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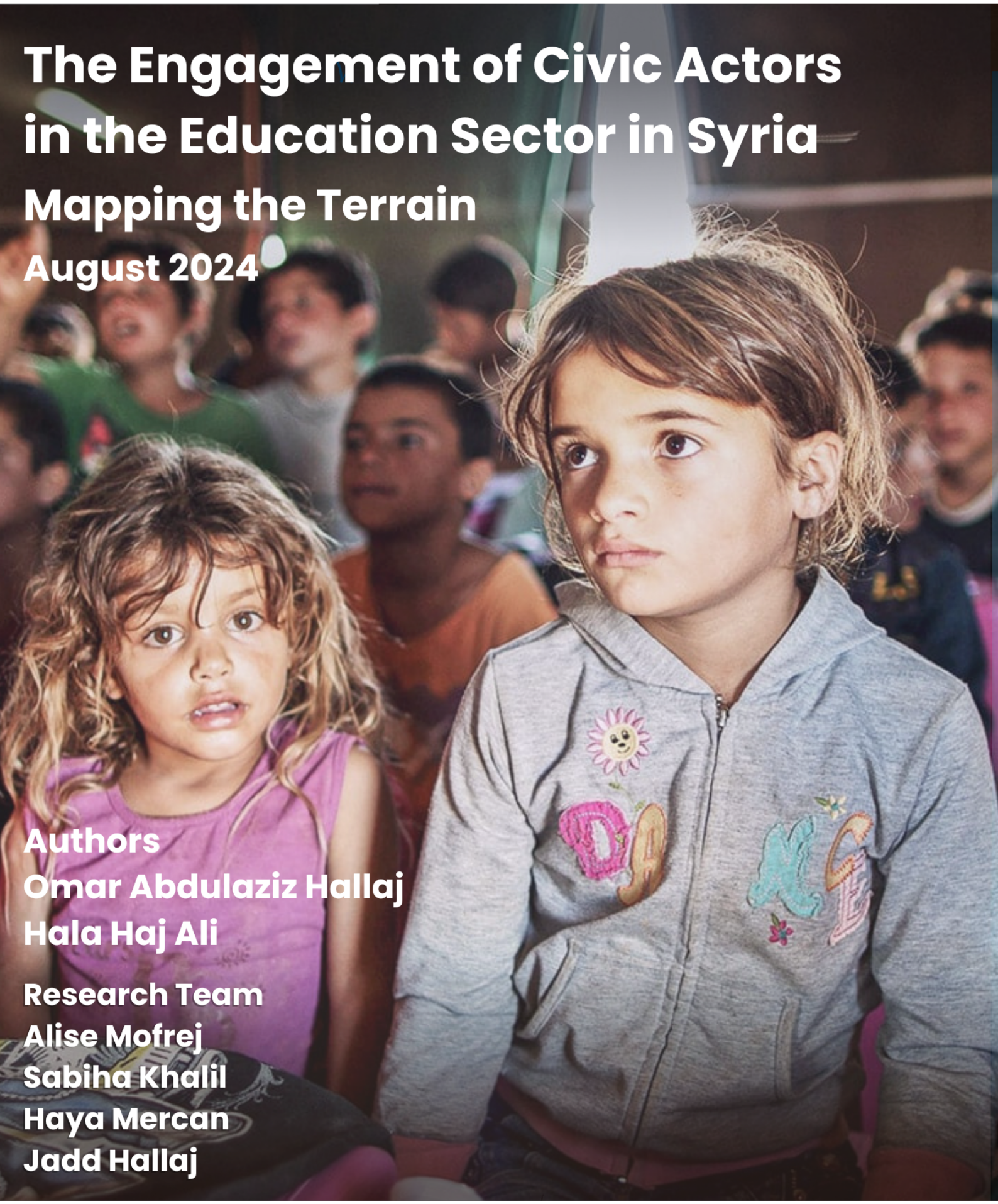
Duderi e. V.

The Engagement of Civic Actors in the Education Sector in Syria

Mapping the Terrain

August 2024



Authors

Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj

Hala Haj Ali

Research Team

Alise Mofrej

Sabiha Khalil

Haya Mercan

Jadd Hallaj

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Authors:

Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj, Partner at LUGARIT
Hala Haj Ali

Research Team:

Alise Mofrej
Sabiha Khalil
Haya Mercan
Jadd Hallaj

For permissions and questions contact

EuroMed Feminist Initiative
Email: ife@efi-euromed.org
www.efi-ife.org
ISBN

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List of Abbreviations

AANES	Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria
CBO	Community Based Organization
CSO	Civil Society Organization
GoS	Government of Syria
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Sham
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
SSG	Syrian Salvation Government
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
YÖS	Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrenci Sınavı: Test for foreign students in Türkiye

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a mapping exercise to understand the role of civils society actors in the provision of educational service during the conflict in Syria. It uses a combination of qualitative interviews with extensive desktop research and online verification of CSOs' work visibility, networking, and reputation to provide a 360-degree reading of the conditions on the ground. Assessment was made to answer two sets of questions. One involves the assessment of CSOs' capacity to act as key stakeholders in the education sector. And the other involved understanding how values of social peace an equal citizenship are being interpreted and promoted by CSOs. This report provides a synthesis of the findings of the research. A subsequent report will focus on lessons learnt and key recommendations. It will be issued in the form of a policy paper separately.

Information was collected from extensive qualitative interviews with 55 key informants. The sample was chosen to cover six cities representing a small microcosm of the conditions in different parts of the country under the control of different formal and quasi-formal de facto powers. In each of the six cities (Dara'a – Sweida – Raqqa – Idlib – Afrin – Qamishli,) respondents were selected to provide a deep reflections and overview of the eco-system surrounding the education sector. The focus of the interviews was on the role of the CSOs in the provision of education services. However, to understand the specific role of the CSOs it was important to contextualize it within the broader parameters of service provision and the specific socio-economic and political conditions in each area. In addition to key informants from the said cities, key informants from other regions and people with knowledge of the field across Syria were interviewed to complete the picture and to provide counterfactuals to the specific conditions at the local level. The semi-structured questionnaires were focused on understanding the current and potential future roles for CSOs in the delivery of education services.

The general results of the research are presented in the body of the report, while specific conditions in each of the six areas are presented in the annexes. The specificities of certain information were withheld to protect the identities and ensure the security of participants. Given the qualitative nature of the research, the analysis provided cannot set an order of magnitude and is meant to understand the dynamics rather than the exact prevalence of specific occurrences. The key findings of the report are summarized below:

<u>Distribution of CSOs' work across the Syrian territory:</u>

- Organizations working in the education sector are present and work in asymmetrical ways in the different regions of Syria.
- Some large organizations are working in the Northwest, but the dominant typology of civic actors working in the sector are small organizations or local community-based initiatives.

- It is not possible to provide a detailed account of the number of organizations working in the education sector, since a large part of them work under the radar, and there are organizations working in more than one sector besides education. The presence of at least 293 organizations in different regions of Syria was verified. But the actual number of civic actors (formal and informal) can be several folds larger.

Main stakeholders:

- Formal and quasi-formal institutions make their presence felt strongly in the process in terms of control over curricula and ideological values. Otherwise, there is little attention given on their part to issues of quality and relevance of the educational sector.
- The role of the private sector is still felt as the formal education institutions are failing to provide quality education. However, private schools are out of the reach of most families. Instead, families save their limited resources and resort to private lessons mainly to help their children with tutoring to pass accredited exams.
- CSOs are generally filling in gaps not covered by the regular schools or the private sector; focusing on non-formal education, emergency education, and remedial programs to help students who dropped out of school to start over again. In many cases CSOs are providing psychosocial support to students and in most cases, they provide critical supplies and logistics needed to operate regular schools.
- Networking among stakeholders is sporadic. A culture of mistrust dominates the relations of CSOs with other actors. CSOs are perceived as well funded entities; local authorities and de facto powers are either taxing them directly or imposing indirect transactional costs to provide the CSOs with licenses to operate.
- In many cases CSO's voluntarily promote the local de facto powers as the sponsors or backers of the services they provide; they show moral allegiance to facilitate obtaining licenses and protect their operations. As a result, in the education sector, as in other sectors, services provided by CSOs are often accredited to local authorities and / or de facto powers.
- Collaboration among CSOs is limited. CSOs often prefer to segment the responsibilities over schools in their areas rather than cooperate. Cooperation and networking are not necessarily rewarding to CSO's, networking and partnerships efforts often backfire, as donors' grant procedures discourage cooperation.

Resources and financial burdens on CSOs:

- Donor funding is a critical input in supporting CSOs in the educational sector. It is provided through short-term cycles that prevent long-term planning. This has created a dependency on donor aid and in some cases undermined local resilience and sustainability. As donor aid is dwindling, many educational CSOs are losing their funding, and terminating their services.
- Smaller CSOs are dependent on larger CSOs to act as liaison with the donors. The reduction of aid money is affecting them the most; larger CSOs have diversified portfolios and are more resilient to face funding cuts.
- Expatriate funds are becoming increasingly more relevant as donor aid is scaled back. Remittances are being pooled by civic actors in many places to achieve better collective impact. Also, local philanthropy and charities are being directed to cover education needs.

But inputs from those sources are still not sufficient to cover the vast needs of recovery in the sector.

- Human resources are scarce. Yet, in many ways the CSOs are better funded than regular schools and can afford to pay better salaries; effectively they are brain draining local educational institutions. But some emerging models are promising; whereby CSOs are subsidizing regular schools and their teachers. Volunteering is also very valuable in many places to cover essential gaps in service delivery.
- CSOs face major challenges to cover costs. To attract qualified staff, they try to provide better salary scales. While donors have not minded a reasonable level of payments to staff, funds have not been consistent and the ability to retain qualified staff is often challenges by short-term funding horizons. Cycles of hiring and firing are a burden to developing quality human resources.
- CSOs are often perceived by local authorities and local communities as wealthy entities. They can be exploited or pressured to provide direct and indirect taxes. Transactional fees and hidden costs eat a substantive part of the CSO funding.

<u>The eco-system in CSO-run facilities and services</u>

- Schools and facilities run or sponsored by CSOs provide a much better educational environment for children.
- Access to school remains fraught with economic and security challenges. These external conditions can affect the equity of educational services especially for girls.
- CSOs have provided new approaches to sponsoring public schools. This model of intervention is providing a better environment for children. But resources are not available to support all schools.
- CSOs provide a level of psycho-social support and non-formal interactive learning often lacking in public schools. But their outreach remains limited to serve the whole population.
- With the exception of some minor incidents, CSOs do not seem to have strong relations with parents. However, in some cases as is the case in Dara'a and Sweida and to a lesser extent in Qamishli, parents' involvement in the work of CSOs is visible. Parents can be a great asset to CSOs in terms of volunteering, facilitating access to resources and building better coordination with the school to support children's education and wellbeing. Unfortunately, this resource is often under-utilized.
- While theoretically most CSOs strive to provide their services equitably to males and females the situation on the ground is affected by many external factors, some are related to parents' preferences, while others are related to policies of gender segregation in schools. In most cases these factors tend to disfavor girls.
- Violence is a major concern for parents when considering sending their children to school, especially girls. This impacts dropout rates. CSOs tend to fare better in terms of safety in the schools, but access to school is fraught with risks. Drugs are emerging as a major risk in and around schools, further discouraging access to education.

<u>The curricula used by CSOs</u>

- CSOs are often applying the curricula mandated by local authorities and de facto powers. However, as most of them are engaged in emergency and remedial education to support the

return of dropout children to school, CSOs often focus on key subjects, such as reading and writing skills, as well as basic math and science. In that regard, their curricula differ little from each other across the country.

- The normative curricula have little relevance as to how the social sciences and humanities subjects are being taught in schools. Teachers implement "real curricula" based on their interpretations of such topics, and their ability to negotiate cultural norms with the community and the parents.
- Beyond the strict adherence to ideological principles, public and quasi-public control over quality is very weak, and the education process is producing very divergent results in different areas of the country. Accreditation systems are often lacking, and even when they are present, they provide little guarantee regarding the quality of education. Still, parents find formal accreditation assuring and, in many cases, take great chances to send their children to take exams in Government of Syria (GoS)-Controlled areas to take their exams and earn accredited degrees.
- CSOs have weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms when it relates to controlling how their curricula are being interpreted by teachers. But CSOs also copycat each other, and the dissemination of best practice is assured not through top-down normative standards but through bottom-up normalization in practice.

<u>The value systems promoted by CSOs</u>

- Teachers hired from the local community are likely to reinforce local community norms and interpret the curricula through these norms. In essence, social norms are coopting the values promoted by the CSOs rather than the reverse.
- CSOs are often reluctant to promote values of social peace and equal citizenship overtly as this may put them in direct confrontations with both de facto powers and parents.
- Social peace is often presented as an internal coherence issue among the member of the community. It is presented as a binding factor to hold the community together or a "fence" to protect the community rather than as a "bridge" to other communities.
- Equal citizenship is often presented in terms of duties owed to the community but devoid of discussion on rights. In most cases, it is translated in terms of abstract notions of doing good, not based on reciprocal recognition of rights and responsibilities to uphold those rights.
- The educational process did not generate an inclusive national vision. Trends towards localization have often perpetuated the isolation of regions from each other.
- Values are often passed as ideal moral concepts and little resources are made available to translate these values into daily praxis, through play or school projects, etc.
- Parents intervene at times if they perceived that the curricula being taught at schools are not respecting of local social norms. Their direct and /or indirect interventions matter more than the mandated curriculum. This adds to the complexity of the eco-system where many actors with competing agendas are trying to control the use of values as identity markers.
- Reporting on values to donor is often input-oriented and not impact-oriented. CSOs use elaborate reporting procedures to show that they are promoting certain values and to prove that they provide equal access and inclusiveness in their operations. But they have little resources for monitoring impact over the long run. Little attention is given to how values are passed and are being interpreted on the ground.

Prospects for future interventions of CSOs in the education sector

- CSOs are often trusted by communities to deliver services. But they are sometimes reviled as not using the resources aimed to support communities in a transparent and efficient way.
- The role of CSOs is most appreciated when they are seen as supporting the largest segments of society as opposed to supporting a small number of beneficiaries. In that regard their impact is stronger when they support and compliment the formal education system not when they act as substitutes to public schools.
- Excessive localization in dispensing emergency education has undermined the possibility of imagining one Syria and reunifying the country in the future. Localization is extremely important in expanding access and ensuring relevance to communities. But localization not matched by adherence to national values of peace and citizenship can undermine the territorial integrity of the country and its ability to heal and prevent the return of violence.
- CSOs will not have sufficient donor funds to scale up their qualitative programs to all children in an equitable manner. By focusing on the quality of supply to promote their competitive edge, CSOs have a blind spot on the volume of demand that is not covered by their services.
- CSO's have the potential to provide their most relevant impact by acting as an auxiliary tool to support formal education processes. Instead of delivering programs that compete with regular schools, they need to focus their limited resources on supporting regular schools with resources, know how, non-formal education, logistical support, improved student access to schools, monitoring the impacts of the educational process, and connecting the schools to parents to improve accountability.
- The sooner CSOs move out of the school management business under the emergency education mode, and move into supporting the return to normal education, the more they are likely to find their true mission and to deliver the strongest impact in the future.

1. Overall Context

The education sector in Syria witnessed major challenges after the eruption of violence following popular demonstrations in 2011. Prior to the conflict most of the education services in Syria were provided by the public sector in public schools. Only a small fraction of the Syrian population received education in the private sector, and the role of civic engagement in the education sector was limited to supporting charitable educational functions for orphans and special needs. In some experimental cases CSOs worked on non-formal education programs.

In general, the education sector was heavily controlled ideologically through a rigid observation of government curricula. These curricula promoted the ideology of the Ba'ath party with regards to issues of identity, social norms, and citizenship. While non-governmental actors were allowed a limited access to the sector, the observance of these norms was tightly controlled.

After 2011, a myriad of actors got involved in the education sector as the central government was no longer capable or willing to provide the service in many parts of Syria. Ensuring that a whole generation is not lost, became a mission for many CSOs that sprung across the country where the public sector retreated. New governance models emerged under the control of different de facto powers, each trying to interfere in the sector to assert its legitimacy and power. New curricula were devised and / or were modified from the original textbooks. Different value systems were introduced reflecting the ideological base of de facto powers. And while diversity in education should be welcomed, the situation led to fragmented approaches on the ground in a manner that would threaten the unity of the country or its ability to establish social peace and reconciliation in the future.

CSOs played different roles to help cover the gaps that emerged in the sector. But their interventions were not all neutral. Many CSOs brought with them their own value systems and these systems diverged considerably even within the same area of control. The prospects of producing a pedagogic process based on critical thinking, equal citizenship, and social peace in a manner that would help to reunify the country in the future came into question.

The research at hand delves into the role of civil society actors in the education sector to assess their overall impact on the educational process, to map the different functions and interventions that are being created through this intervention, and to assess the value systems that are being produced. The mapping exercise had to understand not only the role of CSOs, but to contextualize that role within the complex eco-system in which these actors are operating on the ground. Their partnerships, funding conditions, and acceptance by local populations were assessed in addition to their internal management modalities, absorption capacity and chances for survival and sustainability over the long run.

2. Main Research Questions

Duderi is involved in researching the question of education to formulate the broadest possible understanding of the challenges and opportunities of reconstructing the education sector in the future. This specific report is focused on one important piece of the puzzle by shedding light on the role of civic actor in the sector. The main research question framing this mapping exercise was formulated in the following manner:

Does civil society in Syria play an active role in the education sector, allowing them to intervene directly and / or indirectly to support the development of curricula and steering the educational process in a manner that would promote social peace, citizenship and equality, today and in the future?

Two sub questions would then ensue:

1- What is the absorption capacity of civil society, its outreach and ability to cover gaps in the educational process? This is evaluated based on available human and financial resources, the availability of infrastructure and capacity to forge sustainable and scalable entry points in the education sector.
2- What is the role of civil society in promoting values of social peace and equal citizenship on the ground? Beyond formal curricula, CSOs promote "real curricula" according to their interpretations and their ability to monitor and control the quality of the education services they offer. These factors could be more relevant to analyze than focusing only on the literal wording of the textbooks.

A myriad of additional questions was developed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the situation on the ground. Results were grouped under the following headings:

- Distribution and presence of CSOs on the ground
- Key stakeholders
- Available resources and financial burdens
- The eco-system in CSO-run facilities and services
- The nature of curricula being used by CSOs
- The value systems being promoted and interpreted on the ground
- Prospects for future interventions of CSOs in the education sector

The general findings of the research are presented in the body of the report to provide a comparative understanding of what is happening in Syria in general. Specific conditions in each of the six cities and their regions is provided in the annexes.

3. Methodology

Two approaches were adopted for mapping the role of civic actors in the education sector in Syria:

Desk Top Research:

The first approach involved an extensive desktop review of existing CSOs working in the sector to track their distribution and work visibility. This analysis reviewed data provided by IMPACT based on a comprehensive survey of 293 CSOs working in the education sector inside Syria, or those which have education as one of their key focal areas.[1] The analysis involved tracking their presence online,

[1] IMPACT courteously provided the research team with access to their database related to CSOs working in the education sector. For more information refer to:
https://impactres.org/mapping-civil-society-actors/
Last visited August 20th, 2024.

in regular and social media to assess the perception of their impact and validate their presence on the ground. Each CSO was assessed based on three criteria:

Visibility:
- Consistency of posting on social media
- Content and quality of posts
- Google search visibility
- News
- Follower count
- Follower engagement

Reputation
- Positive/negative reviews in regular and social media
- Content sentiments
- Post comments

Networking with other stakeholders
- Local councils
- Other CSOs and NGOs
- Collaboration with practitioners/individuals

Each CSO was assessed based on the presence of such information in the public domain. No independent verification of the information was possible. This approach enabled a general outlook of the sector, it is not granular enough to assess any one CSO specifically. Each one of the three criteria was assessed on a scale from 1-5 and the results were presented on heat maps for a spatial understanding of CSOs presence and impact across the terrain. An overall grade was given based on the average of the three criteria and was presented in a separate map.

Qualitative Survey:

The second approach relied on a qualitative survey involving 55 key informants working in the civic space and/or in the education sector. The purpose of this survey was to delve closely into the local conditions of six areas representing different conditions on the ground. The six regions under investigation were: Sweida – Idlib – Qamishli – Afrin – Raqqa – Dara'a. These areas have their own specific conditions, but they also present a microcosm of the overall conditions in the country as they cover different types of governance structures, social and economic conditions, as well as different political restraints.

To ensure that the sample is well representative, seven further interviews were conducted with people operating in the education sector from other parts of Syria to provide counterfactuals and complete the picture provided by the in-depth analysis of the six areas. The general findings that pertain to the situation of CSOs across Syria is presented in the general findings. The findings of the specific regions under investigation are presented individually in the annex at the end of the report.

Two women interviewers were involved in collecting the data. The interviewees were given clear explanation of the purpose of the research and were also given the options to proceed only as far as they feel comfortable with the answers. Only one interviewee opted to answer the first part of the questions and preferred not to continue till the end. Ensuring the security of participants was provided by keeping the interview transcripts separated from the list of names of participants and identifying participants by code and not by name. The average interview lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours. However, in some parts of the country, where internet connections were problematic, the interviews were conducted over an extended period based on the availability of connection.

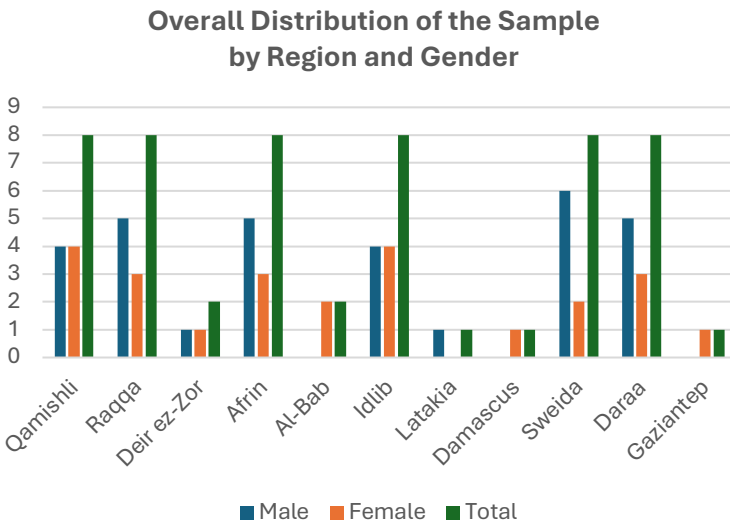
Interviews were transcribed verbatim. More than 1000 pages of text was developed. The results were assessed for each region separately and then collective analysis was done for the whole sample.

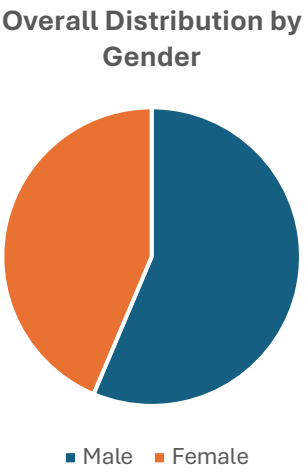
Sample Structure:

The purposive sample was selected based on several criteria, including individuals' knowledge of the educational and political context in Syria and in their areas, length of experience in the education sector, and practical background in civil society organizations. Accordingly, the total sample was comprised of 55 individuals, with 52 residing in the country while three other worked in neighboring countries on educational projects inside Syria. The sample was distributed by age, gender, region, specialization, relation to education, experience in civil society, and conditions of displacement:

Sample distribution by region and gender

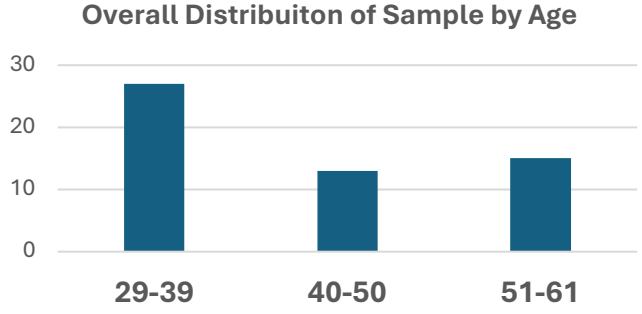
The sample included cities with different forms of governance and under the control of different de facto powers. Gender equality was also considered in the sample, despite the challenge posed by the uneven gender distribution of people working in the sector in the different parts of the country.





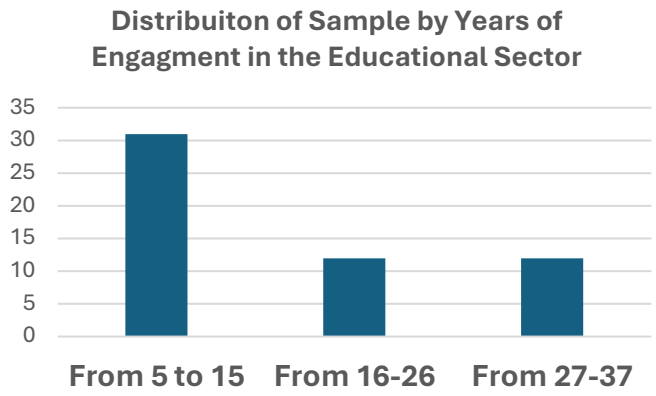
Sample distribution by age

The youngest participant was 29 years old and the oldest was 61 years old with most of the sample being between 29-39 years of age. The mixture of age groups allowed a good reflection on current experiences as well as the possibility of comparing with conditions from before the conflict.



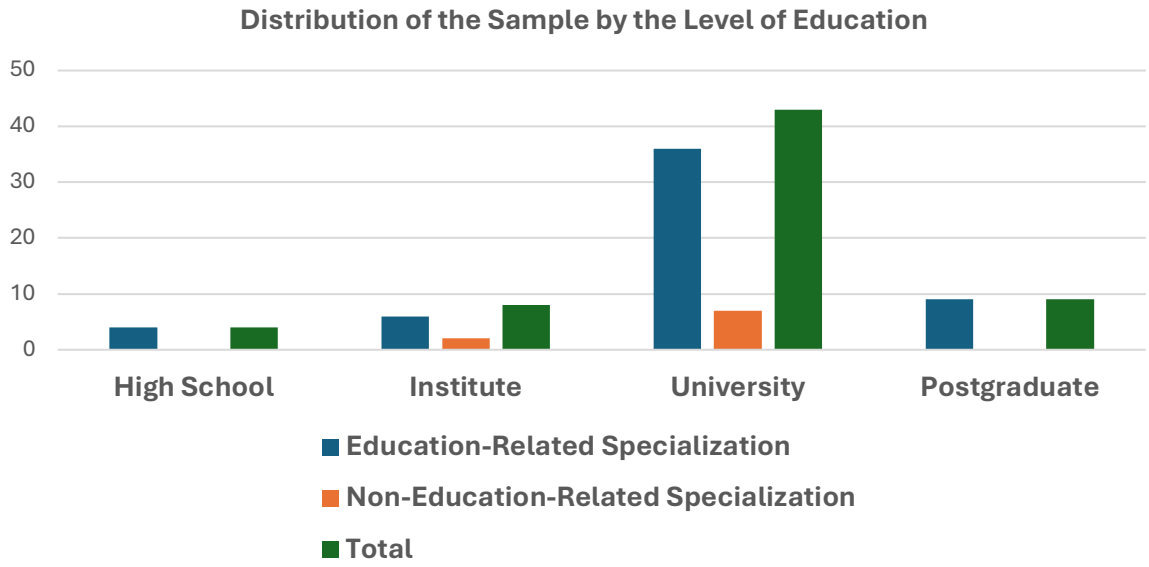
Sample distribution by years of experience in the education sector

Participants had at least five years of experience. Twelve individuals were at retirement age but still played educational roles within CSOs. The composition of the sample provides a good mixture of current experiences as well as provide critical hindsight and institutional memory.



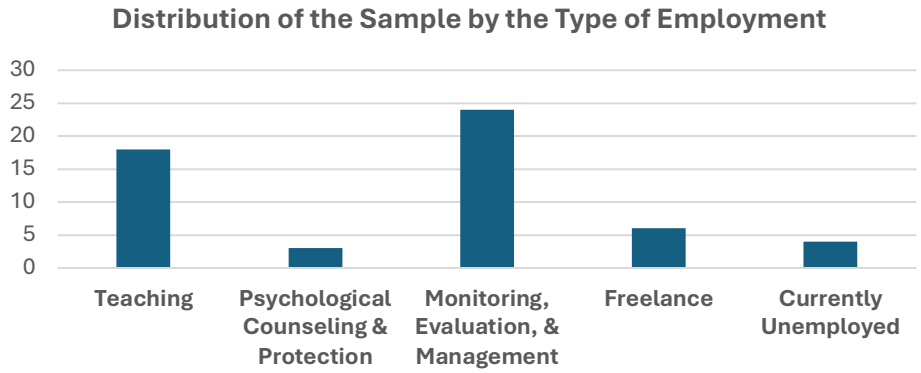
Sample distribution by educational level and relevance of their specializations to education

The sample included people with education-related backgrounds and others from non-educational backgrounds. The education-related specializations included formal degrees in literature, education, psychology, and science. The non-education-related specializations included engineering, law, and business administration; they were chosen because of their administrative roles in CSOs.



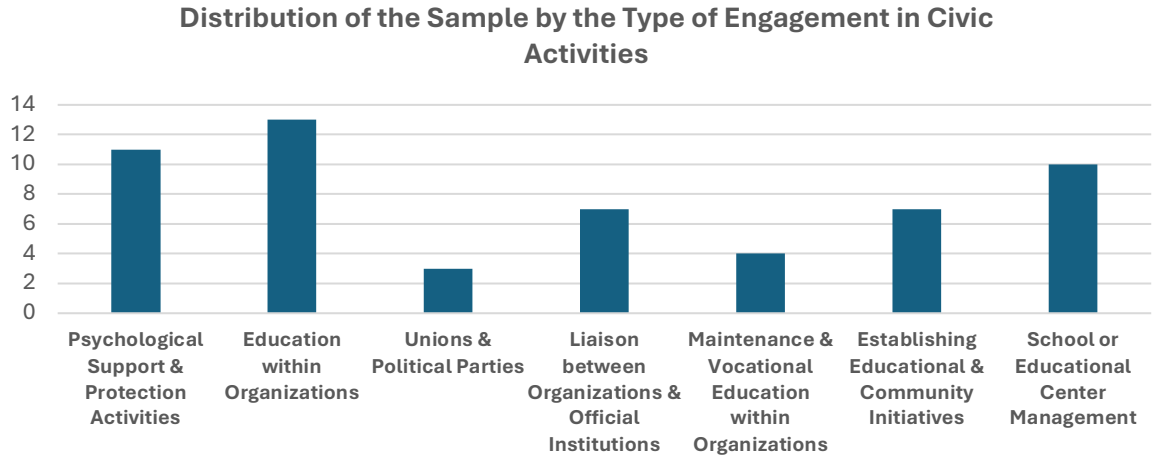
Sample distribution by current occupations

More than two-thirds of the sample were currently involved in teaching, monitoring, and management roles in civil society organizations, which provided the study with a realistic analysis of the work of CSOs from both academic and administrative perspectives, and showed how executive policies intersect with the internal education process in different areas. Four individuals were currently unemployed due to the termination of projects they are working on. Their perspectives on the sustainability of the CSO's work in education was instructive.



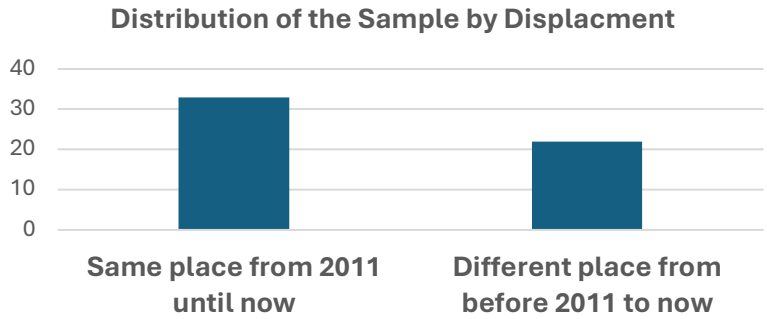
Sample distribution by experience in civil society organizations

Different functions within the civil society sector were included to ensure that all perspectives were considered. The largest share was for educators and those working within protection programs. However, it is important to note that the boundaries between these categories are not rigid, as individuals move between jobs within the scope of their work with CSOs.



Sample distribution by displacement status

Different areas of Syria witnessed different levels of displacement during the war. The sample is representative of the overall level of displacement in the country with some locations witnessing more displacement than others.



It is worth noting that most of the participants in the survey became active in civil society after 2011; those who had previously worked in civil society did not exceed three of the total sample. The role of civil society in education was not prominent before that. In general, the sample included people with long experiences in the education sector but often in their capacity as part of the formal education system.

4. General Findings

The research revealed a fragmented eco-system where different localities are struggling to provide the basic support needed to cover the gaps in the provision of educational services for young people. There are no generalized characteristics to be observed, not even within the same area of control. The Syrian terrain is now fragmented by factors deeper than the political and military conditions dividing the country into four zones of control. Indeed, differences in the same area of control can be much higher than differences among these zones. The Syrian territory is fragmented socially and economically into smaller local realities defined by their communities' resilience and ability to cope with the local manifestations of the conflict.

However, a chaotic eco-system of local coping conditions still reveals some important trends and patterns that extend over the whole Syrian territory. As the power of formal State institutions or informal governance models have failed to provide this essential service in a satisfactory manner, civil society actors had to step their efforts to bridge the gaps, they are often supported both by donors and international organizations, but their most important asset is their positioning in the local community and ability to gain traction there. Each NGO, CSO, and CBOs in each region had to find their own coping mechanism. What determines their impact and success is how well integrated they are within their social networks and their ability to capitalize on social and community capital.

Integration into local social solidarity networks is not always positive. In many incidences, communities reverted to real or imagined social norms to consolidate their internal solidarity and justify their exclusions of the "other". This condition leveraged a type of social capital often referred to as "the fence" at the expense of reaching out to other social groups or what is often referred to as "bridging" social capital. Prejudice, social control, and patriarchal social hierarchies are at play. Even when CSOs pledge to their donors to promote values of peace building and equal citizenship, they do it in a manner that preserve the social order and the nomenclature of patriarchy.

Survival and ensuring that school age children are not left behind are a definitive priority for most CSOs. Stabilizing the livelihoods of communities in times of war are key for collective survival. Respecting social norms that can support communal survival is critical in the absence of other means of protecting the welfare and wellbeing of communities. CSOs and their communities are doing their best to cope in the adverse conditions of an intractable conflict that has so far claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands, displaced millions, and reduced the livelihoods of over 90% of the surviving communities to the lower limits of poverty. Thinking about the future might be farfetched now. However, the situation on the ground is cause for long term alarm.

The fragmented situation will inhibit future solutions to the ongoing Syrian conflict situation. The values of social peace and equal citizenship will be key for healing. Without them the country is likely to fall again into new cycles of violence, with or without a UN facilitated political process to end the conflict. CSOs are not doing enough to promote the values necessary for healing. Peace and citizenship are interpreted in abstract terms that have little implication on the practice of these values. CSOs can barely cope with basic needs and most their energy and efforts are focused on essential logistics of remedial and emergency education, their ability to promote values of peace and equal citizenship are limited and their capacity to plan, manage and monitor the promotion of values is hindered by limited resources and a dangerous security context. The international community needs to take notice. What is not resolved today will have serious regional and global repercussions down the road.

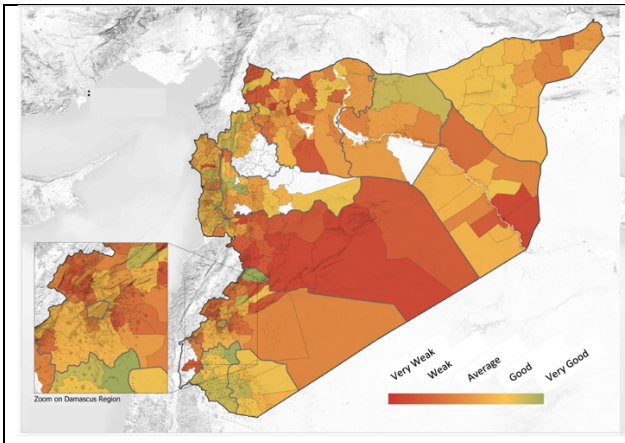
4.1 Distribution of CSOs' work across the Syrian territory:

CSOs working in the education sector have different footprints in the different parts of the country. Our research team was able to verify the presence and activities of at least 293 CSOs that work exclusively in the sector or those with education being one of their key focal areas.[2] Naturally, there are many more CSOs working outside Syria; those were not included in the survey as the mapping exercise was focused on conditions inside the country. Also, the team could ascertain considerable levels of activities of civic groups and initiatives that operate under the radar in informal ways. The mapped CSOs are distributed unevenly across the country. Larger and more numerous CSOs are operating in the Northwest of the country. Other, often smaller, CSOs operate in all regions, but their presence varies quantitatively and qualitatively from one place to another. Most of these organizations are situated in cities and urban areas, though many provide services in rural areas and refugee camps.

The research team was able to use secondary sources to map the visibility of CSOs working in the education field and their reputation within their local communities and the perceived level of rootedness through local networks and connectivity to other stakeholders. While the data is not independently verifiable to assess the status of individual CSOs, it is possible to construct some general observations:

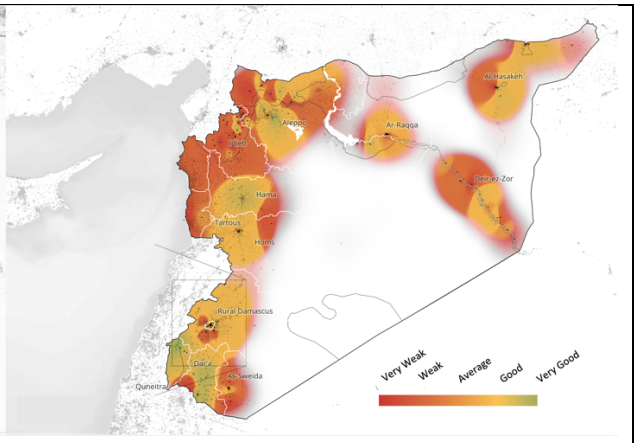
1- While there is a strong correlation in the data in the perception of communities and appreciation of the educational services with the presence and visibility of CSOs, this is not a universal condition. In some cases, the presence of CSOs correlate negatively with the evaluation of citizens of the quality and availability of educational service in the area.
2- There is a strong correlation between the presence of CSOs and the quality of education in areas like Dara'a, Hama, rural Damascus, some parts of the North and Northeast. But in general, education quality is not directly connected of the work of CSOs in other parts of the county such Damascus city, Sweida, the coastal areas and the Northwest. In many cases, education is strong despite the weakness of CSOs which suggests that other stakeholders are providing better quality. In other cases, the situation is poor despite the presence of CSOs. The general conclusion is that CSOs have little impact on the overall perception of quality of education.
3- The reputation of CSOs working in the education sector is independent of the quality of service they deliver. Factors affecting the reputation of CSOs in general may affect the perception of those working in the education sector. There is a high level of externalities impacting the CSOs in the education because of the overall dynamics of the civic space.
4- In many cases, civic work is not linked to formal CSOs. Some areas with informal civic initiatives like Sweida have a weak footprint of CSOs, but the involvement of communities and parents is strong enough to demonstrate a qualitative difference in the access of children to regular schools.

[2] The CSOs were included in the mapping exercise conducted by IMPACT and the data was shared with the team through their generous support to putting Syrian civil society organizations' work in evidence.



The quality of educational services in the different parts of Syria. Data is based on perceptions of communities regarding the quality of services in their areas.

Data provided courtesy of Omran and Lugarit.



The overall presence of CSOs in the different parts of Syria. The overall presence was constructed by a complex indicator comprised of the visibility, reputation, and density of networks.

Data was collected by Lugarit from published sources online.

Figure 1: The perception of quality in the education sector compared to the presence of CSOs in the education sector across most populated areas of Syria. Quality of education and a strong role for CSOs have limited correlation.

4.2 Main stakeholders:

CSOs operate in a complex eco-system where other stakeholders interfere directly or indirectly in the sector. The education sector is not simply shaped by pedagogic institutions. Indeed, the education process involves heavy intersectionality with other sectors. A myriad of different actors working in other sectors shape up the eco-system through their governance models, licensing, logistical support, provision of resources and even competition over resources. In the immediate delivery of educational services, three categories of actors are often present to different degrees:

1. Public and quasi-public institutions
2. Private sector service providers
3. Civil society groups

Each one of these types of actors has its advantages and shortfalls. They may collaborate and / or compete, but for the most part collaboration was restricted to very specific fields. Networking among the three types of actors is very transactional and does not involve strategic visions of complementarity and synergy to provide a sustainable model of service provision.

<u>Public or quasi-public institutions:</u>

Different public and quasi-public institutions compete to assert their oversight over the sector. Some are relatively well equipped to deliver services, while for the most part, all of them have limited resources to provide quality education on their own. These institutions, for the most part, are interested to control the curricula and the value systems being promoted in the schools. Their ability to assure quality is not consistent even in the same area of control. While only the Syrian Ministry of

Education in Damascus can provide accredited certificates of education, the education level in GoS schools is not consistent and in many parts of the country it is among the weakest.

The following are the main public and quasi-public institutions identified by the participants, and their perceptions regarding their role and performance:

- Syrian Ministry of Education: is highly visible in areas controlled by the GoS, or in areas where the central government shares control with the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES). The Syrian Ministry of Education is the only authority that is recognized internationally for issuing accredited educational certificates. It operates in the different parts of the country through the agency of its local Directorates of Education in the governorates. The capacity of these directorates is very different from one area to the next. The Ministry mandates that all CSOs working in the sector obtain an additional license from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. Those receiving funds from international donors often need to obtain an additional permit from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, a great number of informal civic initiatives are carried out without such licenses but under the supervision of the local governors or through informal arrangements tacitly tolerated by local authorities.
- Ministry of Education of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG): oversees the schools in most of the Idlib region and a small part of the Aleppo Governorate. The delivery of services is provided by the Directorate of Education in Idlib, which has a very precarious status as it is recognized both by the SSG in Idlib and the Syrian Interim Government operating in the Turkish controlled parts of the Aleppo province. CSOs operating in the education sector in Idlib must obtain permits from the Office of Organizations in the Ministry that belongs to the SSG. As CSOs in this region are a main service delivery channel, the SSG exercises a high level of control even if it is not heavily involved in service delivery. Additionally, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (the main de facto power in control of the SSG) supervises religious schools directly.
- Ministry of Education in the Syrian Interim Government (SIG): through the Directorates of Education in Northern Aleppo, Ras al-Ayn, and Tal Abyad, exercises nominal oversight over the sector. But the main service delivery is conducted by CSOs and in schools supported by the Turkish government directly. In those areas, local councils also exercise oversight and control over CSOs and offer their own certification of education degrees, recognized in Türkiye only after taking equivalency tests.
- Turkish Ministry of Education: controls the directorates of education on the ground in Northern and Western Aleppo and Northern Raqqa regions. These directorates may be nominally affiliated with the SIG but the Turkish Ministry of Education exercises broad oversight and covers a major part of the education services provided by these directorates. Different parts of the North report to the different directorates of education in the Southern Turkish vilayets.
- Educational Institutions in the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (AANES): play a central role in cities and villages under their control. However, AANES authorities apply different standards in areas with a large Kurdish (and other minorities) population than in areas with majority Arab populations.

Participants in the research highlighted various challenges related to the role of public and quasi-public actors in education. These challenges include a decline in education quality due to textbook unavailability, shortages of qualified personnel in certain regions and rural areas, as well as limited resources for logistics in most schools. During the course of the conflict, some areas witnessed

difficulties in transitioning between different governance systems and de facto control, leading to teacher dismissals and loss of records.

In most areas, teachers are leaving the education sector due to poor salaries and difficult working conditions, despite efforts by local authorities to force them to stay. Damaged and poorly maintained schools lacking basic infrastructure provide inadequate environments in most public schools. Refugee camps and rural areas are receiving less attention from public authorities, leaving the burden on CSOs to cover those areas.

However, some advantages of the public and quasi-public education systems are still noted. These include perceived stability, consistency, and inclusivity. Public and quasi-public institutions have some leverage in terms of minimum oversight over the qualification of teachers. The formal institutions of the GoS in Damascus are still providing accredited degrees and these degrees are preferred by many parents in the absence of such accreditation in other areas. Formal and quasi-formal educational facilities provide the only scalable model of schools, they accommodate the bulk of the service provision in all regions.

Private sector service providers

Respondents indicated a strong role for private sector education providers in the different parts of the country. But their role was not consistent as demand for their services was motivated by different factors:

- Private schools are widespread in Damascus, Idlib, Afrin, Al-Bab, Daraa, and Sweida, but less so in Deir Zorr, Hasakah, and Qamishli. The tuition ranges from $400 to $800 annually, with some schools charging considerably more than the average, depending on the city. They are prevalent in cities, while most rural areas lack such private schools.
- In many parts of the county the private sector is preferred by parents to support their children to pass the 9th and 12th grade exams. In places such as Hasakah, Raqqa and Deir Zorr, parents are keen on having their children pass the accredited exams of the GoS and they will invest in private tutoring to help their children catch up, however, AANES authorities are not keen on such activities.
- Private tutoring is widespread in Idlib, Northern Aleppo, Daraa, Sweida, and the Eastern areas outside central government control, particularly during the final exam month.
- Some paid educational platforms offer tutoring for independent study using accredited foreign curricula, but their presence is limited due to internet and electricity outages throughout the country.

The private sector's involvement in the education sphere faces several challenges according to participants, such as rare availability of private institutions in remote rural areas leading to lack of tutoring options for students, financial constraints for families due to declining household income making private education unaffordable for many, restrictions on teaching accredited curricula in certain areas leading to security risks for private schools, widening wealth disparities due to affordability issues, potentially impacting future class dynamics. While this phenomenon is not new to Syria, the deterioration of the public sector schools has widened the gap between public and private schools to levels never experienced before.

Advantages of private sector providers, as noted by respondents, include consistent functioning, regular attendance, and relatively improved quality of services. They also include availability of

educational materials, quality staff and educational resources, flexibility in private tutoring, smaller class sizes compared to public schools, and parents' ability to communicate and set their preferences with school administrators.

Civil Society

Civil society involvement in all walks of life expanded after 2011, following the increase in displacement movements and the start of militarization of the conflict. Its role is manifest in three forms: organizations, unions, and community-based groups. In the education sector, it plays the following roles:

- There is a diversity of actors involved including international organizations operating indirectly from outside the country or directly with offices on the ground. There are also, local organizations receiving funds from international organizations and larger CSOs. Also, there are many smaller initiatives and CBOs with limited access to external funding, who are being supported by remittances of Syrian expatriates and local charities.
- Local initiatives and CBOs are particularly prevalent in Dara'a and Sweida and to a lesser extent in Qamishli, while larger internationally funded organizations are present in Idlib, Northern Aleppo, Qamishli, Raqqa, and Hasakah.
- In terms of programs, CSOs share similar traits in terms of service provision:
    - Remedial education programs: These are programs developed and supported by UNICEF and are often adopted by other organizations. They are sometimes known as the "B Curriculum," aimed at reintegrating dropouts with their peers in regular schools. Organizations used this curriculum more extensively before 2018, when students in some areas, such as Dara'a, the Eastern region, Idlib, and Northern Aleppo, had lost more than six years of education and wanted to resume their education. This approach was less needed in Damascus, Sweida, and other areas that did not experience long interruptions due to violence and displacement.
    - Supplementary courses in official curricula: (English, Arabic, mathematics, physics). However, some de facto authorities opposed these programs, such as AANES, which sought to control education by imposing its own curricula. In areas where the GoS curriculum was adopted after some modification, like in the SIG and SSG areas, organizations were allowed to provide supplementary courses based on the modified curricula.
    - Vocational courses: such as first aid, sewing, hairdressing, alternative energy, programming, languages, and nursing.
    - Psychosocial support programs: social support activities, non-violent communication, and peacebuilding workshops were mostly integrated into child protection programs. Notably, there were specialized programs aimed at countering extremism, particularly in areas previously controlled by ISIS. These programs were scarce in the SSG areas but more prevalent in Northern Aleppo, especially in cities with ethnic tensions like Afrin.
    - Health awareness programs: targeting families, with a focus on reproductive health programs in Dara'a, Sweida, and Damascus, but less so in other areas.
    - Distribution of stationery and logistics and the full or partial renovation of schools.

The challenges faced by the civil sector, as perceived by participants, include difficulties in obtaining approvals from authorities and the resort to indirect methods involving special favors and corruption. The lack of centralized governance oversight on quality has affected community trust in programs offered by CSOs in some cases. Teachers are poorly protected, and unions are often not able to

protect them in different parts of the country if they are not organized. Legacies of prior control especially by ISIS has limited CSOs' access in some areas, as donors prefer to de-risk their programs and avoid reputational risks of being seen as supporting radical actors or war criminal. CSOs are also seen as focusing too much on primary education and not so much on secondary education or university level programs; their services are often perceived as selective to some aspects of the education process and not to the full spectrum of services needed. In many remote areas and tribal regions, CSOs suffer from nepotism in hiring staff; the criteria for hiring are not transparent in many cases.

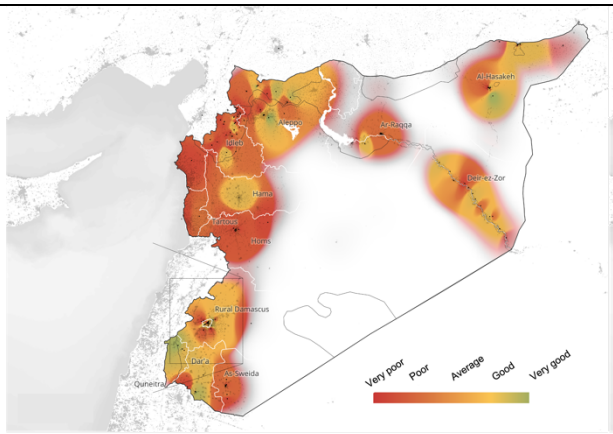
On the other hand, CSOs still provide some advantages according to the interviews. They provide safer environments for children as direct supervision is more readily available, and the staff is better qualified. In some remote areas and in refugee camps they are often the only party present to provide basic educational services. CSOs also provide better interaction with parents and incentives for children to join schools after they had dropped out. In some parts of the country CSOs developed innovative partnerships with local authorities to support the formal education process as opposed to replacing or competing with it. They provide logistical support to schools and teachers' training in other cases. Their psychosocial programs and non-formal education approaches to learning are also promoting new pedagogical methods, albeit this is not always the case everywhere.

Networking and cooperation between CSOs and other stakeholders

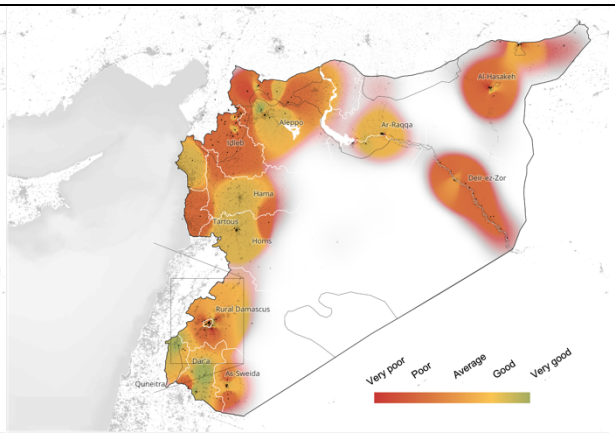
CSOs need to collaborate and interact with other stakeholders to implement their projects. However, in most cases, collaboration and networking was necessitated by transactional considerations and was not based on sustainable strategies to create synergies, leveraging resources, and creating complementarities. CSOs often interact with other actors out of necessity rather than trying to expand their opportunities and maximize their resources. The supply side modality of most donor grants necessitates monitoring, evaluations and due diligence processes that do not favor partnerships. Indeed, most aid modalities encourage negative competition among CSOs. In the assessment of the performance of the 293 CSOs, it was found that networking correlated negatively in most cases with the reputation of CSOs.

There is no direct explanation of this phenomenon. However, one possible explanation may involve the type of partners available to work with the CSOs. CSOs seem to have cultivated the most positive partnerships when they worked on a small scale with local authorities, such as in Dara'a, rural Damascus and Hama. When CSOs were delivering a substantive part of the educational services as in the Northwest, Deir Zorr and Raqqa, they often competed rather than complimented the public schools and each other. In some cases, CSOs were seen as delivering unique services and were appreciated for them as in Lattakia and Homs. They were perhaps perceived well because they provided alternatives to the rigid formal educational system. In general, one cannot readily talk about the positive impacts of networking as a rule of thumb. Conditions vary from place to place and from one set of partners to another.

In all regions, CSOs find it necessary to cooperate with local and de facto authorities to obtain licenses and approvals, but the ease of obtaining these approvals varies. It is easier in the AANES areas, followed by Idlib, then Turkish-controlled areas, and are most difficult in GoS areas, albeit the entry of CSOs into the education sector has become slightly easier in recent years due to the public and quasi-public institutions' inability to cover the full gamut of services needed in the sector.



Degree of networking of CSOs, as documented in online sources.



The reputation of CSOs, as documented from online sources.

Data was collected by Lugarit from published sources online.

Figure 2: Comparison between the level of networking of CSOs and the returns of that networking in terms of reputation. While CSOs in some areas clearly benefit from networking to maximize their reputation and improve their funding prospect, in many other areas there is a negative correlation.

In central-government controlled areas, most of the CSO space was initially monopolized by large organizations operating close to the government, but in the last year or two, due to the deterioration of educational infrastructure, the space has widened slightly, allowing CSOs to provide logistics and books, but not to intervene directly in the pedagogic process per se. Nonetheless, in many areas where the central government's control is weak, such as in Dara'a, CSOs provide more than logistical support and funding to schools. A favored entry point for CSOs is to provide reinforcement classes and non-formal educational activities, such as psychosocial support and tutoring classes. Nonetheless, GoS institutions continue to approach organizations working in education with caution, more so than with those working on health and / or other service-related projects.

CSOs' cooperation with de facto authorities in areas outside GoS control was stronger before 2018, when bodies composed of official, military, and security personnel were created to impromptu governance models to sustain education with the participation of the local community. In Turkish controlled areas CSOs have a more difficult access to the pedagogic process. A memorandum of understanding signed with local councils is offered on a selective basis. Similar memoranda are required with the Directorate of Education in Idlib.

CSOs were also involved indirectly in brokering deals to facilitate the passage of students from the non-government-controlled areas to central-government-controlled areas to take accredited exams for the 9th and 12th grades. These arrangements are seen positively in some circles, but in many other opposition-circles they are perceived as legitimizing GoS institutions. In some cases, it was documented that local de facto powers charged fees for such passage from one area of control to another. CSOs were caught in the middle. Formal fees and bribes are not uncommon, complicating the work of CSOs and their interaction with de facto powers.

Most CSOs loath the interaction with local and de facto authorities. To reduce pressure and limit the direct interference in their operations by local authorities, many CSOs resort to technics of over-

compliance with the policies and constraints imposed by the de facto powers. This was observed to varying degrees in all areas of the country. It manifests itself by overt adherence to the ideological and political stances of the de facto powers, and acquiescing to forced partnerships with public, quasi-public and CSO partners favored by the de facto powers. CSOs go out of their way at times to demonstrate that the services they are delivering are being provided under the auspices and patronage of the de facto powers.

This phenomenon has resulted directly and indirectly in a general perception among local communities that the quality and availability of service is made possible in large part thanks to the benevolence and patronage of de facto powers. There is no escaping this general perception. Donors who prefer to give their funds to CSOs to reduce reputational risks of supporting de facto powers are willingly or unwillingly contributing to this perception. A great deal of resources would have been better leveraged if provided directly to the regular schools. Passing the funds through CSOs to avoid such reputational risks is not effective. CSOs do exceptional work and there are many reasons why they deserve to be supported for the work they do, but avoiding reputational risks for donors should not be one of them.

4.3 Resources:

CSOs can tap on a diversity of funds ranging from donor grants to expatriate remittances to local community support. Each of these sourcing modalities have advantages and disadvantages.

Donor funds:

CSOs are often funded directly or indirectly by international donors. The larger CSOs often receive their funds directly from donors and they provide management and due diligence procedures. Smaller CSOs receive their funding mainly from the larger CSOs or from the United Nations' and other international organizations. Most donor funds are planned and implemented over short project-cycles rarely long enough to complete one school year; project cycles of psychosocial support and non-formal education can be even shorter. For the most part, CSOs do not have the luxury of thinking long term or in strategic manner.

Some CSOs, especially the larger ones, have developed coping strategies by diversifying their donors and focusing on projects in different sectors to aggregate the necessary resources to cover their running cost. Other CSOs have been able to draw on expatriate funds and local philanthropic sources, and in recent years, some of the larger CSOs have even started developing sustainable streams of funding by developing income generating projects to support their humanitarian missions. These CSOs are more resilient than the smaller ones almost entirely dependent on donor funds. As donors are directing their funds to other countries in crisis, funds for Syria are dwindling; the research team observed that many CSOs started to close programs or even close their operations entirely.

Participants often complained that donor funds come with strings attached. Narrowly defined project objectives restrict the CSOs' options to steer funds into areas they feel are more of a priority to their communities. Donor-driven programming and dependency on donor funds are common features of most formal CSOs operations. In some cases, CSOs' managers felt that they have been reduced to the status of contractors for the delivery of aid rather than being free agents operating out of concern for their communities' welfare.

For the most part, those conditions are driven by the fact that the bulk of aid money is provided under the rubric of emergency education and humanitarian protection. CSOs adapt aid aimed for protection or to support psycho-social programs in schools. They focus on remedial education because they cannot take the risk of investing in longer term programs. They cannot think of long-term result-chains and logical frameworks because they must divert their resources to managing short-term funding cycles based on standard proposals and input-oriented monitoring and evaluation procedures.

CSOs also lack the necessary funding for innovation and for networking properly with parents and local communities. Needs' assessments follow formulaic procedures; consultations with communities are often not part of the funding package beyond the initial needs' assessment phase. So long as the donor funds are focused on delivering projects and not on achieving impacts, the CSOs will remain in the emergency education mode. This is greatly reducing their abilities to assess opportunity costs and to find better alternatives to provide education in a systemic and sustainable manner.

Nonetheless, donor aid has enabled CSOs a few advantages that are not available to other stakeholders in the education sector. Through successive project iterations many CSOs have been able to accumulate better equipment and educational programs and materials. They have been able to provide better salaries for their staff and in some cases, they were able to also negotiate some training to the teachers. CSOs have also been able to provide better logistical support to their schools or to the schools they sponsor. And while most donors have very strict due diligence process prohibiting the use of their funds in support of de facto institutions, some CSOs have negotiated carefully to subsidize the education process by providing in kind support and / or indirectly by hiring some teachers who work in public schools on a part time basis as consultants or independent evaluators to subsidize their income.

However, these advantages are often constrained by limited elasticity to manage risks. The failure of CSOs to anticipate changing donor priorities or funding patterns can result in major layoffs. Staff that leave the CSOs often end up leaving to other sectors, regions or leave the country and seek refuge somewhere else. When CSOs manage to secure additional funds, they must train new staff, and in most cases, they struggle to find qualified or even semi qualified staff. In some limited cases, it was found that CSOs hired people without proper qualifications with the hope to provide them with training and try to mitigate the gap. In that regard, the public and quasi-public education institutions have a better record of maintaining minimum criteria for hiring teachers. Even though their salary scales are considerably less than those of the CSOs, formal and quasi-formal education schools offer consistency and better job security, with some fringe benefits to compensate for the lower salaries.

Expatriates' remittances and community support:

The local communities' views on the relevance and value of education varies by region, influencing their willingness to support the educational process for their children. For example, education seems to have been greatly appreciated by parents in Dara'a and Sweida before 2011. In such places, we see greater financial support and contributions from the community. In Dara'a communities conducts periodic fundraisers to restore schools or improve logistical support to schools. They do this under a model called "Faza'a" or urgent mobilization for help. Funds are often managed by trusted local committees and small projects are implemented quickly and handed over to the local school administrations to make use of them and integrate them into the regular education process.

In Sweida, the bulk of support to schools comes from informal civic initiatives; communities supported free tutoring lessons for students who needed extra support to catch up with materials

that are not being properly taught in schools; they provided books, notebooks, and fuel to the schools. Sometimes they helped to cover the transportation costs for teachers to reach schools in rural areas. Unique initiatives included providing food for students, such as in "Luqmat Ahl" initiative, which ensured that students who couldn't afford a meal at least had a small sandwich each day, due to widespread poverty in the area. These initiatives were not limited to the education sector, similar initiatives were also observed in the health sector, where services were provided through collaboration between local civic initiatives and expatriates sending remittances in an organized manner to their hometowns.

In Northern Aleppo and Idlib, interviewees felt that education is not perceived by parents as economically relevant for the wellbeing of the children. Support from the parents and communities is limited. The increased number of displaced persons and the dire conditions in the refugee camps make food, medicine, and basic job creation more urgent than education. Still, there are various local initiatives bringing volunteers to deliver basic literacy programs to children in the direst of conditions.

In some Eastern regions, communities showed little interest in education even before 2011. Families involved in agriculture and livestock-rearing directed their children to field work from early age. Collective efforts to support education are hardly seen outside the main cities. For instance, in Raqqa there was a noticeable effort by communities to provide land or buildings to open new schools. In other places teachers organized teaching sessions on a volunteering basis, and in some parts of the Hasakah region students organized co-learning and mentoring sessions for university levels courses.

Increasingly, community-based volunteering initiatives are bringing parents and teachers to support the education of children with minimal or no external funding at all. These initiatives are often conducted as part of larger community efforts of using social capital to enhance the survival and wellbeing of communities. They are not sector specific. But in the education sector they remain sporadic, focusing on literacy programs or basic education. They lack long term visions and strategic approaches to solving structural problems in the sector. These are not CSOs in the formal sense of the word. But they are important civic trends that need to be encouraged and leveraged as donor funds are being cut across the board.

Finally, due to interruptions in UNICEF funding, associations have resorted to self-funding mechanisms, such as charging symbolic fees from beneficiaries. These fees are still considerably less than private sector fees. But this trend is shifting CSOs gradually towards privatization. This will reduce equity in education in the absence of free of functioning universal public education systems.

4.4 Financial burden on CSOs:

CSOs face major financial burdens. They are often perceived by local authorities and communities to be well funded, therefore, they are often subjected to direct or indirect pressures to extract resources from them. Donors have allowed for a reasonable level of salary scales. Although in many instances CSOs pay lower scales for teachers than administrative functions in the organization. In general, CSOs learned to negotiate their funding proposals to include reasonable rates for their salaries and auxiliary costs. But this has also raised expectations and indirectly transformed local market conditions regarding salary scales, rents, and procurement of materials and services. The attempts by de facto powers to regulate the market and control the externalities created by donor funds on local salaries and prices have often backfired and created channels for corruption.

Salaries:

While CSOs do not pay as generously as the private sector for their staff, they still pay considerably above average salaries, especially when compared to the salaries of teachers and administrators in regular schools who, on average, earn less than a tenth of the salaries of CSOs' staff. Though this is by no means a universal observation. In some places CSOs pay the same or more than the private sector, as is the case in Dara'a and Lattakia. And in some cases, as is the case in the Northeast, the gap between public sector employees and CSOs is not as big but still substantive. Generally speaking, CSOs working in education pay lower salaries than CSOs working in other sectors. But teachers are perceived to work fewer hours and have less stressful jobs. This is disadvantageous for women who are increasingly becoming the main human resources in the classrooms in many parts of the country as male teachers are leaving to find better employment.

Different public and quasi-public insinuations have ventured to regulate the salary scales and to try to equalize the market. This has often backfired or caused indirect additional transactional costs that CSOs have to pay to go through the red tape. Many de facto authorities attempted to regulate the support provided by organizations for salaries to equalize pay scales and reduce tension between teachers supported by CSOs and those who were not. Additionally, some schools received concentrated support while others received none. For example, in Afrin, a local council tried to resolve this issue. In one area in Afrin, the local authority forced the CSOs to distribute salaries to all teachers in the schools and not just to the teachers covered by the donor's grant. The Directorate of Education in Lattakia set a cap on salary scales. In some cases, the attempt to regulate salaries were done without consideration to teachers' experiences and level of education creating a reverse disgruntlement among the more qualified teachers.

Bypassing the regulatory directives on the salary scales created back door channels for corruption. In some cases, CSOs were caught in between rigid donor-approved budgets and the need to equalize the salaries with other teachers as mandated by local authorities. In other cases, CSOs had to pay direct and indirect taxes on their employee salaries as shall be seen next.

Fees and taxes:

CSOs do not pay for licensing their activates in GoS areas but often they must pay bribes to staff in the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Social Affairs to avoid licensing obstacles. Recently, the central government initiated many tax reforms and CSOs are being targeted more strictly to pay taxes on behalf of their staff. The AANES imposes a salary tax on employees. And in the Northwest, this is increasingly the trend as the SSG is imposing direct taxes, while in the North, Turkish authorities regulate salaries, but the armed groups often interfere to extract resources from CSOs.

In some areas, there are unofficial deductions, such as through salary transfers, where a portion is taken from the fees for transferring money. In other areas, CSOs must meet some of the local councils' requests to supply the local education offices such as in the case of Northern Aleppo. But in some case, respondents indicated that bribes were extracted to facilitate licensing and approval of CSO activities. Thus, directly through overt taxation, or indirectly, authorities extract a substantive part of the CSOs funding in all parts of Syria.

4.5 The eco-system in CSO-run facilities and services

CSOs have contributed to an improved eco-system of education in facilities they run or support. However, this has not been a consistent trend. Furthermore, CSOs have not been able to scale up the above average conditions they provide to cover substantive parts of the educational needs in the country. Despite increasing attempts at regulating the work of CSOs by de facto powers, the performance of CSOs remains very heterogenous and lacking strategic guidance. Variations in performance and coverage are staggering.

The performance of CSOs:

The performance of CSOs varies depending on the funding provided by their donors and their ability to sustain and build an integrated support plan over several years to achieve social impact. The type of educational programs also varies. Some programs have direct educational outcomes, while others showed their impacts indirectly in the protection field. For instance, the impact of literacy programs in Dara'a was felt more importantly in protecting children from drugs. In some of the refugee camps in the North results were seen in psychosocial support of youth at risk whereas basic education was lagging.

CSOs do not adopt consistent indicators to measure their performance. The evaluation of their work is mandated by donors on a project-by-project basis rather than measuring the cumulative impact of their work over the long run. Some of the larger CSOs were able to devise longer term plans and monitored them accordingly. But smaller CSOs had diverse short term projects; they often shifted focus based on the availability of donor funds according to donors' latest priorities. They cannot provide an accurate benchmarking for their work and often focus on delivering supplies and inputs rather than meeting demand and achieving impact.

Tracking the satisfaction of communities with CSOs is hard. Many families appreciate that CSOs reduce financial burdens related to sending their children to school, and some CSOs are better at communicating with parents to assess their needs, but for the most part, assessing the performance of CSOs from the demand side is absent and is relegated to anecdotal evidence. CSOs generally offer better quality education than the public and private sectors in terms of diversity of activities and staff training. However, in terms of control, monitoring, and evaluation; they lack the necessary tools to prove their value-for-money using evidence-based data and monitoring instruments that extend beyond single project cycles.

Logistics:

CSOs provide a myriad of logistical support to the educational process. They regularly provide books and teaching materials to support teachers in the classrooms. They support schools with fuel in winter and access to the internet in some part of the country. In some cases, they devised innovative alternative energy solutions to shortages of energy. In some cases, like in Sweida they provided transportation to rural areas for teachers, indirectly subsidizing teachers' salaries. These logistics are scarce or even non-existent in public schools, where teachers' desks and chairs are often paid for by students in the name of cooperative contributions. In some parts of the country, the de facto powers prohibit CSOs from engaging in the pedagogical process and restrict their work to providing school supplies and logistics. They may even direct them to support specific schools. Smaller CSOs may even divide the responsibility of supporting individual schools with one CSOs supporting some classrooms while another one supports other classrooms. This approach lacks strategic vision and impact, it

creates redundancies and high transactional cost. By fragmenting logistical support, opportunities of savings related to economies-of-scale are missed.

Quality of educational staff:

CSOs in all areas of control rely on local staff, often those already working in the regular schools. However, they may also recruit staff from nearby areas due to the scarcity of qualified and specialized staff. CSOs generally prefer available local staff, regardless of their capabilities; they work on training and developing their skills to fit the job requirements. This reduces costs and is relevant to facilitate the CSOs' access to local communities. In principle, the teachers' knowledge of the local customs and traditions, can help align projects with the community's social norms to avoid cultural resistance. However, on the reverse side, this has put the CSOs at the mercy of local pressures to hire unqualified staff. Local powerbrokers can pressure CSOs to hire clients of theirs. They may even share a percentage of their salaries at times; they may also lock them into their clientelism networks.

As a result of short project cycles, there is no stability for staff in CSOs, as had been observed above; the teacher's job ends when the project's funding ends. If the same school does not receive continued salary support, the staff will not be rehired. Stability is more likely in centers directly managed by lager organizations. The diversity of services offered by the larger CSOs ensures that their staff will retain their jobs in other programs or schools even when specific projects are terminated. When teachers leave the project, it is often hard to replace them, and CSOs may lose standing with the community for having failed to continuously employ local staff. Managing the role of the local teachers is even more problematic when it comes to the management of curricula and educational values as shall be discussed below.

Dropout rate:

Dropout rates have decreased compared to the initial phases of the conflict, but they have not stabilized, and are currently rising again across all areas of Syria due to poverty and reduced funding levels to schools. There are differences between dropout rates for males and females, with females starting to drop out after the age of 14, while males drop out as early as 9 years old to work. The longer children are out of school, the less likely they are to return to their studies. Remedial programs are only covering a small portion of this gap.

School location plays a significant role in influencing dropout rates, with higher rates evident in agricultural and rural areas more than in cities; they are also happening at alarming rates in IDP camps far from schools and lacking secondary education opportunities. Dropout rates are higher among females in remote areas and areas with security problems due to transportation difficulties and lack of safety in the vicinity of schools. This is especially acute for secondary schools. Their availability is limited in rural areas and parents are often reluctant to let their girls travel alone to nearby villages to continue their education. Male students face other challenges related to security check points and fear of being wanted by security forces or being forcibly recruited to join local militias.

Other factors also affect dropout rates, like the need for children to work in the fields during different agricultural seasons; this may force them to miss school. Gradually they lag in their education and drop out. Early marriage for girls has resurfaced in many areas, such as Dara'a and Sweida, Deir Zorr, Qamishli, and Hasakah. Contrary to common belief, more advanced formal rights for women and girls in the laws of the AANES did not translate to direct betterment of women's access to education. The

Eastern rural areas have the worst dropout rates, followed by Northern Aleppo (the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch areas), then Dara'a, and Sweida. Dropout rates are lower in Damascus and Latakia.

Dropout rates, especially those of female students, are lower in CSOs programs than regular schools for several reasons: CSOs generally provide a safer environment for girls due to more secure transportation arrangements, attendance monitoring, and a focus on protection issues, in addition to communication with parents in some areas. CSOs have also increased the chances for girls to return to school after marriage. Formal schools in GoS, SIG, and SSG areas forbid their return to school, the situation is more flexible in AANES areas. CSOs provide the only way for girls to re-join school once they have been married. In general, local communities view CSOs as safer for girls than public ones because they often rely on local staff from the community, who are culturally close to the conservative communities. Communities trust that local teachers will not bring values and curricula in contradiction with community norms.

Equity of service provision:

CSOs and the schools they support generally offer the same teaching opportunities to both male and female students, but societal views on gender roles influence the fields of study and the types of vocational training and university specialization students may choose to undertake. Most CSOs attempt to include both genders in their programs, but they cannot impose this on the local community, especially since vocational courses are not part of the school curriculum. This often leads to unequal number of students in gender segregated classrooms, with female classes more likely to close down if there is not enough demand. Maintaining equal but sperate classes as required by many of Syria's conservative communities and de facto powers is not yielding equal results on the ground. This was mostly the case for instance in Idlib when the SSG started enforcing the segregation of schools by gender.

Inequality in some areas stems from prevailing social norms. For example, in Western rural Deir Zorr, unlike in the city, families do not send girls to nearby institutes for exam preparation, nor do they send them to distant universities. Similarly, there is a difference between socially conservative Eastern rural Dara'a and more socially open Western rural Dara'a communities. But this is not a universal condition among conservative communities. Access to education for girls is also affected by other considerations like class, educational levels of the parents and the attitudes of the de facto powers in control of the area.

Violence:

While military hostilities have subsided in many parts of the country, they are still frequent occurrences in places like Deir Zorr and the front-line areas between Idlib and the Ghab region. But in addition to military hostilities across the dividing lines of the conflict, there are new forms of violence such as tribal conflicts and skirmishes between different militias for control of trade routes and illicit trade. Vulnerable groups, small minorities and people in poorer communities are likely to witness more violence than others. Moreover, intervention by security forces and criminal activities add to the difficulties faced by CSOs.

Sometimes local stakeholders like local elders, local councils and de facto powers prove capable of mitigating and controlling violence. There were many incidences reported where such actors specifically intervened to stop violence around schools. But in other cases, competition among these actors have increased tensions.

Girls are especially endangered when hostilities and tensions increase in their areas. There are many incidences of harassment by military personnel against girls in many parts of Syria; it was especially highly noted in high schools in Afrin and Eastern Syria. Education committees do not recognize the principle of protection, even for women, and harassment cases are often covered up.

Violence is often witnessed in the school itself, with students exhibiting aggressive behaviors due to the normalization of violence during the war. This is often accompanied by the spread of drugs, and the carrying of arms. Schools have become direct targets for dealers to promote and sell drugs to students. De facto powers are rarely intervening to stop the dealers. And the CSOs must fend for themselves. Another source of violence is related to arguments between parents and teachers; these can grow quickly into violent situations. Furthermore, for girls, going to bathrooms in schools can prove dangerous. Many schools lack proper facilities and using toiles in facilities in the vicinity of the school leaves them exposed.

4.6 The curricula used by CSOs

CSOs are applying a myriad of curricula depending on the areas of control in which they are operating. However, for the most part CSOs are focusing on remedial education and refrain from engaging heavily in social and political topics, focusing instead on language skills and the basic sciences. In that regard most CSOs provide relatively similar curricula. However, there are great exceptions, where CSOs can be funded to present specific types of religious and or social views. In other limited cases, donors may also encourage the dissemination of values related to social peace and equal citizenship.

However, CSOs often relegate the interpretation of the curricula to their local staff. Internal monitoring of CSOs is focused on providing quantitative inputs rather than assessing the impact of the education system. Teachers often translate curricula according to their personal interpretations. CSOs cannot hold them to account as replacing them can be difficult and as local teachers often have the support of their communities (see above). It is therefore imperative to distinguish two types of curricula in schools: the normative one proscribed in the textbooks and the “real curriculum” taught by teachers. While most recent research was focused on mapping the normative texts, little attention was conducted regarding how the teachers interpreted the curricula in their classrooms.

The different typologies of curricula:

In every area of control, there are different curricula, but most major curricula today are derived from the main one established by the Syrian Ministry of Education before 2011. The central government’s Ministry of Education made subsequent modifications to its curriculum. But its core pre-2011 textbooks are still the reference in classrooms in all regions, as most teachers were not trained to use the new curricula and new textbooks are not readily available.

In the SIG controlled areas, the pre 2011 curriculum remains the basis for guiding education, after removal of subjects considered controversial, such national education and all references to the Syrian president. This is referred to by respondents as the "Interim Curriculum;" it is also recognized for Syrians wanting to continue studying in Türkiye after taking an additional qualifying exam known as the Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrenci Sınavı (YÖS). The Interim Curriculum is applied in Idlib and in all areas where Turkish authorities exercise control in the North. Students that pass the exam receive the “Interim Certificate”. In these same areas, there is another curriculum used by the local education offices in some local councils; it was developed by the Turkish Ministry of Education, incorporating

more religious subjects than the "Interim Curriculum" and altering key concepts of history, geography, and Arabic language while simplifying scientific subjects. Students in Turkish-controlled areas can study in either one of the two curricula, and take its corresponding exams. The modified curriculum adopted by Turkish funded schools applies automated exams and is easier (with greater possibilities for cheating given the decentralized exam processes). While the Interim Curriculum's exam resembles the examination formats used in GoS schools.

In the Northeast, there are two curricula in place: the one mandated by the GoS's Ministry of Education is still applied in the security enclaves controlled by the central government, while the one adopted by the AANES applies in the rest of the region. Despite the ease of the latter, most students prefer to learn using the GoS's official curriculum as it leads to accredited degrees. Students have relatively easy access to the testing centers in zones still controlled by the central government in the Northeast. This preference has enticed the AANES authorities to take steps to prevent the teaching of the official GoS curriculum in its areas of control. The AANES authorities regularly crack down on schools and facilities teaching the official curriculum of the central government. But people still seek private tutoring lessons for their children to enable them to take accredited exams.

Quality control over the GoS curricula is relatively stronger than in other areas. The curriculum is updated regularly under the supervision of specialist pedagogic teams. The official mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of the curriculum in schools are generally consistent, albeit in recent years they have lacked resources to implement them regularly. Nonetheless, there are still great variations in how the curriculum is implemented on the ground in the different regions. Respondents from the different cities under the control of the central government pointed to strong variations of local interpretations of the curriculum. In Dara'a which is only nominally under the security control of the GoS, there was a leeway in diverging from the core topics of the official curriculum. Other areas were reported to have similar trends but perhaps not as overtly as in Dara'a.

Other areas of control have weaker normative standards of quality control. Turkish authorities consulted local educators in the North when developing the curriculum applied in Turkish sponsored schools. But upgrading and modification are not systematically done nor scrutinized as the Syrian central government's processes. The monitoring and control mechanisms are sporadic in nature and there are also great variations in quality controls from city to city. The AANES curricula have changed regularly but less for pedagogical reasons than ideological ones. The same poor level of quality control and diversity of local conditions apply. Areas with majority Arab populations have more of a leeway to interpret the curricula as per local norms and traditions despite the best effort of the AANES to enforce its programs.

On the other hand, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are more rigorous in Idlib, which is moving toward strict centralization of control over the education process, consolidating oversight under the Ministry of Education of the SSG. It is gradually dislodging the control of the SIG over the education process in the province and taking charge of the Directorate of Education, allowing the SIG a minimal role to retain the acceptability of degrees in Turkish universities for students who want to continue their education there.

Private curricula follow the same official and quasi-official curricula in each region, but they add what is called "enrichment subjects" related to foreign languages, arithmetic, and basic IT to attract parents wanting better education for their children. However, introducing these subjects often requires approval from the official and quasi-official authorities and must align with the political climate and ideology of the de facto power in control. On the other hand, some private schools teach subjects or curricula banned in the regular schools such as art and music in Idlib, and GoS's curricula

in the Northeast. In doing so they take security risks; but the market rewards are often considerable, so “special arrangements” are tacitly worked out.

CSOs and NGOs do not have their own distinct curricula separate from the official and quasi-official ones. They use accelerated versions of the curricula approved in each area, focusing on the same scientific subjects while excluding national education and some humanities’ topics. Most remedial education programs are limited to teaching scientific subjects and basic language skills. In this regard most CSOs use similar books and apply methods advocated by UNICEF. UNICEF exerts strict control over methods taught by the CSOs it supports, and mandates pre-approval to any changes to the curriculum or teaching methods. This has helped many students return to schools after missing years of education. However, remedial education has also many shortfalls and some respondents were concerned that the continuation of emergency education after all these years may have detrimental repercussions for the future with regards to building a national identity and unifying educational standards.

CSOs may do some minor interpretations of the curricula and may innovate new teaching methods such active learning. But the teachers' individual abilities and competencies are key to how curricula are interpreted and applied in the classrooms. Most CSOs do not offer complete educational processes; students who finish remedial classes generally end up back in the regular schools controlled by the different de facto powers. A whole generation of Syrians is being brought up without a collective understanding of history, geography, and with core national values. Formal curricula prevent CSOs from exerting influence to teach values of social peace and equal citizenship. Students are raised according to different cultural values (see below). They are also being evaluated according to divergent standards in the study of languages and the sciences. The debate over the curricula and their role often misses the whole point. Educational outcomes are not determined by the formal curricula and the textbooks, but by how these curricula trickle down to the classrooms. Teachers interpret the curricula subjectively and the CSOs exert little control over the teachers in the classrooms.

Ironically, some of the most unifying topics are not related to value systems and ideology, they are to be seen in vocational education and psycho-social support programs. While training manuals may be determined by donors, CSOs have quickly adopted methodologies for teaching and providing these services by copycatting each other. Monitoring technics in these areas became normalized through practice and are very similar in all areas of control, though CSOs may still opt to adopt some variations but these variations are being quickly replicated by others. This bottom-up normalization is worth further examination to see how future reforms to the education system could be steered in a more effective way to achieve scalability.

One of the main factors for such bottom-up normalization may be the involvement of parents with the schools. Parents and students are more vocal in expressing their opinions regarding CSO-managed processes and they often provide practical ideas they saw or heard of in other places. Parents can be a factor of dissemination of best practices as well as being a negative force of preserving the status quo. Their role should be considered very carefully to ascertain the best ways to engage them in the future.

Quality assurance and accreditation:

Administratively, most NGOs and CSOs in Syria are monitored internally to ensure procedural and administrative due diligence, often focusing on inputs and outputs, but rarely on impacts. In the education sector internal monitoring procedures are often carried by a teacher or a dedicated

monitoring and evaluation officer, who conducts regular visits, documenting projects with photos and videos. This process lacks transparency on results, so donors have resorted to sending their own representatives or contracting third party independent monitoring and evaluation firms to verify reports issued by CSO staff and to conduct deeper assessments.

In many cases, officials in the formal educational institutions are hired by the third-party monitors to participate in evaluating schools managed by CSOs, this may provide the only form of scrutiny over the quality of education beyond the focus on the number of students and the quality of inputs. But this very individualized quality control measure has no leverage to track outcomes over the long run or to assess the collective impact of donor funded programs supporting CSOs at large; nor does it tackle long term harm, unintended secondary impacts, and externalities. Most respondents agreed that there is opacity in the way funding is managed and how project monitoring is conducted. There are no channels for validating reports and sharing them with the local community. This was also observed by the research team when evaluating the websites and social media coverage of CSOs. Most of the coverage pertains to how CSOs want to present themselves and not to how they actually operate.

Another sticking issue is the question of accreditation of education. CSOs issue attendance certificates but do not grant accredited certificates for completing educational stages. In some areas, vocational training certificates are authenticated by official bodies such as the local council in Afrin and the directorates of the SSG in Idlib, but those bodies are not internationally recognized accreditation bodies, and their certificates serve little more than securing local jobs. Such certificates are being used as the basis for discrimination against graduates from other areas. In GoS-controlled areas the Ministry of Foreign Affairs intervenes occasionally to certify some vocational training programs that have no clear certification procedures in the Ministry of Education. These certificates can be used for freelance work but not for state employment. All these “semi formalized” certificates fall short of providing universal accreditation and will not be able to compete with graduates of accredited programs in Syria or abroad in the future. Local de facto powers may create job monopolies for their graduates, but those are temporary situations that will not serve the students over the long run. Some private sector operators offer international accreditation of their courses for a fee, but those are beyond the means of most regular Syrians.

The central government in Damascus is still the only accredited party that issues universally recognized certificates. Many parents in non-government-controlled areas remain eager to have their children take exams offered by GoS institutions to obtain accredited certificates, for their children. Children often take huge risks to cross over to GoS areas to take the exams, as seen in Raqqa, Deir Zorr and Idlib, where students use smuggling routes to reach exam centers. This demand for accredited certificates has led to overcrowding in central-government schools within the security zones in Qamishli and Hasakah.

In Northern Syrian the SIG arranged with Turkish authorities to recognize its graduates after taking complimentary exams. Some local councils in Northern Aleppo can issue certificates recognized in Türkiye and domestically, and these are easier to obtain than certificates from the SIG, whose exams are difficult and cover broader subjects. In Idlib, 9th grade and baccalaureate certificates are issued by the Directorate of Education and stamped by the SIG, not by the SSG. This is one of the main reasons to retain the Directorate of Education under nominal control of the SIG while the SIG is gradually usurping effective control over the education process in the Idlib province.

4.7 The value systems promoted by CSOs

Donors, de facto authorities, community leader and parents compete to assert control over the values being disseminated in the schools. While a great deal of debate and focus in paid to the textbooks and the formal curricula, the battle ground, over what values are being disseminated in the schools, is happening at the local level in the classrooms and on social media as much as it is happening in policy debates and political circles. CSOs adopt formal sets of values in their statements of ethics and by-laws. They may publish their values on their websites and other media platforms, but the implementation of these values is another story. Effectively, values are negotiated at different levels with different actors within the CSOs and within the eco-system in which the CSOs operate.

The promulgation of values through practice:

In most areas, CSOs adhere to a strict humanitarian code of conduct requiring them to be neutral politically. The humanitarian emergency mode of operation provided CSOs with both constraints in the formulation and dissemination of values, and protection from the interference of de facto powers. In general, CSOs self-censor themselves to avoid cultural and political sensitivities. In doing so, they refrain from elaborating on the abstract values documented in their bylaws and social media platforms. Values remain abstract ideas without clear implementation guidelines and without monitoring and evaluation procedures to ascertain their impact.

In the different parts of the country, CSOs face serious challenges if they were too explicit in articulating clear parameters for the implementation of declared values. In GoS-controlled areas, values of citizenship can be misconstrued by authorities if their articulation included terms not acceptable to the local as well as the national authorities. CSOs monitor sensitive issues in AANES-controlled areas, particularly those that might be misconstrued as inciting tensions between Kurds and Arabs. Similarly, in Idlib and Northern Aleppo, CSOs cannot discuss universal human rights that contradict local customs and value systems.

CSOs still strive to promote values by linking them to traditional cultural norms and practices prevalent in the local community. Topics like gender, equal citizenship, and women's rights, are often expressed as abstract ideas and interpreted by aligning them to traditional sayings and religious texts. Interviewees working with CSOs think that they can strike a balance between the different interpretations of value systems so long as they can remain at the general and abstract level of promoting values. Generic values centered on active learning, non-violent communication, and citizenship, especially in areas with regional conflicts and religious extremism can still pass under the rubric of “life skills”. However, the abstraction of values and the lack of ability to discuss them in the open and assess results, have limited the public debate on the practice and day to day interpretation of these values. Thus, values are not given a chance to mature, develop and gain rootedness in the day-to-day practice of communities. Values and their contrary prejudices can pass along the same education procedures.

Parents are rarely taken into consideration by authorities on curricular issues. Yet, they often exert real influence through campaigning physically and on social media. All education authorities are susceptible to protecting their reputations. This is how they secure their positioning and entice donors to invest in providing aid in their areas. A disgruntled parent community poses serious reputational risks. This is more the case in areas outside the control of Damascus but is somewhat true in GoS-controlled areas as well. But parents’ pressure can be negative as well as positive. Many parents fear the new curricula are not good enough for their children and they complain that the teachers are using modern teaching methods that are not rigorous enough and insist on teaching

their children using the same old pedagogic methods of memorizing received knowledge. In many cases, especially in the Northwest, parents complained that the curricula were not conservative enough. They also intervened to remove some ideas related to citizenship from the curricula.

This in not restricted to Idlib and Northern Aleppo. In the Northeast, parents complained about how textbooks explained gender and sex education, and objected to references to the Yezidi religion. In majority Arab population areas, parent agitated wanting the AANES authorities to bring back religious education to schools. Insisting on religious education is not just an issue of conservative vs. liberal education systems, but communities in Arab majority areas are often using the issue of religion to assert their local identities with respect to the more secular ideology of the AANES. Values are often seen by communities as identity markers rather than ethical or moral norms of practice.

The role of donors in promoting values:

Most donors do not overtly impose their values on CSOs. However, as we have seen earlier, the fact that most aid is channeled in a supply side mode according to donor agendas, mean that certain modalities of projects are prioritized. CSOs regularly assess donor trends and try to adjust their language and values to match what they perceive as donors' preferences and anticipate as donors' trends. This translates into symbolic gestures adopted by CSOs. They manifest themselves in how CSOs present their values in their documents and proposals and how they dress and decorate their offices. This issue is further complicated by the fact that smaller CSOs do not directly communicate with donors. They can only imagine what donors want through the mediation of larger NGOs. Thus, often, it is the ideology and value base of the larger CSOs that is at play and not that of the donors.

Larger CSOs are mostly based outside Syria. They must abide by cultural codes and adopt values relevant to the countries where they are based. In many cases, they are concerned by the values and the perceptions of communities where they reside and their stereotypes regarding Syria. Concerns over perceptions of radicalization, and fears of over-compliance and de-risking dynamics affecting banks and regulatory bodies, make these CSOs try to represent themselves in harmony with the cultural norms of the countries where they operate. The greatest schism regarding values is not between CSOs and donors but between larger CSOs based outside and smaller ones operating inside; each trying to protect itself in its cultural milieu. This is as much true for NGOs receiving aid from Western donors and adopting liberal values, as it for NGOs receiving charities from the Gulf States and other conservative donor circles.

Local CSOs must manage and mitigate complex dynamics and constraints. They use several sets of discursive instruments to promote and describe their values. By keeping the interpretation of complex values to the level of signifiers,[3] they can fill them with referents at will, depending on the context. Thus, researchers trying to map how values are being promoted in the education system are misled by focusing on the verbal enunciations of the values rather than on how CSOs must constantly shift the interpretation of these verbal constructs in practice.

[3] Borrowing from semiotics, the term signifier here refers to the physical form of the sign (its enunciated sound or written form). In contrast, the signified can be explained as the meaning or idea expressed by the sign. This idea may or may not coincide with the physical reality (the referent) of how the idea is manifest in the physical world. Thus, in the context of this report, when one speaks of "equality," its signifier is nothing more than an 8-letter word inscribed on paper. Its signified is an ideal of people being equal. But that ideal is present in our minds only. The referent would be the way we interpret the value in our daily practice, so the referent can involve practices like equal right to speak but not equal rights to inherit or separate but equal rights to access education, which are different ways equality can be practiced or interpreted by institutions and individuals.

Not articulating clear implementation guidelines and not opening transparent debates on values, is not a malignant practice among CSOs nor is it hypocritical. Most people negotiate complex social systems by adopting techniques that allow them to extend and manipulate the referents of signifiers. International donors use similar strategies when they talk to their constituencies. There has been a great debate on universal values in recent years. But these debates miss the mark in terms of understanding the political dynamics affecting the creation and shift in social norms. Traditions are often invented and negotiated as historical facts, man-made normative standards that were negotiated politically are presented as universal and natural. Paradigm shifts in value systems do not happen by transforming the signifiers, but by constantly influencing practice and day-to-day negotiations on the ground and embodying the same verbal signifiers with new referents.

Value systems at the crossroads:

CSOs must comply with the holidays observed by the de facto authorities, and revere their symbols, such as flags and political slogans. In GoS-controlled areas these involve symbols of the ruling party and the images of the president. In Idlib, religious values are imposed by official authorities in schools supported by CSOs. CSO-run schools there must reinforce values clearly expressed in the Sunnah and Quran as interpreted by the de facto power in control (the Hay'at Tahrir al Sham). The SSG requires the presence of a religious teacher, and the preaching of religious programs such as those developed by Dar Al-Wahi in schools. This applies even in the Druze minority villages. By contrast, AANES authorities in Raqqa impose secular values, they mandate curricula that promote self-governance, but the Arab community there perceives the imposition of these values as attempts to impose Kurdish identity on the Arab population.

Moreover, local authorities may have different interpretations of values than central ones. Securing approval at the central level regarding curricula and value systems, does not guarantee local approvals. To mitigate this conundrum CSOs allow their local staff and the local teachers a great leeway to navigate these problems on the ground as they see fit. They often preferer to hire local staff because they are more adept and managing these complex dynamics. This reduces the control of the CSOs over the values being promoted and allows for the emergence of heterogenous value systems even in the same city. These value systems may be couched in traditional terminology, but in fact these are constantly reinvented traditions.

Displaced people pose similar challenges to the debate on values. Values are often transformed into identity markers for communities that have lost their cultural references. CSOs operating in areas with large concentrations of IDPs often face difficult challenges to mitigate the value system of host communities with those of the newly arrived IDPs. The tensions are often high even within the IDPs' communities themselves. Debates on values are often covert ways to express other socio-economic fears and grievances. Customs become confounded with value systems. And social norms are reinterpreted to create community solidarity systems at the micro level. In Afrin, schools for IDPs from the different parts of Syria are segregated and each community has its own preferred schools and profess different interpretations of cultural values even when they couch them using conservative religious overtones.

Debate over values is symptomatic of concerns over equity of access to resources. Even when donors insist that CSOs deliver their aid equitably among host and displaced communities, the supply of aid is often small compared to the needs. In the supply mode of aid delivery gaps between supply and demand generate feeling of injustice and favoritism. Questioning the CSOs value systems is the natural consequence for not being able to provide aid transparently to all. This situation was better

mitigated in areas like Dara'a where services were devised based on holistic local needs and not on the basis of the needs of host communities and IDPs separately.

The same applies regarding the question of equity of access for girls and directing them to certain fields of study. Neither CSOs, donors, nor local authorities express overt mandates on how to push girls into certain fields of study. But such norms persist. In cultural eco-systems, no one actor shapes the system. It is a complex environment a variety of actors facie many factors that shape the creation and constant transformation of value systems. Justifications are often readily available to explain these dynamics, but simple answers betray the complexity of the situation.

The role of CSOs in promoting opportunities for peace, citizenship, and equality:

Most of the sample members responded that values of social peace and equal citizenship are mentioned superficially within the curricula and are not reinforced by practical activities aimed at solidifying these concepts through practice. For example, the AANES's curricula promote gender equality, ethnic inclusiveness, coexistence, peace, democracy, and non-discrimination, yet there remains discrimination between Kurds and Arabs, and as has been pointed earlier local practice is still prejudiced against girls.

Values cannot be constructed from the top-down, especially in times of war and uncertainty. By the time they filter to the daily practice of people, values are transformed. Equality is understood in the Northeast as equality among the different ethnic and sectarian "components of society." The debate on individual rights vs. collective rights is almost non-existent. Citizenship is promoted in GoS-controlled areas as loyalty to the State. Duties are overvalued at the expense of rights. Social and cultural diversity is not addressed in the curricula. Women's rights in the Northwest are promoted as protection issues and not as rights' issues. Social peace is often translated by teachers everywhere as cohabitation and religious tolerance, but teachers can also simultaneously be promoting hate speech and "political" intolerance while preaching "religious" tolerance.

Some teachers avoid discussing sensitive concepts for fear of sparking debates that could lead to security repercussions or local strife between social groups. Rather than focusing on the enunciation of the values of peace and citizenship, many teachers, with the blessing of their CSOs, focus of techniques and practices: non-violent communication as a way to encourage children to learn and practice negotiation, mediation and peace building without naming them as peace building activities.

CSOs have also promoted a culture of peace by initiating multiple dialogues with conflicting parties in Syria, playing a significant role in mediation on service provision in the water sector, and on countering violent extremism. A significant portion of teachers, administrations, and official institutions do not believe in the importance of integrating these concepts verbally into the curricula. They prefer, instead to have informal spaces where they teach how to negotiate these issues in their classrooms.

Likewise, with the issue of gender equality, most educators interviewed think that forcing the issue may backfire. Many steps can be advanced in terms of raising awareness and empowering women and girls without overtly talking about equality. In many cases they actually reject the concept of equality outright. If one was to trace the role of CSOs in disseminating values, they will be hard pressed to finding them in curricula and normative documents. But for most outside observers these are the only observable issues they can track.

4.8 Prospects for future interventions of CSOs in the education sector

CSOs have mixed reputations among local communities and local stakeholders. On the one hand, they are seen as an important part of the service delivery mechanisms in the education sector. On the other hand, they are sometimes perceived as operating outside community norms and as wasting important resources. Their ability to negotiate among a complex set of actors and to navigate adverse factors are both an opportunity and a hinderance for them. Their ability to scale up their direct delivery of educational services is highly questionable. Supply-side donor aid is dwindling and CSOs operating as delivery channels for such aid are likely to fizzle out. Donors' new trends on localization may provide CSOs for a short lifeline to survive over the short term. However, unlike in other sectors, extreme localization can be very harmful in the education sector. The sector is already suffering from an excessive modality of fence-oriented social capital. What is desperately needed is the bridge-oriented social capital. The ability to promote local agency while connecting to national level networks will be the key test for CSOs to scale up as supporters of the education process and custodians over the values of social peace and equal citizenship. Otherwise, they will remain the weakest link in the chain of emergency education under a regressing humanitarian-oriented paradigm for channeling aid to Syria.

Local community perception regarding the continued engagement of CSOs in the education sector:

The sample participants unanimously emphasized the necessity of continuing the work of civil society organizations involved in education for the following reasons:

- The resources available through these organizations help sustain education in areas experiencing disruptions and dropout, and they improve the quality of education in official educational settings by supporting the public schools to deliver educational services and qualitative programs.
- These organizations serve as a critical source for training and qualifying educational staff, especially considering the de facto authorities' inability and lack of interest in staff development.
- The involvement of the CSOs helped to foster a culture of equality, awareness of issues such as girls' education and the psychological impact of trauma, as well as the acceptance of displaced people into the education system. This has also created a desire among parents to engage their children and especially their daughters in training courses outside of the school curriculum.
- Organizations provide a safe work environment, away from illicit activities and drug dealing.
- Donors and organizations ensure the inclusion of all ethnic groups and communities from different regions in their programs. They also integrate new students into schools, providing them with curricula in their native languages, and promote gender equality albeit at a very basic rudimentary level.

However, several voices argued that the role of these organizations should end for the following reasons:

- The deep involvement of organizations in public functions risks transforming them from civil entities into de facto governance ones substituting the role of public institutions and hindering the prospects of recovering the role of the State in the future.

- The frequent discontinuation of projects leads to a waste of resources, loss of qualified human resources, and inconsistency in achieving educational outcome. Increasingly, with dwindling resources, CSOs' inability to provide sustainable education opportunities will contribute to increased dropout rates.
- CSOs do not meet but a small portion of the educational needs, giving the false impression that international entities are adequately supporting education, which provides the justification for political bodies to continue their political bickering and avoiding engagement in serious negotiations to develop sustainable political solutions in Syria.

Can CSOs contribute to the diversity of educational choices available to communities?

Most sample participants, particularly teachers and administrators, agreed that the diversity of educational sources has provided students, especially those in remote areas and IDP camps, with the opportunity to continue their education. However, their overall impact has not been sufficient due to the major gap between supply and demand. Their comments included the following observations:

- The entry of CSOs into the field of education brought about intellectual and technological openness, bringing the education system closer to modern trends and developments.
- Organizations provided a middle ground between the poor quality of public education and the expensive fees of the private schools.
- The competition between private schools and CSOs created a positive drive to provide better education.
- CSOs have introduced non-traditional courses and training programs and other forms of innovation, such as social-emotional learning programs and non-violent communication.
- Non-traditional vocational training opportunities for women have been made available, allowing them to move beyond stereotypical educational and career choices.
- CSOs have managed to disseminate certain practices and pedagogic tools faster than other systems as CSOs tend to copycat each other. The scalability of innovation in the sector is far greater than its elasticity to scale up service delivery.

Some participants expressed that while organizations have diversified educational sources, this diversification has also harmed education. Some believe that the return of State institutions to a centralized education model is better than having diverse educational sources. They fear that the extreme localization in the sector will contribute to sustaining the fragmentation of the country over the long run.

Thus, communities see the diversity of educational sources as a double-edged sword: positively, it created competition for quality education with public and private schools and challenged the rigidity of old methods of public education. On the other hand, CSOs have competed unfairly using non-sustainable resources and contributed to brain drain and gradual emptying of the public sector from human resources. There is also very little control over the values they disseminate. While some cherished inclusivity and diversity, others loathed the non-transparency of the value systems being effectively delivered.

Moreover, de facto authorities exploited the service improvements in their areas, brought about by CSOs, to assert their legitimacy and enhance their control and authority. CSOs' attempts at appeasing the de facto powers to facilitate obtaining licenses was often mixed with over-adoption of the de facto powers' value systems. Incorporating local officials into their events and using their political symbols in their schools is giving communities the impression that services delivered by the CSOSs

were in large part the results of the de facto powers good governance and patronage. In effect, while CSOs provide diversity of pedagogic tools they tend to play into the local power dynamics as part of the system.

CSOs have the potential to provide their most impact by acting as an auxiliary tool to support the formal education system with resources, know how, non-formal education, logistical support, improved access to schools and stronger focus on monitoring the impacts of the educational system and its accountability to local communities. They are not likely to achieve sustainable impacts if they diverted their non-replenishable and limited resources to run schools. The sooner the CSOs move out of the school management business in the emergency education mode, and move into supporting the return to normal education, the more they are likely to find their true mission and to deliver the strongest impact in the future.

Annexes: summary of assessments of each of the six regions

The role of civil society in Qamishli

Stakeholders in the education sector and the role of civil society actors

The educational process in Northeastern Syria was impacted after 2011, much like other sectors did when the central government pulled the bulk of its institutions and retained nominal control over two security zones. The vacuum created was gradually filled by the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria, which witnessed successive iterations of its governance model over the years. The AANES extended its control over schools in the region, except for the security zones, that remained under GoS control in Qamishli and Hasakah. Schools in most of the Northeast, except for these two zones, shifted their curricula and administration to those of the AANES. But the GoS schools in the region continued to provide limited access to those wanting to obtain the internationally accredited degrees of the central government. The complex division of power in the Northeast creates for constant shifting of governance arrangements, the education sector remains highly susceptible to these fluctuations.

The primary educational actors in the Qamishli area are the institutions of the ANNES; the promulgation of the curricula is followed by the Education and Training Authority, which is often more concerned with the political optics of the curriculum than its quality. The AANES authorities allow for flexibility in the promulgation of the curricula in non-Kurdish majority areas, but Qamishli is a main center of demographic power for the Kurdish political forces within the AANES, and control over schools is very tight. Civil society organizations operate within both the AANES sphere as well as within the security zone of the GoS; their workstyle varies based on their political affiliations and the need to constantly adjust their positioning as they maneuver the complex dynamics between the two authorities.

CSO activities in the education sector are constrained by constant impositions of new decrees, restrictions, and regulations. Consequently, the educational programs of the CSOs in Qamishli and the neighboring town of Amuda are relatively small in scale compared to Eastern Deir Zorr and Raqqa, where CSOs generally have better access to donor funds and where ANNES restrictions are more flexible and the GoS is effectively absent. In Qamishli, their work is largely confined to extra-curricular activities, psychological support sessions, and awareness-raising, rather than direct involvement in normal pedagogic processes.

Despite the fact that many CSOs working in the Northeast have their headquarters in Qamishli, Al-Malikiyah, Amuda, and Hasakah, they rarely implement educational projects in these areas. CSOs are not allowed to interfere with curricula or pedagogic methods. Instead, the AANES allows their involvement in providing logistics and material needs necessary to ensure the smooth running of regular schools; they are often directed to support school renovations, provision of furniture, supply of water, and diverse school supplies. They may also offer supplementary courses in IT and foreign language skills. Education in Hasakah and Qamishli is a sensitive issue for the AANES, as it seeks to demonstrate its political legitimacy by running its own schools and universities.

An exception to the above-mentioned situation is provided by a consortium of international consultants and local organizations working in the education sector, composed of around 70 organizations working in Northeastern Syria. It coordinates with the main education and teaching authorities and their subsidiary educational bodies in Qamishli. The consortium cooperates to develop Joint Educational Needs Assessment for the region and is working to develop a coordinated Education Strategy. CSOs are engaged as sub consultants in the field of education in this situation.

As for UNICEF in this area, its work is more effective in the security zones controlled by the GoS due to signed protocols that allow for the implementation of educational and training projects in all GoS areas of control. Their presence in GoS schools in addition to the fact that those schools offer the only accredited degrees give the schools in the security zone a competitive advantage, and many parents want to send their children there if they can. This has created high demand on those schools and classrooms exceed 70 students on average to meet the demand.

Schools run by the AANES are not as well managed according to many of the interviewees, in addition to the fact that the GoS refused to extend its accreditation to those schools. This leads many parents to doubt the validity of sending their children to AANES schools. The prospects of joining university without accredited certificates will reduce the children's future job prospects. Nonetheless, the population is divided regarding the validity of the ANNES schools. According to the interviewees, the majority prefers to educate their children in GoS schools or in private schools that teach the recognized GoS curricula. Many in the AANES officials send their own children to these schools to secure what they perceive as better future for their children. Alternatively, they may opt to allow their children to take the GoS 9th and 12th grade exams after completing their AANES curricula. On the other hand, there is a more rigid opinion who insist on AANES schools for ideological reasons and hopes that political negotiations in the future will lead to the recognition of the certificates offered by the AANES schools down the line.

CSOs operating in the area do not issue any certificates. Families might send their children to these organizations to learn important skills or acquire vocational training. They may seek to complement the limited practical skills being taught in the regular schools, or may steer their children to acquire vocational certificates independently after finishing regular school.

Resources available to CSOs compared to public and private sectors

CSOs have significantly larger financial resources for their educational services than the AANES and the GoS schools, providing a better environment for beneficiaries, whether children or youth. With adequate funding, they have specialized rooms equipped with all necessary tools for children's' activities, equipment for vocational training and foreign language acquisition. Most of these amenities are lacking in regular schools. But CSOs cannot scale their operations to cover all schools. This has created a dilemma of quantity over quality, and brought about questions of who deserves to access CSO run programs.

Salaries for CSO workers are much higher than their counterparts in regular schools. With the minimum salary of over 1000 USD for administrators and 500 USD for teachers they pay over 5 times the going rates provided by the AANES and 10 times more than the GoS. As a result, the work environment is more motivating and encouraging teachers to engage in skill development. In many cases, these conditions have been the subject of envy of regular schoolteachers and administrators and have incentivized human resource drain towards the CSOs, at least on a part time basis.

While academic backgrounds and work experience are still highly valued in hiring staff, getting a CSO job is often a great privilege, nepotism and local pressures may sometime intervene in the hiring. The same pressures apply in reverse to avoid laying off staff as the CSOs have to consider closing some projects when funding dries up. Allegations of corruption in the hiring processes abound. Donor related due diligence procedures are not shared or published, and communities are generally not involved in the holding the CSOs accountable. This, combined with the fact that CSOs offer their top positions to staff coming from other areas have enhanced perceptions of corruption.

The continuity of CSO work is tied to the continuity of funding for their projects. Most projects have short cycles, while others are longer, depending on the donor and the project's objectives. For example, an organization might run a one-year project of providing awareness sessions, recreational activities, and skill development. They will run exemplary programs according to the participants, but once the project ends, the organization closes the operation if it cannot renew its funding. Other funding might come later covering other topics requiring different types of human resources. And CSOs might run for months without funding until they can secure additional funds. The educators and teachers will be laid off for the period. Many will be lost to other CSOs or may consider leaving the education sector, the region or the country. Replacing them and investing in training new teachers creates additional costs for CSOs. But more importantly it plays into a longer game of brain drain away from regular schools.

Regarding community contributions to supporting CSO work, most interviewees mentioned that there were no contributions from families because their opinions were not taken seriously while planning and designing the programs. Most families have no financial resources to contribute. They interest in providing in kind and volunteering resources are not fully utilized as most CSOs are concerned mostly with the financial resources. When the parents are not engaged in decision-making and their voices are not heard, they are not likely to contribute whatever meager resources they have.

Ability of schools and CSO-led initiatives to provide a good learning environment

Organizations provide a good educational environment, offering transportation support to children and a relatively well motivated work environment. CSOs rely on feedback they get from the complaint boxes in the schools; teachers who receive complaints about mistreating students are duly dismissed. There are dedicated play areas equipped for activities, special halls for psychological support, and a referral system in place, referring students to other professionals such as doctors or psychologists. CSOs try to provide qualitative programs and amenities to show their competitive edge to their donors; they provide free resources and stationery to students, and some educational centers also offer meals. Most CSOs compete to present a perfect image about their activities to their donors sending regular photos and films. In doing so, they create services that cannot be scaled up nor replicated. The supply side thinking of donors and CSOs have focused on the inputs and outputs of programs, but rarely ever considered the impact, and the growing gap between the supply and demand in the sector.

In early 2011, dropout rates were very high due to the security situation and the lack of trust in nascent local institutions. The pre-conflict poor economic conditions of the majority of the population only worsened afterwards. Many families pulled their children out of schools to support the family in earning income or at least to save on costs. The situation leveled up after a while. However, dropout rates are still high in regular schools run by the AANNES and the GoS.

This is further exacerbated in rural areas, while in cities, dropout rates increase after elementary school as girls leave education to seek a trade or early marriage.

In secondary school, dropouts are often motivated by the desire to migrate. Fear of conscription for boys played a role in school dropouts as boys are often smuggled out of the country. Also, the local security forces associated with the AANES periodically sets checkpoints at the crossing to the GoS areas to seek wanted young people or to prevent students from joining GoS accredited schools, leading to increased risk aversion among parents to protect their children.

Girls' dropout rates are generally higher than those for boys, especially in rural areas, due to early marriage and the cultural tendency to prioritize male education for economic reasons, as males are seen as future family breadwinners. However, the educational opportunities for girls have improved, and in most sessions organized by CSOs, female participation is higher and more active than male participation because they have more space to express themselves.

Many CSOs have no programs on their own, they are involved in supporting regular schools, they provide basic logistics, fuel for heating in winter, or alternative energy sources. In some schools they provide connection to the internet to facilitate access to e-learning programs. The AANES authorities prefer this mode of CSOs work than to having CSOs engaged in parallel pedagogic programs that they cannot control.

Schools in the area have not experienced major violence, but there have been some incidences among students due to differences in tribal, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. This is exacerbated by overcrowded classrooms, and the inability of individual teacher to manage them. Most violent incidents are still manageable by relaying on local committees and elders before they become major causes for concern.

Curricula used by CSOs

Generally, CSOs rely on accelerated curricula to reintegrate children into school. International organizations like UNICEF in areas under GoS control have strategic plans to bring students back to school using accelerated learning or self-learning curricula, approved by the GoS. The accelerated curricula focus on non-controversial subjects and basic skills and topics such as math, the sciences and basic language skills. GoS curricula are referenced with minor editing out of political symbols.

In areas under the AANES, the curricula are devised centrally and CSOs have limited leeway to change them. There is a special authority that revises content and assess it on the basis of average grades of students. Amendments are regularly taking place to adjust the curriculum. Experimentation with curriculum has created great confusion as teachers are often not prepared in advance of introducing new amendments. The AANES is not keen on allowing exemptions for CSOs to alter the curriculum, they prefer to manage problem in the curriculum collectively for all schools.

Some parents opposed the AANES curricula, leading to strikes and school closures due to conflicts between the values included in the textbooks and community values. Some participants complained that the term 'gender' was mentioned 73 times in the social life book, often confounding the meanings of gender and sex. This resulted in tough negotiations with the education authorities of the AANES.

In CSO run programs control over the quality and content of curricula is limited. There are few supervisors and directors for the pedagogic process; instead, monitoring and evaluation

departments focus on the number of students and equity of access to boys and girls. Mostly they monitor inputs and direct outputs and have no resources to conduct daily inspections and regular reviews of the outcomes of the educational process.

Values promoted by CSOs

CSOs instill values related to human protection standards, child protection policies, non-exploitation, transparency, and integrity. Teachers are mandated to uphold these values in the classrooms and report on them to management. However, CSOs align themselves with the communities they serve as much as possible, avoiding anything contrary to community values. Donors may sometimes influence projects, especially by introducing non-formal educational projects with specific values embedded in them.

There are official holidays under the AANES, but they are not official for the GoS schools. Sometimes an entire month is taken off to honor all different religious and political holidays. Focusing on inclusiveness is sometimes carried to extreme, yet at the same time, the AANES authorities exhibit clear preferential treatment for some holidays and cultural symbols. Furthermore, in addition to regular holidays, teachers are required to participate in impromptu activities, leading to school closures, such as the protests that were organized against Turkish attacks in the area. Effectively the public assertion of the AANES ideological priorities often leads to confounding the values promoted by the authorities with their identify politics.

The AANES's curricula formally promote gender equality, ethnic unity, coexistence, peace among the different components of society, democracy, and non-discrimination. But the formal adoptions of such values and the promulgation of these values in practice are often disconnected. There is a significant effort to ensure that women are present and participating alongside men in all fields. But in areas where conservative community values prevail, this mandate is watered down, and the authorities have learning not to press hard in areas where they do not have popular acceptance of their ideology.

Equality and plurality are often considered in as group rights and not as individual rights. This has led CSOs to over-emphasize the representation of communities along ethno-sectarian lines in their events and programs; donors have also contributed to this trend. Students are offered education in their mother tongues in addition to the introduction of other languages as complimentary subjects, but accusations of bias and preference for the Kurdish language persist. Many of the Arab speaking parents feel that the favored position of the Kurdish "component "in asserting values and symbolic presence is an assertion of the Kurdish identity and not an assertion of universal values. Values become part of identity politics between ethnic groups rather than being moral principles to create peace.

Local community's view on continued CSOs engagement in the education sector

Local communities often see the need for continued CSOs' work to develop curricula to become more inclusive and to help bridge the gap in accreditation of educational certificates. Unifying curricula is a concern for a great number of people in the area. They appreciate the values promoted in CSO sponsored schools and programs and the nice environments they create. But they are more concerned with providing fair distribution of support to all schools and ensuring equality of access to all students and not just to a few lucky beneficiaries.

Many communities also believe that the diversity of educational sources in this region has been detrimental to the educational process and not a source of enrichment. The overlapping

jurisdictions, competing curricula, and the constant assertion of power by regulating access to schools and accreditation have not created better choices for families to choose from. According to this opinion, CSOs have not contributed to more diversity of options. Indeed, they may have been part of the confusion. Many parents feel that the CSOs should not be engaged in formal education and should focus their efforts on supporting the unification of the education process and providing logistics to regular schools.

The role of civil society in Raqqa

Stakeholders in the education sector and the role of civil society actors

Like in Qamishli and other regions controlled by the AANES, the Education and Training Authority manages official schools, implementing a curriculum that includes both Arabic and Kurdish language classes, with more emphasis on the Kurdish language for Kurdish students. The situation in Raqqa shares many commonalities with Qamishli but the fact that the areas is populated by a majority Arab population has necessitated some amendments to the educations process in the area. The following section will focus primarily on how Raqqa differs from the Qamishli model to avoid replication. In Raqqa and Deir Zorr, the "Autonomous Administration" is often presented as the "Civil Administration", a slightly modified form of governance than in areas with more diversified demographics and high concentrations of Kurdish and other non-Arab populations.

Raqqa witnessed major hostilities in the fight against ISIS. Most of the city's urban fabric was destroyed. The education authorities prioritized renovating schools, training staff, and rebuilding infrastructure, especially in heavily damaged neighborhoods as a first step towards the recovery of life in the city. However, despite strong involvement by AANES education authorities, many aspects of the education process remain uncovered. CSOs' contributions can be significant; they play a crucial role in covering the gap by supporting school renovations and providing other logistics. In other parts of the province not under AANES control, the GoS's Ministry of Education oversees schools, such as in Al-Sabkha area and surrounding villages, following the regulations of the Syrian Ministry of Education.

CSOs have been essential in addressing educational needs in areas with damaged infrastructure, focusing on helping school dropouts, especially in camps lacking official schools. Despite their efforts, they face challenges such as inadequate electricity and internet access. They align their courses with the AANES curriculum up to primary school level, but operate without direct oversight, which affects program quality and continuity.

Although CSOs have been effective in covering educational gaps and supporting communities, their lack of official accreditation and ability to certify their graduates have hindered the long-term sustainability of their programs. Since 2020, UNICEF has ceased support for many programs in AANES-controlled areas and now mainly focuses on GoS-controlled zones with psychosocial support and school supplies. Civil society organizations continue to address educational needs and offer vocational education but without recognized certificates. Their effectiveness is often limited by their short-term funding. Education in AANES areas suffers from quality issues due to constant curriculum changes and inadequate review of errors in the textbooks. Teachers and administrators often lack expertise among teachers and continued

training to keep up with changes. In remote areas, where the AANES's presence is weak, civil society organizations generally provide superior services, preparing students for remedial courses and placement in regular schools despite the formal system's challenges.

Resources available to CSOs compared to public and private sectors

International and local civil society organizations have been instrumental in supporting education in both the AANES and GoS-controlled areas of the Northeast. In AANES-controlled zones, American-funded initiatives like the Injaz program have supported local groups such as Wefaq, Afaaq, and Enmaa Al-Karama since 2017. However, many of these initiatives have been terminated, leaving organizations like Afaaq as one of the few CSOs continuing to offer vocational training and literacy in informal IDP camps. In GoS areas such as in Hasakah city, UNICEF has provided educational materials but has had minimal involvement in other educational projects.

CSOs and NGOs in education offer salaries between 300 and 400 USD; much higher than the official maximum of 70 USD offered in the regular AANES schools or 35 USD in GoS school, causing tension as teachers leave official roles for better-paying CSO jobs. In addition to salaries CSOs must pay taxes on behalf of their staff to the AANES, and recently the GOS has started taxing CSOs staff salaries. The ability or CSOs to pay salaries and taxes are often included in project budgets. This gives them a great advantage in competing to attract qualified personnel. Both GoS and AANES-run schools are suffering to retain qualified staff. Demand for qualified staff has created a problem with forging teachers' certificates. This is a problem faced by both official schools as well as CSO ones. International organizations require verified experience and provide ongoing training, but the gap in human resources need far more systemic efforts.

CSOs are generally better at retaining their administrative staff, but short-term projects limit their ability to retain educational staff. Organizations use a case-by-case management system to support schools but have not significantly developed processes to sustain educational programs in Raqqa. Most remedial education projects are planned on the basis of short cycles of 5-6 months, which hinders their sustainability and the ability to retain qualified staff. Short-term CSO contracts lead to frequent hiring and firing cycles and increase the cost of training. While some civil society organizations train AANES teachers, program discontinuation after funding ends creates gaps preventing the accumulation of knowledge and skills, especially in the early education levels. In addition to educators, CSOs human resource shortages include a diversity of specializations. CSO projects cover school repairs, infrastructure, and logistics; but here again, they struggle with continuity. Some of the gaps are covered by volunteers from the community, though economic hardships limit their contributions.

Ability of schools and CSO-led initiatives to provide a good learning environment

Schools and initiatives managed by CSOs offer a better educational environment compared to official and quasi-official institutions. Many families appreciate the learning environment they provide. However, economic hardships force households to pull their children from schools even though schooling is free. Dropout rates among boys and girls are on the rise, with rural areas seeing more children dropping out to help their families with agricultural work. For girls, early marriage is making a comeback, after girls got a breathing room in the wake of the defeat of ISIS in the area; ISIS sleeping cells still exert influence in some places. Tribal customs also contribute to dropouts, especially among girls as parents refuse to send their daughter to mixed

gender AANES schools. Dropout rates in CSO settings are rather low, compared to higher rates in regular schools where dropouts can lead to child labor or to pushing children to the street to beg or engage in illicit activities.

Girls are particularly affected by dropout rates; CSOs address this by promoting girls' enrollment with their parents, offering transportation, conducting awareness sessions, and working to ensure a safe environment. This focus on security has made CSOs sponsored schools and training programs a more secure choice for female students and a true opportunity for girls to continue their education. The direction of girls towards specific professions is influenced by parental views, with some communities still favoring stereotypical education and career roles for women despite a shift towards more diverse professions.

Issues like drug abuse, tribal conflicts, discrimination against displaced people by host communities also impact dropout rates. AANES schools provide basic services like electricity and heating but often fall short on providing other amenities and teaching materials. CSOs are often called upon to sponsor these schools but are prevented from influencing the educational process otherwise. CSOs are also the main provider of logistics and support to educational initiatives in the informal IDP camps.

Curricula used by CSOs

CSOs in the area have limited flexibility to choose their curricula, given the temporary nature of their projects and their limited ability to influence educational policy set by the de facto authorities. Curricula, which must be approved by the Education and Training Committee within the AANES, are adapted from external programs to fit local needs. They profess to cater to local cultural priorities and values, however, in Raqqa these values vary considerably from those in the Kurdish majority areas. Tensions were high at points as communities rejected what they perceived as attempts at favoring the Kurdish culture, and as a result the AANES allows local schools some leeway to diverge from the standard AANES curricula. In Raqqa, CSOs use a range of curricula, including those from UNICEF, the AANES, and the GoS, though the latter is prohibited beyond remedial classes. The curricula offered by CSOs primarily focus on basic literacy and arithmetic.

CSOs adjust curricula based on local and cultural needs, with input from stakeholders and parents. They employ monitoring tools to ensure adherence to the curriculum, though teachers could suggest minor adjustments if they thought it would benefit the educational process. Officially, teachers under the AANES cannot modify the curriculum, but effectively there is little control to ensure their adherence.

Private sector actors are prohibited from teaching GoS curricula, but many still do it when tutoring students to prepare them to travel to GoS area to take accredited exams. CSOs for the most part prefer not to take such risks and face penalties and disruption of their licenses.

Generally, CSOs encourage skill acquisition equally for boys and girls without interfering to push girls towards specific career paths. However, their openness in this regard is met by resistance from parents. Social norms play a major role still in determining how curricula are interpreted. In many cases parents were concerned that curricula did not include religious studies and were not teaching community values. Some parents though, favor the AANES's curriculum, which integrates pedagogic elements from various sources and is secular in nature.

Moreover, many parents fear that the AANES's educational certificates are not accredited and would not enable their children to pursue higher education later. They are less concerned with the values being promoted in the curriculum than the future careers it is likely to afford to their children. Students may attend preparatory classes in AANES schools and then take exams by traveling to GoS areas to get accredited certificates.

Values promoted by CSOs

Values taught by CSOs focus on non-discrimination and are influenced by the CSOs self-definition of its core values. Nonetheless, teachers' personal values are perhaps more relevant in indoctrinating children. While curricula are designed to promote specific sets of values, their reinforcement largely depends on teachers. Donor entities have not directly imposed conflicting value systems in the area. Official holidays and public events in schools have increased in number but celebrations do not affect CSO-run facilities.

Curricula in areas under both the GoS and AANES in the Northeast of Syria include values like freedom, democracy, justice, and environmental awareness. Additionally, AANES authorities in impose secular values that emphasize gender equality and equal citizenship. The AANES curricula are generally seen as free from overt political bias, though they tend to glorify Kurdish figures and history in a way that local communities perceive to be unfair to the Arab majority in the area. Many think that the secular values of the AANES curriculum are Kurdish cultural traits and identity markers. Their demand for religious education could be seen as a reaction to feeling that their identity is being threatened not because they are overtly conservative themselves.

Overall, the curricula emphasize group rights, individual duties, and a general notion of societal well-being. In Raqqa, gender equality is downplayed compared to other areas under the control of the AANES. While equal citizenship is defined in narrow ideological terms as the equality among the ethno-sectarian "components" of society. Some interviewed believed that the focus on the "components" actually created more ethnic tensions; they would have preferred more emphasis on a national Syrian identity to avoid being drawn into these tensions. Either way, the emphasis on citizenship being a national issue or a group identity issue avoids the discussion on individual rights.

The values found in the curricula are often not reflected in practice, with many educators not applying them or choosing to interpret them in their own way. CSOs sometimes work to promote values of peace and equality through activities and play, especially by integrating children from diverse backgrounds in learning to negotiate and communicate with one another. This has fostered cooperation among Arab and Kurdish children as well as between residents and displaced people. Yet, there is little monitoring to assess the impacts of such programs, and their results remain anecdotal.

CSOs also, work on integrating children from extremist backgrounds, such as those returning from Al-Hol camp, into society. They have engaged in various counter radicalization programs despite some reservations by the authorities.

Local community's view on continued CSOs engagement in the education sector

Opinions on continuing the CSOs engagement in the educational process are divided. Some view the lack of a centralized educational policy and frequent curriculum changes as problematic, suggesting that CSOs should focus on overseeing government institutions'

educational efforts and holding them accountable rather than directly engaging in small scale localized educational programs that fall short of building a national education system. They are concerned about interruptions in CSOs' projects. Others appreciate the diversity of educational approaches, noting the benefits of non-traditional courses and vocational training provided by CSOs. Programs, which include social and emotional learning, address specific needs and gaps uncovered by regular schools. They believe this keen addressing of needs is key to motivating student enrollment and retention in schools. Despite occasional flaws, CSOs are seen as positively contributing to education and providing job opportunities that encourage students to complete their education.

The role of civil society in Idlib

Stakeholders in the education sector and the role of civil society actors

In Idlib, the Ministry of Education of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) has a central role in overseeing the educational process. Nominally the SSG does not directly assume the responsibility over the Directorate of Education of Idlib, for a variety of reasons discussed below. The SSG oversees many of the educational facilitates under the auspices several directorates, including the Directorate of Private and Vocational Education. However, the SSG's Ministry of Education directly manages eight educational complexes: Idlib, Ma'arat Misrin, Dana, Atarib, Harim, Ariha, Jisr al-Shughur, as well as the IDP camps. These complexes ensure the implementation of educational policies through regular field visits and strict oversight, albeit the provision of the service is nominally independent of them in the majority of cases. Their control over the IDP camps is more direct as they have authority over teacher transfers and approval of new staff and not just over the overall performance of the schools.

The Directorate of Education in Idlib, has a special status as an intermediary between the SSG and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). The Directorate effectively manages educational programs in regular schools and assumes administrative supervision in all schools. In essence, the Directorate's recognition by Türkiye as the authority that can certify graduates and prepare them to the equivalency exams if they were to continue their education in the Turkish universities later gives the Directorate a special space to operate independently from the SSG. Also, many donors would likely pull their funding of the education sector if the Directorate was affiliated officially to the SSG (given the SSG's direct affiliation with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, considered by many donors to be a designated terrorist organization). An entente has emerged to retain this special status for the Directorate of Education, informally inheriting its previous affiliation to the SIG but effectively acting as a middle ground that no one wants to disturb. The Directorate currently sets exam questions in collaboration with the SSG and issues secondary school certificates recognized by the SIG, serving as a liaison between the two governments' education ministries.

However, the role of the Directorate is coming under increasing scrutiny by the SSG. The Ministry of Education of the SSG is increasing its interference in managing exams, issuing of certificates, and oversight over conditions in schools. The Ministry is also directly overseeing the licensing of CSOs working in education and regulating their interactions with other institutions affiliated with the SSG. Given that the CSOs in Idlib are heavily involved in the direct management of schools and delivery of formal education programs (unlike in other regions

where their role is restricted to auxiliary functions,) the direct oversight by the SSG over the CSOs gives the Ministry of Education of the SSG a strong entry point to influence the sector. Gradually, the SSG is assuming more control through its provision of educational services directly in the educational complexes.

Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, the de facto group in charge in the area and the real power behind the SSG, operates its own brand of religious schools directly. The Dar al-Wahi religious schools set formal religious teaching courses and even promotes special awareness and proselytizing programs to preach to the Druz and Christian religious minorities in the area. Their program is pushed informally to be the main reference for religious education in other schools.

Civil society organizations, including Manahel, Syria Relief, Violet, Orange, Islamic Relief Waqf, Global Mercy, etc., as well as programs run by UN OCHA, are pivotal in supporting the educational process. Some of these organizations run entire schools, while others may support in different minor capacities. Furthermore, there are volunteer initiatives led by educational activists include committees focused on protection, education, and awareness, addressing needs such as wheelchair provision, school dropout prevention, and reintegration of displaced children into schools. Initially, these initiatives and organizations concentrated on primary education, but they are increasingly more supportive of secondary schools. The need for moving beyond primary education is evident by the high dropout rates in secondary education. The educational complex overseeing the schooling in the camps is mounting pressure on CSOs to support secondary education for IDPs. However, resources ae often limited to cover all needs; logistics and stationery for secondary education remains limited compared to primary education.

Other actors interfere in the education process in Idlib. The Teachers' Union in Idlib is a robust organization advocating for teachers' rights. They can exert considerably influence on the education process under the guise of protecting teacher's interest. The Union has organized protests and strikes to demand better conditions for teachers. For that reason, it has come under increasing pressure by the SSG, which seeks to control it.

Resources available to CSOs compared to public and private sectors

Support from CSOs is not consistent and not well coordinated; this has led to heterogeneous service delivery across the region, with some areas receiving more assistance than others. The SSG's Office for Organizations attempts to direct support based on need, but some regions, particularly remote areas like Jabal al-Summaq, receive less assistance due to accessibility issues. Before the SSG's direct involvement in the sector, CSO's provided more diverse programs, but strict regulations have now shifted many organizations' focus to relief rather than development aid. The SSG wants to assure its control over the education process, but simultaneously it wants to avoid its financial burden. So ultimately it must leave some room for the CSOs to handle funding and resource mobilization.

This lack of clarity over responsibilities has resulted various disruptions to educational programs, which in turn has affected the ability to streamline funding for schools. Most importantly, the disruption affects the teachers negatively. The CSOs cannot provide them with secure contracts, and they are not officially public employees to benefit from the regular fringe benefits afforded to public employees by the SSG.

The lack of clarity over decision making processes also affect the distribution of schools and resources dedicated to the schools. In principle, prioritization follows set criteria of

vulnerability. Displaced communities in camps and tented settlements sometimes receive badly needed resources as a priority, but nearby villages maybe denied these resources and are forced to close. Funding is not directed based on area needs but based on specific community needs in those areas. This has led to segregation, competition of communities over resources, and feelings of resentment. Schools that receive less resources cover the gap through leveraging community-based initiatives. But these initiatives cannot operate under the radar for long; they also face challenges in licensing and oversight of their funding sources. Some schools have opted out of seeking external funding, as external funding is hard to get and puts them directly under the strict control of the SSG authorities. The Sham School for example have not received formal CSO support in years; it relies entirely on voluntary teaching and local charitable donations.

Organizations bridge the gap between the lower-quality public sector and the private sector. They do that in a variety of ways and not just through providing classroom support. For instance, some CSOs specialize in supporting special needs' students by providing them with equipment such as hearing aids and eyeglasses. Some organizations distribute in-kind materials or cover the teacher's transportation to school or other ways to indirectly subsidize their salaries. On the other hand, some initiatives like "The Leading Teacher" provide emergency education in camps through mobile schools, addressing transportation issues and reducing dropout rates.

CSOs act as enablers of the process but their impact on the outcomes of the pedagogic process is limited in that regard. They provide diverse services support to educational activities, with some focusing on remedial learning or logistical support to the process. In this regard they have little influence over educational outcomes. Perhaps the most influence they have is when they support the training and qualification of teachers in some cases. Nonetheless, their inability to control what happens in the classroom does not mean they have no impact. Communities' acceptance of these organizations is generally positive due to their contribution to making education more affordable on a larger scale; more so than in other regions where CSOs have focused on niche roles.

Parents prefer CSO-supported schools as they provide better quality education and teacher performance. The issue of accreditation of certificates, notwithstanding there is a reasonable trust in the education system in the area. In Idlib, CSOs cover s substantial part of the costs of education bill. A critical balance has been struck between their role and that of the regulatory bodies of the SSG. This was reflected in higher public appreciation of both roles. The fact that donor funds are not allowed to pass to regular schools for fear of legitimatizing the de facto powers of the Hay'at Tahrir Sham, has only undermined transparent and scalable access to education for children in the area. It has not undermined the perception of the community regarding the SSG institutions, to the contrary the positive performance of the CSOs is lending credibility to the SSG's patronage and legitimacy to its governance model.

Ability of schools and CSO-led initiatives to provide a good learning environment

Dropout rates are notably lower in schools supported by CSOs due to their engaging activities, better amenities and logistics. Most organizations actively follow up on dropouts by visiting students' homes and referring them to other specialized CSOs to address non-pedagogic issues such as special needs, financial support to the family or psychological support. Despite these efforts, some dropout rates remain high in CSO-supported schools due to occasional shortages in necessary supplies, such as textbooks. This may impose occasional burden on parents and may cause a spike in dropouts. However, some have argued that poverty is not always the main

factor; dropout rates are often attributed to a cultural norms regarding advanced education opportunities for girl. Others have pointed out that the complete reliance on CSOs has created a dependency on aid and reduced initiative for self-help. Thus, the slightest disruption to the delivery of service drives parents to pull their children out of schools rather than try to come up with remedial steps in partnership with the CSOs.

Nonetheless, poverty is still a major concern. As poverty deepens among local communities, the dropout rates have been steadily rising. Displaced students face the highest risks of dropping out due to increased financial needs resulting from their prolonged displacement. Additionally, in some locations, it was noted, local teachers discriminated against displaced students. This issue is less prevalent in Idlib city as the presence of displaced communities has been normalized there, but in smaller towns the prejudice can be real, and it is a major factor in pushing parents to abort the education of their children.

Organizations tend to employ more women than men, largely because women's opportunities in government institutions and the private sector are limited. These organizations provide a socially secure and financially stable work environment for women. The SSG's Ministry of Education has enacted a law requiring gender segregation in schools stating from the fourth grade, with male teachers for boys and female teachers for girls, even in private schools. This policy has occasionally resulted in the closure of classes for girls due to insufficient enrollment in classes. Many private schools halted complete educational stages while waiting to secure the enrollment of enough female students. The cost of classes in the private sector is high and most parents cannot afford to pay higher fees for their girls to go to school. At times CSO-run schools and programs are the only opportunity left for girls to receive any education.

The local communities generally perceive CSO-supported schools as safe for girls, as these schools employ local staff who share the community's conservative values. The preference for gender segregation of classes is not only an SSG one, but many parents are afraid that their girls may be subjected to values that contradict local norms. This attitude reinforces the strict observance of segregation across all types of schools. CSOs however, still have some resources to run the necessary classes for girls, while other schools may opt to close them down, when there is no sufficient attendance.

Other issues affect girls' dropout rates. Early marriage is one of them. CSOs provide the only opportunity for females to rejoin schools after having been married and have had children of their own. But access to such programs is not sufficient to reverse the trend. Other issues are also relevant. Health problems including stunted growth due to malnutrition limit girls' educational opportunities, as has been observed by some participants. This condition often leads to bullying and creating negative psychological pressures. CSOs sometimes try to remedy the situation by providing food stipends, but in some cases, health issues are treated by providing growth hormone injections to affected children.

On the other hand, CSOs provide better discipline by adhering to scheduled class times, monitoring progress, considering they must report to donors on these issues. Public schools are supposed to follow a set plan for the school day and academic year, with disruptions only occurring due to exceptional events like has happened during the earthquake in 2023. However, there have been more disruptions recently. Shortages of teachers and teachers' strikes is a main factor in disrupting classes. Lack of school vacancies and the need to reduce transportation costs for teachers have mandated two-shift schedules, with girls attending in the

morning and boys in the afternoon. Private schools face some of these disruptions. But CSO run schools seem to maintain better consistency.

When an organization's funding for a program ends, the Directorate of Education takes over responsibility for the school, including teacher salaries. Laws have been enacted to prevent teachers from leaving after the end of a project, ensuring that the academic year continues without disruption. Despite these regulations, education can still be disrupted by local issues such as frequent displacement and land ownership problems in camps, which can lead to school closures.

Curricula used by CSOs

The curricula adopted by non-governmental organizations align closely with those of the Interim Curriculum set by the SIG. The Directorate of Education in Idlib as had been discussed above plays a bridging role between the SSG and the SIG. Its curriculum matches that the SIG, with some minor modifications mandated by special sensitivities of the SSG. The Interim Curriculum itself is an amendment of the pre-2011 GoS curriculum, it follows the same standards for teaching the sciences as well as the Arabic and foreign languages. The social sciences were modified to remove ideological references and symbols that are scene to be supportive of the central government's ideology.

CSOs generally adhere to the Interim Curriculum, yet they may modify content in minor ways to match the speed with which remedial education takes place to put students back in school. All changes to the curriculum need the approval from the Directorate of Education. Private schools may offer additional subjects like Turkish language and mental arithmetic, while some banned subjects such as drawing, and music may be offered unofficially as extra-curricular subjects or psychosocial support programs bypassing the SSG prohibition on these subjects in the curriculum.

Curricular modifications are managed by the Curriculum Department in the Directorate of Education through specialized committees. The Directorate provides the textbooks to regular schools, but the CSOs must often print their own books for informal or remedial education programs. Camp curricula are accelerated to help students catch up, though teachers may adjust these curricula to match students' comprehension levels. Recent curriculum changes have caused confusion among students and teachers due to inconsistent adjustments, such as the reinstatement of previously removed lessons.

Coordination between organizations and official bodies is mandatory, requiring a memorandum of understanding with the Directorate of Education, which manages the certification process. Certificates issued by CSOs are not recognized in SSG institutions unless processed by the Directorate but have limited recognition beyond the Northwest of Syria. After 2016, GoS certificates were largely rejected, local institutions were pressured to hire local graduates. The certificates from the Directorate of Education offer job opportunities in both Idlib and the Turkish controlled parts of North Syria. This has somewhat compensated for the lack of accreditation of degrees. However, to continue university studies abroad these certificates are only recognized in Türkiye after taking the YÖS equivalency exam for foreign students.

Control over the pedagogic outcomes of the education process is limited, as resources for monitoring and evaluation are designed for short cycles of donor funded projects. CSOs generally monitor the implementation of educational projects based on inputs and outputs, and rarely ever based on assessing the learning outcomes of the curricula being taught.

Values promoted by CSOs

The educational complexes of the SSG oversee CSO-run programs, with supervisors and evaluation officers ensuring adherence to ideological and moral standards. The Directorate of Education does not interfere directly in that regard. Teachers in CSO-supported schools are often required to take additional classes to enhance their qualifications for future employment. These classes include emphasis on the moral codes that need to be enforced in the classes. The SSG's Ministry of Education maintains strict oversight, even in remote areas, ensuring adherence to educational standards. Thus, while the Directorate of Education (nominally under the SIG oversight) evaluates the technical content of the pedagogical process, the SSG regulates morality, creating for an overlapping and confusing regulatory environment for CSOs.

CSOs typically avoid introducing values not included in the curricula. But even when it comes to the stated values in the curriculum, they tend to avoid discussing values except in very generic terms. The task of interpreting values is often relegated to the teachers in the classrooms. The teachers in turn interpret the values cautiously with one eye on local community values and another eye on the directives of the de facto authorities. The SSG enforces its interpretation of Islamic values through weekly lessons derived from Quranic teachings and Hadith. The parents are not always in line with these instructions, especially in minority Druz and Christian communities. Other parents may feel that the curricula are not sufficiently conservative. Even basic programs aimed at helping girls broaden their horizons in terms academic choices, may draw criticism from some parents, though they may be approved by the SSG.

To avoid confrontations, CSOs refrain from engaging students in school debates and activities related to the discussions of values such as equal citizenship and social peace. Occasionally these values are discussed under the rubric of phycological support and non-violent communication skills. But for the most part, this is a topic left to the teachers to manage, each according to their own understanding of the local sensitivities. CSOs may include such values in their reports to donors and on their web sites, but effectively, they have no monitoring processes to track how the teachers are resolving the complex sensitivities in the classrooms.

In regular schools, curricula may reflect a commitment to peace, however, they do so by promoting interpretations of Islamic values that can undermine civil peace, especially through indirect biases against other religious groups, such as the Alawite sect. The focus on peace and citizenship is largely religious rather than civic, with lessons intended to instill tolerance grounded in religious principles but interpreted in way that discriminate against other religious groups by making them the subject of tolerance and not equal citizens.

Participants noted that many teachers will often couch these values in rhetoric and cultural references that make the values more accessible to the students and acceptable to their parents. But often this technique ends up shifting the meaning completely and deliver counter values. Social peace becomes a code for reinforcing the notion of a protective "fence" around the community, while undermining acceptance of other areas in Syria and reducing the possibilities of building future "bridges". Values and their countervalues are taught in ways that allow the signifiers of the value system to slip depending on the context.[4]

CSOs must manage this potentially hazardous terrain by allowing these slippages to occur, but without being seen as interfering to manage them. They avoid explicit discussions about citizenship to prevent controversy over issues related to acceptance, rights, and freedoms.

[4] Refer to earlier definition of "signifiers" in footnote number 3.

Discussions of minorities and religious diversity are generally avoided. Equality is not directly addressed in curricula, though it is sometimes implied through informal lessons and play activities. One topic that is hard for CSOs to manage is the issue of gender equality. This is one area where donor funds can be instrumental in promoting a specific value. CSOs divert this topic to questions of equal access to girls in their schools and to notions of equitable rights.

This approach aligns with traditional customs and religious beliefs, avoiding conflicts with societal norms. But most often these are not policy issues within CSOs. CSOs simply follow the path of least resistance as these issues are often relegated to teachers to be the main arbiters in negotiating these values with the community and not the CSOs.

CSOs may profess to promoting values of equality and peace, but they are also engaging in other value creating practices. Many CSOs have additional mandates than providing education, for instance they may engage in building mosques and promoting conservative dress codes. In that sense, they may be promoting different sets of values at the same time. Whether they do that out of genuine adherence to their missions or as a way to manage the pressures from the de facto powers and the SSG depends on how CSOs resolve these issues internally in their own hierarchical structures. One should not assume that CSOs are singular entities that have strict controls over their moral codes. Different echelons of the organization may have different priorities and value systems. What is clear however, is that CSOs exert little effort to open these topics to public debate and prefer to set their resources away from monitoring the promulgation of values in their programs.

Local community's view on continued CSOs engagement in the education sector

The community's view on the continued role of CSOs in education is positive, with notable achievements in raising awareness, reducing dropout rates, and pioneering online education. However, funding remains a critical issue, as CSOs are limited in their ability to scale up their programs, albeit in Idlib they are better funded than in many other places of the country. The reduction of donor aid and the discontinuity of projects has hindered the creation of a sustainable educational process. Financial support should be comprehensive to avoid the decline of schools once an organization withdraws. But often when CSOs pull out, their schools regress, and the teachers they have supported are at risk, despite the best efforts of the local authorities to retain them and integrate them into the regular schools' operations. Remedial and emergency education may have had an urgent reason to exist in the past. Continuing them today is gradually undermining the emergence of a sustainable educational system.

The diversity of educational sources has been beneficial, fostering competition and encouraging organizations to improve their offerings. This competition, along with the adaptability of organizations, has supported education in remote and impoverished areas and provided opportunities for married women to continue their education after they have dropped out. Organizations have introduced new concepts to the Directorate regarding child protection, which has positively impacted the educational landscape. CSOs in the Idlib area are indispensable the education sector and will remain so for the foreseeable future. But gradually, donors and CSOs need to focus their efforts on areas where they create less dependency and provide more value for money. Tough choices will have to be made going forward.

The role of civil society in Afrin

Stakeholders in the education sector and the role of civil society actors

The Turkish Ministry of Education manages curricula, academic calendars, exam schedules, and public examinations in the Afrin region. The Directorate of Education in the Olive Branch areas (nominally under the oversight of the SIG) acts as a liaison between the Turkish authorities and local schools, overseeing programs, managing exams, and coordinating decision-making. Additionally, local educational offices of the local councils implement decisions from the Directorate but do not set educational policies.

Civil society organizations like Sidad, Bahar, and Mars engage in literacy and remedial learning projects but are limited to providing logistical support and must seek approval from the Directorate of Education for their initiatives. These organizations have minimal impact on the quality of education due to their lack of involvement in core educational activities. Public education remains the preferred option due to its affordability, despite declining quality and overcrowded classrooms. Private education is costly, with varying regional affiliations, and organizations support education through logistical aid without interfering with official operational mechanisms. Certificates are issued by the Turkish Directorate of Education and are recognized by Turkish universities after taking qualifying exams.

In some cases, local councils through their education offices promoted a simplified curriculum, also recognized by Türkiye after taking the equivalency exams. CSOs have to manage their operations in a complex and often contradictory regulatory environment where oversight over the sector is not very clear.

Resources available to CSOs compared to public and private sectors

Organizations offer higher salaries ranging from $300 to $400, significantly more than the $90 earned by regular schoolteachers regardless of their qualifications or experience. However, salaries are not the main line of expenditures for CSOs who are often directed to support regular schools rather than create parallel educational programs. CSOs supply schools with basics like school bags, stationery, and books. But support is not universal. CSOs only assist a limited group of students based on lists from the educational office of the local councils. Sometimes, school principals bypass these lists to create their own, leading to inconsistencies in distribution of support.

While organizations provide modern educational tools and focus on remedial educational programs to help dropouts in re-joining regular schools, their impact on overall school teaching methods is limited and inconsistent with some schools receiving abundant support while other receive none. The need for CSOs to continue supporting some aspects of the education process is changing. Public schools have seen improvements in terms of supply of printed books, courtesy of the Turkish authorities, but this is not always consistent, and CSOs are often called upon to fill some gaps in logistical supplies. Yet, CSO-projects themselves lack continuity. They are typically lasting 3 to 6 months with variable coverage. Sporadic gaps and unpredictable shortages have major impact on disrupting the education process. Local support for education is minimal, and request for community contributions are often met with resistance, as dependency on aid has undermined the self-help initiative of communities.

CSOs select staff from outside Afrin, allegations of nepotism and favoritism in hiring abound. Public schools face staffing issues due to a lack of specialized teachers and frequent resignations. CSOs are exempt from taxes but may be asked to cover costs typically handled by the Directorate of Education to other schools. Managing which schools get CSOs' support and which schools receive salary subsidies for teachers have sparked concerns over favoritism.

In general, the Directorate of Education ensures continuity in public schools by overseeing academic progress and teacher attendance. CSO-projects, however, have fixed schedules dependent on donor plans and may not address long-term needs effectively. CSOs support heating needs in schools but rely on the Directorate of Education for electricity and internet services, which are more accessible in Afrin city than in more remote areas.

There were concerns in some circles that SIG and Turkish financial resources are directed more toward religious learning, leaving the CSOs to pick up the tab on supporting regular schools. Regardless of the causes, the CSOs still carry a substantial part of the financial burden of providing education in the area, even though they are not very involved in the direct provision of pedagogic inputs.

Ability of schools and CSO-led initiatives to provide a good learning environment

Dropout rates in public schools are rising, particularly among boys in elementary school and girls starting middle school, with displaced students experiencing higher rates than residents. Financial difficulties and seasonal agricultural work, such as olive harvesting, contribute significantly to this phenomenon. Sometimes students may be absent for extended periods; CSOs' remedial classes can help them return and progress to the next grade. Prior to 2018, the imposition of the Kurdish language by then Kurdish affiliated de facto powers and the cancellation of Arabic instruction caused many students to drop out of schools and not return. After the areas was taken over by the Syrian National army, affiliated nominally with the SIG, many Kurdish students feel alienated from the education process in like manner.

Girls faced and continue to face additional barriers due to cultural attitudes toward their education and security. CSOs aim to ensure equitable support to males and females in their programs. However, they often avoid gender mixing because of cultural sensitivities. Like in the Idlib region, the separate but equal principle has not provided a truly equal alternative for girls.

There are incidents of violence involving military factions and security forces intervening in schools, including physical assaults on teachers, weapon possession by students, and sexual harassment of female students. In response, some school principals take measures to ensure students' safety, such as visiting homes and talking to parents. They also resort to preventing unauthorized entry by setting their personnel to control access to schools, in the absence of support from the Directorate of Education or local councils on this issue.

Curricula used by CSOs

The SIG has developed its own brand of curriculum, often referred to as the Interim Curriculum. It was adapted from the GoS pre 2011 curriculum after removing most political and ideological references. On the other hand, the Turkish education system imposes curricula with amendments made by the Turkish Ministry of Education, resulting in books with a predominance of religious themes and using iconography and images reinforcing social conservative norms. The SIG curriculum is harder but leads to exams that that have a wider acceptability, whereas the programs provided in the Turkish funded schools is easier, and the

exams are automated and graded locally which allows for some room to manipulate the system. Local councils often promote the latter programs, and parents' preferences for the conservative outlook of the program have made the use of the Turkish curriculum more popular. Either way, the students wanting to continue their university education in Türkiye must take the YÖS equivalency test for foreign students. The SIG curriculum is stronger, but the Turkish one provides better chances of learning the Turkish language to pass the exam and move on to Turkish universities.

CSOs offer accelerated remedial curricula using the same modified books but in a condensed format. Teachers cannot alter lessons but have raised concerns about errors in the textbooks. The curricula do not reflect the heritage of Syria's diverse regions, which is sensitive in Afrin due to its Kurdish community. CSOs use documentation mechanisms involving photo submissions and periodic evaluations by third parties, but there is often no regular verification of project implementation beyond the documentation of inputs; learning and educational outcomes are rarely the subject of monitoring and evaluation processes.

Values promoted by CSOs

CSOs can nominally focus on values related to women's rights, justice, and mental health through programs implemented in schools, but these are often part of protection initiatives rather than core educational programs and are typically time-bound and presented in watered down ways. Mental health is not a central component of the educational system, as public schools lack permanent psychological counseling departments. CSOs generally avoid engaging with broader societal values to prevent parental objections, adhering closely to donor intentions without making substantial changes to societal norms. This is not unlike the situation in Idlib, albeit there is not central authority in Afrin that intervenes to control the values disseminated in the schools. (See above in the section on Idlib for a comparable analysis on the limitations of the role of CSOs in promoting discussions and debate about values.)

CSOs include values of peace, citizenship, and equality in their proposals, websites, and official curricula. However, these concepts are not effectively promulgated by the CSOs. Concerns over the attitudes of parents, ongoing security risks, tensions between local communities (hosts and displaced communities as well as among displaced communities), differences of cultural norms between Arab and Kurdish communities, constant accusations of discrimination and the whimsical attitudes of de facto powers and local militias make any public debate on values an explosive issue.

Despite efforts to promote civil peace and diversity, the impact of these efforts is limited by the Directorate of Education's interference and control over the interpretations of religious values and fears of openly addressing the grievances of the Kurdish community in the area. Official SIG institutions have not been able to contribute positively to issues of societal equality; discrimination against the Kurdish community persists, and CSOs generally do not address these issues in their programs.

Local community's view on continued CSOs engagement in the education sector

CSOs need to revise their intervention strategies to better support education by focusing on continuity, equal distribution of support across schools, and addressing gaps in teachers' salaries and school supplies. Effective collaboration between organizations is essential. The community views the diversity of educational sources as both beneficial, by fostering competition with private schools, and detrimental, as it diverts resources from public

education, and gradually contributes to the brain drain from the regular schools to the CSOs at first, and then when their projects are terminated, teachers are lost to the private sector or leave the education sector or the region, all together. CSOs contribute to vocational training and expand educational opportunities but are not a substitute for comprehensive curriculum development. Furthermore, while religious education is appreciated by many parents, the chaos created by a lack of centralized well-regulated education process assuring the quality and accreditation of education is causing alarm for many parents with regards to their children's future.

The role of civil society in Sweida

Stakeholders in the education sector and the role of civil society actors

The Syrian Ministry of Education is the primary authority in the education sector, responsible for curriculum design and updates as well as the running of public schools. Private institutes also offer supplementary courses that align with the Ministry's curriculum for middle and high school diplomas. Civil society organizations have become increasingly vital in supporting education by providing logistical aid, school supplies, and incentives like free training courses. These organizations are actively involved in educational campaigns to bring dropouts back to school and providing adult literacy programs, often in collaboration with the Ministry of Education.

Over the past two years, the role of CSOs in schools expanded significantly. Initially, only the Syria Trust for Development and UNICEF were permitted to work within schools but worsening economic and security conditions led to a broader acceptance of CSOs' involvement. These organizations were later authorized to collect donations and provide essential supplies, including textbooks, resources to facilitate teacher access to schools in remote areas and upon occasion indirect subsidies to teachers' salaries. Many CSOs are now licensed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and operate openly, though some still rely on informal support from expatriates and local donors. Accessing international donors must be approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Local communities contribute by offering free tutoring, exam papers, and stationery. Some initiatives like Luqmat Ahl (a morsel shard among relatives) address food insecurity among students. This collaborative effort demonstrates a principle of social solidarity aimed at supporting education without intervening to affect the job market for teachers and pulling them away from regular schools.

Resources available to CSOs compared to public and private sectors

Education in Sweida faces significant challenges, including lack of resources, low salaries, and transportation problems, especially to remote areas. Despite these problems, public schools cover a large student demographic, while CSOs serve a smaller segment. CSOs' staff generally receive higher salaries, ranging from $300-500, compared to the public sector's maximum of $35, but these are mainly administrative and auxiliary jobs. CSOs sometime subsidize teacher salaries in regular school rather than lure them away to work as employees of the CSOs. Many CSOs workers also volunteer their time, including many retired and current teachers who offer remedial and tutoring classes to support students in regular schools. CSOs often provide better-quality educational materials and equip classrooms with heating and electricity, which

public schools typically lack. In that regards they tend to make regular classes more accommodating rather than create alternative classroom environments.

CSOs are more focused on urban areas, leaving rural regions to rely on local and expatriate support through informal CBO initiatives. CSOs' projects are often planed and implemented along short-term project cycles; they are influenced by donor interests and priorities, which can change based on political constraints and international trends. For example, some international organizations like UNICEF have recently reduced their support to CSOs, leading to cuts or closure of some activities. When support ends, local communities often step in to maintain educational processes; they undertake essential repairs to school facilities and provide heating during winter. Remote areas, like Mujaymir, depend heavily on local and expatriate contributions to fund community development projects, including education. Local donations and initiatives are crucial for sustaining education in the absence of consistent support.

Ability of schools and CSO-led initiatives to provide a good learning environment

CSO-led educational initiatives offer a more stable and slightly better-resourced learning environment compared to public schools. These initiatives provide safe, equipped locations with essential school supplies and qualified teachers. But these formal initiatives are not scalable and aid to CSOs is shrinking. Recent economic hardships have hit the Sweida area particularly hard and have caused increased dropout rates. Poverty, unemployment, rising costs, and social issues such as school violence and parental separation are affecting prospects of children continuing their education. The war's impact further affects school attendance, especially in remote areas requiring travel. Recent political unrest in the province is also a factor. Yet, communities in Sweida still show a high appreciation for the education of children at large. Where formally registered CSOs are failing, informal CBOs are picking the tab. They may not provide as exemplary conditions as in the case of externally funded CSOs but they are providing minimal conditions to ensure that children have a fair chance to go to school.

Dropout rates are similar between boys and girls, though girls face additional barriers such as early marriage or household responsibilities. Increased religious conservatism in some communities also affects girls' educational opportunities. Displaced individuals receive equal support from CSOs as host communities as aid is directed to support public schools in an area to serve all its residents and not to specific groups as is often the case in some other regions. Despite these local efforts, CSOs' projects have developed a dependency on donor funds and may end abruptly, leaving gaps in educational services. Violence and harassment in schools, including theft of equipment, pose additional challenges. Nonetheless, local CBOs and CSOs continue to drive support to the educational process, despite ongoing difficulties.

Curricula used by CSOs

CSOs do not design new curricula but adhere to the curriculum provided by the GoS's Ministry of Education. They support students with the official curriculum without making modifications. Parents cannot request changes to the curriculum but may ask teachers to focus on areas where their children need improvement. Private schools also follow the Ministry's official curriculum. UNICEF supervisors evaluate teaching methods and provide feedback to improve performance. CSOs employ qualified teachers to monitor educational progress and address issues but do not otherwise intervene in the pedagogic process itself. The curriculum lacks cultural diversity, particularly with regards to religious education, where non-Muslim students

are excluded from lessons on Islam, and the brand of religious studies provided is not entirely compatible with local community interpretations.

Values promoted by CSOs

CSOs often promote "humane" values and "social balance" without challenging the official curriculum. They focus on recreational activities and non-formal activities to promote values such as tolerance and acceptance of diversity through social-psychological support sessions. Donors do not require specific values to be emphasized, so CSOs align their values with community standards. CSOs strive to be inclusive in their work; displaced students are included in educational processes, receiving logistical support such as school supplies and sometimes food as an incentive to continue their education. CSOs adhere to government-mandated holidays and do not have additional one of their own.

Schools and official curricula have made limited progress in promoting values of peace, citizenship, and equality. Recent updates to the official curriculum have introduced terms like dialogue and peace, but effective implementation is lacking. Most teachers are not trained in constructive dialogue and use authoritarian methods. Dispute resolution among students is also inadequate, reflecting broader problems with conflict resolution in the area. Building peace requires constructive dialogue, respect for diversity, and promoting justice and equality, which are often absent in schools. Citizenship values should reflect equal participation in school events, but favoritism is common. Recent curriculum updates include these concepts, but their effective implementation relies on teachers' ability to convey them. Schools often neglect different beliefs and ethnicities, which should be included to promote social cohesion. In general, the system in Sweida is more focused on improving access to education than being concerned with challenging ideological principles of the GoS curricula and values.

Local community's view on continued CSOs engagement in the education sector

The local communities recognize the limited role of international and formal CSOs in education and stress the need for continued involvement of parents and communities in the education process. While there is growing and more vocal interest to enhance values of citizenship and equality in the province at large, the bulk of the communities still believe in the role of formal education in regular school as the only viable way to provide education for all. The role of CSOs is seen as a temporary phase to shore up the public education system. Demands for more voice, equality, democracy is addressed to the national political system at large an not to the educational authorities. CSOs are not an alternative to a national educational system although the GoS is not able to cover all needs equitably and address grievances in a fair manner. Attempts to diversify sources of pedagogic processes do not seem to be welcomed. The local communities believe that CSOs work in education is crucial and must be strengthened, especially during transitional phases, but only to ensure the protection and development of

The role of civil society in Dara'a

Stakeholders in the education sector and the role of civil society actors

The Syrian Ministry of Education oversees the education sector, setting curricular standards and developing regular updates. Private institutes offer additional courses that complement this

curriculum and prepare students to take formal diploma tests. Civil society organizations have taken on a crucial role in supporting education by providing logistical support, school supplies, and incentives like free classes to support students to take formal exams. CSOs had a legacy of working in the sector, when the areas fell outside the control of the central government; however, their role regressed considerably after donors decided to divest from the area upon its return to Damascus's control. However, their involvement has grown significantly over the past two years, resuming many of their old roles and developing new ones. Nonetheless, CSOs in the region receive little donor aid still. They are mainly collecting donations from expatriates and from local charities and charitable persons. Local initiatives are mostly informal and aim to cover specific short term needs or gaps. They have become a dominant model for improving services in all sectors. They do not constitute a specific type of stakeholders, as local arrangements differ from one town to the next. But this model involves coordination between informal community groups, local elders organized in a "central committee' and public institutions and local councils.

In terms of interaction and networking, the relationship between CSOs and government entities has fluctuated. State institutions were initially resistant to cooperating with CSOs on education, but some cooperation emerged, with CSOs often working around strict regulations to fill gaps in services. Organizations faced challenges in securing security permissions but coordinating with some de facto powers like the 8th brigade (mostly comprised of ex combatants from Dara'a) helped to normalize the positioning of CSOs.

Cooperation among CSOs is limited to logistical support rather than sharing financial burdens. CSOs operations are highly localized. Donors do not encourage such cooperation, indeed, in most cases donors' due diligence procedures prohibit such cooperation. Moreover, communities and expatriates providing resources to local initiatives remain small and local in nature.

Resources available to CSOs compared to public and private sectors

In Dara'a, the education sector faces challenges such as resource shortages, low salaries, and the unavailability of transportation for teachers and students. Public schools are serving a large student base, while CSOs are focusing on a smaller segment. CSOs' staff typically earn higher salaries compared to their public-school counterparts, and CSOs often provide better educational materials and facilities, but their interventions are selective and not scalable. Their projects are generally planned based on short cycles and are mostly influenced by donor interests and priorities. This creates major disruptions when funding decreases. By contrast, community-based initiative relying on local and expatriate contributions are less visible but are essential for sustaining education by leveraging their resources with those of the public institutions creating for more durable and locally relevant solutions, particularly in remote areas.

CSOs are supplying essential items like textbooks, transportation for teachers, reconstruction of schools, as well as running some informal education programs such as supporting remedial classes and tutorial lessons. Local initiatives also contribute by offering food to impoverished students. The primary mode of communal support is known as "faza'a" or urgent mobilization aimed at achieving specific short-term goals or to fill in a specific gap in the provision of the service. They do that in close cooperation with local authorities and often hand over their achievements to the regular schools to manage them. In that regard, the civic model in Dara'a is focused on generating social and community capital to support the education process but

not on creating a parallel system that would compete with the formal education process or pull away teachers from formal schools. While some CSOs are licensed to gain access to international donors (primarily from the United Nations), most operate informally as their funding is not incumbent on formal grants.

These local initiates and drives cannot cover long term needs in the sector. As the economic situation declines and resources dwindle, teachers are finding it increasingly difficult to survive on basic salaries, even when partially supported by CSOs and civic initiatives. Many teachers are opting to join the private sector, leave the country or change their careers, creating major human resource gaps. Gaps in core subjects are covered by less qualified replacements. In some cases, there were reports of recent high school graduates being hired to become teachers without further training and qualification.

CSOs sometimes intervene to train teachers. Women teachers are increasingly finding entry points in the public sector to replace male teachers who are opting to leave to work in the CSOs or the private sector. This may provide them with new opportunities for employment, but often they accept lower salaries and are not treated fairly. Thus, while civic initiatives may intervene to support acute and temporary urgent needs, they cannot address deep structural needs and prejudices.

Ability of schools and CSO-led initiatives to provide a good learning environment

With the decline in military operations and relative stability in Dara'a's towns, the incidence of school dropouts has decreased after 2018. Dropout rates vary by gender, age, and timing, but economic hardship remains a major factor, with most dropouts being male students. In Tafas, male students typically drop out around age ten, while female students tend stay a bit longer and leave during the preparatory stage. Contributing factors include poor economic conditions, which drive male children to work to support their families, and female children to be forcefully married before reaching adulthood. Also, many children drop out after experiencing bullying because of their economic status or for being IDPS. Some dropouts are incentivized by opportunities to work in smuggling and drug dealing. Other factors include security concerns for the older males who fear to be recruited to the military service and / or being subjected to security checks. Many opt to leave schools and migrate or move from the public eye in rural areas.

Many public schools in the area are damaged as a result of fighting and some are still occupied by IDPs as temporary shelters. The remaining classrooms are overcrowded and provide a poor environment for learning. Combined with a widespread belief that higher education is useless to obtain a job, general perceptions that continuing education in universities is fraught with corruption, and that university degrees provide no useful life-skills, these factors act as strong incentives for parents to pull their children out of schools.

In contrast, dropout rates are lower in private and civil society-supported educational programs, as students who pay for or voluntarily enroll in these programs are more motivated to attend. Civil society organizations have initiated various projects to combat dropout rates, such as the Category B curriculum to reintegrate students into age-appropriate grades, improvements to school environments, and support for married girls to continue their education. The Al-Birr Association provides food coupons to encourage re-enrollment, though these initiatives face logistical impediments and are not scalable.

CSO-led initiatives offer a better learning environment compared to public schools, providing better-resourced facilities with necessary supplies. They often provide resources to train teachers and may at time subsidize their incomes, thus contribute to improved quality of teaching. CSOs' support is equitable and non-discriminatory in nature, but the reliance on donor funding can lead to abrupt project terminations, creating gaps in educational services. CSOs cannot offer a visibly better environment in their initiatives, but civic engagement is making a dent in how public schools provide their services. In Dara'a the general trend today is for civic actors to focus on scalability of access at the expense of quality.

Gender equality in educational opportunities is generally maintained by the CSOs, with girls receiving equal access to education and training, though vocational courses often reflect stereotypically gendered academic and career paths. Educational opportunities at the university level are constrained by customs and traditions, particularly in more conservative areas, which restrict girls' ability to travel for education.

In civil society organizations, monitoring of the quality of education is primarily managed by committees appointed by the CSO's leadership, with documentation often involving photos and anecdotal documentation of success stories. At best it might include pre and post activity questionnaires for the beneficiaries of the programs. There is no long-term monitoring of quality and impact of education programs beyond individual projects.

Given the synergy between public schools and the civic actors, the monitoring and evaluation processes of the CSOs provide an important insight of how the sector is functioning at large. Public authorities have lost the ability to effectively control quality. Official superintendents oversee the teaching in schools but the system, in general, lacks the necessary resources to sustain the monitoring of the education process. CSOs' staff lack the skills to replace the official superintendents and cannot make up for all the shortages and limitations of infrastructure, personnel, and adherence to curricula. Most monitoring procedures are focused on the quantity of the inputs and not the quality of outcomes. This means that many of the harder to reach needs are often sidelined. Students with special needs face special hardships in such a situation.

Security concerns impact educational access, with military checkpoints and risk of detention limiting university attendance and forcing students to settle for less desirable study options. However, safety during travel to schools is generally ensured by community customs that protect girls, and local notables play a role in maintaining security. Nonetheless, community protection in the face of overt violence has not been able to deal with drug-related issues in the schools. CSOs and local authorities have limited resources to face this growing problem.

Curricula used by CSOs

Educational curricula align with government standards, ensuring consistency in exams. Civil society organizations supplement core subjects with training courses for teachers and tutorials for students, but they operate within the normative frameworks of the official curriculum. Before 2018, CSOs had more freedom to alter curricula, including removing political references and ideological content imposed by the GoS. Today Dara'a's schools nominally adopt the full official curriculum set by Damascus with all its ideological references. However, in the classrooms, teachers still have their own ways of maneuvering around these subjects. Students must learn them by heart for their exams, but for the most part they are no longer indoctrinated by them. On the other hand, Dara'a has not seen the establishment of religious schools, and extremist

factions failed to influence the education process at large. The community has gradually learned to assert its values and preferences, neither the official state ideology nor the radical Islamist one has strongholds in the province.

Organizations are allowed to enhance certain subjects through tutoring and reinforcement classes, but they must obtain the Ministry of Education's approval first. While CSOs cannot amend or change the content of the curriculum they have some leeway to adopt better teaching methods to improve student engagement and active learning. Community groups and de facto forces typically do not interfere with curricula or teaching methods.

Parents often appreciate CSOs-run programs for their children and value the extracurricular activities provided by civil society organizations but when it comes to secondary education certification, they prefer having their children take exams at government centers and obtain accredited certificates. Many students have dropped out of school when the area was outside of GoS's control, and many students obtained unaccredited certificates from opposition institutions like the SIG. Today these young adults have a hard time to seek public employment or to catch up on their education. Parents want to make sure that the next generation of children receive fully accredited degrees. Civic initiatives and volunteering parents are directing civic engagement to the basics of education and opting away from qualitative CSOs programs that do not directly contribute to achieve this basic goal.

A major challenge in that regard, is the insistence of the Ministry of Education to constantly upgrade and update the curricula without having the resources to train the teachers and to provide the materials needed to support the teachers in promulgating these updates in the classrooms. Whatever is the merit of these curricular innovations, in a country emerging from war, the focus should be on the basics. Parent and teachers in Dara'a have chosen that approach to implementing the curriculum.

Values promoted by CSOs

De facto powers interfere little in the dissemination of values or imposing of ideological symbols and holidays. These formal ideological constructs are the sole prerogative of the central government according to the agreements that allowed the return of the province to the control of Damascus. The relationship between CSOs and local authorities is cooperative, with negligible confrontations, in strong contrast to the tensions between local military actors and the central government security forces. Civilian authorities facilitate educational projects of the CSOs and vice versa.

However, formal values imposed in the curriculum do not filter to the actual teachings in the classrooms. Teachers ultimately interpret the values in manner compatible with community values and social norms. And as was pointed earlier, CSOs and local civic initiatives have opted not to challenge the formal role of the state but to influence the process through the normal operations of the formal schools.

However, as CSOs and civic initiatives are born by the community more than by donor funds, they create indirect pressure to uphold community values and social norms. The teachers in the regular schools have the full community support in that regard. This has had positive impacts in shielding communities from extreme radical ideas and from direct confrontation with the central government on ideological grounds. But it has its negative impacts, especially in upholding rigid norms when it comes to equal access for girls to choose their educational paths and future careers.

CSOs can provide some mitigation against the rigid imposition of social norms and the often-conservative interpretations of religious doctrines with regards to girls' education in their extra-curricular activities, non-formal programs, and psycho-social support activities within schools rather than independent centers. Focus on values of equality is addressed in the form of play, life-skills courses and other like non-formal education programs.

In many cases, CSOs have been able to provide qualitatively different entry points for girls to change the course of their lives through vocational training. While traditional norms encouraged girls to pursue stereotypical study and career options, the dire economic conditions are making the prospects of women earning income in non-traditional fields more acceptable to conservative communities. CSOs are channeling such challenges into forging new opportunities. But progress made in that regards, is limited as resources are limited. Some parts of Dara'a are harder to accept these new realities than others. The Eastern countryside is less accommodating of transformation of social norms than the Western countryside. All this is to say that values are not transmitted in the curricula but through time consuming social negotiations. CSOs have to tread very careful grounds in Dara'a, like in other places in Syria, using limited resources to reconstruct the basic rights to obtain universal access to education for children, they manage the value issues as best they can but they often find it more productive to leave that issue to the discretion of local teachers rather than invest major resources and social capital to address them.

In the educational context of Dara'a, there is a lack of clear approach for promoting peace. CSOs have promoted different concepts related to social peace such as appreciation of inclusivity and awareness of Syria's cultural diversity. While these topics were a corner stone of donor aid to the region when it was under opposition control until 2018, they dropped from the donors' agendas afterwards. Today issues related to social peace are often addressed indirectly by providing courses in non-violent communication and various extracurricular activities. Yet, as in many other places in Syria, these values are left to the interpretation of local teachers. These interpretations are circumstantial. Local conflicts between de facto actors form Sweida and Dara'a can unleash hate discourses; teachers can simultaneously talk about peace while glorifying past wars and warriors and evoking violence as the only way to obtain peace.

Citizenship education in the curriculum emphasizes duties to the homeland without addressing citizens' rights. Diversity and inclusiveness are not overt topics in the curriculum. Communities in Dara'a are exclusive and most students are not likely to encounter students form other backgrounds until they are in university, when they have already been influenced by social stereotypes and prejudices against the imagined "other". This is not unique to Dara'a but in Dara'a it is particularly manifest. Across Syria, the lack of understanding of the country's diversity of cultures, ethnicities as well as religious and sectarian beliefs was at the core of the ongoing conflict. Yet, the formal curriculum stubbornly avoids addressing this issue. Recent years have seen increased efforts by CSOs to incorporate cultural awareness and sensitivities related to the diversity of Syrian communities into lessons and programs. But CSOs must tread a very careful security and social environment. They lack the resources and the social traction to scale up these efforts.

Equality is only broadly mentioned in curricula, but without addressing issues of gender equality. Indeed, the national curriculum has its many biases and gender stereotypes. CSOs in Dara'a are not concerned with challenging the ideological constructs of the national curriculum. Instead, they have introduced basic ideas about women's rights through non-formal education and extracurricular awareness sessions. However, promoting full equality is

challenging. The gap is huge between such initiatives and the social reality students face at home, where traditional gender roles and domestic violence are prevalent. For the most part, teachers are not equipped to handle such issues; their teaching methods often fail to support broader principles of peace and equality in practice in the classrooms. Results were more productive when working with teachers and counselors as opposed to overt labeling of programming under the rubric of equality and peacebuilding. Some pilot initiatives were carefully designed such as the initiative developed by the NGO Mars with the support of the UNDP. Still the challenges are not to be underestimated. Poorly designed and rushed programs to promote equality may backfire and cause parents to pull their children, especially girls from schools. The tradeoffs of normalizing access to education in the post conflict and the promotion of values of peace and equality have no simple solutions.

Local community's view on continued CSOs engagement in the education sector

Education is highly valued due to the region's historical commitment to literacy and the role it has played in supporting social mobility in the past. Most of the population of Dara'a was agrarian and living in poverty, education provided the best means to break the cycle of poverty for the bulk of the population. Private schools are unaffordable for most, and public schools are the only real option. CSOs in Dara'a opted not to provide highly qualitative programs parallel to the public school system and chose instead to direct their limited resources to improve the public educations system as best as they can. The quality of the service is not ideal; however, the public perception of the quality and affordability of the service are among the highest in the country.

The region is still struggling to normalize its services six years after it was returned to the control of the central government. Communities face major challenges, not least of which is the issue of drug abuse among young people and the lack of economic opportunities. Communities have not depended on CSOs to find solutions for them; there is a realistic understanding of the limitations of donors' funds. By integrating civic engagement into the formal education process, Dara'a may provide a reasonable model for how CSOs can make the most impact in the future:

- Streamline service provisions in regular schools.
- Focus on closing the gap for dropouts,
- Introduce innovations only when they have a good chance of being replicated and scaled, there are good uses for resource other than meeting donors' agendas.
- Avoid confrontations related to the ideological content of the curricula and focus instead on enhancing learning opportunities and skill acquisition.
- The community is the main stakeholder and community capital is the most sustainable resource. To mobilize this resource education must be relevant to these communities.
- Values are critical and one must work to broaden their interpretation and application, but this is a socially negotiated process that must strike a balance between national ideological constructs and local community norms. Peace cannot be gained by fighting, and equality cannot be achieved by turning a blind eye to the realities of a country not yet out of grip of war. Dara'a's communities and civic actors are struggling to shield the education process and secure a minimum of hope for their children.