A Concluding Note from the Conference "Supporting Syrian Civil Society and Diaspora Organizations: Lessons learnt and the way forward"[1]

On February 4-5, 2020, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in collaboration with DRC Diaspora Programme and UNU-MERIT/ Maastricht University convened an invitation-only conference to discuss the lessons learnt, challenges and best practices in supporting the Syrian civil society and diaspora in the past three years and to assess future priorities and needs. Participating in the conference were Syrian civil society actors and other stakeholders based in different countries across Europe and the United States as well as from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

The conference kicked off with opening speeches of Dorothee Hutter (GIZ Head of Syria Portfolio), Jean-Baptiste Délèze (Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), Mingo Heiduk (DRC Civil Society Engagement Unit & Diaspora Programme), Frank Samol and Erik Mohns (Qualification Initiative for Civil Society (QICS), GIZ Syria Portfolio) and followed by the presentation of the new research study "Diaspora mobilisation in contexts of political uncertainty - Exploring the potentials and limits of the Syrian civil society in Exile", prepared by Eleni Diker, Researcher and Nora Jasmin Ragab, researcher, UNU-MERIT/ Maastricht University. The recommendations of the study guided the subjects and content of the workshops realized within the scope of the conference.

The conference was structured around smaller, facilitated workshops with panel discussions to allow all participants to enter into practical discussion. This note provides an overview of the workshops, a summary of the presentations and discussions, and suggestions for next steps.

Workshop 1: Community Empowerment, Youth, Women

Chair: Rand Sukhaita & Amani Alkebriti (QICS)
Panel: Mey Seifan / NESWA, Karam Hilly / Door Beyond War, Abdul Jaleel Al Shaqaqi / Basmeh and Zeitooneh

Workshop description: The last years witnessed the emergence and ongoing development of a vibrant, politically and socially engaged civil society led by Syrians with the aim to, first, play a part in the social and political transformations inside Syria and second, respond to the pressing needs of the Syrian population both inside the country as well as abroad. At the same time, diverse structural factors and organisational processes can produce power asymmetries within the Syrian civil society and the broader Syrian society, based on factors such as class, generation and gender, risking the exclusion of women, youth and other marginalized groups. Community empowerment, as a bottom-up and participatory process, can provide a space for potentially marginalised sections of the Syrian society to identify and

formulate their interests and foster their participation in decision-making processes. The Syrian civil society should represent all segments of the society in the process of governance, take a leading role in identifying the structural and hidden barriers that prevent participation of women and youth and take a community empowerment-based approach to address these challenges. This workshop aims to discuss the different tools and mechanisms to enhance spaces of empowerment for underrepresented groups to enable their participation as equal members of society.

The workshop is designed based on the following recommendations of the study:

- **Democratizing decision-making processes at the international level.** A future political settlement in Syria should be Syrian-led with decision-making roles in justice, return & reintegration and reconstruction. A greater representation of Syrian civil society in international decision-making processes should be selected in a transparent and democratic manner.

- **Mobilizing youth.** Participation of youth should be promoted further to harness more civic energy by offering training programs targeting youth workers, facilitating their engagement in all stages of civil society work.

- **Increasing representation of women**. Women are underrepresented particularly in managerial levels in Syrian CSOs. The intrinsic dynamism of Syrian civil society presents an opportunity to improve structures and processes of governance to embed gendered perspective in all aspects of civil society work. It is vital to work with women and women-led organizations in order to mainstream a gender sensitive approach

Workshop Findings:

What does empowerment mean for us?

- Tools to **provide persons with meaningful ends to their action and ownership** are seen as crucial to build the capacity and skills of youth in order to enable their active participation in political, social, economic and cultural life. As such, the process of empowerment can be understood as enabling persons to understand and give meaning to their action. If persons understand the meaning of their action, realise their resources and achieve knowledge how to build on them, this can foster process of self-empowerment.

- In addition, empowerment has also a collective dimension. It is therefore crucial to **provide safe spaces for sharing experience and learning from each other**, in order to manage conflicts and different positions constructively and to build a strong collective voice.

- The concept of empowerment was also critically discussed, potentially risking a reinforcement of societal power imbalance, as it creates images of the strong helper and the weak women in need of assistance. Next, to the individual and collective dimension, empowerment therefore also needs a structural transformation in form of a **redistribution of political power,** in the course of which people or groups of people step out of a position of relative inferiority to power and acquire a greater capacity for democratic participation and political decision-making.

What do you consider as major barriers and obstacles to community empowerment and the participation of underrepresented groups?

- The story of the Syrian people is one of **trauma and fear**, not only because of the conflict and displacement but because of the country's history of authoritarian ruling. Psycho-social support is needed to cope with the trauma resulting from historical and present experiences of collective victimhood.

- One of the major challenges is the **security situation insides Syria and in displacement**. As a result an emergency response is still the main priority of international donors, resulting in short term project and initiatives that focus more on securing the short term needs than long-term efforts to enhance meaningful participation of all segments of the Syrian society.

- This emergency response results also in a lack of **financial resources and limited sustainability of projects,** since many funding streams are short-term in nature. However, tackling the empowerment of marginalised segments of the Syrian is a long-term endeavour as it needs to address societal power imbalances to ensure meaningful participation.

- These social inequalities tend to be a result of **patriarchal societal structures and patrimonial power relations** that prevent equal participation of women and youth. A 'toxic masculinity', in which men represent the voices of women in a system which is made by and for men to men, poses structural barriers for women to participate in decision making processes or achieve the power of interpretation over their lives.

- It was acknowledged that these societal structures tend to prevent marginalised groups of the society in getting **access to power and decision making.** Hence, there is a lack of decision-making roles for women and youth, as these groups have limited voices in meetings and lack representation in local councils or in international decision-making processes.

- The revolution gave a space for personal transformations in which changing worldviews, new dreams and vision for a future of the country emerged. Due to conflict and displacement, the lives of Syrian youths became increasingly marked by experiences of suffering, loss and dislocation, through which many **lost the meaning of and motivation for their actions.** As such, displacement engenders not only the physical loss of houses, but also of has a symbolic meaning of losing one's home, identity, memories, history and places of belonging.

- Due to conflict and displacement there is an increasing risk of an **entire generation of children and youth being deprived of their basic right to education**. Yet, children and the youth will be the ones to lead the country towards a peaceful future. However, conflict and displacement also resulted in an opportunity for children and youth to exit low quality education provided by the regime. Hence, if alternative forms of education based on human rights are provided, this could yield a lot of benefits for the upcoming generations.

What can be different tools and mechanisms to provide spaces for empowerment to underrepresented groups?

- It was acknowledged that is important to **provide women skills and tools, in order to make them identify their power and transform their resources into action.** Protection and safe spaces can

provide opportunities for women to socialize and re-build their social networks, receive social support and to acquire contextually relevant skills and knowledge in a safe and non-stigmatising way. In addition, activities should provide space for organising to take action and opportunities for meaningful participation to foster a feeling of self-empowerment and the ability to act rather than react.

- **Edutainment, a mix of education and entertainment**, facilitated through the use of arts and media can create meaningful ways to remobilise women to take action, as it presents a useful tool to access women and enable reflection on their resources in a creative and powerful way.

- **Staring from the feelings, resources and needs of the people** is crucial to enable a sustainable empowerment process. The process, hence, focusses on the personal transformations in order to understand our feelings and the feelings of others. If persons realise their meaning, can identify their resources and identities it helps them to create an understanding of their ownership.

- In addition, **empowerment** should not be considered as an add-on activity or separate project, but instead **should be integrated in the vision and programming** in order to build a response based on deeper interventions, and comprehensive and integrative models. As such, also humanitarian action should always have a empowerment dimension to lead the beneficiaries out of dependence towards a more self-determined life.

- It is important to **strengthen the grassroots** and not only people who are organised in organisations, but also those in more informal networks. Providing spaces for the grassroots to organise and build identities can lead to powerful empowerment processes and transformations.

How can we promote the participation and representation of different sections of the Syrian society in our work and in other decision/making processes?

- In general, it was acknowledged that the process of empowerment requires **a deeper interference, transformation in form of "mentality change" or even a cultural revolution** in order to foster a change in patriarchal societal structures and a redistribution of political power. The Syrian civil society and women led-movements can play an important role in fostering societal transformations, by engaging in activities aiming at breaking stereotypes and promoting new discourses in society.

- This also requires that concepts and terms of gender, feminism and empowerment are redefined in the Syrian context. Hence, instead of imposing these concepts from a European perspective, there is a need to **redefine the concepts and terms in Arabic** in order to create a new political, cultural and social system based on local feminist ideas.

- The process of empowerment should be based on a **long-term response,** since structural changes that enable the transformation of power imbalances and meaningful participation is a long-term endeavour

- **Media and advocacy work** that raise awareness on the situation of women, but also makes the perspective and voices of women heard in public life is crucial to challenge dominant images and stereotypes present in the Syrian society.

- A n**eeds and resource-based response**, including evaluation of what has been done so far, seems crucial to foster the sustainability of youth empowerment programs. Reaching out to the youth and asked them about their needs, dreams and resources is crucial to ensure that projects are based on a youth-centric approach. Spaces for exchange and reflection of experiences and lessons learned among Syrian CSO are seen as important for the evaluation of projects.

- Community based S**tructured Psycho-Social Support** can provide the youth with opportunities to express their feelings, learn and practice new coping skills, and to interact with others. This yields the potential to build the power of group, by promoting solidarity, spaces of belonging and activities of trust-building and dialogue.

Workshop 2: Advocacy & Media

Chair: Philipp von Zwehl (QICS)
Panel: Lina Chawaf / Rozana Radio, Laila Kiki / The Syria Campaign, Jade Kahhaleh / We Exist

Workshop description: A future political settlement in Syria should be Syrian-led with decision-making roles in justice, return and reconstruction. A top-down agreement faces the risk of breaking down due to lack of nuanced understanding of the Syrian context, whereas local and grassroots ownership in peacebuilding can render it successful and durable. However, current international decision-making processes tend to provide limited space for the representation of Syrian civil society actors. The platforms to mobilize support and call for action and international recognition of the Syrian issue are limited or only available to certain segments of the civil society. Further, potential influences of advocacy efforts are not only shaped by the different opportunities and constraints present in the host and origin country, but also influenced by the diversity of the civil society landscape in terms of different identities, ideologies, interests, and the level of capacity of the actors involved. The opportunities to harness advocacy efforts to promote wider solidarity and mobilization could be utilized further by mobilizing youth and implementing programs to facilitate their systematic engagement in civil society work. In addition, access to reliable, objective and timely data could also allow for more effective advocacy work based on factual and neutral evidence.

The aim of the workshop is to discuss the potential design and implementation of advocacy strategies and to formulate their priorities effectively. It seeks to provide tools to construct strategic alliances with potential partners and stakeholders and channels to make the voices of the civil society heard in places of relevance. The workshop also tackles the question of how to promote a strong.

The workshop is designed based on the following recommendations of the study:

- **Democratizing decision-making processes at the international level.** A future political settlement in Syria should be Syrian-led with decision-making roles in justice, return & reintegration and reconstruction. A greater representation of Syrian civil society in international decision-making processes should be selected in a transparent and democratic manner.

- **Mobilizing youth.** Participation of youth should be promoted further to harness more civic energy by offering training programs targeting youth workers, facilitating their systematic engagement

in all stages of civil society work, enhancing their engagement with international community through participation in events and recognizing the abilities and skills of youth and working in reinforcing it.

- **More research.** Syrian civil society should develop partnerships with universities and promote research on relevant issues. It is critical to achieve the much-needed wedding of academia and civil society as a way to build on the knowledge of civil society and frame it academically. Action and advocacy are more efficient and credible when based on factual and neutral evidence.

- **The right to return and the wish to remain.** Host countries should refrain from circulating discourses that tend to carry a notion of an obligation to return, but rather design policies that recognize the right to return, but also the potential of a wish to remain.

Workshop Findings:

*What is the specific role Syrian media and advocacy organization played in the past years? What **impact** could be achieved?*

- **Media can serve as a powerful tool for advocacy efforts**. Regime has implemented the siege tactic, but siege was not only about access to food and water, it was also about access to information – to media. Media can provide space for Syrian voices to be heard and advocacy efforts can amplify these voices.

- It is crucial to **amplify the voices of Syrians**, inside or outside Syria. The speech and the story have to be owned by Syrians, and it is important to ensure that their version is heard, not someone else's version.

- **Media can help archive/preserve stories and testimonies of Syrians.** Syrian Archive has collected more than 3 million digital content, and each one of them serve as evidence for the victims.

- There are **many effective media/advocacy platforms**, which can be considered an achievement in this regard.

- **Media can bring about societal change**, change of mentality and perceptions. For example, Rozana Radio is running a taboos program in order to allow women to voice their experiences regarding sensitive topics. Sometimes women are not aware that what they experienced is unfair or is a crime. Hearing similar stories to their own experiences on the radio helps women to become aware of the unfair treatment towards them and open up, share their own experiences.

- **Art and culture** can play an important role in bringing together Syrians and host communities. An organization in France organized an art and music festival to help the public understand the richness and diversity of Syrian cultural production in the past and present and help create connections with local communities. Documentaries such as For Sama, White Helmets are very important because they humanize the story. It is mentioned that the word Syria has a bad connotation on a non-Syrian's mind, a quick google search on Syria will only bring images of destruction, vulnerability. Art and culture can help rebuild this image.

- In France, it was possible to **ease transfer of funds to local partners** through advocacy efforts following an inter-ministerial meeting with banks.

- It is recognized that traditional media can **reach out to all fractions of the society**. Neutrality of media is also important. There is some space of freedom for radio programs in government-controlled areas.

*What are the **main challenges** Syrian media and advocacy organizations are facing currently in their work as Syrian diaspora?*

- There are major **safety and security risks** for those actors documenting/reporting human rights violations. Documenting human rights violations is still a crime in Syria.

- There is a common concern regarding the feeling of losing hope after long term commitment and dedication. Another source of frustration is the difficulty to measure or feel the i**mpact of advocacy efforts**, how it contributes to the Syrian cause? "Did our suffering stop after being on the first page of the New York Times?". It's perceived as a challenge to overcome this fatigue. Losing does not mean giving up, it is time to think about why we weren't able to achieve our goals and what we did wrong, it is a starting point to think what we did wrong. One stage to start the kind of a new beginning. Relating to the struggles of activists, some participants mentioned the need for p**sychosocial support for activists.**

- **Securitization of the Syrian issue** in Europe is perceived as a challenge. In the discussions concerning Syria, the emphasis shifts towards terrorism (ISIS, HTC etc.), which signals changing perception towards refugees in Europe. It is argued that Europeans tend to refer to a refugee crisis or a terrorism crisis, but it is actually a catastrophe, humanitarian crisis.

- For some actors, the **conservative culture** presents a challenge and they are criticized or rejected by some parts of the society for exposing taboo topics. Others criticize discussion of these topics as untimely, due to their perception of these as minor issues that concern a small minority and diverts attention from more important issues, issues that have higher priority for them.

- The Western media is criticized for their selective attitude while reporting from Syria. For example, some media agencies are demanding interviewees with specific attributes and do not comply with the **standards of journalist ethics**. In addition, the regime also invites foreign journalists for "marketing" purposes. It is suggested to follow up on news and reports in international media about Syria, and check if they meet ethical/quality standards of journalism by getting in contact with newspapers if needed.

- A key challenge is the so-called **narrative battle**, in which the regime and Russia are channelling funds into disinformation campaigns to counter the real stories of people. An example is the organized propaganda against White Helmets. In this battle, the regime is more likely win because it has the advantage of being a government, it has the money and resources to channel into disinformation campaigns.

- It is perceived that the majority of the funds are allocated to humanitarian and emergency projects and relatively **less funding is available for advocacy efforts.**

- The **normalisation of relations** with the Syrian regime is perceived as a threat and it is argued that the civil society actors should think about how to deal with this new phase.

- There is a need to think outside the box to create **new advocacy strategies and unconventional tools** in order to increase outreach. One of the concerns is that all the efforts circulate among the same group of people. It is perceived as a challenge to mobilize the Syrian community and reach out to more people. Some participants argue that the Syrian community have little interest and commitment to participate in advocacy efforts, while others express that it is wrong to blame the people as they are trying to build themselves a life. It is important to think about how to engage them again, how to activate them again rather than blaming them.

*What are **priority** topics for Syrian media and advocacy organizations in the future?*

- **Arbitrary detention and forced disappearances**
- The issue of **return** is recognized as one of the priority topics for Syrian media and advocacy efforts. There are examples of rejection of asylum claims in France and Denmark. It should be continuously emphasized that Syria is not safe and the discussions on which areas are safe/unsafe inside Syria should be avoided.
- **Youth and women** are areas that can be tackled relatively easily because the image of Syrian men is jeopardized by European media.

*How can we reach **more long-term and strategic actions** in advocacy instead of one-time campaigns?*

- Establishing partnerships with **social media companies** can provide Syrian organizations more space on social media. For example, when Facebook changed its algorithm it impacted a lot of charities. It is important to advocate for these issues with tech companies. On the other hand, through website home pages or Facebook pages, organizations can only reach people that are already aware. A new strategy could engage **Influencers or Youtubers, combining them with media**. For example, "For Sama" was introduced by a very famous Youtuber among youth, with many followers. On the same day, the audience in the theatre was aged between 13 to 27, all crying and shocked, it is a rare opportunity to reach this age group.

- It is important to establish **strong alliances** around common topics of interest, gathering different perspectives and tackling the issue from different angles.

- Learning from the experiences of other peoples and nations in the region could prove useful. One of the things that require more investment is **communication with other diasporas**. In the past, many peoples and nations have been through similar experiences, we should look at campaigning experiences in Palestine, for example. We can also benefit from speaking a common language.

- The organizations should support the communities they are working for **not only through representing them, but also empowering them to take ownership and speak for themselves**. A good example is #theyaresyria videos, telling the stories of Syrians, told by Syrians and entirely made by Syrians.

- Sometimes the actual need on the ground does not match with the priorities of the donor community. It is questioned whether the CSO activities are donor-driven or do civil society have a decision-making role. In this regard, the civil society should not necessarily follow the existing trends but take a more proactive role in designing programs.

- It is important to maintain **connections with local organizations and local people,** on a grassroots level.

- **Media targeting children** is mentioned as a need in order to keep children connected to their roots and identity.

Workshop 3: Creating Common Spaces in Host Country Contexts

Chair: Frank Samol (QICS) Panel: Majid Albunni / WASL-VDSH, Ziad Khayyata / SCNP, Fadi Hallisso / Basmeh & Zeitooneh

Workshop description: Networking and cooperation can offer the Syrian civil society the chance to strengthen their influence and visibility and facilitate access to resources. Enhanced cooperation can provide access to financial resources and help build capacities of organizations through mutual exchange. By bundling forces in networks, organizations can respond more effectively to the needs of the target group by identifying gaps and priorities. As a result, effective synergies can be created through cooperation instead of competition, by pooling resources and utilizing the different skills and competences more efficiently. Moreover, joint action by the civil society and a strong collective voice can lead to the advancement of political goals and thus promote empowerment through solidarity. A common, coordinate vision can, hence, counterbalance potential processes of fragmentation and polarisation within the civil society. It is therefore crucial to support creation of online and offline platforms and spaces to ensure sustainable and effective interaction and exchange among different stakeholders involved in the Syrian issue. This workshop aims to discuss how to strengthen notworking activities among Syrian civil society actors and other stakeholders in order to promote new spaces for reflecting on strategies and joint future actions rather than reactions.

The workshop is designed based on the following recommendations of the study:

- **Creating common spaces.** It is critical to establish platforms and organize networking events that bring together Syrian-led organizations to allow space for reflecting on strategies and joint future actions rather than reactions.

- **Strategic & coordinated approach.** Respondents underline the necessity to take on a proactive role with a long-term vision through analysing the hurdles that are facing them rather than solely reacting to the happenings. A safe space for dialogue and the use of scenario building workshops can provide a space for discussing and reflecting on joint strategies and plans for action.

- **Solidarity for capacity.** Organizations working on a lower capacity can benefit from peer-to-peer learning opportunities, in which well-established Syrian CSOs extend thematic experiences and technical assistance to smaller ones. At the same time, established Syrian CSOs could learn from the grassroots experience of smaller organizations.

Workshop Findings:

Lessons learned

- **Understanding common space.** It is expressed by the participants that creating common spaces is not only about creating new bodies but rather extending their domains to include more topics. Specific organizations mastered in certain fields over the past 5 years, allowing for a more refined focus on services provided to civilians.

- **Promoting advocacy.** Some organizations were able to conduct advocacy touring, granting them the ability to better communicate their mission and goals.

- **Normalizing gender inclusion.** Increasing organization's awareness with regard to female inclusion, and women in roles of leadership.

- **Finding common spaces.** Finding common spaces for refugees was one specific obstacle faced by organizations in this process. Many of them expressed the limited manoeuvrability in the market of physical spaces, leading to difficulties in procurement processes. Other obstacles, such as the differences between working in more stable environments like Europe, versus more volatile environments, such as Lebanon or Turkey, were also addressed. Organizations felt that there is an unwillingness from the Lebanese community to work with Syrians, and in the cases they did it was done out of economic benefit.

- **Importance of mapping.** Organizations learned the importance of mapping exercises to identify ideas, projects, and areas of focus. This was one of the main factors of the organization's success with regards to the efficiency of work and played a significant role in facilitating implementation.

- **Measuring impact.** Organizations are facing distinct challenges with regards to influencing the agendas of high-profile meetings, such as those in Brussels.

- **A need for development.** Implementing and supporting new and relevant projects played a key role in furthering previously-established initiatives

Challenges

- **Coordination and communication.** Coordination amongst different civil society organizations also presented significant challenges. Despite attempts to synchronize goals and objectives over virtual meetings, remote coordination was an obstacle. In the instances where coordination was achieved, maintaining communication between networks then arose as a separate challenge.

- **Restriction on mobility.** Visa procedures and requirements presented challenges for networks located outside of Europe. This segregated portions of the diaspora platform in areas like Syria and Lebanon, as many were unable to attend meetings in Europe. Mobility restrictions in certain locations also became an obstacle when it came to the implementation of certain projects. In

specific cases they were unable to advertise the projects of Syrian organizations, as it would put staff in Lebanon or Turkey at risk.

- **Lack of trust.** A widespread lack of trust was highlighted as a significant challenge that civil society organizations are facing. To combat this distrust a greater collective action between organizations is required.

- **Need of sustainability.** There is a constant need for relevant activities to keep the focus of existing initiatives. There is no added value to initiating new networks, but there is a need of sustaining and strengthening existing ones.

- **Political ground.** Finding common political ground between all involved entities was identified as a major challenge, largely due to differences in ideological and religious perspectives, and ethnic and religious diversity. In addition to this, common ground between entities in this context is often based on democracy. However, participating parties come from a variety of ideologies (e.g. Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan), liberals…), which can lead to larger groups or networks attempting to impose their opinion on others.

- **Relevance.** Panellists noted that finding relevant topics and useful content for participants and observers alike was a challenge.

- **Funding pressure.** Certain organizations receive less or no funding due to a lack of networking, and as a result cannot afford representation at UN associated meetings.

Outlook
- **Increase of mapping.** A high importance needs to be placed on conducting mapping in areas of interest. This has been found to result in a greater efficiency of work. Mapping of this nature would be undertaken on advocacy.

- **Identification of goals.** Identify small and smart relevant goals to the topics identified. Design and allocate working groups responsible for achieving said goals.

- **Assigning coordination.** Assign committed coordinators to fill in the gaps present in communication and coordination.

- **Self-funding.** Identifying a variety of ways to fund initiatives and projects to reduce reliance on donors. A specific panellist suggested that, "we should be the ones making conferences as such one day not wait for GIZ or DRC to do it."

- **Consolidation**. Consolidating efforts with other involved organizations could make programs more effective. Consolidation of common spaces was also identified as crucial, specifically common spaces in host countries.

- **Inclusion of young generations.** There is a common interest in transmitting the information of the current network to future generations which requires the current organizations to include youth activities.

- **Localization of agenda.** Organizations have requested a mechanism wherein international organizations could influence the agenda of state governments to take specific networks and initiatives into consideration.

- **Filtering mechanism.** A systematic approach to filtering radical opinions being imposed upon entities within a network is necessary to promote a more democratic space.

- **Learning experience.** "We are not the first or last diaspora. We should learn from other diasporas." There is a common understanding of the need to learn from other diaspora's experience to expand their knowledge.

- **Proactivity of roles.** There is a need to focus on establishing more proactive roles for organizations in host countries. For example, certain Syrian organizations are forced to work with municipalities, so there needs to be a reassurance that they could operate autonomously in Turkey.

Workshop 4: Justice and Accountability

Chair: Julie Bernath (SwissPeace) Panel: Anwar Al Bounni / Syrian Centre for Legal Studies and Research, Joumana Seif / Syrian Women Network, Fadwa Mahmoud / Families for Freedom

Workshop description: Transitional justice refers to dealing with past atrocities during the transition to democratic and stable governments through mechanisms which can set the path for fostering a renewed social compact to ensure justice and accountability for the victims. Since an early stage, Syrian civil society actors both inside the country and in the diaspora have engaged in the pursuit of justice and accountability to break the reign of impunity for the atrocious crimes committed by all sides of the Syrian conflict. The Syrian war is considered the most documented conflict in history with thousands of videos, victim testimonies, and pictures uploaded on the internet and in social networks. The extensive documentation of violations with the engagement of activists, civil society organizations, citizens, lawyers and victims is considered a strong advantage as it can ensure that victimization is recorded, remembered and compensated for. In addition, Syrian civil society actors have actively pursued trials that address crimes committed by home-state perpetrators abroad under universal jurisdiction laws, which, in some European host countries, enables prosecution for serious violations of human rights outside of the country where such violations occurred when the justice system in the home state is unwilling or unable to do so. The politically sensitive nature of the issue of justice in the Syrian context leads to variation of responses by civil society actors in different host country settings. In some countries, diaspora civil society actors could contribute more to transitional justice issues through conducting comprehensive evidence gathering and truth telling, raising international awareness or being involved in prosecutions on national or international level. This workshop discusses the opportunities and challenges related to justice and accountability in the Syrian context and seeks to identify potential tools and mechanisms for a comprehensive and coordinated response.

The workshop is designed based on the following recommendations of the study:

- **Democratizing decision-making processes at the international level.** A future political settlement in Syria should be Syrian-led with decision-making roles in justice, return & reintegration and reconstruction. A greater representation of Syrian civil society in international decision-making processes should be selected in a transparent and democratic manner.

- **Focusing on justice, treating reconciliation with caution.** International community should increase efforts to keep the issues of justice and accountability for Syrians, including victims of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention alive. The notions of justice and reconciliation should not be conflated, and the international community should recognize the sensitivity of the term reconciliation.

Workshop Findings:

What are the different tools and mechanism used in the pursuit of justice and accountability?

- The **application of universal jurisdictions** is of particular relevance in the context of Syria, as it seems unlikely that the Syrian state exercise its criminal jurisdiction over those responsible for international crimes. Universal jurisdiction allows states, such as Germany, Sweden, and Norway the prosecution of international crimes, although the offence has no direct reference to the country meaning that the offence has not been committed on its territory, or by or against of one its citizen. This mechanism is not only a first step to achieve accountability but has also a strong symbolic power as it sends the message that perpetrators will be held accountable for their crimes.

- In general, there is **confidence in Europe's legal systems**, which are considered as trustful and independent systems that protect the rights of individuals. While it is generally acknowledged that there is a need to hold criminals accountable also inside Syria, at this stage of the conflict European courts are considered as the only bodies where fair and independent trials are achievable.

- Victims' organizations can foster a **victim-centred and victim-oriented perspective** on the issue of justice, provide safe spaces for the victims of crimes and advocate to raise awareness on their causes. For example, Families for Freedom, a transnational women-led movement is pleading for the pursuit of justice and accountability for their family members who had become victims of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention. The movement organizes protests and campaigns to mobilise the public for their cause and to lobby European governments to put pressure on the Syrian regime, its allies and other armed groups responsible for the crimes. Among the main demands are the release of detainees unlawfully kept in prison, the disclosure of the locations of the bodies of those executed or tortured to death and accountability of those who had committed the crimes.

- It was generally acknowledged that **European countries provide important spaces for mobilisation**. For example, the Freedom Bus travelled across European cities with pictures of those who are missing to raise awareness on the cause of forced disappearance. Next to raising

awareness, the movement advocated at international political talks, such as the Geneva peace talks for putting the issues of enforced disappearance and arbitrary and unlawful detention on the agenda to ensure international recognition.

- New initiatives that foster a **gender-sensitive approach to justice and accountability** were highlighted. As such, a survivor-oriented approach that seeks to improve coordination between Syrian women and human rights organisation in the work with survivors inside Syria was highlighted as success.

What are the main challenges and obstacles in the pursuit of justice and accountability in different host country settings?

- The **politicised nature of the UN response** poses a crucial challenge when it comes to the pursuit of justice and accountability in the Syrian context. Syria is not a signatory of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution in May 2014 to refer the situation to the ICC, meaning that *the ICC has no mandate to exercise jurisdiction* in the case of Syria.

- Given *the **distance to crimes**,* the prosecution process is complex and is very complicated due to the comprehensive collection, documentation and analysis of evidence needed to prepare files in order to facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings.

- Given that prosecution is often based on ***confidential procedures***, the public prosecutor is not authorized to reveal the warrants before the person is arrested. This means that some efforts of seeking justice and accountability are not visible in the public and less feasible to raise awareness on.

- Critique was raised that European governments tend to neglect their responsibility of holding their citizens who fought inside Syria accountable for their crimes as they resist to return them to their countries of origin. Yet, it is also challenging to ***hold non-Syrian actors accountable*** (e.g. foreign fighters) since a lot of evidence has to be gather in order to start the process of prosecution at European courts.

With regard to conflict related sexual violence the inputs and discussions raised the following challenges:

- The input of Joumana Seif discussed how the Syrian regime uses rape, insults and humiliations of a sexual nature, forced abortion and other forms of sexual violence as part of a widespread and systematic attack against women in detention. Next to the use of violence, women face also particular vulnerabilities when it comes to health issues such as menstruation and pregnancy. Yet, the ***gendered dimension of detention tends to be widely neglected.***

- Women also face distinct challenges upon relief from detention. While men are often celebrated as heroes, female detainees often become subject to ***stigmatisation***. As such, even if women

come out of prison, they remain in detainment due to marginalisation and exclusion from the society.

- The experience of conflict related sexual violence, stigma and blame from the society result in **severe psychological consequences**, which have not been addressed adequately. This calls for a coordinated long-term approach, which not only provides socio-psychological support to the survivors, but also a community-centred approach to effectively address stigma arising from CRSV.

With regard to forced disappearance and detention the inputs and discussions raised the following challenges:

- **Impossibility to address the issue of detention inside Syria,** as regime repression prevents people to talk about the issues since people risk being detained themselves.

- **The burning questions on the missing/disappeared** remains a priority for victim organisations, since people are being detained and are dying in prison every day. Families of victims of enforced disappearance are in a constant state of anxiety over their loved ones. Before there are international peace talks the issue of forced disappearance and detention has to be addressed at the international level. As such there is a need to balancing efforts for accountability with the priority of detention.

- However, the **questions of enforced disappearance tend to remain unaddressed in international peace processes**. Some states and the UN have condemned the regime practices and in February 2014, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2139, which calls for an end to enforced disappearances in Syria. However, no real actions are taken to end enforced disappearances, to reveal the whereabouts of detainees or disclosure and report on their fate.

- In general, it is **very difficult to access information** regarding the whereabouts of family members. Humanitarian organisations are bound by the humanitarian law and cannot access the prison to identify the persons. They can just ask the regime for information to understand what happens to detainees.

How can stakeholders enhance cooperation? What is needed to reach a coordinated and comprehensive response?

- **Address the issue of weapon trade, money laundering and diversion of public funds,** as with the Caesar Act passed by the United States, which puts political and economic pressures on the Syrian regime and its allies.

- **Increase coordination amongst organisations also across sectors (e.g. health).** The issue of justice provides a common ground for action, despite the difference among Syrian civil society actors. There is a need to present and advocate a strong and coordinated message to Europe and international community, to work together, to gather and to analyse the evidence. Working together with health organisation, which are also a target of systematic regime violence can yield

various potentials, not only when it comes to getting access to victims but also with regard to gathering evidence on war crimes and crimes against humanity.

● Given that sexual violence is also entrenched in the legal system, there is a need to not only work with survivors of conflict related sexual violence but also **change the legislation that allows for such crimes** in Syria. Next to the legal system a community centred approach is important to change the mentality of male dominated society.

● The **establishment of a work plan** that facilitates a coordinate response on conflict related gender-based violence is important to address the various dimension of the issue. Next to psychological support for the survivors a community centred approach is needed to address the stigmatisation women face in the society.

● **Addressing different meanings and priorities of justice**, is important to tackle the different needs resulting from the Syrian conflict and displacement. As such, justice could mean very different things in different times and different context. For example in Lebanon, where families do not have access to humanitarian aid, for them achieving justice might mean to get access to the humanitarian system.

● **Syrian civil society actors can provide important platforms** for victim victims organisations such as Family for freedom, to get access to information and outreach in order to make their voices heard and spread.

● While informal networks are very important and successful in supporting victims, they tend to lack capacity and resources since there are no donor funded mechanisms to support such initiatives. **Strengthening and supporting informal networks** seems crucial to help the survivors efficiently.

Workshop 5: Enhancing a Localized Aid Response in Syria

Chair: Marius Stahmer (QICS)
Panel: Abdulaziz Ramadan / DOZ e.V., Fadi Al-Dairi / Hand in Hand For Aid and Development, Isabella Bronkalla, Deutsch-Syrischer Verein

Workshop description: Strengthening local actors and engaging them in humanitarian aid response and planning can make progress more likely in the long-run. Increased localization of aid has been a core commitment at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, given the increasing recognition of the unbalanced power dynamic of the humanitarian system and the necessity to shift the power from international NGOs to national and local actors. Localization is not only morally and ethically desirable, but channelling aid through the local communities can also help build the capacities of local actors towards a more sustainable response that can eventually improve cost-effectiveness. It can play an essential role in sustaining or improving support in territories taken by the government of Syria. It is therefore essential for the international community and large Syrian NGOs to empower relatively small Syrian-led organizations (and communities) by building their capacities and contracting with them as equal partners to provide a more cost-effective and sustainable humanitarian response. It is crucial to facilitate small NGOs' and local communities' access to funds and partnerships which can, in turn, help

them maintain a stable workforce that is sufficiently qualified to enhance the impact of the organization. The workshop addresses the question of how localisation of aid can be promoted in the Syrian context, by discussion the opportunities and challenges of a localised aid response in a context of diminishing cross border access and high risk & constraints in regime held areas, as well as lessons learned from successful engagement.

The workshop is designed based on the following recommendations of the study:

- **Localization of aid.** International organizations should be supportive of contracting local organizations and delivering aid through local Syrian run initiatives and include them in the design of programs.

- **Preventing brain drain from local civil society.** The local CSOs typically lose their most qualified staff to the INGOs, who offer better salary packages. The rhetoric of enhancing capacities of local civil society should be accompanied by a commitment to help local organizations attract and sustain qualified staff.

- **Less paperwork, more funding.** The high bureaucracy of grant applications and complicated procedures hinder the access of less professionalized Syrian CSOs to funding opportunities. Multilingual and simpler application forms, reduced reporting duties to donors, longer-term grants that cover overhead and human resource costs are vital for the survival of smaller organizations.

- **Strategic & coordinated approach**. Syrian organizations can take on a proactive role with a long-term vision through analysing the hurdles that are facing them rather than solely reacting to the happenings. Syrian organizations can work towards being integral components of the humanitarian response and planning on issues concerning Syria and Syrian refugees.

- **Easing sanctions that affect civil society.** The restrictions on money transactions to Syrian organizations is impeding the work of many Syrian CSOs inside and outside Syria. Stakeholders should enter in dialogue with financial institutions to facilitate financial transfers and to mitigate the negative impacts of "de-risking" measures.

- **Tackling the misconceptions about civil society inside**. The CSOs in government-held areas are not necessarily pro-regime and categorizing them as such can only work in the advantage of the Syrian government. Recognizing the existence of a civil society that upholds pluralistic and civic values inside regime-held areas and opening channels of dialogue with them could be an investment in the future of civil society Syria. At the same time, the potential of co-optation by the current government and the security risk that independent civil society organizations face in government-held areas should not be underestimated. Cooperation therefore should follow the acquiring of contextual knowledge, creating trust and acting in a conflict-sensitive manner.

Lessons learnt:

- **Diaspora work integrates.** It is argued that, as a diaspora organization, it is not possible to work in isolation from the local community in host country context. It is therefore perceived that diaspora work can bring people together, and help create a sense of belonging and identity. The nature of work requires an understanding of the rules to work together, ensuring regular communication and trust, distribution of responsibilities and being open to feedback and recommendations.

- **Earning trust of local communities is crucial.** It is argued that the precondition to localization of aid is to have a strong and reliable network in the region and to ensure that the trust is mutual. For DSV, for example, the local actors are typically identified through personal relationships and networks between Germany and Syria based on self-initiative and interest but evolve to become a professional partnership based on shared mission and objectives.

- Localization is not only the responsibility of IOs, but also the responsibility professionalized, large Syrian NGOs.

- **Localisation does not mean to give a grant.** It is argued that if the Syrian CSOs are not provided by the necessary tools, neither grants nor costly capacity building trainings offered by IOs can realize their full potential. *"Teach us how to fish – do not give the fish."*

- **Localisation of rules and procedures.** A complexity arises from the shifting meaning of localization of aid, which is commonly used in the context of big organizations working with local partners, leading to localization of rules and procedures, rather than localization of aid by people and by grassroots, through social contacts.

- **Close cooperation and coordination with local councils and other NGOs**. It is crucial to involve local councils and other NGOs in the origin country while conducting cross border operations or needs assessments.

Challenges

- **Access challenges.** Local access challenges to the people in need due to security concerns.

- **Risk management – duty of care**. Protection of humanitarian actors is a major challenge. Some organizations were not aware of the humanitarian notification that is sent to OCHA, by conflicting parties, which points to a problem of coordination.

- **Involve other CSOs in coordination efforts**. Coordination and communication among NGOs are seen as key challenges. How do we use alliances and networks to ensure more flexibility in bringing support to communities?

- **Prospective of D-INGOs on localisation**. INGOs in Damascus are not considered as potential partners for localization not only in principle but also because the intelligence do not allow them to go outside Damascus.

- **How to avoid NGOization of civil society.** The diminishing funding opportunities for Syrian diaspora organizations reduces the flexibility of programming and leads to donorization of civil society, leaving little space of freedom when it comes to designing programs.

- **Avoid dependencies, empower communities**. improve self-reliance of persons in need, rather than leading to aid dependency.

- **Regular communication.** Another challenge is posed by the distance when it comes to working with local partners. It is expressed that communication via digital channels creates a work environment that is more prone to miscommunication and misunderstandings and there might be tensions between staff which may go unnoticed. It is important to communicate and talk to each other in person.

- **Maintaining neutrality on the policy level.**

Outlook

- **Localisation: work with informal structures?** According to some, working in regime-held areas is off the table as it may channel funds in the hands of the Assad regime, but a potential is recognized for providing capacity development trainings based on the argument that knowledge directly goes to the people, not to the regime. In addition to INGOs in Damascus, there are a number of informal structures, local organizations and activists which are recognized by the participants as doing a good job, however, their resources are highly limited due to sanctions. They are likely to be funded by individual philanthropists, which means limited funds.

- **Divisions of local communities NE and NW.** It is crucial to ensure knowledge transfer between civil societies and communities of Syria, on a regional level, among Northeast and Northwest Syria. The local communities should hear each other's voices and stories.

- **Localisation of suppliers.** It is recognized that localisation of suppliers can help improve local businesses not only inside Syria, but also some of the many Syrian businesses in host countries, such as Turkey. This could also counter the negative impact of the entry of INGOs in Northern Syria, which is argued to lead to inflation, increase in rents and devaluation of currency. Yet, bigger organizations with stricter reporting duties, tendering requirements and procurement policies are more limited in their choices and localisation of suppliers is less likely. The donors may not approve of contracting companies inside Syria based on concerns that they are affiliated with the regime or other conflicting parties. In fact, the European Commission has a list of companies that are not affiliated with the regime.

- **Professionalization process of CSOs.** It is argued that the diaspora developed monitoring and evaluation skills and capabilities, and donors should make use of this progress by offering equal partnerships. Others see more potential to be realized, arguing that diaspora work should be more professionalized through trainings, tools, networking in order to boost positive impact on humanitarian and development processes.

Workshop 6: Local Governance
Chair: Erik Mohns (QICS)
Panel: Hayma Alyousfi / Shaml, Bahjat Hajjar / LACU, Ashraf Rajab / SYCAC

Workshop findings:

Lessons learnt and challenges?

- L**ack of Security.** Due to the current situation in Syria, local councils find it challenging to work in a volatile environment. Participants expressed that security concerns are affecting their activities. For instance, public elections could be affected as the lack of security would affect civilian's participation (Example: The election centre was bombed in Zamalka when public elections were taking place).

- **Building organizational structure.** One of the main goals of local councils is to build national solidarity through a democratic process. However, civil society organizations expressed that local councils sometimes lack organizational structure in responsibilities and power. For instance, during the elections of the candidates of local council there is a lack of transparency and accountability. Candidates in most cases are chosen because of their prominence rather than qualifications. Local councils are aiming to establish ad hoc peace. There have been direct and indirect elections however the majority were indirect elections. There should therefore be a mechanism to promote more accountability not just in elections but also throughout the services.

- **Lack of experience.** Local councils suffer from a lack of experience in some services provided. Due to the fact that the councils were formed during a time of crisis most of the people working were not involved in this kind of work before. There has been an incidence where local councils have had elections with minimal preparations. The councils also suffer from a poor implementation capacity of their services. Therefore, there is a need in providing support and training to members of local councils to have a more efficient impact.

- **Gender balance.** Civil society organizations observed the lack of female participation and inclusion in managerial positions in local councils. The participation of women is limited to certain tasks such as distribution human aid. One of the panellists explained that this issue could sometimes be regulated when women's participation is included as part of funding conditions.

- **Funding challenge.** Local councils are facing funding obstacles. This lack of funding restricts local councils from providing services to civilians and to preserve their independence. Furthermore, most of the funding provided by donors such as for instance the United Nations goes to INGOs which is affected by the funding of local councils. The lack of funding makes local councils rely on taxation which in most cases cannot apply due to the high level of poverty in some governorate.

Taxation is also usually implemented by armed groups which then might affect the autonomy of the councils. There were success stories of taxation, for instance taxation in such 'al Atareb' helped provide water without the help of donors. The funding conditions set by donors represent another burden that the local councils are challenged with. In some cases, they have to work within the area of focus that the donor provided which could limit the effectiveness and the creativity of their services and activities.

- **Inclusion of IDPs.** Civil society organizations believe that local council should look into possibilities including IDPs and allow them participation within the institution. There has been a main disagreement between member of local councils on whether or not IDPs should be allowed a participatory role. While some perceived the local council to be rather for locals that have been living there all their life, others perceived their participation as a barrier that would not allow them to return to their place of origin. It is therefore challenging to include them. Reasons behind this major disagreement is that IDPs are sometimes perceived to be a competition in terms of sources and funding to local councils. The election law of local councils does not grant IDPs most of the time the right to vote.

- **Democratization challenge.** Syrians have proven their use of democratic procedures whenever they have the chance especially after the war and the governance system has shifted towards a bottom up approach. Local governance became a part of the Syrian culture and that wasn't the case before. As discussed previously, local councils suffer from the lack of experienced members as well as an organizational structure. These obstacles accordingly affect aspects such as decision-making mechanism. There are no specific criteria regarding decision-making which leaves responsible person to taking decisions without any criteria. The latter therefore affects the accountability of local councils.

- **Cooperating with civil society.** The relationship between civil society organizations and local councils started with disagreements over funds but then eventually local councils realized that civil societies are not competitors and that they could work together. Panellists expressed that the situation got better after 2015.

Outlook
- Address **the expansion of local councils** in areas that are still governed by the current regime.

- **Expand the services** to IDPs and refugees beyond humanitarian aid. There is a need to address the political participation of vulnerable populations rather than focusing on short term impact.

- Reconstruct and build the communities through **active mobilization of civilians.** Local communities should attempt to find an efficient mechanism where they could identify the potentials within experts and professionals.

- **Ensure the autonomy and independence of local communities.** Local communities could also provide fair and efficient services if they are working in a democratic environment. Therefore, their autonomy is key to better address the future of Syria. For instance, local communities had to withdraw activities from the Idlib governorate as the salvation army was taking credit for their work.

- **Prepare** for the 2021 elections to aim for better outcomes as well as aiming for the inclusion of IDPS and Syrian refugees.

- **Learning from the past.** It is essential for local councils to learn from other diasporas and their experiences. For instance, one of the panellist perceived the Sudan to be of an important case study for Syrian local councils**"** the movement of the people didn't start in 2019, the first wave was in the 80's but they continued to work with local groups, and these were the ones who made the change in 2019."

- **Enhance** cooperation between civil society organization and local councils.

- **Participation of youth and women**. Local councils should aim to improve the participation of the youth. One of the panellists expressed that if they are not included in the current situation then they won't be able to impact the future. Therefore, the participation of the youth and their inclusion should be of a high priority to ensure the sustainability and the success of local councils. The participation of women is lacking for most of the local councils therefore there should be a mechanism to ensure gender balance and equality in managerial positions as well as the participation in different services.

Informal session: Upcoming trial in Germany
Chair: Joumana Seif , Anwar El Bunni

The aim of the informal session was to address the upcoming trial in Germany which will be the first trial for state torture against a government. Germany has arrested two alleged former Syrian secret service officers in Berlin and Zweibrücken, Anwar R and Eyad A, with crimes against humanity. The European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights have been following up on the investigations for years and the arrest was perceived as a step towards seeking justice on the international level. Anwar R is assumed to have arrived in Germany between April 2011 and May 2012. He has been accused of being involved with the torture of more than 4000, 50 murders or more and 1 case of sexual assault. There will be a trial and a public hearing for the cases. It's going to be in German however it will be translated in Arabic to the accused.

Key points
- Develop a mechanism of an international arrest warrant for those currently in power in Syria.
- Divulge information on the case and trial to Syrian civilians, as it may encourage them to share experiences, and ultimately testify against war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- This case shows the effort of Syrian and international civil society groups to bring justice to the victims of torture and violence.
- Trials as such could last a minimum of 2 years.
- There are speculations that the accused would not confess to the crimes, which could impede and lengthen trial proceedings.
- There will be 16 witnesses that will testify against the crimes.
- This is considered a key moment for the justice and accountability of Syria.
- There are adjudicated facts which include mass graves and bodies that were carried away from Al Khatib Branch (prison).
- Anwar R has been in Germany since 2014.
- Victims had given testimonies against Anwar R. and Eyad A. to the immigration department when they arrived. Testimonies were also given on other people that were accused of war crimes.
- Anwar R. never gave any real information to the German authorities.