

POLICY BRIEF – BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY CAPACITY IN FRAGILE AND CONFLICT AFFECTED STATES

By Didi Alayli

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Introduction

Civil society actors play a vital role in countries affected by fragility, conflict and violence. Some will provide emergency relief, support the most vulnerable in society and provide vital services to conflict-affected populations. Still others will promote active citizenship, support social cohesion, facilitate dialogue and create networks and connections across boundaries. In doing so, these civil society organisations (CSOs) identify and respond to local drivers of conflict. Yet many face severe capacity constraints that prevent them from performing these critical functions.

The World Bank predicts that almost half of the world's poor will live in countries affected by fragility, conflict and violence by 2030.¹ Fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) is a contested term, with no agreed definition. It tends to refer to contexts where governments are unable or unwilling to provide basic public services (such as health, education, or sanitation) to the majority of their population. They also may not have the authority, or capacity, to protect their citizens from violence and often lack widespread legitimacy. There may be limited democracy, a strong role played by the military in government, suppression of political opposition, control of media or absence of civil and political liberties.²

According to the World Bank's 2015 list, seven out of 33 FCAS are Arab states, including Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Yemen. The number of crises in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has grown rapidly in the last decade, particularly since the so called Arab Spring. Increasingly dangerous and volatile security situations in places like Syria mean that many international actors are opting for distance management³ in their implementation of humanitarian programmes, working through local partners able to operate on the ground. In these circumstances, the need for project efficiency acts as a strong incentive for international actors to provide capacity development to these organisations, however it is not always planned from the outset.

This policy brief will argue that the growing challenges of working in FCAS, which defy conventional interventions, necessitate a broader commitment to capacity development on the part of the international development community – international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government aid agencies, the UN and others. Whether the international–local engagement is based on the distance management of humanitarian programmes, or support for longer-term development projects, which can be rare in such settings, there is a critical need for investment in building the knowledge, skills and attitudes of civil society actors with a view to the future. In responding to the needs in FCAS, it also makes sense to prioritise support to CSOs that are explicitly tackling the local drivers of conflict.

¹ See www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview

² Based on a definition provided by Stewart and Brown who define fragile states as 'states that are failing or at risk of failing with respect to authority, comprehensive service entitlements or legitimacy' (2009: p. 3). See Stewart and Brown, 'Fragile States' CRISE Working Paper No. 51. Oxford: CRISE, University of Oxford.

³ Remote management 'is likely to become a permanent feature of humanitarian organisations' operating procedures' (DRC paper A08, 2015 based on the Libya experience).

The brief draws on learning and evidence from an evaluation commissioned by the British Council of their work with a network of young⁴ Syrian activists called Mobaderoon ('initiative takers' in English) which grew out of its Active Citizens programme around five years ago. This evidence suggests that supporting people to connect, to learn and to act, even in a small way, can be vital to their sense of hope and resilience and their ability to defend positive civil values for a peaceful future.

The methodology used in the evaluation supported network organisers and participants to develop their monitoring and evaluation skills and to apply these in the evaluation process. In the absence of broader capacity development programmes, this dual purpose approach (capacity building alongside evaluation) offers real benefits to local CSOs. It helps to improve analytical capacities, support learning, and build a culture of evaluation and reflection. Ultimately, the approach helps civil society to better identify and respond to the challenges it faces.

Mobaderoon is a network of social activists which was set up in 2011 by two dynamic Syrian women after attending a Training of Trainers workshop for the Active Citizens programme run by the British Council in Damascus.

Inspired by citizenship values and calling for 'peaceful co-existence' in Syria, today Mobaderoon has an active, virtually connected membership of around 3,000 young people across Syria. The network continues to run training workshops (including Active Citizens) designed to inspire others to civic action in their communities through the founding of small social action projects. These have taken place in greater Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Lattakia and Tartus.

In 2015, the British Council commissioned INTRAC to undertake a mixed methods evaluation of Mobaderoon's impact to date. This policy brief is one of five reports produced.

⁴ Around 62 per cent of respondents to our online survey identified themselves as being aged 25 or younger.

What are the challenges?

State fragility is often accompanied by low civil society capacity. Civil society actors may be under resourced and have limited political and operating space. When conflict strikes, the delicate fabric of civil society is further undermined. Paffenholz (2009) argues:

‘Violence destroys and disrupts existing forms of social organizations and social networks by spreading fear, distrust and intimidation. It is important to note that violence-induced changes not only affect the possibilities of civil society peacebuilding at a particular moment, but may also change the very structure of civil society.’⁵

Syrian civil society, in particular, faces a double whammy. The number of formal, registered organisations is low⁶ due to decades of state monopoly of all collective action, with most working as traditional charitable associations. INTRAC’s Briefing Paper 30 (2012) outlines the development of the CSO sector in Syria, a sector where even the small number of more professional NGOs set up in the early 2000s need to observe strict political red lines. Advocacy work is effectively banned and even capacity building is viewed with suspicion by the authorities ‘as it is often understood as making NGOs too unruly’.⁷ According to a four-year study on civil society groups in Syria,⁸ this history has led to a situation where ‘Syrian CSGs now lack a solid base on which to build. This is particularly true of secular groups’.⁹ It is these civil society groups, including Mobaderoon, which are now thrust into the logistical and security chaos of a civil war, at a time of extreme need.

As the needs of Syrian civilians for everything from shelter to bread rise steeply amid the violence, for reasons already set out, the burden of responding to the crisis falls on local, hard pressed CSOs. As explored by Popplewell (2005) the issue of finding the right local CSO partner is often fraught with difficulties¹⁰ including concerns about the authenticity and legitimacy of foreign-supported local groups. In reality, the majority of CSOs continue their work without international support. Experienced local staff and volunteers are subject to forced migration alongside civilians, exacerbating the lack of available human resources. Particularly in conflicts driven by sectarian issues, as in Syria, social cohesion is under threat as the populace inevitably takes sides. A recent study¹¹ commissioned by Finn Church Aid identified ‘ideological polarization’ as one of the top five challenges faced by Syrian civil society today. There is a fundamental lack of trust between CSOs active in opposition areas and those active in government-held areas, making national level collaboration almost impossible.

In relation to Syrian CSO access to much needed capacity building support, the *Activism in Difficult Times* study found that of the 94 civil society groups surveyed 59 per cent reported receiving ‘no form’ of capacity building support (presumably since the civil war began). Of the remaining 41 per cent who referenced receiving ‘some’ form of support, only eight of these groups indicated that they had received training and capacity building support, while five indicated that they had received logistical support. These figures offer a stark insight into both the scale of Syrian civil society needs and the urgent need for (international) investment in it.

⁵ Paffenholz, T ‘Civil Society and Peacebuilding: Summary of Results for a Comparative Research project’. CCDP Working Paper. CCDP, the Graduate Institute: Geneva, 2009, cited in Earle, L, ‘Literature Review on the Dynamics of Social Movements in Conflict Affected-States: Issues Paper’. GSDRC, University of Birmingham: Birmingham, August 2011.

⁶ Official estimates vary from 300 to 2,000 according to INTRAC Briefing Paper 30, p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸ Khalaf, R, Ramadan, O and Stolleis, F (2014) *Activism in Difficult Times, Civil Society Groups in Syria 2010-2014*. Online at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/11162.pdf>

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Popplewell, R (2015) *Civil society under fire: Three big questions for peace builders working with local civil society*. INTRAC Briefing paper 42

¹¹ Swisspeace together with Conflict Dynamics International and FarikBeirut.net (2016) *Inside Syria: What Local Actors Are Doing For Peace*. Online at: www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Mediation/Inside_Syria_en.pdf

Capacity building in the midst of conflict – is it worth it?

Collier holds that *‘in fragile states capacity building cannot happen until a country has begun to reform. Before that point, training and providing local people with skills creates an incentive to migrate, causing “brain drain” and perpetuating fragility.’*¹² This argument neglects the dedication and compassion of many civil society actors who choose to stay, often at great personal risk to themselves and their families, so that they can support local communities affected by violence, conflict and fragility. In Syria, forced migration has already affected millions of people, so the risk that skilling-up CSO staff and volunteers will add significantly to this trend seems minimal.

Oxfam states that civil society encourages active citizenship, particularly among marginalised groups, helps to make states more accountable to their citizens, and provides services to populations in fragile states.¹³ It can also play an important supportive role in conflict-affected contexts. Paffenholz finds that CSOs perform a number of vital functions, including protecting civilians, monitoring human rights violations, advocating for peace and human rights, promoting socialisation and social cohesion, facilitating dialogue and delivering vital services to local communities.¹⁴ Local civil society actors have a strong understanding of the context in which they work and the particular drivers of conflict and violence that create and sustain fragility.

INTRAC would argue that investment in local skills as part of civil society capacity building is always worthwhile, but especially in FCAS where civil society plays such a unique and vital role. The evidence of the Mobaderoon evaluation points to the need for long-term capacity building to be planned from the start, backed up by sufficient resources, to better support local CSOs to fulfil their essential functions.

Re-building shared values and societal trust

One of the most critical issues facing FCAS is a lack of societal trust.¹⁵ Meeting people’s essential needs through humanitarian programmes is vital to securing life but does not ultimately secure peace. This only happens when people’s thinking and behaviour change. This is why organisations like Mobaderoon, with its strong citizenship values (non-sectarian, pro human rights) and a sound vehicle – the Active Citizens programme – for articulating and bringing these values to life, are so important.

Despite the challenge of widening societal divisions, from its base in six (largely) government-held areas Mobaderoon has used its extensive online presence to connect young people together, challenge prejudice,¹⁶ and inspire them to dream of a future, peaceful co-existence in which all Syrians will have an equal stake. As a practical expression of their active citizenship, significant numbers of young network members¹⁷ have become involved in delivering small-scale social action projects (SAPs) for the benefit of their communities. With as many as 86 per cent of survey respondents reporting *‘a direct positive impact on their role as a citizen’*, there is clearly a new found sense of agency¹⁸ and hope.¹⁹

This is no small achievement; it is also noteworthy that it has been achieved through the use²⁰ and adaptation of an international training curriculum rather than project funding. Although the network impacts identified are indirect, mainly evident at the individual level and, by their nature, hard to measure, Mobaderoon is clearly making a difference to people’s lives in the most extreme circumstances. Of course there are limitations too. The network’s ability to operate from

¹² Cited in Dowst, M, ‘Working with Civil Society in Fragile States’, Policy Briefing Paper 23 (2009) INTRAC p. 5.

¹³ Oxfam (2013) *Civil society in fragile and conflict affected states*. Oxfam Policy Compendium Note. Oxfam: Oxford.

¹⁴ Paffenholz, T (2009) *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: Summary of Results for a Comparative Research project*. CCDP Working Paper. CCDP, The Graduate Institute: Geneva.

¹⁵ Notably Seth Kaplan in *Fixing Fragile States: a new paradigm for development?* (2009).

¹⁶ In our online survey, 83.5 per cent of respondents reported an increase in ‘their acceptance of other communities’ following training with Mobaderoon.

¹⁷ A self-reported figure of around two thirds.

¹⁸ The most popular reply choice to the question asking what survey respondents most valued about being a member of Mobaderoon was ‘the chance to achieve positive change in people’s lives’ at 34.5 per cent.

¹⁹ Seventy-two per cent reported that their membership of Mobaderoon had had a ‘positive effect’ on their psychological well-being.

²⁰ Actively sanctioned and supported by the British Council.

government areas has caused suspicion among some opposition groups. While their online presence helps to facilitate national level outreach, the lack of physical offices on the ground in Syria is seen by some as a drawback as it means the organisation is less well known and, arguably, less trusted on the ground.

One area worth reflecting on by both Mobaderoon and its supporters concerns the timing of their work to build citizenship values as the basis for social cohesion. Paffenholz (2009) argues that such work is more effective in conditions of low levels of violence or, indeed, in post conflict. In their discussions with the INTRAC team, network members spoke about their difficulties in promoting the concept of peaceful co-existence among some local communities who found it unrealistic in today's Syria. Among the five SAPs (self-) evaluated by Mobaderoon, the most impressive project for us (Non-violent behaviours) provided training with the aim of reducing violence within government shelters for the displaced. The focus of this SAP – protection and advocacy – perfectly reflects the priorities which Paffenholz identifies²¹ as being the most effective (alongside facilitation, in the meaning of group training) across all phases of conflict.

It is in such fields that a strong, values-based training organisation like Mobaderoon can make a real difference and INTRAC's support has helped to highlight this.

Incorporating capacity building into the evaluation process

One way of building capacity, even in the most difficult contexts, is through evaluations. As internationals, INTRAC staff and consultants could not visit Syria in person, due to the security situation. The evaluators therefore supported the network to undertake self-evaluation, first by pre-building evaluation capacity through face-to-face training in Lebanon and, second,

by providing those involved with online mentoring. The network's monitoring and evaluation team benefited from a number of interventions, including training and mentoring by an experienced Arabic speaking monitoring and evaluation expert in the use of participatory learning and action methods.

This approach greatly increased the analytical and evaluative capacity of the network. By the end of our year-long engagement with the group, our team saw clear evidence that this longer-term accompaniment approach was strengthening an evaluation 'culture', based on reflection and learning, amongst its staff. INTRAC is convinced that if international donors can accept the limitations of such an approach and commit to providing the additional resources needed, the advantages of this dual purpose – capacity building and evaluative – approach for local CSOs (especially in FCAS settings) more than outweigh the disadvantages of 'good enough' evaluation.²² In this case, it is clear that the supportive role played by the British Council in relation to the network – outside of the usual donor-partner funding paradigm – through which trust was established, very much paved the way for Mobaderoon's willingness to engage so fully in the evaluation, a process which began with its leadership helping to shape the terms of reference.

Crucially, given the severe lack of experienced CSO workers in Syria, INTRAC had the chance to build capacity in a responsive and needs-based manner among civil society activists who will likely use these skills for years to come; this is an important contribution. Based on this experience, we find CSO capacity building in the midst of conflict not only possible but a very worthwhile investment for international actors as they formulate their interventions.

²¹ Paffenholz (2009) p. 12.

²² INTRAC is presenting a paper to this effect, under the heading of 'Unpacking complexity: Exploring evaluation 'rigour' in conflict-affected and humanitarian situations', at the UK Evaluation Society's Annual Conference in London in April 2016.

Conclusions

Despite the climate of uncertainty that pervades in FCAS, there is a pressing need for the international development community, first, to support local civil society partners as genuine partners in development (and humanitarian) programmes and, second, to create strategies which address both short and long-term capacity needs. Here, the recent Tufts study found that *'the international organisation's capacity to partner is as important to successful operations as the local organization's capacity to partner'*.²³ This means that the assessment of capacity should be directed toward both international and local organisations. INTRAC's experience of working with the Mobaderoon (and perhaps the British Council's too) confirms another Tufts study finding, namely the importance of building understanding and trust between local and international organisations: *'From the perspective of local organisations, the most effective and preferred means of capacity building was to have a focal person in the international organization who worked closely with the partner over time.'*

Additionally, in conflict settings, there are compelling reasons for international development actors to prioritise support for CSOs explicitly tackling the drivers of the particular conflict, in this case through citizenship programming which aims to strengthen social cohesion against a backdrop of growing sectarianism, while bearing in mind the evidence about good practice in this area (regarding timing and focus).

The continued technical support which Mobaderoon has received from the British Council – including through this evaluation – is not only highly valued by the network's leadership but is also laying important foundations for Syria's future. This added value owes much to the innovative methodological approach proposed by the British Council, which INTRAC has found to deliver real benefits to its Syrian partner.

²³ Howe K, Stites, E and Chudacoff, D. *Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management settings – the cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan*. Feinstein International Centre, 2.

Recommendations to international development actors

1. To support development programmes aiming to build long-term civil society capacity in FCAS (as well as humanitarian programmes) and, within this, to prioritise support to CSOs which are tackling the drivers of conflict.
2. To identify spaces where individuals or groups have dynamism and are working with a perspective of future peaceful co-existence. The emphasis should be on facilitating locally-owned initiatives.
3. When supporting interventions aimed at the promotion of shared values, people's sense of agency etc. in conflict settings, to bear in mind the evidence about the phasing of such work; also recognising that their effects will be long term and hard to measure.
4. When providing capacity development to CSOs in FCAS, to carefully contextualise training and combine it with extended mentoring and coaching in the application of skills. Although both labour and cost intensive, this is the most effective approach.
5. To factor into evaluation budgets additional resources to support capacity building as part of the process, including the identification of a focal point within the capacity building organisation. This both helps to extend the local reach of evaluations and lays the foundations for better monitoring and evaluation and learning in local CSOs.