

# “THE EVOLUTION OF SYRIAN NGO NETWORKS: THEIR ROLE IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND LONG-TERM PROSPECTS”

ICVA CASE STUDY #4

## Short summary of the case study:

This case study focuses on 12 Syrian networks based in Gaziantep that received training as part of the Syrian NGO Network Engagement and Partnership Program, carried out by International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). The study documents the experience of these networks, derives lessons learned, and reflects on main strengths and opportunities. Furthermore, it responds to the need to review the work of local Syrian networks as a unique opportunity for collective coordination and joint advocacy. Finally, the study aims to document the evolution of Syrian NGO networks over the last decade, emphasising the role of local Syrian networks in collective advocacy work, representation, participation, and their attempts to merge humanitarian response with mid- to long-term responses and strategies (Nexus) in their role as coordination bodies. In addition, it highlights the role of women-led networks and their contributions. The case study reviews Sex, Age, Disability Disaggregated Data (SADDD) and highlights positive examples, while making recommendations for increased inclusion.

## Timeline of the initiative:

This project was carried out from 1 September 2020 to 30 June 2021.

## ICVA’s role and influence:

In a collaboration with UNDP Syria and the local Syrian Network League (SNL), ICVA has worked closely with the heads of the Syrian NGO Networks to strengthening their existing capacity on a set of required skills related to collective advocacy, representation, and strategic planning. To enable them to play a vital role in joint coordination and representation. This will lead to positive impactful outcomes that serve the most vulnerable people from the displaced and refugee community within and outside of Syria. ICVA worked closely with UNDP to facilitate the partnership with the Syrian NGO Networks inside Syria, in Turkey and the broad region to become more connected internationally to the humanitarian ecosystem and to support them in developing their strategies and ways of working.

Additionally, ICVA has been using the recommendations in different regional and global coordination platforms to advocate for more space for the voice of local Syrian Networks to be heard and echoed. For

example, with the support of ICVAs advocacy, two local Syrian Networks have been more active members in the Regional Syria INGO fora-SIRF aiming to better coordinate with counterpart INGOs on different humanitarian issues linked to humanitarian access, funding, and protection issues. Another example is the engagement of SNL in the Interagency Standing Committee Results Group 1 on Localization as a member, in which they share their contributions on how to advance the role of local actors in the humanitarian structural platforms at the global and regional levels.

ICVA has also kicked off the 3RP meetings talking about the evolution of the Syrian Networks and utilised the recommendations in our [case study](#) to influence the other actors to join hands with Syrian Networks and CSOs, increase trust, voice, and overall influence. These recommendations will continue to be used by ICVA to advocate for further coordination and collaboration with the Syrian civil society on different platforms.

### **How the process and outcome reflected ICVA's priorities, and related to the Theory of Change:**

The aim of this project supports the theory of change across all focus areas as information-sharing on all areas was eminent with the networks. This project specifically builds on the theory of change related to coordination where the long-term outcomes are:

- Coordination mechanisms are inclusive of NGOs, contextualised to provide effective assistance and protection to those affected by crisis.
- Collective NGO ability to engage and influence coordination mechanisms is strengthened.

Through this project, intensive training of good governance, strategic planning, and joint advocacy including a review of humanitarian architecture and an understanding of how to get involved were taught. As an outcome of this project, ICVA was able to support one of the networks involved in this training (SNL) to join the Interagency Standing Committee Results Group 1 on Localization as a member. Additionally, we have offered opportunities to engage with the RHC, OCHA colleagues, UNDP colleagues, etc. for greater inclusion opportunities and joint advocacy opportunities.

These are all activities that have made this project successful and linked to ICVA's theory of change specifically when it comes to localization, the inclusive Humanitarian coordination and enhancing leadership for local actors in humanitarian coordination platforms.

### **How the work has influenced the humanitarian sector:**

The objective of this work is to further strengthen the coordination of national/local network, to further empower them to join to lead the humanitarian response in their specific country. This case study further influences the wider humanitarian community by demonstrating the active presence, and determination of local/national networks and organizations.

Local Syrian networks have been able to participate and actively engage with other active NGOs and UN agencies in different important platforms such as IASC subgroup on Localization, meetings with Syria RC,

and the Brussels conference at Syria. ICVA has been able to keep abreast of all key events and informing the Syrian networks on the importance of being active at all these important events. In addition, how it's important to build alliances and to coordinate with counterpart NGOs for impactful collective advocacy work.

### **What has been the positive impact so far?**

There have been many positive impacts based on this project, including providing opportunities for the networks to represent their national/local CSOs at various high-level discussions with the RHC, UN agencies, and on panel discussions around Localization/Nexus. The networks and their members were supported with access to information and knowledge on how to use this information. ICVA supported two of the local/national networks to be active participants/members with SIRF (Syrian INFO Forum). Lastly, cross-regional learnings across networks took place.

Moreover, networks have been active in coordinating and learning from each other. Before ICVA intervention, the local Syrian networks were not familiar with one another. ICVA's initiative encouraged networks to learn about one another and increase positive and effective communication, further advancing efforts on key issues at the core of the humanitarian sectors such as: Localization, Nexus, strategic planning, and collective advocacy.

This project offered linkages with different regional and global conferences and coordination platforms in which local CSOs can contribute their valuable inputs and expertise.

In December, local Syrian networks conducted different training sessions inside Syria for small-mid level Syrian CSOs to share the information, knowledge, and tools that ICVA team had shared with the local Syrian networks in Gaziantep, Turkey. These training sessions enriches the experience for those local CSOs and will contribute in achieving long and lasting positive impact on the capacities for those local actors.

### **What could be further improved?**

Syrian NGO networks should further engage in exchange and learning to increase their visibility, inclusivity and improve advocacy efforts. INGOs should take one step further to support local networks and donors should provide more direct funding.

### **The way forward – some recommendations:**

#### **Recommendations for Syrian NGO Networks:**

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

- Networks can maintain the engagement of their members through their governance mechanisms. A steering committee or network board can make sure that objectives (set by members) are implemented, while maintaining member engagement.
- Networks should work on increasing their visibility. This involves building their own websites as a platform for describing their work and that of member organisations. This will also enable learning and exchange across different networks and act as a tool to enable networks to reflect on and clarify their specialisations, ensuring a linkage between humanitarian and development work. Local actors could work on articulating and sharing their strategies and implemented programs and demonstrate their investment for accountability.
- More efforts should be exerted to include women and youth in decision-making. While the participation of women has improved since the networks were founded, there is work to be done to create a free and safe environment for meaningful participation for women in decision-making positions and in the peace-building process. Local networks can further improve advocacy by developing and voicing clear policy and operational asks, getting more involved in global and regional opportunities including preparing statements, attendance at major global events, hosting press briefings, and providing press statements — all in a collective manner. Networks should coordinate with the entire membership when submitting a statement or proceeding with a campaign and other collective advocacy opportunities to ensure transparency.

#### **Recommendations for INGOs:**

- INGOs should support networks and not only organisations. In addition, they should work on improving alliances between organisations and networks by bringing together Syrian organisations from different locations and affiliations to overcome divisions. INGOs should ensure that networks are included in their advocacy efforts, campaigns, press releases, statements, etc.
- INGOs should ensure that networks participate in discussions and decision-making to avoid a top-down approach. This involves sharing agendas prior to meetings, organising orientation meetings, reducing the use of jargon and acronyms in meetings with networks, and asking for feedback ahead of meetings. It also involves overcoming language as a barrier by providing interpretation at events.
- INGOs are encouraged to provide specialised technical development and tailored quality training to networks as per needs assessment results. UNDP identified capacity gaps in terms of collective actions, joint programming, funding, and activity implementation. As there has been learning through experience since the beginning, there needs to be evolution in terms of training topics based on most recent needs.

#### **Recommendations for Donors:**

- Consistent and long-term funds should be provided for networks and their initiatives, as this in turn directly affects all members in the networks. Although not providing services on the ground, the role of the networks is crucial and donors should ensure that resources are available for them to serve members through representation, information sharing, collective advocacy, etc.
- Funders should provide clear guidelines and improve network access to information and funding opportunities that are related to their area of work.
- In addition to support through intermediaries, donors should also collaborate and support local actors directly - as engaged into also through the Grand Bargain. The direct support should be accompanied by adopting an attitude that favours risk-sharing (instead of risk-shifting). This should be done pragmatically, with donors selecting who has the best outreach and capacity to deliver to the target populations. In doing so, donors should support local NGOs in complying with administration and the required paperwork.

### **Recommendations for UN Agencies**

- UN agencies (such as UN OCHA, UNDP and the UN High Commissioner on Refugees) should support local actors taking seats on working groups as well as in cluster and other humanitarian coordination mechanisms by having a quota for local actors. Support is particularly needed for women-led organisations and networks, to ensure gender inclusion and mainstreaming.
- UN agencies should support longer-term strategies for networks (namely linking humanitarian to development work) as done currently by UNDP. This UNDP investment needs to continue with the aim of sustaining current results.