOs to apply as consortia or which place demands on the grantee to manage partnerships according to best practice. Since 2011, the Dutch Ministry of Development Cooperation has offered MFS II funding for development assistance which sets out such conditions; however, evaluations of this mechanism are ongoing.

5. Core funding for LACs and CSOs

Donors should fund modest but reasonable salaries for CSO and LAC staff to reduce incentives for them to leave Syrian CSOs to join international organizations. Under the close scrutiny of a subcontractor, additional funds might also be made available to encourage former civil servants with sought-after expertise to join LACs.

6. Donors should commission the following studies to guide policy

i. Study of protection, monitoring and early warning, advocacy and public communication, socialization and social cohesion activities

ii. Updated surveys of independent media, documentation and evidence gathering.

7. Conclusion

This paper has provided only an overview of the state of Syrian CSOs and of international engagement with them. A more in depth study is necessary to map the capacity building, funding, coordination (and other) needs of CSOs. If international actors came together to do this thoroughly, it would provide valuable information with which to formulate a comprehensive strategy for engagement with CSOs.

The breadth of the study – assessing not just the LACs or looking only at support given to evidence-gathering CSOs – has pros and cons. Of course, it means that there is less detailed information on the state of particular types of CSOs, but what is gained is a better overview of international engagement, showing the disconnect between the work of humanitarian agencies and national donor-funded CSO capacity building programmes, demonstrating the lack of coordination and overall guiding strategy.

The benchmarking system of assessing the state of Syrian CSOs is imperfect but proved useful tool for gaining an overview of the situation. This could easily be used to assess the situation in other conflicts. Moreover, should one with to complete a more thorough assessment of the civil society situation in Syria, the criteria set out in the benchmarks offer a useful starting point for creating a survey.

There is a real need for research into institution-building in the context of protracted conflict. Post-conflict development assistance is used to develop institutions but only after the cessation of hostilities. Humanitarian aid is directed at ongoing conflicts but not at the development of local institutions. When conflicts are short, this is no problem – it is possible for inter-national actors to fill governance gaps, providing services directly. However, where conflicts are protracted, direct international relief is insufficient: it results in aid dependency and – with donor exhaustion – will result in governance gaps slowly re-emerging. Engaging with local actors in the ways set out above is a step in the right direction but work must be done to identify new strategies to provide the best possible local governance in the fragmented territory of countries suffering from protracted civil conflict.

The paper also highlighted a need for research on (i) relations between non-state armed actors and CSOs and (ii) coordination between local actors in areas of civil conflict.

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Appendix 1 – Interviews

Individuals working on Syria CSO policy & programming
2x Department for International Development (DfID)
Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (1)
Group of Friends of the Syrian People (Friends of Syria)

Individuals involved in projects, engaging directly with Syrian CSOs
Baytna Syria / Transtec S.A.
Chemonics
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)
International Rescue Committee
Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2)

Individuals with an overview of Syrian CSOs and international support
Development Transformations
Overseas Development Institute
… and involved in Syrian civil society
Arab Reform Initiative
The Day After Association

Appendix 2 – Benchmarks

1. Organizational Capacity

Infrastructure and management
- To what extent are CSOs governed capably and strategically? Do they set a clear mission, sensitive to the needs of their constituency, plan effectively and formulate appropriate programmes?
- How well equipped are CSOs – in terms of building facilities, office equipment, information and communications technology, machinery, internet access etc.?
- How well staffed are CSOs – in terms of number and their qualifications etc.? Are they able to retain their staff?

Finances
- How well financed are CSOs? How diverse are their sources of funding? How effective are CSOs at fundraising? How dependent are CSOs on project funding?
- How well managed are CSOs' finances and are they effective in applying for grants?

Relations with other CSOs
- To what extent do CSOs coordinate to avoid interfering with each other's activities?
- To what extent do CSOs make efforts to cooperate/collaborate? Do they engage in joint projects? Are they developing and/or supporting CSO networks and coalitions?
- To what extent do CSOs share information and communicate best practices?

Relations with other actors
- The state
  Are there unreasonable legal obstacles to the existence or activities of CSOs? Does the state otherwise obstruct the activities of CSOs? Are CSOs able to communicate or work with the state? Do CSOs seek constructive relationships with the state?

- International actors
  Do CSOs seek the support of international actors? Do CSOs have good knowledge of international actors? Do CSOs seek to network, partner or work with INGOs etc.?

- Armed groups
  Do armed groups obstruct the work of CSOs? Do CSOs remain independent of armed groups? Are armed groups receptive to the representations of CSOs?

- Citizens and communities
  How positive is the general public's perception of CSOs? Do CSOs seek to build a local constituency? To what extent do citizens understand the motives and purposes of CSOs? To what extent does the media cover the activities of CSOs?

2. Operational Capacity

Relief and recovery
- To what proportion of those in need can CSOs provide relief and recovery?
- How well equipped are CSOs for relief and recovery in terms of physical resources?
- What level of expertise – skills and knowledge – do CSOs have in relief, recovery and service-delivery (including in M&E of their activities)?
- To what extent do CSOs provide relief and recovery in accordance with the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality, neutrality and humanity?

Peace activities
- To what extent do CSOs undertake peace activities in a strategic way? On what scale do they undertake these activities?
- To what extent do CSOs observe best practices of inclusiveness, local ownership, respect for human rights and mainstreaming gender?
- To what extent do CSOs approach peace in a holistic way, considering peacemaking and peace-keeping work as well as peacebuilding activities?
- What level of expertise – skills and knowledge – do CSOs have in peace activities?

Advocacy, evidence gathering, media, and monitoring
- To what extent are CSOs undertaking advocacy, evidence gathering, media, and monitoring?
- To what extent do CSOs abide by the principles of accuracy, completeness and impartiality in this work?
- What level of expertise – skills and knowledge – do CSOs have in these areas of work?

3. International Engagement

Strategic and coordinated approach
- How effectively do donors collaborate and work together to produce a strategy on the basis of joint needs assessments?
- To what extent do donors coordinate to avoid gaps and/or duplication in their engagement with CSOs?
- To what extent do donors coordinate to avoid imposing excessive administrative burden on local civic actors?

Capacity building
- To what extent do international actors conduct a proper assessment of CSOs' capacity building needs, and are they appropriately sensitive to the preferences of the CSOs?
- To what extent do international actors provide adequate and appropriate organizational capacity building?
- To what extent do international actors provide adequate and appropriate operational capacity building?
- To what extent are the delivery mechanisms for capacity building appropriate to the CSOs and the contexts?

Funding and equipping
- How sufficient is international funding to CSOs? And, where funds are limited, to what extent do international actors allocate funding to CSOs appropriately – both in terms of the amount received by individual CSOs and in terms of the overall number of CSOs funded?
- How flexible are donors and organizations responsible for sub-grants in disbursing funds?
- How sensitive to the context are international actors in imposing financial reporting procedures?
- Are international actors providing CSOs with sufficient core funding?
- Are international actors helping CSOs to procure the equipment they need?

Partnerships
- How thorough are INGOs' assessments of potential partners?
- How sensitive are INGOs' M&E requirements to the context and the capacity of their partners?
- Do INGOs have appropriate structures and staff in place to manage their partnerships?
- To what extent do partnerships between INGOs and local actors reflect mutual respect, equality, transparency, complementarity and trust – by involving local actors in programme design, evaluation, etc.?

Support for CSO coordination
- To what extent do international actors actively encourage and support coordination between CSOs, advise on best practices and fund platforms for coordination?

Political support
- To what extent do international actors provide appropriate and sensitive political support to CSOs?

Engagement in peace projects
- To what extent do international actors engage CSOs in peace processes in a "systematic, substantial and strategic" way, and are they careful to preserve CSOs' legitimacy in the eyes of their constituents?

Harms to avoid
- To what extent do international actors take care to preserve the legitimacy of local actors (where it exists)?
- To what extent do international actors take care not to incentivize CSOs to act in unproductive ways?
- To what extent do international actors take care not to distort the local labour market?

Blank

Blank