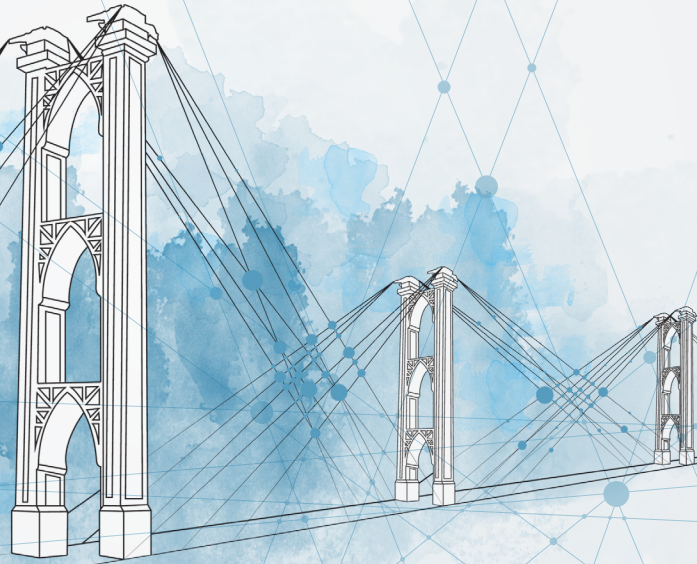




مركز دعم المجتمع المدني
Civil Society Support Center



Civil Society in Deir Ezzor

REALITY AND CHALLENGES

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research department at Citizens for Syria.
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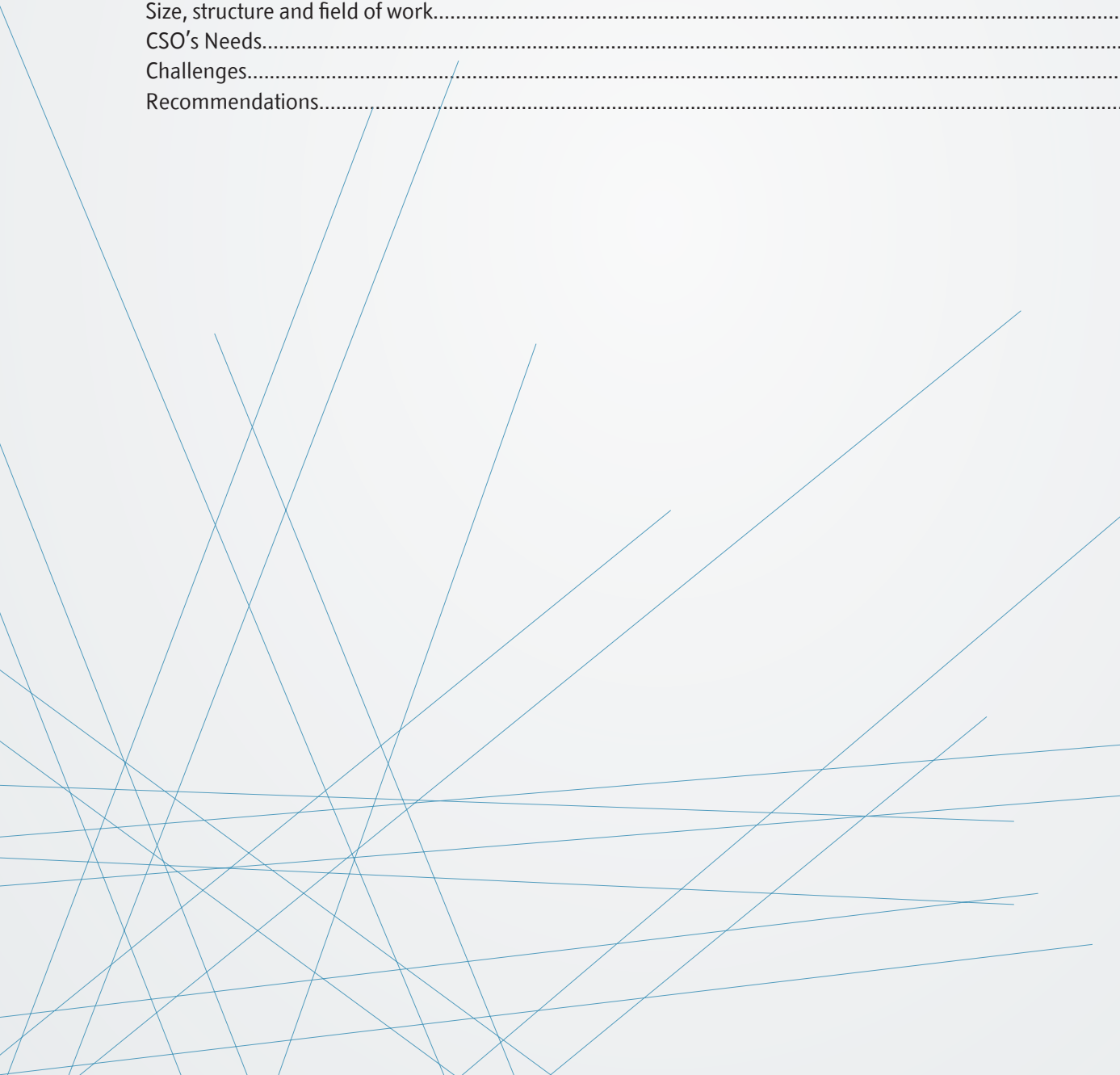
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List of acronyms:

CSSC: Civil Society support Center

CSO: Civil Society Organization

INGO: International Non-Governmental Organization

ISIL: Islamic State in Iraq and Levant

M&E: monitoring and evaluation

SDC: Syria Democratic Council

SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces

SIG: Syrian Interim Government

Introduction:

The map of civic entities in Deir Ezzor consists primarily of three actors: the local authorities, represented by the Civic and Legislative Councils; Local CSOs, which are nascent and lack adequate capacities; and INGOs and donors. Additionally, there are several active society members and tribal leaders who are not directly affiliated with these entities.

This study aims to shed a light on the status quo of civic work in Deir Ezzor considering the recent changes on the political and military level, provide an overview of the opportunities and challenges facing civil society, and provide recommendations for all actors currently operating or planning to expand their work to the area.





Methodology:

This study compiles results from interviews conducted with members of nascent CSOs located in Deir Ezzor, and non-affiliated key informants including respected community member, and representatives of local authorities. For the purpose of this study, CSSC team members in Deir Ezzor conducted a total of 22 one-on-one interviews, 12 of them with representatives from seven local CSOs (one of them is a non-registered CSO operating from abroad), and another 10 interviews with the key informants. The interviews with local CSOs primarily focused on the size and scope of the CSO, in addition to their most prioritized needs. The key informant interviews focused more on their view of the opportunities and challenges for completing civic work in Deir Ezzor.

In July 2018, CSSC launched an initiative to bring together civil society actors in Deir Ezzor. Through a series of public meetings and thematic coordination meetings, the initiative aims to establish connections and provide a space for discussions about the reality, needs, and challenges of civil society in Deir Ezzor, allowing local and non-local actors to come up with roadmaps to respond to the needs and overcome obstacles facing the civil society. At the time of this publication, one public meeting and one coordination meeting have been held, whose outputs are captured in this report, with more meetings planned to take place during September 2018.

Data and information mentioned in this report were collected and analysed during August 2018. Any later changes in the situation are thus not reflected in this report.

Situation Overview:

In September 2017, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with the support of the US-led International Coalition, launched an offensive against ISIL forces that were controlling most of Deir Ezzor province, except for some regions that remained under regime control. Within a few months, the SDF drove ISIL forces from most of the strongholds, resulting in major changes in control in the region. SDF forces control currently most of the province's rural areas, with major cities remaining under regime control as well as several ISIL enclaves in some locations, leading to continuous clashes and a relatively unstable military situation.

On the governance level, areas under the control of the SDF are managed by the Deir Ezzor Civic Council (Executive Council) and the Deir Ezzor Legislation Council. Both councils operate under the Syria Democratic Council (SDC) and were formed in September 2017 after the launch of the SDF military offensive. It is worth mentioning that another council was formed in August 2017 by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) in Turkey under the name "Deir Ezzor Provincial Council", however the presence and authority of this council on the ground remains limited.

Prior to ISIL control of Deir Ezzor, when most parts of the province fell to the opposition's control, a wave of civic work emerged in the region, with several initiatives and organizations taking the lead in providing local citizens with basic services and documenting human rights violations, in addition to advocacy and awareness efforts. However, when ISIL started expanding and taking control in the region, the space for civil society to operate deteriorated. Most activists fled the area and stopped working, except for some notable underground efforts focusing mainly on documentation of crimes and human rights violations.

The changes in governmental control in recent months has led to a revival of the civic work in the region. However, the environment for civil work is still primitive or weak, as described by several community members during interviews, due to the lack of capacity and inability to respond to the critical needs of the local communities. One interviewee stated that most of the work done by the CSOs or the Civic Council in the domain of essential services can be seen only as "temporary solutions, inadequate to fulfill community needs."

The revival of civil society in Deir Ezzor is manifested primarily by the reformation of small-size local organizations and initiatives. The number of initiatives is rising continuously. Newly established organizations must register and receive a license from the Civic Council prior to beginning work. The registration process takes up to two months and, when completed, the organization is granted a temporary work permit. This work permit is renewable if the organization meets all required conditions. At the time of this report, 6 organizations have already received their work permits and registration documents to operate in different areas in Deir Ezzor, while many other organizations and initiatives are still working on their application or waiting for the council's decision. At least four CSOs are in the application process and have not been granted their permit. Through interviews with key personnel from the six registered organization, the CSSC team was able to collect some basic information about their size structure, work domains and priorities.

Size, structure and field of work

The CSO space in Deir Ezzor is nascent and, as such, all CSOs operate with small teams. Most reported having teams of five to seven main members. All registered CSOs participating in this study reported as well having at least one woman in the team. In addition to main members, many CSOs have honorary members, employees on projects, or teams of volunteers supporting their operations, the count of support staff at the time of the interviews varied between 2 and 20 in some cases, with one organization having a support staff of 85 persons.

All seven interviewed CSOs mentioned that they have some kind of organizational structure. Departments and offices in each organization varied according to their domain of work. All reported having a finance department, however only one has written financial policies and procedures. Six out of seven organizations reported having a designated person/office for public relations or media. One interviewee mentioned that although organizational structures are present, the lack of funding and capacities hinders the commitment to those structures in reality, leading to the overlap of roles inside the organizations based on available resources.

In terms of work domains and priorities, it is noticeable that most of the CSOs still have no clear priority or specified category of beneficiaries. Only one organization that is currently implementing an agriculture project mentioned farmers as their primary beneficiary group. As work domains, services (essential services) was listed by four out of six organizations as a main field of work, three CSOs mentioned education as a field of work, while social services and relief were listed by two organizations each. One organization specializes in human rights and documentation of violations. One interviewee from a non-registered organization mentioned the difficulties faced by organizations that work on human rights or advocacy to obtain a registration certificate or even funding to operate in Deir Ezzor, saying that donors don't seem to be interested in such topics, while local authorities tend to delay registration requests.

In terms of activities, one CSO reported having two projects under implementation—the first is a service project involving the removal of rubble while the second is an educational project. This CSO is also working on getting funding for a third project under development. Two other CSOs reported having one project under implementation, one of them is an agricultural project while the other is a project to restore a water canal in the eastern countryside. The remaining three organizations reported having projects in development phase, but none in implementation.

CSO's Needs:

Financial support and funding were the most cited need for all CSOs operating in the area. Given the fact that these CSO's are nascent with very minimum experience, donors remain noticeably uncertain about providing direct financial support for large-scale projects. Donors' hesitancy to invest more in the region can also be attributed to the unease concerning the security situation and the future of governmental control of area.

The second most identified need of local CSOs is trainings and capacity building. Several interviewees stressed the need for experts and trainers, in addition to equipped training spaces as needed means for capacity building of their staff. Prioritized fields of training varied from one organization to another. Some of the most frequently reported needed topics are M&E, financial management, and media and outreach.

Networking and coordination support with both other local organizations, as well as donors and local authorities was identified as well by more than half of the interviewees as a prioritized need.

The fact that these CSOs primarily serve vast rural areas, in addition to are latively unstable security situation, has also influenced the working environment leading to the need for more logistical support particularly related to transportation services and work spaces.



Challenges:

Despite the enthusiastic return of civil society actors to Deir Ezzor, the political, social and operational context is still challenging and far from ideal. Obstacles facing civil society actors, whether locals or non-locals, varies in nature and influence. In a broader look at the situation, the following areas can be identified as the most challenging:

- Given the enormous needs of the area and the insecure security situation, roles and responsibilities among the different actors, including civil society and government, remain fluid. Several key personnel who were interviewed in this study felt the provision of essential services and responding to community needs is the supposed role of both CSOs and local authorities. Two members from the Civic Council felt that the role of the council should be mainly coordination and facilitation of the CSOs work. This issue was also brought up by participants at the coordination meeting organized by CSSC in Deir Ezzor in August 2018, as attendees from various stakeholders referred to the lack of coordination and the overlap of actions as one major challenge facing the civic work in Deir Ezzor. A pressing need is to clarify these roles and reduce overlap, where possible.
- The region lacks basic services across all sectors, from education to health to water, electricity and infrastructure. Many interviewees stressed the importance of the agriculture sector, which constitutes the main income resource for the majority of the area's inhabitants. The generally poor service situation represents a major obstacle for nascent CSOs and initiatives, putting them under pressure to respond to needs even when they lack the essential capacity or the scope to do so. One interviewed community key member stated that organizations should coordinate among each other to avoid all working on one issue.
- The general state of reluctance amongst INGOs and international donors to commit to operating in the region is also a major challenge. The fear of a potential return to battle with regime forces remains a concern for all active entities. However, five of the interviewed key personnel who held positions of local authority, referred to the security limitations as "exaggerated" and "from the past".
- Driven mainly by security and political concerns, international actors including major donors and INGOs are still reluctant to operate in Deir Ezzor province. In comparison to other areas of Syria, specifically Raqqa province which has witnessed similar on-the-ground developments, the amount of available funding to local partners is significantly less. This fact is clearly reflected in the number of projects being implemented in the region. In addition, local CSOs remain driven by the donors' requirements and plans and thus discouraged from taking the lead in developing and implementing their concepts and project ideas.
- Given the absence of civil society actors over several years of ISIL control, and the migration of skilled personnel in all fields, the area suffers from a general lack of awareness about the role of civil society. One interviewee mentioned that the deficiency of capacity among CSOs is not limited

to simply technical capacities and organizational skills, but also in the awareness and understanding of civil society's concept and role. Lack of community awareness about the role of civils society represents a challenging factor for CSOs in getting the needed community support and participation.

- All newly established CSOs work in the geographical areas controlled by the SDF and governed by the Civic Council, which are the rural areas spread on both sides of the Euphrates river. The vast nature of the area, accompanied by lack of financial support, results in logistical and operational challenges. CSOs have limited their activities to certain accessible regions to avoid challenges related to transportation and moving goods and equipment across different areas, rather than being able to respond where needs are the greatest.
- Local CSOs continue to face legal and administrative burdens when seeking to operate in Deir Ezzor. Completion of registration procedures can take months, and the permit granted in return is usually short-termed, no more than three months. These restraints have a direct influence on the ability of the CSOs to plan ahead or to have a clear strategic vision.
- CSOs are also affected by the political stance of their registration authorities. Organizations registered in Turkey for example face many challenges in operating in Deir Ezzor, which would jeopardize their legal status in Turkey as well as the safety of personnel outside Syria due to the political conflict between Turkish authorities and SDF.

Recommendations:

- Raise awareness and conduct advocacy through media and on-the-ground activities to define the role of civil society and lay the ground work for further effective projects. The civil society space in Deir Ezzor is nascent and immature, and there is a lack of understanding about the role CSOs play in society. This awareness will be important particularly for activities conducted by CSOs outside the essential services and small-scale humanitarian work sector. This will allow CSOs to expand in the future to meet needs identified by the local community and support the general development of the region.
- Increase coordination and efforts to strengthen relationships amongst the different stakeholders to overcome the current issue of unfocused efforts and to ensure effective interventions in all sectors. The ongoing lack of coordination demonstrates the importance of efforts that aim to create a suitable environment for dialogue and to bring together different actors to discuss how to address community challenges.
- Provide local CSOs and initiatives with the opportunities to develop their individual and organizational capacities through customized capacity building programs, workshops, and connections with experts in various relevant fields.
- Support CSOs to conduct further needs assessments in Deir Ezzor province to fully understand the immense needs, inadequacy of provided services, and capacity of local actors. Activities implemented by local CSOs are generally driven by donors' requirements and plans, and not fully based on an accurate needs assessment. Greater attention should be given to conducting these assessments and supporting data-driven proposals by both local and international actors alike to ensure more effective, relevant and sustainable programming for the region.
- Increase coordination with the Civic Council and provide it with the needed support to ease and accelerate the registration process of newly established CSOs. This would have a direct positive impact on the willingness of community key personnel and individual activists to group and form new initiatives and CSOs, leading to a more diverse and active civil society. A comprehensive and flexible legal framework for civic entities that allows for increased working space with reduced constraints is also needed to encourage CSOs to explore various sectors and expand in terms of size, domain and effectiveness.
- Establish communication channels to connect local CSOs with donors and INGOs to explore opportunities of collaboration and support, taking into consideration the special characteristics of the region and their emerging challenges and obstacles.



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