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# The Engagement of Civic Actors in the Education Sector in Syria: Lessons Learned and Recommendations September 2024



**Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj**



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**Policy Paper**

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Lessons Learned and Recommendations**

**Author:**

Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj, Partner at LUGARIF

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EuroMed Feminist Initiative

Email: [ife@efi-euromed.org](mailto:ife@efi-euromed.org)

[www.efi-ife.org](http://www.efi-ife.org)

ISBN

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## **Executive Summary**

This policy paper is developed to draw lessons learned from a detailed research initiative conducted by Duderer to map the role of civic actors in the education sector in Syria. The research provided a deep review of conditions in six regions covering local conditions in all zones of political control that have sprung during the conflict. This policy paper is meant to provide a synthesis of the key lessons learned from the said research and suggests targeted and actionable recommendations to the key stakeholders.

The research allowed a comparative framework for understanding the broader challenges facing the provision of education to children and young adults in the whole of Syria. CSOs were found to be playing essential roles in ensuring that a lost generation of children is finding its way to receiving their right to education. However, the research found that CSOs interventions in the sector are heterogeneous and are often donor-driven and not sustainable. CSOs were strong at bringing about innovation but were not effective at scaling up their innovations. They were highly resilient in tapping on local resources in some parts of the country and mitigating the cultural challenges of providing values of citizenship and social peace. However, they worked in small and separate islands that prevented the aggregation of their impacts and indirectly deepened divisions between communities.

The key lessons learned involve a focus on the role of teachers in the success or failure of providing quality education and civic values in schools. Teachers were being siphoned from regular schools to work with CSOs undermining the ability of regular schools to sustain their human resources. CSOs need to refocus their operations to support teacher in their regular schools and not create separate processes.

Localization was a relevant factor in drawing on local resources and ensuring acceptability and relevance to the different communities. However, hyper-localization led to further fragmentation of the cultural and social realities of society, encouraging the creations of fences rather than building bridges between communities. A main outcome of this approach was in undermining the emergence of national standards and in succumbing to real or imagined social norms that undermined the access of girls to schools.

Funding provided under the humanitarian framework created dependency on donor aid. Supply side logic to the provision of education undermined the ability to scale up and sustain operations. Moving to an early recovery framework cannot repeat the same modalities of aid. Aid should be directed to leverage local resources and to encourage cooperation and mainstreaming of outcomes and impacts and move away from its current focus on inputs and outputs.

CSOs must mitigate a complex and risky environment to promote values of equal citizenship and social peace. They have not the resources to monitor the impact of their work nor of managing how the teachers are interpreting these values on the ground. These values are disseminated on the most superficial level as empty “signifiers” and identity markers and not in practice. The more successful

models of disseminating values came from informal, non-formal, and psycho-social programs, that focus on the skills needed to practice these values not on their formal representation in the curricula. Resources need to be provided to mainstream these types of learning experiences in the regular schools.

Diversity in service provision has enabled innovation and introduced promising pedagogic methods of active learning, instead of the traditional methods of memorizing received knowledge. However, diversity should not undermine the need for accredited learning outcomes and assurances that education is providing children with the necessary skills to continue their learning journeys and access career opportunities in the future. CSOs need to work together to streamline their approaches and gradually attempt to bypass the political divides to ensure that a national education system is providing accredited education for all.

Knowledge creation needs to be sustained through accumulation. A national strategy for recovery in the education sector needs to build on evidence from the field and aggregating multiple sources of data. The UN with CSOs can and should bridge the temporary challenges of setting up such a space of exchange, knowledge sharing, co-creation, and impact monitoring.

The policy paper ends by presenting detailed recommendation to three sets of stakeholders, mainly, the CSOs, the donors, and the UN agencies. Other research work conducted by Duderi aims to provide more detailed recommendation for reform and reconstruction in the education system that pertains to the roles of other stakeholders.

## 1. Context

As part of its mandate to support the recovery of the education process in Syria, Duderi has commissioned several research papers to develop deep knowledge on the current conditions of the education sector in Syria. These papers are at the core of consolidating the evidence-base needed to engage Syrians from all walks of life in dialogue and partnerships to improve the dire conditions facing a whole generation of young people in the war-torn country. Different stakeholders will need to work together to reform the system and establish the normative and practical approaches for reconstructing the public education system in the post-conflict. One key stakeholder in the process is the Syrian civil society represented by a myriad of large and small civil society organizations (CSOs), as well as by local civic initiatives and community-based action groups. This policy paper is meant to present key lessons learned from a recent study on the role of civic actors in the Education sector to derive recommendation for enhancing and leveraging their role in the future.

The research titled "The Engagement of Civic Actors in the Education Sector in Syria: Mapping the Terrain," was developed in July and August of 2024. Its findings are available separately; readers are advised to revert to that report to delve deeply into the detailed conditions on the ground in six Syrian regions mainly: Dara'a, Sweida, Raqqa, Idlib, Afrin, and Qamishli. The report also offers a broad exploration of the role CSOs play in the education sector across the whole country. It synthesizes findings from qualitative interviews with 55 key informants alongside extensive desk research and online verification. The study aimed to understand CSOs' capacity as key stakeholders in education and how they promote values like social peace and equal citizenship to support healing and recovery in the post-conflict.

This policy paper builds on the findings of the said report to provide overall lessons learned and practical recommendations. While this policy paper is focused on the transformations needed to

enhance and maximize the impact of civic actors in the sector, together with other research conducted by Duderer, the aim is to lay the foundations for a road map for the recovery and reconstruction of the education system in the future.

The research revealed a significant but uneven presence of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Syria's education sector, with a strong concentration of large CSOs in the Northwest; otherwise, the majority of civic actors involved in education are either small CSOs or community-based organizations. These organizations operate in challenging environments, navigating complex relationships with formal and quasi-formal institutions that prioritize ideological control over the quality and relevance of education. With the private sector largely inaccessible due to high costs, CSOs play a crucial role in filling gaps, particularly in non-formal and emergency education. They provide remedial programs for students who have dropped out, offer non-formal education activities and vital psychosocial support, as well as support the provision of logistics, and financial support to regular schools. However, their efforts are often hampered by weak networking with other stakeholders and a perception that they are well-funded, which leads to exploitation, indirect extractions of fees and resources, and pressures for nepotism in their hiring processes by local authorities and de facto powers.

Financial and human resource challenges further strain CSOs, particularly smaller ones that rely heavily on short-term donor funding, which undermines their long-term planning and sustainability. As donor funds are decreasing, many CSOs are struggling to maintain services, with expatriate funds and local philanthropy proving relevant, but insufficient to meet the sector's needs. CSOs tend to offer better salaries than regular schools, thus, attracting qualified staff from regular schools. However, the reliance on short-term funding results in high turnover in staff, which hinders the development of quality human resources. Despite providing better educational environments than public schools, with more psychosocial support and interactive learning, CSOs have limited reach, and access to education remains a challenge, especially for girls facing economic and security barriers.

CSOs generally adhere to the curricula mandated by local authorities and de facto powers. Yet they tend to concentrate mainly on core subjects like reading, writing, math, and science, particularly in emergency and remedial education contexts, thus avoiding the ideological or political content of curricula. CSOs' programs and agendas profess nominal adherence to values of social peace and equal citizenship. However, they have to navigate a fine line on how to interpret these values. Caught between donors, de facto powers, local authorities, and community social norms, CSOs often pay only nominal attention to the formal dissemination of values in the textbooks, preferring instead to translate them as practical skills of non-violent communication and equity of participation in non-formal activities. Most often, the interpretation of normative values is relegated to local teachers who will choose to interpret them based on local norms. This ends up supporting the creation of values that contribute to local solidarity within the community acting as a "fence" as opposed to supporting values that help communities to create "bridges" to other communities. CSOs have weak monitoring processes focused on inputs to the education system and not outcomes. Control over the dissemination of values and other educational outcomes is weak, resulting in highly divergent outcomes across the country.

The accreditation of certificates is formally available after passing the exams mandated by the central government in Damascus. In many parts of the country accreditation is only possible through special arrangements with less-than-optimal levels of recognition to secure entry into the job market or further studies in universities. Parents continue to value formal accreditation, sometimes taking significant risks to send their children across the conflict lines to take formal exams. Parental

involvement in CSO activities is generally limited. And in many parts of the country parents are disenchanted with the outcomes of the educational process; they are taking their children out of schools to find paying work.

With donor aid dwindling, many local initiatives are providing new forms of social and community capital ranging linking local community resources and volunteers with expatriate remittances to develop workable solutions. There is a growing view among local communities that while CSOs' work in Syria was valuable and covered an essential gap in the provision of educational services, CSOs' work will not be scalable to meet all needs. The innovation and focus on quality, and the role of the teachers should be mainstreamed in regular schools to support universal access to education as opposed to creating parallel service provision mechanisms that can benefit only a small segment of the population. To maximize their impact, CSOs should transition from the hyper localization approach and the direct management of schools under emergency conditions to supporting the return to normal education, aligning their mission with long-term national goals for a more sustainable impact on Syria's education sector.

## 2. Main Lessons Learned

The mapping of CSO's engagement in the education sector report explored in detail the nature of the eco-system surrounding the work of the CSOs. In the following section, the key lessons learnt are presented under specific themes to highlight the opportunities and risks to suggest relevant entry points for the scaling up and maximizing of CSO's engagement in the sector. Learning from the current practices is critical to avoid pitfalls and expand opportunities. This is not an assessment of the work of the CSOs per se, as much as an attempt of looking forward. Many of the processes devised by the CSOs were specific to their time and place. Reviewing lessons from the past is meant to chart possibilities to develop and not to sit in judgment over the brave work that was carried out in the direst of circumstances by civic actors. CSOs undertook major risks just to ensure that a generation of Syrians still had a chance to have a future. This paper is meant to build on their work moving ahead.

Key lessons learned from that research can be summarized under the following headings:

### Teachers

Teachers are the most critical elements in the success and failure of any educational process. Their qualification and ability to provide a safe and productive classroom environment is key to providing quality education, safe and inclusive classrooms, and the introduction of innovative learning opportunities. Teachers are also at the forefront of introducing core values to students. When properly trained by the CSOs they were able to negotiate complex cultural issues and social norms and still introduce critical values such as equal citizenship and social peace through play and extra-curricular learning modules. CSOs often lured the most qualified among them away from the formal education system but could not secure their employment. This led to a gradual brain drain of qualified educators away from scalable and sustainable service delivery processes in the regular schools to short term jobs that did not contribute to the long-term development of educational outcomes.

The most successful approaches to building human resources happened when CSOs or community groups supported teachers in the regular schools rather than pulling them away to CSO-run schools

or programs. CSOs provided teachers in the regular schools with training, teaching materials, subsidies for transportation and in some cases direct and indirect subsidies for salaries. This enabled public schools to retain teachers, accumulate knowledge and preserve a modicum of equity between male and female teachers. Pulling the most qualified teachers away from relatively well-regulated public jobs may have created some entry points for women teachers to join the work force, but it has also instilled a culture of differential pay and treatment for men and women.

Working with teachers to enhance their ability to negotiate the introduction of values of peace and equality has far more impact than attempting to convince de facto powers to change their curricula. Teachers will tend to interpret values according to their perceptions of how their communities view such values. They have been left on their own to manage cultural complexities and different manifestations of social norms. Rather than leaving teachers on their own, providing them with best practices, tools, pedagogic methods will pay off in terms of transforming abstract value systems into daily practice. It is a far more sustainable and scalable approach than trying to introduce these values through parallel programs outside the schools.

Many donors look at public teachers as public servants and opt to avoid reputational risks of supporting them for fear of being seen as supporting de facto authorities. Donor redlines need to be eased out. As aid is dwindling, the only possible way to cover the gap is to support teachers in the schools than to provide high quality education in CSO-run settings. This shift will not undermine the work of CSOs. Indeed, it might give CSOs a far more relevant role to scale up their work and increase their leverage and impact. Focusing on teachers' training and bringing teachers together from different schools and regions to exchange knowledge and develop teaching practices is also key to developing bridges to reunify the education system in the future.

## **Localization and community capital**

Local efforts to meet growing needs and mobilize resources proved to be one of the most promising approaches to the provision of education services in the most remote and hard to reach areas as well as in the most disenfranchised cases. Communities collaborated, and different local stakeholders brought their distinct resources to leverage critical social and community capital in support of the education process in their areas. Larger CSOs often fail to capture this dynamic as their standard operating procedures and donor regulations inhibit working with communities beyond the narrow confines of needs' assessment studies and occasional consultations with "beneficiary groups". Localization means putting the community stakeholders at the helm. Indeed, it aims to allow them to lead and support their leadership by complimenting their initiatives and maximizing their resources.

However, that is not what is happening under the rubric of localization on the ground in Syria today. Localization is construed as further fragmentation of the already highly fragmented efforts to provide service. It is allowing communities to become independent one from the other rather than building bridges. It is locking the education process entirely under the real or imagined pressures of community norms and denying girls fair access to education and future jobs of their choice. Moreover, it is hindering the possibilities of leveraging resources, creating synergies, sharing knowledge, and scaling up their work by creating economies of scale from the bottom up. Donors today are leveraging economies of scale at the top by providing their resources to larger CSOs who then retail them to smaller ones. This is creating competition over resources and dependency on aid. Communities are not becoming more independent and education processes are not becoming more scalable and sustainable.



For localization to work effectively, donor aid should not be seen as supplying a service but enhancing and leveraging resources to meet local demands and priorities. These resources include local authorities' resources, local contributions, parents' own resources, community volunteers, and expatriate remittances. Where donor aid can make a difference is in providing them with knowledge, resources to build bridges beyond their communities to build economies of scale from the bottom up. Exchange of knowledge and experiences, building access from the local level to the broader national and international arenas using virtual communication tools to reach knowledge resources. Extreme localization contributed to one type of social capital that draws fences around communities. It is contributing to the deepening of the social and political divides in the country. Resources will be needed to help leverage successes at the local level and build bridges to other communities. Localization needs to be balanced by a country wide approach to de-conflicting the education system, with the hope that one day Syrian would be reunited.

## **Scalability and sustainability**

Most funding for CSOs working on education is planned, implemented, and monitored based on short-term project cycles. This has prevented CSOs to develop long term strategies to meet demand for their work and create real impact. Educational projects conceived in the humanitarian mode of operation under the rubric of "emergency education," may have contributed to returning some children back to school. Programs may have also had some relevance to provide much needed psycho-social support. However, the emergency education is not a substitute for regular schools. Educational needs should be considered in the long-run, cumulative inputs are needed to support the creation of sustainable result chains; project cycles not extending beyond a few months, or at best one year, do not allow for such accumulation.

CSOs invest heavily in training teachers and setting the necessary mobilization for their projects only to discover that their funding is being cut or reduced. They will have to lay off staff they had invested in training and risk losing them. As these teachers are often recruited away from the regular schools, they cannot be returned to the regular schools. In sum, short term cycles have helped to drain them away from the regular schools, not to mention created heavy mobilization and demobilization costs. CSOs may have provided vital services, and donor funds may have helped to deliver quality services and much needed innovation in the sector, but they are not sustainable nor are they scalable.

CSOs have little elasticity to expand or absorb risks as a result. Their focus on serving a defined number of beneficiaries has disenfranchised the ones that had not been served. CSO's monitoring and evaluation procedures under such modality of work are focused mainly on tracking inputs (number of students, equity of access, number of classes, teacher/student ratios, supplies and logistics delivered, etc.). Sometimes they will report on direct outputs (how many people were admitted to school after taking the remedial classes). But in general, there is no reporting on impact. No one is reporting on the quality of education and the trajectories of students after they finish the programs. There is no reporting on how skills and values are assimilated, and most importantly there is no clear evidence as to what percentage of the demand is being covered. Is the input providing value for money, is it efficient and effective, is it relevant, or has it reduced illiteracy and dropout in the area?

One of the key problems of the current approach to funding is its reliance on supply side funding mechanisms. These are not likely to create multiplier in the system. This approach creates inflationary tendencies as it tends to induce highly unbalanced pay scales and causes deformation is

labor markets. Supply side approaches to aid tend to cover the bulk of the resources needed to achieve educational standards that are far better than the locally available ones. This leads to dependency on aid and total collapse of projects and processes once aid is reduced or stopped. Alternatively, demand side aid is the preferred mode of support that expatriates are adopting when sending their remittances, and it is showing promise for scalability and sustainability. Demand side support leverages the existing resources and closes critical gaps. The bulk of the resource is dispensed locally at market values. The financial resources are matched by community and parent volunteers. It provides appropriate levels of innovation of quality (perhaps not as impressive as in the case of the supply side approach), but it is more sustainable, and far more scalable. Multipliers allow the external aid to extend far beyond its immediate purchasing power, and the disturbances it is likely to cause in the local job market are minimal. Simply put a dollar put on the demand side is likely to go three to four times longer than on the supply side.

The current mode of CSOs may not favor the switch to demand side operations. The overheads and administrative benefits to their operations are better served in the supply side approach. But many CSOs are starting to learn that with the dwindling of donor aid, they need to change the way they operate. The early recovery process discussed at large in Syria today, should not be about what sectors will be served and which ones will be cut out. It should focus on what modes of operation and funding will prevail. In the early recovery process, aid should be directed to the core institutions delivering the educational service. CSOs can still play vital roles in providing training, support for logistics and innovation. They can focus on promoting better communication between the schools and the community and holding the public institutions to account for performing their duties in the provision of educational services. However, they should step away from the provision of the service themselves. The early recovery process should not entail be reduced to the question of supporting either the CSOs or the regular schools but should focus on creating better synergies and division of labor to maximize the impact of each role. CSOs can also play the role of a safe channel to support regular schools while minimizing the influence of de facto powers.

## **Equal citizenship, and social peace**

Values are a contested issue even when war is not raging in a country. In Syria the war has created divergent value systems. CSOs had to maneuver a very dangerous path around the question of values. They try to give students in the different parts of Syria a minimum understanding of basic civic values like equal citizenship and peace despite the diversity of other values imposed by de facto powers. Different stakeholders are involved in shaping the debate on values including local authorities, national authorities, different military powers, and to a certain extent the donors. But the most influential actors in pushing the values that CSOs end up promoting on the ground are the parents and the larger CSOs that channel donor aid to smaller ones.

On the ground CSOs needed to mitigate the conflicting values systems. They had to pay heed to the value systems of the de facto powers dominating their areas by adopting their curricula, their official holidays, and celebrations, as well as their indirect interpretations of the value system. They had to also contend with diverse community pressures expressed by the parents of the children. These pressures are not constant and should not be stereotyped. Value systems are in constant flux as communities often utilize value as identity markers to protect the community's internal solidarity. They will likely keep the "signifiers" of the values they profess to carry, but gradually accept shifts in the signified of such values, and still translate these values into different and often contradictory

practices as the “referents” of these values are constantly being re-negotiated socially and politically.<sup>1</sup>

To avert direct confrontations, CSOS had to refrain from discussing values overtly. Understanding that any attempt at formal interpretation and engaging students and parents in discussions on values may get them into trouble, they opt to retain generic notions of values in their formal discourses and literature, and leave the interpretation of values to the teachers in the classrooms. In cases where the teachers were well prepared, they delivered very useful interpretations of values related to equality and peace through play, informal activities and the teaching of practical skills that help students develop non-violent communication, inclusiveness, and sharing skills.

In cases where the teachers were ill equipped, they ended up translating these values into generic enunciation of values drawing on simplistic or reductionist interpretations. Citizenship becomes an obligation to fulfil duties devoid of rights. Peace becomes a form of internal harmony inside the community (fence) instead of accepting other communities (bridge). Acceptance of difference is framed within a notion of “tasamouh” or tolerance, a condescending attitude of the more powerful to accept the less powerful. Values are being disseminated along with their countervalues; with peace being discussed while accepting and promoting hate speech, and equality is thought of in terms of group rights and not individual ones. In general, CSOs have very weak control and monitoring of how their values are being disseminated on the ground. They lack the resources to do so with their focus directed to tracking the inputs and outputs of short-term project activities, rather than tracking the impact of their programs and assessing how skills and values are being disseminated.

Many observers are focused on the presence or lack thereof of values in the curricula. This may be an important factor to consider over the long run, but for the time being this is a futile exercise. The main attention should be given to the way these values are negotiated in the classrooms through informal and non-formal education. The de facto powers will not allow any formal challenge to their curricula. Focus should be set on the teachers to improve their ability to interpret values in terms of skills and practice. Efforts should be exerted to shift the “referent” of the values and not their “signifiers”.

## **Diversity within a national education system**

The current efforts to save what can be saved in terms of access to schools for children was certainly warranted five or six years ago. Donors and international organizations such as the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) have put tremendous resources and efforts to facilitate the access to education in all parts of Syria. UNICEF has negotiated streamlining curricula to ensure a minimum of standards of skill acquisition, albeit they were not able to unify curricula. They

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<sup>1</sup> Borrowing from the field of semiotics, the term signifier here refers to the physical form of the sign (its enunciated sound or written form). In contrast, the signified can be explained as the meaning or idea expressed by the sign. This idea may or may not coincide with the physical reality (the referent) of how the idea is manifest in the physical world. Thus, in the context of this report, when one speaks of “equality,” its signifier is nothing more than an 8-letter word inscribed on paper. Its signified is an ideal of people being equal. But that ideal is present in our minds only. The referent would be the way we interpret the value in our daily practice, so the referent can involve practices like equal right to speak but not equal rights to inherit or separate but equal rights to access education, which are different ways equality can be practiced or interpreted by institutions and individuals.

were also not able to extend accreditation to areas not under the control of the central government of Syria.

Donors are placing their reputational risks above the considerations of providing universal education in Syria. They fear that supporting the delivery of education in regular schools would lead to the legitimization of de facto actors, involved in crimes, or placed on terrorist lists, steered them to give their funding to CSOs instead. This had many manifest advantages for narrowing the gap of dropouts from schools and providing badly needed approaches for innovation and active learning in education. However, the diversity brought by the CSOs is both an advantage and a major risk. On the one hand, CSOs have created new approaches to learning and broke the traditional patterns of learning of indoctrination through memorization prevalent in the Syrian education system. On the other hand, the resources, provided to CSOs were heterogenous to the point where some services received an abundance of funds, while other key educational services were left without any. Furthermore, diversity has not supported access to accredited educational certificates, and created fragmented educational practices that will be very hard to re-integrate into a single national educational system in the future.

Not enough resources were given to streamline the educational innovations. CSOs disseminate such knowledge by copycatting each other to facilitate access to donor funds. Parents are also often aware of these innovations and insist on having their children benefit from them. But mostly parents were concerned that their children were not receiving quality education in the formal schools and that their children's education is not accredited in many parts of the country, and even when it is, the quality is poor, that there are risks of their children's education becoming worthless. As a result, many parents are opting to pull their children from schools to seek monetizable work skills.

There will not be a unified national educational system in the foreseeable future, unless the deadlock in political negotiations was overcome. The priority for the coming period is to develop workable solutions to bridge the gap of access to education both quantitatively and qualitatively. Donors' aversion to funding regular schools needs to be overcome. The finding of the research point very clearly that credit for improved education and other services in any area is being awarded to the de facto powers anyway, despite donors' abstaining from funding local authorities directly. If CSOs are going to be the only entry points to donor funding, they should be directed to create indirect access to regular schools. They will need to bring in their innovations and resources to support education for all in regular schools and no longer be funded to work on a select set of beneficiaries.

In doing so donors can create a critical mass of support that can help leverage important opportunities to streamlining the accreditation of certificates, harmonizing the values being disseminated in regular schools, introducing innovations in learning. They would be doing all of this by scaling up and providing fair access to all. Diversity is appreciated, but the absence of a national education system is not diversity, it is creating chaos and segregated communities; it is rubbing Syria's youth from their futures.

Donors and CSOs alike need to search for practical entry points to re-engage the regular schools, provide them with resources, enhance the quality of teachers, streamline the skills and values being taught in those schools and enhance their accreditation. The practical approach to this issue will not happen by focusing on one set of schools or one set of issues. Some of these issues might be more of a priority in some areas than others, but all areas have very urgent priorities in the education sector. This might be the single most important entry point for mediation efforts to bring a fair and quality education to all.

## Knowledge creation, M&E, and national statistics

CSOs developed a wide range of teaching tools, pedagogic approaches, and highly relevant local knowledge. This wealth of knowledge is not systematically monitored, evaluated nor stored. Institutional memories within most CSOs are short term memories. Teachers' and administrators' turnover is very high. Most lessons learned in the field are documented on an anecdotal level. Donors and CSOs have adopted formulaic approaches to monitoring and evaluation processes that focus on inputs and occasionally on outputs but rarely on outcomes. Third party evaluation processes are limited in their scope to individual projects. Very little attention is given to assessing the cumulative impact of the work in the sector. The positive learning outcomes of the individual projects soon dissipate after the next project cycle.

The short-term focus of emergency education under the rubric of humanitarian aid to Syria has failed to generate strategic approach to save a lost generation of children and young people. It has failed to track in real time the feedback and knowledge emerging from schools, it is not capable to establish sufficiently granular statistics about conditions in the sector across all of Syria, and it is not able to even predict patterns of demand. Monitoring and evaluation of individual projects cannot track aid effectiveness and efficiency, nor are they capable to track harm done.

Aggregating data about the education sector is a national responsibility. National educational plans and strategies need to be informed. But the political fragmentation of the country will not allow for such a coordinated effort in the foreseeable future. UNICEF through its various hubs can develop a basic benchmark based on a few key indicators. This is critical to directing aid to where demand is taking place; it is also important to set up a baseline for the future. But for an effective monitoring process to take place, the nature of the indicators needs to transform from input and output based data to outcome-based data. It needs to be published in formats that are usable for CSOs (granular data, gap analysis, segmentation of sub-sectors within the education system, etc.). The current reporting on educational outcomes is very limited. The UN data can give an overall estimate on dropout rates, but they cannot assess pockets of resistance to the education process, nor can they point to the quality of education being provided. How many students in Syria are graduating from elementary schools without mastering the minimum literacy skills?

CSOs are often afforded some resources to do basic monitoring of projects but not on the level of impact. They do not have the resources to assess how skills and values are being disseminated. Attempts at harvesting data are sporadic, often covering one part of Syria at the exclusion of others. Knowledge and lessons learnt are not aggregated and disseminated because the CSOs have no resources to document them and coordinate knowledge sharing. Indeed, if anything, donors' due diligence producers discourage collaboration and sharing of results for fear of double counting outputs per units of inputs. Mostly this culture has divided the country into small islands that do not communicate with each other and will never be able to join forces in the future to build a unified national education system.

Calling for a national education system is not calling for regression towards an old rigid pedagogic process. It is a call for reform. But reform does not happen in the abstract. It needs local knowledge and the integration of knowledge tools to scale up and influence national approaches. It is a call to share experiences and share evaluations of lessons learned (both successes and failures). Resources need to be created to support the aggregation of efforts; if not by bridging the divides between formal education stakeholders, then at least by allowing CSOs to play the role of the bridge for now.

### 3. Main Recommendations

A great deal of discussions is taking place today concerning the role of education in the early recovery process. Donors, UN agencies and CSOs are debating the merits and challenges of moving towards a new paradigm for delivering aid in Syria. Unfortunately, the bulk of these discussions are still operating from within the humanitarian approach to aid, further entrenching the inefficient modes of dispensing an ever-shrinking pool of aid money. The lessons learned from the research at hand are clear: streamline the education processes within the regular schools and focus the role of CSOs on supporting knowledge creation, teacher training, monitoring and accountability. Until there is acceptance of delivering donor aid directly to regular school, CSOs can play the role of a proxy to support formal education. CSOs can and should support the logistics of regular schools, they can help with streamlining the dissemination of skills and values through non-formal and informal learning processes on the side of formal education services. CSOs will always be a parallel process for pushing innovation in learning, but they are no substitute for regular schools.

To translate the lessons learned from the research to practical interventions, recommendations were tailored to address the mandates of the different stakeholders.

#### Recommendations to CSOs

Civil society action will remain one of the most relevant factors contributing to the recovery of the education sector. However, to be effective they need to address the following concerns in their future work:

- 1- CSOs' work is not a substitute for regular schools, CSOs need to direct their mandates to support formal education and compliment it as much as possible by working on covering the gaps not covered by formal education. This may reduce their ability to impact the pedagogic process in terms of designing and modifying curricula, but it will provide them with privileged access to scale up and expand access to education for all.
- 2- Their real impact will be felt through non-formal, informal, and complimentary psychosocial programming that can bring new learning methods to the core of the formal education. By training regular schoolteachers, they can be far more impactful than by trying to pull these teachers away towards unsustainable parallel educational processes.
- 3- CSOs need to develop better accountability frameworks by opening dialogues to parents and developing monitoring and evaluation systems based on impact and not on inputs and outputs. Their evaluation of impact needs to be designed for tracking long-term impacts accumulation of skills and values; likewise, they need to develop long-term assessments of risks and harm done through their programming.
- 4- CSOs need to scale up their knowledge sharing platforms and learn to collaborate with other partners. Few of them are likely to survive if they competed negatively, but they are likely to develop more innovative and sustainable approaches to do their work by creating synergies with other partners.
- 5- Sooner or later the different educational systems will have to be merged once the political deadlock in Syria is resolved. Merging the divergent systems on the ground will be a daunting task. CSOs need to start developing bridges among all communities in Syria to understand the conditions on the ground, promote shared educational standards and expand the discussion on values.

- 6- The ultimate and most sustainable resource to support the educational system is the Syrian communities whether inside Syria or abroad. CSOs need to reduce their dependency on dwindling donor funds and look at leveraging local resources and communal social capital. This means finding workable arrangements with all stakeholders on the ground. The supply side humanitarian aid is ending, and no amount of advocacy is likely to bring it back.

## Recommendations to donors

Donors have different and conflicting priorities in Syria. The early recovery paradigm is both an opportunity and a challenge. Abandoning the educational sector in Syria will spell major risks for migration and radicalization of youth in the future. Donors need to transform their support in the sector to meet increasing demand with dwindling resources. The early recovery approach to education is not about being selective on which actors to fund and which activities to cut. It is about leveraging existing resources to facilitate the transition towards more sustainable solutions. This means they need to focus on:

- 1- Channeling resources to the regular schools. With the understanding that donors cannot fund local authorities directly, they can use CSOs to provide entry points into the regular schools across Syria. A minimum of due diligence is still needed to avoid funding de facto powers, but there should be a clear firewall between teachers and school administrators on the one hand, and the political system in place on the other. No amount of due diligence will resolve the perception of legitimacy afforded to the de facto powers as a result of improved services. But due diligence can ensure that funds are not heading in that direction.
- 2- CSOs should be encouraged to collaborate and to leverage other resources to move away from complete dependency on aid and scale up their operations. Accounting systems should be incentivized to increase local contributions to projects in both in-kind and financial terms.
- 3- CSOs should be afforded spaces to open relevant dialogues with parents and local communities, as well as among themselves across the different communities in Syria to develop a common understanding regarding learning outcomes, civic values, and pedagogic methods. CSOs need to share knowledge and learn from each other, the surest ways for replication of knowledge are not through unidirectional training modules, but in incentivizing co-learning and co-creation experiences. The current copycatting among CSOs can be far more productive if it involved mutual learning experiences in the field.
- 4- Aid needs to move from the supply side mode to the demand side. It needs to break the cycle of dependency. The best way to do that is to follow communities in the way they are working to solve their problems and enhance their access to knowledge and resources rather than create alternative delivery structures. However, the current models of localization that are promoted in donor circles are not suitable. Localization of implementation needs to be strongly connected to bridging and co-creation opportunities, lest we want to further fragment the country.
- 5- Donors need to work with the UN agencies and especially the UNICEF to coordinate possibilities for leveraging their aid to bring mutual benefits to educational processes and accreditation to all students. Entry points will be hard to secure, but keeping the delivery of education services fragmented without formal recognition of educational outcomes will only exacerbate the situation over the long run. The collective weight of donors in this regard is not to be underestimated. Holding the UN accountable to transform their operations from humanitarian interpretations to an early recovery framework, is needed if the aim was to provide education and not merely to be seen as doing something in the field.

## Recommendations to the UN agencies

The United Nations' organizations have a vital role to play in the recovery of the education sector and assuring universal access to education for all. However, The UN has grown to be as dependent on donor aid as the CSOs. They often overlook opportunities coming from the bottom-up, and often interpret development in a top-down way. Consultation with CSOs and communities are mostly formulaic. The relationship of the UN agency to local CSOs is not one of partnership but of project-cycle management and contractual arrangements. To be more effective, the UN agencies need to consider the following:

- 1- It is high time to move from emergency education under the humanitarian work mode to more sustainable approaches of bringing children in all parts of Syria to join regular schools. CSOs will likely be the main channel of moving resources in ways that are acceptable to donors, but CSOs need to be directed to work closely to compliment regular schools, enhance the quality of service they perform and provide better accountability for their work, rather than setting parallel educational processes.
- 2- CSOs can, and should, be supported to develop innovative approaches to education, but this should take place in the context of mainstreaming and scaling the impacts of these innovations across the whole educational system in all parts of Syria.
- 3- The issue of accreditation of educational certificates is a sticking point, with the central government not wanting to extend its accreditation to areas outside its control, and areas outside the control of Damascus lobbying for independent accreditation. The UN will have to think of the larger package of educational services as a means of providing the necessary incentives to work on the problem of accreditation as part of the search for wider entry points to equitably support education for all. It cannot be singled out as a “confidence-building measures” in a-step-for-step logic. Trust is a two-way street, and all parties need to find some assurance in moving forward.
- 4- Evolving a national recovery framework for education should entail more than designating where the money is spent, but it should answer how the money is spent. Moving away from supply side modalities to compliment bottom-up approaches is key for scalability. However, while localization is relevant to leverage local resources and maximize the outputs of the educational process, it is not a substitute to coordination, developing common approaches, and sharing knowledge.
- 5- The UN, and especially UNICEF need to develop a broad partnership with CSOs working in the education sector from all parts of Syria and not in each area separately. There are many obstacles for such a move, but bridging the political, cultural, and logistical divides is critical to unifying national standards, sharing knowledge, and learning from bottom-up processes to re-imagine the possibility of a national educational system down the line.
- 6- The UN needs to develop a more transparent open database and tracking mechanism to assess the impact of education processes. CSOs can help crowd-source data from their programs. It will act as a custodian of national data on education, providing a sustainable and finely aggregated evidence necessary to build national indicators. Building the strategy to reunite the Syrian national education system in the future will require clear baselines and will evidence-based approaches to tracking progress. This is another sticking issue, considering the contested reliance on national statistics and the question of data sovereignty. In the context of the early recovery framework, an expansion and modification of the Humanitarian Needs Outlook (HNO) process can be developed to collect and aggregate the data for the time being.