



IMPACT
Research

Hubs and Bubbles: Syrian Civil Society after a decade of conflict

A report based on mapping of civil society organisations in Syria

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Researcher:
Armenak Tokmajyan

Lead Researcher:

Armenak Tokmajyan

Field research and data collection:

IMPACT field team in Syria

Proofreading and text editing:

Sinead Barry

Graphic design:

Tammam Alomar

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IMPACT - Civil Society Research and Development e.V., founded in Berlin in 2013, is a non-profit civil society organization. With a team based across Europe, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq, IMPACT aims for a globally active and well-connected civil society as the cornerstone for social and political change. To this end, IMPACT focuses on long-term, balanced support to individuals and organizations in both conflict and developed countries through its fields of development, dialogue, and social engagement. IMPACT places a significant emphasis on its research component.

The background of the page is decorated with several abstract, light-colored geometric shapes. These shapes are composed of thin lines forming various polygons and polyhedrons, some of which are partially cut off by the edges of the page. They are scattered across the top and left sides of the page, creating a modern, architectural feel.

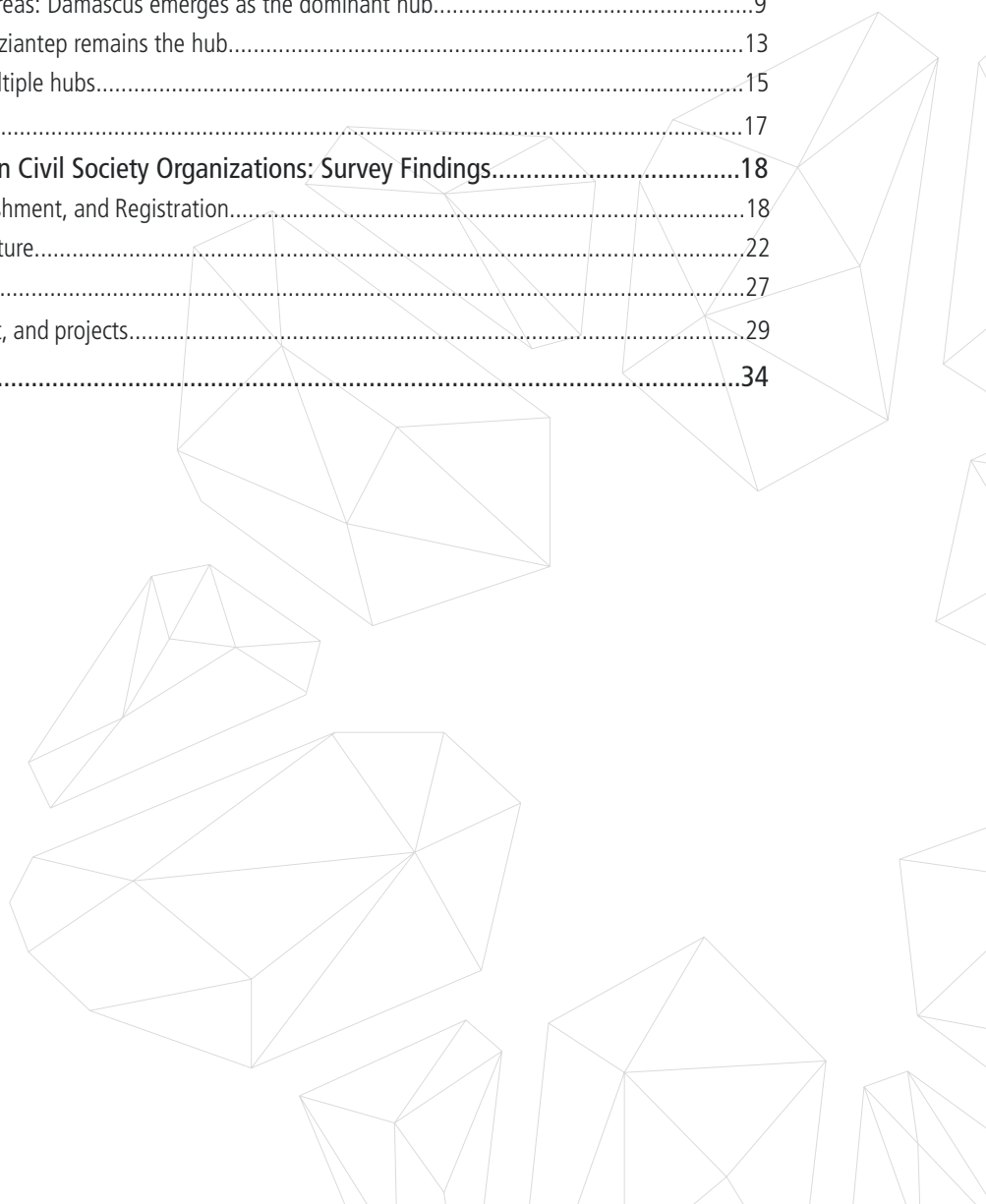
Biography of researcher:

Armenak Tokmajyan is a nonresident scholar at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut focusing on the conflict in Syria. Before joining Carnegie, Tokmajyan was a research fellow at International Crisis Group, focusing mainly on Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and patterns of displacement inside Syria. Prior to that, he was a research fellow at Budapest's Central European University, focusing on conflict dynamics in Aleppo. Tokmajyan was awarded the Richard Holbrooke Fellowship by Central European University in 2015 and Frank Giustra Fellowship by International Crisis Group in 2016. He holds a master's degree in peace, mediation and conflict research from University of Tampere, Finland.

Tokmajyan's work include "The Center Gives: Southern Syria and the Rise of New Peripheral Powerbrokers" (forthcoming book chapter, Palgrave Macmillan), "How the Small Town of Sarmada Became Syria's Gateway to the World" and (Carnegie Middle East, 2021), "Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon" (International Crisis Group, 2020), "Politics of Rural Notables" book chapter in an edited book entitled Local Intermediaries in post-2011 Syria: Transformation and Continuity (Published by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Beirut, June 2019). His peer-reviewed academic work include " Militarization of the Syrian revolution: Was this the wrong choice?" (Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research 7(2), April 2015) and "Hezbollah's Intervention in Syria: Religious Obligation or Political Choice?" (Journal of Approaching Religion Vol. 4 (2), December 2014).

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Executive summary

Despite significant changes in their operational environment, Syrian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) continue to play an important role since the last survey was completed (Autumn 2018). Since then, the level of violence and combat operations receded, the economic crisis worsened and the region was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. On the military and political control level, Syria's map, which before 2018 was dotted with different zones of control, became divided along three main lines—the northeast, the northwest and government-held Syria. These divisions, along with the aid regime that has parallel responses in each region, largely frame CSO work. The territories dictate CSOs' ties to each other and to international organizations.

This report is based on data collated in summer 2021 through a mapping of civil society organizations whose main activities or head offices were in Syria. In total, 767 CSOs participated in the survey, 90% of them headquartered inside Syria. 249 CSOs participated from government-held areas, 218 from Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) held Idlib, 61 from opposition held northwestern Syria that is under de facto Turkish control. 96, 58 and 68 CSOs from parts of Raqqqa, Deir Ezzor and Hassakeh that are under the control of Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AA/AANES). Due to restricted access, the so-called "Peace Spring" areas under Turkish control were not included. Below are some of the key findings:

- Many Syrian CSOs and international organizations operate out of local or regional hubs. While Damascus is the unequivocal hub in government held areas, Gaziantep in Turkey plays that role in the northwest. In the northeast, the image is more complex. Local CSOs are mostly concentrated in the cities of Raqqa, Hassakeh, and Qamishli, whereas international organizations are congregated in the relative safety of Syria's northeastern tip.
- Syrian CSO ties to each other, INGOs and UN agencies are largely confined to the de facto boundaries of the three political projects. About 1 percent of the 767 CSOs implement projects in more than one area of control.
- Since 2018, the number of newly established CSOs grew significantly. This is largely due to the contraction of ISIS and the subsequent proliferation of new organizations in parts of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor that are under the Autonomous Administration's control.
- There is a high tendency for official registration of CSOs, except in Idlib, where about 40% of 218 CSOs reported to not have registered anywhere.
- Surveyed CSOs are mostly small with 30 members or less and reported strong reliance on project-based temporary employees and volunteers.
- Organizations with no women members constitute a small minority, except in areas in northwestern Syria that are under Turkish-backed forces. Nonetheless, men make up the majority in most CSOs.
- A large number of Syrian CSOs have relatively complex organizational structures. At least half reported securing grants from large donors, which require strong institutional capacity.
- Only about 50% of CSOs reported their budget figures. The total reported amount was strikingly small relative to the scale of the Syrian response.
- Some 20% of all CSOs reported relying only on donations to secure funds while 55% reported that one of its three main sources of finance is donations.
- The most common work domain for CSOs (51% of them) is humanitarian aid and social services, followed by development work (49%), education, (36%) and health (35%).
- CSOs implemented some 2800 projects in the year that preceded the survey, which equals to about 4 projects per CSO.

Introduction

With the Syrian conflict entering its 11th year, Syrian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) continue to play versatile roles to fill the many gaps. This ranges from participating in the Syria humanitarian response to contributing to local governance to carrying out development work. As a direct product of 2011 uprising, CSOs across Syria and neighboring countries adapt and evolve in response to the changes that happen on political, military, and economic levels.

This report is based on the analysis of the phase IV of mapping Syrian CSOs conducted by IMPACT (previously known as Citizens for Syria). It covers the year before the survey was conducted in summer 2021. It is as a continuation of the previous mapping of Syrian civil society conducted in 2015 (phase I), 2016 (Phase II) and in 2018 (Phase III).

The report is divided into two parts. In its first part it argues that the three political projects in the northwest, northeast and government held areas—whose boundaries became clearer after 2018—along with the main hubs out of which UN, local and international CSOs operate, greatly frame CSO work and its internal interaction in Syria. Part I begins with an explanation of the context change since the previous survey was conducted in 2018, and discusses the argument in the context of the three regions by dedicating three separate parts. It is based on survey results, semi-structured interviews, and some secondary materials.

Part II of the report presents and analyzes the results of the survey. This part is divided into four sub-sections. The first discusses the distribution of CSOs in the region, the year they were established and the registration rate amongst them. The second presents the most common size of CSOs, their organizational type and structure. The final two sections deal with finance and type of work.

Terminology

Civil society:

Despite its common use, the term civil society has many definitions and interpretations. CIVICUS, a global alliance of civil society organizations, has used a broad working definition of civil society organization as “the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations and institutions to advance shared interests.”¹ The World Bank on the other hand focuses more on the organizational aspect and defines civil society as “to refer to the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations.”² For the purpose of this report we adopt World Bank’s definition, as it suits the organizational focus of the mapped entities.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs):

In line with the World Bank’s definition, this report uses the UN Guiding Principles Reporting Framework for Civil Society Organizations’ definition as “non-state, not-for-profit, voluntary entities formed by people in the social sphere that are separate from the state and the market. CSOs represent a wide range of interests and ties. They can include community-based organizations as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In the context of the UN Guiding Principles Reporting Framework, CSOs do not include business or for-profit associations.”³ Accordingly, we consider a Syrian CSO each CSO that meets the above-mentioned definition, whose key members are Syrians or legally equal, and its main activity is aimed towards the Syrian cause whether through lobbying or providing services to Syrians in Syria and neighboring countries or institutions that target a social or ethnic group of Syrians.

1 <https://www.civicus.org/downloads/2013EEI%20REPORT.pdf> p.5

2 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/partners/civil-society/overview>

3 <https://www.ungpreporting.org/glossary/civil-society-organizations-csos/>

Scope and Methodology

This report is a follow up to “Changing Contexts and Trends in Syrian Civil Society” report published in July 2019. It aims to illustrate a map of Syrian civil society organizations: their distribution, features of their relations with Syrian and non-Syrian organizations at home and abroad. Based on the results of the survey, the most significant trends within Syrian civil society organizations are also documented.

Following the definitions provided above, the report sees CSOs as a main representative of civil society structures. It excludes analysis of non-organized civil society movements such as grassroots initiatives, as well as government-alternative structures that emerged in areas outside of the central government control and are undertaking responsibilities traditionally associated with governmental organizations such as local council, health and education directorates and local courts. The report also excludes media organizations, both traditional (newspapers, radio, television) and social media as they usually adhere to different structures that require a stand-alone analysis.

The report relies on data collected specifically for this purpose using a standardized mapping tool, which was used in the previous round of the project. The tool is a questionnaire consisting of about 80 mostly close-ended or multiple-choice questions. Four topics are covered: location, structure, domain of work, finances, and funds. The tool was adapted from a capacity assessment tool used in previous mappings and was adjusted in consultation with a number of Syrian CSO members to provide quantitative data. The study aimed to include as many Syrian CSOs as possible, focusing on their organizational characteristics and internal structures.

The data included in this report was collected during the summer 2021 by a field team consisting of more 20 enumerators spread across four main teams inside Syria. The team was distributed by area of control (government-controlled, HTS-controlled, Turkish-controlled, and AA-controlled). All the enumerators were trained on data collection methods, informed about the purpose of this assignment, and equipped with detailed written guidelines for the questionnaire. IMPACT’s field team collected data using the Formera online data collection platform and interviewing key members of CSOs active in each one of the targeted areas. The collected data is based on self-reporting and reflects CSOs own assessment of their status.

The data collection process was followed by manual data cleaning to remove duplicates and non-eligible entries, reducing the total number of entries from 843 to 767 that were included in the analysis. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using SPSS and MS-Excel to produce tables and charts for single or aggregated variables. The results of quantitative analysis were then cross-referenced with contextual updates, media reports, field team observations and qualitative input from interviews conducted formally or informally with members of CSO. The findings in this report are the results of this process. While this report analyzes data collected initially, the mapping exercise continued after the period and additional CSOs were added and are to be included in an extended regularly updated database to be managed by IMPACT.

Limitations

- Some CSOs in northwestern Syria have not been included in the mapping due to lack of cooperation. The team identified more than 25 CSOs that either didn't respond or refused to take part in the survey. These were included in the secondary data but not in the analysis of this report.
- Security concerns and tendency to work in small teams and a low profile in GoS controlled areas has hindered accessibility. IMPACT identified a number of CSOs in these areas that were either unreachable or unwilling to cooperate for security concerns. IMPACT relied on secondary sources to map CSOs in these areas and include them in the mapping database. However, due to the inability to conduct the full mapping exercise with them, these CSOs are not included in the analysis.
- Surveys as a means of data collection have many advantages but they also come with some drawbacks. Some of them include non-response bias or sampling bias. Given that the survey was taking place in conflict circumstances, many respondents may have avoided, answered partially or incorrectly some questions due to security concerns.
- Although the data has been thoroughly cleaned, a small number of duplications, misplaced or invalid answers may still remain. These minor potential errors should not impact the overall results and analysis.

Part One:

Syrian Civil Society in Context: Hubs, Relations, and Major Trends

The environment that the CSOs operate in Syria and surrounding countries have changed significantly since the previous survey (2018). The 2018 phase was marked by the government's recapture of many opposition strongholds in the previous two years and the collapse of ISIS at the beginning of 2018. By the end of 2018, the various control areas solidified into three main political projects - opposition forces in the northwest, the Kurdish project in the northeast, and the Syrian government in the rest of Syria.

These territorial changes influenced the work of Syrian civil society organizations. Some crucial hubs for Syrian and international organizations were sustained but others collapsed, and new hubs emerged. It also resulted in the emergence of new hubs. These hubs and the three political projects as a whole frame the work of Syrian civil society organizations. Some particularly significant influences are: (1) their relations with each other locally (within the national borders of Syria), (2) their relations with their counterparts beyond Syria's national borders, and (3) and their ties to local communities, INGOs and major donors like the EU and UN, especially in the financial sense.

The first section of this report explains the change in context. A separate section is dedicated for each territory, in which the report highlights several key features since that frame CSO work and relations. The materials are drawn from the results of the survey, semi-structured interviews, and some secondary materials.

1. Contextual change

The previous survey ([Phase III](#)) came after two years of intense violence with major changes to political control and authority in Syria. Syrian government forces and its allies captured many opposition strongholds, most notably the eastern part of Aleppo city, eastern Ghouta in rural Damascus, and the entire southern front. These years also witnessed the collapse of ISIS whose control extended from eastern parts of Aleppo all the way into western parts of Iraq. Thus, the previous survey depicted the work of CSOs in a rapidly changing environment caused by active military operations. This survey, in contrast, depicted civil society and their work in the relative stability that proceeded 2018 and within the context of the three political projects.

Since August 2018, violence and active warfare have markedly receded. While the government consolidated its security control over the newly captured territories and destroyed any hopes of regime change through military means, it failed to re-incorporate country's northwest and northeast. In the former, Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham consolidated its power by eliminating rivals and forming a local government to take care of the day-to-day governance issues. Its priority shifted from toppling the regime to governing its territories as well as cleaning itself from western lists of terrorist organizations.

In the meantime, Turkish and pro-Turkish forces consolidated their grip on the parts of northwest that remained out of HTS control. The fate of the entire northwest has become even more dependent on Turkish policy in Syria. In the northeast, the Kurdish-dominant Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria was solidified in fall 2018 to become the de facto ruler in the area. More recently, it also officially started pursuing political support and recognition as an autonomous entity within the Syrian national borders.

Military operations took place in this period, however, the overall intensity of the conflict was low. According to Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the death toll in Syria between 2018 and 2021 was around 40,000 in comparison to around 52,000 in 2016 and 35,000 in 2017 respectively. Government forces launched several offensives against Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the northwest and succeeded in capturing many areas, while Turkey conducted two military incursions into Syria—one in Afrin in January 2018 (codenamed, "Olive Branch"), and another one in northwestern Syria in October 2019 (codenamed, "Peace Spring"). Both were directed against Kurdish forces. In the south, since government's recapture of Dara'a and Quenitra, instability and occasional escalation were the defining features of the situation. Although these events were important, they did not significantly alter the Syrian territorial map.

The shifting environment had a marked impact on the local and regional hubs, which emerged during the conflict as important centers for Syrian and non-Syrian organizations. Besides physical locations of activity, these hubs also served as crucial financial centers for many local and international organizations. In a sense, they became the gates into the main pool of humanitarian finance for hundreds of Syrian organizations. But, given the influence of opposing authorities in their area of operation, the hubs also have a political dimension.

2. Government Held Areas: Damascus Emerges as the Dominant Hub

In government held areas, Damascus is the main hub. Out of the 266 CSOs in government held areas (including Dara'a and Quneitra) 74 are based in Damascus city. The second biggest hub is Aleppo city, with 40 CSOs and third is Suwayda' city, with 28 CSOs. However, unlike other cities, about 65% of CSOs based in Damascus have operations in other governorates. In Aleppo and Suwayda', for instance, only 8 and 30 percent of CSOs work in other governorates than where they are based. As the capital of Syria and the base of UN's Syria response, Damascus has always been an important hub for humanitarian response, but its significance grew since 2018.

Up until early 2018, the Jordanian capital Amman was an important hub especially for rebel-held southern Syria that included large parts of Dara'a and Quneitra governorates. In practice, that meant UN agencies' presence, which delivered cross-border aid into Syria via the Nassib crossing. In addition to UN agencies, the hub also hosted many INGOs and Syrian organizations that, too, ran operations in southern Syria. This hub declined and eventually ceased from playing major role ahead of regime's recapture of the south with Russia's help in summer 2018.

As a result, all Syrian organizations that worked in Dara'a were displaced, UN or other cross-border operations were halted, and INGOs that used to operate out of Amman shifted attention to other conflict areas. According to a senior humanitarian worker who was in Syria at the time, it was Damascus based organizations that expanded into the south after regime's recapture. This observation is in fact reflected in the survey data. The number of CSOs who operate in Dara'a and Quneitra is very small, only 17. And eight out of seventeen have their headquarters in Damascus.

Before 2018, when government held areas were still dotted with opposition enclaves especially around Damascus, aid reached these areas in several ways. Crossline operations organized by Damascus-based UN agencies was an important and official track. In this context, Beirut based Syria organizations and INGOs played a role too, though an informal one. One senior humanitarian worker who was in Damascus at that time explained that financial or in-kind aid, originating from Lebanon, reached these besieged areas. One former employee in a humanitarian organiza-

tion in Lebanon explained how he facilitated the informal transfer of \$500,000 from Lebanon to an organization in opposition-held and besieged Eastern Ghouta. This suggests that the amount of aid going into these areas was not negligible. Nonetheless, given that these operations were informal, it is not possible to assess their true scale. Like in the south, government's recapture of besieged areas led to the expulsion of local CSOs and brought the area under the responsibility of Damascus based organizations.

CSO relations to other organizations and wider society in government held areas are complex. One dominant characteristic is that CSO operations and relations with other CSOs are confined to Government of Syria (GoS) controlled areas, except for rare cases. Just 4 out of 266 CSOs in government held areas have operations in other parts of Syria. Working in other areas would most certainly lead to logistical, legal and coordination issues, but most importantly the CSO would run into security complications. A former UN official with long-term experience working in Syria said that CSOs in government-held areas are already overwhelmed by formal and informal security restrictions on them. Opening connections with CSOs in other areas would only bring trouble.

The Damascus hub plays an important role in the network of relations, especially when it comes to finance. This is most clear in the humanitarian aid context. UN agencies, which are responsible for most of the humanitarian aid response, are based in Damascus and essentially serve as a gate into the main pool of humanitarian funding for local and international organizations based inside Syria.

This is reflected in the data. Approximately 55% of Syrian CSOs in government-held areas reported receiving funds from main donors like EU, USAID, and UN, with 25% of them reported receiving finances only from those donors. In reality, this means UN as the others do not directly deal with Syrian organizations in regime-held Syria. This illustrates strong financial ties between Syrian CSOs and the UN. It is also important to mention that there are financial constraints that limit CSO financial interaction with the outside world. As a previous IMPACT report suggests, Syria is a "red flag" for banks, which require lengthy paperwork from organizations to be able to provide financial services. While large organizations manage to overcome these complications, smaller ones tend to depend on such large organization for funding.⁴

The picture is somewhat different in the domain of development work, which constitutes a small part of the overall response. While organizations based in Damascus dedicate funds for development, Syrian CSOs also turn to organizations in Lebanon for development funds, though informally. According to one senior researcher with intimate knowledge of Syria's humanitarian context, millions of US dollars still enter Syria from Lebanon informally. Given that local CSOs can only receive money from organizations authorized to work in Syria by the Ministry of Social Af-

4 for more information on the challenges CSOs face in this regard, see: https://impact-csrd.org/reports/Invisible_Sanctions_IMPACT_EN.pdf

fairs and Labor, there is no legal framework to organize the necessary transactions, leading to the floods of informal transfers. This example suggests that some Syrian CSOs have informal financial ties extending beyond the hub which by its informal definition, is difficult to assess.

Another important interaction takes place between the CSOs and local or diaspora community-based initiatives. Donations raised by the CSOs offers a frame to understand the informal relations between CSOs and their communities. Donations are a very common form of funding activities. Some 20% of CSOs in government-held areas reported that they solely rely on donations, another 40% reported that donations are one of their main three source of funding. The survey does not reveal the source of these donations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are several trends. One such is donations collected from the workers of the organization, who themselves are often part of the community they work in. Another type is to organize free services to those in need (i.e. free surgery).

The most prominent form, however, seems to be raising money from the well-off inside Syria or in diaspora community either as a zakat (almsgiving, which is a religious obligation in Islam) to perform charity work and help the needy. There are several organizations that were included in the survey and have been known for their strong ties to local business owners in their communities and have been working even before 2011. The high reliance on donations along with existence of many forms of private or informal fundraising suggests strong ties with local communities. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the reported amounts in question are trivial compared to the official humanitarian response by large donors.

Informal networks in government-held areas

Over the course of the conflict the Syrian government has taken massive steps to organize the aid sector and the civil society space. It has come to exercise significant control over UN agencies, INGOs and local Syrian organizations through formal institutions such as the foreign ministry, Syrian Arab Red Crescent, and Social and Labor Affairs ministry. Throughout the conflict, government agencies intervened in issues ranging from granting a license (or not) to foreign organizations to influencing aid distribution.

In the case of civil society, a fundamental principle has come to dictate the Government of Syria's approach: that civil society ought to be an extension of the state, not independent of it. An embodiment of this thinking is the Syria Trust for Development-a government-controlled NGO under the thumb of the first lady. Syria Trust has turned into an important instrument to shape and influence Syrian civil society activities in regime-held areas. Although the bulk of interactions in the civil society and aid domains happen within the aforementioned frames, informal relations continue to exist and follow certain trends.

The Government of Syria's attitude has been suspicious towards informal networks that operate outside its control, especially those with ties to actors outside GoS-held areas. This is particularly true for financial ties between local and foreign CSOs when those located outside channel resources to those in government-held areas. This distrustful attitude could be traced back to government's narrative of the Syrian uprising, where foreign funded local networks played a crucial role in organizing and funding the protests and then the rebellion against the regime. Therefore, running or being part of an informal network in regime-held areas is a very risky business. Nonetheless it is possible to identify several types of informal networks that are either tolerated by the regime or operate without its knowledge.

Across Syria there are what we may call trust networks, which link local CBOs or CSOs (usually small in size) to other local or even global organizations on the basis of trust. Such interactions usually involve community-based organizations or initiatives that are entrenched in their communities, on one hand, and have access to resources through local or foreign based Syrian CSOs or CBOs, on the other. The base of such relations is often personal trust but the cog that keeps this mechanism alive is informal financial transactions, chiefly the Hawala system. IMPACT's field team could identify some informal networks that secretly work in both regime and opposition areas. Though the scale of their work is hard to estimate, it is often small. Some of these activities go unnoticed by the regime, others are tolerated and sometimes targeted. One factor that influences the fate of such networks is the proximity to the center, Damascus.

A Syrian researcher from Rif Damascus explained in a conversation to the author that in some instances, regime security agencies arrested local women community-based organization (CBO) members for informally raising money for orphaned children. This indicates the Government of Syria's seriousness in cracking down on any informal activity close to the centers of power.

In the Suwayda' governorate, where regime's security grip is weak, CSOs can work without GoS interference. For instance, the survey shows that Suwayda' governorate is a hub for informally working CSOs in regime held areas (see below, Part two, first section, subsection "C"). Moreover, local organizations openly receive funds from CSOs outside Syria, including Europe without fearing reprisal from regime.

The regime also seems to tolerate informal cooperation, and large financial transactions, between local CSOs and funders located outside Syria as long as those interactions don't pose a direct threat to it. According to two researchers specialized in humanitarian affairs, INGOs based in Lebanon currently finance several CSOs (names won't be mentioned for security reasons) inside Syria informally. According to one of the researchers who has personal experience, the organizations that are on the receiving end have strong informal ties within the regime and they do not pose any threat to it through their informal networks. Such example, according to him, include Christian Charity Organizations.

Work through informal networks inside Syria has its risks and advantages. Informal networks have the opportunity of working independent of the regime policies, secretly or with its tolerance, all of which increases their agency. But it also increases the risks. Given regime's inherent suspicion towards informal networks, it either seeks to eliminate such networks or turn them into the extension of government-controlled institutions.

3. Northwestern Syria: Gaziantep Continues to be the Hub

Gaziantep, Turkey is the main hub for Syrian, non-Syrian organizations, and UN agencies that operate in the **northwest**. According to the survey (which included only CSOs that are located in Syria or have offices and active operations there, and excluded those who work solely in Turkey), some 20% of all 279 CSOs surveyed in northwestern Syria have their headquarters in Turkey, mostly in Gaziantep. In fact, Gaziantep is the single biggest location for surveyed CSOs in the region with 36 of them based there.

The importance of Gaziantep lies in several factors. In the beginning of the Syrian conflict, UN agencies chose Gaziantep as their hub for northwest Syria response. They oversaw the cross-border humanitarian aid delivery which in and itself created a huge cross-border ties between organizations located in Gaziantep and implementing partners in the northwest. In fact, according to a founder of a long-time Syrian CSO based in Turkey, there are many Syrian organizations that are based in Syria but maintain representation in Gaziantep given that it is the main hub for UN agencies and INGOs that work in the northwest.

In addition to the UN, there are many INGOs that take Gaziantep as their headquarter. They operate inside Syria without maintaining permanent representation there. Finally, displacement crisis that pushed millions of Syrians to southern Turkey also played a role. Having relocated to Turkey, a vibrant civil society community emerged. Therefore, in many ways, northwestern Syria and southern Turkey, especially Gaziantep, have become strongly interlinked both in terms of humanitarian response as well as the establishment and development of Syrian civil society.

Several experts and practitioners in the aid domain in Turkey explained that in the past three years the number of CSOs in Gaziantep may have decreased. Few of the noticeable trends include closure of some CSOs due to decrease in funds, relocation to European cities or other cities inside Turkey, notably Istanbul. Nonetheless, Gaziantep remains to the most important hub for northwestern Syria. On the political level, namely the changes that occurred on the battle ground in Syria, Turkey's own military interventions, and the continuation of UN authorized cross-border operations from Bab al-Hawa, all contributed to Gaziantep's importance as a hub.

Similar to government-held areas, CSO relations to other organizations and wider society in the northwest have many dimensions. The most striking similarity is the nearly non-existent cooperation between CSOs located in the northwest with those in other areas of control. Out of 218 CSOs in Idlib region and 61 in Turkey backed northwest Syria, there are 4 organizations that operate in the northeastern parts of Syria under the control of the Kurdish dominant Autonomous Administration. None reported working in government held areas. This is in part because both UN and INGOs, that channel most of the funding, have separate working frameworks in northwest, northeast and government areas. But it is also due Turkish laws about financing terrorism, which concerns Syria's northeast. Ankara considers the dominant Kurdish force there, the PYD/YPG, a terrorist organization. Therefore, any financial ties between organizations based in Turkey and Syria's northeast could be subjected to legal repercussion.

In this sense, CSO relations are largely confined to northwest Syria and Turkey, with Gaziantep playing a crucial role especially when it comes to finance. Like in government held areas, UN agencies are responsible for most of the humanitarian aid that enters cross-border through Bab al-Hawa. While the UN relies on local organizations and INGOs for implementation, the direct link between its agencies and Syrian organizations in the northwest vary between HTS-held Idlib and other parts of the northwest (Afrin and so-called "Euphrates shield" areas) that are under Turkish-backed forces. According to the survey results, only 14% of 218 CSOs in HTS-held Idlib reported receiving funding from main donors like EU, USAID, and UN. In the other parts of the northwest, where half of civil society organizations are based in Turkey, the image is different. More than 40% of CSOs have direct access to the pool of funding given by large donors.

The situation is similar in the context of CSO financial links with INGOs, which are mainly based in Turkey and implement both humanitarian and development programs. In Idlib, only 30% have reported receiving finance from INGOs as opposed to 55% in the other parts of the northwest. There are a number of reasons that could explain this divergence. The survey shows that the biggest number of unregistered CSOs are in Idlib. Some 40% (88 in total) CSOs are not registered anywhere. This automatically creates complications in entering into financial transactions with INGOs and or major donors like UN, which comes on top of already complicated image of financial transactions from abroad to Syria. Working conditions have become increasingly difficult after the dominance of HTS on Idlib, as an earlier IMPACT study reports.⁵ Therefore, these CSOs either rely on private funds or are at the mercy of registered Syrian organizations which have access to funds and have larger room to finance operations informally.

Like in the government held areas, the number of organizations that rely on donations is rather high in the northwest. A closer look, however, reveals that this is true only for HTS-held Idlib where some 40% of CSOs reported relying solely on donations and another 20% reported that one of their main sources of income is donations. In the course of the conflict many organizations have developed ties and networks to Syrian diaspora communities and Islamic networks and with collected donations. Nevertheless, based on the reported amounts, the scale of these donations is trivial in comparison to the finances dedicated to the Syrian humanitarian response.

5 https://impact-csrd.org/reports/Invisible_Sanctions_IMPACT_EN.pdf

4. The Northeast: Multiple Hubs

CSO trends in the northeast are similar to the other two regions, however, there is no local hub that is equivalent to Damascus and no regional one that is equivalent to Gaziantep. The survey shows that there are three local hubs for Syrian CSOs in the Kurdish controlled northeast: Raqqa, Qamishli, and Hassakeh. While 70% of 68 CSOs that were surveyed in Hassakeh governorate are based in Hassakeh and Qamishli, 80% of those surveyed in Raqqa governorate are based in Raqqa city. In Deir Ezzor, such a hub does not exist. All CSOs are spread along the northern shores of the Euphrates River.

International presence, too, is not concentrated in one place. Up until January 2020, Irbil in Iraqi Kurdistan was a UN hub for delivering cross-border humanitarian aid from Ya'rubiyeh to northeast Syria. When the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2504 on January 2020, it revoked this authorization and thereby halted cross-border aid. Currently the UN sponsored humanitarian aid in the northeast is managed by the Damascus headquarters, which has regional office in parts of Qamishli that are still under government control.

Contrary to Gaziantep, INGOs in the northeast are strongly present. Many INGOs were concentrated in Ain Issa up until Turkey's most recent incursion (codenamed "Peace Spring") in late 2019, which turned the town into a front-line. Currently, reports suggest that many are operating out of Amuda and Malkiyeh (Derik) in the far northeast. In other words, the international presence is heavily concentrated in the northeastern tip of Syria.

Local CSO ties to other organizations in the northeast are defined by numerous trends and bear some similarities to other parts of the country. There are also noticeable differences within the northeast between Hassakeh, on one hand, and Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, on the other. The striking similarity with other parts of Syria is that relations or ties between CSOs based in the northeast and those in other parts of Syria is practically non-existent. **There are only two organizations in the government-held areas and two organizations in the northeast that have operations in other areas of control (4 out of 470 CSOs).** Concerning ties with the northwest, the image is rather similar: no CSO in the northeast reported having operations in the northwest.

In terms of financial ties to other organizations, in Jazira region (Hassakeh Governorate), some 60% of CSOs reported having financial ties to INGOs as opposed to only a handful that had direct access to major donors like EU, UN, or USAID. This reflects the dependency of local organizations on INGOs who appear to be playing a major role in directing international humanitarian finance to the northeast.

In Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, the image is different. CSOs located in parts of these two governorates that fall under Autonomous Administration's control report higher reliance on main donors like EU, UN, and USAID. About quarter of these CSOs receive finance from main donors and some 15% from INGOs. A humanitarian worker based in Raqqa explained that the distinguishing traits of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor from other regions is the ISIS factor. Both were at the center of ISIS-controlled areas and witnessed large amounts of destruction during the anti-ISIS campaign. After liberation, these areas, unlike Hassakeh Governorate which mostly remained out of ISIS control-attracted funds from various donors.

The de-authorization of cross-border operations by the UN has complicated CSOs' relations with UN agencies. As noted, UN operated out of its Damascus headquarters and latter's regional office in the northeast. It is therefore subject to government regulations. For instance, qualitative interviews conducted for this reported suggest that UN can only work with local organizations in the northeast which are authorized by the central government. But since these local organizations are operating in Autonomous Administration's territory, they have to have authorization from the AA. In short, CSOs in the northeast are required to tick many boxes before even attempting to apply for UN funds.

In terms of CSO relations with counterparts outside Syria, there are also different trends in Jazira (Hassakeh Governorate) as opposed to Deir Ezzor and Raqqa. The latter two appear to not have strong ties to CSOs in the region. The data shows that there is nearly no CSO that has branches or headquarters in Turkey or Iraq. Two interlocutors, one from Raqqa and another from Deir Ezzor, interviewed for this report, suggested that CSOs in their areas hardly have any relations with those based in Turkey or the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). That is, however, not the case with CSOs based in Jazira and other Kurdish majority areas. While these CSOs do not have strong ties to Turkey, they do have networks with CSOs based in Kurdistan Iraq and in some cases even implement joint projects inside Syria.

In terms of raising private fund (donations), the northeast stands out. Like in other parts of Syria, the CSOs in the region reported strong reliance on donations. When zooming in the region, however, it appears that in Jazira not only reliance on donation is high but unlike other places the generated income that was reported is significant. CSOs in Jazira that stated relying on donations as their only source of income have reportedly generated some US \$15-17 million in the year that preceded the survey, more than all other regions combined. To some extent this reflects strong ties between the CSOs operating in Kurdish-dominated regions and the Kurdish diaspora who, according to several Kurdish activists, donate privately. The overall amount received in donations is high.

Conclusion

To conclude, post-2018 Syria is not only de facto territorially divided into three parts, it is also divided into multiple parallel systems of humanitarian response and several communities of civil society. These divisions have existed since the beginning of the humanitarian response and the evolution of Syrian civil society after 2011. Nevertheless, today, more than ever, they are divided along the main lines of three zones of control and influence-government held areas, northwest and northeast. On one hand, the policies of the authorities that rule these areas have contributed to confining CSO external ties to the territories they operate. On the other, the aid regime has developed parallel response mechanisms in these three areas, which, in turn, has reinforced the frames that confine CSO ties to within the area of control where they operate.

Part Two:

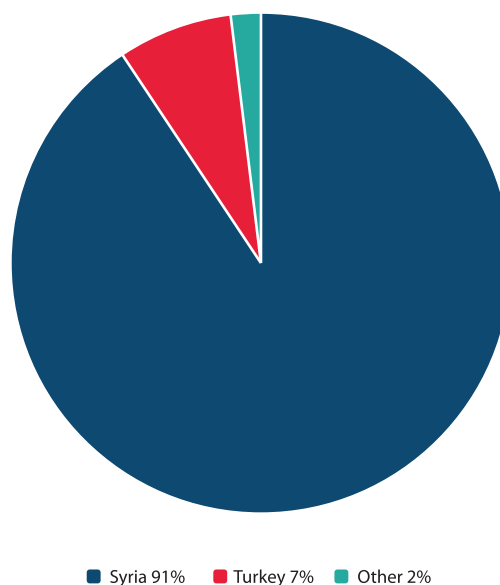
Mapping Syrian Civil Society Organizations: Survey Findings

1. Distribution, Establishment, and Registration

A. Distribution

The vast majority of the surveyed CSOs, about 90%, have their head offices inside Syria. Turkey comes second and hosts the headquarters of little less than 60 CSOs or 7% of all survey participants. That leaves only a dozen or so CSOs that have operations in Syria, though their headquarters are outside Syria or Turkey [See Figure 1]. In other words, the survey largely reflects the state of CSOs that are based in Syria, and operate there, and does not include Syrian CSOs that are found outside and work mainly outside Syria.

Figure 1: the distribution of surveyed CSO headquarters on country level



A more nuanced image of distribution appears at the city level. The most striking characteristic is the concentration of CSOs in nine cities in the region-eight in Syria in addition to Gaziantep in Turkey. Inside Syria, the biggest concentration is in Raqqa city with 78 CSOs, followed by Damascus with 74 and Aleppo with 40. Outside Syria, Gaziantep is the biggest hub with some 36 CSOs headquartered there, which is about 5% of all surveyed CSOs.

In government-held areas, Damascus appears to be the center of CSOs with more than quarter of 249 surveyed CSOs having their main offices there. That is not surprising. Besides security, the large population, availability of human resources, and logistical solutions, Damascus is also the most important financial hub given that many INGOs and UN agencies are based there. The list is followed by Aleppo city and Suwayda' cities, with 40 and 28 CSOs. The three cities together host more than half of 249 CSOs surveyed in government-held areas.

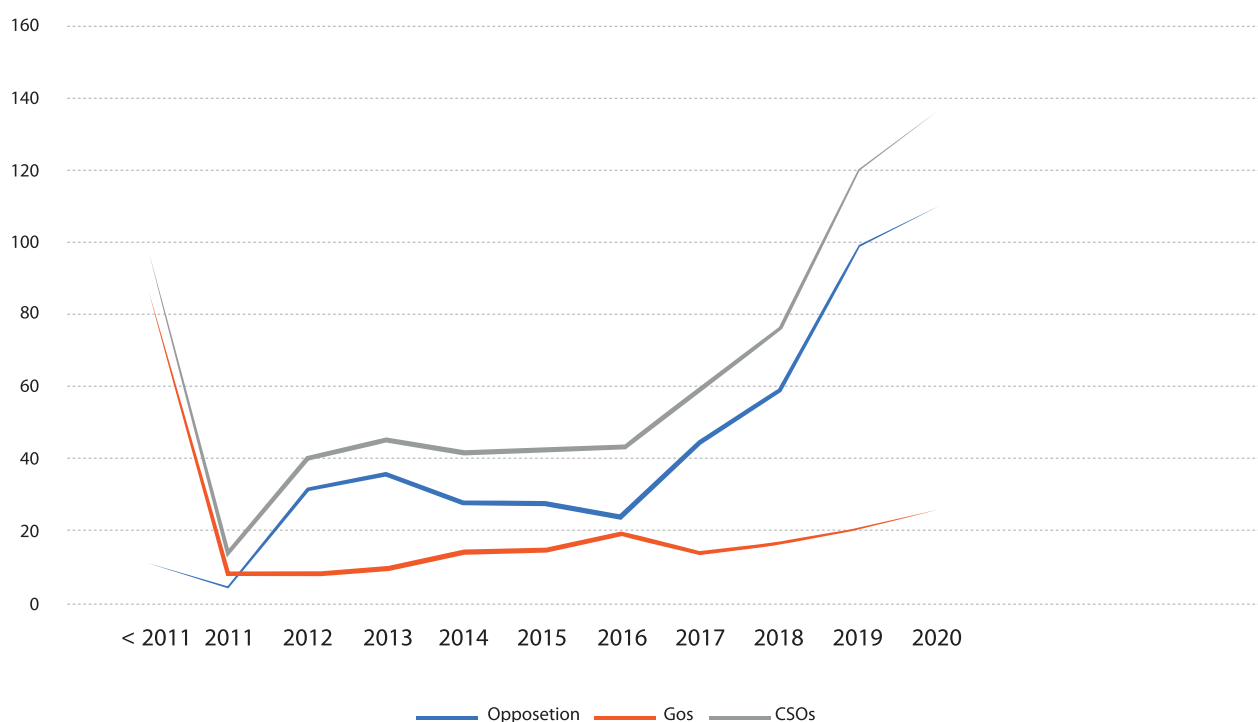
In the northeast of Syria, the striking characteristics is the contrast between the distribution of CSOs in Hassakeh and Raqqa in contrast with Deir Ezzor. Approximately 80% of all CSOs surveyed in Raqqa are based in the provincial capital. In Hassakeh the provincial capital along with Qamishli host some 70 percent of all CSOs. In Deir Ezzor, in contrary, there is no hub. Part of the reason is because the provincial capital falls within the government controlled areas. More importantly, CSOs in Deir Ezzor are mostly closer to be community based organizations, with many relatives and residents of the same community being the founder of the CSO. This might explain the wide distribution of CSOs along the northern shore of the Euphrates, where most communities in Deir Ezzor live.

In the northwest, at least three characteristics strike. Firstly, some 20 percent of the 279 CSOs surveyed in Idlib and northern Syria (Euphrates Shield and Afrin) are based in Turkey, most of them in Gaziantep. This underlines the importance of Gaziantep as a regional hub to the response in the northwest. Secondly, there is a high concentration of CSOs on the border region. In Idlib, where 218 CSOs are widely distributed across the region, some dozen cities no further than 20km from Bab al-Hawa, host 40% of all CSOs in Idlib. In the northern region, (where half of 61 CSOs are based in Turkey) 13 are headquartered in Azaz, a stone's throw away from the Bab al-Salama crossing with Turkey. Possible reasons include relative safety, large populations, and proximity to organizations based in Turkey which is important both logistically and financially.

B. Establishment

Overall, the number of new CSOs has continued to grow across Syria though trends between areas under government control and those outside it carry some significant differences. When looking at the years of establishment records of all CSOs that participated in the survey, we notice at least three clear trends-noticeable increase in 2011-2012, stability between 2012-2016, and a noticeable increase after 2016 with a record number of 140 new CSOs in 2020 (see Figure 2). The subsequent sections will break down the data to provide a deeper picture of the causes of these trends and regional (GoS, northeast, northwest) differences.

[Figure 2:] Surveyed CSOs, date of establishment



The increase in 2011-2012 is explained by the start of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, though almost all of them appear to be currently working in areas outside opposition control. This suggests that the initial boom in 2011-2012 may have happened in areas that fell outside government control. With the collapse of state authority in these areas, the need for organizations such as CSOs increased, which partly explains the boom. Another possible reason is the absence of state rules and regulations, and therefore no restrictions to establish CSOs.

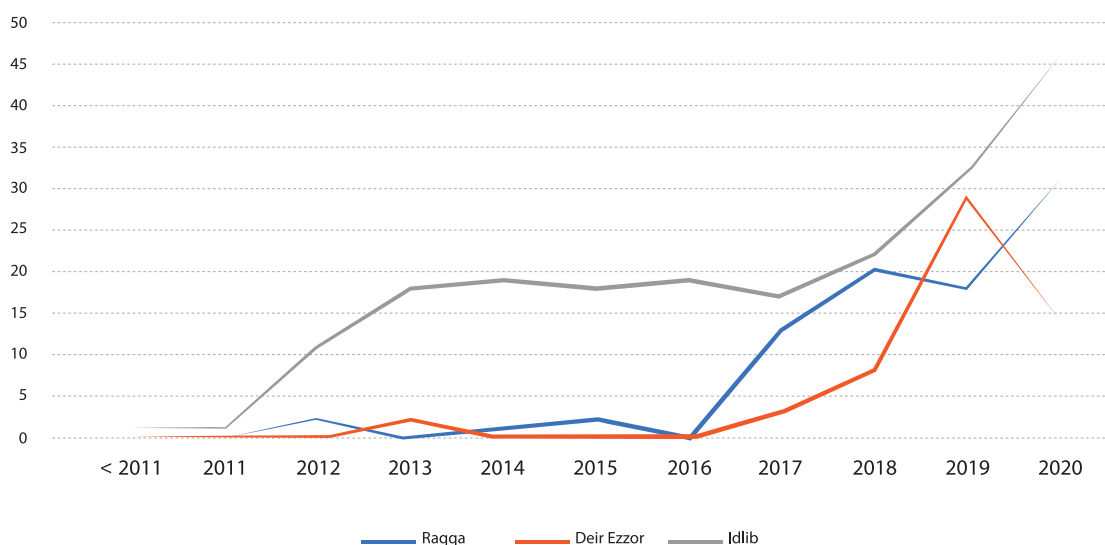
In the government areas, on the contrary, this initial boom did not happen. That could be partly because there were already many licensed organizations, which responded to new needs. The survey shows that 86 out of 249 (or 35%)

CSOs that are currently based in government held areas were found before 2011, some dating back to 1920 and 1940s. Another possible reason for the delay in the boom is that establishing any sort of non-governmental organization needed lengthy security and administrative procedures and the permission was far from guaranteed (see figure 2).

In 2016, after a period of stable growth in the number of new CSOs, the numbers increased noticeably. (Figure 2) The reasons lie in key developments in northern Syria, especially in Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Idlib, namely, the retreat and collapse of ISIS in 2017-2018. This opened the space and the need for more civil society organizations in areas previously controlled by the caliphate. The data strongly supports this claim and that is most evident in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor which were mostly under ISIS control. In parts of Raqqa that falls outside government areas, 95% of all CSOs were founded after 2017, while the boom was in 2020 with 31 new CSOs in one year. In Deir Ezzor, the trend is similar. The boom occurred in 2019, with the establishment of 30 organizations or half all CSOs that participated in the survey [see Figure 3].

In government held areas the trend seems to be different. Although the number of new CSOs in 2018, 2019, and 2020 increased in comparison to the years before (as the Figure 2 shows), it did not experience a boom comparable to Raqqa and Deir Ezzor that were outside government control. An in-depth study on non-governmental organizations in Deir Ezzor suggests that at least 20 organizations were active in the region. Nevertheless, they were either existing organizations-i.e., established before 2011, or branches of organizations that had their headquarters in another city, which could explain why government held Deir Ezzor did not register any boom in new organizations after ISIS's defeat.⁶

[Figure 3:] Surveyed CSOs in Raqqa, Idlib and Deir Ezzor, date of establishment



6 <https://medirections.com/index.php/2019-05-07-15-50-27/wartime/2021-03-18-11-25-22>

The number of new CSOs being registered in other areas remained stable with marginal relative increase in 2019 and 2020. After Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, the most noteworthy increase was in Idlib where in 2019 and 2020 36 and 42 new CSOs were as opposed to 17 and 22 in 2017 and 2018. It is hard to pin down a particular event that led to the increase in the numbers of CSOs in Idlib. It is worth noting, however, that unlike Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, about 70 percent of the new CSOs in Idlib defined themselves as initiatives, volunteer groups, or a coalition rather than organizations with complex structures.

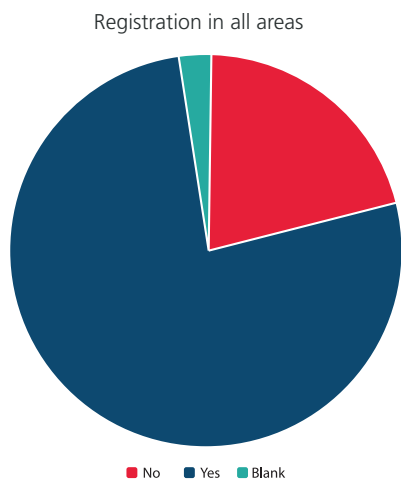
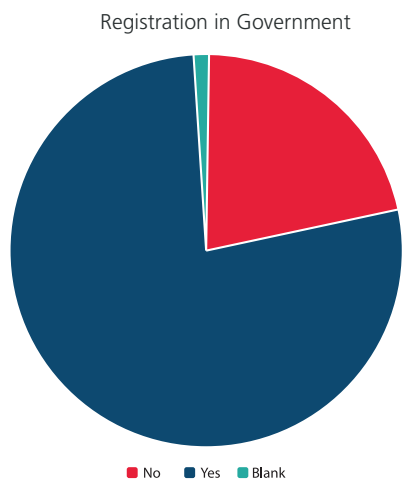
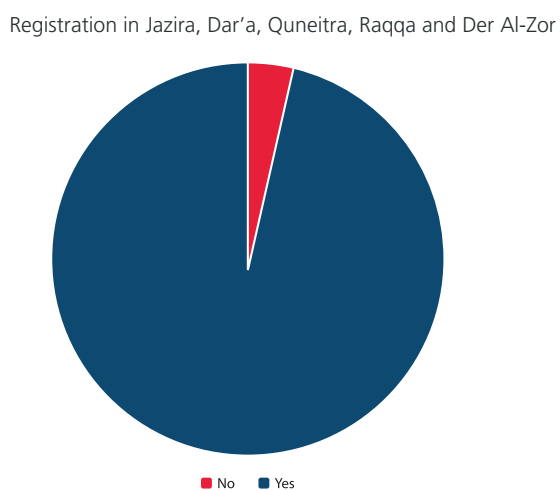
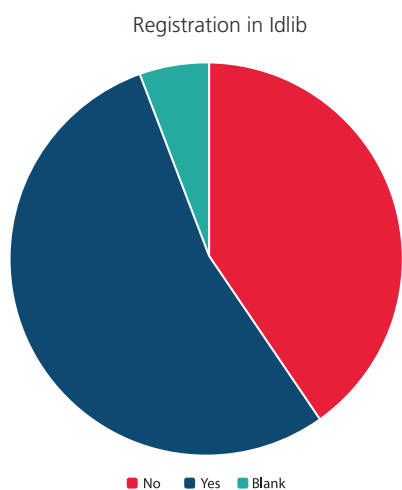
C. Registration

The data shows that there is a high tendency for official registration, except in the case of Idlib (see Figure 4). About eighty percent of all surveyed CSOs reported having official registration. The overwhelming majority of surveyed CSOs in Hassakeh, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor in addition to Dara'a and Quneitra are officially registered, while in northern Syria the percentage of unregistered CSOs is about 10 percent. That percentage is 20% amongst CSOs in government held areas (excluding Dara'a and Quneitra) and worryingly high in Idlib, where it is 40%, meaning 88 out of 218 organizations, are not registered.

The 54 CSOs surveyed in government areas which operate without official registration have at least three dominating characteristics. Firstly, about 75%, or 40 out of 54, identify themselves as teams or initiatives some even without a physical headquarter, which could indicate relatively basic organizational structures. Only 13 out of 54 identify themselves as organizations and institutions, which alludes to a more complex structure. The second characteristic is that Suwayda' province is the biggest hub for unregistered CSOs. Some 40 percent of all-that is 21 out of 54-happen to be based in Suwayda'. Eight out of the 13 CSOs that identified themselves as organizations and institutions eight are based in Suwayda'. Government's weak security grip on Suwayda' could explain the high number of unregistered CSOs, some of which openly oppose the regime.

The issue of registration is most pressing in Idlib, where some 40% of all the CSOs are not registered. In fact, Idlib's unregistered CSOs make up more than half of the total unregistered CSOs. The domination of HTS-designated terrorist organization in the west-and its civilian wing, the salvation government, could be part of the reason. Registration with the local government could, in fact, hinder access to funds rather than help given that HTS is heavily sanctioned by many governments and organizations.

Figure 4: registration in different regions



2. Size, Type, and Structure

A. Size and type of employment

Surveyed CSOs are mostly small in size with 30 members or less and report strong reliance on project-based employees and volunteers. The overwhelming majority of surveyed CSOs are small. Just under 80% have 30 members or less. The most common organization size is 6-10 members with about one third of all CSOs having that many members. The second most common is size is 11-25 members, which is the size of about quarter of all CSOs. This assumption is confirmed by the small percentage large CSOs-only 6% percent of all CSOs have more than 100 members in their teams.

When it comes to employment type, CSOs rely more on project-based employees and volunteers. Some 75% and 70% of all CSOs reported having full-time and part-time employees, respectively. The number of CSOs that reported having project-based employees and volunteers was greater, with 81% and 86% percent respectively. When broken down against area of control the overall trend remains the same though it appears that in government areas the reliance on full-time and part-time employment is higher. Approximately 92% of them reported having full-time employees in their ranks as opposed to 67% of CSOs surveyed in other areas.

However, the data does not reveal the full extent of CSOs' reliance on short-term assignees. A Beirut-based researcher specialized in humanitarian affairs explained that many organizations have a small team of full-time staff and expand by hiring project-based employees and volunteers when they manage to secure funds (i.e., project funds). A humanitarian worker from Raqqa echoed this observation by saying "CSOs expand and contract depending on how much project fund they secure."

B. Employment: The gender dimension

The data shows that organizations with no women constitute a small minority-except in northern Syria-though men make up the majority in most CSOs. In total, only seven percent of CSOs-that is 57 of them-reported having no women on their team. When the data is desegregated per regions, it appears that the most pressing situation is in the Turkish controlled areas in northern Syria, where 20 out of 61 or one third of the CSOs have no women on their teams. Raqqa and Idlib follow northern Syria on the list with 10% and 9%, while the rest scored five or less percentage.

Membership, however, does not translate into majority. Most organizations across Syria are male dominant. For instance, according to the survey collected from government held areas (Dara'a and Quneitra excluded), the CSOs with the size of 6-10 and 11-25 (which make up the majority of the CSOs), are mostly male dominant: only 6% of CSOs with the size of 6-10, and only 29% of those with 11-25 members are majority-women. Regarding CSOs surveyed outside government areas, the picture is similar: among those with 6-10 members only 11% are majority-women, while those with the size of 11-25, only 24%. As organizations get bigger, the number of women increases, though the male-dominance continues to prevail.

The survey results reflect the findings of many studies, which document the challenges faced by women in the world of CSOs. One such study found that women organizations could face "challenges in obtaining legal recognition from local authorities or having any form of umbrella protection."⁷ Another study conducted by IMPACT concluded that there are a host of challenges including a lack of gender awareness in many CSOs, inequalities in the job market, security concerns, and the social context.⁸

C. Structure

A large number of Syrian CSOs have complex structures and well-functioning departments that are able to secure grants from demanding donors. Some 60-70% of survey participants reported having an executive bureau, human resources office, and separate public relations and communications department. Around 90% reported having an administrative department and finance department. (See Figure 1) As expected, specialized departments are less common. These include research, technical, design, and several other departments indicated in figure 1.

Another striking result concerns fundraising. The number of CSOs that has a specific fundraising department is very small considering finance is one of the most pressing issues. This might be because fundraising for civil society organizations, as is done in Europe for instance, was not the norm in Syrian organizations before 2011. One research project on Syrian non-governmental organizations dating back to 2010 found that "fundraising is still in its infancy ... [and that] Many Syrian organizations' have no clear fundraising strategy."⁹ This has changed in the past ten years although the survey shows it has yet to grow deep roots.

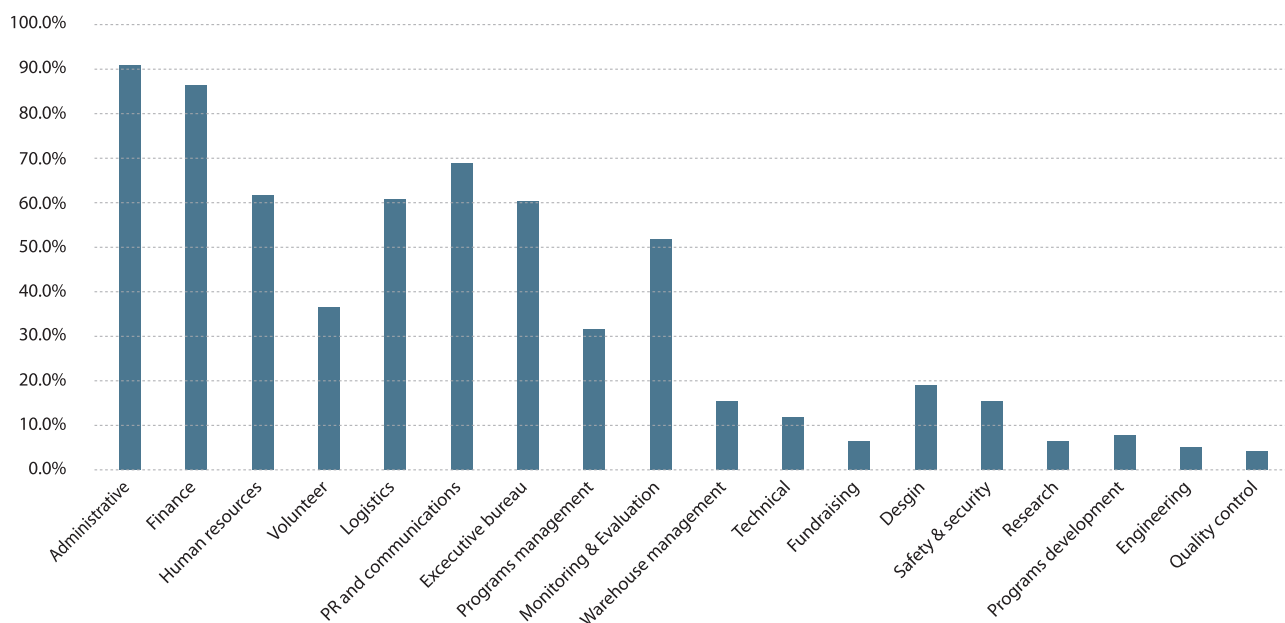
7 <https://women-now.org/wp-content/uploads/Feminist-and-Womens-Organisations-in-Syria-Challenges-and-Opportunities.pdf>

8 https://www.impact-csr.org/reports/Gender_Dynamics_within_Syrian_Civil_Society.pdf

9 <https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Briefing-Paper-30-The-NGO-sector-in-Syria.pdf> p. 10

Having a department is only part of the story, however. It was beyond the scope of the survey to reflect on the effectiveness of these departments. Nevertheless, the data does offer useful insights on the performance of the CSOs.

Figure 5: Departments in Surveyed CSOs



One indirect way to assess the complexity of a given CSO is to understand its source of funding. That is because receiving funding from main donors such as EU, USAID, and UN is no easy task and requires relatively well-functioning departments that can craft complex and demanding funding proposals, demonstrate ability to implement big projects as well as have skilled multi-lingual employees who, among other things, could report back to the donor. Therefore, without a complex and well-working structure, a CSO is unlikely to receive funds from these vita donors. In general, securing grants from INGOs is in easier, although it still requires rather complex, functioning structures. The percentage of CSOs that meet this high bar is in fact not trivial.

The data shows that about one third of the CSOs in Syria receive funds from EU, USAID, and/or UN, which, as explained above, indicates a complex structure. Some 20% of CSOs who do not take grants from EU, USAID and/or UN, reported receiving funds from INGOs. In other words, these two statistical data suggest that at least half of CSOs that participated in the survey have rather complex, relatively well-functioning departments

3. Finance

Two striking characteristics define the financial operations of surveyed CSOs: **secretiveness and reliance on donations**. Inquiry about previous year's budget is one of the questions that has received the least answers. Out of 767 CSOs surveyed in all areas, 409 revealed the main sources of funding and specified the amount. That is only 53% of all CSOs. Therefore, the remarks here concern only those CSOs that reported their finances and cannot be generalized. It is also important to note that reporting income is a sensitive issue for many reasons. Out of security concerns, privacy policies, or reasons related to their financial policies, some organizations either do not declare their finances or do so inaccurately. Nevertheless, the data offers a number of useful insights.

In government areas, CSOs rely on main donors more than INGOs while in areas outside government control the trend is the opposite. In GoS-held areas, about a quarter of all CSOs reported receiving money only from main donors like EU, UN, or USAID, while another 30% reported that the main donors constitute one of their multiple funding sources. In practice, this means that CSOs rely on UN funds given that USAID does not directly fund CSOs in government held areas, nor does the EU. In contrast, only 4 CSOs reported receiving money directly from INGOs, and some 34 (or 12%) reported that INGOs constitute one of their multiple sources. Some 6% of all CSOs reported receiving funds other Syrian organizations.

Other areas, all taken together (including Dara'a and Quneitra), show an opposing picture. Only 106 out of 518 (or 20%) reported having funds from main donors like EU, USAID, or UN. While 165 or (34%) reported receiving funds from INGOs. Some 50 CSOs, or 10% of the total, reported receiving funds from Syrian organizations. In other words, the data suggests that organizations in government held areas have better access to main donors (UN, in practice) and there is less sub-contracting. In opposition areas, the reliance is higher on INGOs and Syrian organizations who secure funds from main pool of humanitarian funding and then subcontracting to CSOs.

There is strong reliance on donations in all regions. About quarter of all CSOs depend only on donations, and another quarter reported that their first primary source of funding is donations. It is hard to assess whether this reflects the reality. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Islamic principle of zakat (almsgiving), where richer Muslims donate a certain percentage of their income to charity, is the dominant form of collecting private money for aid purposes. Nevertheless, it is important to note that despite high number of organizations who reported to be relying on donations, the reported amount of donation is small in comparison to the official figures of Syria humanitarian response.

Nevertheless, the amount of CSOs that reported relying on donations is simply too high to be ignored. On the positive end, this means that CSOs are very skilled in securing money from outside the main pool of humanitarian finance. This gives them maneuverability in the case of shortage in humanitarian funds. At the same time, however, it raises questions about the share of local CSOs from the multi-billion funds collected in international donor conferences. This concern is reinforced by the very low reported numbers of available financial resources relative to the overall available fund.

The data suggests that the **bulk of the money intended for the Syrian response does not reach the CSOs included in the survey**. As mentioned earlier, 409/767 or some 53% of CSOs revealed their budget in the year that preceded the survey. CSOs have reported receiving some 50 to 70 million USD from the main humanitarian pool fund (excluding donations and self-sustainable CSOs). It is crucial to note that this number may not necessarily reflect reality. Even taking the possibility of inaccurate reporting into account, the number is strikingly low.

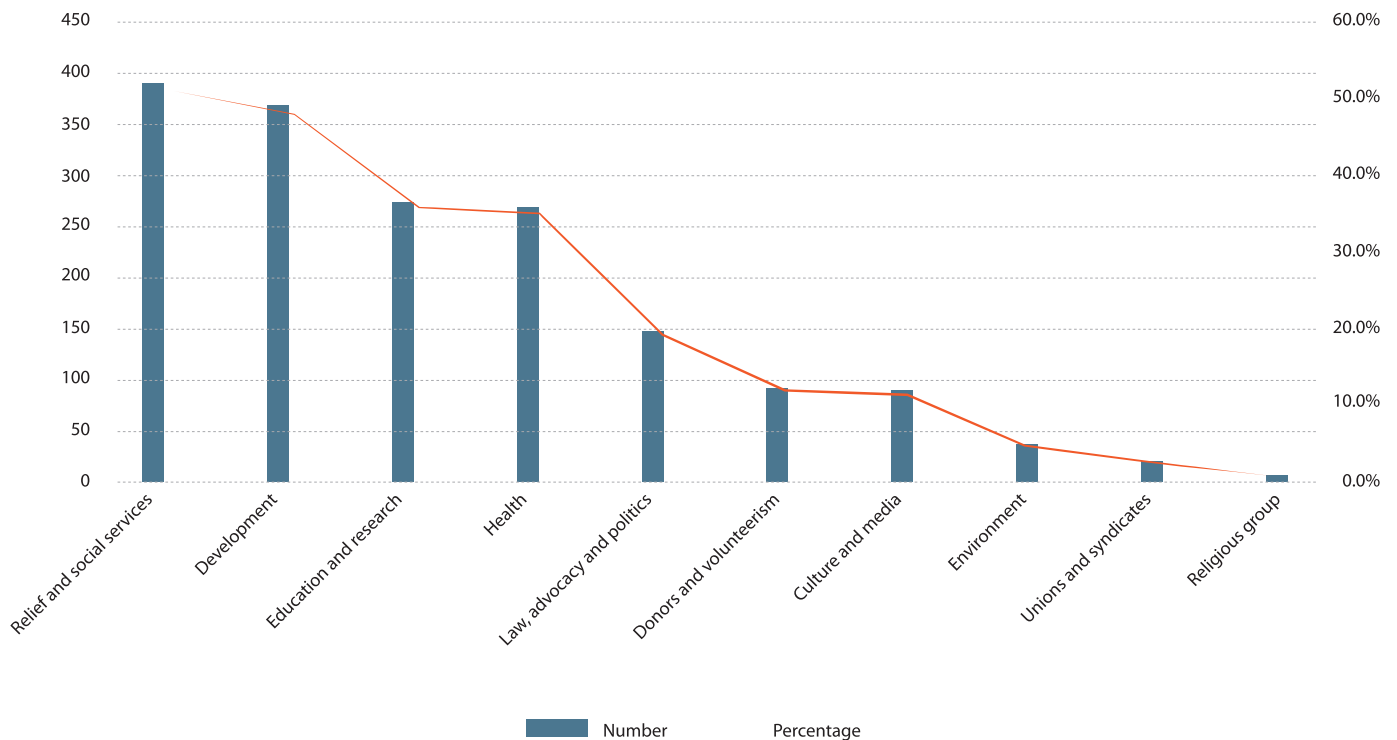
To put the figures in perspective, during the fourth Brussels Conference on “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region” on June 30, 2020, the international community announced a total funding pledge of 5.5 billion USD (€4.9 billion) for 2020. By January 2021, donors had contributed 7.6 billion USD (€6.8 billion) in grants for the year 2020 for Syria and neighboring countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt), exceeding the Brussels pledge by 54%. Syria’s share of this pool of humanitarian funding was 2.5 billion USD (€2.2 billion),¹⁰ which makes 50-70 million US dollars reported by CSOs appear very low.

10 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/financial_tracking_report_no_11.pdf p.4

4. Work domain, targets, and projects

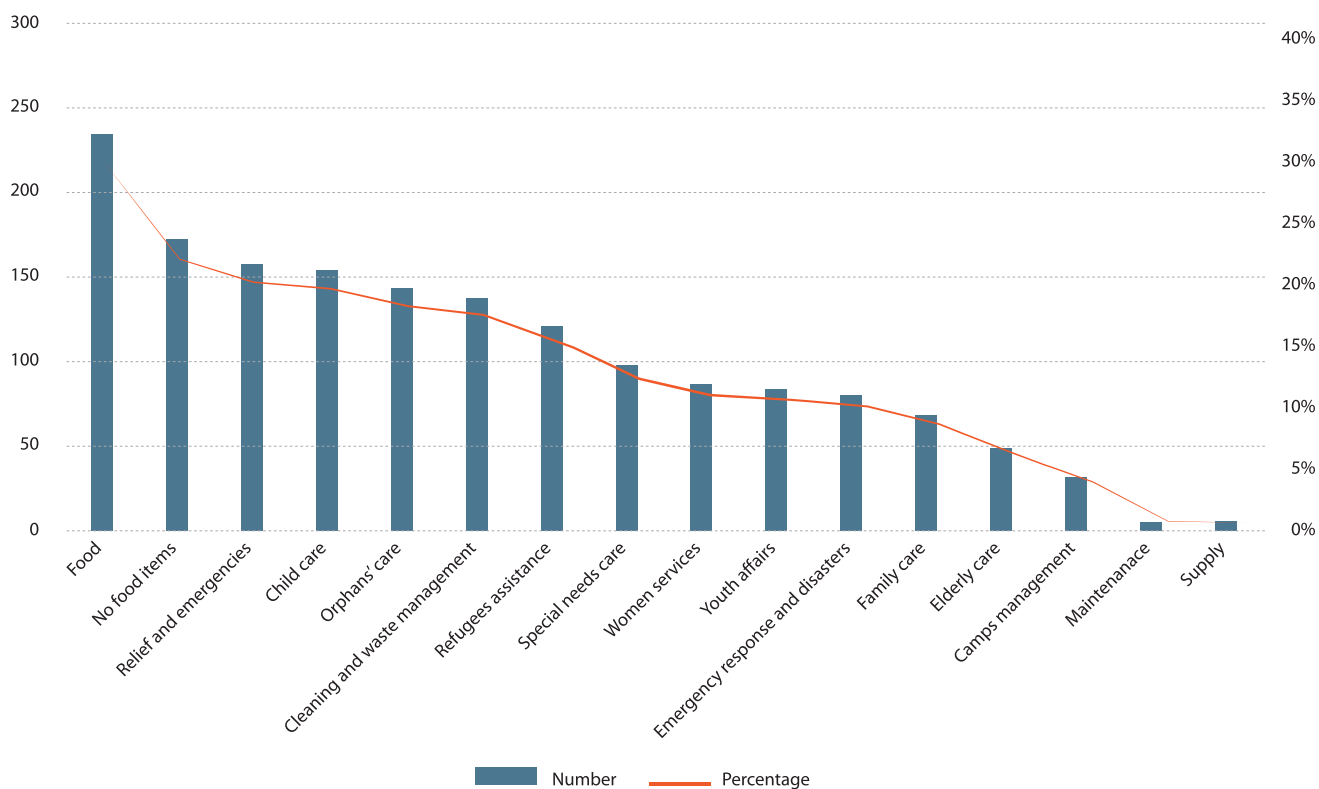
A. Work domain

Syrian CSOs' main work involves the response to basic humanitarian emergencies such as the delivery of food and non-food requirements. Development also constitutes a large portion of the work, especially women empowerment. As (Figure 1) shows, the most common work domain for CSOs is humanitarian aid and social services with 51% followed by development work with 49%, education (36%) and health (35%). The almost equal attention granted to emergency humanitarian response and development reflects the reality of the Syrian conflict. On one hand, emergencies such as displacement and destruction continue to happen, however, given that the war has dragged for more than a decade, CSOs could not ignore the need to work in development too. As one senior humanitarian worker explained, "you cannot shift to development at the expense of basic humanitarian response when there are hungry people. Both types of responses are needed."



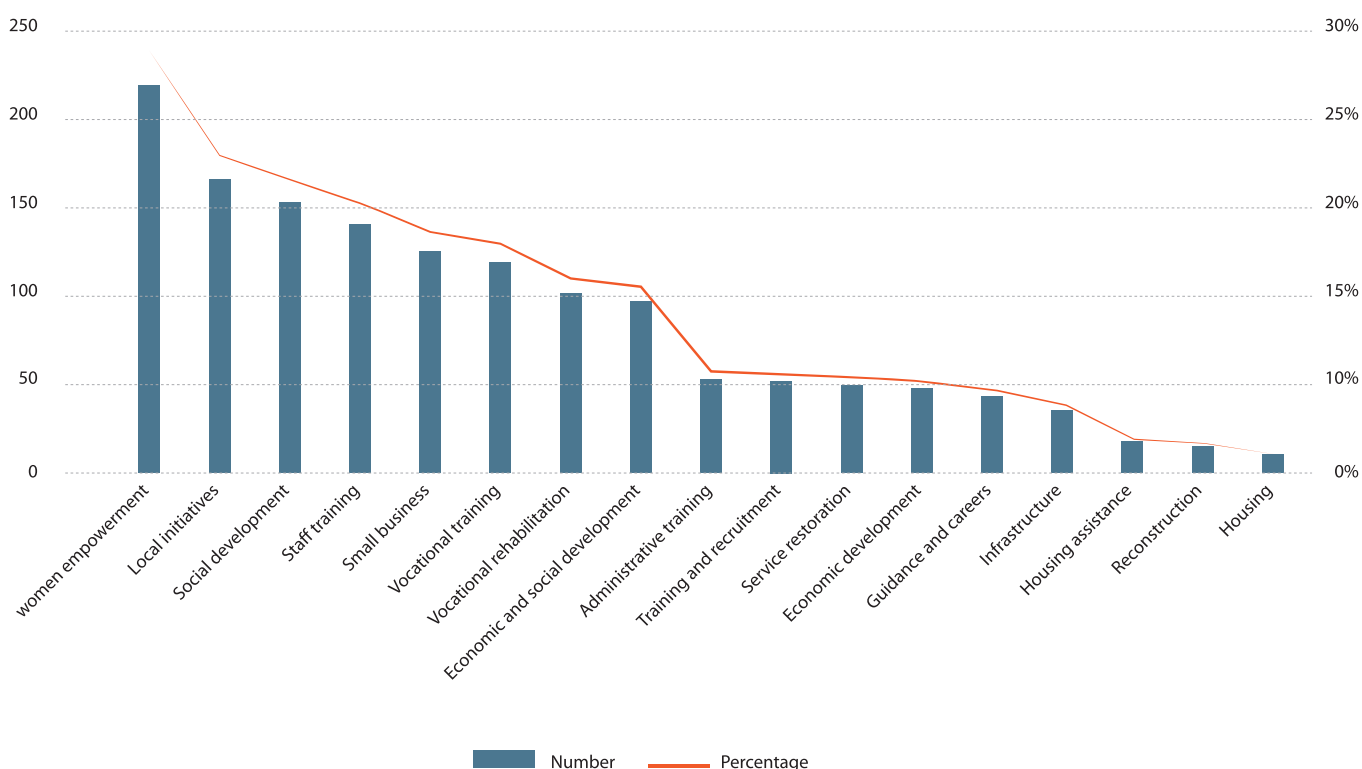
The most common category within the **humanitarian aid category** is related to food (31%) and non-food (23%) aid delivery as well as humanitarian emergency response (21%). This suggests that many CSOs are still responding to needs of an active war situation. Although conflict has markedly receded since the last survey (2018), short-term escalations, bombardment and other types of violence occur regularly. The data also indicates that attention is being given to people who have siled to the vulnerable category due to the war such as widows, orphans, unemployed men, and disabled people, to name a few (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Humanitarian aid and social service, most common sub-work domains



Development by definition tackles more long-term needs than humanitarian aid. In this context, the advancement of individual capabilities has been the main focus of the CSOs. As figure 3 shows, about 28% of Syrian CSOs focused on empowering women, some 20% focused on social development (which focuses on the advancement of the individual in a society) and some 18% on capacity-building in addition to supporting local initiatives and projects, where the individual is also central. In contrast, areas such as **infrastructure, housing, and economic development** have attracted little attention and presumably also little funding.

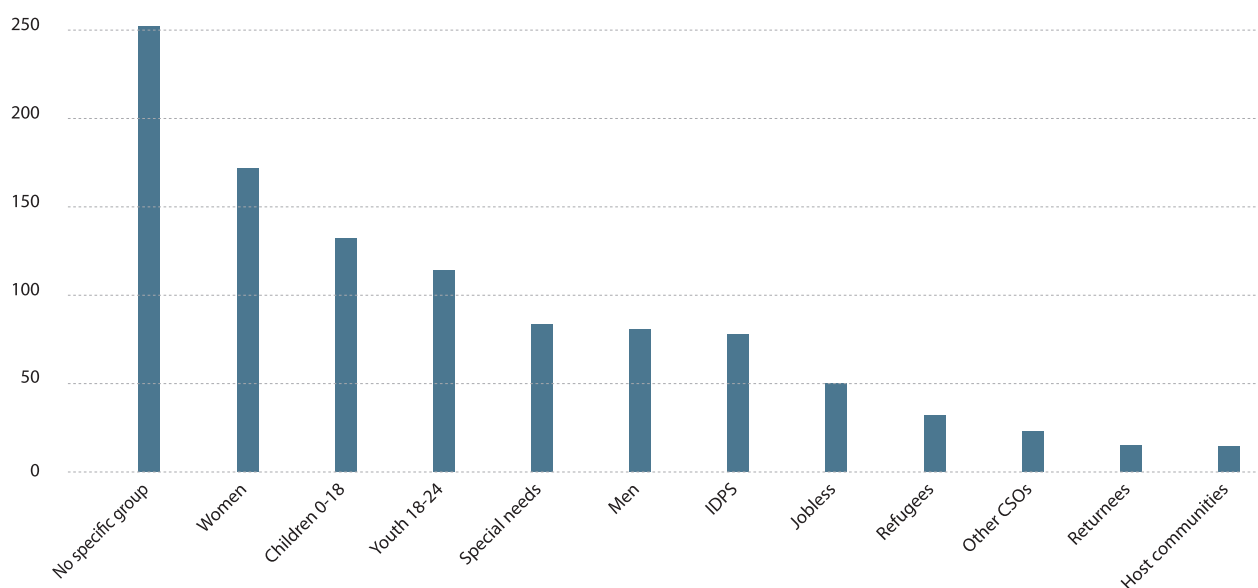
Figure 3: Development, most common sub-working domains



B. Target

Most CSOs do not specify a target group while from those who do, “women” is the most common target group. CSOs surveyed government held areas, some 20% do not have any specific target group, the highest single indicator. In the rest of the areas the percentage of CSOs that do not target specific groups is 47%, again the highest indicator. In other words, some 344 CSOs surveyed in entire Syria-or 66% of all CSOs-do not have target group. The single most targeted group is women with 287 CSO of all CSOs (or 55%) having women as their main, or one of the main target groups. This reflects the strong interest of donors in this target group (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: CSOs per target group of beneficiaries



A possible explanation for why most CSOs do not specify their target group lies in their attempt to increase their chances of receiving funding. By not specifying a target group, CSOs could apply to many different organizations. A humanitarian worker from Raqqa explained that when in such cases the CSO succeeds in winning a project, the core team would hire project-based employees who could implement the project.

C. Project Count, Size, and COVID-19 Response

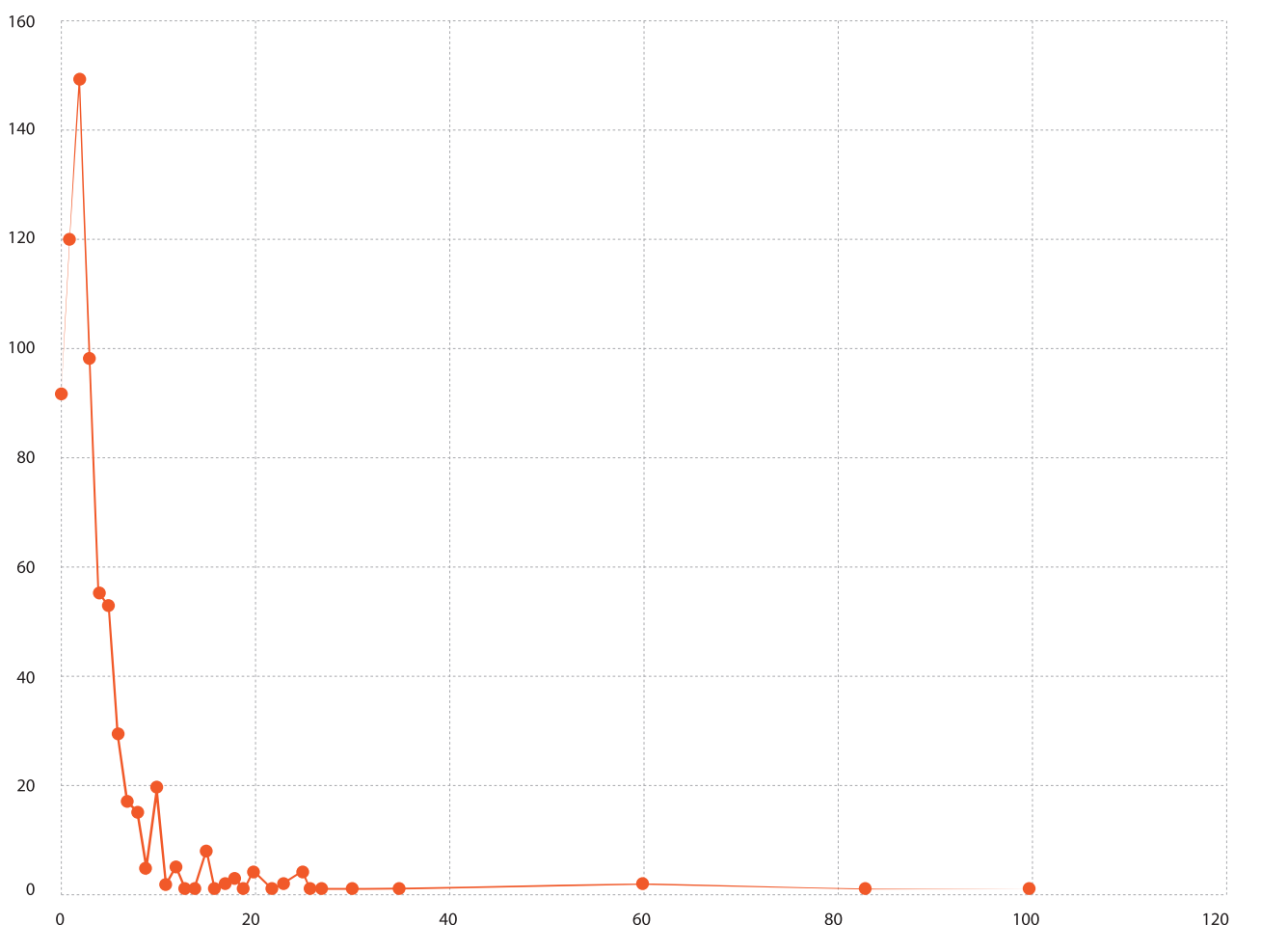
Syrian CSOs implemented some 2800 projects in the year that preceded the survey, which equals to about 4 projects per CSO. 695 CSOs reported the number of projects that they carried out the previous year. 72 did not report. When the number is broken down, however, it appears that CSOs surveyed in government areas (excluding Dara’a and Quneitra) were less efficient than their counterparts in other parts of the country. They implemented some 700 projects (3.2 projects per CSO) while those in other areas implemented 2160 projects or (4.6 projects per CSO). The vast majority of CSOs implemented between 0-5 projects—a trend consistent in all areas. That means some 567 CSOs out of 695 (about 80%) carried out between zero and five projects in the year that preceded the survey.

Another striking characteristic is the number of organizations that reported not carrying out any projects. In areas outside government control some 91 CSOs—that is about 20% of the 464 CSOs that reported—did not implement any project. In the government held areas, in contrast, there was only one CSO that reported having not implemented a

single project. When broken down further, the data shows that about half of the 91 CSOs which did not implement any project were in Deir Ezzor. A possible reason for that could be their young age and inexperience in securing funding or implementing projects given that 75% of all CSOs were found in 2019-2020.

Qualitative and quantitative data from the survey suggest that there was a noticeable shift in CSOs focus after the COVID-19 pandemic hit Syria in March 2020. The Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and State building (CSPPS), a network of CSOs, peacebuilders and others who work in 27 countries including Syria, reported in summer 2020 that Syrian CSOs “saw the scope of their development-oriented projects redirected to emergency plans consisting of the distribution of medical kits, as well as awareness-raising and sterilization campaigns.”¹¹ The data supports this claim. In Idlib, for example, survey participants were asked whether they provided any response related to the pandemic. Out of 152 that answered, 102 responded positively. Though it should be noted that big bulk of this response consisted of awareness campaigns, distribution of masks and sterilization kits, and to a lesser extent distribution of hygiene baskets and disinfection campaigns. Very few supported hospitals and provided self-isolation spaces.

Figure 5: Number of projects implemented by 695 CSOs



11 <https://www.cspps.org/civil-society-role-Syria-COVID19>

Recommendations

To international stakeholders:

- **Humanitarian and development aid:** Donors are encouraged to continue to balance between humanitarian aid meant to meet basic and emergency needs and development aid that invests more in the long term given. In all parts of Syria, both kinds of support are needed.
- **Increase direct funds to Syrian organizations inside Syria:** The data shows that the percentage of funds that reach local Syrian CSOs is trivial in comparison to the overall budget. Main donors (EU/UN/USAID) are encouraged to diversify their benefactors inside Syria and increase their numbers.
- **Practice caution in financing informal CSOs in government-held areas:** While informal CSOs that operate in government-held areas manage to escape the rigid rules and regulations of the central authorities either by working underground or with informal agreement with it, such CSOs undertake considerable risks when receiving financial support from outside. The Government of Syria is highly suspicious of informal networks operating beyond its control. Authorities have tried to eliminate such networks or incorporate them into their ruling apparatus. Caution should be exercised to ensure the sustainability of networks and the security of CSO members.
- **Support internal development and growth:** Most Syrian organizations are very small. To help Syrian CSOs grow, become more professional, efficient, and able to implement large projects, large donors are encouraged to support internal development by, for example, providing core funds. The larger and more professional the Syrian CSOs, the bigger their impact will be on the ground.
- **Fundraising:** Despite the fact that raising funds is an issue for many organizations, very few have fundraising departments. As explained in the report, this could be because this practice-as done in the west-was not common in Syria. Donors who focus on capacity building are encouraged to help Syrian organizations to train and hire fundraisers and establish fundraising departments.
- **Research:** Donors are encouraged to support research on civil society organizations including collection of quantitative data and field-based research which would help map Syrian CSO activity and understand the rapidly changing environment around them. In the humanitarian research domain, donors are encouraged to support and train CSOs to conduct assessments on the impact of humanitarian and development aid, including rigid monitoring and tracking systems.

- **Hubs, not bubbles:** While local and regional hubs are crucial for organizing aid work, large donors, INGOs, and Syrian organizations that are concentrated in large regional or local hubs should be careful to not turn the hub into a bubble, which limits interaction to those physically located in the hub, and where informal relations flourish. This may come at the expense of organizations who do not have easy access to the hub.
- **International donors and local authorities are** highly encouraged to improve the legal environment to facilitate CSO work and support them not only to implement humanitarian and development projects but also think, write about, and advocate for issues related to social change, state-society relations, political power, and authority.

To Syrian CSOs:

- **Diversify sources of finance:** Syrian CSOs are encouraged to continuously look for new sources of finance and diversify them as much as possible. This applies in particular for some 28% CSOs which reported relying exclusively on donations and some 20% percent exclusively rely non-Syrian organizations. While the first category is encouraged to invest in skills and capacities that could help them access international aid fund, the latter category is encouraged to invest in raising private funds locally, from Syrian diaspora or non-Syrian sources.
- **Women empowerment:** The data suggest that Syrian CSOs give a considerable attention to “women” as a target group and “women empowerment.” However, men still dominate the CSO landscape in Syria. This in particular applies to parts of the northwest that is under the control of Turkish backed forces about 50% of the CSOs surveyed have no single woman in their ranks. CSOs are encouraged to develop women empowerment within their own ranks.
- **Research and data gathering:** Syrian organizations are encouraged to work with relevant data, and train staff to do so professionally, given that accurate information helps better plan and execute projects.
- **Advocacy, alliances, and access:** CSOs are encouraged to form alliances and advocate for their cause. In areas outside government control, only one third of the organizations that participated in the survey—that’s 185 out of 518—reported being in an alliance. Such channels for coordination and networking could help CSOs advocate for a common cause locally and internationally. It could also help share experience and better access to funding resources.



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