



Civil Society Workers' wellbeing and Duty of care in North East Syria

Paper based on survey of civil society workers in northeast Syria
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List of acronyms

- ◆ **NES** Northeast Syria
- ◆ **CSOs:** Civil society organizations
- ◆ **ILO:** International labor organization
- ◆ **WHO:** World health organization

List of definitions

- ◆ **Worker:** People who work for an organization regardless of their position or contract type.
- ◆ **Employee:** A person who is on the organization's payroll and receives a specific salary and is eligible for benefits.
- ◆ **Contractual:** A person hired for a specific project or timeframe for a set fee
- ◆ **Management/ managers:** A person responsible for leading or administering an organization or group of staff or/ and board members
- ◆ **Staff:** People who work under the leadership of a manager including employees and contractual.
- ◆ **Newly hired workers:** A person who has been part of an organization for less than 36 months.
- ◆ **Old-timer:** A person who has been part of an organization for more than 36 months.

I. Introduction

1. Background

IMPACT's civil society support program aims to support civil society to reclaim its space and assume effective roles. To support this goal, it is important to understand the current space and trends in CSOs from the point of view of civil society members in NES. This concept lays out a plan for this research project.

2. Methodology

This study relies on a cross-sectional perception survey of 158 members of active CSOs in NES.

This paper interprets data related to CSOs' space and operational context. It focuses in the 1st part on the social, and mental wellbeing domains and in the 2nd on the perception of duty of care in the NES organizations.

3. Limitations:

The survey focused most on the social and mental wellbeing components and omitted questions related to the physical wellbeing of CSOs members. Therefore, we will not address physical wellbeing.

The demographic distribution shows that 50% of the respondents are from Raqqa, 32% from Deir Ez Zur, and only 18% from Al Hasakah. In the absence of accurate mapping of CSOs in NES, it is difficult to decide if respondents consist of a representative sample.

Other metadata reveals that 32 respondents are females (21%). 65.6% of female respondents are from Al Raqqa; around 50% of female participants from Al Raqqa are in a decision-making position. This is not the case for other female respondents in other areas. This makes us question the authenticity of the sample, the accessibility of women in Al Hasakah and Deir Ez Zur to the survey, and even to work opportunities within the CSOs.

The only tool used for this study is a survey. Even if surveys are very practical, they limit the access to qualitative information and are usually used with other tools to allow triangulation to validate data.

IMPACT, which conducted this study, is known in the NES as an incubator and donor for CSOs. The dynamics of the donor-implementing partner relationship might have influenced the respondents' responses to this survey.

II. Results

2.1 Workplace wellbeing

According to the ILO, “Workplace wellbeing relates to all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, their working environment...”¹

Wellbeing is broken down further into three major components: Social, mental, and physical wellbeing. Each of these components interacts with and influences the others, and they are all imperative to overall wellbeing.

In this part, we will explore workspace wellbeing for workers in CSOs in NES based on the two main domains the social and the mental, without addressing the physical wellbeing.

2.1.1 Social wellbeing at work

The sense of belonging, social connectivity, healthy work relations, and fairness at work among other factors play a role in enhancing social wellbeing. This part will present findings related to these components.

The Sense of Belonging

The results show that 85% of respondents believe that the vision and mission of the organization express their thoughts and aspirations, and 81% believe that the projects of the organization are in tune with their thoughts as well. We note a slight difference between the responses among different groups including the newly hired and the old-timers. This alignment of workers with the CSOs can be seen from two different perspectives.

On one hand, a sincere sense of belonging where people feel accepted and included by those around. This feeling influences how a worker perceives and contributes to an organization’s common goals².

On the other hand, this impression of a major consensus around the mission, vision, and project can be a camouflage for conformity in the workplace. Conformity is the process whereby people change their beliefs, attitudes, actions, or perceptions to match more closely those held by groups to which they belong or want to belong³. When workers feel excluded, they sometimes feel the pressure to conform to the group standards and expectations just to belong. With conformity, people will lose their individuality⁴ which can negatively affect workers’ wellbeing and productivity.

6% of old-time respondents have a neutral response and 4% do not believe that the vision and mission of the organization express their thoughts. Furthermore, 13% of newly-hired respondents have a neutral response, and 4% do not consider that the projects of the

1 https://www.ilo.org/safework/areasofwork/workplace-health-promotion-and-wellbeing/WCMS_118396/lang--en/index.htm

2 <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/blog/human-capital-blog/2021/what-is-belonging-in-the-workplace.html>

3 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/conformity>

4 Individuality refers to the quality that distinguishes a person from others

organization express their aspirations. This is a normal attitude since with time “reality sets in and a gap forms between the ideal and the real. The job and work environment turn out to be different than what workers envisioned. Employees re-evaluate expectations, reflect on the progress, and reaffirm the positive things”⁵. This phase is named “real reconciliation” and it is a healthy phase in the job life cycle. These old-timers might be in this phase, yet we do not have enough data to confirm or refute this assumption.

Healthy work relations

In response to the question about task-related conversation: “I participate with my colleagues in discussions about work development, even if it is outside my specialty or specific tasks”, 91% of respondents had an affirmative response versus 4% who refuted this statement and 5 % of neutral responses. A high level of participation in communication among employees at the workplace is an indicator of healthy work relations. When communications increase, people tend to also talk about task-related conversations, which then promote feedback, conflict reduction, and increase motivation. These are indicators of healthy work relations⁶.

Yet, it is important to highlight that if these professional conversations are taking place outside the workplace, they might have a negative effect on workers' wellbeing. They can indicate an overload, an inability to separate personal life and professional life. Unfortunately, we do not have enough data to analyze further this probability.

Fairness

According to the ILO convention, fairness is about the employer preserving and promoting all the workers’ rights such as parental rights– flexibility at work, right to personal leaves- right to protection and to work in a healthy and safe environment including the right to annual vacation⁷... The available data allows us to examine some elements of the following components of fairness: the preservation of rights, the right to fair payment, and the right to protection.

Preservation of rights

90% of respondents believe that their rights are preserved at their workplace.

Right to fair payment

The findings demonstrate that 52% of the management group and 48% of the workers’ group feel that the salary they receive is appropriate to the nature of their work whereas 37% disagree and 15% are neutral. Equal pay for equal skill at work is a principle of the Fair Labor Standards Act – USA and supported by the ILO⁸.

⁵ 2012, Dr. Thomas J. Denham, Careers In Transition LLC – Published Friday, June 22, 2012

⁶ <https://www.worktechacademy.com/seven-dimensions-workplace-wellbeing/>

⁷ Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156)

⁸ ILO-Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)

Right to protection

When asked about their knowledge of the mechanism for submitting complaints or feedback without specifying if the system is addressing workers or the community, 91% of male respondents had a positive answer, versus 100% of women in Al Hasakah and Deir Ez Zur. The situation in Al Raqqa is different, where 24% of female respondents were not knowledgeable about the feedback mechanism. ILO Violence and Harassment Convention⁹ recognizes the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment. It encourages the establishment of a feedback system for employees.

In response to “who should be responsible for protecting the rights of workers in the CSO sector”? 60% of staff point to the role of organizations’ management among other parties in protecting the rights of the workers and 40% only of the management group share this viewpoint.

Fairness in the workplace contributes to workers feeling safe and engaged in their work. Unfair treatment is not a legal act and can negatively affect workers' wellbeing. Data limited our ability to holistically comprehend the workers’ perspective on fairness and rights and its relation to wellbeing in the NES context. It highlighted ambiguities as well that need further exploration such as:

- ◆ The elements that make workers feel that their rights are protected in CSOs even if 60% of the managers believe that is not the organization's responsibility.
- ◆ The contradiction between the 90% of the respondents that affirm that their rights are protected and the 61% among them who believe that their salary is not fair.
- ◆ The knowledge of workers of their rights since people will evaluate only what they know. Therefore, it is essential to have a clear definition of all the rights before assessing if these rights are preserved.

2.1.2 Mental wellbeing

According to WHO ‘mental wellbeing’ or ‘mental health’ is defined as a state in which every individual realizes his or her full potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to her or his community.¹ " In different terms, it is about how a person manages emotions, thinks, and acts.

Mental wellbeing includes but is not limited to the capacity of making decisions, developing self-esteem, and envisaging professional growth while remaining optimistic. In this section below we will address these elements of mental wellbeing.

Voicing opinions and Decision making

⁹ ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190)

¹ <https://www.fph.org.uk/policy-advocacy/special-interest-groups/special-interest-groups-list/public-mental-health-special-interest-group/better-mental-health-for-all/concepts-of-mental-and-social-wellbeing/>

73% of staff and 95% of the managers stated that they have the space at work to share their opinion or to object. An opinion is a personal judgment. It may be accepted or rejected, but the importance is in voicing them. Voicing opinions can be an indicator or/and a booster of confidence, and open-mindedness to learning. Expressing opinions made people feel like part of the decision-making process.

70% of staff and 95% of the managers affirm that they have the power to make task-related decisions. Decision-making, in addition to being a skill, has the potential to influence positive thinking and enhance mental wellbeing¹ by ensuring the inclusion of people in the system and enhancing their sense of ownership and belonging.

Self Esteem

When asked if their suggestions are considered while developing projects or programs; in different words if they feel that their contributions are valued, 78% of females and 81% of male respondents were affirmative. 95% of the management group and 71% of staff supported this statement.

94% of female and 85% of male respondents feel equal with co-workers, regardless of gender, religion, or nationality. There is a tight relation between the sense of equality and self-esteem. The feeling of being equal boosts self-esteem and in consequence enhances the overall wellbeing of the person.

Concerning the appreciation of the local community, 55% of respondents feel that the community has a positive view of workers in the CSOs.

Self-esteem describes a person's overall subjective sense of personal worth or value¹. Maslow suggests that individuals need both appreciations from other people and inner self-respect to build esteem. Results show that self-respect and appreciation of workers in the organization are high. Yet, 45% of workers in CSOs do not feel fully appreciated by their local community.

Professional Growth

Results indicate that 20% of the managers and 35% of staff respondents consider that their work with CSOs is temporary and does not fully express their career desire.

9% of the managers do not consider civil work as the field of work where they like to continue their career and 25% of the workers shared this same position. We note that all respondents from Al Hasakah refute this statement.

28% of the managers believe to have a limited opportunity to build a career in the field of CSOs and 49% of staff members agree with this statement.

¹ Attitudes and opinions, 2nd edition, Oskamp, S.1991

¹ <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-self-esteem-2m-2795868>

It is important to mention that around 16% of respondents do not approve or refute any of both statements.

Professional growth refers to gaining new skills and work experience that can help a person reach a career goal. It is related to optimism and aspirations for the future.

Studies demonstrated that an unclear or slow professional path can affect everything from wellbeing and engagement to productivity and turnover¹. Organizations become in a risky situation when future career uncertainties affect several managers and shake their social and mental performance.

Security and Optimism

As a response to the following question: I am currently working with a clear contract that makes me feel secure about my job, responses differ among groups. 91% of female and 71% of male respondents agree with this statement. 73% of staff members and 78% of the managers approve of it as well. The main difference was between the group of contractual respondents and the employees where 59% of the first group and 83% of the second confirm that they feel secure about their actual jobs.

When it comes to future job security which is an essential factor of work security, 66% of respondents feel insecure about it. We notice similarities in the responses among all respondents' groups.

Results of both questions indicate that even if people feel secure with their current jobs, they do have fears about their future careers. According to ILO work security is about working conditions that are safe and promote workers' wellbeing. It is not limited to promoting safety against physical harm, but it is also about promoting a state of being free from emotional threats. This future career insecurity might affect the present. It can have a negative influence on concerned workers' engagement, motivation, effectiveness, and wellbeing¹.

4

The sense of belonging, fairness, and the ability to socialize, decide and project in the future at work, have been shown to reduce work demand-related stress, increase cohesion; and decrease worker turnover. Even if findings seem positive, the limited number of old-timers among the survey 's respondents indicate a high rate of turnovers 83.5% of staff and 87% of higher management are newly hired versus only 4.4 % of executive and board members and 2.5% of staff who have been working with the organization for 5 years or more. Different factors can explain the high rate of turnovers such as external factors, personal factors, and work environment factors, especially power struggles, tensed work dynamics, a sense of unfairness, and a lack of optimistic aspiration for the future. This discrepancy between the idealism of the workplace clear in the survey's responses and the limited number of old-timers needs further explorations to better understand the reality.

¹ Hays UK Salary & Recruiting Trends 2019 guide³

¹ <http://www.ilo.org/sesame/SESHelp.NoteWSI> 4

2.2: Perception of right to protection at work

Duty of care means being responsible for workers' health, safety, and wellbeing. This means protecting their welfare while they are at their workplace, or on official duty off-site and even abroad¹ .

5

In this part of the paper, we will report findings related to the management and the staff's perception of their rights and responsibilities in preserving and promoting workers' protection and wellbeing.

96% of respondents confirm the right of workers to receive compensation that covers the security and psychological risks resulting from working conditions. While 48% believe to have sufficient guarantees regarding compensation for security, safety, and personal protection in risky situations

94% of respondents agreed that it is the responsibility of CSOs to ensure the protection and mental health of their workers. And, 96% of respondents agree that there is a need for a platform to communicate and support workers in the CSOs.

For the question related to who should be responsible for protecting the rights of workers in CSOs the answers present a ladder of responsibilities that diverge between managers and staff. Yet, both indicate that the management of the organization comes in 4th place. 60% of staff pointed out the role of organizations' management among other parties in protecting the rights of the workers and 40% only of the management group shared this viewpoint. The infographics below illustrate both groups' perception of the ladder of responsibility entities of workers' duty of care.



Figure 1: Ladder of responsible entities for workers' duty of care from the managers' perspective

¹ <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLST411.html>



Figure 2 Ladder of responsible entities for workers’ duty of care from the staff perspective

Findings indicate that the workers in the CSOs who participated in this survey seem to be aware of the importance of their protection and wellbeing. They believe that they will benefit from a support system to enhance their wellbeing and from more compensation for security, safety, and personal protection. But when it comes to the entities that need to ensure the duty of care, most of the respondents do not put the organizations’ management at the top of the ladder of responsibilities. The organization's duty of care depends on the laws of the country and sometimes the part of the country in which it operates. Organizations must respect legal obligations; yet, in some countries, laws are not existing or are not applied. In these cases, the duty of care becomes an ethical responsibility of the organizations that usually abide by the ILO and WHO international health and safety standards and human rights.

III. Conclusion

The concept of duty of care including promoting workers’ rights and wellbeing is recently introduced to the region. The findings related to some of the wellbeing components, such as optimism regarding future career paths, alignment with the CSO mission, vision, and projects in addition to the preservation of rights are not conclusive. Other components such as socialization, contribution to decision making, and the preservation of rights, seem to be as strong aspects of the NES organizations. Yet, the high rate of turnovers contradicts these findings since it can be due to burnout or distress among other potential reasons.

Most of the respondents agreed that they need further compensation for the risks they take at work and that they will benefit from support and communication with others. But they do not agree on the entity that will function as a duty of care for the workers.

There is a probability that the survey’s respondents do not reflect accurately the characteristics of the larger CSOs workers in NES. And there is a doubt concerning workers’ wellbeing, the perception of rights, and duty of care were subject to cultural influence, prejudice, and maybe fears of additional responsibilities and expenses.

To ensure the validity of the findings, and to deeper the understanding of these complicated topics it will be worth exploring further:

1. The knowledge of workers in CSOs of their rights since the comprehension of the rights is essential to evaluate if these rights are preserved or not.
2. The knowledge of the CSOs about international workplace wellbeing standards in addition to local laws and regulations and the management's legal and ethical responsibilities. In addition to their financial and human readiness to commit to these standards.
3. The reasons behind the low percentage of old-timers among workers and its relation to workplace wellbeing.