



Early recovery in the Syrian Arab Republic

Support for civil society



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Key messages



Early recovery's added value could be the dovetailing of localism and higher-level political dynamics, and civil society can be the vehicle that facilitates this.



Prioritizing civil society under early recovery will pose challenges and face obstacles but is feasible.



There is a need to identify what kind of civic activism might prove most helpful and effective within early recovery cooperation.



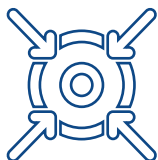
Civil society needs to play a central role in peacebuilding as a counter to overcentralized political structures that can add to existing tensions, and more attention needs to be paid to the link between civil society organizations (CSOs) work on local-level community and social dynamics than to what donors routinely show themselves willing to countenance.



The underlying aim of civil society support should be active civic participation and capacity that ensures CSOs' co-creation over early recovery decisions.



Donors and Syrian CSOs will need to evolve if they are to harness new dynamics of civiness beyond traditional civil society forms, but this also represents an opportunity to tackle current limitations to CSO support.



Amid significant policy differences, there are points of convergence between different parts of civil society and different donors that can allow for a focus on civic preparedness.



External interventions must be measured against this metric of civiness rather than the traditional menu of stand-alone funding for CSO projects.



Despite all the difficulties and sensitivities, early recovery with embedded civic monitoring could help build inclusive local social contract dynamics, mitigate the risks of internal and external actors appropriating the agenda, and protect fragile civic spaces better than at present.



Civil society roles can most usefully focus on multiple links and bridges: between political and apolitical activism, between formal and informal movements, between old and new civil society, and between in-country and out-of-country groups.



This mandate should centre on long-term civil society capacity-building as a core metric of early recovery, in line with priorities decided by CSOs themselves. Gender elements should be mainstreamed across this capacity-building agenda, rather than only supported as a stand-alone priority as hitherto.



Early recovery indicators should be developed. These indicators should move beyond assessing only standard humanitarian or development outcomes to include those that relate to long-term civic institution-building. In line with the concept of civic preparedness, the indicators should be moulded around measures of communities' capacity for self-organizing and autonomous needs provision, as well as around State functions.

Introduction

This study examines the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in an early recovery phase of the Syrian conflict. It offers lessons from other comparable contexts that might shed light on the potential and challenges of such CSO engagement in the Syrian Arab Republic. It ventures operational policy suggestions that might be of relevance to both Syrian civil society and international organizations and donors as they reflect on possible avenues for early recovery work.

The concept of early recovery has been the subject of increasing debate within the Syrian Arab Republic and among international organizations working in the country. With little prospect of any comprehensive political settlement and with conditions worsening in the country, some believe the concept of early recovery could pave the way for increased international support for the Syrian Arab Republic. While many believe such widened support is overdue, others are concerned that it could signal backing to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic. While the earthquake that hit parts of the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye in early 2023 increased the need for international funding, it also led to sharpened debates about dividing lines between humanitarian, reconstruction, and rehabilitation projects.

There are many debates around early recovery; this report has a precise remit, to examine one very specific element related to civil society's involvement within this context. This is not a report about the general state, internal dynamics or evolution of Syrian civil society – there have been a considerable number of such assessments already completed in recent years. Nor is its remit to look at the overarching dynamics of the Syrian conflict or the country's drastic humanitarian situation. Instead, the report focuses on the very specific question of civil society's potential role in a possible imminent phase of early recovery in the Syrian Arab Republic. This requires a comparative analysis across other countries and regions, identifying lessons and trends that might be relevant to and useful in the Syrian context. The report is designed to offer lessons learned and best practices from the spheres of conflict resolution and analytical work on civil society.

Several policy questions on this issue are raised in this report. What is the optimal approach to integrate CSOs in early recovery efforts? How can local Syrian CSOs be assured a role in agenda-setting and in the process of co-creating policy ideas? How can Syrian civil society roles best dovetail with support from international donors and how should these donors act to maximize the effectiveness of CSO's

efforts in early recovery? How much scope is there for international donors to embed rights-based issues and justice concerns into the early recovery agenda, despite the absence of a peace settlement that covers such concerns?

The present study aims to provide insights on how CSOs can improve the quality and positive impact of an early recovery phase and how their concerns could be considered to minimize possible risks. The analysis covers civil society roles in both standard service and practical needs-related priorities, alongside more politically sensitive matters, which are more complex and contentious and revolve around the extent to which CSOs can advocate for the inclusion of human rights and justice in the early recovery phase.

In this context, the report urges both donors and activists as well as other key actors to focus on different forms of *embedded civic infrastructure and monitoring* as a way of allaying concerns over early recovery support. Despite all the difficulties and sensitivities, early recovery with embedded civic monitoring could help build inclusive local social contract dynamics, mitigate the risks of internal and external actors appropriating the agenda, and protect fragile civic spaces beyond the current measures.

01

Early recovery as civic capacity

Twelve years on from the civil unrest of 2011, the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has reached a stage that is often seen in such contexts. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic has largely prevailed and is in no sense at imminent risk. Violent conflict has abated, but without the country having returned to full peace. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic has largely contained resistance, yet it has not regained authority over the totality of sovereign territory; indeed, the country is highly fragmented into different territories, with different authorities holding sway in each.

While full-scale war does not rage, the prospects are slim for a formal peace agreement to end the conflict in the near future. At the same time, humanitarian and developmental challenges are more acute than at any time since the conflict started. As the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic continues to deteriorate, especially on the economic and social levels, challenges including increases in refugee flows are additional reasons that invite a reconsideration of international engagement in the Syrian Arab Republic.

In this context, the concept of an early recovery phase has gained prominence. One consideration is that many donors are shifting their attention to other crises and a new strategy might be needed to re-engage their support the Syrian Arab Republic. Many donors, although not all, have moved funds away from Syrian civil society in recent years. All donors have been committed to empowering civil society, but also constrict their support around certain political aims. The European Union is now preparing a civil society roadmap for the Syrian Arab Republic, as used in over one hundred countries over the last decade, but it remains unclear what new initiatives and funding will flow under this plan. Sanctions have made it more difficult to ensure that some CSOs receive allocated external

funding. In Government-held areas, funds pass almost entirely through intermediaries or United Nations bodies and are intended for relief efforts. In other areas, authorities in charge have also tightened control over civil society, making operations challenging for critical CSOs advancing human rights. External civil support has lost traction and needs a new approach to re-establish momentum, and this recognition helps explain the support for early recovery.

United Nations-funded early recovery activities have been in operation for some years, at least in opposition areas. The United States of America has gradually allowed some elements of early recovery funding, rendering them exempt from sanctions. In the last couple of years, the European Union has been moving away from an exclusive focus on humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Building on these developments, the key issue is whether the early recovery concept can be deployed more prominently and systematically, and how it can be designed or fine-tuned in the future to broaden its relevance. Insiders acknowledge that, so far, early recovery projects have allowed for relatively little proactive community involvement but have rather taken the form of standard sectoral development projects. There

has been some progress towards some area-based projects with civic components, though only on a very tentative basis.

Given that there is little hope of a total peace agreement, debates are now focused on designing a more comprehensive early recovery phase, with Syrian and international actors being divided on this matter. Those supporting the concept see it as a mean to advance valuable cooperation without fully legitimizing the Government. The civil society consultations organized by the European Union in June 2023 found rising support from civil society for linking humanitarian and development work in the Syrian Arab Republic,¹ while some actors inside and outside the Syrian Arab Republic believe it might imply a seal of approval to the current status quo. In the United States Congress and several other Western parliaments, sensitivities remain high about any involvement that might be construed as supporting the Government of Syria. It is in this context that some are pressing for a significant civil society role, in the hope that this might bring certain issues to the table which would otherwise be overlooked.

Donor stances on early recovery are shifting, but different actors understand the concept in contrasting ways. Early recovery is a highly contested concept, sparking vibrant debates within the United Nations and other bodies for many years, and causing scepticism among many civic actors. It still lacks a clear, universally accepted definition and is not a term that has been used regularly elsewhere: normally donors transition directly from conflict to reconstruction and infrastructure projects. Against this backdrop of general debate and uncertainty, this report is not concerned with the entirety of the concept but addresses just one specific concern: the role to be played by civil society.

The early recovery concept is generally understood to refer to the move from humanitarian and emergency relief to a focus on developmental approaches and building institutional capacities and stability necessary to move towards a fuller recovery phase as part of a humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

The triple humanitarian-development-peace nexus could serve as a strategic framework to fortify the role of civil society in rebuilding and strengthening institutions.² This nexus supports the interplay of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts, emphasizing the need for collective outcomes and cooperation among diverse stakeholders. As the Syrian conflict persists, the interplay between these three dimensions becomes increasingly crucial, and integrating them in planning can reduce service delivery gaps and duplications, ensure that root causes are addressed, and facilitate the transition from response to recovery. Even if the nexus is not primarily about CSO support, it could be harnessed to amplify the role of civil society in early recovery as a pivotal vehicle for localizing initiatives and navigating higher-level dynamics. The nexus approach underscores active civic participation in decisions and could also help empower CSOs in co-creating collective outcomes for early recovery.

Early recovery is less formalized and State-led compared to the concept of reconstruction and carries less of an implication that a conflict has been settled



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on terms satisfactory to its various participants. The United Nations has worked towards defining some of its projects as early recovery, to include tasks like sanitation, street maintenance and family support microcredits outside the scope of standard emergency relief aid. National donors have generally been more cautious, and their early recovery funding remains for now a small percentage of their humanitarian aid. Key to the definition of early recovery is that, apart from not being implemented by the State, early recovery is still linked to basic needs, whereas reconstruction is more about supporting general economic activities.³

There are different views on various issues concerning early recovery, including the questions of how far should it move along the spectrum towards standard reconstruction work; how much space should be included for sensitive political matters related to the conflict; and through which bodies and under which conditions should aid be delivered.

While it is generally agreed that there is now a need for international support to go beyond humanitarian relief, different views exist as to what the ultimate aim of early recovery should be: a way of offering more aid with fewer political red lines or of bringing more rights-based issues into international support to attenuate the dominant position of the Syrian Government. Some see it as entailing a modest widening of humanitarian aid; others see it as a more ambitious shift beyond the aid paradigm of the last twelve years.

A related concept of rehabilitation-plus has surfaced to allow some reconstruction after the earthquake – individual buildings but not entire systems – but some donors are concerned that the Syrian Government may be using the disaster for its own gain. The current situation is unclear, as some donors are shifting positions on aid and sanctions informally without unequivocally embracing a particular definition of early recovery. The United States has allowed some early recovery work, for instance. Some Arab States are pressing for degrees of normalized engagement with the Syrian Government, with a possible – although as yet undefined – read-over for early recovery funding.

As the relevant actors, including some donors and Syrian CSOs, remain sceptical on these matters, the notion of early recovery certainly entails uncomfortable trade-offs and concessions. This report's remit is not to argue one position or another, but rather to explore practical options of involving civil society if the early recovery agenda does advance. It offers a range of ideas and suggestions to this end but does not downplay the essentially political judgements that will underlie the viability of early recovery forming a constructive part of the country's future. There has been a series of decisions supporting the transition to early recovery programming. In July 2012, the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously on Resolution 2585 in July 2021 calling for a broadening of international humanitarian assistance to the Syrian Arab Republic, which includes early recovery projects.

The report adopts a specific definition of early recovery's civic component, suggesting that the current policy debate must not be only about how far the concept allows normal reconstruction or economic normalization. If it is to be a



The report adopts a specific definition of early recovery's civic component, suggesting that the current policy debate must not be only about how far the concept allows normal reconstruction or economic normalization. If it is to be a preparatory stage for full post-conflict phases, then it should include a core element of fostering civic preparedness too.



The focus of the civil society component would be less on donors supplying certain services and more on localization – that is, helping communities organize to provide those services themselves.

preparatory stage for full post-conflict phases, then it should include a core element of fostering *civic preparedness* too. It must allow for civil society deliberation on future pathways forward, including on sensitive political issues. Even if it is to be mainly about the grey zone interface between humanitarian relief and development projects, early recovery needs to include some scope for conversation on political factors to win inclusive buy-in.

Consequently, early recovery should be measured not only in terms of areas of permissible new aid but also framed as societal *self-governing capacity*. The focus of the civil society component would be less on donors supplying certain services and more on localization – that is, helping communities organize to provide those services themselves. In this context, the report assesses how far the involvement of civil society actors might help embed civic values in a constitutional process, to reflect citizen demands and concerns. The report suggests the form this involvement could take and the methods in which civic preparedness could be measured and assessed.

If debates have taken place for several years on the complex overlaps between early recovery, humanitarian relief, development aid and reconstruction, the link to stabilization programmes will also need careful consideration and management. Stabilization is defined as a more overtly political focus on ending violence, normally in an immediate post-conflict phase. It embraces activities such as dispute resolution, civil-military coordination, disarmament and civil security, and carries a certain military connotation – although some international bodies find that it has become too broad in some definitions to be operationally optimal.⁴ Donors have funded stabilization activities, especially in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, related to counter-terrorist concerns. Although the concept does not closely fit the whole Syrian context, given the absence of an agreed-upon peace deal for stabilization and of suggestions for defence measures, some of the activities normally supported under a stabilization label might overlap with early recovery work.

Complicating matters further, civil society is also a contested concept that is difficult to pin down within the particular conditions in the Syrian Arab Republic. Analysts and international organizations have long debated the best definition of civil society and different variations are used in policymaking circles. Given its aim, this report uses the United Nations definition of civil society as comprising “any non-profit, voluntary citizens’ group which is organized on a local, national or international level”, including both community-based organizations as well as NGOs.⁵ This includes cooperatives, unions, analytical institutes and other such bodies, while excluding business. As there is no single State operating in the Syrian Arab Republic with a nationwide purview, it is difficult to apply a firm measure of civil society here, especially outside Government-controlled areas. Hence, the report focuses less on formal status and more on the roles and actions adopted by collective social entities and aims to give a better understanding of these roles and actions to form the *de facto* core of Syrian civil society, even if institutional definitions used elsewhere do not fully apply.

02



There is now abundant academic research showing that peace settlements are more durable when they involve a fuller range of stakeholders, including civil society.

Lessons from conflict analysis

Analytical work conducted over many years has shed light on civil society roles in conflict contexts, covering a wide range of themes, a number of which are potentially relevant to this report. These themes highlight the importance of civic engagement, its untapped potential in most conflict settings, but also the difficulties of incorporating CSO support into conflict resolution strategies. Crucially, recent work on conflicts and other experiences can offer lessons of specific relevance to an early recovery process in the Syrian Arab Republic and to the role that civil society might play in it.

Inclusive settlements. Most analytical work on conflict resolution has over many years focused on elite negotiations and the conditions needed for them to generate durable peace accords. Increasingly, one strand of analysis has come to pay greater attention to the need for fully inclusive political settlements. While traditionally referring to the inclusion of leaders from various factions or segments of societies, this term has, to an extent, prompted broader considerations about civil society participation in conflict-affected environments.

Until recently, academic research has stressed the extent to which negotiators and mediators tend to prefer smaller negotiating tables and how they do not see civil society inclusion in peace negotiations as especially helpful or important. The general focus has been on the importance of power-sharing talks and the need for leading representatives of different parties of a conflict to agree on the proportionate interests of their respective groups. Civil society influences are often depicted as a complicating factor that can undercut efforts to reach an agreement. Up until the 2000s, there were relatively few peace agreements that offered formalized and regular involvement from civil society.

However, there is now abundant academic research showing that peace settlements are more durable when they involve a fuller range of stakeholders, including civil society. Elite deals may reduce violence between factions and armed groups, but they keep in place coercive and predatory leaders within their own factional spaces and their lack of accountability can continue to stir resentments and instability. The experience of top-down peace agreements, such as the Dayton Agreement in Bosnia or the Taif Accords in Lebanon, suggests that such agreements reinforce ethnic identity formation in ways that prevent deep societal peace and reconciliation taking root.⁶ Lessons drawn from cases such as Northern Ireland suggested that civil society actors can play a significant role in generating pressure for ending conflict and for peacebuilding.

It is now widely agreed that conflict strategies need to bring in non-State actors and adopt approaches not based on mediation between elites in order to address underlying drivers of violence. There is also consensus that civil society dialogue can correct some of the polarizing effects of formally democratic channels such as elections, party systems and parliaments.⁷ This can help build a crucial social contract in

the form of the generation of societal consent that is needed prior to engaging in, and underpinning, particular institutional reform paths.⁸

One issue of relevance to this report is that the academic and analytical literature tends to focus on these issues in relation to a post-conflict phase in which societal actors can help embed a peace deal that has already been secured. There is much less work covering the specificities of early recovery phases in which the challenge is to involve civil society in the absence of momentum behind peace talks or any formal peace agreement.

Beyond liberal peacebuilding. In the most recent phase of academic literature, the most predominant focus of work has been on critiquing the failures of “liberal peacebuilding” – that is, conflict resolution efforts rooted in support for liberal democracy, economic reform, governance programmes, and similar initiatives. Many authors argue for a different approach to peacebuilding outside the so-called liberal framework. This perspective foregrounds the importance of local actors rooted in societies and calls for them to have the lead role in peace and reconciliation efforts. Studies adopting this perspective proffer evidence that peacebuilding and reconciliation are more likely to achieve durable and successful outcomes when structured around deeply rooted local civic actors.

Some recent academic work specifically cites the Syrian Arab Republic as a case where what is sometimes regarded as Western liberal peacebuilding is inappropriate. This perspective strengthens the case for civic engagement in Syrian early recovery, but it carries implications that are not entirely comfortable for donors and international organizations. The ubiquitous critique of liberal peacebuilding generally is based on scepticism about Western donors being appropriately positioned to help in conflict resolution as their templates are still too wedded to liberal values such as democracy-building and unwilling to entertain support for illiberal actors.

Indeed, one of the underlying assumptions of much analytical work is that donor interventions have largely failed and have gained a bad reputation. Certainly, international actors have generally reined back their ambitions in the field of conflict resolution as the failure of conflict interventions in the last two decades has bred caution and more narrowly focused support. There is much less appetite among donors to push for far-reaching political reform or transformation in countries experiencing conflict than a decade ago. The message from this whole strand of conflict analysis is that donors cannot

play the lead role, must be more willing to adopt models outside the liberal template and must adapt to the agency of local actors.⁹

Funding CSOs. At a more operational level, lessons are more specific or nuanced. The findings of one recent and extensive study, especially relevant to the specific subject of donor support to civil society in conflict situations, are detailed in a 2023 Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI) report that examines very detailed programmes of civil society support in a number of conflicts, noting the large-scale donor support for civil society over the last several years in conflict situations.¹⁰ In Mali, the European Union has been implementing substantial support programmes for civil society organizations throughout the past decade.¹¹ Funding for civil society has been at a high level under the European Union in 2021.¹² In the Sudan, donors began to look at ways to support civil society actors as the country’s post-2019 democratic transition faltered. Across all such cases, the European Union recently launched a 1.5 billion euros cross-cutting support programme for civil society organizations that prioritizes funds for civic actors to promote “stability” in conflict contexts.¹³

The GPPI study concludes that despite best intentions and some positive long-term effects, civil society support in acute crises has thus far largely failed to live up to its promise. This can be attributed to several reasons:

- While large amounts of funding have gone into civil society, they have not been able to offset the power of political actors supported by the backing of armed force – in this sense, it is important to recognize the limitations of what the civil society dimension can achieve.
- Despite the frequently posited connection between civil society support and stabilization objectives, donors in practice undertake efforts to support civil society actors and protect civic space largely as an end in itself and have not succeeded in linking this support fully to political strategies for ending conflicts.
- Donors typically lack a clear political strategy that guides their civil society support; donors often find it difficult to articulate which pathways out of a given crisis they consider plausible¹⁴ and to link their civil society support to such strategy.
- Donors tend to work with partners to whom they are already close and overlook the most innovative or relevant local civic actors.

Many civil society actors receive support but push back against the aims of the international community and individual donors. In Mali, the most influential efforts of civic activism opposed Western stabilization efforts and yet had local legitimacy, leaving donors uncertain in their funding strategies towards them. Often, this tension arises because many sectors of civil society want moves towards deeper reform and peace than donors – which operate in a more limited containment mode – are willing to push. In Lebanon and the Sudan, for example, prominent civil society groups had far more transformative ambitions regarding the scope and speed of political change than donors were willing to support.

Even where political priorities are reasonably clear, the common practice of taking funding decisions only or mostly at the level of individual projects makes it difficult to pursue those priorities to maximum effect. For example, while donors saw the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement as central to their political strategy in Mali, only a fraction of their projects with civil society partners had a clear relation to this process. Moreover, the evidence is that donors' project-driven programming leads to resources being spread over various, often relatively small, initiatives, many with short funding lifecycles of one or two years, that may each have a positive incremental effect but do not make a significant difference at the systemic level in terms of political dynamics behind the conflict.

Limited support in other conflicts. The reasons why the international community's twenty-year effort in Afghanistan failed are multiple and complex, and beyond this report's mandate; but there are some modest lessons that can be drawn on the one very specific issue of civil society support. Donors provided a huge amount of money to Afghanistan: between 2002 and 2020, 32 billion dollars flowed in from the United States and 26 billion euros from the European Union (Commission and member States). The focus was on "Afghan ownership" and supporting the Government's national development strategy. In practice, the funds pumped into government bodies fuelled corruption and elite State capture, and this derailed the process of peacebuilding and paved the way for the Taliban's return. In hindsight, insufficient support was given to parallel organizations outside State structures that might have held this deterioration in check.

Within its overall funding, the international community did not attach high priority to supporting local work through

community-based civic initiatives, even though it did adopt a number of such approaches. Critics argue that Western powers were too absolute in excluding Taliban-linked local groups from development and humanitarian work. This raises broader lessons about how donors should deal with restricted groups without excluding local communities. External powers tried to implant formal institutions that traditional civil society groups either worked around or captured for rent-seeking actions. The priority the donors attached to counter-insurgency and projects against radicalization displaced usefully inclusive low-level or apolitical civic initiatives. Development aid officials resisted the notion of funds having security aims; in turn, military officials complained that humanitarian aid was devoid of political considerations.

Such tensions continue as the European Union has now adopted what it terms as a basic needs approach, focusing on vital humanitarian supplies and services. This approach was originally labelled humanitarian-plus but was redefined, as this term was deemed to give too much of an impression of political impartiality or equidistance between different Afghan actors. The basic needs strategy is about strengthening local capacities, often through civic initiatives that are different from both pure emergency relief and long-term development programmes with the Government which donors are not supporting – this having some resonance with the concept of early recovery in the Syrian context.¹⁵

While this snapshot is far from delving into the very complex and contested factors that led to policy failures in Afghanistan, there is evidence to support the more general lessons from conflict analysis: civil society needs to play a central role in peacebuilding as a counter to overcentralized political structures that can add to existing tensions, and more attention needs to be paid to the link between CSOs work on local-level community and social dynamics than to what donors routinely show themselves willing to countenance.

Another very specific case from which lessons are often drawn is that of the State of Palestine. European donors have poured huge amounts of money into Palestine; although most of this has gone to building the capacity of proto-State public bodies, a considerable portion has also gone to civil society. This has succeeded in fostering one of the most dynamic and internationally effective CSO communities in the world and has helped them to push forward the case for Palestinian statehood. Funding has helped with advocacy and more local

community services. Ultimately, however, this case suggests that extensive support for civil society can only help to a certain extent without high-politics conflict resolution. There are also lessons related to the way in which international support has gone to one sector of Palestinian civil society and stayed clear of Hamas-controlled Gaza: arguably, CSO support has fanned the flames of Palestinian internal rivalries more than it has built bridges between them.¹⁶

Political reform. Alongside analytical work on conflicts, there is a wider range of work on the role of civil society bridge-building initiatives in processes of democratization. The literature provides many studies of examples where civil society engagement formed a part of power-sharing accords and arrangements and how these in turn provided a foundation for moves away from authoritarian rule. These examples include Lebanon, Liberia, Nepal, Nigeria and Sri Lanka. In this strand of analytical work, the main lesson drawn relates to the general role of power-sharing and how this can benefit from extending downwards to embrace civil society.¹⁷ Clearly, this is a different focus from the very specific issues around early recovery in an unresolved conflict; nevertheless, it does offer an indirectly relevant lesson that integrating civil society participation into pragmatic accords can later facilitate wider processes of political reform.

Indeed, studies on democratization in recent years have generally attached greater importance to the role of civil society actors. A key lesson drawn from this literature is that

the dynamics driving political change have shifted in recent years, in large measure as a result of underlying changes in societies. Many analysts stress the emergence of locally rooted mobilization and movements during the 2010s that shifted the ways in which democratization unfolds or is impeded.¹⁸

Empirical evidence reveals the reinforcement of social mobilization outside traditional political structures to be a strongly emergent trend around the world and one that plays a more consequential role in political change than elite-negotiated reform. This kind of reform process has, for a long time, been the dominant focus of attention for those studying democratic transition. This trend has begun to tilt the analytical balance back towards understanding political change as the result of diffuse mobilization rather than of smooth, structural modernization.¹⁹ The new dynamics revolve around a whole new type of representational claim pursued through the collective action of local communities outside institutionalized channels of accountability. It is potent because it flows from deep-rooted social shifts such as the loss of traditional authority and the disappearance of fixed, inherited identities.²⁰ Again, these trends go well beyond the subject matter of this report, but specific cases of civic engagement in contested polities like the case of the Syrian Arab Republic cannot be held entirely separate from such altered political dynamics – and concrete policies like those related to Syrian early recovery should acknowledge and leverage these dynamics, rather than sidelining them.

03



Important policy consideration: the challenge extends beyond merely including civil society within early recovery cooperation; it necessitates identifying what kind of civic activism can prove most helpful and effective.

Trends in civic activism and the politics of early recovery

Most lessons focused on conflict situations are concerned mainly with civil society roles in relation to peace settlements. These analyses are quite separate from a broader sphere of lessons that relate to general trends in civic activism. Although the respective conflict and civic activism literatures are relatively disconnected from each other, the broader trends in civic activism are highly relevant to the politics of Syrian early recovery, and they can shed light on the possible involvement of citizens in influencing policy developments.

This observation underscores an important policy consideration: the challenge extends beyond merely including civil society within early recovery cooperation; it necessitates identifying *what kind* of civic activism can prove most helpful and effective. Many of the most pressing challenges that donors' civil society programmes have faced in recent years come from this shifting nature of civic activism, and their attempts to deal with this shift offer vital lessons for what works and what doesn't, especially in conflict contexts similar to the Syrian Arab Republic. The evidence points towards significant changes in the nature of civic activism across the world in recent years. These changes might prove useful reference points for the current Syrian context.

There is a strong consensus that a sphere of more informal civil society activity has gained significance and prominence. There has been widespread analysis in recent years of a shift away from the traditional understanding of formalized civil society to a more expansive notion of informal activist citizenship, or what may be called *citizenism*, to capture the rise in informality.²¹ This represents a change from longstanding forms of civil society organization towards

looser notions of community as the primary vehicle of social mobilization and organization.²²

In many emerging civic initiatives, citizens' involvement is less formal compared to the participation characterizing social movements.²³ Some of the strongest developments in global civil society have involved less of a focus on formal civil society structures and more of a focus on new civic *practices* and ways of representing civic claims around specific citizen concerns.²⁴ Some of the most prominent forms of civic activism in many countries are today diffuse and exhibit evolving organizational structures and membership, and they strive to link different issue-based networks. Civic groups mobilize around certain issues and generally in an intermittent form that is very different from regularized and traditional NGO or political party work.²⁵

This is referred to as a second generation of civic activism that is displacing the first generation, represented by professionalized NGOs, and is more concerned with the citizen aid of micro-organization.²⁶ The influential umbrella organization *Civicus* alludes to a fundamental shift in civil society as individual citizens are "engaging in ways that are

instinctively inclusive and embrace principles of solidarity and collective action”.²⁷ This most commonly involves daily, low-key small events – what activists refer to as nano-contestation, or very micro-level ways in which civic actors seek to reshape political agendas without direct confrontation at a macro or systemic level.

Much of this emerging and shifting civil society is driven by a spirit of constructive practicality. Analysts note that what is increasingly the most effective strand of civic activism is that of everyday community-level self-organization.²⁸ One writer alludes to a “resurgence of participatory culture; an explosive revival of civic life, as people organize themselves to rebuild society from the bottom up”.²⁹ Today’s ascendant civic campaigns are “experiments in new forms of sociability”, with dynamics that extend well beyond anything found in professionalized NGOs.³⁰

The growth of what is widely referred to as a new ethos of mutualism has shown particular value in difficult and unstable political contexts in which basic service provision and governance have been severely disrupted. In an effort to circumvent political and economic difficulties, this kind of civil society can generate community buy-in behind a “sharing economy” and peer-to-peer initiatives that are more immersed in practical local actions than in targeting macro-level political aims.

The Middle East and North Africa region has been fully engaged in this trend. In Egypt, much civic momentum has come in the last decade from community-based functional groupings, such as street vendors, doctors, and urban-renewal specialists in addition to so-called decentralized collectives.³¹ In Lebanon, organizations have emerged to provide humanitarian relief within communities scarred by conflict, relying on crowdsourcing for operational funds and liaising through sporadic town hall gatherings.³² In Palestine, cultural movements and forums have commenced in Gaza as an attempt to move civic activism away from the power struggle between Hamas and Fatah.

In Libya, kinship groups have become more important, as NGO structures have struggled to take root in the years following the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi from power. In Morocco, the February 20 Movement spurred self-organization and local-level agency outside the professional NGO community.³³ A new trend in Tunisia is that of cooperatives taking over and managing land for the “commons”. In addition, informal

Tunisian youth groups like iWatch and Al Bawsala have been set up to monitor corruption and a range of youth issues.³⁴ Many Turkish activists have moved to low-profile, small and flexible citizen self-help initiatives.³⁵

All this is relevant to plans for early recovery cooperation in the Syrian Arab Republic: focusing on this type of civil society engagement would be moving in line with an emerging trend across the region and evidence from across the world that these “new civics” offer significant gains in civic society effectiveness and impact.

Indeed, the emerging civic activism raises one question that is directly germane to this report and to the possible early recovery agenda of the Syrian Arab Republic, which comes from this activism’s focus on day-to-day issues rather than directly political agendas. While some might see this as an advantage to the Syrian Arab Republic, it raises the question of whether it might completely leave aside more political concerns related to human rights and other sensitive questions.

On this thorny question, many analysts and activists stress that the emerging activism does have political relevance, albeit in a very indirect way. The emergent civic activism not only involves citizen participation on practical issues but also on the gradual formation of more deeply rooted democratic identities.³⁶ Many new civic groups are consciously based on consensual deliberation. Some analysts argue that a new wave of effective deliberative democracy is unfolding, through more open and inclusive styles of debating being adopted by activists. The newer forms of community activism have increasingly built themselves around better-quality deliberative dynamics, a particularly when compared to social movements.³⁷ Supporters of the new civic activism insist it has facilitated both deeper deliberation and wider participation in a way that is mutually reinforcing.³⁸

Even though it focuses on ostensibly apolitical priorities, this activism fosters practices that contribute towards new work systems, social organization, community relations and knowledge sharing.³⁹ This embodies a broader trend towards “networked governance” where the influence of citizens, civic organizations, markets, and governments all intertwine in patterns of shared authority. **These are dynamics that could be harnessed in the complex interface between apolitical and political issues.**

Many civic leaders believe that the new civic activism not only offers wider participation and deliberation but also opens the way towards alternative templates of democratic practice that go beyond Western, liberal forms.⁴⁰ Some see this kind of activism as fostering “circular democracy” – a concept distinct from both the “vertical” politics pursued through single political parties and the purely “horizontal” confrontation of archetypal social movements. This is circular in the sense of expanding an everyday, problem-solving praxis of democracy and seeing more democratic social relations as an end in themselves.⁴¹ It can be harnessed as a form of citizenship training that leads people to think more broadly about the vitality of democracy and societal interests beyond their own narrow preferences.

Many informal civic groupings have begun to explore alliances with more political actors, for example through a tighter intersection between protest politics and changes in formal institutional politics.⁴² Simultaneously, some NGOs have begun to involve diverse local community-based movements in some of their operational modes.⁴³ These very tentative, incipient trends could prove highly important and relevant to the Syrian context if they could be further and constructively encouraged. The new activism can often galvanize local citizen engagement, prompting collaboration with NGOs to sustain pressure through legal campaigns and political lobbying, advocating for broader policy change relevant to specific issues.

Outlining these trends helps highlight some of the types of civil society initiatives that have had a positive impact in recent years and that have sought to correct some of the long-standing criticisms of CSOs. This summary is offered in an effort to orient donors in their reflections on exactly how to deliver civil society support within the Syrian early recovery phase.

Indeed, some experts have suggested that wider and looser forms of activism have particular relevance to conflict situations including in the Syrian Arab Republic. They have argued that what matters in conflict environments is not the standard concept of civil society but a broader notion of what may be termed *civiness*, defined as “forms of behaviour” that are compatible with “rights-based, inclusive rather than

exclusive political orders” and that firmly militate “against uncivic politics, in particular the combination of endemic corruption, ethnic or religious sectarianism, and economic and social injustice”. A wider array of actors displays this *civiness* than those included in formal, traditional understandings of civil society. **External interventions must be measured against this metric of civiness rather than the traditional menu of stand-alone funding for CSO projects.**⁴⁴

The new kinds of civil society that are taking shape should not be overly idealized; they are not a panacea and have drawbacks of their own. Yet, the significant lesson from recent trends and studies is that donors will need to change existing practices fully to harness the potential of these kinds of civic activism. It is widely agreed that international donors have not fully taken advantage of the benefits of the emerging forms of civil society action.

Although most aid agencies and foundations claim to be aware of the shortcomings of an excessively strong reliance on NGO support and that civil society support needs to be broadened to include the new civic activism, in practice they have taken no more than a few very timid steps in this direction. Donors should certainly resist the temptation to perceive the new activism as an easy alternative vehicle for the funds encountering issues when channelled through more established NGOs. However, there is a merit in rethinking the design and delivery of civil support. One strong conclusion from academic studies is that the expectation of external support influences the strategies adopted by civil society actors, establishing an interactive relationship between the two levels.⁴⁵

To sum up, an important policy implication can be drawn from all this: the pertinent question extends beyond whether donors should support early recovery measures; about it involves exploring the opportunities of leveraging the early recovery agenda as a starting point for cultivating a different type of civic activism, which might be suited to the difficult context prevailing in the Syrian Arab Republic, allowing for the adaptation of rights-based policy approaches to navigate such a highly politicized and divisive arena.

04

Syrian civil society: into early recovery?

Many of the aforementioned overarching trends resonate with the involvement of civil society in the context of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. This involvement has received a great deal of attention and has been well documented. Numerous reports have mapped Syrian civil society over the last several years; while this report is not tasked with replicating these, it is instructive to draw out some features and issues specifically relevant to early recovery debates.

A number of features and trends shape and condition policy options that might be possible and effective in an early recovery phase.

Service delivery. Mappings of Syrian civil society find that the largest number of civic initiatives have been those engaged in humanitarian and/or developmental work; this trend entails a gradual move away from the initial post-2011 tendency to see civil society as synonymous with “the opposition”. Civic initiatives have also taken root in Government-held areas in response to a collapse in public services. In these cases, they have taken on a service delivery function and, in a few instances, leveraged this function to indirectly address human rights concerns, albeit within an extremely restrictive civic space environment. As these CSO initiatives expanded, initiatives with “political” agendas have diminished and currently represent a small minority.⁴⁶

Most recently, CSOs in the Syrian Arab Republic have focused primarily on livelihoods and service delivery, even if they seek more indirectly to pursue some political goals including governance, democracy and peace concerns.⁴⁷ This focus on service delivery is relevant to this report as it underpins

widespread agreement among civil society leaders that a transition to early recovery is necessary to better facilitate support for such pragmatic civic functions. Initiatives such as the Syrian Civic Platform and Women for the Future of the Syrian Arab Republic have moved tentatively towards an early recovery through widening community cooperative projects.

Local resistance. A second and related trend involves the advancement of local mechanisms that have been used by community leaders to promote peace. These include traditional and tribal structures, religious arbitration bodies and independent civic courts and mediators. Strong leadership groups have emerged in many Syrian communities to help them address both large-scale and corollary conflicts. These groups have negotiated ceasefires and truces, worked to release prisoners, mediated local disputes and worked to maintain intercommunal relations by promoting coexistence between different ethnic and religious groups. These tend to be groups not directly involved in either faction in the conflict.

Leaders of localized peace initiatives are often tribal elders, religious leaders and individuals who are widely respected in their community, as well as informal groups led by women

or young Syrians. These groups and initiatives have built up significant “peace capital” given that they are viewed as legitimate, have strong networks of relationships, and favour a practical problem-solving approach.⁴⁸ There has been an increase in non-formalized civic groups organizing local governance capacities. The Sahem (or “Contribute”) Initiative gathered citizens together to work on community-level governance issues with the aim of galvanizing more local involvement in day-to-day decisions. These emerging groups are new, small, run by young activists and often combine work on peace, democracy and practical service provision.⁴⁹ In-depth research shows that although war has, unsurprisingly, weakened social capital and trust, it has also triggered a wave of resistance-oriented volunteerism.

Area-based civics. While reports, and this analysis, seek to draw out common features across the Syrian Arab Republic, very distinctive civil society dynamics have taken shape in the different geographical regions: Government-controlled territory, opposition-controlled Idlib, Turkish-controlled areas, and democratic self-administration areas in the north-east. Civic space has narrowed in areas retaken by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic. In contrast, territory retaken by the Syrian Democratic Forces from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) has seen an increased civil society presence. In Turkish-controlled areas, civil society is mostly present through large international humanitarian NGOs providing emergency relief. In Idlib, both international humanitarian organizations and more grassroots Syrian bodies ejected from elsewhere were present, but then somewhat displaced as Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham gained control.⁵⁰ This diversity in civic trends – the existence of very different civil societies within the Syrian Arab Republic – feeds into a widespread agreement that the emergent area-based approach will be a vital spine of an early recovery phase.

Civic dialogues. In another key feature, there has been no shortage in the last decade of civil society dialogue forums involving Syrian civil society leaders, based inside and outside the country. In our consultations for this report, interviewees agreed that the focus on very general “gathering” functions of civil society forums has been the strongest element of civic support to date. The best-known of such initiatives include the National Agenda for the Future of Syria (NAFS), Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), the Women’s Advisory Board and the Brussels Conference on Supporting the future of Syria and the Region. The United Nations-facilitated

Constitutional Committee brings together government and opposition figures, as well as a middle third of civil society representatives, although it has not met since early 2022.

Set up in 2016 under the United Nations Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, CSSR has focused on practical rather than political issues.⁵¹ One report⁵² finds that CSSR has “fostered dialogue and deliberation among civic actors across social, ethnic and geographic divides over time to jointly analyse realities and soften hard-line positions, engage in collective problem-solving, and foster consensus on shared principles and inclusive pathways forward”. CSSR has helped reinforce an informal layer of civiness separate from the political logic of the conflict between the regime and opposition (both government and opposition delegations were unsupportive of CSSR, and Turkish authorities prevent Kurdish representation from participating). Some pro-democracy, anti-regime CSOs perceived that CSSR diluted the struggle against the Syrian Government and for democracy, and many excluded groups viewed its efforts as fostering an elitist insider CSO. Nevertheless, the report argues that the CSSR forum served as a way of keeping contacts and dialogues in motion when formal talks ceased, along with NAFS, which is adopting the same principles of this locally-driven approach to conflict resolution.

Donor support and early recovery

The underlying features and trends mentioned in this report influence civil society positioning towards the concept of early recovery. Many civil society groups have been at the forefront of moves towards early recovery that are already being made in the last two years.⁵³ In Idlib, many civil society groups have pushed for donors to move beyond humanitarian efforts towards a broader early recovery approach. Some work is already underway, for instance, through the Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund, especially on health issues and restoration of basic services, as well as on getting educational services back up and running, and finance for small businesses to provide independent livelihoods for the population.

However, in our interviews for this report, civic leaders expressed some scepticism that early recovery could help in achieving their goals. Despite the developments outlined previously, there are significant differences among civic actors over the early recovery concept. Those based outside the Syrian Arab Republic tend to be more critical of

this concept than those inside. Some CSO leaders express distrust towards the concept of early recovery and fear that the support of the United Nations in this regard is de facto a stability-oriented preference for the Syrian Government that is likely to weaken local civil society. Others fear early recovery could channel funds to the Government that are then used for security-related purposes. They insist that it must come with pressure on the Government and involve aid going more to other geographical areas. The earthquake relief aid has worked to the advantage of the Government and made CSOs even more pessimistic as a result.

Civil society groups are trying to interpret donors' positions on early recovery and adapt to them. In some measure, this is opportunistic, as CSOs have sought to access early recovery funds, or have relabelled relief work as "early recovery" in order to get easier funding from the United Nations and donors. Some CSOs feel that donor red lines are softening as there is a wider recognition that the systemic root causes of worsening conditions need to be tackled, and local groups need to position themselves for this shift.

05

Recovery funding and civil society



This section suggests ways in which early recovery could embrace and reflect the principle of civic preparedness laid out in section 1 as being core to a comprehensive approach to this phase of international support in the Syrian Arab Republic.



The need for firmly embedded civic monitoring across a range of themes touching on early recovery is a cross-cutting theme.

Over the last several years, donors have made some progress in reflecting the aforementioned dynamics in Syrian civil society within their funding programmes. However, this progress has been modest, and other priorities are pulling funds away from the Syrian Arab Republic. Many CSO policy aims remain unmet, while social and economic conditions are generally worsening. International support for civil society has evolved and improved in recent years, and many of the trendlines in this civil society funding could be useful in the Syrian early recovery context if donors commit to developing them more systematically.

This section suggests ways in which early recovery could embrace and reflect the principle of **civic preparedness** laid out in section 1 as being core to a comprehensive approach to this phase of international support in the Syrian Arab Republic. To do so, changes are needed to fully reflect the broader civic trends and lessons learned that are outlined in previous sections and enshrine them in concrete policy and funding designs. Only this way will there be any prospect of addressing the persistent doubts of many CSOs, individual activists and donors about early recovery plans. **The need for firmly embedded civic monitoring across a range of themes touching on early recovery is a cross-cutting theme.**

Civic-led humanitarianism-plus. The notion of expanded humanitarian support has gained traction in recent years and will be pertinent to the early recovery phase in the Syrian Arab Republic. This is already a trend apparent in donor support that has gained momentum in recent years. The United States Government has permitted broader exemptions to allow NGOs to participate in an expanded notion of humanitarian aid in the Syrian Arab Republic. Several donors have explored such an approach in Afghanistan and other places; as previously explained, the European Union has relabelled this basic needs approach in Afghanistan.

Civil society could play a particularly valuable role in mapping and monitoring this path towards an expanded form of humanitarian assistance. This role would dovetail well with the kind of roles that new civic initiatives have been playing, as described in the previous sections. It is here that the networks and connections that civic actors have established would help the international community implement such an agenda



Civil society could play a particularly valuable role in mapping and monitoring this path towards an expanded form of humanitarian assistance.

on the ground. This is in line with a recent Chatham House report that recommends using CSOs for a community-based approach to keep aid going in difficult political contexts.⁵⁴ Civil society could be tasked with debating the sensitive issue of how far non-political relief can be stretched, and how to build alliances between different parts of Syrian society on these questions. Having civic actors deliberate together on the contested and complex relationship between early recovery and humanitarian-plus support could be a valuable part of the process itself, and also help forge convergence in a way that top-down definition of these terms will not.

Embedded civic monitoring could help ensure that early recovery proceeds in ways consistent with the local community organization and not against it. This should harness the trends towards localized and informal activism, outlined above. Such a role could be built around an *area-specific* approach, as needs and civic dynamics differ across the different parts of the Syrian Arab Republic. Building on instances such as Aleppo and Hama where hyperlocalized civic conciliation around practical issues has had some impact, a network of *place-specific civic platforms* could be developed, and then gradually linked to each other to foster a wider pattern of civil society influences.

This should involve the array of civic groups that have found ways of delivering mainly humanitarian aid while staying separate from politics, in Government-controlled areas, in Turkish-controlled areas, in the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-controlled area – or around Raqqa through the civic groups that have already formed a semi-independent reconstruction committee. This would enable CSOs to devise ways of softening the divide between humanitarian and development assistance and set up forums to connect CSOs with uncompromised actors among the local government structure or the private sector.⁵⁵

The February 2023 earthquake could open the way to such a civic-led humanitarian-plus approach. A United Nations briefing notes that over 15 million people in the Syrian Arab Republic now require humanitarian assistance and suggests that humanitarian programmes focus on community resilience.⁵⁶ One assessment of responses to the earthquake laments that insufficient aid has gone to local CSOs which are the only effective vehicles for delivering aid outside Government-controlled areas. Community resilience will need to be built from the bottom up through strong civic infrastructure and monitoring. The European Union civil protection mechanism could be used to offer support but also exert pressure on the Government to actively involve CSOs into early recovery issues beyond emergency relief. This would help generate civic preparedness for future phases of support that may move towards fuller reconstruction efforts, helping ensure societal buy-in for such a move.

Mainstreaming and fused funds. Many donors have increasingly made efforts to mainstream civil society support within other areas of their external funding. This entails backing for CSOs as part of other areas of funding, addressing matters such as economic, social, health, or education programmes, rather than implementing stand-alone programmes of civil society support. This could be an approach of particular relevance to the Syrian early recovery phase. If these other forms of aid gain

momentum, the integral involvement of civil society in critical monitoring of their implementation could help ensure a wider buy-in from society and a way of trying to ensure this does not occur only according to the priorities of the Syrian Government.

However, in practice, donors have not yet taken this mainstreaming trend far – either in the Syrian Arab Republic or elsewhere – and the amount of the overall development aid that goes to civil society is still relatively limited. While donor efforts to mainstream civil society support have advanced, more could be done to secure and formalize these commitments in the Syrian Arab Republic. The evidence suggests that donors often overlook the civil society component of mainstream development aid as apparently more concrete priorities arise.

Donors could set a minimum percentage for the amount of sectoral aid that will be channelled through civil society and basic civic infrastructure under an early recovery package. This would be civic engagement structured tightly around thematic and sectoral priorities shared across Syrian communities. It could also fund civil society involvement in early recovery activities that are largely about economic and business development and run by local private-sector actors.

Reaching informal activism. Donors have neglected an informal layer of activism that merits more inclusion in support programmes – as the Syrian Government now controls nearly 70 per cent of the territory, this is a challenge that has to be taken on; otherwise, the whole sphere of civil society becomes too exclusively about opposition groups in small areas of territory left autonomous from government control. The withdrawal of funding from Idlib because the area is controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham has had the inadvertent side effect of damaging much genuine civic mobilization.

International donors could stipulate that a certain minimum share of their early recovery support in the Syrian Arab Republic will go to newer, flexible civic groups, in addition to existing more traditional CSOs. This should include a commitment to include in support programmes those parts of civil society that may not be entirely in agreement with Western donors or share their whole agenda. It should entail more effort to reach rural groups, where support for informal movements might help narrow the worrying urban-rural divide in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Several donors have begun to move in this direction. The European Commission and Sweden are two examples:

they have for several years been moving away from large international NGOs to development-oriented local actors and exploring more informal civic initiatives too. Nevertheless, international donors will need to consider more tailored and specific tools to facilitate such a strategy. They should, for example, commit to using subgranting for a significant share of early recovery funding in order to get support for the kind of community-based, informal civic initiatives that have proved so useful in many contexts around the world. They should embed such groups and networks in the embedded monitoring mechanisms of early recovery spending.

Some donors have already been increasing the extent to which they support subgranting in recent years. This enables them to channel funds to large, well-known international NGOs and other civil society organizations which then use these funds for smaller and often more informal local-level civic initiatives. This has been an important change, although most donors are still cautious over some aspects of subgranting, and this limits how much funding reaches smaller, newer and more informal civic initiatives than those that donors normally support.

Donors generally acknowledge that while subgranting has enabled them to reach smaller and newer organizations, these recipients still tend to fit within a standard template of rights-based advocacy work. They have struggled to find new and effective ways to reach previously unsupported forms of civil society, which have gained importance in recent years. In the Syrian context, donors could commit to ensuring that a certain percentage of their funds through the large international NGOs benefit groups that have not previously received support.

It is necessary that this focus on informal activism finds a way to include support for *non-registered initiatives* within a broader and looser notion of civic infrastructure. Most donors have long required CSOs to be formally registered in order to receive support and yet many of the most dynamic sectors of civil society today are not registered. This is true in the Syrian Arab Republic as elsewhere around the world and donors have, in recent years, adapted to the growing challenge. In some cases – a small number of European Union, German, Swiss and Swedish projects – have found ways, often indirect, to reach civic initiatives that choose not to register. Yet donors, in certain political contexts, generally recognize that this condition is unduly inhibiting and unrealistic. Funders' due diligence rules also make it hard for small and new civic initiatives to secure funds from most donors.

The European Union in particular has sought to broaden its support beyond highly formalized NGOs to reach individuals and non-registered entities, although CSOs have criticized its latest calls for proposals in the Syrian Arab Republic for still largely requiring formal registration. In one notable example in Türkiye, the European Union has supported an innovative Sivil Düşün Programme which has epitomized this approach. This essentially supports an umbrella initiative to identify and engage non-traditional or informal activist groups. Donors could use such examples as possible models for the involvement of civil society in the Syrian early recovery phase. Those consulted for this report stress that non-registered civic society entities must have a stake in Syrian early recovery, as the sectors of society whose buy-in will be essential to its success are mostly not able to register as formal CSOs.

It is through the focus on informal groups and non-registered initiatives that donors can embrace the need for *experimentation* which is often highlighted as a key lesson from conflict studies. It is understandable that many donors may prefer to continue channelling most support through large international NGOs with which they are familiar. However, taking on board the lessons from other conflicts and from wider trends in global civil society would call for a different approach.

Donors will need to be more receptive to experimentation if they wish to address the critiques of liberal peacebuilding, explained above, and build a wider base of **civic preparedness** as part of the early recovery agenda. For some time, there has been a general call for locally driven approaches to aims such as reconciliation that do not fit with liberal concepts like democracy. Some Syrian groups have begun to explore transitional justice aims that are locally rooted and may not fit liberal-democratic templates. Many donors may feel there is risk involved in this, but some kind of pooled *civic experimentation fund* could share this risk and open possible avenues to unblocking the current status quo. Humanitarian teams focused on specific areas might serve as entry points to reach non-registered civic actors and help provide some kind of due diligence.

Financial and non-financial support. In difficult conditions, Syrian CSOs still need standard funds for core institutional capacity-building. They need support to overcome their ad hoc forms of operating and develop more long-term capacity and thematic agendas. However, they also need, and indeed seek, other kinds of support. An important lesson from the last several years of aid developments is that donors need to explore alternatives to traditional project funding for civil society organizations. Countless studies have revealed the limitations to this mode of support and CSOs' growing frustration with such project templates – templates that seem to fit poorly with the fluidity of local conflict dynamics and threats to the civic space.

There is widespread agreement now that donor engagement with newer civic actors needs to look beyond the traditional form of direct grant funding. Some donors and international organizations are unlikely to be able to fund non-registered entities with standard project support. Early recovery civic preparedness needs to involve a wider set of approaches, such as alliance-building, peer exchanges involving other conflict contexts, advice and support – what might be defined as networked civic infrastructure.



Early recovery civic preparedness needs to involve a wider set of approaches, such as alliance-building, peer exchanges involving other conflict contexts, advice and support – what might be defined as networked civic infrastructure.

One useful role that international support could play would be a *linkage* function: as outlined above, a lesson to take from other contexts is that a key factor in many countries is how well newer and older civic groups work together. Donor civil society support will need to focus far more on building better links between the old and new parts of civil society and attach priority to supporting forums specifically tailored to this objective. Donors such as the European Union have played a notable role in backing the various dialogue forums that have operated over many years. In a more ambitious early recovery phase, these donors need to have a more concrete and formalized role in *co-creating* policy agendas and move beyond generic bridge-building dialogue.

Rules for Government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs). Donors will need to tackle the role of GONGOs in the early recovery phase. It is inevitable that the Government will insist on involving these Government-backed NGOs in any civil society strand to early recovery. In Government-controlled areas, GONGOs make up a large share of formalized civil society.

It may be unrealistic to expect that the international community can exclude GONGOs from civil society forums set up to work on early recovery projects. However, there is a need to define rules able to ensure that most of the support is geared towards those with looser government links than to the most directly controlled GONGOs in a way that enhances the whole value of having civil society components to early recovery. Furthermore, such rules could be part of civil society monitoring mechanisms, helping draw lines according to which a local community deems GONGO participation to be in line or in contradiction with early recovery aims of conciliation.

Civil society and conflict resolution. As outlined above, many studies and organizations have criticized donors' engagement with civil society in the Syrian Arab Republic for being disconnected from international powers' overarching approach to the conflict. If civil society involvement is to be deepened in the early recovery phase, donors will need to address this shortcoming – or risk weakening the value of civic engagement.

This reflects a general imbalance in international civil society support that donors have increasingly sought to address. There is increasing recognition among practitioners that diplomatic, trade and security policies often undermine or even threaten the same CSOs that donors are funding. Donors should be obliged to demonstrate more positive linkages between civil society and other dimensions of their strategy towards Syrian early recovery. While the European Union has developed an approach known as the Resilience and Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, a recent evaluation finds that it has struggled to operationalize its peace elements – with humanitarian and development initiatives still sitting apart from wider foreign policy and conflict strategy.⁵⁷

In fact, this situation could be monitored and evaluated by CSOs themselves, with one crucial aim: to reduce the ability of external powers to use early recovery programmes for their own direct gain or nefarious influences that contradict agreed guidelines for how early recovery fits into the overall political situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. This kind of wider leverage and role is essential to ensuring that civil society exerts meaningful political influence and is not simply a passive recipient of new early recovery funding, which could undermine the spirit of civic preparedness within the early recovery agenda.

06

Political factors

In addition to these core aspects of early recovery, the question arises of civil society roles in relation to more sensitive political issues. The link between humanitarian-plus and political rights is the nexus between pillars 2 and 3 of NAFS Phase III goals.⁵⁸ This is likely to be the most difficult area of civil society engagement, where many donor doubts persist and where expectations will need to be set accordingly. If this dimension is not given some substance, however, the buy-in to early recovery is likely to be more limited and the prospects for fruitful civil society engagement are unlikely to be especially positive.

This is a challenge, because this is the area where most disagreement continues to exist among CSOs and donors, and many insist that international support needs to get away from a political approach. In many of the civil society mappings and assessments summarized above, there is almost a unanimous view that international actors need to move beyond a binary vision of the conflict and aim to soften divides over political questions. While this reasoning might be generally sound, the lessons from conflict analysis warn that moving too far in the direction of focusing only on so-called soft or apolitical issues will bring problems of its own and risk giving a false impression that political contestation can be excised from a cooperative civic sphere.

Full *civic preparedness* requires the inclusion of means to address these sensitive issues within early recovery, even if expectations of what can be achieved at this level need to remain modest for the foreseeable future. Early recovery needs to include not only the very practical issues on which ready agreement and shared concerns exist across divides but also some kind of template for deliberating on differences too. Early recovery will not enable civic preparedness if it becomes synonymous with depoliticization – our interviews revealed concerns that this is a risk, on the part of both many CSOs and some donors.

The circle to be squared will be for donors and civic actors together to unblock the conflict's impasse while finding more indirect or even oblique ways of bringing in civic support for issues related to political rights and justice – not with unrealistic aims to solve these but to create channels for managing differences and civic deliberation over the longer term. This could be done by foregrounding a concept of *embedded civic monitoring and infrastructure* as the guiding logic of early recovery.

Indirect approaches in hostile environments. This aspect includes lessons to be drawn from donor funding to civil society in so-called hostile environments. There is a general trend towards governments squeezing CSOs or directly attacking them, and of civic activists adapting their work in response to these restrictions. This problem extends well beyond the phenomenon known as closing civic space as it entails a much wider and systematic targeting of support to the civic sphere. These contexts may not directly resemble the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, but some of the approaches pioneered in recent years might be relevant to the extent that they help address rights issues in indirect ways.

Donors have sought to adapt to the increasingly hostile environment for civil society around the world. In such cases,



This concept of civic infrastructure refers to a growing variety of networks, hubs, spaces, community forums. These provide activists and the public with opportunities to meet, deliberate and plan actions aimed at addressing civic or socioeconomic needs.

there has been a general trend for donors to adapt their work by adopting less overtly political policies and programmes. They have focused primarily on less directly political themes, such as culture and arts, the environment, education and youth, media diversity, social entrepreneurship, and gender and disability rights. For example, in many countries, funders have backed the development of the culture and arts sector to address issues of evolving national identity in the hope of fostering democratic civic attitudes. Projects covering these themes have political relevance, but often in a relatively oblique fashion.

These approaches are rooted in an aim of importance to the early recovery phase in the Syrian Arab Republic: their core goal is to preserve and extend a civic infrastructure, even where direct democracy and human rights funding is no longer possible. This concept of civic infrastructure refers to a growing variety of networks, hubs, spaces and community forums. These provide activists and the public with opportunities to meet, deliberate and plan actions aimed at addressing civic or socioeconomic needs.

In the Syrian context, a focus on supporting civic infrastructure could build up civic capital by enabling political agency from the ground up. Such an approach would offer venues for civil society organizations to engage with individuals to channel their agency in more organized and impactful ways. Some funders such as the European Endowment for Democracy have taken steps in this direction already. Supporting social entrepreneurship could in this vein help generate further domestic funds for civic and democracy initiatives.

Connecting exiled groups and engaging the diaspora. Debates about exiled civil society have raged for many years, including in relation to the Syrian Arab Republic. Today's fluidity and flexibility in civic activism call for an updated approach to this age-old issue, especially as rigid lines no longer exist between groups inside and outside the country. NAFS, the Women's Advisory Board and CSSR have played a significant role in fostering a civic spirit on certain issues among civil society actors outside and within the country check, which should lead into a new phase that changes the lens through which this perennial challenge is tackled: what many still refer to as exiled civil society should give way to a notion of delocalized civic action. Today the precise physical location of civic and political rights work is often less important than whether fully coherent networks of civil society groups function well across physical spaces.

In the Syrian early recovery phase, donors could launch a dedicated programme of *delocalized civil society support* that works to deepen connections between actors inside and outside the country. Some donors do have experience in recent years of funding initiatives aimed to prevent civil society communities from diverging into two separate parts and instead help build bridges between internal and external elements. These can serve to inform a more concerted effort in this political area of civil society support in the Syrian Arab Republic.

The focus should be on *embedded civic monitoring* that uses delocalized activism as an asset for community-level early recovery support. This could be part of a

stepped approach that begins with area-specific, community-based practical civic engagement, building outwards to gradually incorporate some of the more politically-oriented rights concerns foregrounded by Syrian diaspora actors outside the country. The internal-external bridging could prove particularly valuable when addressing the rights of returning refugees, as this is set to become a crucial issue in the years ahead.

Protection from direct attacks. Donors have had to adapt their civil society funding in the last decade as Governments undertake more targeted, more draconian and often more subtle attacks against civic activists, and in many cases against external funding for civil society organizations. A far higher share of donors' civil society funding now goes directly to protecting civic space and activists. Donors now have a decade of experience in trying to protect civil society partners and in adjusting to the different legal tactics deployed by institutions. This needs to be a prominent part of a civic preparedness approach towards early recovery cooperation in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Donors and United Nations bodies could use their full range of diplomatic tools and funding to prevent the early recovery agenda from worsening restrictions against civil society. Indeed, they should stipulate that one early recovery aim is to better protect and widen the civic space, even if in modest and incremental ways. Early recovery programmes could serve as an entry point to a more strongly embedded civic monitoring of restrictions in civic space and early-action commitments to redress these restrictions.

Full spectrum civic monitoring. Embedded civic monitoring could be attached to the full spectrum of civil society activity. Activists from different sectors of activity could embrace this notion as a way of harnessing an early recovery agenda for their own aims. Civil society's role in documenting abuses, violence and crimes has been especially important, and a source of general civic capacity-building and citizen journalism. Activists working on ecology, urban design and other ostensibly apolitical issues could advance full-spectrum civic monitoring as a means of creating more open spaces for meeting and reconciliation. Groups working on gender rights and women empowerment should be given a prominent role in leading such monitoring.

This might help activists gain more influence than in the current situation. Likewise, there would be a strong case for activists to insist on strongly embedded monitoring mechanisms to ensure against corruption in the use of early funds coming into the country, in all areas of de facto authorities, and this might serve a wider agenda of activism related to the quality of governance and results-oriented programmes. Such full-spectrum monitoring would aim to connect civic leaders outside the Syrian Arab Republic with those inside, and local groups with more geographically extended CSOs.

This underscores a crucial consideration: while many suggestions in this report stress local civic dynamics, localization is not a panacea. Evidence from other conflicts suggests that it can backfire if not accompanied by more national-level civic activism focused on institutional rules, rights and governance framework – the



One lesson from other places is that too much effort to boost CSOs merely as service implementers can backfire as it detracts from public authority rules, capacity and framework which are needed for peace in the long term.

kind of infrastructure needed to bring out the positive potential of local, community-level civil society engagement. Some donors point out that they have already funded many small-scale, informal and community basic-needs projects and that this is not what is most lacking; the current imbalance is that these projects were not translated into a fixed institutional environment and capacity through which civil society can shape political or policy agendas. One lesson from other places is that too much effort to boost CSOs merely as service implementers can backfire as it detracts from public authority rules, capacity and framework, which are needed for peace in the long term.

This issue is one of potential consensus building in the early recovery phase that is not so directly political but concerned with rights. It is key precisely as part of the civil society agenda as well as paving the way for an essential focus on transitional justice too. This civic monitoring could also be used to protect the rights of returning refugees. Donors could still place more of a priority on locally-led initiatives and also do more to help knit together the many local committees and build human rights norms into these peace resources gradually as a way of indirectly including a more political reform focus.

Lessons from Ukraine. The conflicts in the Syrian Arab Republic and Ukraine are very different. Yet there is one issue that Ukrainian CSOs have taken up that is relevant to this report: they have worked to keep human rights issues within Ukraine on the agenda in a context where there has been pressure to focus on a narrower range of humanitarian priorities and physical reconstruction.

Crucially, civil society has kept a focus on democratic reform even during the war. In an influential template – the Ukraine Recovery Conference and Lugano Declaration – civil society organizations presented their own agenda to set the parameters for post-war reconstruction. Central to this was the insistence that democratic quality must not be sacrificed on the altar of physical reconstruction or uncritical backing of governmental powers. The civil society declaration insisted that Ukraine must continue to be a multi-ethnic society after the war. The Lugano civil society manifesto stated: “The burden of war and the associated suffering should not motivate political elites and some members of society to support authoritarian systems of governance and seek populist solutions”. It also asserted: “The strategy of reconstruction and modernisation, and specific plans and projects at all levels should not take place in a narrow circle and under the pressure of current circumstances, but in an open, transparent, inclusive way”.⁵⁹

Over 80 per cent of Ukrainian citizens are now active in some form of civic monitoring, most of which are not within formalized NGOs but new informal movements that emerged with effect from 2022. Some of these movements emerged amid the COVID-19 pandemic and have now been repurposed for the conflict. Unprecedented scales of crowdfunding have been directed to emergency supplies and the army. This civic resilience emerged out of a decade in which new and dynamic forms of citizen engagement had proliferated across Ukraine. Even as various Ukrainian Governments stalled on reforms in the 2010s, a civic sphere was gathering strength in the adversity of Russian threats. In these years, civil society



In line with the concept of civic preparedness, the indicators should be moulded around measures of communities' capacity for self-organizing and autonomous needs provision.

organizations had steadily evolved, spreading out into small towns and involving more citizens from local communities, a different kind of civics from the big human rights NGOs working with international donors.

Regardless of all the differences between the two contexts, Syrian CSOs could usefully consider lessons from what is occurring in Ukraine and the unprecedented depth of embedded civic monitoring across previous divides. The fusing of conflict, reconstruction and political rights agendas in Ukrainian civic initiatives could provide templates that resonate with Syrian early recovery challenges. Since February 2022, Syrian NGOs have provided lessons from their experiences to Ukrainian counterparts; they may now consider reversing this and being more open to receiving lessons from events in Ukraine.

Civic participation through citizen forums. One area of growing interest around the world is the use of citizen assemblies as a tool for conflict resolution. Citizen assemblies are a form of mini-public deliberation, based on the random selection of a certain number of individuals who are tasked with devising common recommendations on certain topics. This is clearly a very different form of civil society engagement from that represented by CSOs or informal social movements. It involves a way of ensuring that ordinary citizens can participate and deliberate together. This approach is especially relevant to conflict contexts as academic evidence suggests that citizens who participate in such forums tend to soften their differences with each other and reach a consensus even on sensitive political questions. Such meetings in Bosnia, Colombia and other fragile contexts have been invoked with this bridge-building evidence in mind.

The international community could commit to supporting initiatives to set up a number of citizen assemblies for all parts of the Syrian Arab Republic as an integral part of its early recovery phase. This would ensure that citizens from different sides of the conflict would deliberate on shared challenges and have the space in which to reach a consensus. Citizen assemblies do not work magic and often fall short of expectations, but there is plentiful evidence that when they are run well, with the correct methodology and expert convenors, they can soften polarization and societal tensions.

These citizen forums could be used to address important and thorny issues that are of concern to all sectors of the population. Academic evidence shows that it is on such issues that structured deliberative forums help generate

convergence in views. In the Syrian Arab Republic, assemblies would be useful on many currently crucial themes, such as a strategy for refugee returns that would offer some protection for their basic rights; an approach to economic and social needs with an embedded focus on human rights.

This is certainly an out-of-the-box idea as it falls outside the normal menu of options for CSO support. Yet such fresh and different approaches might be exactly what the impasse in the Syrian Arab Republic calls for, in particular as a way of addressing political rights concerns. It could offer an additional form of **embedded civic infrastructure and embedded monitoring**.

Humanitarianism-plus-plus. All these methods could be brought together under an approach of humanitarianism-plus-plus support. As pointed out above, some donors have expressed concern that the concept of humanitarianism-plus can be deemed too politically blind. Whether the European Union relabelled basic needs approach addresses this is debatable; this label might give even more of a narrow humanitarian feel. In the Syrian Arab Republic, the international community could adopt a “basic rights” approach with an express aim of widening out the humanitarianism-plus concept.

This would need to be spelled out in greater detail than in other places where humanitarianism-plus has been attempted and a strategy clarified for rights concerns. The lesson from Afghanistan is that this is challenging in the absence of such political clarity – the European Union is struggling to go beyond pure humanitarianism and the Netherlands has announced it will pause funding to Afghanistan as a result of the Taliban’s decision to bar women from working for NGOs. Moreover, in Afghanistan, donors are operating without contact with the regime; the working assumption is that the situation would be different with early recovery programmes in the Syrian Arab Republic and would require an adjustment to the basic needs approach. Donors will need an approach that more specifically establishes a mandate for supporting local capacities that relate to political rights.

Crucially, civil society should be given a lead role in mapping a strategy around this basic rights approach and what this means in terms of funding priorities. This would help initiate a co-creating space that is somewhat autonomous from international donors and organizations – an autonomy needed to reassure many sectors of civil society about the intentions behind early recovery.

Civic capacity. This mandate should centre on long-term civil society capacity-building as a core metric of early recovery, in line with priorities decided by CSOs themselves. Gender elements should be mainstreamed across this capacity-building agenda, rather than supported as a stand-alone priority hitherto. Decision-making impact in CSOs should be an integral part of how civil society institutional capacity-building is measured in the early recovery phase – this would mark a qualitative improvement from the way that international support has been implemented to date.

Crucially, early recovery indicators should be developed to reflect this priority. These indicators should move beyond

assessing only standard humanitarian or development outcomes, to include those that relate to long-term civic institution-building. In line with the concept of civic preparedness, the indicators should be moulded around measures of communities' capacity for self-organizing and autonomous needs provision. Humanitarian aid often, even if inadvertently, undermines such local capacity, and the Syrian Arab Republic is no exception to this tendency. If early recovery could develop a way of reversing this and measuring the impact of local capacity, then it would certainly add something innovative and vitally needed to the policy equation in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Conclusion



As early recovery is such a contested concept, Syrians themselves need to define what it means and how far it can be taken: civic engagement over the term itself needs to be part of the process and could arguably be used as an opportunity to close some civic divides. Early recovery must be designed not just as a shift in aid programming but as an inclusive societal process in its own right.

The policy ideas suggested in this report are intended to spark debate and provide a platform for civil society follow-up on the challenges ahead. The ideas put forward in the report take full cognizance of the sensitivities relating to early recovery and the doubts over its political implications. There are, of course, no easy ways forward but lessons can usefully be taken from other conflict contexts to inform early recovery in the Syrian Arab Republic. It may be that the civil society component of early recovery is not the most pressing or pivotal, and yet if it is not fully developed. Without it, this process is likely to be divisive and a potential source of instability.

As early recovery is such a contested concept, Syrians themselves need to define what it means and how far it can be taken: civic engagement over the term itself needs to be part of the process and could arguably be used as an opportunity to close some civic divides. Early recovery must be designed not just as a shift in aid programming but as an inclusive societal process in its own right.

The ideas contained in this report could serve as the basis of deeper civic dialogue around the specific challenges of early recovery and in particular initiate a participative approach to monitoring early recovery funds. Details will need to be put in place quickly to ensure that this monitoring is systematic,

balanced and constructive, and that it comes with firm indicators drawn up by all parts of society. In this way, early recovery can be a vehicle for the kind of civic preparedness that this report suggests as crucial for the longer-term prospects of conflict resolution. This report contains ideas that should be relatively uncontroversial on the softer end of early recovery to more political and rights-based questions. The underlying approach seeks a balance: for early recovery to effectively serve as a template for the next phase of international support to the Syrian Arab Republic, it must keep political differences within manageable bounds without entirely neglecting them.

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The present study addresses core questions around what 'early recovery' means in the context of the Syrian Arab Republic and for various actors. Specifically, it analyses the role and influence of civil society and international stakeholders in the early recovery phase. The study also explores the concept and definitions of early recovery and looks into regional experiences and lessons learned from other conflict settings, with a focus on the scope and margins of civil society participation in the various sectors of early recovery.

Assessing the important role of civil society in the design, delivery and monitoring of early recovery, and rebuilding the social fabric are essential in all sectors of the early recovery agenda.

