

Report:

Enhancing the Role of Civil Society in Syria

April 2026



CENTER FOR CONFLICT AND HUMANITARIAN STUDIES



The Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies extends its sincere appreciation to all partners, organizations, and local associations in Syria for their active contributions and pivotal role in implementing this project. Their close cooperation and professional commitment have had a significant impact on the successful delivery of these workshops and the achievement of their intended objectives.



Sessions Timetable

Damascus	9 November 2025
Homs	10 November 2025
Hama	11 November 2025
Idlib	12 November 2025
Dara'a	7 February 2026
Suburb of Idlib	8 February 2026
Aleppo	9 February 2026
Tartous	10 February 2026
Latakia	9 April 2026

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Executive Summary

In collaboration with World Humanitarian Action Forum (WHAF), Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) organized nine-day sessions in Syria under the title “Enhancing the Role of Civil Society in Syria.” The sessions took place in two phases. The first phase was undertaken in Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Idlib between the 9th of November and the 12th of November 2025. The second phase started on the 7th of February 2026 and concluded on the 9th of April 2026, taking place in Dara’a, Suburb of Idlib (Jisr al-Shughur), Aleppo, Tartous, and Latakia. These sessions gathered 174 individuals (104 male and 68 female) who represent the Syrian civil society, thereby providing a conducive environment to discuss the existing realities, issues faced, and way forward.

These sessions served three primary objectives. Firstly, to understand the existing reality and scenario in which the civil society operates within the Syrian context, which is essential to lay the groundwork to examining the barriers and analyze the prospects for change and improvement in their work. The second objective of the dialogue sessions was to foster increased consultation, exchange of views, and shared comprehension of the challenges and opportunities in the face of civil society in Syria, which can lead to the generation of recommendations that can be utilized by diverse civil society actors. The last objective was to produce local knowledge aiming to enhance the capacities and capabilities of CSOs in Syria, this empowering their role within the context of the country’s situation.

The daily agenda followed a comprehensive format, including diverse activities, to maximize the impact of the sessions. This included open discussion among the participants, group discussions focusing on certain themes, participating in live surveys and discussing the results during the session, and question and answer (Q&A) section with participants, asking their perspective to improve the role of civil society.

Prior to the launch of each session, participants were informed about the nature of the sessions and the application of Chatham House rules, giving them the opportunity to feel safe and provide critical input. Additionally, they were informed about the use of information retrieved from the sessions to produce research outputs, such as policy briefs, peer-reviewed articles, and reports, highlighting the anonymity of their personal details in all times.

The active participation of various civil society actors in nine provinces proved highly effective in the dialogue sessions as they critically delved into pressing issues surrounding their work in Syria. With the empowerment of civil society and decisive involvement in the rebuilding of Syria as their collective goal, the participants passionately engaged in constructive discussions, offering diverse perspectives and expertise to propose pragmatic solutions that could alleviate the challenges they face throughout their work in the complex context of the country. Through their unwavering dedication and determination, participants demonstrated the transformative power and significance of inclusive dialogue, paving the way for tangible advancements in the repositioning of the Syrian civil society after the fall of Assad.

CHS positively noted the commitment and strong desire among the participants to be part of such dialogues that aim to build their capacities and enhance their role in this new phase. Overall, the dialogue sessions successfully achieved its objectives of becoming a safe and conducive platform for participants to talk freely about their first-hand experiences and to highlight what they need most in the current phase to make an effective change through the upcoming events and projects. They had the chance to discuss various aspects of civil society's work, without fearing any consequences, instead working toward increasing their impact on society and improving their contribution to the country's recovery.

Background and Rationale

In 2011, influenced by the series of Arab Spring protests, Syrian people took the streets to protest against the regime led by Bashar Al-Assad, asking for a new, democratic system that respects the rights and freedom of all Syrians. These calls were responded with brutality and violence, killing and wounding many, while further triggering people to join the revolution. The crisis caused devastating destruction, displaced millions of Syrians both internally and abroad, and deteriorated critical sectors in the country (IOM, 2025; Kabbani, 2025). Almost 14 years later, the unexpected fall of Assad regime on December 8, 2024, left Syrians in a new reality, marking the end of 53 years of authoritarian rule of the same family (Al Jazeera, 2025). This has changed and even led to reshaping or reconceptualizing several aspects and areas that were repressed under the previous regime. Over the course of thirteen years of conflict (2011–2024), Syrian society has undergone profound political, social, and economic transformations (CIHRS, 2025). On one hand, these shifts have generated unprecedented challenges for local organizations and community initiatives. On the other hand, they have activated the roles of civil society actors, pushing them to take on pivotal roles—such as educational support, women's empowerment initiatives, and civic-leadership programs—and break the decades-long restrictions imposed by the regime (CIHRS, 2025; Kangarlou & Khurma, 2025).

Even with the fall of Assad regime, civil society actors have been facing new challenges that shape the civic space. Internal crises have erupted among different segments of the Syrian society in post-Assad Syria. These became evident during the sectarian crisis in Latakia and Suwayda (Siddiqui, 2025), and the armed tension between the Syrian army and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Kurdish-populated areas (Gritten & Hagan, 2026). Such events reflect the dire need for civil society to strengthen social cohesion. However, amid these crises, the influence of civil society did not meet the expectations, despite their active involvement and endeavors to rebuild and secure sustainable peace in Syria.

Within this context, a clear need has emerged to bolster civil society efforts and create an inclusive space for dialogue between civil society actors and the rapidly evolving social and political environment. Such a space is essential to explore pathways for the future of Syrian civil society in the absence of a coherent national roadmap that reflects the aspirations of Syrians themselves.

This moment represents a critical juncture. It calls for greater coordination among local humanitarian players and other key actors and for leveraging the diverse strengths as well as complementarities of civil society organizations (CSOs) and community cohesion initiatives. The dialogue sessions conducted under this initiative form an initial step toward rebuilding an effective relationship between Syrian civil society and its surrounding environment, including but not limited to the new Syrian government and international aid and development agencies. They are grounded in the conviction that, despite the hardships endured, Syrian civil society retains significant potential to contribute meaningfully to the country's future, particularly if it is granted adequate space, support, and recognition.

Objectives

The initiative aims to enhance the role of Syrian civil society as an effective and locally accepted actor in the post-conflict phase by:

- Assessing and analyzing the current state and needs of civil society
- Strengthening shared understanding of existing challenges and future opportunities
- Generating locally produced knowledge that contributes to the development of a strategic vision for empowering civil society.

The initiative generated a high level of in-depth, community-rooted reflection on the state and future trajectory of Syrian civil society. By convening civil society actors from different governorates, the initiative created one of the rare spaces for transparent engagement. The sessions revealed the extent to which local particularities continued to shape the civic landscape. Participants highlighted variations in governance arrangements, social and demographic conditions, the legacies of conflict, and emerging economic dynamics. Understanding these differences was essential for designing interventions capable of supporting an inclusive, coherent, and sustainable civic sector in a post-conflict Syria.

A central contribution of the initiative lay in its participatory methodology, which ensured that insights, priorities, and proposed pathways emerged directly from those most engaged in civic life. Rather than applying external frameworks, the process allowed participants to define the conceptual and practical contours of civil society's future role. As a result, the outcomes reflected locally grounded expertise and the aspirations of communities across the country.

Ultimately, the significance of the initiative rested not only in the knowledge gathered but also in the relationships built and the collective vision that began to take shape. By identifying common values and charting possible transitions for the sector, it established a solid foundation for subsequent stages of the initiative and for the broader strengthening of Syrian civil society in the post-conflict period.

Methodology

The initiative consists of nine dialogue sessions held across several Syrian provinces. The first phase was held in November 2025, with the opening session taking place in Damascus on the 9th of November, followed by sessions in Homs, Hama, and Idlib on November 10, 11, and 12, respectively. After assessing the first phase and refining the initial outputs, the second phase took place on February 7, 8, 9, and 10, and April 9, in Dara'a, Suburb of Idlib (Jisr al-Shughur), Aleppo, Tartous, and Latakia, respectively.

The northeastern area consists of non-accessible regions and, therefore, is excluded from these phases. The ongoing tensions between the government and SDF have rendered provinces such as Al-Hasakah, Deir Al-Zour, and Al-Raqqah high-risk and operationally complex environments. As a result, these areas were not accessible during the first phase of the initiative. During the second phase, limited engagement became possible following a preliminary understanding between the government and SDF leadership. However, the security and political situation remains fragile and unpredictable, posing significant constraints on organizing in-person sessions and ensuring sustained implementation in these provinces.

These sessions provided an interactive forum, bringing together representatives of CSOs, religious and community leaders, youth initiatives, academics, local actors, feminist groups, and representatives of various syndicates. The data collected from the discussions will be analyzed to provide an analysis of challenges and opportunities, suggest policy recommendations for decision-makers and donor organizations, and produce a locally driven future roadmap to guide the Syrian civil society with respect to contextual factors and shared vision.

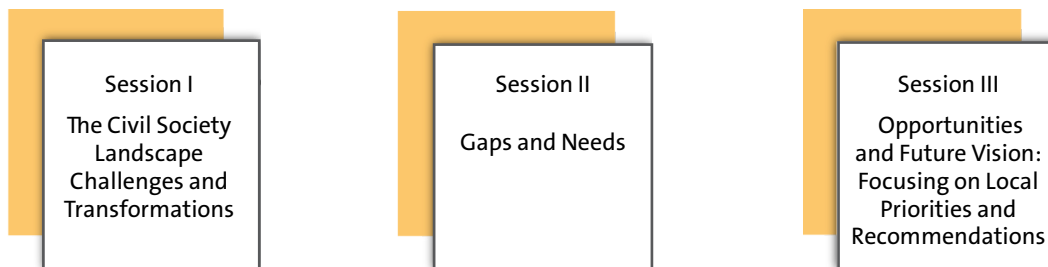
Agenda and session format

The sessions adhered to a structured and sequential agenda designed to guide participants through a comprehensive examination of the evolving role of civil society in Syria (see [appendix 1](#)). The agenda and format of the sessions ensured a participatory, coherent, and evidence-informed process that supported the development of grounded insights and forward-looking recommendations.

The agenda starts with the first thematic session, offering an in-depth assessment of the civil society landscape before and after the protracted crisis in Syria. Through an open and guided plenary discussion, participants explored the long-term impact of authoritarian governance on civic space, the emergence of both new and traditional actors, and the shifting dynamics between civil society, public authorities, and international actors. This allowed participants to get in direct discussion with various civil society representatives, promoting transparency and acceptance of each other in societal and community efforts. Additionally, an emphasis was placed on how the role, legitimacy, and visibility of CSOs have transformed in Syria.

The second session allowed participants to work in groups and discuss critical aspects of the work of civil society, followed by collective presentations by each group. Three main questions formed the basis of this session, as they focused on identifying the principal gaps and operational challenges faced by CSOs and community initiatives. The questions revolved around the priority needs linked to the transitional period, gaps in funding and organizational legitimacy, and the legal and bureaucratic constraints that continue to undermine institutional sustainability and long-term planning.

The program concluded with a final session dedicated to exploring the opportunities for strengthening the future role of civil society and developing localized priorities and actionable recommendations. This session provided a chance for open discussion on fundamental aspects of the Syrian civil society’s work, such as the capacity building needs of civil society actors, potential pathways for partnerships with the new government, and opportunities for impact-oriented civic engagement. It adopted an interactive exercise to facilitate discussion. To foster active participation and collect data on critical issues related to the positionality of civil society in Syria, a live survey was conducted with participants, and the results were displayed and reviewed. This was followed by a structured dialogue where the session generated context-specific priorities for different governorates, highlighted policy recommendations, and proposed practical mechanisms to strengthen local partnerships



Outcomes

The outcomes of the initiative can be categorized into three sub-sections. Through the sessions conducted in nine provinces, participants were granted the opportunity to discuss the situation of civil society during the Assad regime up until today, illustrating its positionality amid the rapidly evolving scenes in Syria. Beyond assessment of civil society, a remarkable part of discussion was dedicated to analyzing and highlighting the main challenges and barriers faced by various civil society actors in the post-Assad Syria. Lastly, participants provided policy recommendations and emphasized the opportunities that should be leveraged to enhance the capacities of civil society actors and better integrate them into recovery and reconciliation efforts, especially amid the fragile peace and fears of renewed conflicts.

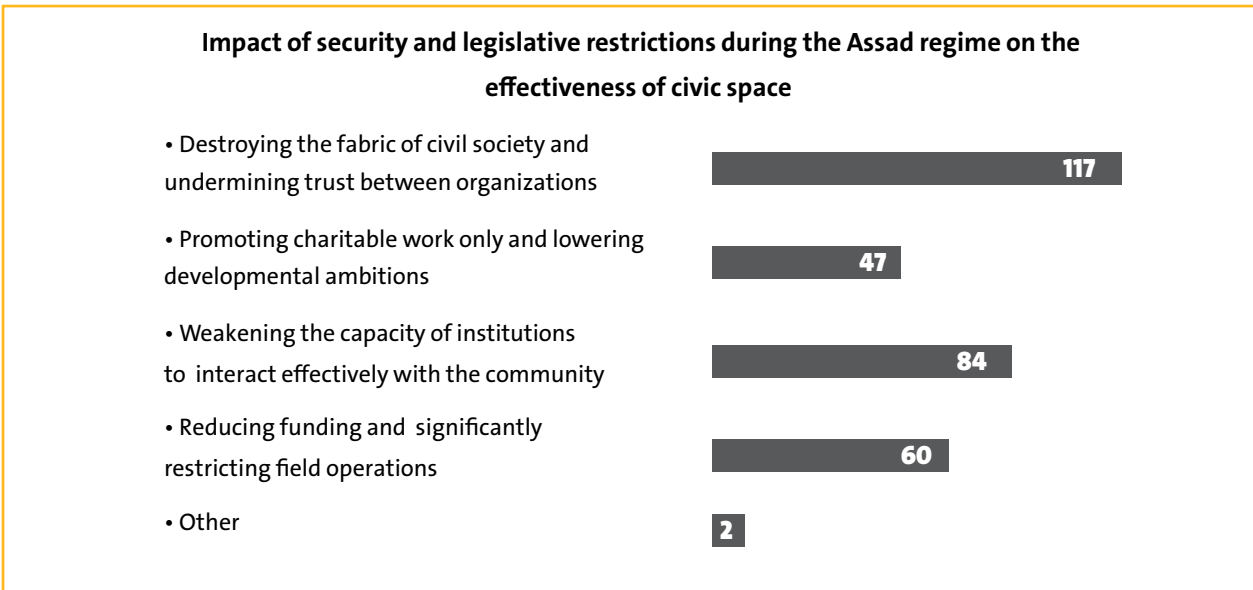
I. Contextualization of Syrian civil society

Across all nine provinces, participants described a civic landscape shaped over decades by authoritarian rule, where civil society functioned less as an independent social sphere and more as a constrained administrative extension embedded within state structures. Civic activity existed within a system designed to preserve political control, limiting civil society’s ability to operate as an autonomous social actor. Due to the Assad regime’s portrayal of civil society as opposition before 2011, initiatives by various CSOs were tolerated only when they reproduced state legitimacy, social obedience, or regime-centered narratives of stability.

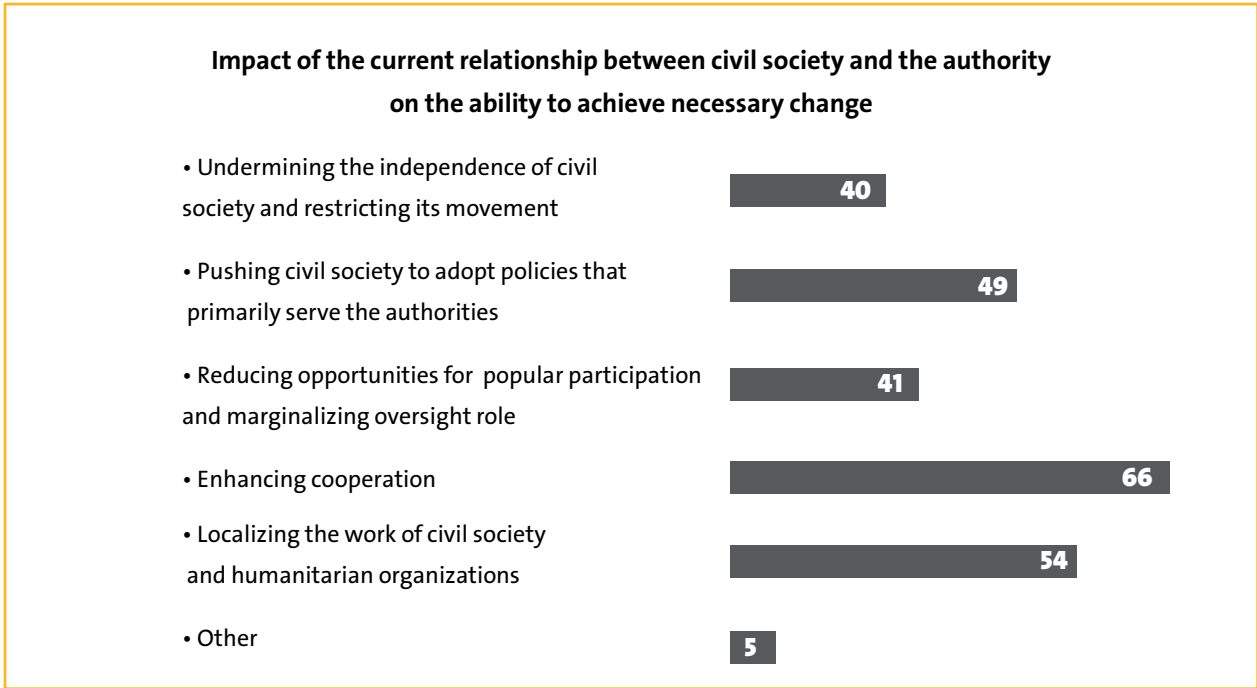
During this period, civic concepts such as rights-based work, public advocacy, community mobilization, and policy critique were systematically conflated with political dissent. This conflation produced a social climate in which humanitarian or developmental initiatives were treated with suspicion

and often publicly discredited concealed political activity. Participants repeatedly emphasized that even the conceptual vocabulary of civil society, including children’s rights, governance, or accountability, was either absent, discouraged, or distorted in public discourse.

The civil landscape emerged as the product of decades-long authoritarian rule, where civil society did not exist as an independent actor, functioning as a restricted administrative extension of the regime. This repression fostered a social environment where fundamental concepts such as rights based work, children’s rights, governance, accountability, and policy critique were systematically suppressed.



The governance model shaped the legal, administrative, and social environment in ways that restricted civic formation. Laws regulating associations did not recognize independent non-governmental organizations as legitimate actors. Registration, operation, and public engagement procedures were designed to retain political oversight rather than regulate civic life. Security vetting was embedded in administrative processes, routine activities required multiple approvals, and organizations frequently operated under the threat of accusations ranging from political disloyalty to financing terrorism. As a result, civil work often became an exercise in survival. Many initiatives operated covertly, adopted alternative naming structures, or limited their work to basic charitable functions to avoid repression. In practice, civil action was tolerated only when it reinforced state legitimacy, social obedience, or regime-centered narratives of stability. Independent organizing was discouraged not only through legal restriction but through social conditioning, where citizens internalized the risks associated with collective civic action.



This environment produced adaptive survival mechanisms. Civil initiatives were frequently framed through religious charity, informal community mediation, or discreet professional networking. In many regions, civil society is socially functional yet politically invisible. Out of 174 participants across nine provinces, 117 highlighted the severe structural impact of authoritarian policies on civil society architecture, particularly in undermining trust and coordination among CSOs. Beyond institutional fragmentation, the system weakened relationships between civil society and local communities, impeding cooperative stabilization efforts. Civic activity became associated with hidden agendas, political affiliation, or proximity to ruling structures. Success in community work was often interpreted as evidence of political alignment rather than professional competence or social commitment. This created layers of distrust between civil actors and authorities, among organizations themselves, and within communities conditioned to perceive independent association as a threat rather than a social asset. Competition-oriented relationships between organizations further weakened civil society’s positionality as a governance and recovery partner.

During the war years, civil society underwent a forced structural transformation. The collapse or retreat of state service provision created what can be described as an institutional vacuum shock, where survival needs forced communities to construct parallel governance and service systems. Civil actors transitioned from charity-based assistance into complex operational roles including emergency governance coordination, shadow education systems, health logistics, and community dispute mediation. This transformation was ecological rather than ideological. Civil society expanded because the alternative was societal collapse. However, expansion occurred under conditions of fragmentation, militarization, donor dependency, and localized power competition, producing highly adaptive but uneven civic ecosystems.

At the same time, the civic landscape was shaped by regime-aligned structures that sought to control and redefine the meaning of civil society itself. The Syria Trust for Development, established and led by Asmaa Assad, functioned as a prominent example of this dynamic. Publicly presented as a national humanitarian and development platform, the organization was heavily promoted as evidence of an active and thriving civil society. Participants across the nine sessions, however, explained that in practice, its centralized control over resources, partnerships, and access channels concentrated civic space within regime-approved boundaries. This monopolization of funding and institutional legitimacy constrained independent civic actors, limited pluralism, and narrowed opportunities for autonomous participation. Consequently, Syria's civil society actors were unable to meaningfully contribute to reconstruction, rebuilding, and peacebuilding efforts.

Following the fall of the regime, Syria entered a paradoxical normalization phase. Civic space expanded dramatically in conceptual, political, and operational terms. Previously criminalized concepts such as accountability, governance reform, and rights-based programming re-entered public discourse. Organizations gained legal visibility and increased capacity to engage in policy dialogue. At the same time, many institutions inherited administrative reflexes rooted in centralized control, security-style oversight, and political risk aversion. The transitional civic model is therefore characterized by partial autonomy combined with cautious state supervision, where civil society is recognized as necessary yet simultaneously treated as potentially destabilizing if fully independent.

Survey data reflected this complexity, where 66 participants explained that the current civil society government relations are conducive for CSOs to lead broader partnership and deeper collaboration, enhancing their impact on the ground. Moreover, 54 participants viewed the transition as an opportunity to reshape civic roles through constructive pressure, policy engagement, and public accountability, contributing to the localization of the third sector. Across discussions, there was broad agreement that civil society's primary contribution in this phase lies in restoring societal balance, rebuilding trust, and filling governance gaps without replicating political overreach patterns of the past.

A defining feature of the transitional period is the shift from survival legitimacy to governance legitimacy, both for the new government and CSOs. For instance, participants shed light on

Developing a sustainable civil society requires the integration of institutional memory with emerging practices, thereby contributing to the establishment of an inclusive and stable social system in the post-conflict era.

how people are openly and publicly criticizing the government, and no one is detaining them. This shows that the government secures a safe space for civil society and civil space to prosper. Additionally, during the conflict, organizations earned trust by sustaining communities. In the transitional period, legitimacy depends on civil society's ability to reconstruct social contracts, restore inter-community trust, and mediate relationships between citizens and state institutions.

Another structural transformation concerns civic psychology. Across regions, participants described a persistent security memory, where actors anticipate surveillance or political consequences even in contexts where formal repression has decreased. This psychological legacy limits transparency, constrains public advocacy, and reinforces informal decision-making cultures. Simultaneously, younger actors, and particularly those shaped by wartime civic mobilization and digital communication networks, demonstrate greater courage and higher expectations of public participation. This creates intergenerational civic tension that functions simultaneously as a risk and a strategic resource. Older actors carry institutional memory and administrative knowledge, while younger actors contribute energy, digital fluency, and public engagement confidence. Sustainable civic development depends on bridging these capacities to form a balanced civic ecosystem capable of shaping a stable and inclusive post-conflict social order.

Economically, civil society is also undergoing a legitimacy transition. During the war, donor funding functioned as a substitute for state welfare provision. In the current phase, organizations face pressure to demonstrate development impact rather than humanitarian necessity. This shift requires technical capacity in monitoring, evaluation, policy engagement, and research-driven programming. Many war-formed organizations are still consolidating institutional maturity in these areas.

Participants further emphasized that reconstruction in Syria is not solely material but institutional, cultural, and ethical. Rebuilding governance structures, strengthening syndicates and professional associations, restoring public confidence in collective action, and nurturing a rights-aware society were described as prerequisites for societal recovery. Rebuilding infrastructure without rebuilding civic culture risks reproducing structural failures that historically constrained Syrian civil life.

Despite ongoing challenges, an emerging sense of shared responsibility exists between civil actors and authorities. Cooperation is present but fragile and uneven. Authorities seek to prevent uncontrolled proliferation of organizations, while civil society seeks meaningful policy influence. Sustainable relations require mutual trust, transparent legal frameworks, and a shared civic vision. Existing dynamics represent both an opportunity and a structural test. Civil society can consolidate itself as a constructive national actor or risk reproducing fragmentation, competition, and inherited distrust patterns.

Alongside the commonalities shared by the four governorates, localized factors have emerged as influential in shaping the reality of civil society. Each governorate possesses a unique historical and political trajectory that has directly influenced the capacities and challenges of its respective civil society.

Touching on a deeper structural insight, civil society functions as social shock absorption infrastructure. In contexts where state recovery remains uneven, civil society stabilizes local economies, provides youth engagement pathways, and reduces risks of social fragmentation. This positions civil society not at the margins of governance but at its functional core, even where political recognition remains incomplete.

In addition to the common themes emerging across nine provinces, participants highlighted factors shaping context-specific realities of civil society. While national patterns dominate, province-level dynamics reveal distinctive historical and political plans, which shape the capacities and challenges of civil society differently in each area.

Idlib stands out for having a comparatively long period of autonomy from the regime, which enabled a more mature and diverse civil society to develop. This experience produced actors with deeper familiarity with rights-based work and governance debates. Even in the surrounding areas of Idlib, such as Suburb of Idlib, civil society expanded into governance-adjacent functions including service coordination, legal mediation, and local administrative support throughout the Syrian protracted crisis. Yet, participants also noted the risks of replicating regime-era practices, such as symbolic activities, unclear mandates, and politicized appointments. Additionally, the expansion of civil society generated fragmentation across territorial, ideological, and governance lines. Such dynamics complicate the effective integration of civil society's roles into the transitional phase.

Hama, shaped by its history of repression since the 1980s, revealed deeper scars of distrust. Civic actors described a persistent perception of CSOs as disloyal or politically suspect, emphasizing structural attempts by the previous regime to isolate Hama from national civic life. This legacy continues to influence community trust and organizational behavior. Additionally, Damascus and Homs shared patterns of securitized control, but discussions in both sites highlighted the resilience of informal civic networks and the re-emergence of research, psychological, and developmental centers after the transition. Homs participants also described a particularly politically active youth cohort, owing to the city's prolonged, intense exposure to repression and conflict.

In Aleppo, the pre-2011 civic space operated within what participants described as a security box, where political discourse survived only in socially coded spaces such as male café intellectual circles or religiously framed social initiatives. Following the regime's fall, civil society operates within a high-energy but strategically fragmented environment, characterized by a tension between centralized administrative governance models, mainly in Damascus, and a highly adaptive, locally embedded civic culture. Civil actors increasingly frame civil society as structural state infrastructure rather than charitable complement, emphasizing that small-scale local initiatives function as binding mechanisms sustaining broader governance systems. Furthermore, Tartous—historically functioned as an administrative and security stronghold where civil society was tightly contained within state-approved unions and regime-aligned charitable structures—however, reflects a gradual transition. In the post-transition period, civil society operates in a legally recognized but closely monitored

environment, navigating implicit administrative and political boundaries. A defining feature of the civic space in Tartous is linguistic adaptation, as organizations often frame governance or justice work using socially acceptable terminology such as social cohesion or environmental protection. The city illustrates how regime-proximate civic ecosystems transition through gradual negotiation rather than rapid rupture.

Civic space in Latakia remains highly constrained, characterized by pervasive surveillance, restrictive regulatory frameworks, and extremely limited freedoms for civil society organizations and community initiatives. At the same time, there is a clear deficit of trust between communities and authorities, with participants stressing that rebuilding this trust must be driven by the state. Social tensions, including rising sectarian expressions, further complicate the environment for civic action.

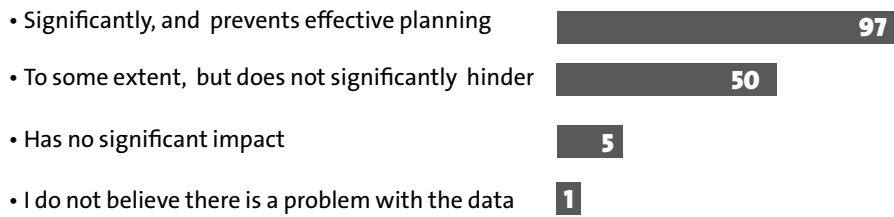
In Dara'a, civil society reflects a different trajectory, defined less by wartime institutional explosion and more by institutional absence and psychological legacy. While civic activity emerged primarily through local survival networks rather than formalized NGOs during the crisis, the transitional phase witnessed the rise of civil society with latent civic potential, constrained by economic collapse, municipal service breakdown, and donor distortions. A central challenge is rebuilding public trust in institutional civic action after prolonged service failure and political marginalization. Civil actors increasingly prioritize trust reconstruction before expanding operational programming, reflecting a slower but potentially more socially grounded civic reconstruction pathway.

II. Challenges and barriers faced by civil society in Syria

Civil society representatives within the nine provinces described a landscape marked by structural, legal, financial, and institutional barriers that continue to constrain their influence and limit their contribution to the transitional process. Although the political context has shifted, many of the underlying constraints that are rooted in past governance models, fragmented authority structures, and economic deterioration remain deeply embedded. These constraints undermine organizations' ability to operate sustainably, build trust with communities, and engage effectively with emerging administrative authorities.

A central theme addressed by participants was the absence of a coherent national framework defining the role, responsibilities, and scope of civil society. Almost two-thirds of the participants emphasized the significant impact of the absence of national strategies and approaches to coordinate the work of various civil society actors, which in turn obstruct the smooth and effective transition into the next phases.

Impact of the absence of a national plan and clear coordination procedures between different entities on the efforts of civil society



They stressed that without a clear civic vision and unified reference structure, civil society remains vulnerable to ad hoc decision-making, shifting political expectations, and inconsistent regulatory practices. The lack of an agreed definition of civil society’s mandate, whether humanitarian, developmental, or rights-based, has produced recurring tensions with government entities, each of which maintains different interpretations of civic space. There was an emphasis that these uncertainties foster hesitation among CSOs, discourage long-term planning, and create an uneven operating environment across regions.

Participants also identified structural gaps in coordination. Despite the proliferation of organizations, no effective national mechanism exists to align priorities, reduce duplication, or ensure equitable coverage. Province-level examples showed that communities either receive overlapping services or none at all, depending on local organizational presence. The gap goes beyond civil society coordination to include weak communication between government institutions and civic actors contributes to misunderstandings, contradictory procedures, and delays in approvals.

Despite the proliferation of organizations, there remains no effective national mechanism to unify priorities, mitigate redundancy, or ensure balanced geographical coverage.

III. Financial and legitimacy barriers

Financial sustainability emerged as one of the most pervasive challenges, where the majority of participants described a sharp decline in international funding driven by competing global crises, shifting donor priorities, and the uncertain political trajectory in Syria. Existing funding remains largely short-term and humanitarian in orientation, with limited allocation toward development, institution-building, peacebuilding, or early recovery, despite broad acknowledgment of the importance of these areas for stability during the transitional phase. CSOs across all provinces expressed concern that donors continue to maintain a narrow emergency-relief framework that does not correspond to communities’ evolving needs to rebuild livelihoods, restore public services, and strengthen local governance structures.

Financial constraints, however, are not limited to resource scarcity alone. They are structurally linked to legitimacy dynamics, donor behavior, and geopolitical shifts. Persistent gaps were highlighted between funding allocation models and locally defined priorities. In several contexts, externally designed project frameworks continue to dominate funding streams, resulting in programmatic

misalignment with socio-economic realities on the ground. This was particularly visible in areas where standardized “model projects” were implemented without sufficient contextualization, thereby limiting community ownership and weakening long-term sustainability prospects.

Participants further described the financial ecosystem as increasingly volatile. Shifts in global donor attention toward other crisis settings, combined with sanctions regimes and political decisions affecting humanitarian operations, have reduced predictable funding flows.

These dynamics have contributed to project cancellations even after needs assessments were completed, undermining trust between communities and civil actors. Funding volatility is compounded by restricted banking channels, sanctions, and financial compliance barriers that constrain access to resources. Delays in transfers, limitations on withdrawals, and the absence of clear guidance on permissible financial transactions were repeatedly mentioned by the participants. In time-sensitive sectors such as health and livelihoods, regulatory and compliance-related transfer delays have resulted in operational paralysis.

These financial restrictions affect not only CSOs but also the broader economic environment, limiting investment in community infrastructure and obstructing partnerships with international actors. Smaller organizations are particularly vulnerable. Lacking the administrative capacity to navigate complex financial procedures, many rely on irregular donations, seasonal contributions, or personal networks to sustain operations.

Legitimacy challenges are closely intertwined with these financial constraints. Internal legitimacy remains weakened by persistent distrust between communities and organizations. Communities shaped by decades of securitized governance often struggle to differentiate between civic action and political affiliation. Community divisions rooted in conflict-era alignments continue to shape perceptions of organizational neutrality. At the same time, external legitimacy remains constrained by ambiguity surrounding the legal status of certain activities, particularly for organizations operating across multiple jurisdictions where regulatory frameworks differ.

Civil society actors are frequently required to satisfy competing legitimacy standards simultaneously, including donor accountability requirements, government compliance frameworks, and community expectations of neutrality and representation. These layered legitimacy demands are imposed without corresponding structural support mechanisms. At the institutional level, the absence or weakness of representative governance structures further complicates recognition of civil society actors as legitimate policy partners in transitional governance processes. Restrictions stemming from international sanctions, including compliance with global counter-terrorism frameworks, further complicate partnerships with external donors and delay approvals for new initiatives.

A further structural challenge concerns the partial professionalization of civil society. In some cases, organizations evolved into internally closed systems centered on staff continuity rather than institutional mission, creating barriers to broader civic participation and weakening public trust. Parallel to this trend, the transition of experienced civil society personnel into government roles has created additional capacity and continuity gaps within organizations, further straining institutional sustainability at a time when strategic adaptation is required.

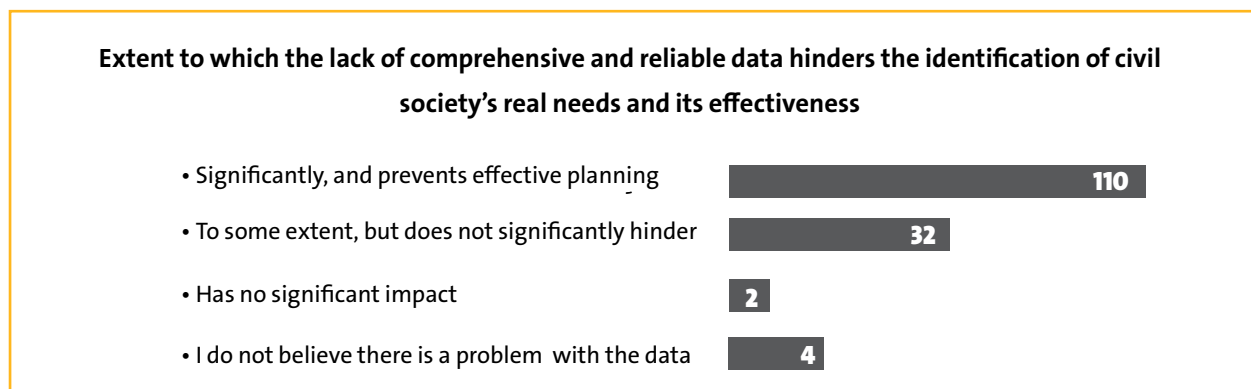
IV. Capacity gaps and institutional weakness

Across all provinces, CSOs emphasized significant gaps in institutional capacity. Staff shortages, limited training opportunities, and weak governance structures continue to undermine organizational performance. Most capacity-building initiatives remain short-term, project-based, and donor-driven, leaving organizations without sustained institutional development strategies. The absence of long-term investment in governance systems, financial management, digital infrastructure, monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and strategic planning restricts the ability of CSOs to influence public policy or manage medium- to large-scale programs effectively.

Capacity limitations, however, extend beyond technical deficiencies. They are increasingly systemic, rooted in structural weaknesses related to strategic orientation, institutional governance models, and knowledge management systems. Many organizations continue to operate within short planning cycles aligned with project funding timelines rather than long-term institutional development frameworks. This reinforces reactive operational cultures and constrains strategic positioning in transitional governance processes.

Disparities in capacity across geographic areas further complicate the landscape. Uneven funding distribution between previously regime-controlled areas and other regions has contributed to unequal development of organizational expertise, digital infrastructure, and leadership pipelines. In some areas, limited exposure to training and technical support has resulted in organizations functioning at minimal operational capacity despite high community demand for services. These disparities risk entrenching regional inequalities in civic influence and service provision.

A critical structural weakness concerns data and knowledge infrastructure. Participants consistently pointed to the absence of unified, updated needs databases and the weakness of feedback and evaluation systems.



Out of all participants, 110 indicated that the lack of data and credible information system limits the understanding of CSOs’ needs and obstructs their effectiveness. Without reliable data ecosystems, organizations struggle to avoid duplication, measure impact, or engage credibly in policy dialogue. Data fragmentation reduces cross-organizational learning, weakens evidence-based programming, and diminishes the efficiency of donor investments. It also limits the ability of civil society to transition

from service provision toward informed governance engagement.

Human capital constraints extend beyond technical skill gaps. A broader societal shift has affected civic participation patterns. Economic pressures have forced many individuals to take multiple jobs, limiting their ability to volunteer or engage in collective action. Brain drain remains a critical concern. The emigration of highly skilled youth and professionals has created substantial gaps in leadership continuity, technical expertise, and institutional memory. Although volunteer enthusiasm persists across provinces, organizations lack the trained workforce necessary to assume specialized, developmental, and policy-oriented roles.

Leadership formation presents an additional structural challenge. While youth engagement levels are high, structured leadership pathways remain underdeveloped. Young civic actors often possess advocacy energy and digital fluency but lack policy literacy, legal awareness, negotiation capacity, and institutional governance experience necessary to engage effectively in transitional governance environments. Without structured leadership development mechanisms, civic renewal risks remaining symbolic rather than institutionally transformative.

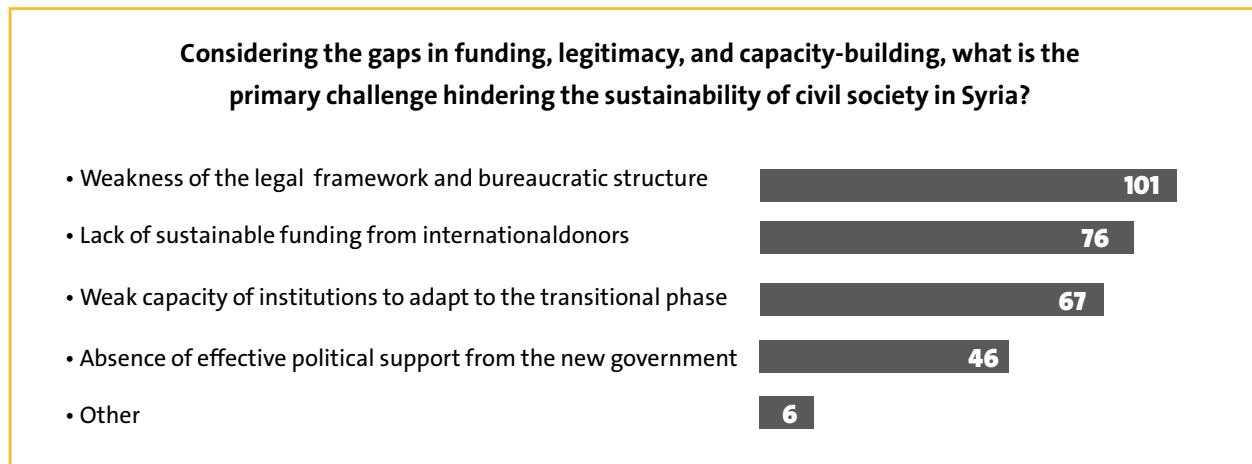
In parallel, participants reflected on the continuing influence of political polarization on institutional credibility. Organizations that were previously politicized or instrumentalized for political confrontation continue to face trust deficits. Experiences across multiple provinces demonstrate that once politicization occurs, it can jeopardize funding streams, fracture institutional alliances, and erode community trust. Such dynamics underscore the necessity of strict adherence to professional mandates, institutional neutrality, and transparent communication practices.

V. Legal and bureaucratic barriers

Civil society actors consistently identified legal and bureaucratic restrictions as major impediments to their work. Legal and administrative constraints represent one of the most significant structural barriers to civil society sustainability. Existing laws governing associations are outdated and misaligned with the needs of the transitional context. Regulatory frameworks are not adapted to transitional governance realities. Many laws governing civil work remain outdated or overly restrictive, while new legal frameworks remain underdeveloped or inconsistently applied. The lack of a legislative body in some regions further compounds these issues.

Procedures for registration, licensing, and project approvals remain unclear, often relying on discretionary decision-making rather than standardized regulatory frameworks. Administrative fragmentation is a major operational barrier. In multiple environments, authorities retain overlapping approval power over similar activities, creating procedural duplication and uncertainty. In some cases, CSOs face parallel humanitarian and political approval processes, increasing transaction costs and discouraging innovation. Without clear regulatory guidance, CSOs rely on fragmented administrative

instructions, temporary measures, or informal arrangements. Bureaucratic practices, many of which are inherited from the previous governance system, continue to prioritize control over facilitation. Participants highlighted the persistence of bureaucratic control mindsets, even where formal security oversight has decreased. Licensing processes, project approvals, and operational permissions often remain slow and unpredictable. Excessive paperwork, overlapping authorities, and unclear chains of responsibility create delays and disincentivize innovation.



This administrative ambiguity increases organizational risk exposure and limits long-term planning. To illustrate, over half of the participants selected weak legal frameworks and highly bureaucratic structure as the main factors undermining the effectiveness and sustainability of Syria’s civil society. Moreover, participants across provinces described constraints such as unclear financial regulations, limits on cash movement, barriers to receiving external transfers, and the absence of temporary legal measures that could facilitate partnerships during the transitional period. Many of these constraints impede not only sustainability but also accountability, as CSOs operate without clear financial compliance standards or independent auditing structures.

Another major concern relates to the absence of protective legal frameworks for volunteers and civic actors. Unclear liability protections discourage volunteerism and weaken grassroots civic engagement. Additionally, inconsistencies in approval criteria across institutions create unequal operational conditions between organizations.

VI. Operational and structural challenges

A number of operational problems emerged across the provinces. These can be characterized by four interrelated themes, including:

1. Fragmented coordination structures both among CSOs and between civic actors and government institutions, which lead to duplication, inconsistent coverage, and inefficient use of resources.
2. Corporate social responsibility and private-sector engagement gaps, where companies are not adequately encouraged or incentivized to support community initiatives.
3. Weak monitoring and evaluation culture, where many participants noted that results-based systems remain underdeveloped or undervalued.

4. Limited digital transformation, including weak adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), modern administrative tools, data systems, and digital oversight mechanisms needed for efficiency and transparency.

While participants in some provinces placed more emphasis on certain aspects of these barriers over others, these operational challenges significantly shape the operational setting of CSOs. They reinforce the broader structural limitations that hinder civil society's contribution to governance, service delivery, and community resilience.

The persistence of emergency-oriented structures intersects directly with fragmented coordination systems, weak monitoring and evaluation cultures, and limited digital transformation. Organizations designed for rapid response often lack the institutional architecture necessary for long-term planning, impact measurement, and integrated development programming. As a result, duplication of services, inefficient resource allocation, and limited policy influence are reproduced even in relatively stabilized environments.

Participants stressed that civic actors must gradually reposition themselves within broader national development ecosystems rather than operate parallel to them. However, this shift is constrained by weak national economic diversification strategies and limited integration between civil society programming and national development planning. In this context, the move from emergency response to sustainable civic development is not merely programmatic but structural.

Nevertheless, there are province-specific dynamics that impede the work of CSOs. For instance, while Idlib's long period outside regime control created a comparatively developed civil society ecosystem, it also introduced unique regulatory and political tensions with the emerging authorities which perceive civil society's external networks as both an asset and a sovereignty concern. Similarly, in Suburb of Idlib, civil society operates within a structurally fragile environment marked by limited institutional consolidation and uneven regulatory clarity. Organizations face capacity disparities linked to years of fragmented oversight and inconsistent access to technical support. High community demand contrasts with minimal functional infrastructure, weak data systems, and limited exposure to long-term governance planning. The result is a civic space that remains socially active but institutionally underdeveloped and highly dependent on short-term project cycles.

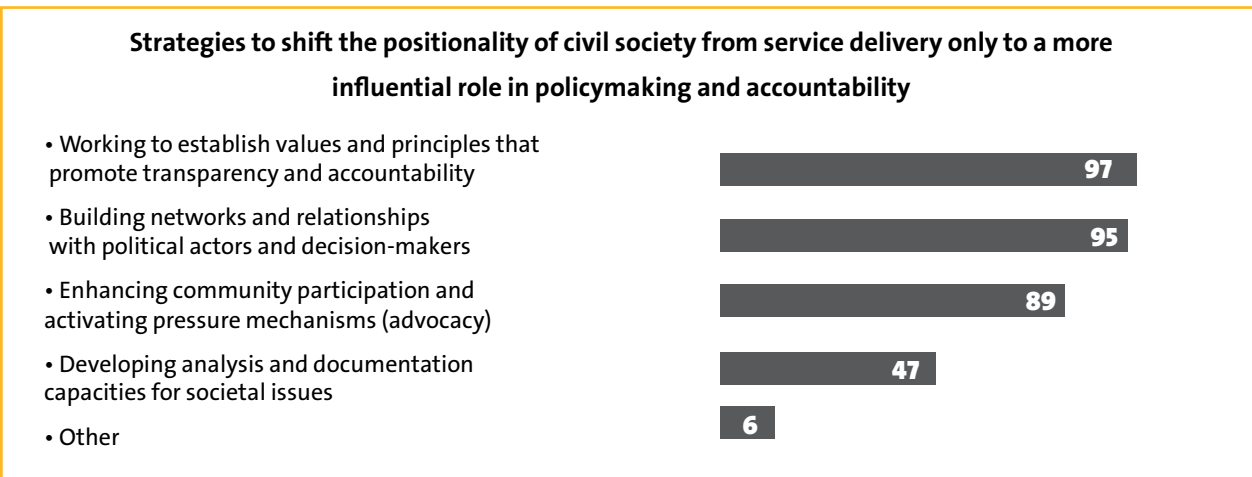
In Aleppo, participants highlighted the impact of banking restrictions, limited private-sector engagement, and weak integration between civil society programming and national development planning. Combined with youth emigration and reduced human capital retention, these dynamics constrain the sector's transition from emergency-oriented service delivery toward sustainable development engagement. The situation of CSOs remains different in Damascus, where participants express systemic concerns, such as gaps in national planning, insufficient clarity in government vision, and the absence of unified regulatory and oversight structures.

Participants in Hama emphasized that CSOs continue to suffer from deep legacies of historical repression, resulting in lower public trust and weaker organizational cohesion. Participants described ongoing administrative barriers, politicized regulations, and procedural requirements that remain

shaped by past authoritarian practices. In Homs, participants highlighted the impact of sanctions and banking restrictions on local investment, organizational sustainability, and staff retention. The province has also experienced acute youth emigration, leaving institutions with reduced human capital. Despite strong volunteer traditions, organizations lack consistent support from governmental bodies, making long-term planning difficult.

Civil society actors in Latakia face a severe lack of funding, compounded by limited access to capital, local investment, and capacity, which marginalizes local actors and contributes to brain drain. Additionally, excessive state control, favoritism in permissions, and mistrust toward CSOs restrict operational space and create unequal opportunities, particularly disadvantaging local organizations. This, alongside bureaucratic obstacles and delays in obtaining approvals for CSOs-led initiatives, obstruct timely implementation of activities.

In Tartous, organizations operate within tightly regulated procedural frameworks, where slow licensing processes and layered approvals limit strategic flexibility. Capacity gaps are reinforced by uneven funding distribution and limited investment in governance systems, digital infrastructure, and policy literacy. In addition, participants in Dara’a explained how civil society is shaped by political volatility and institutional distrust, underscoring persistent administrative ambiguity, inconsistent regulatory enforcement, and limited protective frameworks for civic actors. While volunteer engagement remains present, uncertainty surrounding legal protections and long-term governance arrangements constrains organizational consolidation and sustainable planning.



Recommendations and Opportunities

The sessions conducted across nine provinces identified critical recommendations and opportunities to strengthen the role, influence, and sustainability of civil society in Syria. They highlighted that civil society must transition from service provision toward a broader, policy-influencing, development-oriented role while navigating a complex socio-political and legal environment.

Among the participants, 97 emphasized that establishing clear values and principles centered on transparency and accountability is key to shifting civil society toward a more influential policymaking and oversight role.

To ensure that civil society's role is constructive and active rather than passive in Syria's future, 88 participants stressed the importance of establishing relations with political actors and policymakers. Such strategies position CSOs as key actors in decision-making, resulting in society- and community-driven policies and decisions that guide Syria's path toward recovery and reconciliation.

Throughout the sessions in both phases, four broad, interrelated recommendation areas emerged as priorities. These include governance and legitimacy, sustainable financing, human and organizational capacity-building, and strategic engagement with communities, state actors, and the private sector.

Recommendation 1: Enhance local governance and social legitimacy

Participants emphasized that the effectiveness and credibility of civil society depend on robust governance structures, clear legal frameworks, and coordinated action. Trust both among CSOs and between CSOs and local communities or government is essential to ensure legitimacy and avoid duplication of efforts. Transparent and participatory mechanisms allow organizations to define priorities, identify gaps, and respond to community needs while maintaining independence and ethical standards.

1. **Regulatory reform and hybrid accountability frameworks:** Modernize or renovate associations laws in line with transitional civic needs, restructure registration mechanisms, and develop temporary strategies to allow operational continuity in transitional areas. Legislation should safeguard organizational independence, encourage accountability, and clarify civil society's role vis-à-vis the state. Simultaneously, organizations must implement dual reporting systems that meet regulatory compliance while maintaining downward accountability to communities, translating financial and programmatic data into accessible, community-facing formats.
2. **Judicial and institutional independence:** Advocate for the establishment of rule-based governance, judicial independence, and separation of powers to prevent concentration of authority. Civil society should strategically promote a transition from a "rule of power" paradigm toward a rule-of-law framework anchored in transparency, fairness, and equal citizenship, thereby creating the institutional and normative foundations necessary for effective transitional justice. Accountability mechanisms and legal clarity must precede broad social cohesion initiatives to ensure that reconciliation efforts are meaningful and credible rather than cosmetic.
3. **Coordination and integration:** Establish national and provincial coordination platforms, roundtables, and shared data systems to prevent duplication, align organizational priorities with local and national needs, and enable joint vulnerability mapping. Coordination must also integrate civil society into broader development and governance agendas while maintaining clear distinctions between humanitarian, developmental, and rights-based interventions.
4. **Trust-building and social legitimacy:** Promote participatory decision-making, ethical financial management, and transparent reporting to restore public confidence in civil society. Local legitimacy can be strengthened by clarifying civil society's role as a "moral and legal pressure"

actor rather than a substitute for political authority, ensuring neutrality operationalized through equitable service delivery, conflict-sensitive programming, and non-partisan engagement.

5. Institutionalization of partnerships: Facilitate structured collaboration between CSOs, government authorities, and local councils. Civil society should adopt competency-based governance standards, meritocratic hiring practices, and transparent operational frameworks, particularly in judicial advocacy, educational reform, and institutional partnerships, to strengthen legitimacy and reduce vulnerability to politicization and nepotism.
6. Promoting civic values and mitigating polarization: Reinforce transparency, accountability, and collective action as core operational principles. Civil society must actively address regional and social fragmentation by institutionalizing national-first protocols, structured dialogue platforms, and unified identity policies that prevent competitive regionalism and sectarian division while fostering social cohesion.
7. Institutionalize community-anchored governance models: Embed community advisory boards, participatory budgeting consultations, and localized oversight committees within CSO operations to ensure sustained engagement, enhance decision-making legitimacy, and strengthen accountability to the populations served.
8. Introduce legal measures to address sectarian hate speech: Establish clear prohibitions, enforcement mechanisms, and reporting channels, particularly within schools and public spaces. This should be complemented by preventive education and awareness campaigns that promote tolerance, reduce discrimination, and protect social cohesion from early stages of socialization.

Recommendation 2: Ensure sustainable funding and resource mobilization

Representatives of CSOs emphasized that long-term sustainability depends on diversified financing strategies, transparent financial practices, and alignment with local economic realities. Effective funding mechanisms must combine international assistance with local resource mobilization and private sector engagement to reduce dependency on external cycles and enable a transition from relief-oriented programming to development, governance, and sovereignty-focused initiatives.

1. Develop strategies for diversification of funding sources: CSOs should combine international grants, local donations, religious endowments (waqf), corporate social responsibility initiatives, and revenue-generating activities to ensure financial stability and independence. Additionally, organizations must map donor concentration risks and design contingency operational plans for potential funding withdrawal, particularly in politically sensitive sectors such as governance, protection, and rights documentation.
2. Institutionalize engagement with local economic ecosystems: Resource mobilization strategies must align with economic sovereignty, prioritizing agriculture, small-scale industry, and local production. Civil society should advocate for and participate in initiatives that enhance food security, agricultural independence, and vocational training for youth who did not complete formal

education. Supporting interest-free loans for farmers, climate-adapted wheat production, and localized agricultural cycles was identified as a core strategy for linking economic development to political and community resilience.

3. Leverage private sector participation: CSOs should institutionalize structured engagement with businesses, including mandatory Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) frameworks that require banks, telecommunications firms, and major companies to allocate a defined percentage of profits toward local infrastructure, education, and community development. Civil society must coordinate, monitor, and ensure transparency and equitable distribution of CSR contributions to avoid dominance by specific actors and to maximize social impact.
4. Implement long-term investment frameworks: Multi-year funding models, low-interest loans for social enterprises, and structured reinvestment mechanisms are critical to sustaining developmental programming. Such frameworks reduce reliance on short-term, project-driven international aid, provide stability for planning, and allow organizations to invest in institution-building and community-led initiatives that extend beyond immediate humanitarian relief.
5. Enhance transparency and financial accountability: CSOs must institutionalize audits, standardized reporting systems, and independent oversight mechanisms to strengthen donor confidence and attract domestic and diaspora capital. Participants emphasized that domestic investors prefer municipalities over NGOs due to a confidence deficit. Thus, rigorous accreditation systems and transparent reporting are essential to rebuild trust and unlock local capital.
6. Invest in financial compliance literacy: Dedicated compliance units or shared service hubs should be established within CSOs to navigate complex donor regulations and prevent funding losses due to misalignment with international or local compliance systems. This ensures operational continuity and reduces reputational and legal risks associated with administrative non-compliance.
7. Adopt context-sensitive budgeting and resource allocation: Civil society should advocate for localized economic realism in funding models. Participants highlighted discrepancies between international per-capita aid metrics and the actual geological and infrastructural costs of well-digging and irrigation repair. Budgeting frameworks must reflect real costs of infrastructure, production, and local logistics to ensure effectiveness and prevent resource misallocation.
8. Expand access to small loans and livelihood support: Establish community-based financing schemes, microcredit programs, and vocational training initiatives. These should target marginalized groups, enhance local entrepreneurship, and address gaps in skills and capital, enabling communities to build sustainable income sources and reduce economic dependency.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen human and organizational capacities

Participants across multiple provinces emphasized that strengthening human and organizational capacities is central to the sustainability and effectiveness of civil society. Capacity-building efforts

must be holistic, combining technical, governance, and conceptual training while leveraging local expertise and diaspora knowledge to ensure continuity, institutional memory, and resilience. Based on the discussion of civil society actors, key recommendations are listed as:

1. Professional development for CSO staff: Establish continuous training programs, including on the job coaching, seminars, and workshops covering governance, project management, monitoring and evaluation, and leadership. Training must extend beyond technical skills to include ethical reasoning, critical thinking, and “why-oriented” methodologies that cultivate intellectual resilience, particularly among youth exposed to prolonged conflict.
2. Youth and women engagement in leadership: Prioritize the inclusion of young people and women in decision-making, community mobilization, and organizational leadership roles. Structured leadership pathways, which combine civic education, policy literacy, negotiation skills, and participatory engagement, are essential to bridge generational gaps, foster innovation, and prevent structural disengagement that could compromise long-term social cohesion.
3. Knowledge transfer and networking: Facilitate exchanges between experienced organizations in Idlib, diaspora experts in Lebanon, Türkiye, the Gulf, and European countries, and emerging CSOs. This strengthens institutional memory, promotes operational effectiveness, and supports long-term organizational learning, ensuring that successful practices are adapted rather than lost in transitional contexts.
4. Evidence-based operations and data systems: Develop research and documentation centers to gather accurate data, conduct needs assessments, and guide strategic interventions. These centers contribute to cultivating a sustainable culture of monitoring, evaluation, and accountability while addressing fragmented monitoring practices and weak digital infrastructure that currently undermine program efficiency.
5. Educational and judicial advocacy: Civil society should actively support reforms that prioritize national education budget increases, specialization, professionalism, and merit-based appointments. Schools must be reconceptualized as “libraries of thought” rather than administrative classrooms, with teachers selected for competency rather than political loyalty, creating the foundational pillars for long-term civic and institutional development.
6. Institutionalizing civic awareness and conceptual literacy: Promote public education on rights, responsibilities, governance, and civic engagement to build an informed citizenry capable of collaborating with civil society institutions. Training must focus on conceptual and philosophical grounding to prevent technical skill development from occurring in isolation from broader civic and ethical understanding.
7. Structured social qualification of religious institutions: Given their voluntary engagement and societal influence, imams and priests should receive systematic training in civic education, peace-

building, and social cohesion. These institutions serve as key platforms for disseminating civic norms and reinforcing community engagement, complementing formal civil society initiatives.

8. Organizational professionalization and long-term planning: CSOs must strengthen governance structures, data systems, and evaluation frameworks to overcome short-termism and fragmented project cycles. Institutional maturity requires transparent decision-making, knowledge management systems, and planning horizons that extend beyond donor-imposed timelines, ensuring reform and operational effectiveness persist independently of immediate funding fluctuations.

Recommendation 4: Restructure civil society’s engagement approaches with communities, government, and technology

Beyond internal capacities, civil society must engage effectively with broader societal structures. Sessions across all provinces emphasized that civic participation must be reciprocal, principled, and contextually grounded, leveraging local knowledge and structures while ensuring accountability, transparency, and youth empowerment.

The insights of participants lead to the following recommendations:

1. Bottom-up planning and community-tailored interventions: Engage communities directly in decision-making to ensure initiatives are context-specific, culturally appropriate, and responsive to local priorities. Participatory planning enhances legitimacy, mitigates duplication, and fosters ownership of solutions.
2. Reciprocal civic engagement and Social Contract of Duties: Promote structured campaigns that balance rights with responsibilities, including micro-initiatives such as neighborhood sanitation, community maintenance, and local governance participation. These approaches counteract passive “waiting cultures” and encourage active, accountable citizenship.
3. Systemized volunteering strategies for youth empowerment: Transform volunteering from informal charity into structured, incentive-based systems. Participants recommended linking volunteer hours to university admission credits or professional certifications, creating tangible pathways for youth engagement, skill development, and civic leadership.
4. Decentralized, trust-based engagement models: Leverage neighborhood leaders, tribal structures, and local religious institutions to implement initiatives where formal organizations may lack credibility. Hybrid engagement models should maintain transparency, ethical standards, and accountability while increasing reach and community trust.
5. Principled engagement with government: Civil society should provide policy input, monitor implementation gaps, and advocate for reforms without substituting for state functions.

Clear operational boundaries preserve autonomy, reduce risks of co-optation, and reinforce civil society's legitimacy as an independent actor in governance and development.

6. Digital infrastructure and technological adoption: Invest in integrated digital platforms for project management, monitoring, reporting, and citizen engagement. Enhanced data systems reduce duplication, support evidence-based advocacy, and enable transparent oversight, increasing operational efficiency and public confidence in civil society initiatives.
7. Leveraging cultural and educational institutions: Collaborate with schools, universities, and cultural centers to foster civic values, volunteerism, and innovation. These partnerships institutionalize community engagement, strengthen social cohesion, and provide platforms for youth participation in local development.
8. Strengthening inter-sectoral coordination: Establish mechanisms to harmonize civil society efforts across humanitarian, development, educational, and political initiatives. Alignment with national priorities ensures coherent strategies, equitable service delivery, and maximizes the impact of civil society contributions.
9. Support community-level dialogue and exchange initiatives: Organize inclusive forums, joint activities, and facilitated discussions that bring together diverse civil society actors. These spaces can challenge stereotypes, encourage mutual understanding, and rebuild social ties, contributing to reconciliation and reducing perceptions of threat and exclusion.

While overarching strategies apply nationally, each province faces unique challenges requiring tailored approaches. Participants in Damascus highlighted that CSOs can leverage proximity to central authorities to influence legislation and policy, pilot innovative funding mechanisms, and lead national coordination efforts. Emphasis should be placed on establishing centralized platforms for data, communication, and resource allocation. The sessions in Aleppo touched on the centrality of three questions to guide recommendations, which are: Why did it (the collapse of civil society as a critical actor in governance in key areas) happen? How is it treated and dealt with? How can we avoid its repetition in future? They also stressed the essentiality of promoting a social contract of duties for youth engagement. This comprised the launch of a city-wide campaign embedding micro-initiatives that link citizens' rights with civic responsibilities, including neighborhood maintenance, local governance participation, and volunteerism. Importantly, this recommendation addresses the "waiting culture" in Aleppo, empowers youth to participate actively in societal reconstruction, and aligns civic engagement with long-term social cohesion objectives.

Idlib offers opportunities for knowledge transfer from experienced northern NGOs, development of participatory governance models, and the integration of formerly marginalized areas into broader civil society networks. Participants in Suburb of Idlib unanimously suggested supporting community economic empowerment through local markets. This initiative combines economic revitalization with civic participation, encourages self-reliance, and mitigates dependency on external aid while reinforcing social cohesion and community-led development

Recommendations from the CSOs in Homs revolved around capitalizing on historical networks and youth engagement is key. They argued that transforming service-oriented organizations into policy-

influencing entities, integrating municipal governance structures, and fostering innovation through skill-based initiatives are critical opportunities. In Hama, on the other hand, civil society actors suggest simplifying registration procedures, clarifying legal frameworks, and promoting partnerships with local authorities to mainstream community-driven projects into regional development plans.

In Dara'a, participants emphasized the centrality of institutionalizing neighborhood-led civic initiatives. A critical recommendation was the development of a volunteer model where youth and local community leaders organize civic activities, such as street cleaning, cemetery maintenance, and local infrastructure repairs, through neighborhood committees rather than centralized NGOs. The importance of strengthening religious institutions as civic education platforms was discussed in Tartous. This necessitates the implementation of structured social qualification programs for religious leaders (imams and priests), training them to deliver civic education, social cohesion, and peace-building initiatives. Given their voluntary influence and daily engagement with communities, these institutions can serve as neutral spaces for promoting national identity, ethical volunteerism, and community-led development without compromising civic legitimacy or partisan independence.

Given the fragile societal relations in Latakia, promoting social cohesion through structured dialogue, civic education, and inclusive community initiatives is perceived as a key strategy to address sectarian tensions while rebuilding trust. Participants in Latakia shed light on the essentiality of reforming the regulatory environment to enable civil society to operate independently, including simplifying permission procedures, reducing bureaucratic delays, and ensuring transparency and non-discrimination. At the same time, investment in local capacity and sustainable financing mechanisms is essential to strengthen administrative and legal competencies, expand access to funding, and mitigate brain drain. This requires proactive state engagement based on accountability and transparency, shifting the burden of trust-building from civil society to public authorities.

Limitations and Operational Challenges

Despite extensive planning and coordination efforts, the initiative encountered certain constraints that shaped both its implementation and the scope of its findings. Among them, there is:

1. Limited access to the northeast

The initiative was not able to conduct sessions in the northeastern provinces. Although a formal agreement between the government and the SDF had been announced during the second phase of implementation, security guarantees remained insufficient. Sporadic clashes and the fluidity of local security dynamics created conditions that did not allow for safe and responsible field engagement.

The absence of participation from these provinces constitutes a critical limitation. Civil society ecosystems in the northeast have developed under distinct governance and administrative models, and their exclusion may affect the representativeness of the findings. As a result, perceptions captured in this report do not fully reflect the diversity of civic experiences across the entire national territory. This limitation should be considered when interpreting conclusions related to national-level patterns.

II. *Inability to secure timely approval in Latakia for in-person sessions*

The initiative was also unable to conduct in-person sessions in Latakia due to delays in obtaining formal authorization, which required us to conduct the sessions using online format. Despite submitting the request well in advance, approval was not granted within the operational timeframe. This delay reflects the highly sensitive political and social environment in Latakia, where authorities are exercising high caution, and administrative procedures remain particularly stringent. This absence is analytically significant. Latakia represents a province historically associated with the former regime's core support base and has experienced acute sectarian tensions following the fall of Assad.

III. *Operational and logistical constraints*

The implementation phase required intensive daily travel between provinces under difficult infrastructural conditions. Road networks in several areas remain severely damaged, poorly maintained, and operationally exhausting. The absence of adequate rest periods and the cumulative strain of continuous movement placed considerable pressure on the initiative's team.

While the team maintained delivery standards, such conditions represent an operational risk factor. Physical fatigue, compressed scheduling, and infrastructural fragility can affect efficiency, coordination quality, and adaptive flexibility during field engagement. These logistical burdens illustrate the broader structural realities within which civil society initiatives currently operate in Syria.

About CHS

The Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) is one of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies Programs. It was established in 2016. The Center focuses on producing in-depth research, building specialized capacities, and guiding policies aimed at promoting peace and resolving conflicts through diverse and multi-track dialogues. The Center aspires to become one of the leading research institutions in the Global South, dedicated to addressing issues of conflict and humanitarian response from a critical and forward-looking perspective.

CHS is committed to producing high-quality research that is methodologically rigorous and objective. It aims to support evidence-based policies and practices while facilitating multi-track dialogues that bridge theory and practice. Through engagement with various actors at local, regional, and international levels, the Center seeks to enhance effective and informed responses to the challenges of conflict and humanitarian action.

About WHAF

The World Humanitarian Action Forum (WHAF) is a global initiative launched in 2008 to foster meaningful collaboration between international organizations and local humanitarian actors, particularly those working with or within Muslim communities. Formerly known as the Humanitarian Forum, WHAF continues to build inclusive partnerships across faiths, regions, and sectors to address critical gaps in the aid ecosystem.

While WHAF's network is broad and diverse, many of its partners bring lived experience from contexts often marginalized in mainstream humanitarian discourse. This includes deep engagement with alternative models of aid financing and the consequences of de-risking policies, particularly those impacting organizations associated with Islamic identities.

WHAF was created to ensure these and other underrepresented perspectives help shape the future of humanitarian work, contributing to a sector that better reflects the plurality of the communities it aims to serve.

Way Forward

With the conclusion of both phases, a comprehensive evaluation and strategic planning are essential to consolidate the initiative's impact and inform future interventions. The assessment of the two phases allows us to build on strengths identified, address gaps or barriers encountered, and refine methodological approaches to dialogue and engagement. Lessons learned regarding session design, facilitation, and participant engagement will guide the development of subsequent initiatives to ensure greater effectiveness and inclusivity.

As part of this process, the team will continue to engage partners and local actors who supported and hosted discussions across Syria. Their feedback will be systematically gathered to assess experiences, identify challenges, and incorporate insights into the design of any follow-on activities. Strengthening these partnerships is critical for maintaining local ownership and ensuring that future programming reflects community priorities while enhancing civil society's reach and credibility.

Overall, the initiative witnessed the participation of a wide spectrum of civil society actors. This encompassed grassroots initiatives, faith-based organizations, women-led groups, youth networks, private-sector-linked actors, and other underrepresented stakeholders. Broad representation improved the contextual accuracy of findings, fostered inclusive dialogue, and contributed to more comprehensive, national-level conclusions regarding civil society's evolving role in Syria.

In parallel, knowledge products and dissemination activities will leverage insights from both phases. A webinar series will be organized to present key findings and facilitate dialogue with a wider audience, while a policy paper will translate recommendations into actionable guidance for policymakers, practitioners, and donors. Additionally, data from the sessions will be used to develop a peer-reviewed academic article, contributing to scholarly debates on governance, post-conflict recovery, and civil society development in Syria.

Finally, the consolidated report from both phases will be shared with key stakeholders and disseminated through social media and other communication channels. This approach ensures broad public access to findings, reinforces the initiative's commitment to transparency, and strengthens sustained engagement with both local and international audiences.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Collaborating partners from Syria

Name:	Location/contribution:	Role
Onsur	Damascus	Humanitarian and development organization
International Humanitarian Relief	Homs	Humanitarian organization
Takwen	Hama	Humanitarian and development organization
Violet Organization for Relief and Development (Banafsaj)	Idlib	Civil society
Mar Georges Church	Dara'a	Religious institution
Hand in Hand for Aid and Development		Humanitarian organization
Imran Association for Development Equity and Empowerment	Suburb of Idlib (Jisr al-Shughur)	Development organization Civil society organization
Equity and Empowerment Mercy	Aleppo	Civil society organization Humanitarian organization
Mosaic Human Relief and Development FADA Association	Tartous	Humanitarian and development organization Development organization
Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) Syrian NGO Alliance	Logistics, transportation, and coordination support (phase two only)	Humanitarian organization An alliance of Syrian humanitarian organizations
Mosaic Human Relief and Development	Latakia	Humanitarian and development organization

Appendix 2: Session agenda

9:00 – 9:30	Registration and Welcome
9:30 – 11:00	<p style="text-align: center;">Session 1: The Civil Society Landscape – Challenges and Transformations</p> <p>Objective: To analyze the reality of Syrian civil society before and after the conflict.</p> <p>Session Format: Guided open discussion.</p> <p>Discussion Topics: How did the period of authoritarian rule affect civic engagement and civil society work? Who are the new and established actors in the civil society landscape? What is the current relationship between civil society and the authorities? What changes have occurred in the role and position of civil society?</p>
11:00 – 11:15	Coffee Break
11:15 – 12:45	<p style="text-align: center;">Session 2: Gaps and Needs</p> <p>Objective: To identify the main gaps and challenges facing civil society organizations and initiatives.</p> <p>Session Format: Small working groups followed by a collective presentation.</p> <p>Discussion Topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most pressing needs for navigating the transitional phase. • Gaps in funding, legitimacy, and capacity-building. • Legal and bureaucratic barriers to sustainability.
12:45 – 13:30	Lunch break
13:45 – 16:00	<p style="text-align: center;">Session 3: Local Recommendations, Opportunities, and Future Vision</p> <p>Objective: To explore available opportunities and outline the future role of civil society.</p> <p>Session Format:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A structured open discussion on opportunities for partnership and local and international support, with the aim of producing practical and actionable recommendations. • An interactive exercise using a pre-prepared Google Form, followed by a presentation and analysis of participants' responses. <p>Discussion Topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What opportunities should be seized? • Local priorities according to the geographical context. • How can organizations transition from service providers to agents of impact? • What role should municipalities and the new government play? • What values and principles should be embedded in the emerging civil society



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