

Effective local peace initiatives and inclusive national peace negotiations in Syria

Community leaders, tribal elders, religious figures and above all ordinary citizens are involved in an extraordinary array of local initiatives to mitigate conflict and violence, and to hold together the remaining threads of Syria's social fabric. Across Syria, these local 'peace resources' are: (a) filling the void created by an absent state to provide some basic order in their communities; (b) intervening to halt the escalation of inter- and intra-communal violence; (c) negotiating local truces and ceasefires between opposition groups, and between opposition groups and government forces; (d) organising the exchange of prisoners or bodies; and (e) working to prevent inter-communal violence and conflict by promoting human rights, and the values of tolerance and coexistence. In spite of these brave actions, the impact of peace resources is, on the whole, restricted to the specific communities where they live, and is mostly short-term in nature. This is due to the isolated way in which peace resources work and their reliance on traditional and customary approaches.

At the national level there has been some progress in building processes aimed at negotiating a political settlement to the Syrian conflict. Importantly, attempts have also been made to make these processes more inclusive and accessible to different Syrian groups, especially through the promotion of civil society participation. However, ordinary Syrians who remain in their community say that civil society organisations operating at a national level, or in exile, are not informing them about these processes and are not best placed to represent their views. As a result, many Syrians feel that their voices are not being heard. This contributes to an overall lack of support or pressure for national-level peace processes among many community groups.

In December 2013 and January 2014 the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria (CCSDS) and the Peaceful Change Initiative (PCI) mapped peace resources in nine provinces inside Syria.¹ The mapping was followed by a Dialogue Forum in February 2014, which brought together 28 community-level peace resources to discuss and deepen key insights from the research.

This briefing highlights key lessons learned about the challenges that peace resources face in effectively mitigating conflict inside Syria, as well as the aspirations that communities have for more inclusive peace processes.

¹ The mapping was conducted in nine provinces inside Syria – Al Hasakah, Aleppo, Dar'a, Damascus, Damascus Countryside, Dayr Az Zawr, Hamah, Idlib and Latakia. Mapping also took place amongst Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon and Turkey, but in less depth. It is important to note that most of the mapping took place in what can broadly be described as opposition-controlled areas and therefore mostly reflects the perspectives of people who are more likely to support the Syrian revolution. That said, the mapping also includes people who are equivocal towards the revolution, or who are supportive of the Damascus Government.

The mapping encompassed 25 focus group discussions and 49 interviews with people influential in their community. A total of 245 people participated in the mapping, including 170 men and 75 women, yielding a gender ratio of around 70:30.

This project is funded by the UK Government's Conflict Prevention Pool.

Effective local peace initiatives

The mapping identified some important conditions that need to be in place for local peace initiatives to be effective:

- Strong local traditions of inter- and intra-community conflict resolution practices.
- A broad array of community leaders who have strong *a priori* legitimacy within their communities, and to whom communities have instinctively turned to fill the gap left behind by a collapsed state.
- Acceptance of the need for such initiatives, so as to prevent the further escalation of conflict and to minimise the devastation visited upon ordinary citizens.

However, the mapping also highlighted a number of factors that currently undermine the ability of those leading such initiatives – ‘peace resources’ – to be successful locally, and ultimately to contribute to an overall resolution of conflict in Syria.

Ordinary people, extraordinary situations

Peace resources are often well-educated people who have the respect of their communities, but who have no particular background or skills in conflict resolution, negotiation or mediation. They may, for example, be doctors, engineers or administrators, who suddenly find themselves in a position where they have responsibility for negotiating issues of life-or-death importance on behalf of their community.

Syria has strong traditions of conflict management, mediation and negotiation, as well as a rich tapestry of customs that can provide guidance to peace resources on how to resolve intra- and inter-communal conflicts. However, the scale of conflict and violence in Syria often goes beyond what tradition and customs are able to effectively manage. Mapping participants acknowledged that peace resources are largely doing

the best they can with the tools available to them, but that these tools often lead only to temporary solutions that do not address the drivers of conflict.

In some cases, the solutions chosen to address a particular conflict issue in the short term may even create the conditions for further violence in the future. The mapping revealed a number of examples where communities have turned to unhelpful tactics to pressure reluctant parties to enter into negotiation or mediation processes. For example, if one group has kidnapped for ransom people from another group, the victims' families may arrange a series of revenge kidnappings in order to create a balance of power between the two sides, as an incentive for negotiation.

Mapping participants noted that peace resources are often responding to urgent and dramatic events, and, therefore, do not have time to reflect on new and better adapted methodologies, or to think about longer-term approaches to address the drivers of conflict.

Lesson 1: Programmes that build conflict resolution skills for peace resources, that mentor them as they address practical conflict challenges, and that provide a space for more long-term thinking and planning, are essential for strengthening the impact of community-level peace resources in Syria. While several organisations are already working to provide this kind of support, it is not currently strongly coordinated.

Challenge of meeting high expectations

Many peace resources enjoy *a priori* respect within the community. However, according to the mapping, the key to gaining and maintaining the credibility required to represent a community's interests in conflict resolution and management processes is to be effective within them.

As illustrated above, many peace resources do not have formal training or skills in this area. Furthermore, considering the nature of the conflicts they are dealing with, it is to be expected that some of the negotiation and mediation processes may be highly complex, and it may take substantial time and effort to achieve an effective result. In a situation where communities are desperate for a 'result', peace resources can lose credibility if their initiatives do not come to fruition relatively quickly. The demand from communities for quick results may be an important cause of the predominance of short-term solutions. It may also be the reason behind the high turnover of negotiators, which mapping participants felt is undermining the impact and efficacy of negotiation processes at the community level.

Lesson 2: At the same time as providing technical support in conflict management for peace resources, additional support is required to help them manage their communities' expectations, and to raise awareness about the nature of sustainable conflict resolution.

Peace resources work in isolation

The mapping revealed that the impact of any given peace resource is often geographically limited, and that the initiatives of different peace resources are often isolated from each other. Even within the same town, peace resources working in different parts of the town or amongst different communities tend not to have developed strong patterns of regular contact with each other. While there are many inspiring examples of peace resources coming together in a particular area to establish a reconciliation council or civil peace committee, these organisations tend not to coordinate and collaborate with one another. Connections are even weaker between resources working in different provinces, or between opposition- and government-held areas. This is the case even when peace resources are working on the same or similar issues.

The peace resources who convened for the Dialogue Forum spoke of the acute need for better communication with each other, and were eager to establish a network that could enable them to collaborate across different ethnic, religious and geographical divides (including between opposition- and government-held

Case studies - local peace resources in action

Arbitration between brigades in Aleppo

In Aleppo province there has been significant violence between different opposition brigades. The community asked for a mechanism to arbitrate between the brigades. As a response, a committee was established that brought together representatives of the different fighting factions. Given the previous civilian careers of many brigade members, the committee brought together former judges, experts in Islamic traditions and other people considered to bring relevant expertise to the process. The committee began acting like a court to arbitrate disputes between brigades in order to prevent an escalation in violence. Eventually the court began arbitrating civilian disputes as well.

Civil council in Dayr Az Zawr

In Dayr Az Zawr, a civil council has been established by local citizens to help manage conflict by promoting dialogue and communication. In total the Council has 80 members. When a conflict broke out between two tribes in the area, 20 members were selected as contact points for the conflict resolution process. These members then chose five to form the committee that would intervene directly in the conflict. Decisions about how to proceed in the process were not taken until the five members of the committee had consulted with the 20, who, in turn, consulted with all the remaining members. Efforts were also made to provide feedback about the process to residents with an interest in the outcome.

areas). However, it was clear that peace resources do not currently have a strong, shared sense of what a peaceful Syria can look like, or even who can be involved in making that peace.

They therefore cautioned that a network should be allowed to grow gradually from smaller conversations and collaborative initiatives. This, they felt, would allow trust and common understanding to be built between peace resources from different groups and geographical areas.

Lesson 3: The isolated manner in which peace resources operate limits their impact to the immediate area where they live and work. If local peace resources are going to play a stronger role in addressing broader drivers of conflict in Syria, it is important to find ways of creating greater connections between them, so that they can engage in joint analysis, planning and action. However, such collaboration should be built sensitively, 'from the bottom up', so that peace resources from across divides have the opportunity to build trust with one another.

The work of peace resources is controversial

The scale of suffering inside Syria is such that communities generally welcome initiatives that can bring some relief to their situation, even if it means talking to 'the other side'. In fact, according to the mapping, retired government officials and former army officers, though not wholly trusted, are often regarded as effective peace resources because they can provide an essential communication bridge to the government on urgent community needs.

Some community members in opposition-aligned areas take a relatively pragmatic approach to dialogue with the Damascus government and its supporters, and are willing to engage with whomever necessary in order to achieve their desired result. However, other community members believe that the Damascus government and its supporters have, through their actions, forfeited the right to be part of negotiations about the future of Syria. As a result, mapping participants acknowledged that peace resources can face both reputational and

physical threats from those who do not support dialogue with the Damascus government.

Lesson 4: This raises a broader point about how to promote more inclusive peace processes in Syria, when some do not support dialogue across conflict-divides, and may be willing to undermine, intimidate or harm those that do. It is essential to foster conversations in Syrian communities about the utility of inclusive peace processes, and how they provide an essential foundation for achieving a sustainable peace agreement.

More inclusive national processes

The mapping also sought to understand those existing mechanisms that, if strengthened, can enable communities to connect with, and make their voices heard in, the peace processes taking place at a national level.

There was a particular focus in the Dialogue Forum on identifying ways in which community-level peace resources, and civil society actors operating at a more national level or in exile, could collaborate to develop mechanisms that enable communities to: (a) have access to accurate information about national-level peace processes; and (b) input into those processes.

Isolation from information and influence

People in all regions in Syria feel disconnected from national-level processes aimed at negotiating a political settlement to the conflict. Mapping participants reported having only limited access to trustworthy, unbiased information about these processes. In this regard, it is important to note that a very low proportion of mapping participants reported having access to, or using, social media as a source of information

Members of political parties, some local council members and people associated with more established local civil society organisations were generally perceived to have some access to information about national-level political processes. However, there was a perception across the Syrian regions included in the mapping that those who do have access to information share it exclusively through personal connections and within very small friendship groups.

At the same time, mapping participants felt that they do not have opportunities to influence national-level peace processes, and indeed that their opinions are not being sought by national civil society and political actors. It was instructive that several interlocutors said the mapping was the first time they had been

asked their opinion on issues relating to the long-term future of Syria.

A reluctance to share information and to engage in direct consultation with community groups is understandable, given the security situation inside Syria. Nevertheless, the absence of two-way communication on national peace processes is exacerbating communities' sense of exclusion from them. The result is that while some mapping participants expressed optimism for the Geneva II process, few demonstrated any sense of buy-in or expressed open support.

Lesson 1: There is an urgent need for civil society and political actors involved in national-level peace processes to collectively develop and implement better systems for information exchange and consultation with community groups.

The importance of accurate information about community perspectives

Participants in the Dialogue Forum believed that the success of peace processes depends on accurate information about the situation, experiences, views and aspirations of Syrian communities being provided to those that are directly involved in negotiations, as well as to those that have indirect influence on them. The input of accurate information from the community level is seen as important:

- so as to ensure that community views are taken into consideration by the negotiating parties
- because access to information about the real situation 'on the ground' will lead to better decisions being made in the course of negotiations
- so as to increase the accountability of peace processes towards communities.

In terms of accountability, mapping participants felt that the clearer the information made available to negotiators, the easier it will be to monitor whether they are honestly and diligently representing the interests of Syrian communities.

Lesson 2: The provision of accurate information from communities to those involved in negotiations is seen as essential for the success and legitimacy of peace processes.

The role of peace resources in understanding community perspectives

During the Dialogue Forum, peace resources discussed the role they could play in facilitating information gathering. They discussed the idea of establishing a network of peace resources spanning different parts of Syria, with individual members of the network acting as a focal point for understanding their respective community.

Peace resources were concerned that the process of gathering and disseminating information should be as inclusive as possible and, therefore, suggested that in each area a mapping exercise should be carried out to identify: (a) who are the different community groups present there; and (b) who are the local leaders that can speak on their behalf.

In addition, peace resources made concrete suggestions for how they could generate accurate information about communities. These included: (a) facilitating focus group discussions; (b) conducting interviews with influential people; (c) administering questionnaires for quantitative analysis; and (d) collecting signatures for petitions. That said, participants emphasised the need for a 'bottom-up' approach to information collection, with relationships and networks developed in a gradual manner.

Lesson 3: Even in the midst of the chaos that prevails in many parts of Syria, peace resources were confident that there are ways of generating accurate information on community perspectives for national peace processes, though this needs to be done gradually and in a sensitive manner.

Connecting communities to peace processes through civil society

The mapping was not able to identify many clear examples of direct two-way communication between communities and civil society actors working at the national level or in exile. This is especially the case in regard of communication on national peace processes. According to mapping participants, the ideal would be for national civil society representatives to establish some kind of representation in the different provinces of Syria, so as to bring them closer to communities and to facilitate direct two-way communication. Where this is not possible (e.g. because of security), it was felt that national civil society could still establish alternative communication mechanisms, including indirect communication through intermediaries.

Mapping participants identified a number of existing indirect channels of communication. Local civil society organisations, especially those working on humanitarian issues, provide one channel. Such organisations were thought to work both with communities (their 'beneficiaries') and with organisations operating at a national level (their 'partners'). However, where intermediary channels do exist, they do not at present facilitate communication, as there are no well-established practices or formats for using them to share information with or consult community members.

In their role as active members of civil society with strong links to the 'grassroots', the peace resources participating in the Dialogue Forum felt that they were well placed to represent their communities' perspectives to national civil society actors, especially if they were first supported to establish a 'network' for strong communication and collaboration among themselves.

Lesson 4: National civil society can develop indirect two-way communication with communities through: (a) existing local intermediary organisations; and (b) a network of local peace resources. As security conditions and the space to operate vary greatly within Syria, the approach adopted for two-way communication needs to be tailored to local realities.

Composition of a national civil society platform

Dialogue Forum participants discussed their vision for how civil society should engage in national-level peace processes. Broadly speaking, they were in favour of the establishment of an inclusive national civil society platform, which could be a key focus of engagement between communities 'on the ground' and the negotiation process.

The discussion was by no means conclusive as to how such a platform should be constituted or how it should operate. However, the Dialogue Forum participants did consider the types of actors that they felt should be part of the platform, in order for it to be considered inclusive and legitimate by communities. The list below presents a summary of these conversations. It is intended only to provide some sense of current community expectations of the membership of a platform, were it to be established:

- Religious people
- Tribal Sheiks and elders
- Representatives of family associations and assemblies
- Public figures and social leaders
- Women's groups
- Youth gatherings
- Business people
- Lawyers
- Cultural / educational groups

Some Dialogue Forum participants felt that it would also be important for any civil society platform to include civilian representatives of armed groups.

Lesson 5: It is important that civil society participants in any national platform are selected carefully, to include the types of people that communities view as legitimate. Further, it will be important to clearly communicate the composition and role of any platform, so as to manage expectations and to make sure that communities understand its function.

Legitimacy to represent communities

Independent civil society organisations are a relatively new phenomenon in the Syrian context. The mapping suggested that in many areas they are not yet seen as fully credible or trusted. In order to have legitimacy, those involved in a civil society platform, or who are representing communities in the official political process, should:

- represent a verifiable constituency 'on the ground'
- have a wide network of relationships amongst their constituency and with other groups
- have the ability to communicate clearly with different groups (including factions and brigades)
- have good analytical skills
- believe in the need for a peace process that is inclusive of different groups' perspectives – including the perspectives of people from different sides of the revolution.

Most importantly, the mapping revealed two clear lenses through which communities view legitimacy:

Proven effectiveness. Even persons who do not enjoy *a priori* legitimacy (such as tribal, social or religious leaders) can earn the legitimacy to represent their community, if they have relevant skills, knowledge and relationships.

Transparency and consultation. Legitimacy is bolstered when people share information with the community about the situation / negotiation / mediation that they are involved in, and regularly ask communities for their views and experiences in relation to the pertinent issues.

Lesson 6: The individual legitimacy of civil society actors involved in national peace processes depends on their ability to be 'effective' and the degree to which they make a concerted effort to consult with, and share information to, community groups. Importantly, even if not initially held, legitimacy is something that can be earned over time.

Summary of learning

Effective local peace initiatives:

1. Local peace resources need capacity-building support in conflict resolution skills. This entails stronger coordination by those providing such support.
2. Additional support is also required to help peace resources to manage the expectations of their communities.
3. It is important to find ways of creating greater connections between peace resources, so as to increase their impact. Such collaboration should be built sensitively from the 'bottom-up'.
4. It is essential to foster conversations in Syrian communities about the utility of inclusive peace processes, as not all support engagement across divides.

More inclusive national processes:

1. Civil society and political actors involved in national-level peace processes should collectively develop and implement better systems for information exchange and consultation with community groups.
2. The provision of accurate information from communities to those involved in negotiations is seen as essential for the legitimacy of peace processes.
3. Peace resources are confident that they can generate accurate information on community perspectives for national peace processes.

4. National civil society can develop indirect two-way communication with communities through: (a) existing local intermediary organisations; and (b) a network of local peace resources.
5. Civil society participants in any national platform should be selected carefully, to include the types of people that communities view as legitimate.
6. The individual legitimacy of civil society actors involved in national peace processes depends on their ability to be 'effective', and the degree to which they make a concerted effort to consult with, and share information to, community groups.



Contact information



The **Peaceful Change Initiative** is a not-for-profit network, registered in the UK, with operations in North Africa, the Middle East and the South Caucasus. We work to support more effective management of conflict in societies undergoing significant change, by increasing skills and opportunities for dialogue, inclusion and collaboration.

Hub Islington
5 Torrens St
London, EC1V 1NQ
info@peacefulchange.org
www.peacefulchange.org



The **Center for Civil Society and Democracy** seeks to support and strengthen civil society and democracy, and promote the values of freedom, justice and coexistence through the analysis of the current situation and developing and implementing solutions.

ccsdsyria@gmail.com
www.ccsdsyria.org