



Priorities and decision making: Determinants of localization of
Aid in Northeast Syria
Research Paper

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I. Introduction

The civil society landscape in Northeast Syria is dynamic with a notable increase in both local and international actors. A growing number of active local civil society organizations (LCSOs) and an increased interest from international actors (INGOs and donors) in the region, along with external factors shape the map of actors. Because of this, a closer look is necessary to best understand the context to engage in more relevant programming that would reduce suffering and respond to needs of local communities.

This research paper looks at civil society actors in the region and their relationships with the aim of understanding the overall civil society environment in Northeast Syria. It starts by looking at the factors by which civil society actors define their work priorities and the role of donors' agendas in defining the type of programming in the region. It then moves on to examine the dynamic of relationships between LCSOs and INGOs as well as other stakeholders (namely donors), specific bodies within the local authority and the Northeast Syria forum (NES Forum). The research also touches on the existing administrative framework introduced by the local authorities for LCSOs and INGOs to operate. Moreover, the paper sheds light on the challenges facing LCSOs in the region and the steps INGOs and donors can take to ensure the localization of aid. Particular attention is given to women-related issues. The paper then provides a list of actionable recommendations for the various stakeholders.

II. Methodology

This study started with extensive desk-based research on the civil society scene in Northeast Syria within the larger context of Syria as a whole. Then, a plan for qualitative research was devised to target different stakeholders in the region. Consequently, the study compiled results from qualitative interviews conducted with representatives from LCSOs, INGOS, donors, local authorities and the NES forum. Three LCSOs' representatives were interviewed, two of which were from Raqqa with one of them representing an organization focusing on women-related projects, and one from Deir Ezzor. Three officials from INGOs were interviewed representing their respective organizations as well as three representatives of major donors. Two interviews were conducted with officials from the local authority and one interview was carried out with a representative from the NES forum. The interviews were semi-structured with interview questions sent out to the key participants beforehand. The interviews were carried out in July and August 2021.

III. Local CSOs not in the driver's seat

Civil society priorities in Northeast Syria (NES) are largely defined by economic and social contexts which vary from one area to another. Controlling power shifts have an impact on the changing dynamics of civil society in the region. Another important factor that influences the way needs and priorities are defined is the available resources and their distribution. All of these factors come to play alongside the influences from different civil society stakeholders. These are mainly LCSOs, INGOs, donors, the Northeast Syria forum and the local authorities. This chapter will explore the influence each of these stakeholders have on setting priorities in NES.

LCSOs, INGOs, donors, the NES forum and the relevant bodies from the local authorities carry out studies and needs assessments which are then used to design programs and projects. This, however, involves details related to dynamics between different stakeholders. For instance, an LCSO in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor said they carry out needs assessments in two different settings: either when a donor asks them to do so as a prerequisite to commencing a project or when the organization is not operating or carrying out any projects. In the case of the latter, the LCSO carries out a general needs assessment for the region to increase its own understanding of what the needs are or what to look for. In this case, the results of the needs assessments will either be kept in the LCSO's archive or shared with the donors. However, despite the importance of such understanding of the region, according to an LCSO interviewed as part of this research, donors will eventually carry out the projects as they see fit. LCSOs in general carry out needs assessments within their area of specialty. They potentially also work with their partner INGOs on defining priorities. Similarly, INGOs carry out initial needs assessments and they have to solidify donors' strategies with the local communities' needs.

The changing regional context significantly influenced the way in which priorities are defined. For instance, one INGO representative voiced his view and said that before donations came to Raqqa, small voluntary groups were the ones setting their own priorities. Then donations and support started coming after the liberation of Raqqa, mostly through Syrians outside Syria. When that happened donors or the Syrian intermediary became the main actor in setting priorities. He explained that some people who had voluntary experience in the past managed to negotiate priorities. However, donors started having more influence than they should in setting priorities, without proper consultations with local civil society actors. For example, some organizations started because there was a certain grant they wanted to take on, even though in some cases those organizations did not possess the relevant experience needed.

INGOs also influence priority setting. This becomes a greater issue when INGOS design and implement projects remotely with no effective presence on the ground. Ramifications for this are numerous and include, for example, an increase in the risk of corruption. On the other hand, when INGOs have a strong presence on the ground and interact with the local civil society, they can provide better support.

Given this, and LCSO competition over grants and donations, they do not have sufficient leverage to negotiate priorities or influence the way projects are executed. LCSOs need support, so they would, in many cases, do what they think the donor wants them to do. For example, LCSOs sometimes use unnecessary language that is disconnected from what the society actually needs, because they think this is what the donor wants to hear.

For donors on the other side, as per interviews with major donors in the region, they reported that the overall funding strategies they have in NES are tied to their respective countries' regional strategies and the objectives those countries want to achieve. For example, one major donor reported that their overarching strategy consists of ensuring the lasting defeat of ISIS and advancing a political solution to the Syrian conflict in line with The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254. All of their assistance is oriented around this strategy. The same donor further explains that other factors come into play with regard to details of implementing these strategies, including inputs from local partners.

In some cases, donors do attempt to facilitate dialogue with LCSOs. While for some donors Covid-19 put a strain on ongoing dialogue with LCSOs, other donors found online communication to be useful in keeping a regular contact with LCSOs. Some change with regard to working with LCSOs has been ongoing, but more needs to be done. For instance, one donor said: “In the past we did not manage to establish strong relationships with LCSOs because of limited funding targeting NES. However, now with more funding going to NES we are in a position to better understand the context and establish stronger connections.” This slight shift was also reported by an LCSO in Raqqa:

“In the past donors did not ask our opinion on the sort of projects that need to be carried out, only in the recent few weeks we were approached for our opinion on the projects that should be carried out. There has to be more effort to involve LCSOs because they hold the knowledge of the local context” - Hind Mohammad, Director of women for peace - LCSO in Raqqa

Donors' strategies and objectives are interlinked with their budgets and its divisions. Within this budget, there is room for flexibility. Since donors' strategies and objectives are one of the main factors in defining civil society's priorities, there is room for creativity and proactiveness from other stakeholders to define priorities within the major donors' strategies.

However, this is not a straightforward process and it is influenced by many factors. For instance, major donors in NES depend on their trusted partners, which are usually their respective national companies and non-for-profit organizations to carry out most of their larger scale projects. Thus, the space for other stakeholders to influence and negotiate programs is narrowed down to small-scale projects that usually address typical civil society work. Although those local partners are independent to a certain extent, they still operate within the overarching donors' strategy. In some cases, donors also push those local partners to take a leading role in designing projects and reaching out to LCSOs for consultations. Another factor that influences LCSOs' ability to influence donors' strategies is the lack of direct contact between LCSOs and major donors.

Most of the interviewees mentioned the importance of having a platform for LCSOs in which they can coordinate their efforts, discuss challenges, come up with solutions and have a stronger influence on setting priorities in the region. INGOs on the other hand are in a better place to collectively influence the trends in the region. This is mainly due to the NES forum.

“Every donor has an agenda certainly, the NES forum's job is to ignore the political agendas and to go to the ground and to see what the actual needs are and to advocate for those and ensure that there's consistency despite political agendas that everyone can get behind something, because it's a huge crisis, that's the role of humanitarian advocacy... It is also down to good advocacy and coordination platform to educate the donors on what's needed and to advocate strongly enough so that they start to focus on these issues and that is the NES forum's job.” Representative of NES forum

Local authorities such as the NGO affairs office and the various committees also carry out needs assessments. These groups hold monthly meetings with different stakeholders to identify gaps and discuss priorities in the region. However, they face the challenge of the lack of cooperative work between them and LCSOs.

“The real challenge is with regard to cooperation and early coordination, there is no real joint work to define priorities. LCSOs set priorities based on donors' strategies and that creates gaps between responses and the actual needs” – Representative of NGO affair office

IV. Dynamics of relations between civil society actors in north East Syria

The main civil society actors in NES are the LCSOs, INGOs, donors, NES forum. Other relevant stakeholders in this context include specific bodies within the local authorities namely the NGO affairs office and the committees entrusted with different areas such as the Women Committee, Youth Committee and Agriculture Committee. This chapter will explore the dynamics of relationships between these different actors.

1- Administrative framework and relationships with the local authorities

In Northeast Syria, local authorities introduced a system and framework for LCSOs as well as other civil society actors to operate within. As part of this research, two officials from the NGO affairs office were interviewed and asked about this system.

The current framework was developed through an agreement between the local authority and a major donor. According to one major donor, the agreement was assembled in what was intended to be a straightforward process.

Before LCSOs and INGOs are allowed to operate in NES, they have to go through a process of registration at the NGO affairs office. There are conditions to obtain the license to work. These are stipulated in the Law of Organizations, Associations and Civil Society Institutions Number 2 of 2019 issued by The General Council of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The NGO affairs office, alongside other relevant bodies within the local authorities, is currently working on a new draft of this law. In the instances not regulated by this law, the NGO affairs office issues circulations and shares them with LCSOs and INGOs as well as other stakeholders such as the NES forum, through a WhatsApp group created for that purpose. Other WhatsApp groups also exist for specific cities such as ones for Raqqa, Hasakah, and Deir Ezzor.

The NGO affairs office is the first entry point for civil society actors to operate in Northeast Syria. Its priorities focus on directing humanitarian work, as they aim to create an attractive environment for humanitarian actors and donors to operate in the region, reduce the gap between the response and the needs, support LCSOs, and act as a platform for networking and communication. They hold a monthly meeting with LCSOs and INGOs to discuss needs and priorities as well as the available resources.

The interaction with the NGO affairs office and the requirements for operating differs depending on the type of organization. For instance, donors do not need to go through the above mentioned registration process, they would instead notify the office of their work. As for LCSOs and INGOs, after they obtain their license to operate in the region they have to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with different committees operating within the local authorities, each in their area of specialty. For example, an LCSO starting an agriculture project will first have to get its registration from the NGO affairs office. Before the project commences, it would have to sign an MOU with the agriculture committee. This MOU defines the relationship between all stakeholders for that specific project. For instance, some projects are designed from the beginning to be handed over to the specialized committee once an LCSO has reached a certain stage in the project execution. According to the NGO affairs office, this MOU is an official document that sets out the duration of the project, different stakeholders involved, areas of work as well as details such as the number of beneficiaries. Some LCSOs said that they face more challenges dealing with these committees than they do when dealing with the NGO affairs office. These were delays in finalizing MOUs and excessive interference from different committees. One LCSO said: “This sort of routine isn't helpful to our work and hinder our operations”

An LCSO operating in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor reported that its relationship with local authorities mainly consists of the interactions with the NGO affairs office and the specialized committees. According to this LCSO, the change of the administrative framework in Deir Ezzor (from having one civil council for the entirety of Deir Ezzor, to four councils) resulted in issues at work as LCSOs faced a lack of professionalism and management skills from the members of these councils.

Another LCSO operating in Raqqa said that NGO affairs offices issue its circulations and policies without consulting LCSOs. It suggested having a platform for LCSOs to discuss these policies and the gaps in them and share those views with the NGO affairs office. For this sort of work to be done, there has to be a suitable environment for it, meaning human and financial resources as well as consultants in order for LCSOs to be able to carry out such work.

It is worth mentioning that some of the challenges LCSOs faced in the past in their relation with the NGO affairs office were improved. For instance, in the past LCSOs could only get three or six-month licenses, which impacted the flow of their work. Presently, they can get a license for a year with a six months reporting system. One LCSO said this is a marginally better set up.

In general, both LCSOs and INGOs reported that it is generally easy to get registered to operate in NES, although the process seems to be easier for INGOs than for LCSOs. INGOs receive support from the NES Forum if they face issues obtaining their license while LCSOs don't. The NES forum intervenes with the NGO affairs office on matters that impedes access and the humanitarian response. However, both LCSOs and INGOs interviewed as part of this research reported that the administrative system is not clear or transparent and that it changes

constantly. For instance, an INGO operating in multiple parts of NES said that there are formal and informal procedures to follow. Another issue that local civil society actors face in their relationship with the local authorities, is the lack of a judicial system to go to in case of disputes. LCSOs reported not knowing where to go when, for example, an MOU takes longer than it should. The NGO affairs office, on the other hand, said that they are the official body entrusted to deal with such issues and while the different committees have an important role to play they do not have a legal role nor do they hold a power to intervene with the work of local civil society actors. One INGO reported that they had to terminate their partnership with an LCSO because of issues related to interference from the local authority that deemed that the LCSO was not independent.

Another INGO said that the relationship between the local authority and INGOs and LCSOs is sensitive and multi-faceted. For instance, the local authorities realize that they need these actors to carry out projects in the region, but on the other side they would rather carry out those projects themselves as a de facto ruling authority in the region. The local authorities try to impose when an LCSO or an INGO intends to carry out a service-providing project. For example, local authorities demand a form of partnership in the case of water or electricity provision. The same INGO explained that the issue is that many donors will not and cannot assist the Autonomous Administration directly for political reasons, so civil society actors end up having to carry out service-providing projects that are usually done by local authorities. Donors, in general, find that it is easier to support local or international NGOs and to treat them as a private sector to a certain extent. This policy is not a special one for Syria, donors do the same in the Balkans and Afghanistan for example. Donors might think that by doing so there will be less room for corruption.

Moreover, The Autonomous Administration local authorities face an issue with regard to the high salaries of INGOs in comparison to what they can offer their employees. For example, an engineer working at an INGO would get 500 US dollars in comparison to 150 US dollars if they worked at the local authority. Due to this, many people prefer to work at INGOs rather than the local authority and therefore the latter face an issue of losing qualified people

Some donors work to strengthen the local authorities' ability to deliver services and practice good governance as part of their strategy while other donors do not have any direct contact with the local authorities. Moreover, donors have different perspectives on LCSO's relationship with the local authorities and it seems to be shaped by their own relationship with the latter. They all seem to be aware of the issues facing LCSOs in their relationship with the local authorities. Some appreciate the local authorities need to have an oversight on civil society work in general and others view it as relatively minor in comparison to the situation in other parts of the country.

In general, LCSOs and INGOs as well as the NGO affairs office stated that the office and other relevant bodies within the local authority would benefit from capacity building and

training in technical issues surrounding civil society work. According to one INGO, the NGO affairs office should be able to take on the responsibility of directing humanitarian work and providing information and security assistance, however, currently these functions are being carried out by the organizations themselves.

2- Relations between LCSOs and INGOs

LCSOs in general seem to have a broad view of their relationship with INGOs. They see both the positive and negative aspects of this seemingly inevitable relationship.

One LCSO in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor stated his belief that LCSOs are the weakest link in the overall dynamic of relationship between LCSOs, INGOs, and donors. Despite the fact that LCSOs have been carrying out successful projects for many years, other stakeholders still view LCSOs as new and incapable. The same LCSO said they declined three projects recently because they saw that those projects were not in line with their identity as an organization. For this LCSO, so there are no direct relationships between LCSO and donors. INGOs work as an intermediary. This is a typical form of partnership between these two actors. One of the reasons behind this lack of direct contact is that LCSOs need to fulfill certain conditions in order to get direct funding from donors, such as having a bank account and being registered in a country outside Syria. These conditions are almost impossible to fulfill for most LCSOs, so they end up either partnering up with INGOs to execute projects on the ground on their behalf or execute their own projects after getting funding through these INGOs.

This issue was exacerbated with the closure of the Yarubiya crossing. Before the closure there was a cross-border pooled fund which was used by LCSOs that was less restrictive in terms of due diligence requirements. Now, all actors have to get funding imposing a big bureaucratic impediment on whether a donor can partner up with an LCSO or not.

One LCSO explained that INGOs have coordinators or supervisors on the ground who supervise LCSOs, evaluating their work and report on it. Thus, INGOs have a full overview and understanding of LCSOs that they want to partner with, and they set the goals of their partner LCSOs, based on full understanding of their strength and the people managing these LCSOs.

This power dynamic between INGOs and LCSOs results in LCSOs being overly dependent on INGOs. It also results in LCSOs not having a room to be independent or creative in their projects. One LCSO operating in Raqqa that focuses on women-related projects stated that INGOs are effective in their field of work, but that there is a lack of communication and networking opportunities. She said that it's always more effective when LCSOs are consulted regarding the projects and activities. If meaningful consultations are carried out, partnerships

between INGOs and LCSOs will be enhanced, she said. However, that does not seem to be happening in Northeast Syria.

Another reason behind LCSOs' discontent with the current form of partnerships is related to resource management. As one LCSO put it:

“50% of grants are spent on administrative fees for INGOs instead of it being spent on development projects in the region”.

Another LCSO operating in Raqqa said that in general relations with INGOs are good, some of them worked on building LCSOs capacity and that was very beneficial.

With that being said, one LCSO operating in Deir Ezzor stated that the gravity of the situation in the region and having to deal and respond to a big humanitarian crisis does not leave space for LCSOs to choose the best form of partnerships.

“The form of partnership doesn't matter as much it matters to provide services to a society on the brink of collapse, there are no alternative so all of our work is within what is possible and available.” - Representative of an LCSO operating in NES

INGOs on the other hand have complex and varied perceptions of LCSOs, depending on a few factors. One of them is whether a specific INGO partners up with LCSOs or if it carries out its own projects directly, as this gives INGOs more exposure to LCSOs and an opportunity to have a better understanding of LCSOs and their reality. The type of partnerships also plays a role in the way INGOs perceive LCSOs. Some INGOs partner up with LCSOs for the purpose of implementing projects, while others aim to build LCSOs' capacity to carry out projects on their own. The quality of experience INGOs had in their partnerships with LCSOs also impacted the way they see them.

The perceptions of INGOs interviewed as part of this research varied from viewing many LCSOs as unprofessional and inactive while others saw LCSOs as an essential actor in the region for which INGOs have a responsibility to build their capacity and work on empowering them on all levels. One INGO operating in different parts of NES said that in Raqqa there are many LCSOs but only 10 of them are active.

“In order to have successful relations between INGOs and LCSOs there has to be transparency and professionalism from LCSOs so INGOs can trust them,”

INGOs take the role of donors sometimes as a form of partnership, so they don't implement projects directly but rather partner with LCSOs to implement the projects on the ground. INGOs also work on building LCSOs' capacities but in many cases they wouldn't partner with LCSOs that are new and don't have any experience yet.

One INGO operating in different areas in NES and has multiple partnerships with LCSOs said that the elements that impact the way they see each other are the LCSOs' level of experience as well as the INGOs' policy. In their relations and partnerships with LCSOs they face issues in relation to LCSOs capacities, as working on building these organizations capacity takes a long time and a lot of work. Sometimes there are internal conflicts within the LCSO that also affect the work and partnership.

One point that was brought up multiple times by both INGOs and LCSOs is the importance of having a platform for LCSOs where they can share information, build partnerships, and find solutions for the challenges facing them. LCSOs said that they have been working on a civil society platform for LCSOs in Northeast Syria, in order to improve partnerships between INGOs and LCSOs. Through this forum they want to have direct contact with donors. The platform will also be used to lay out the problems and challenges LCSOs are facing in North East Syria in order to find ways and solutions to deal with them. This platform will be conducting its meetings in person rather than online.

Currently, there already exists a platform, referred to as ASO as reported by some of the interviewees. According to their website, “it is an optional and voluntary assembly of civil society institutions in Northeast Syria. The platform works on coordinating and facilitating collective action with the aim of enhancing development, meeting humanitarian needs, encouraging respect for human rights in Syria, and defending the society's interests in North and East Syria.” According to their website, they have 136 member organizations. One LCSO says ASO does not have a way to pressure donors to achieve what LCSOs are demanding, Thus LCSOs are counting on the new platform they are working on to have more power. His reasoning behind having more hope in the new platform is that the new platform is backed by a US donor. Many LCSOs currently depend on WhatsApp groups to coordinate and share information. Not having an active platform for LCSOs seems to put LCSOs at a disadvantage in comparison to INGOs.

INGOs with a clear mandate to work on humanitarian assistance can join the NES forum which came about in 2016 and was formally recognized in 2017. The NES forum, is the primary coordination mechanism for humanitarian coordination in NES. It is a coordination

platform mainly for INGOs and consists of a small number of LCSOs and has three main functions: representation of their members with various stakeholders, coordination of the various sectors operating in NES, and advocacy. The advocacy function is for the population of NES, not advocacy for members.

When LCSOs were asked about their views on the NES forum, they said that they think the NES forum deems LCSOs to be unprofessional and new, and that the NES forum does not prefer to work directly with them. However, the NES forum, in an interview with them said that they are keen on interacting more with LCSOs and are working on a local partner working group which was set up recently to help the NES forum members to build better policies and engagement with local partners. The NES forum wants to create a space for discourse and discussions to hear from LCSOs about their concerns as well as the issues and challenges they are facing and the ways in which the NES forum can better support them.

One LCSO said that their donors asked them to attend a meeting with the NES forum. However, she said that those meetings were held in English with no Arabic translation and many LCSOs could not understand what was being said as they are not fluent in English. The same LCSO said that they once had an issue with an INGO and wrote to the NES forum to ask for assistance but nothing happened. She said that although the NES forum introduced itself as a networking platform, one that can help solve issues that arise between LCSOs and INGOs, they have not lived up to it.

V. Women-related issues

This chapter will focus on LCSOs working on women-related projects. It will start by discussing the way in which they set their priorities, then it will move to discuss the dynamics of relationships they have with different stakeholders in the region and will end with listing some of the challenges these LCSOs face in their work.

Setting priorities

Local civil society organizations focused on women related projects are similar to the rest of LCSOs in NES. They carry out needs assessments and studies to determine the priorities in the region where they operate. For instance, one LCSO focusing on women-related projects said that in Raqqa in 2018-2019 the dire economic situation and overall context dictated that they focus on basic service provision, as this was what women needed back then. However, currently in Raqqa, they are able to carry out advocacy, training, raise awareness, and in general work on a more diverse range of projects. She added that Deir Ezzor currently is where Raqqa was in 2018-2019, thus the priorities are basic service provision. She points out that:

“the logical sequence of priorities in NES determines our priorities. First we work on livelihood then we can move to awareness building and only then we can add a layer of working on empowering women to participate in public affairs”.

In Deir Ezzor, LCSOs are slowly being able to break the barriers and work on gender-related projects. This outcome is the fruit of two years of steady work. For example, one LCSO said that in the region the norm is to solve problems through committees of community figures who are mainly men, but after six months of work they managed to convince them to have at least one woman in these committees to participate in decision making when it comes to women-related issues. The same organization said that only in this year did they manage to employ a woman, he said that in the past this was impossible.

Perceptions and dynamics of relationships

LCSOs working on women related projects like the rest of LCSOs in the region have relationships with INGOs, donors and the local authorities. While the dynamics of these relationships are not very different from the general norms in that regard, there are certain areas where these organizations face an additional layer of challenges and complexities. For instance, one INGO said that women-focused LCSOs are shy in their efforts, however, he recognizes that INGOs need to be putting more effort to change the stereotypes of the way these organizations are viewed. He thinks this will reflect on empowering them to be as efficient as other organizations, since they hold a unique power to carry out projects in a way other organizations cannot. He adds that there is deep weakness in this area of work and that INGOs need to support women-focused organizations on all levels including financial support and capacity building. As for women-focused LCSOs' relationships with the local authorities, they face the same challenges other LCSOs face in the region. However, one INGO said that local authorities put pressure on women organizations to work with its own women committee. The same LCSO interviewed in this research said that they indeed had a troubled relationship with the Women Committee as the latter wanted to know details of this LCSO's work such as the names of the beneficiaries and the content of the training materials. The LCSO spokesperson added that at one point the Committee asked to add specific beneficiaries to the program to which the LCSO said they would be always happy to add any beneficiary to their projects as long as they fit the required criteria. The LCSO said that currently they have a smooth relationship with the committee after they paid them a few visits and they reached an agreement on the extent of each party's role.

Challenges

There are many challenges to working on women-related projects in NES. Some are related to the social and economic context. One LCSO said that poverty in some regions results in the lack of awareness and interest in working on gender or women-related issues. Moreover, there is a general lack of support for women-focused organizations and projects. This includes lack of funding as well as lack of general support in education and training. A representative of one donor mentioned that they are aware of the need to put more effort and attention to programming that focuses on women. This stems from the fact that when they started working their strategy was mainly focused on infrastructure and restoring services. As such, gender was not a big focus in the beginning. One limitation is that most civil society organizations are dominated by men and when there is a woman in the board of directors their impression is that she is not empowered to take on a meaningful leadership role. One thing they tried doing in the past is putting gender mainstreaming as a core focus of the capacity building component in their project. There have been some instances that resulted in

ramifications for funding when organizations did not adhere to following through with the gender policy.

On top of that, one women-focused LCSO said that they face issues in relations to women workers' rights. For example, if a project's duration is three months and the worker is pregnant or breast-feeding, she won't be accepted to be part of this project because she might take time off. Even when she is offered a maternity leave, it will be 15 days of unpaid leave. She adds that this is unfair because women working for INGOs have the right for paid maternity leave as well as an hour a day for breastfeeding. In this organization, they introduced a system of creating a safe space for their women workers as well as their beneficiaries to bring their children to the work space, however, not all donors cover such expenses.

Women-focused organizations are in need of capacity building and financial support to be able to deal with the challenges they face when trying to establish their work and tackle society's view of them. Moreover, projects and programs must be designed and tailored based on consultations and work with local women in the region rather than depending on donors' agendas and language which will inevitably be disconnected from the local communities.

VI. Limitation of localization in northeast Syria

Civil society actors (particularly LCSOs) in Northeast Syria certainly do not operate in a conventional context and they face challenges that require creative and collective effort to face. For instance, the situation in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor is very unstable and poses many security concerns as it was voiced out by an LCSO official operating in the region: "Killings occur on a daily basis in Deir Ezzor, it could be because of a family dispute or overcrowding in a queue for bread." The official added that parts of the society still hold ISIS ideology. LCSOs and other civil society actors are working slowly but steadily on changing that ideology. He added that communities in villages where they carry out their projects view civil society organizations as people who deliver food baskets, and that LCSOs are working on changing this perception. Moreover, key informants reported that the local communities are not yet accepting workers from outside their communities to carry out projects and prefer that people from within their communities do that. The issue here is that there is a shortage in qualified people from these communities to carry out the work, which results in slow or delayed projects.

LCSOs are also facing the challenge of not having direct access to donors which means access to resources. That poses an obstacle in the face of enabling LCSOs to have a

meaningful leadership in shaping the civil society work in the region. One LCSO said that they declined three projects recently because they deemed those projects to not be in line with their identity as a local organization. That same LCSO sums up that context by saying:

“LCSOs are the ones who know best the needs of the region. If the real participation of local organizations is activated, there will be stronger and closer projects to reality.”

Another issue that results from the lack of direct contact with donors as one LCSO puts it is LCSOs’ ability to carry out projects ends up being tied to their personal connections and networks. He added that some donor-affiliated companies or programs have a set of fixed groups of LCSOs that they work with regularly. That leaves many other LCSOs not able to operate or carry out projects because they lack connections.

Most donors and other key stakeholders operate outside NES. Such remote management of programs impacts their ability to fully understand and appreciate the specifics of the region and its needs. If major donors had a presence on the ground, their understanding would be deepened and their ability to communicate with local actors and design strategies that reflect the region’s needs would be improved. One major donor reported that Covid-19 hindered their partners’ ability to have in-person consultations sessions which were used to get feedback from LCSOs.

VII. Steps INGOs, donors, and other stakeholders can take to ensure more localization of aid

Sustainability

LCSOs reported that they would benefit greatly from a more sustainable way of support. In other words, LCSOs are having to halt their operations when a project ends and thus they risk losing trained and qualified staff who would rather move to work for INGOs if they get the chance. LCSOs frequently lose qualified staff to INGOs since the latter are able to offer much higher salaries to their employees which put LCSOs at a disadvantage with this regard. LCSOs think that having core funding would help them be more sustainable in their operations. However, donors interviewed as part of this research said that LCSOs need to be aware of the reality and limitations of funding in such an environment and that donors do not have the ability to fund long term projects in an unstable region.

Recommendations:

- ◆ International donors, including INGOs, should make more resources available to provide core funding to LCSOs.
- ◆ LCSOs should be consulted on the type of programming to be carried out in NES.

Introduce a broader approach to building LCSOs capacity

Most of the key informants interviewed in this research mentioned training and capacity building for different actors. For instance, an LCSO operating in Raqqa and focusing on women related projects said that they would benefit from capacity building and training targeting reconciliation and conflict resolution since she thinks they reached a point in their work that put them in a position to work on such issues. Another LCSO added that:

“training and coaching needs to be tailored in the direction of where local civil society wants to head”.

An LCSO operating in Deir Ezzor said that there are only ten active LCSO in the region while 60 others are not operating. He is counting on creating and developing a wider and more capable civil society in the region.

“One thing can be done is to give new LCSOs small pilot projects, this way they can prove themselves and get some experience at the same time.”

One INGO referred to IMPACT’s incubation program (CSSC) as an example of effective multi-level capacity building approaches. There is a clear need for more networking efforts which would help connect LCSOs with INGOs that can partner up with them or help build their capacity and train them on different levels.

Recommendations:

- ◆ Provide practical support to LCSO support programs, such as the existing Civil Society Support Centers (CSSC) that have been put in place by IMPACT.

- ◆ Make resources available for local projects that aim to rebuild social cohesion.

Recommendations specifically in relation to women-related issues:

- ◆ Support women-focused organizations on all levels including financial support and capacity building.
- ◆ Ensure that gender mainstreaming is as a core focus of capacity building components of donor projects.
- ◆ Donors and INGOs supporting women-focused organizations must ensure the rights of female workers such as covered maternity leave.
- ◆ Donors, INGOs and any relevant stakeholders must ensure that female workers are not subject to discrimination on any ground in the course of employment.
- ◆ Donors and INGOs must tailor their programming based on consultations and work with local women in the region as well as women-led organizations.

Enhance communication and networking between different actors

LCSOs reported that they would benefit from creating and maintaining a network for LCSOs which would help them have regular contact with donors, coordinate their efforts and have a stronger collective voice. LCSOs repeatedly stated that they should be consulted with regard to activities and projects in the region as this will help design successful projects that reduce waste of time, effort and money. INGOs should help facilitate and enable such effort.

Recommendations:

- ◆ Intensify practical support to, and coordination with the recently established LCSO platform, and other civil society networks.
- ◆ Actively encourage/offer practical support to the NES forum to meaningful and equally include Syrian LCSOs and strengthen the latter's capacity within the NES forum mandate.

Develop policies and regulations:

Both LCSOs and INGOs reported that regulations relevant to their work should be transparent and written with clear mechanisms for LCSOs to use when there are issues with the local authorities. LCSOs also reported that they need regulations that would protect them against actions from the local authorities to constrain their work. Particularly, LCSOs

reported that they fear detention if they protest corruption. One last issue was the need to fix the issue with the delay in MOUs.

Recommendations:

- ◆ LCSOs should be given the space and resources to participate in designing regulations and policies that affect their work.
- ◆ Better communication between the local authorities and LCSOs should be facilitated.
- ◆ Clear mechanisms should be made available for LCSOs to refer to in case of disputes with the local authorities.