

## SEMINAR REPORT

### HOW TO SUPPORT BOTTOM-UP COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN SYRIA

January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2017, from 9.30 to 12.30, in Marina Congress Center, Helsinki

#### **Rationale for the seminar: Need for bottom-up approaches and Syrian civil society involvement**

On Monday 23 January 2017 Crisis Management Initiative, Felm, Fida International, Finn Church Aid, Kehys, Kepa and Save the Children Finland held a seminar on How to Support Bottom-Up Community Resilience in Syria. The seminar was organized as a side-event to the launch, the following day, of the 2017-2018 UN Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and the key humanitarian priorities of on Syria.

The objective of the seminar was to identify challenges and develop common grounds for a coherent way to support bottom-up community resilience in Syria, and to present innovative approaches and critical perspectives from the ground and offer scope for interactive discussions, as well as to set out recommendations for improved coordinated action to feed into the next day's deliberations.

About 250 persons from all over the world attended the seminar. Among them were policy, development and aid professionals from various international organizations as well as academics, diplomats and media representatives.

#### **Conclusions from the discussion:**

Syrian civil society voices demanded better inclusion in planning and implementing responses on Syria. The genuine inclusion of Syrian civil society in all phases of aid programming was seen as not only the right thing to do, but also as a vital prerequisite for success in building local resilience, long term development and sustainable peace. It was noted that the multiple roles of Syrian civil society have to be recognized: instead of being a mere service provider it is an important actor both in building social cohesion and in interacting with local governance. Participants agreed that it is important to learn from the past experience and to ensure that aid to Syria doesn't polarize further along the dividing lines of the conflict but instead creates incentives for cooperation is crucially important.

#### **UNDP recognized the need to better involve Syrian civil society in all phases of programming**

At the beginning of her key note speech UNDP Administrator **Helen Clark** noted that since 2010 Syria has lost three decades of human development gains and by 2015 had fallen to among the bottom 10 countries in the world in terms of the Human Development Index. New funding is needed to support livelihoods, access to basic services and actions that build people's capacities and their resilience, which contributes to long term development, in order to stop the erosion of development gains.

According to Clark, two factors are particularly important to UNDP: ensuring strongest partnerships with the civil society and gaining multi-year, hybrid funding for the continuum from humanitarian and resilience support towards development work

Clarke said that for UNDP, civil society has come to play a central role in building resilience, and it will need to play an even greater role in policy and advocacy in Syria in the future. She said that closer links are needed between



the UN and civil society in Syria to build resilience, prevent further fraying of the social fabric, help the most affected to cope and recover, and engage in early reconciliation and social cohesion activities.

Following comments to her keynote address, Clark pointed out that she encourages the UN organisations to post people to localities. This is difficult at first, but if initiatives are not horizontally linked, they won't work.

During the panel **Samuel Rizk**, the Country Director for United Nations Development Programme in Syria noted the need to go beyond defining civil society only as registered NGOs, as it includes a much wider set of actors. He also discussed the enormous and multidimensional challenge of reconciliation and how to take the first steps.

## **Syrian civil society voices demand better inclusion in planning and implementing the Syria response**

### ***International aid has contributed to the fragmentation and polarisation of Syrian civil society***

Participants noted that until now UN's and INGOs' work and funding have followed the conflict division lines and thus have contributed to deepening the fractures between Syrians without creating incentives for them to work together. Donors fund civil society actors in Syria selectively, and as a result traditional social cohesion and resilience structures have fragmented. Further disparities have been created through organising most civil society training programmes outside Syria, while people inside have limited access to capacity building. It was also noted that until now responses to Syria have so far been top down with little involvement of local people. Funding has targeted isolated regions and contributed to polarised discourses.

Participants highlighted that empowering and sustaining linkages between civilian actors across dividing lines is of vital importance. Linking civil society and other local civilian actors from different territorialities in Syria will help to counter the military networks, the participants stressed.

### ***Delivering as one? – UN Funds and Agencies in different sectors have not been integrated***

The UNDP's move to area-based planning was welcomed by the Syrian participants, but expressed hopes for a better integration of different UN agencies in different sectors of work.

Syrian CSOs have received only a small portion of the funding that goes to the response operations done inside Syria –in 2016, only 2 % of the annual humanitarian funding went directly to local organisations. Flexible funding is required to be given directly to Syrian organisations. INGOs and UN agencies need to change the way they work with CSOs and make true partnerships, instead of service contracting. In the peace process, CSOs need to be linked to their local constituencies. In donor conferences, such as the coming conference in Brussels, the agenda needs to be set by the Syrians, not by external actors.

Syrian civil society is there to respond, but often lacks the capacity to understand how the international assistance framework functions. There is a need for training on development programming and how to work with the international aid structures and funding mechanisms. The response framework is often tailored to the internationals.

### ***Traditional structures of social cohesion have not been acknowledged and supported and little incentives to bridge dividing lines have been created***

The Syrian participants highlighted that the correct way of bottom-up support for Syria is to pay attention to social cohesion in the country at national and at the urban/local levels, to create a common spaces for Syrians, and share knowledge with civil society, and not to limit knowledge within the UN and other international actors.



It is important to linking city-to-city trade, and improving connections between the people and markets. At the city/town level, work must be done both with the host communities and IDPs. Involving cultural resources of each city is crucial. Even when working in a village-level, the national level strategy must be thought of. Supporting social cohesion at a national level by linking cities and within cities by bringing residents and IDPs together.

When talking about supporting Syrian civil society, it is not enough to state how much was delivered and achieved, but to talk about what were the problems that were faced, how they could have been resolved, how many people were not reached and why, how to work in empowering civilian communities and to support them in a sustainable manner.

### ***Strengthening local governance and institutions is a key to counter militias***

The panellists stressed that NGOs cannot fill the gap created by the absence of state institutions in Syria and that militias are exploiting the weakness of civil authorities. It is vital to unite the forces of civil society and quasi government institutions to weaken militias and create bottom-up representative powers. Participants pointed out that there is now an opportunity to build peace institutions from bottom-up to counter terrorism more broadly.

### ***The change in gender roles caused by the war has not informed programme consultations***

Participants noted that one of the key obstacles for building resilience is the lack of consultation and meaningful engagement with Syrians, particularly women. The war has impacted and changed the gender roles in communities. Women in Syria are taking additional responsibilities outside the home, including providing for the family and collecting water, because men have been forced to restrict mobility due to fear of arrest, conscription or recruitment; and yet women are still the least consulted.

### ***Role and importance of the local reconciliation and Track III processes for the political negotiations not fully understood***

A question of how to move from negative to positive resilience was raised. The war economy is an example of negative resilience in Syria. CSOs can improve the situation by creating horizontal linkages between cities and towns across dividing lines, and re-focus on building complementarities between regions of Syria to eradicate war economies. Syrian CSOs are happy to engage with the international community at this strategic level.

Normally, reconciliation is a positive term; it has its own political economy. Who are those creating the space for the peace process in a locality? They are the future peace-track leaders. But many times these people are disconnected from the track 1 or track 2 processes. This plays to the hands of central government.

Often local reconciliation in Syria has been looked at by donors as conflicting with the greater political process, as sidetracking it. It must be understood that the track 1 and track 3 are inseparable. Local reconciliation should not be seen as a substitute for political process but as a complementing and supporting structure of it.

Further, reconciliation is not only across the government – opposition divide, but *within every structure, between each locality*, within the Kurdish communities, government forces etc. Most importantly, we need reconciliation actors who bring these localities together.

Participants pointed out that we need to rethink how we should look at reconciliation. Syria has been divided since 2013, and now it is difficult for civilians to move from one part to another. Traditional structures were abandoned. Some UN agencies and INGOs have also expanded the fractures by working only with the government side or the opposition side, not with both sides. This has cut the value chain that previously connected the cities.



### ***Coordination has been talked about but not implemented***

As one panellist pointed out, “We hear talk of cooperation and coordination everywhere and we see it nowhere”. With this approach we end up with a situation in Syria that in some small easier to reach area there are three internationally managed health centres and in some locations with 300 000 people just one hospital.

It was recalled that coordination is a core humanitarian standard. We have not often had such a good understanding of needs inside Syria in order to get the coordination architecture working together. But the resilience and development narrative is still very fragmented; there is no common discussion. We have worked in all areas, including the besieged and the occupied areas. We have adaptive business models, labour market support. First we must improve quality of programming, and improve textual analysis to improve advocacy.

It was also pointed out that genuine participation of Syrian civil society in international coordination, pledging and advocacy meetings must be ensured. This would embody genuine inclusion in planning.

### ***Sanctions harm the civil society in all respects***

A lot has changed during the six years of war. Because of sanctions, Syrian civil society is deprived of the normal resources. Still, the panellists highlighted, it is Syrian civil society that has contributed to the crisis response more than the international actors, and the Syrians themselves are a major donor in the Syrian crisis situation.

Sanctions have led to dependency on war economy. The reality is that oil is bought from ISIS, both in opposition and in government areas alike, because of the sanctions.

### **Donors must aim for flexibility in funding to ensure cooperation and coordination**

In her closing remarks **Sirpa Mäenpää**, Ambassador of Peace Mediation from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, noted that coordination is needed between international and local level; between track 1 and track 3 peacebuilding processes; across sectoral borders; across the political divides of the Syrian conflict and between the humanitarian and peacebuilding responses. Mäenpää pointed out that the need for coordination has to be taken into consideration by the donors when planning the funding instruments. Flexible funding is needed when trying to build bridges and cross borders between the humanitarian, development and peace sectors.

### **Key conclusions and recommendations from the seminar included:**

1. There is a need to better link humanitarian assistance to existing civilian and local Syrian structures. If we are to make resilience real, then we need to realign the global humanitarian system, and strike a better balance between local and international actors.
2. Local actors need to be more involved in decision-making and coordination. Consultation with Syrian stakeholders should go beyond defining humanitarian needs and cover all aspects from participation in planning to the implementation of priority investments. There is a need to move from supply-driven approaches to demand-driven planning and implementation.
3. Programming that focuses on supporting local livelihoods should consider working with and enabling community resilience, build local ownerships for solutions and support local innovation. To ensure sustainability, aid should focus on strengthening the establishment of durable value chains and link production to broader international markets.



4. There is a need for donors to consider and support the multiple roles civil society actors can play in building community resilience; they should not be reduced to service providers.
5. UN and other international donors must be able to work with and support traditional communal resilience, and support social capital accumulation and not just formal NGOs.
6. The international community needs to revisit sanctions and assess their impact on community resilience and development.
7. Donors should find creative ways to scale up multi-year, long-term, and flexible support to Syrian civil society organizations, particularly women's organizations, which would allow them to strategize and plan for the future.
8. In order to build social cohesion, aid programming should promote city-to-city activities in areas under different controls and within single locations to support initiatives bringing residents and IDPs together.
9. When working in different Syrian geographies, development aid needs to be coordinated and harmonized with potential or ongoing political processes to help dissolving the already polarized political division lines.
10. There is a need to rethink the role of track III dialogues and local reconciliation as a vital building block towards the political track I process.

### **Agenda of the seminar:**

9.00-9.30 Registration

9.30-9.40 Welcome by Mr. **Kai Mykkänen**, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development

9.40-10.30 Supporting Bottom-up Community Resilience in Syria – planning instruments and practical considerations

*Chair and facilitator:* **Sami Lahdensuo**, Senior Advisor to President Ahtisaari at Crisis Management Initiative

*Key note speaker:* **Helen Clark**, Administrator of the UNDP

*Comment by* **Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj**, Co-coordinator, Common Space Initiative

Discussion

10.30-10.45 Coffee break

10.45-12.30 Panel – Civil Society's Role in Building Stability - modalities for international support

*Chair and facilitation:* **Rilli Lappalainen**, Secretary General, The Finnish NGDO Platform to the EU KEHYS, and **Matthias Wevelsiep**, Head - Programme Development Unit, Finn Church Aid

**Lama Khaddour**, civil society activist, Damascus

**Zedoun Alzoubi**, CEO, Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM)

**Eva Zidan**, Coordinator, Coordinamento delle organizzazioni per il servizio volontario of Italy (COSV)

**Roy Azar**, Project Coordinator, International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC)

**Alexandra Saieh**, Syria Crisis Policy and Campaigns Advisor, Oxfam

**Samuel Rizk**, Country Director, United Nations Development Programme

Discussion

Concluding Remarks: recommendations for improved coordinated action



**Kristiina Rintakoski**, Director, Peacebuilding and Advocacy, Felm - Suomen Lähetysseura  
**Mathieu Rouquette**, Syria INGO Regional Forum Representative (SIRF)

**Sirpa Mäenpää**, Ambassador, Peace Mediation, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

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