Personal Motives and future perspectives of civil society workers
Paper based on survey of civil society workers in NES
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Introduction:

The present context of civil society organizations' work in Syria cannot be understood without historical contextualization. In fact, civil society is a relatively modern concept that only emerged after 2011 for multiple reasons, most importantly the absence of political life in Syria. Consequently, the civil society experience has faced and continues to face multiple challenges and issues related to the form and substance of its work. This context applies to all Syrian regions and cities, including north-eastern Syria which continues to face numerous challenges and issues at different levels due to the political changes and successive military interventions during the past ten years, which in turn affected the work of these organizations.

Based on that, and as part of a research project by IMPACT that builds on a survey of civil society workers covering several topics, each including a set of questions, along with some interviews conducted in Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, and Hassakeh, this study aimed to build a more accurate understanding and perception of civil society's actual space and characteristics from its workers' point of view. Understanding this society's characteristics might call for addressing them from several aspects, including understanding the reasons that contributed to the different personal motives for working with CSOs, investigating the factors that distinguish these motives, and studying how this affects the workers' future perceptions as well as their actual attitudes towards these CSOs.

Personal motives for civil society workers:

In response to a question about those motives, humanitarian response was listed as the first motive to work with CSOs according to the survey data with 47% of responses, as the humanitarian and developmental situations the region continues to face created this need. In addition, the workers' belief in the importance of societal change and spreading citizenship values and civic culture was also listed. This was shaped through collective awareness over the course of 11 years that pushed towards adopting these principles and recognizing their importance. The need to establish an incubating civil work environment that believes in these principles thus became urgent, particularly in light of the disappointment that accompanied the political process and subsequent military interventions, leading some to perceive civil work and the change it creates as the way out. According to a local organization's CEO in Qamishli:

"Civil work was our consolation for the failure of political action. In fact, it aimed to try to mend what was destroyed by the political process and military interventions. Today, many of us believe that the solution will start within these organizations and through their workers who believe in human rights first."

According to the study, the motive to learn and acquire knowledge was just as important as the former, with 16% of respondents agreeing that the various sectors of civil work provided job opportunities mainly based on learning and knowledge production and transfer. This provides the frustrated Syrian youth who were forced to drop out of their undergraduate education, with this opportunity. CSOs addressed educational problems by trying to find relevant solutions either through focusing on expertise and the desire to participate in societal change and gain knowledge or by building a career that would later enable them to establish local civil work with others. A local organization's employee in Raqqa noted that:

"Working with CSOs is free from the limitations of bureaucracies rooted in government work, providing us with new opportunities and hope for learning and being more productive."

Participants in the study considered access to a suitable and relatively stable income a motive, with 7% of the respondents, given that most of these organizations' workers previously worked in other professions that were somehow affected by the political or economic situation in particular. CSO, thus, represented a type of alternative to other workspaces for their employees, providing new opportunities with more advanced and open titles and contents, along with an equally important consideration reflected by the relatively stable income able to bridge the gap between the high cost of living and the deteriorating economic situation. This was confirmed by a local organization's employee in Deir Ezzor:

"I often consider finding a financially safer job, although returning to my main profession would be very challenging as I have been away for years. CSOs are a double-edged sword; they do not guarantee your continuity, but keep you hanging in many ways. You cannot easily move on to another job."

Accordingly, many are trying to secure a side job or establish a private business that protects them from the risk of losing their income due to suspension of the project. However, the majority notes that this will not prevent them - according to the study - from trying to find alternatives that enable them to stay within this work environment that fosters development and knowledge and plays a key role in inciting a societal intellectual change that improves life in the regions where they live.

Future perspectives:

The study revealed that the previous motives are among the main factors that contribute to shaping the future perceptions of workers in CSOs in the three regions we have mentioned. According to the study, some agreed that their involvement in civil work is temporary for different reasons, the most important of which is the lack of job security, according to 47% of respondents in Deir Ezzor, 45% in Raqqa and 46% in Hassakeh. Indeed, the work of organizations is governed by short-term projects and funds, and some work without employment contracts, hence triggering continuous unemployment concerns. Another reason is the organizations' challenge to carry on in the face of political, security, and military changes witnessed by the region in addition to the absence of a safe and stable environment, which greatly impacts these organizations' activity and work. They may be suspended as a result of political-military threats leading them to suspend their work, necessarily impacting their job security. One of Raqqa's civil activists communicated this by saying:

> *"Our work sometimes stops or is suspended as a result of a tweet by a political official or head of state, as was the case when President Trump tweeted that he was withdrawing his forces from the region."*

The intervention of de facto authorities is also a major challenge, as they continue to interfere, violate and impose rules and limitation to CSOs work to varying levels, but in ways that violates human rights and international conventions. That has prompted many civil activists to leave or refrain from civil work, this is also reflected by the high percentages of respondents in all three regions who agreed that security risks constitute their major concern for working with CSOs (25% to 50% of respondents). In addition, the restriction of donor policies also adds another challenge to civil work in NES, due to political polarization and the imposition of certain agendas that contradict the principles of civic action and the workers in this field. Among others, these factors may raise the concerns of civil organizations' workers for their safety and professional future.

As the study shows, others indicated that engaging in civil work is not temporary but rather linked to their professional future. This is the phase of establishing and accumulating experience as well as forming a social base to later build on. The conflict has not ended and its social, psychological, and economic effects will last for years. Therefore, the future necessitates transitioning to a deeper phase that is more understanding of the context and needs of society, applying ideas appropriate to the Syrian reality, and avoiding the gaps and problems experienced by the civil work experience.

On the other hand, the study attempted to understand the impact of working in CSOs on the workers' social life, as well as the way society interacts with this work. According to the survey, 50% of respondents in Raqqa, 32% in Deir Ezzor, and 18% in Hassakeh agreed that engaging in civil work positively/negatively affects their personal and social relationships. On the one hand, some faced mistrust from their surroundings due to the novelty of this type of work in society and people's misconstruction of its essence. On the other hand, some believe that these organizations support outsider thoughts, which exposed workers to rejection and questions from the environment, in addition to the nature of the workers' wages which raises questions about their entitlement. However, in the context of a relatively recent civil work context, this is inevitable and more stages lie ahead to accept civil work and use it to ignite a cumulative awareness that lays the foundation for fundamental change at all levels. Undoubtedly, the Syrian women's employment and the demand for their civil, social, and political rights and empowerment was one of the most prominent issues that faced many societal challenges, in an attempt to rebuild their relationship with society. An employee working in the cultural sector in Qamishli stated the following:

> *"As we started working, we faced difficulties and rejection from society regarding the new concepts we put forward, especially involving women in civil work and prompting them to politically empower themselves. However, thanks to cumulative work, women have become more powerful and present in various areas of life."*

On the other hand, some believed that these spaces had a positive impact on their social life as they contributed to creating communication systems that are more open to others away from ethnic and tribal considerations, and introduced them to other cultures from geographical areas outside Syria. A female worker in a local civil society organization in Raqqa stated the following:

> *"Civil society organizations provided new common grounds as many of us have transcended the various disagreements and differences that have been entrenched over the years. We have also opened up to new relationships with people from other geographical areas and become more receptive. It is an opportunity to reshape our national and social identity."*

Conclusion:

In view of the foregoing and the study results pointing out differences and disparities in the workers' motives and future perceptions in response to different questions aimed at addressing part of their issues related to civil work, it is safe to say that civil society experience, including its advantages and disadvantages, remains an ongoing experiment with a specificity that varies according to the place, time, environment, and external influencing factors. Accordingly, differences in workers' personal experiences and their varying attitudes are somehow subject to the above-mentioned factors.

On that basis, this difference must constitute a common ground we can build upon by reconsidering these institutions' work mechanisms from several aspects, most notably addressing their employees' security and legal situation seriously and granting them the opportunity to participate in decision-making. That would help alleviate their concerns and future apprehensions, reduce their feeling of alienation from the work environment, and enhance their sense of belonging to the principles of civil work. It is equally important to continuously provide them with skills and training that will help them perform their tasks more effectively and establish their own experience in a way that enables them to understand the needs of the local community and its social, political, and economic contexts in the future.