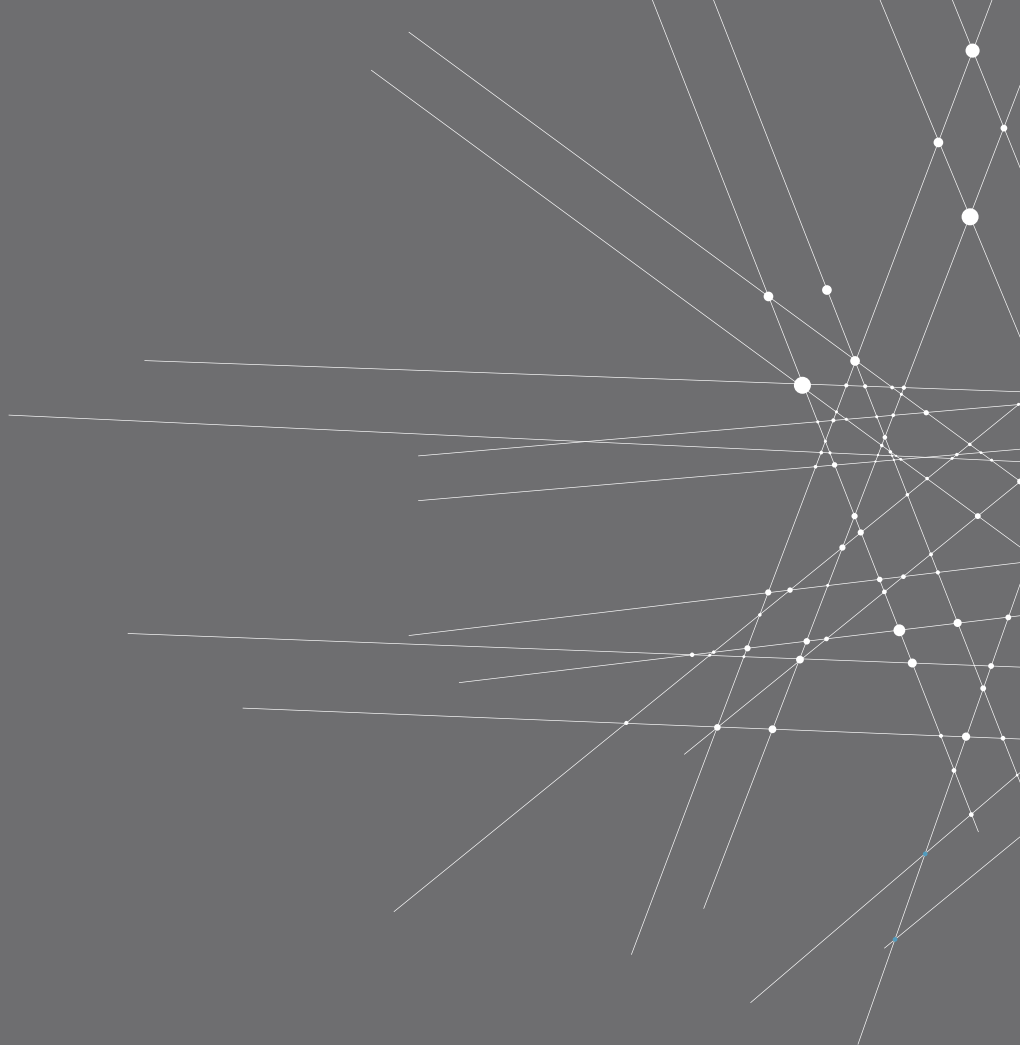مركز دعم المجتمع المدني
Civil Society Support Center

Civil Society Landscape in Raqqa and its surroundings

A report prepared by
The Civil Society Support Center in Raqqa

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Introduction:

The idea behind establishing the Civil Society Support Center (CSSC) stems from the team› unwavering faith in the importance of civil society organizations and their role in building and rehabilitating local communities as a guarantor for stability. Only can the gap in aid, services and rehabilitation be narrowed through a vibrant civil society as these communities gradually move toward societal development, advocacy and governance.

The Civil Society Support Center (CSSC) is an inclusive non-ethnic non-sectarian platform that was founded as a «multi-function hub» that specializes in supporting Civil Society Organizations s(CSO).

The center is a common workspace for organizations and initiatives that are operating in the area, granting them access to various resources that serve and consolidate their capacity to meet the needs of the local community and assume their genuine role in society›s forward momentum.

Work on launching the Civil Society Support Center (CSSC) has been ongoing since the beginning of March 2018. As part of the pre-launch preparatory phase, this report was drafted by the M&E team in order to contribute to the design process of the center's activity program, which is tailor-made to meet both the needs of the civil community in the area and the center›s objectives.

This report strives to evaluate the overall status of Raqqa›s civil society and personnel while taking into account the cultural particularity of the region and its recent history.

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Project Background:

Like the rest of Syria's developing provinces, Raqqa has for decades suffered from marginalization. The province of Raqqa was the first to be free from regime control in its entirety, coming under opposition rule in March 2013. In a bid to meet the pressing need to provide services, a civil society movement began to take shape in the province amid the total absence of any Syrian regime presence. Shortly after, a large number of newly-founded organizations were established and began operating in various fields including rehabilitating basic services, providing societal activities such as psychological and social support, as well as the empowerment of women and vulnerable groups. A large number of local councils were formed in the interim in different cities and towns inside the province, most prominent among them was the Local Council of Raqqa, which served as the most well-established display of executive authority in the region.

This coincided with the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its later expansion towards different regions across Syria. In mid2013, at a time when ISIL was making attempts to grab additional territories, a number of abductions and assassinations of prominent local society figures have led many activists, fearful for their lives and of suffering a similar fate, to either completely suspend all activities or flee to neighboring Turkey.

In early 2014, opposition forces that were in control of the province were forced to retreat under ISIL attacks, which allowed it to overrun large swaths of territories and declare Raqqa as the capital of its state in January 2014. Gradually, all groundwork for civic operations was terminated in the region, save for a small number of groups that continued to work covertly in the province.

In late 2017, as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) made gains in the region, ISIL's hold on power began to diminish, paving the way for the resumption of civil society activities, coinciding with the gradual return of a considerable number of civil workers as stability was slowly being restored. Activists and technocrats like engineers, lawyers and others started establishing a number of organizations and initiatives in order to meet the needs of residents as well as provide various services in the region. Within a few months, the number of local, Syrian and international organizations operating in Raqqa soared to over thirty.

In October 2017, following the liberation of the entire city from ISIL, the Civil Action Forum team began operating in the region by launching a cooperative initiative to support civil society. The initiative brought together representatives of organizations working in the region through public meetings and mini workshops focusing on specific fields of expertise that should be prioritized, in accordance with the orientation and objectives of each CSO as well as through highlighting the needs of the local community. Among some of the most significant results to emerge from the initiative was the establishment of a "tree of needs" in each region that demonstrates areas of intervention, challenges and obstacles facing civil work as well as an analysis of the current situation. The initiatives, suggestions and proposals were included as a basis for the initiative's future work plans and activities.

Based on the outcome of the "Sharek" initiative, the team started working on expanding the scope of its activities in order to ensure the sustainability of the initiative in the long term. Hence, came the idea of a center that serves as an incubator for individuals and organizations working in the region. The CSSC aims to provide a wide range of services that help develop the capabilities of these institutions and build a common civil workspace by opening two hubs, the main center in the city of Raqqa and a sub-center in the city of Al-Tabqa.

Environmental Analysis:

Raqqa

Al-Tabqa
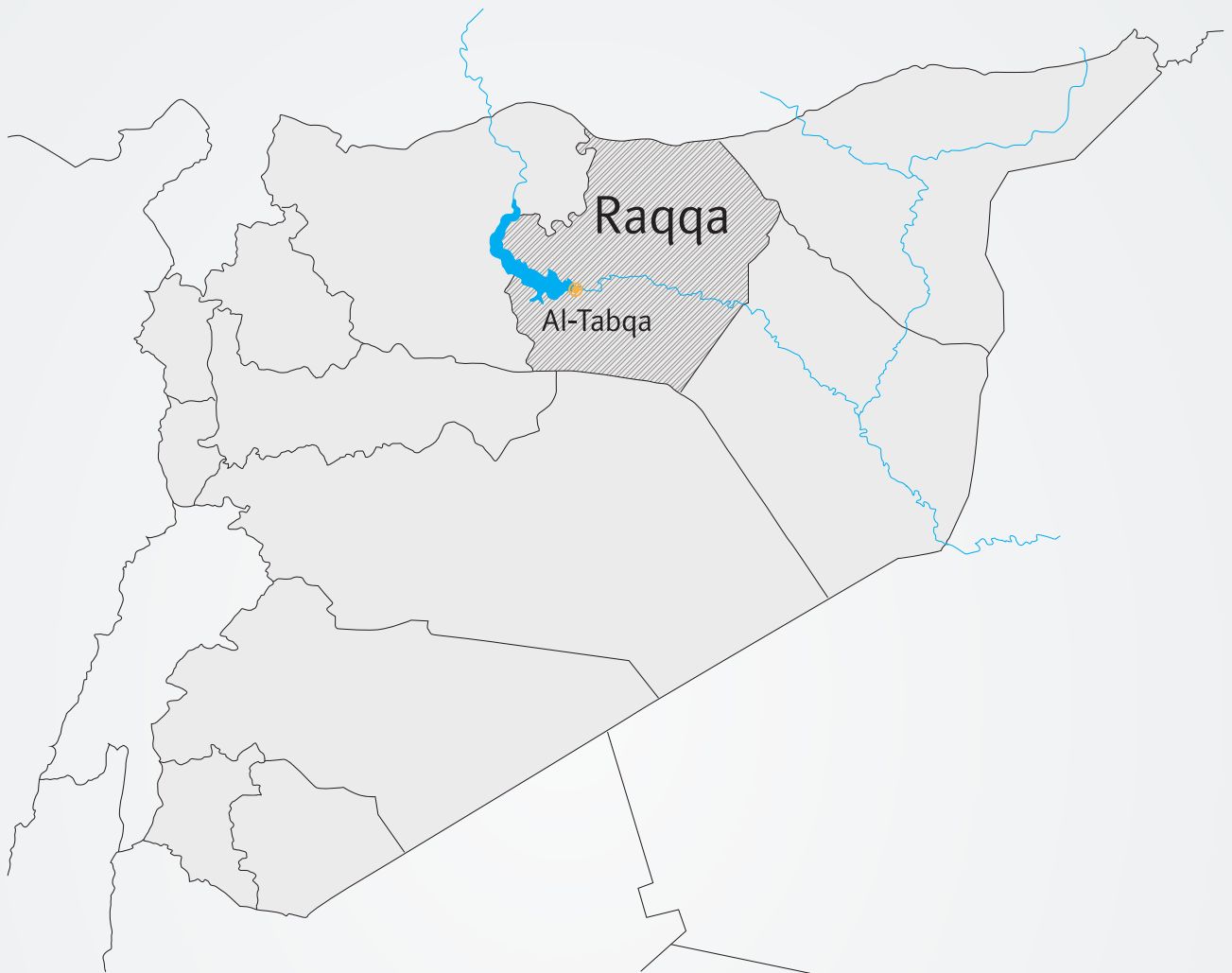
Demographic Data:

Al-Raqqa province is located in north-central Syria on the northern bank of the Euphrates River. It extends north to the Syrian-Turkish border. The population of the governorate, according to the official census in 2004, was 800,000, of whom about 300,000 resided in the city of Raqqa. The total population in the province decreased to around 500,000 in 2017 due to the massive displacement, deaths and migrations that the city›s population has suffered over the years. In addition to the city of Al-Raqqa, the province includes three main population areas: the town of Al-Tabqa and its countryside (about 160,000 in 2004) as well as Tal Abyad and its countryside, the town of Ain-Issa, in addition to other conglomerations made up of villages and towns across the province.

When the city was under ISIL control, a large number of residents fled Raqqa. According to a United Nations report published in February 2018, some 60,000 residents returned to the city after ISIL was driven out of the province. In mid-2017 civil society activists and workers estimated the population of the city of Raqqa to be about 280,000, while the population of the city of Al-Tabqa and its countryside stood at about 175,000.

Political and Security Situation:

The province is currently under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which militarily rule the province, while the "Internal Security Forces" handle security. In terms of the political aspect and providing services, the Civil Council of Al-Raqqa is the official body in charge of the area. The council was established on April 18 2017, and restructured in January 2018 by forming affiliated legislative and executive councils to act as a local government in order to administer the province. The Al-Tabqa area is managed by the democratic civil administration of Al-Tabqa which was first formed in November 2017. both RCC and DCAT are supervised and managed by Democratic Syria Council which represents currently the highest governance entity in the province. The security situation is relatively stable after over six years of continuing deterioration.

Remnants of exploded and unexploded mines, estimated by activists to number close to 8,000, constitute the major security threat to the lives of a large number of returnees in the devastated city.

Economic Situation:

The economy of Al-Raqqa is a market economy based predominantly on natural resources. Agriculture and farming have historically been vital to the province's gross income. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, arable land in 2010 made up 41% of the total area of the province. As a result of fierce battles that took place in and around the province's cities, much of the agricultural infrastructure was largely destroyed, water plants and irrigation pumps were severely damaged, making it impossible to resume any farming activities. Additionally, the unavailability of farming supplies such as fertilizers and seeds was a major factor that contributed to the total disruption of the agricultural sector in the province. Many local organizations and service providers are currently working on rehabilitating irrigation and watering networks across different parts of the province.
The livestock sector is managed by the Livestock Committee of the Civil Council, which is primarily concerned with the rehabilitation of this crucial sector.

The area has been witnessing a boom in reconstruction as residents who fled battles and raging ISIL violence slowly returned to the region over the past few months. However, locals are currently struggling to find building materials in local markets, which are monopolized by a small number of traders and suppliers, in addition to the high cost of supplies and high labor wages.

Technical and Infrastructure Situation:

For their communication needs, locals in the area rely mostly on the Syrian mobile network, however the service is unreliable and has a poor quality of coverage. The only other alternative for residents of the province is to use private Turkish cellular networks especially in the northern areas adjacent to the Turkish borders. Access to the internet is a major challenge for CSOs due to the lack of internet connectivity in the area except for satellite internet, which is an impractical alternative due to the high set-up costs and the numerous permits and licenses required from local authorities (the Syrian Democratic Council).

The shortage of electronic equipment and appliances such as cellphones and laptops, is an additional challenge as well as the high prices of these appliances which is attributed to the fact that sellers and suppliers manipulate market prices which adds an additional burden, since activists already have to pay ludicrous shipping fees to import these items from other areas.

The province's s infrastructure suffered massive destruction due to the damage wrecked upon the region following the ferocious battles that ravaged Raqqa over the past few years. Roads and bridges that connect various areas in the region were destroyed, severing and disrupting movement across different cities and towns inside Raqqa. Water, electricity and sanitation networks were rendered out of service upon sustaining massive damage, burdening CSOs and authorities working on rehabilitation with additional responsibilities as they attempt to restore normalcy in Raqqa and its surrounding area.

Legal Situation:

Organizations wishing to operate in the region are required to obtain a license before engaging in any civil activity. Licenses are obtained from the Bureau of Organizations, an affiliate of the Syrian Democratic Council, which is based in the city of Ain Issa. It takes a period of one to three months to obtain a license which is valid for three months and may be renewed if the organization wishes to sustain operations. This law applies to both local and international organizations.

Report Methodology:

As part of the preparation process conducted prior to the center's launch, the CSSC team met with representatives from 20 organizations in order to better grasp the current state of CSOs that are active on the ground, with special emphasis on identifying their fields of work and specializations that must be focused on and in order to inspect these organizations' needs. These meetings helped identify potential partners and specify the areas in which the CSSC could benefit these organizations. It also helped pinpoint the activities the center could offer in both Al-Raqqa and Al-Tabqa branches. Throughout the evaluation process the team met with 40 CSO members who work in various fields in order to survey their opinions with regards to the needs of civil society and their priorities in terms of services that the center could cover. Data and information cited in this report summarize the results of those meetings.

The Current State of Civil Society :

The region is currently witnessing a vibrant resurgence within civil society as around 20 local CSOs are operating in the area at present. The term local CSOs here refers to civil groups and organizations that were established locally and consist of staff and workers who are native to the area. In addition to those CSOs, there is a number of Syrian organizations that have expanded their area of operation and broadened the scope of their work by opening new offices across Al-Raqqa province. Furthermore, several international NGOs have recently started operating in the area in various sectors by either striking partnerships with local CSOs and providing them with support, or by choosing to operate on the ground through field offices.

Work areas and specialization:

By examining the fields in which the selected twenty organizations currently operate, it is quite evident that there is a high tendency towards focusing on social services and relief, as 15 out of 20 organizations are presently active in those domains. On the other hand, developmental and educational projects as well as research rank second. It is worth noting that a few organizations are active in the fields of advocacy, rights/law and politics, as only two of them concentrate their efforts on those areas. Notably, culture and media are not among the areas of focus for those twenty CSOs. The absence of religious and faith-based organizations should also be noted. (Figure 1).
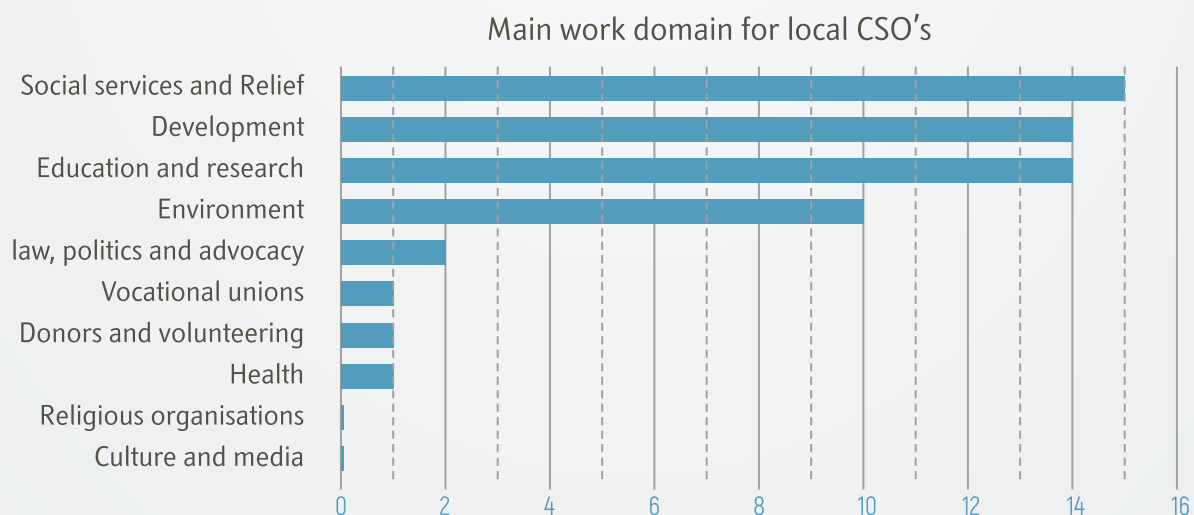
Main work domain for local CSO's

Figure 1: Count of CSO's according to main work domain

Twelve of the CSOs that identified social services and relief as their main area of focus primarily work within the field of child protection, while eleven of them chiefly center their work on women empowerment. The remaining organizations are involved in a variety of social development and relief activities as demonstrated in (figure 2).

Domains of work in social services and relief

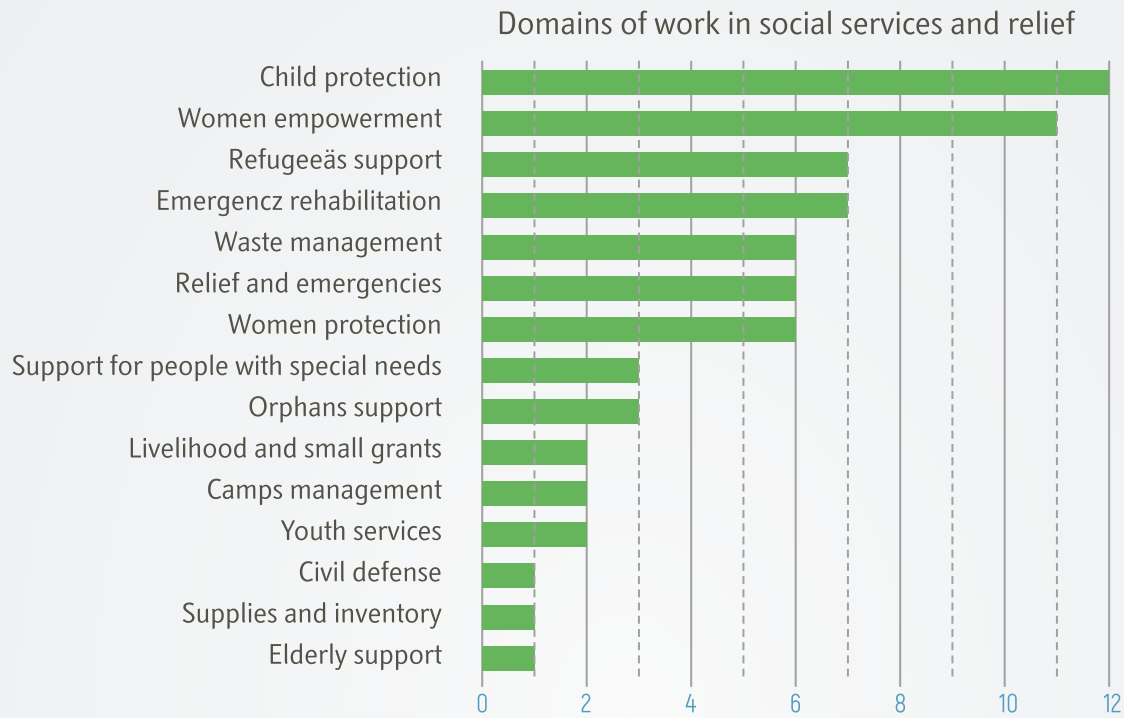| Domain	Count
Child protection	12
Women empowerment	11
Refugeeäs support	7
Emergencz rehabilitation	7
Waste management	6
Relief and emergencies	6
Women protection	6
Support for people with special needs	3
Orphans support	3
Livelihood and small grants	2
Camps management	2
Youth services	2
Civil defense	1
Supplies and inventory	1
Elderly support	1

Figure 2: Count of CSO's according to work domain in social services and relief

However, it should be noted that despite having established their main areas of focus, these organizations lack the vision as to what specific categories of beneficiaries they aim to serve/target. At least twelve of the selected CSOs, as stated by their representatives, do not have a clear or well-identified target audience or certain demographics to whose needs they wish to cater. Meanwhile, the eight remaining CSOs focus their efforts on different groups, mainly women and children (figure 3).
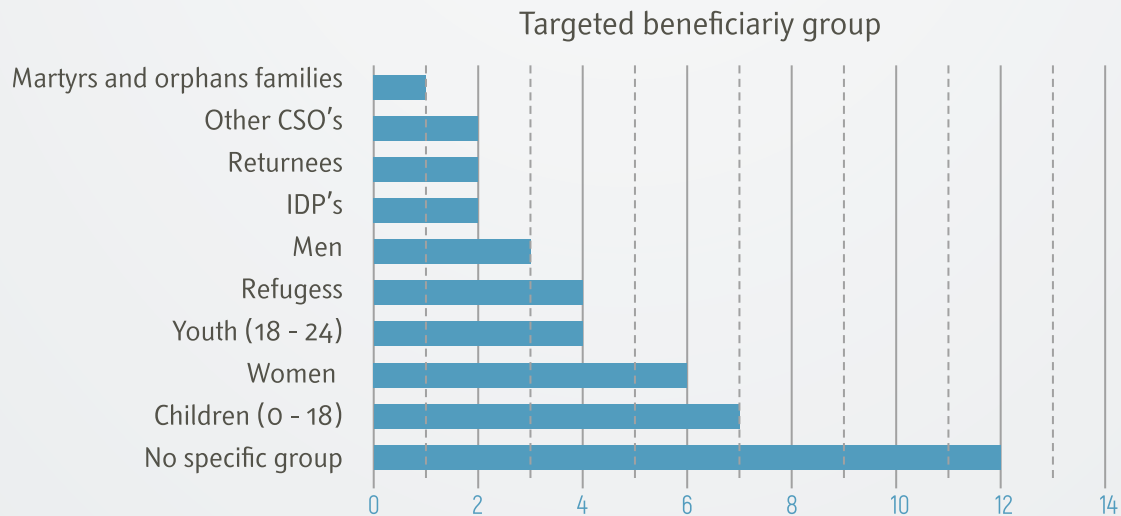
Targeted beneficiariy group

Group	Count
Martyrs and orphans families	1
Other CSO's	2
Returnees	2
IDP's	2
Men	3
Refugess	4
Youth (18 - 24)	4
Women	6
Children (0 - 18)	7
No specific group	12

Figure 3: count of CSO's according to targeted groups

Structure, Size and Activity:

Despite their relative nascency and limited staff, All CSOs that were interviewed during the mapping process appeared to have some semblance of an organizational structure. Each of these organizations constitute at least two departments. Remarkably, these nascent CSOs devote special attention to financial management, as all twenty of the CSOs included in the mapping appear to have a finance department (figure 4). Meanwhile, 90% of the organizations appear to follow certain financial procedures (Figure 5). The lack of interest in program development, research, grants, quality and technical management, is strikingly evident. (Figure 4).
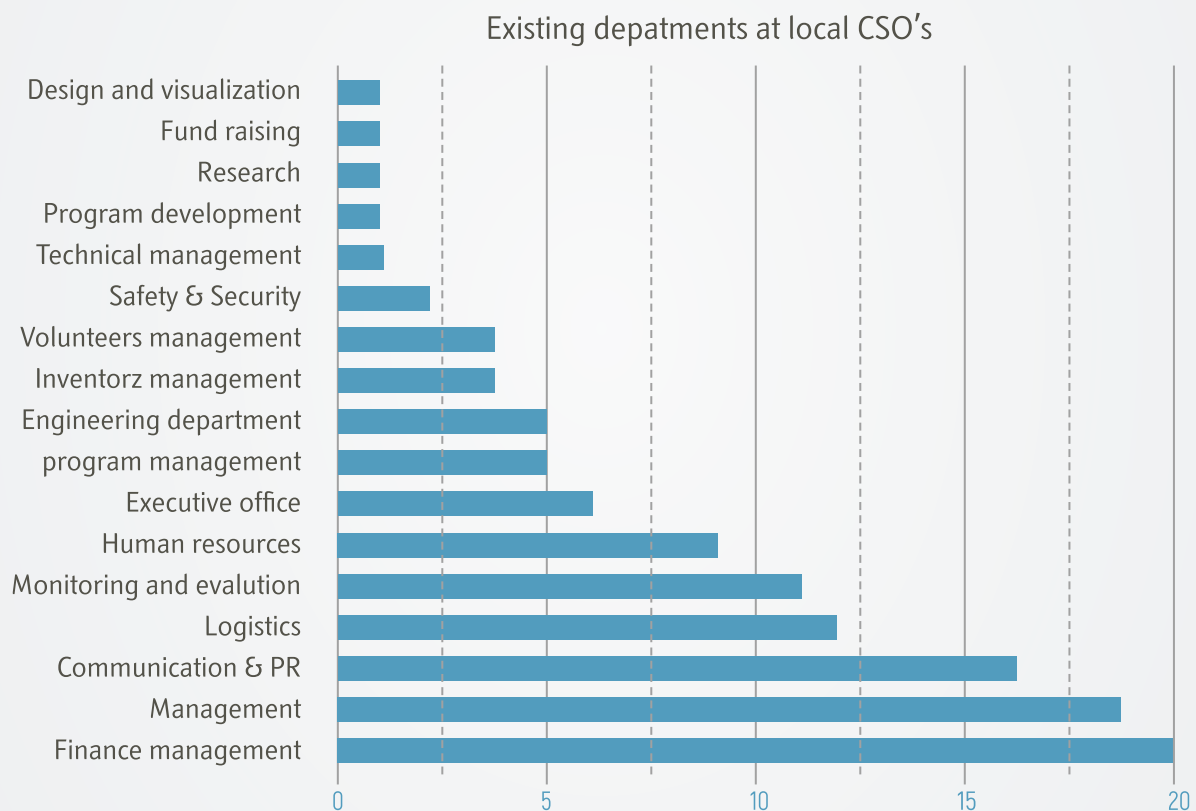
Existing depatments at local CSO's

Figure 4: count of CSO's according to existing departments
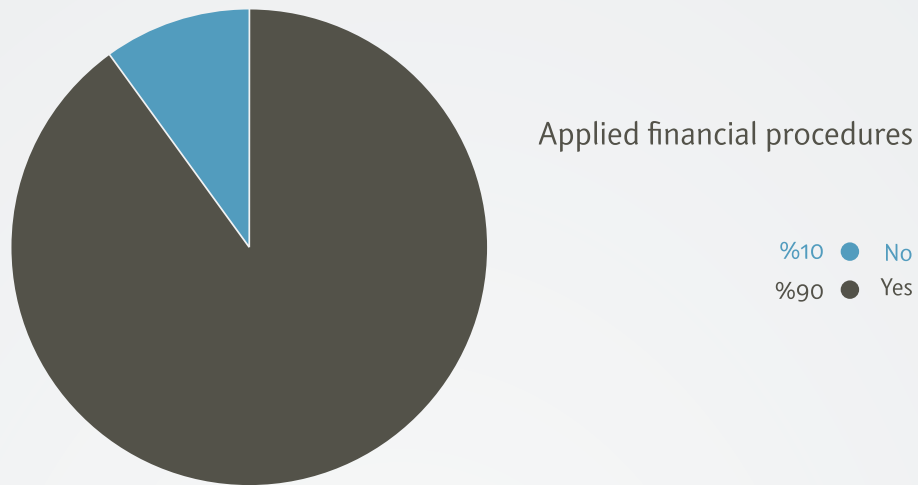
Applied financial procedures

%10 ● No
%90 ● Yes

Figure 5: percentage of CSO's according to presence of applied financial procedures

In terms of the size of staff, the majority of CSOs are small with regards to their human resources. The number of permanent employees for fifteen of the twenty organizations sampled does not exceed 10 (Figure 6). However, many of these organizations primarily depend on volunteers or project-based contractors for the implementation of their projects, which enables them to carry out operations on the ground without possessing a sustainable human resources component in the organization.
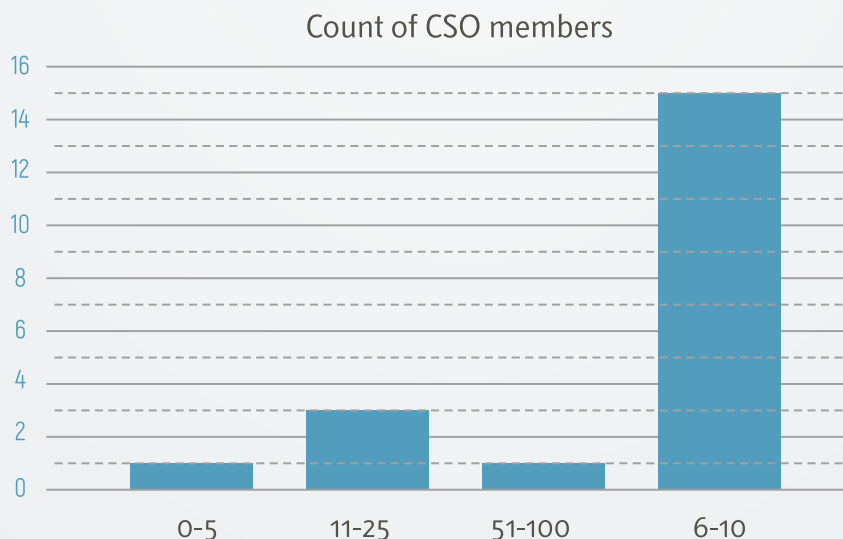

Count of CSO members

Figure 6: Count of CSO's according to number of members

In terms of the number of projects that were implemented last year, the CSOs' relative inexperience is quite evident in that regard, which is undoubtedly due to a general lack of previous experience in the field of civil society in the region until late 2017, which severely undercut organizations' ability to secure opportunities and implement projects. Despite the aforementioned, however, 12 of the 20 CSOs sampled were able to implement at least one project in 2017 (Figure 7).
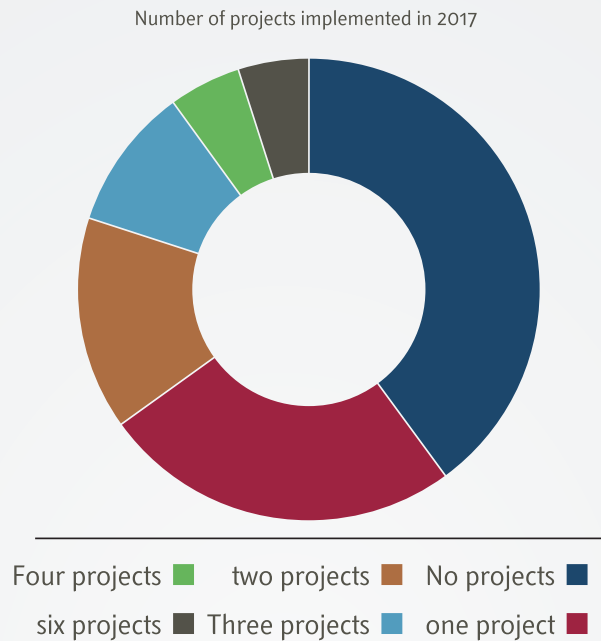
Number of projects implemented in 2017

Four projects ▇   two projects ▇   No projects ▇
six projects ▇   Three projects ▇   one project ▇

Figure 7: count of CSO's according to number of implemented projects in 2017

Needs:

Securing technical equipment and appliances is the main priority for 11 of the organizations included in the mapping, while salaries and operational expenses come second, which is due to the nascency of these organizations and their lack of sufficient funds that ensure the continuity of operations and the sustainability of their organizational structure and its impact on local society. (Figure 8).
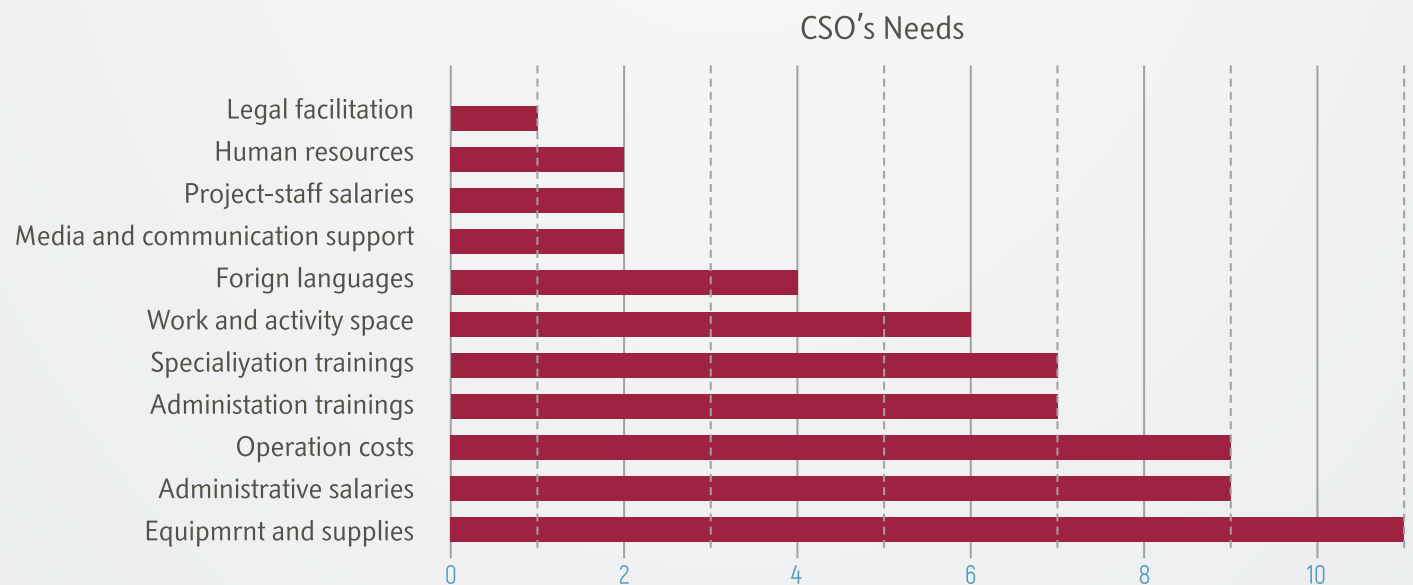
CSO's Needs

Figure 8: count of CSO's according to needs

Furthermore, specialized or managerial and administrative training within each organization›s respective field that focuses on the overall institutional organization is as well among the essential needs for these CSOs, as shown in the figure above. By closely examining the training trends among mapped CSOs, it is evident that the main areas of interest for the majority of organizations fall under the category of project management and monitoring & evaluation (figure 9). On the other hand, it is strikingly evident that there is almost a total absence of training focused on fundraising, despite the fact that most of these CSOs are experiencing financial crises. The lack of interest in fundraising can be attributed to various reasons which include: 1) lacking a clear mechanism to identify priorities, or 2) a lack of experience, competence and capacity on the part of CSO staffs when it comes to identifying the best mechanisms and means of raising funds, 3) their unawareness of the importance of fundraising and their inability to identify the right channels to secure needed funds.

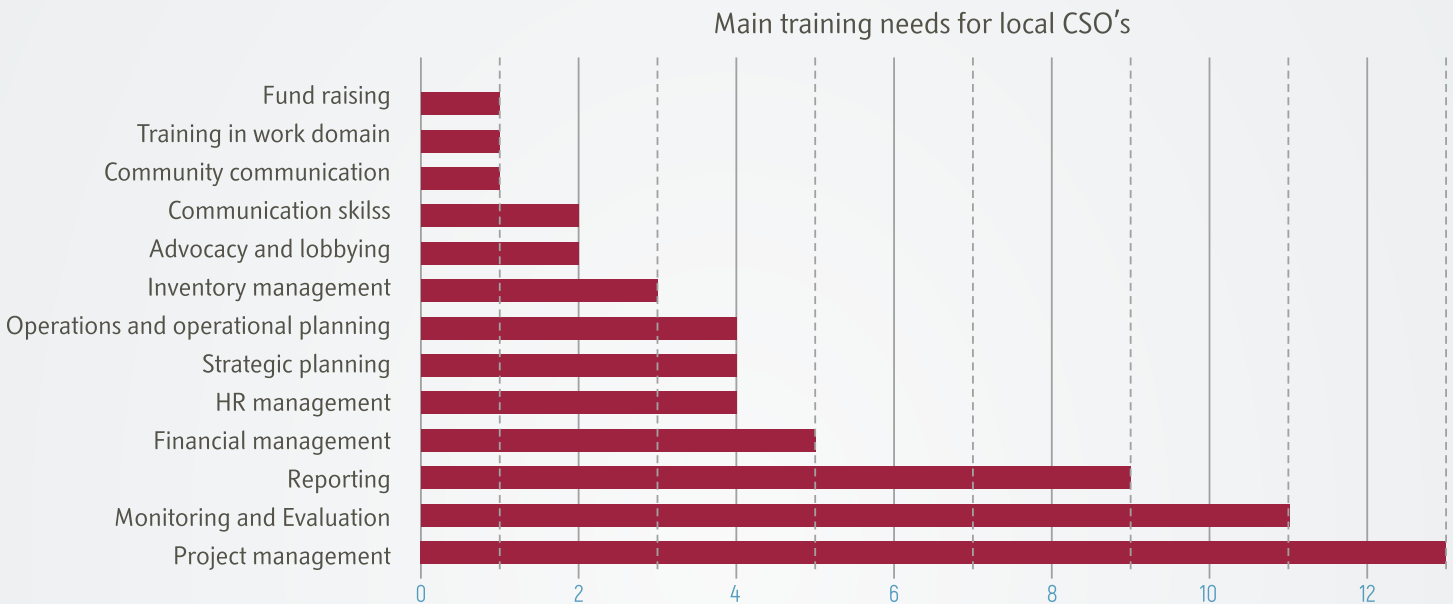## Main training needs for local CSO's

Figure 9: count of CSO's according to training needs

One of the main priorities in terms of training for individuals working in the field of civil society seem to be aligned with those of the organizations on the managerial level. Project management training was cited as a top priority for 29 workers out of 40 of the individuals interviewed for the mapping. Training focused on human resources management came second followed by monitoring & evaluation. Meanwhile, soft skills training such as communication comes last at the bottom of CSO workers' list of priorities as illustrated in (Figure 10).
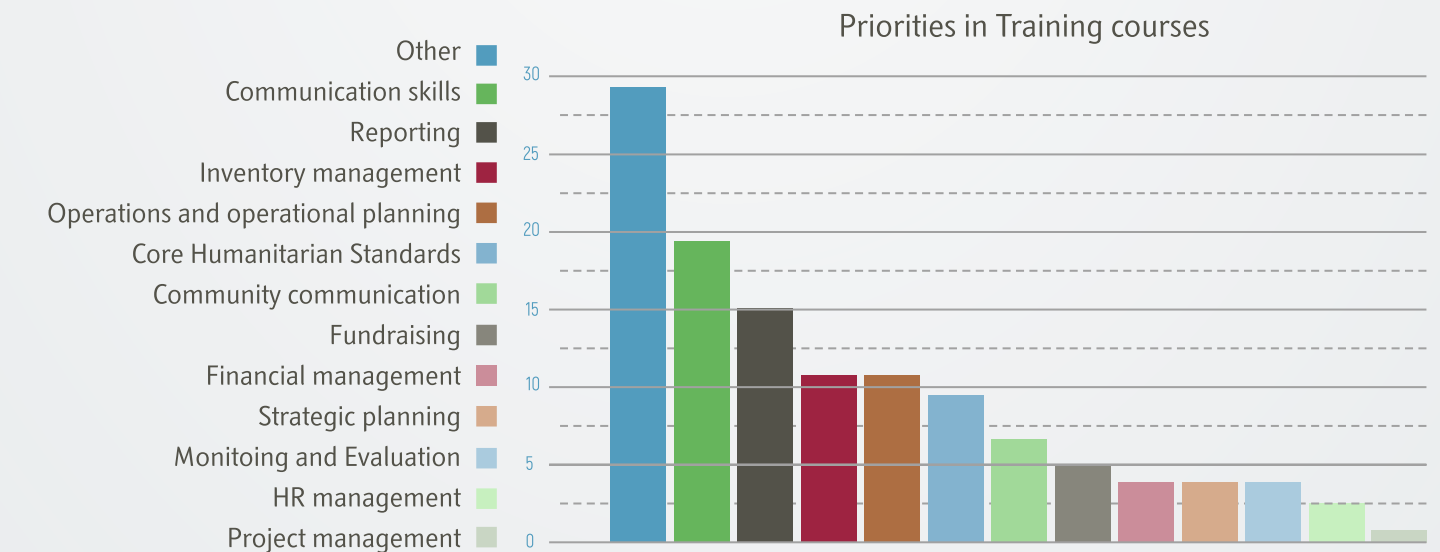
Priorities in Training courses

Figure 10: Trainings to the number of individuals who consider it a priority

Other services:

Of the 40 individuals interviewed in the mapping, 26 workers in the field of civil activity stated that training is at the top of their list of priorities as an area where the center could provide assistance. Followed by programmatic and planning support which includes project development consultation as well as the development of work plans and strategies. (Figure 11).

Priorities in center's services

Training and capacity development
Planning and programatic support
Workshops
Workspace
Technical support
Availability of Internet
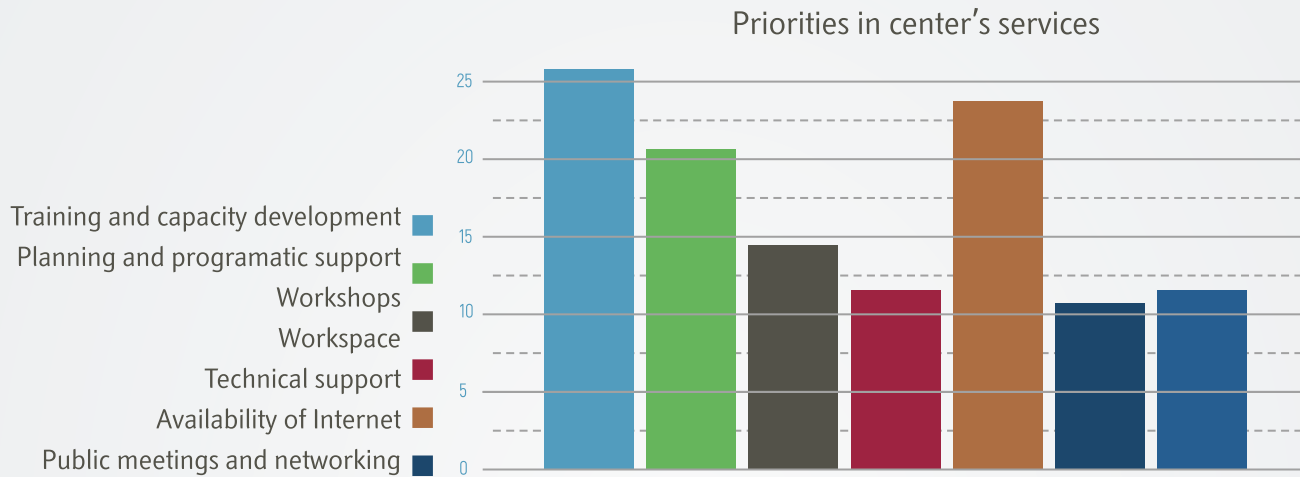Public meetings and networking

Figure 11: Center's services to the number of individuals who consider it a priority

As part of its work plan, the center also aims to provide organizations with the opportunity to hold joint workshops that cover a wide range of issues related to civil society, in order to share their respective crews' experiences in the civil field and develop mechanisms for joint future projects.

According to 28 of the civil society personnel that were interviewed during the mapping process, generating new ideas for potential projects is among the main topics that should be included in any joint workshops in the future. Meanwhile, identifying these CSOs' work areas and specialization fields came second, in addition to holding workshops to determine their organizational needs which demonstrates a strong desire among CSO personnel to optimize their organizations' work approach and operational mechanisms.
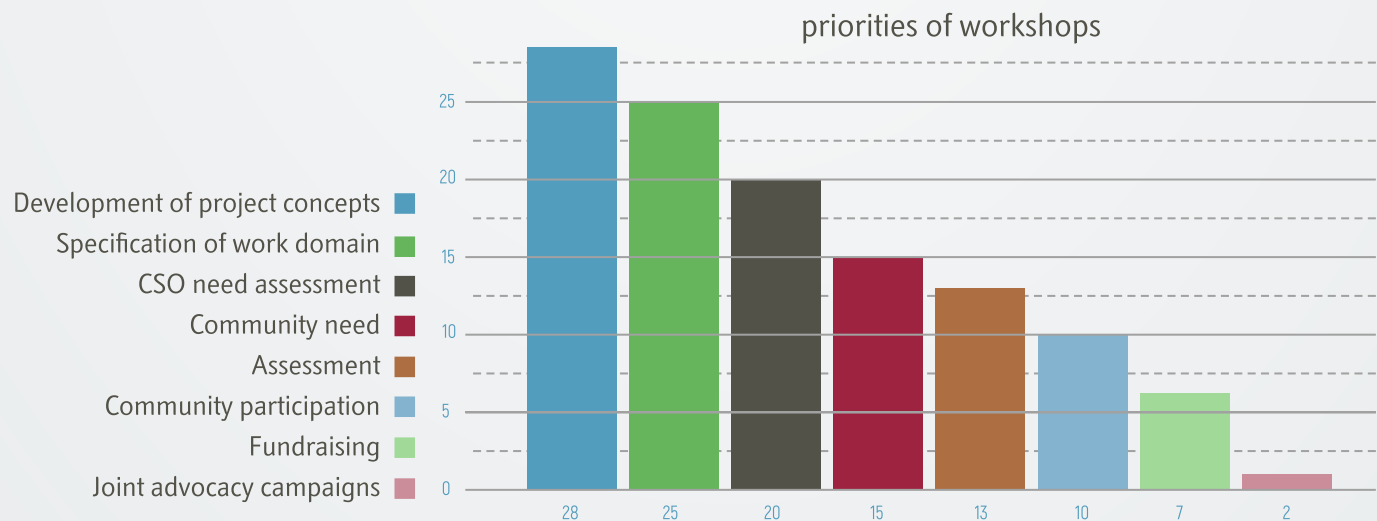
priorities of workshops

Development of project concepts
Specification of work domain
CSO need assessment
Community need
Assessment
Community participation
Fundraising
Joint advocacy campaigns

28   25   20   15   13   10   7   2

Figure 12: Workshops to the number of individuals who consider it a priority

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With regards to technical and educational support, it is evident that a great need for consultation in the area of institutional organization must be addressed while taking into account the fact that, despite possessing simple structures, these nascent organizations suffer from weak organizational hierarchies, and a severe lack of capacity development and skilled staff in various departments.
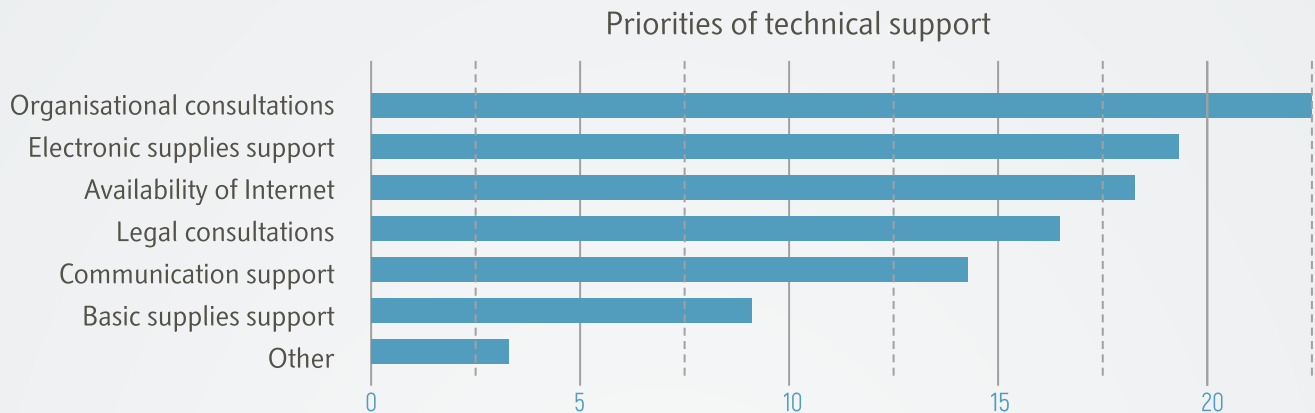
Priorities of technical support

Figure 13: Field of technical support to the number of individuals who consider it a priority

As per the above figure, what could be surmised is that there is a pressing and undeniable need to provide these CSOs with a well-functioning stable internet connection. Addressing this demand efficiently would mean overcoming obstacles that face both individuals and organizations such as high service fees and the need to obtain permits from local authorities. According to members of CSOs interviewed for the purpose of this mapping, being provided with a stable internet connection would further allow them to establish contact with international NGOs and donors, as well as help improve ties with local CSOs that operate in different areas of the province as otherwise keeping in touch with them would be costly due to expensive transport expenses.

Additionally, this emphasis on internet connectivity reflects an awareness and a commendable interest among civil society workers towards networking and coordinating with their peers from both local and international organizations. According to 23 CSO staff members who were interviewed, the availability of internet would contribute to providing them with more opportunities to widen the scope of their work, in addition to allowing them to further access different sources of information from training programs to references, as well as help them reach out to others and promote the activities of their respective organizations. (Figure 14).
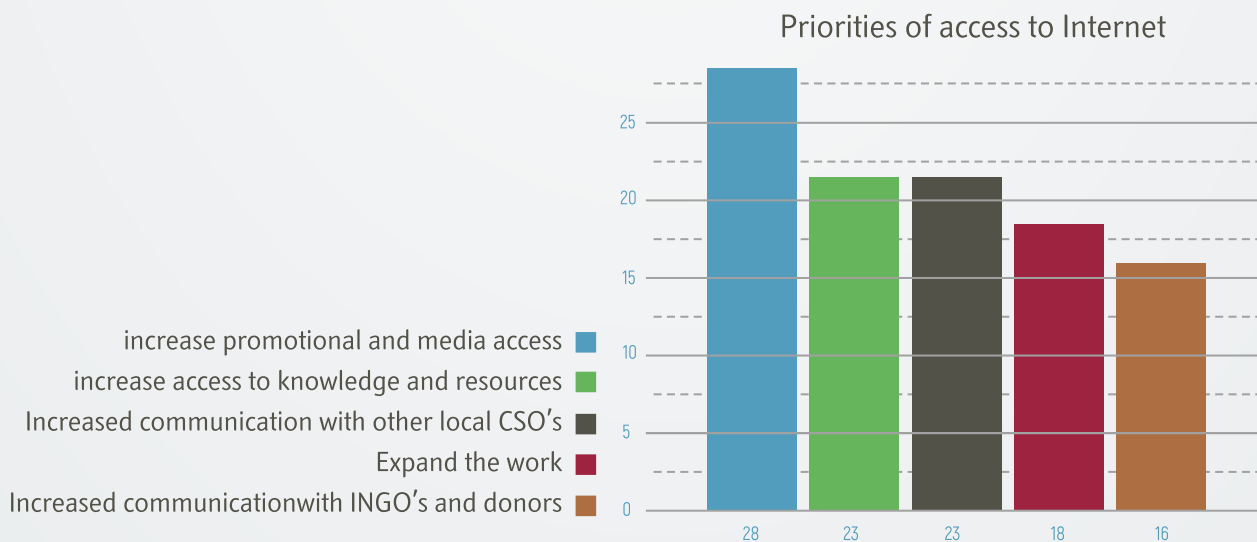
Priorities of access to Internet

Figure 14: Use of internet to the number of individuals who consider it a priority

CSSC Response Plan:

Based on the previous data and in line with the center's objectives and workplan, the CSSC activities are to be designed and oriented towards working with partner CSOs and their staffs on the following aspects:

Offer training programs tailored to meet CSOs' needs with a special emphasis on project and human resources management as a core mission.

Supplement basic training with additional courses focused on advocacy and basic humanitarian standards of quality and accountability.

Connect partner organizations and their staffs with networks of specialized experts to provide them with technical and intellectual support as well as advise on institutional organization to respond to the reality of nascent organizations and support them to be able to carry out the tasks assigned to them by the community.

Raise awareness about the importance of establishing administrative structures and institutional hierarchies as well as consider the important role of non-core departments.

Develop human resources and financial policies in order to qualify organizations to expand and increase their operational capacity through the development of organizational structures and human capital.

Suggestions:

Emphasize the need to work with local CSOs through cooperative workshops in order to identify areas of work and specialization, taking into consideration target groups and local community needs.

Work in cooperation with partners and stakeholders on raising awareness regarding the importance of participatory approach and community participation in identifying operational priorities and methods.

Build and develop channels of communication and cooperation between local and non-local organizations, especially those working in relevant fields, to avoid competition and conflicts of interest as well as encourage the sharing of expertise and resources to ensure the maximum benefit for all involved, and increase the overall efficiency of civil work.

Cooperate with local authorities in order to facilitate and speed up registration and legal licensing procedures.

Encourage international NGOs and donors to grant local organizations more freedom and independence in terms of their operational approach and chosen projects, taking into account the needs of local communities when designing projects and grants.

Conclusion:

The data included in this report offers a clearer view of the current landscape of civil society in the province of Raqqa which is marked by the enthusiasm of CSOs and civil workers. This eagerness is quite evident in the dynamic way these organizations and workgroups have been formed, their reliance on volunteers as well as their desire to consolidate their efforts. However, most of these newly-established organizations aren›t yet sufficiently equipped in terms of their institutional and organizational capacities and capabilities, and they›re in a dire need for technical, operational, educational and financial support. Providing these CSOs with support programs that help institutionalize their work approach in a way that ensures sustainability and allows these entities to grow and respond efficiently to the current needs and adapt to the fast paced changes on the ground in Syria after seven years of conflict.