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THE EVOLUTION OF SYRIAN NGO NETWORKS

THEIR ROLE IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND LONG-TERM PROSPECTS

JUNE 2021

ABOUT ICVA

Founded in 1962, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) is a global network of over 130 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in 160 countries, operating at global, regional, national, and local levels, whose mission is to make humanitarian action more principled and effective by working collectively and independently to influence policy and practice. Based on its 2019-2021 Strategy, ICVA promotes and facilitates NGO engagement in the development of humanitarian sector, with a focus on Forced Migration, Humanitarian Coordination, Humanitarian Financing, and cross cutting issues.

While historically based in Geneva, ICVA in 2013 expanded its presence to Asia, MENA (Middle East and North Africa) and Africa aiming to: ensuring closer proximity with its members in the regions; expand representation to regional or global humanitarian and political actors based in these regions; develop stronger links between field realities and global policies.

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CONTENTS

ACRONYMS

Ellaf	Ellaf Union for Relief and Development
EU	European Union
HCI	Humanitarian Coordination Initiative
HLG	High Level Group
ISCCG	Inter-Sector/Cluster Coordination Group
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
ISG	International Support Group
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NNGO	National Non-Governmental Organization
SADDD	Sex, Age, Disability Disaggregated Data
SGU	Syrian General Union
Shaml	Shaml Syrian CSOs Coalition
SIRF	Syrian INGO Forum
SNA	Syrian NGO Alliance
SNL	Syrian Networks League
SNP	Syrian NGOs Platform
SSG	Strategic Steering Group
SWN	Syrian Women's Network (Shams)
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
US	United States
USYCO	Union of Syrian Civil Society Organizations
Watan	WATAN Network
WECAN	WECAN Network
WOS	Whole-of-Syria
WPN	Women's Protection Network

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This study is part of the larger Syrian NGO Network Engagement and Partnership Programme, carried out by International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) in strategic partnership with UNDP Syria to deliver an engagement and partnership programme with a core group of Syrian non-governmental organization (NGO) networks. This report is an ICVA product that is supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Syria and local Syrian networks. Its overall purpose is to strengthen the capacity of Syrian NGO networks to enable them to play a vital role in joint coordination and representation by strengthening skills and capacity across a range of areas including coordination, governance, and strategic planning. Strengthening local humanitarian actors and networks in Syria and the region is key to a strong humanitarian response. International efforts should supplement – not substitute – national and local efforts.

This case study focuses on 12 Syrian networks based in Gaziantep that received training as part of the Syrian NGO Network Engagement and Partnership Program. This training on joint coordination and advocacy, as well as good governance and strategic planning was intended to strengthen the impact of these networks and their capacity to play a vital role in joint coordination and representation. The study seeks to document the experience of these networks, derive lessons learned, and reflect on main strengths and opportunities. Furthermore, it responds to the need to review the work of local Syrian networks as a unique opportunity for collective coordination and joint advocacy.

Finally, the study aims to document the evolution of Syrian NGO networks over the last decade, emphasizing the role of local Syrian networks in collective advocacy work, representation, participation, and their attempts to merge humanitarian response with mid- to long-term responses and strategies (Nexus) in their role as coordination bodies. In addition, it highlights the role of women-led networks and their contributions. The case study reviews Sex, Age, Disability Disaggregated Data (SADDD) and highlights positive examples, while making recommendations for increased inclusion.

This study will be used for advocacy purposes nationally, regionally and globally. It concludes by making a number of recommendations aimed at strengthening the role of local Syrian networks in the decision-making and leadership processes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines the emergence of Syrian NGO networks by describing the networks, the timeline of their establishment and activities, size, membership criteria, and their evolution individually and in coordination. The role of these networks evolved from coordinating relief work between various organizations, to engaging in capacity building of organizations, and then to joint advocacy efforts and member representation. With decreasing humanitarian assistance, organizations found themselves needing to adapt to the new situation, and progressively moving towards development or a combined humanitarian-development approach (NEXUS. The study findings were based on a qualitative methodology including 13 interviews with representatives of seven Syrian networks in Gaziantep, Turkey, as well as an interview with other stakeholders.

These NGO networks, most of them established in Syria border areas in Turkey, succeeded in coming together and founding the Syrian Network League (SNL) in 2015 to overcome difficulties of coordination and collaboration between them. The SNL ensures network representation in international events, provides a platform to unify policies, participates in advocacy campaigns, and engages in capacity building facilitated by the Syrian Civil Society House.

The main challenges faced by Syrian networks include difficulties coordinating due to geographical spread, and distrust and poor communication between network members. Moreover, at the beginning, the networks lacked a clear identity. In addition, throughout their work, they have faced issues regarding funding, legal registration and security vetting. As a solution, networks reduced the numbers of their member organizations, re-structured internally, and engaged in successful collective advocacy efforts that gave them more legitimacy. Initially, some issues emerged in terms of inclusion, namely the low participation of women and youth in decision-making processes. Eventually, however, mechanisms were established to overcome these issues. Yet, women-led networks played a significant role in ensuring change. Women slowly became more visible, but efforts must continue to ensure that they are active in the decision-making process. There is also more awareness about the importance of incorporating factions from different political and religious affiliations in the networks.

For the long term, there is a slow shift towards stronger linkages between humanitarian and development perspectives that needs to be reinforced. If there is political peace in Syria, most network representatives expressed strong motivation to return and continue doing the work they are doing to rebuild the country and be involved in the peace-building process. However, for this to happen, there needs to be a democratic and safe environment in which they can operate.

The report ends with recommendations to Syrian NGO networks to engage in exchange and learning, to increase their visibility, inclusivity and improve advocacy efforts. It also asks donors for more long-term funding opportunities, better information about such funding opportunities and direct access to them by local organizations. It recommends UN agencies to collaborate with local actors directly, focus on long-term strategies for networks, and be involved in advocacy efforts of networks with member states. Finally, it recommends INGOs in general, to support networks and not just organizations, involve them in discussions and decision-making, as well as provide technical development training to support their efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Following the Syrian uprising in 2011, an estimated six million Syrians fled abroad, mostly to neighbouring countries[1]. Today, Turkey hosts more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees registered under Temporary Protection status[2]. Initially, both the Turkish government and the refugees themselves anticipated that the war in Syria would not last long, and that Syrians would return to their home country. At that time, Turkey maintained an open door policy. Humanitarian efforts were deployed, mainly through the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD). However, as it became clearer that their stay was going to be long-term, local organizations began burgeoning. At least 700 Syrian NGOs were created within Turkey, of which 20 per cent are estimated to be active inside Syria. This growth was accompanied by the emergence of a number of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Syria near the border and in neighbouring countries. Gaziantep, in particular, located in the south-eastern part of Turkey close to the Syrian border, turned into a migration hub for Syrians and accompanying NGOs (local, international and Syrian). Many of these Syrian and local organizations face complex and sensitive work conditions, often working above capacity while being under resourced.

Civil society networks are defined as "an alliance between a group of organizations that includes mobilizing their resources and their common capabilities to support the network's position and increase its external influence in order to achieve common interests and goals while maintaining the independence of each member."[3] Today it is widely accepted that networks of NGOs can be more effective than individual isolated organizations. They expand organizational capacity, provide social capital and build synergies among organizations and a sense of belonging.[4] They also enable exchange of information, experiences and resources.[5] Networks reduce duplication of work, help problem-solving, give access to financial resources and increase learning.[6] Yet, despite the recognized benefits of networks, challenges remain.

Syrian NGOs had limited experience working in networks, however, they began to develop capacity in both Gaziantep and the northwest of Syria. Today, we can count 12 networks comprised of approximately 200 local Syrian CSOs. They were founded between 2012 and 2019.

Their work and achievements have not been well-documented, with the exception of a study by Gumus and Nasif (2019), which examined Syrian CSOs in Gaziantep. That study found that the focus on networking among NGOs has increased, with those operating from Turkey within networks numbering more than 250 organizations. This paper responds to the authors' suggestion that more study is needed of Syrian civil society networks.

METHODOLOGY

This study used mainly a qualitative methodology to collect data about Syrian CSO networks in the area. To do this, stakeholders were identified from organizations working in a wide range of sectors, including, but not limited to humanitarian aid, advocacy and development. It sought to obtain information from organizations with different political affiliations, objectives and agendas in order to gain a broad view. (The list of organizations approached and the roles of the participants interviewed is annexed at the end of the report in Annex 1).

The following steps were followed to complete this study:

• Desk review of relevant reports and documentation

• Research methodology and workplan, including research questions and schedules

• Remote qualitative interviews with key informants (due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person meetings were not possible)

Various networks and organizations and their contact people were identified and listed, with the support of ICVA. A total of 28 representatives of different organizations in Turkey and abroad were contacted via an explanatory email. Of these, 6 organizations and 7 networks agreed to participate in the interview. In some interviews, there were more than one representative from the organisation. The interviews were carried out from May to June 2021 and lasted on average one hour.

The interview protocol (Annexes 2 and 3) was designed in collaboration between ICVA and the commissioned researchers. The protocol covered topics such as chronology and experiences of networks, role of networks in collective action, advocacy, representation and participation, the inclusion of networks, their relationship with other networks and, ultimately, recommendations based on the study findings. Most interviews were conducted in Arabic although a few were conducted in English. The participants were asked if they or their organizations wished to remain anonymous. All interviewees agreed to be recorded for transcription purposes.

The interviews were transcribed, translated verbatim in most cases. The data analysis was an iterative process that started before the fieldwork and developed during and after the interviews, through thematic coding to spot recurring themes, and identify overlaps.

THE EMERGENCE OF NETWORKS IN THE TURKEY HUB

After the Syrian protests in 2011, and the subsequent control over large portions of the Syrian territories by opposition parties, a large number of Syrian organizations emerged to meet the needs of the population, and to represent the demands of different groups in the transition towards democracy. As such, a number of organizations emerged to implement humanitarian and emergency response work. As a result of this drastic transformation (from the total absence of such organizations to a significant increase in presence), a situation of "chaos in relief work" emerged; there were few coordination channels between the organizations. Initially, each organization was doing its work in isolation, competition was common, and confrontation not infrequent. Local organizations did not see the value of coming together and attending coordination meetings. Over time, however, the organizations began to recognize that it was needed to establish networks in order to address gaps in coverage. Training by ICVA emphasized the need for mutual support and cooperation, along with the importance of focusing on the network's mandate and goal in serving its members for the best impact.

Description of Syrian NGO Networks

Syrian NGO networks were established as many as nine years and as few as two years ago (the youngest is the Women's Protection Network or WPN, and the oldest include Watan and the Union of Syrian NGOs). A total of 12 networks emerged (outlined in Annex 4). At the time of this study, networks had between 8 and 26 members per network (the smallest organization is Shaml, and the largest is the Syrian General Union or SGU). Each network has specific goals, membership criteria, fees and a strategy.

Membership is formed around a variety of criteria, e.g., nationality: they accept only Syrian organizations (WECAN Network), or organizations whose employees and board are mostly Syrian (Syrian NGO Alliance or SNA). Some networks require the organizations to be officially registered (WECAN, SNA, WPN and Ellaf) with the internationally recognized governmental authorities, or on a UN platform (Syrian Networks League or SNL); have a headquarters (Syrian General Union or SGU); an established internal architecture comprised of board members; staff positions; and objectives (Watan). Some coalesce members in the same field of work, e.g., humanitarian assistance (Union of Syrian Civil Society Organizations or

USYCO) or in civil society space (WECAN). Others require a member organization to provide services to women (WPN). Still others have criteria related to the size of member organizations (SGU requires an administrative body with no less than five official representatives) or partisanship. Some require organizations to be independent, and not have religious, political or partisan objectives or to be linked to any military organization (WPN, Watan). Some networks (SGU) require organizations to provide services without discrimination on the basis of religion, race, or political affiliation. Or in other cases, membership criteria is based on length of establishment; some accept organizations that have been active for no less than six months (WPN), others for at least one year (Ellaf) or two years (Watan).

Networks also have established other procedures related to membership. More specifically, the organizations must sign the Network Code of Honour (which includes the code of conduct) to become members. They also are required to pledge to pay the annual subscription fee (Syrian Women's Humanitarian Network or SWHN, Ellaf, and SGU) or provide twice annual reports on organizational activities (SGU). The membership of the organization has to be approved by two members of the general body of the federation and of the board of directors (Union of Syrian Civil Society Organizations or USYCO and SGU), in other cases, the member has to be officially recommended by two full-fledged organizations in the coalition (SNA, Ellaf).

Role of Networks

The main role of the networks was initially to coordinate relief work between member organizations. They did this by sharing information and needs assessment studies, creating social linkages, building bridges etc. Moreover, networks started to engage in capacity building of members – training sessions for skills development (advocacy, communications, decision-making, etc.) and capacity building related to organizational development (project management, protection, governance and internal reorganization, or strategic planning). Additionally, networks aimed to build the capacity of younger organizations through what began as individual voluntary actions but over time became further institutionalization and structuring.

Networks also organize advocacy efforts by supporting common campaigns initiated by member organizations. They also represent the organizations, working to connect member organizations and other organizations or between organizations and funders. However, as humanitarian assistance has decreased over time, member organizations and networks have found themselves needing to adapt to the new situation, and progressively moving towards the field of development or the humanitarian-development NEXUS. This transformation gained momentum after 2019. However, it was negatively affected by the COVID-19 global pandemic which not only hindered the ability of organizations to work on the ground but restricted access to the funds needed to carry out this transformation.

Evolution of Networks: Challenges and Achievements

The Evolution of networks can be divided into three phases:

· **2011-2013:** Following the 2011 uprisings and subsequent military activity, a significant proportion of the population was displaced. Many humanitarian needs emerged. For this reason, it was very important to organize the humanitarian work and to enhance coordination which represented the main reason for the formation of networks. There was a broad agreement among organizations for the need to establish a unified body that can carry out organizational operations to avoid chaos and ensure the arrival of assistance to various locations that were affected as well as support in critical capacity building of newly established local organizations and CSOs.

The objective of founding Ellaf was to organize humanitarian assistance in the border regions of rural Aleppo, it was even initially called Ellaf of rural Aleppo… It was a representation of organizations that work in humanitarian emergency response. It was chaotic, let's say…we operated on allowing assistance to cross the border through checkpoints but there was chaos and an absence of the local authorities. It was necessary for there to be a coordinating body to organize these operations…. So the organizations that work in these areas came together. –Syrian NGO Network representative

It went through several phases; its main objective was to build the capacities of Syrian civil society, as there had been no Syrian civil society prior. A few activists who were in Europe and Turkey decided to train civil society organizations that

were being formed in Syria. –Syrian NGO Network representative

· **2014-2018:** The need for capacity-strengthening programmes increased; members lacked important organizational skills. After 2014, many of the organizations started shifting towards institutional organized work and gained new experience that helped develop their performance. At a later stage, when hopes for an imminent political transition became less prevalent, replaced by a recognition that the conflict would last longer, unification of efforts became more urgent in order to meet the needs of a population whose humanitarian conditions were deteriorating. The need to organize and unify organizations to increase their representation and also to conduct collective advocacy efforts became more urgent in order to improve the overall situation for refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs). It is during this period that SNL was established with the aim of meeting those goals.

The founding of SNA was the result of a demand that people in need within Syria make their voices heard. It was the voice of [representatives from Syrian network] voices, in order to facilitate decision-making in what concerns humanitarian response. –Syrian NGO Network representative

The objectives of the organizations changed; as a result [our] network changed too and took on different roles….Now we do advocacy that organizations are working on…but the advocacy tools require further support and funding and communications and relations, either from the networks, or from the SNL which was playing its role very well. –Syrian NGO Network representative

· **2019 onwards:** From 2019 to this writing, due to the protracted crisis, humanitarian efforts alone are believed to be insufficient. Rather, there is an increasing need to link humanitarian and development actions to build resilience (NEXUS). While this shift is imminent and ongoing, the COVID-19 pandemic has not allowed for massive shifts into the development context due to the lack of funding and the emergency situation that was at the forefront.

After the humanitarian angle stopped, and the emphasis became on creating civil pressure on issues…we felt some weaknesses, because we felt unable to carry out this type of work, or – let me say – we had a lot of weakness in getting there. –Syrian NGO Network representative

ICVA was one of the actors that effectively supported NGO coordination bodies in order to improve humanitarian operations. It brought together Syrian civil society organizations in Gaziantep and acted as a bridge connecting them to the UN, governments and regional organizations. It aimed to increase partnership and provide local advocacy training. It also mediated for these networks to participate in global and regional events with INGOs, NGOs, networks in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, UN agencies, and other global stakeholders. It carried out a needs assessment, identifying the need to strengthen strategic planning and governance and accordingly offered capacity development opportunities, diligently working towards this via tailored trainings and coaching.

The challenges faced during these three periods were numerous. For one, civil society was geographically spread out and thus had difficulty organizing. Its members acted individually. In response to humanitarian crises (such as the collective expulsion/deportation in Deraa and Ghouta), however, NGO networks played a crucial role in organizing cross-border initiatives, coordinating between organizations in Syria and outside Syria to ensure civilians' safe exit (in collaboration with UN/general security), providing resources, and integrating refugees into new communities (according to the network's focus). This shift was perceived as a great achievement in that it helped contain the chaos in relief efforts in some areas.

Prior to 2011, a civil society movement hardly existed. As a result, individuals (and not organizations) were trusted to carry out civil and political activities. Networks thus needed to represent not only organizations but also these trusted individuals (i.e., civil society actors). They succeeded in bringing these two types of actors together.

We consider regrouping organizations and individuals was a great achievement because there is a lot of individual potential that should not be lost; this has to be done by networks. We tried to bring together individuals and organizations and tried to represent all.
–Syrian NGO Network representative

Moreover, **there was also a lack of trust and communication between different organizations**, as they feared one another. This is where the networks played a very important coordination role. Networks helped organizations work on overcoming their lack of trust of other Syrian entities by connecting them, establishing social linkages, and increasing their awareness of others' missions, goals and work. Networks currently believe the success of civil society is based on systematic coordination with organizations across different regions, and with different factions in Syria, as well as collective advocacy. As a result, they slowly started to develop a way to become more specialized, delegating work and responsibilities between different networks. SNA is always cited as an example of a network that is relatively small (composed of 24 organizations that are similar to one another) but recognized for its members' work in advocacy. Such advocacy was limited but has greatly evolved over the last few years. Similarly, Ellaf is known for its capacity building programmes; other networks refer clients to it for this speciality. In becoming more specialized, individual networks can become representatives in their specialty fields and the primary contact for Syrian civil society. A representative from UNDP stated that more specialization in the network increases confidence and reduces mistrust.

Networks are also able to play an important role in humanitarian coordination and cluster meetings. This leads to a more effective and meaningful national NGO engagement in international humanitarian coordination structures.[7]

As networks began to see that these efforts were bearing fruit, especially in terms of advocacy, they felt like their points of views were better represented during important events and their attitudes started to change. They understood that there was enough work to go around for all to participate. Networks also ensured that there was a point of contact between larger NGOs with funding but limited presence in Syria, with smaller local ones that had less funding but good access. *"The networks were competing with each other, now they complement each other,"* reported one of the interviewed network representatives. This statement was reiterated by a majority of our interviewees.

Funding and fundraising have been identified as a major challenge for networks. Indeed, opportunities are usually geared towards organizations with direct implementation (emergency assistance programs) experience rather than NGO networks. As a result, many ensure continuity of their efforts through volunteer work by their core members; others requested donor-funded consultancies for communication experts in order to continue their activities. The more established networks, such as SNA, can rely on funding from membership fees to keep functioning. Networks require continuous investment

and reliance on membership fees is not adequate. Expenses related to logistics and rent are vital to maintaining organizational infrastructure; as such, a sustainable funding strategy must be in place. Maintaining continuity despite low funding is a major achievement for networks, especially during the pandemic period.

We do not have any employees at all...as board of trustees, our work is voluntary...we do all of the work, even secretarial work...This is an important barrier as we each have our work and this is above what we can do. The extra pressure on our work [effects] the quality of our work. We have a lot of goals that we are not able to accomplish because of the lack of time. We need an employee that can run the social media. We cannot keep looking for volunteers. –Syrian NGO Network representative

Even in COVID-19 times... Ellaf had a relation with organizations in Syria. Training sessions continued. Everything was going on, on an individual organization effort. –Syrian NGO Network representative

Funding should also be provided for network priorities, not those of the donor.

We want projects that empower women and are effective but without straying from Syrian values. We face this issue sometimes, with some INGOs we get funds for projects that do not suit the Syrian context, and that can cause issues for us, in the local community. –Syrian NGO Network representative

Some organizations faced difficulties with their legal registration due to the complexity of the registration process in Turkey. As a solution, they joined registered networks, which indirectly granted them official legal status. Similarly, networks that are not registered gain official status by being affiliated with Syrian local networks.

NGOs also faced challenges in conducting security vetting, a requirement to obtain funding. In response, **UNOCHA created a vetting platform that was open** to individual organizations and networks. It vetted each organization, making sure that it was humanitarian not political. It also supported the institutional capacity of member organizations through adequate investments in internal structure, agreement on the vision, clear mandates, etc. This platform gave networks further legitimacy before funders.

Organizations are subjected to audits and observation... we have to stay legal in all our transactions. So we cannot do monetary transfers to Syria. This is causing issues for us. The Caesar Act[8] also made it difficult for

us to receive money from international funders [..], as we are a Syrian organization. –Syrian NGO Network representative

In an effort to address challenges such as lack of trust, fundraising, legal registration and security vetting, networks developed and implemented a series of organizational development trainings, networking opportunities and open meetings, thereby increasing the level of information-sharing. Additionally, **in order to ensure the effectiveness of their work, networks reduced the number of member organizations in the network.** This strategy was mentioned by several networks as a way to ensure the quality of the network. For instance, one of the networks, USYCO, initially had 88 organizations distributed over several geographical areas. This overextension led to ineptitude. As a result, four years ago, the network re-structured itself to include only organizations in Turkey and Lebanon, based on available capacity. It was described as a difficult but essential step in the development and strengthening of the network.

Networks engaged in several successful collective advocacy efforts with other networks. The networks collectively advocated for the renewal of UN resolutions extending cross-border humanitarian aid several times over the last four years. Networks also were able to coordinate on and attend advocacy platforms such as the Syria conference in Brussels and other regional and in-country meetings. Furthermore, they repudiated a 2018 petition for removing political sanctions against Syria that falsely claimed to represent Syrian civil society. Network members worked together to advance justice, bringing a former member of the Syrian secret police to be sentenced to 4.5 years in prison in Koblenz in 2021[9] and pressing for legal action to be taken on behalf of victims of sexual violence in Syria's prisons (mostly by SWN).[10] These accomplishments gave the networks greater legitimacy and a separate identity from their member organizations. Network representatives further highlighted their strategic goal to expand these successes to other regions.

[I]n 2020, we were involved in bringing to trial eight members of the security forces accused of committing sexual violence in prisons. The Koblenz trial recognized it as a crime against humanity, because it was systematic and aimed to break the will of the prisoners and of the Syrian people. It was a big success and a huge achievement. Of course, the network did not achieve this alone, it did so in collaboration with Urnammu for justice and human rights organization

[an NGO which have been established by a group of human rights defenders], a member of the network, and the organization for human rights in Germany (ECCHR), a German organization with Syrian consultants. –Syrian NGO Network representative

All of these networks collaborated together to create the Syrian Networks League (SNL); many network representatives consider this their greatest achievement to date, as discussed in the next section.

Syrian Networks League, An Advanced Coordination Mechanism

The SNL was founded in 2015 by eight networks and 185 national NGOs. While there was a previous initiative aiming to bring together organizations and networks under the Syrian Humanitarian NGO Platform, supported by UNOCHA Turkey, the SNL is governed by Syrian NGOs and networks alone. SNL is a unique coordination body in the MENA region and is critical to enhancing coordination and representation among Syrian networks. It was founded as a result of the difficulties of coordination and collaboration between networks. The network consists of member organizations and the staff is comprised of dedicated individuals working on coordination, communication and advocacy. It is a network of networks.

Figure 1: Diagram showing network members of the SNL

Its main objective is to ensure selection of representation for a very geographically dispersed Syrian civil society, in terms of field of work (humanitarian, development), and in terms of political affiliation of members. Similarly it promotes the representation of Syrian NGOs in inter-agency bodies such as High Level Groups, the Strategic Steering Group, International Support Group, Inter-Sector/ Cluster Coordination Group, and elections at both the Turkey hub and for Geneva and Brussels meetings. Prior to that, there would have been competition between networks to have these seats occupied by someone from their own networks, regardless of relevant skills.

®SNL

Before there needed to be a representative from each network; now the representative comes out of SNL.
–Syrian NGO Network representative

The success story that people always tell us is that donors, for any occasion, used to contact 180 organizations but now we are doing the coordination. The donors speak to SNL, they ask for seven representatives, and SNL coordinates to ensure that. We heard that donors, states, civil society organizations and other stakeholders are very satisfied with the presence of the SNL. [T]they are able to talk to a party that represents all 180 organizations and networks.
–Syrian NGO Network representative

SNL also participates in advocacy campaigns for humanitarian and civil society causes, coordinating common statements for events on behalf of its networks in meetings and civil society chambers. It has progressively became the "larger umbrella for Syrian civil society in Turkey."

At the beginning, there was a lot of internal competition between networks although they were all part of SNL. Currently, we started adopting the principle of complementarity. From the representation perspective, when there was an event, there used to be a representative attending from each network. Someone from Ellaf, someone from SNA, Now, if there is the Geneva meeting, only one has to go from SNL, which we consider as the essential umbrella organization. The selection [of the representative] is now based on the best representation and not on the network. SNL chooses and not the networks. The networks nominate individuals from the steering committee to the SNL. The latter [steering committee] chooses individuals for representation seats in HLG, SSG and others. We also hold elections for representation of Syrians in UN OCHA and other INGOs. –Syrian NGO Network representative

SNL also facilitates service delivery in the northwest part of Syria by mapping services and programs of civil society, and how they are distributed on the ground.

Finally, SNL also engages in capacity development initiatives for information exchange (such as produced audio-visual materials, distributed on its webpage or mailing list) and promotes success stories shared throughout Syrian civil society. Strategically, it assesses needs in Syrian civil society, producing recommendations and sharing them with donors.

It also provides consultancy services to put together strategic plans for organizations and networks. These efforts are facilitated by the Syrian Civil Society House, which was cited as an important complementary and cost-effective initiative in capacity building. The house was founded with funding from UNDP, mainly to enhance legal and financial coordination among Syrian NGOs. Interviewees mentioned it as providing a space for network representatives to organize meetings. Beyond the logistical aspects, the benefits of having such a space are also symbolic. Several individuals mentioned it and expressed feeling a sense of belonging in that house.

You feel like a part of Syria is here... you feel like it's your space and you don't need permission to enter it, unlike international organization spaces. –Syrian NGO Network representative

INCLUSION AND EMERGENCE OF WOMEN-LED NETWORKS

Inclusion in Networks

During the networks' inception, women and youth did not participate adequately, network representatives and other stakeholders recall. To address this, mechanisms were established to ensure balance in representation within the organizations, which then was gradually reflected on the top levels of leadership. Women-led organizations played an important role in that respect, but also initiatives such as quotas for men and women led to an increase in female representation and decision-making inclusion. Organizations in the network are given weighted scores depending on whether or not their boards have women members, which is then reflected in their contribution to the ranks of SNL leadership. This has resulted in improved representation of women on the SNL board, a step forward.

Several interviewees noted that work remains before women have an active presence or adopt a more active role in network decision-making processes.

After a network joins SNL ... each body is evaluated and given a score and when there is a tie in the votes, the networks that have a higher score in the process depending on how active they are and how many women they have in their board, will also have more say in decision-making. This is according to our strategic plan. Initially most members were represented by men, now progressively female representation is clearer, whether in the networks or in the SNL... –Syrian NGO Network representative

More efforts will be needed to ensure the meaningful participation of women in leadership and in decision-making processes.

Some actors highlighted that in order for networks to be more inclusive, the structure of the local organizations/CSOs must be more inclusive. This problem should thus be addressed at its root. To do so would ensure that women, who had been largely excluded from this field, progressively get the space required to be part of the decision-making process. In addition, female employees in organizations also face issues in a male-dominated workplace.

As it's a patriarchal society, if there were any issues of harassment of female employees by their male colleagues, it would be very difficult for them to talk about it. –Syrian NGO Network representative

Youth and persons with disabilities (PWD) representation in NGO networks is negligible and needs development.

Emergence of Women-led Networks

Syrian women's organizations were created to give a space to organize and advocate towards broader civil participation. The main driver behind this movement is female solidarity and their awareness of the absence of "gender equity"[11]. The SWN was the first network of this kind:

The idea came up at the start of the conflict in Syria, part of the Syrian protests. At the beginning women were creating small organizations. Prior, there was no civil society, and no civil society organizations in Syria. In 2012, the idea continued to develop. We had started to set up a national assembly and there were no women in it. The voice of women was absent. The Syrian revolution changed the traditional image, liberty, pride, equality. We want democracy. We organized a meeting and invited all women without distinction—from different backgrounds, political parties, factions in Stockholm. We decided to create a women-led Syrian network. The marginalization of women led the women to gather and have a united voice ... for those who don't have a voice. –Syrian NGO Network representative

Since their establishment, women-led networks have aspired to look at both humanitarian needs and long-term issues such as gender, peacebuilding and Sustainable Development Goals. Initially, it started with intervention with media and education, then development of skills, and evolved into advocacy, collaboration and networking to form a pressure force to defend women's rights. –Syrian NGO Network representative

Timeline of Women-Led Networks in the Turkey Hub

Until 2013

The first women-led network, SWN, shattered the traditional image of Syrian women through media and education programs.

2014-2016

SWN built capacity within organizations in skills such as computer and linguistic skills, and general and advanced political skills.

2016-2020

Other women-led networks were established (such as WECAN, WPN). These networks aimed to create a lobby for women's rights, defending the rights of women employees in organizations, establishing advocacy campaigns for women, and training and building capacity in the governance of organizations.

New approach

These women-led networks are distinctive because they use the NEXUS approach but highlight underrepresented members of society and safeguard equality and equity. This is due in part to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting priorities and possibilities.

We are working more towards development, towards increasing awareness because the context imposed this on us. Humanitarian work decreased a lot after COVID-19, except perhaps medical work. The online experience over the past year, oriented our thinking this way, because you can do development work online, but not humanitarian work. –Syrian NGO Network representative

LOOKING AHEAD: THE FUTURE FOR SYRIAN NGO NETWORKS

Linking Humanitarian and Development Perspectives

Most Syrian organizations and networks implement both humanitarian and development projects. As the context changes, NGO networks should consider existing barriers to long-term planning. Networks and organizations need a better general understanding of the NEXUS approach, and the importance of development focused on rebuilding, peace-making and gender empowerment. Even if the outcomes for NEXUS programming are less immediate as compared to isolated humanitarian projects, the impact can be more long-term (and programs are longer, from 3 to 5 years). Organizations will need to develop tools for tailoring programs and activities to be more comprehensive, using the NEXUS approach, and in pitching those ideas to receptive donors.

A Future in Syria

If there is peace in Syria tomorrow, Syrian NGO networks have different ideas and vision of their future. They have expressed strong motivation and attachment to the idea of going back to work in Syria, but admit that this depends on security, a democratic context, and the presence of laws and regulations that can protect the various actors and the work of organizations and networks. Their fears are linked foremost to their own security upon return.

Some say that they will continue their work and participate in the rebuilding of Syria and in the peace-building process, advocating with the future government of Syria on development issues, and the development of new programs. While there is consensus about incorporating development programming in Syria in order to ensure that all needs are met, these ideas remain vague. For many, this is due to a general lack of motivation as the organizations and networks feel powerless in the face of international decisions and the response. Women-led networks, for instance, expressed the desire to participate in creating a broader role for women in the peace-building process and in Syria's re-construction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation for Syrian NGO Networks

- Networks are encouraged to engage further in a process of **exchange and learning** among themselves and with other networks elsewhere (e.g., Palestinian networks) with more experience. This will enable more impactful learning, and would allow networks to provide added value to their members.

- Networks can maintain the **engagement of their members** through their governance mechanisms. A steering committee or network board can make sure that objectives (set by members) are implemented, while maintaining member engagement.

- Networks should work on **increasing their visibility**. This involves building their own websites as a platform for describing their work and that

of member organizations. This will also enable learning and exchange across different networks and act as a tool to enable networks to reflect on and clarify their specializations, ensuring a linkage between humanitarian and development work. Local actors could work on articulating and sharing their strategies and implemented programs and demonstrate their investment for accountability

- More efforts should be exerted to **include women and youth in decision-making**. While the participation of women has improved since the networks were founded, there is work to be done to create a free and safe environment for meaningful participation for women in decision-making positions and in the peace-building process as a whole.

Local networks can further **improve advocacy** by developing and voicing clear policy and operational asks, getting more involved in global and regional opportunities including preparing statements, attendance at major global events, hosting press briefings, and providing press statements — all in a collective manner. Networks should coordinate with the entire membership when submitting a statement or proceeding with a campaign and other collective advocacy opportunities in order to ensure transparency.

Recommendations for Donors

- **Consistent and long-term funds** should be provided for networks and their initiatives, as this in turn directly affects all members in the networks. Although not providing services on the ground, the role of the networks is crucial and donors should ensure that resources are available for them to serve members though representation, information sharing, collective advocacy, etc.

- Funders should **provide clear guidelines and improve network access** to information and funding opportunities that are related to their area of work.

- In addition to support through intermediaries, donors should also **collaborate and support local actors *directly*** — as engaged into also through the Grand Bargain. The direct support should be accompanied by adopting an attitude that favours risk-sharing (instead of risk-shifting)[12]. This should be done pragmatically, with donors selecting who has the best outreach and capacity to deliver to the target populations. In doing so, donors should support local NGOs in complying with administration and the required paperwork.

Recommendations to UN Agencies

- UN agencies (such as UN OCHA, UNDP and the UN High Commissioner on Refugees) should **support local actors taking seats on working groups** as well as in cluster and other humanitarian coordination mechanisms by having a quota for local actors. Support is particularly needed for women-led organizations and networks, to ensure gender inclusion and mainstreaming.

- UN agencies should **support longer-term strategies for networks** (namely linking humanitarian to development work) as done currently by UNDP. This UNDP investment needs to continue with the aim of sustaining current results.

Recommendations to INGOs

- INGOs should **support networks and not only organizations**. In addition, they should work on improving alliances between organizations and networks by bringing together Syrian organizations from different locations and affiliations to overcome divisions. INGOs should ensure that networks are included in their advocacy efforts, campaigns, press releases, statements, etc.

- INGOs should **ensure that networks participate in discussions and decision-making** to avoid a top-down approach. This involves sharing agendas prior to meetings, organizing orientation meetings, reducing the use of jargon and acronyms in meetings with networks, and asking for feedback ahead of meetings. It also involves overcoming language as a barrier by providing interpretation at events.

- INGOs are encouraged to **provide specialized technical development and tailored quality training** to networks as per needs assessment results[13]. UNDP identified capacity gaps in terms of collective actions, joint programming, funding and activity implementation. As there has been learning through experience since the beginning, there needs to be evolution in terms of training topics based on most recent needs.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: List of interviews

	Date of interview	Duration	Name of organization	Type of organization
INT1	12-05-2021	45 min	UNDP	Other
INT2	20-05-2021	65 min	Union of Syrian Civil Society Organizations	Network
INT3	24-05-2021	63 min	Syrian Networks League	Network
INT4	24-05-2021	72 min	Syrian Women Network	Network
INT5	26-05-2021	42 min	Women's Protection Network	Network
INT6	26-05-2021	72 min	WECAN Network	Network
INT7	01-06-2021	56 min	ICVA	Other
INT8	02-06-2021	64 min	Ellaf Union for Relief and Development	Network
INT9	07-06-2021	60 min	Syrian NGO Alliance	Network
INT10	09-06-2021	40 min	NW Syria NGO Forum	Other
INT11	10-06-2021	42 min	UN OCHA	Other
INT12	10-06-2021	90 min	Syrian INGO Forum	Other
INT13	10-06-2021	32 min	Bonyan Organization	Other

Annex 2: Interview Protocol for Networks

Introduction of the goal of the research:
The study is part of the larger Syrian NGO Network Engagement and Partnership Programme, carried out by ICVA in strategic partnership with UNDP Syria to deliver an engagement and partnership programme with a core group of Syrian NGO Networks. Its overall purpose is to strengthen the capacity of Syrian NGO Networks to enable them to play a vital role in joint coordination and representation by strengthening skills and capacity across a range of areas including coordination, governance, and strategic planning. For the present study, we are mainly interested in interviewing representatives from the 12 Syrian Networks based in Gaziantep. Feel free to answer or not depending on your experience and knowledge.

Anonymity: You or your institution can choose to remain anonymous.

Recording: The interview will be recorded (audio only) for transcription purposes.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Chronology and Experiences of Networks

Can you tell us about your network, and its organizations?

- When was it formed?
- What are the different stages of transformation since it was established?
- Can you give us examples in which networks worked together and succeeded? (ex: forced expulsions, integrating refugees to new societies, Syrian Networks Alliance, Brussels/sanctions)
- What are the difficulties faced?
- What do you know about your network, its members and their scope of work? What do you know about other networks?
- On which domains of work does your organizations focus?
- How much do you believe your work can have an impact? And what can be done to improve the impact of your work?

Role of networks in general/collective action

- What do networks contribute to in general?
- How does your network govern? How is it governed?
- What are their benefits, their drawbacks to civil society?
- Can you provide examples of how the network improves efficiency?

Role of network in collective advocacy

- What does the network advocate for? How are these decided upon as a network? Cross-border resolution/Geneva sanctions against regime
- What have your experiences been like (efforts and difficulties)?
- Whom do you advocate to? (state institution? other organizations? municipalities?)
- What approaches do you use to communicate with state actors? (Face to face, email, phone? Personal contact? Campaigns?) With other actors?
- Can you give some examples of success with advocacy to date? Why was it successful?
- What are the difficulties/limitations you face in doing advocacy?
- Have your advocacy practices changed in the last few years? If so, how? Why?

Role of network in representation and participation

- How does your network represent its members?
- How does it encourage participation of its members in decision-making?

Inclusion

- Does your network qualify as women-led?
- What are women's roles in your organization?
- How do you ensure that there is diversity within the network?
- How are networks inclusive in their policies? (for disabilities, childcare?)
- What kinds of initiatives have you implemented to increase inclusion levels (of women, older groups, people with disability)? Have they been successful? What have the challenges been?

From humanitarian to mid- and long-term (development) responses

- What attempts have been carried out by networks towards long-term strategies? (towards social peace, a new social contract, gender, rebuilding?)

Political engagement

- Where do you serve, which areas in Syria?
- Can you broaden your work to other regions, other groups?

Relation with other networks and with SNL

- What are the challenges and issues faced with other networks and with SNL? What are the successes achieved?

Recommendations

- What recommendations would you suggest for further advancement of networks?
- What is your strategic plan for the future?
- If there is political peace tomorrow, what is their vision of networks in the future of Syria?
- How do you choose who to represent and who not to represent (organizations in government held areas and non-government held areas) and create bridges (in a non-politicized way)?
- What specific message would you like to send to donors/ UN agencies, INGOs/ local and national NGOs/ to themselves?
- Are there any points, ideas that you would like to share or add to topics discussed too quickly or topics that we omitted?

Annex 3: Interview Protocol for Other Stakeholders

Introduction of the goal of the research: The study is part of the larger Syrian NGO Network Engagement and Partnership Programme, carried out by ICVA in strategic partnership with UNDP Syria to deliver an engagement and partnership programme with a core group of Syrian NGO Networks. Its overall purpose is to strengthen the capacity of Syrian NGO Networks to enable them to play a vital role in joint coordination and representation by strengthening skills and capacity across a range of areas including coordination, governance, and strategic planning.

For the present study, we are interested in interviewing representatives from the 12 Syrian Networks based in Gaziantep but also other organizations that have interacted with the networks. Feel free to answer or not depending on your experience and knowledge.

Anonymity: You or your institution can choose to remain anonymous.

Recording: The interview will be recorded (audio only) for transcription purposes.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Can you tell us about the nature of your involvement (or the involvement of your organization) with networks of Syrian NGOs?

- Which networks did you interact with?
- How long have you interacted with them?
- What types of activities did you interact with? (Advocacy? Humanitarian assistance? Other?)
- What are your impressions of these networks?
- How do they contribute? What are their limitations?
- Examples of successful initiatives as networks? Why?
- How inclusive are they in terms of participation/decision making?
- To what extent have attempts been made towards long-term strategies (instead of humanitarian)?
- What recommendations would you suggest for further advancement of networks?

Are there any points, ideas that you would like to share or add to topics discussed too quickly or topics that we omitted?

Annex 4: List of Syrian Networks in Gaziantep

No.	Network	Abbreviation	Arabic Network Name	Establishment Date
1	Ellaf Union for Relief and Development	Ellaf	اتحاد إيلاف لالغاثة و التنمية	2015
2	Union of Syrian Civil Society Organizations	USYCO	اتحاد منظمات المجتمع المدني السوري	2012
3	Syrian General Union	SGU	الاتحاد السوري العام للجمعيات الخيرية والهيئات الاغاثية	2014
4	Syrian NGO Alliance	SNA	تحالف المنظمات السورية غير الحكومية	2014
5	WATAN Network	Watan	شبكة وطن	2011
6	Syrian NGOs platform	SNP	منبر الجمعيات السورية	2014
7	WECAN Network	WECAN	شبكة نستطيع	2017
8	Women's Protection Network	WPN	شبكة حماية المرأة	2019
9	Syrian Women's Network	SWN (Shams)	شبكة المرأة السورية "شمس"	2013
10	Humanitarian Coordination Initiative	HCI	مبادرة التنسيق الأنساني	
11	Shaml Syrian NGOs Coalition	Shaml	تحالف منظمات المجتمع المدني السوري "شمل"	2015
12	Syrian Networks League	SNL	رابطة الشبكات السورية	2015

https://www.icvanetwork.org/resources/localisation-humanitarian-leadership-january-2021

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[2] Directorate General of Migration Management. Accessible at: https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27

[3] Gumus Abdulkadir & Nasif Ahmet (2019) "Applied Study on Syrian Civil Society Organizations in Turkey – Gaziantep". Remah Review for Research and Studies. Issue n. 36.

[4] Liebler, C. and M. Ferri (2004) "NGO Networks: Building Capacity in a Changing World" Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, Office of Private and Voluntary Cooperation, U.S. Agency for International Development.

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[6] Starkey, P. (1998) "Networks for Development". The International Forum for Rural Transport and Development IFRID. London England.

[7] ICVA. "Localisation in Humanitarian Leadership - January 2021" Accessible at: https://www.icvanetwork.org/resources/localisation-humanitarian-leadership-january-2021

[8] The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 also known as the Caesar Act is US legislation that sanctions the Syrian government, including Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, for war crimes against the Syrian population. It indirectly appears to have also affected Syrian organizations, which were subjected to vetting to ensure that they are not affiliated with the Syrian government.

[9] DW (2021) Accessible at: https://www.dw.com/en/german-court-hands-down-historic-syrian-torture-verdict/a-56670243

[10] DW (2020) Accessible at: https://www.dw.com/en/can-syrian-sexual-violence-survivors-get-justice-in-germany/a-53875140

[11] For more information about the creation of women-led organizations and their evolution, see "Feminist and Women's Organizations in Syria: Challenges and Opportunities," August 2020 by Women Now for Development. Available at: https://women-now.org/wp-content/uploads/Feminist-and-Womens-Organizations-in-Syria-Challenges-and-Opportunities.pdf

[12] "Risk and Humanitarian Culture," an ICVA briefing paper. March 2020. Available at: https://www.icvanetwork.org/resources/risk-and-humanitarian-culture

[13] UNDP, Organizational and Capacity Development Assessment of Syrian Civil Society Organizations. January 2019

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