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CONFLICT  
RESEARCH  
PROGRAMME

Research at LSE ■

# A process in its own right: the Syrian Civil Society Support Room

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16 June 2019



## About the Conflict Research Programme at LSE

The Conflict Research Programme aims to understand why contemporary violence is so difficult to end and to analyse the underlying political economy of violence with a view to informing policy. Our research sites are Iraq, Syria, South Sudan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Syria Conflict Research Programme focuses on five interrelated research topics. The function and legitimacy of public authority, identity politics, economic drivers of the conflict, civicism and reconstruction. The programme uses a mixed methodology using primary and secondary sources. The programme collaborates with the Middle East based Governance and Development Research Centre.



This research was funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID); however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official positions or policies.

**Front cover picture:** The UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura opening the Syria peace talks in Geneva in January 2017. Behind him he chose to have two Syrian women. A member of the Civil Society Support Room and a member of the Women Advisory Board. On his right sat the government delegation and on his left sat the opposition delegation, both not showing in this picture. Photo credit: Sputnik International.



*Over the years, both in Afghanistan and in Syria, I have seen the substantial impact on peace building by civil society, and in particular women. This has been especially useful recently in the establishment of the Civil Society Support Room and the Women Advisory Board in the context of the Syrian political process. The advice, creative ideas and approaches I received were invaluable. ”*

***Staffan de Mistura, former UN Special Envoy to Syria***

## Acknowledgements

We would like to express our great appreciation to everyone who helped us in collecting the papers, background materials and data for this research. This includes the CSSR participants in the survey, the interviews and the focus group who provided us with a wealth of ideas and plenty of their time. We are particularly grateful for the help provided by Mr Alladin Zayyat, who took upon himself to collect and archive the documents of the CSSR including its internal reports, recommendations, evaluations and communications. Assistance provided by Sami Hadaya in conducting interviews, and by Sohaib AL Zoubi in convening the focus group is greatly appreciated. Help provided by Hani Jesri in designing the questionnaire is greatly valued. Feedback given by members of OSE, swisspeace, and Noref on the design of the questionnaire was very helpful.

We are also grateful to the members of the OSE who answered our interviews questions and engaged with us constructively in conducting this research, and especially to Salvatore Pedula, the OSE member in charge of coordinating the CSSR who engaged with us in providing needed background information and helped us to disseminate the initial findings of our research which increased its impact. We would like to thank Staffan de Mistura who granted us a meeting with him to discuss our initial findings and answered our questions on the impact of CSSR and for agreeing to speak at the launch event of this research.

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## Executive Summary

This study investigates the Syrian Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), the first formal mechanism to involve civil society in the United Nations-led Syrian political talks in Geneva. Through a survey, interviews and focus groups, the research explored the impact and design of the CSSR. It was done primarily from the perspective of CSSR participants themselves but also involved interviews and discussions with members of the UN Office of the Special Envoy (OSE) team. The results provide insight into the value of inclusive civil society mechanisms formally linked to track I negotiations and the report considers the key design elements that can optimize the impact of the CSSR moving forward.

The CSSR was established under the leadership of the third UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura. This was after years of active lobbying by Syrian civil society calling for an independent role in the political process. It began as a small unstructured meeting with 12 participants, mainly men representing the views of the opposition. It gradually evolved into a more structured mechanism that enabled more than 500 members of Syrian civil society, one third of them women, including Syrian experts and technocrats, to play an advisory role to the UN Special Envoy and his team, and provide input into the broader political process. As a novel approach to rendering political talks more inclusive, the CSSR's flexible architecture was capable of adapting and responding to recommendations by its participants, generating a sense of ownership while also improving its design over time. While it still requires further improvement, the CSSR can be seen as a qualified success with positive impacts on multiple levels, even beyond intended ones.

What emerges from the research is that the CSSR is more than a complementary advisory mechanism that helped enrich the UN-led political process and has added value independent of its impact on negotiations between the government and the opposition. Eighty-one per cent of respondents, for example, reported that CSSR participation helped to break barriers and converge conflicting viewpoints. Participating in the CSSR was a transformative process that fostered dialogue and deliberation among civic actors across social, ethnic and geographic divides over time to jointly analyse realities and soften hard-line positions, engage in collective problem-solving, and foster consensus on shared principles and inclusive pathways forward. As such, the findings support the conclusions of other studies that civic inclusion processes can create new opportunities for citizen engagement, allowing multiple perspectives to develop a shared vision, shape priorities, generate agenda items and potentially legitimise an agreement. In this way, it can help to address the original drivers of the conflict.

Given the visible gridlock at the political level, taking part in the CSSR unsurprisingly reduced confidence in the track I negotiations and its delegations. It did not help generate trust in the political process and the political actors but it did increase trust among participants

themselves. For the mediator, it provided a countervailing account of the conflict to those presented by the regime and opposition and their external backers. It proved that Syrians from different backgrounds can come together while also questioning prevailing sectarian narratives of the war and highlighting key areas of possible agreement. With the track I process stalling and the negotiating parties refusing to sit with one another, the CSSR rose in prominence and became akin to a track II process. It allowed the interests, needs and preferences of diverse communities on the ground to be expressed while also creating space for building constituencies of change across dividing lines to engage in consensus-building. Through the opportunities it provided to network with other relevant external actors, the CSSR helped deepen the understanding of the underlying drivers of conflict while also, at times, facilitating some positive action on the ground, including humanitarian access, temporary ceasefires, and negotiated evacuations. In general, women were more positive than men in their responses on the impact of participating in CSSR on bridging perspectives, breaking stereotypes and reducing prejudice as well as more positive of its impact on the broader political process.

In Syria, a key question is how to preserve and build a pluralistic democratic Syria where citizens from all backgrounds feel protected. The CSSR became a space for civic actors from different backgrounds, geographies, and perspectives to meet and challenge themselves and the dominant narratives that sustain conflict and shape international action. The process of coming together, despite deep mistrust among some members and clashing perspectives, to deliberate on key issues and principles could be described as a form of 'pre-figurative politics' or re-imagining of the social contract in a non-violent manner. The findings underscore the importance of inclusive mechanisms designed to promote dialogue and reasoned deliberation to forge a consensus around a shared vision, one that can foster social cohesion and create the conditions to align stakeholders behind the public interest and the foundational principles that can underpin a legitimate settlement. The close link of the CSSR to official processes was critical for legitimating and elevating the role of civil society in peace-making and peace-building. However, a critical area where CSSR failed on inclusivity is on having a balanced representation of Syrian Kurds.

One important thing that emerged in the research is the strong feeling of ownership most participants had of the CSSR. Many do not perceive it as a top-down initiative but as a mechanism they lobbied for and earned. They were not passive users or beneficiaries of the CSSR. This led to a positive, more proactive and engaged attitude by participants. At one point, some even exercised the use or threat of boycotting meetings as a tool to be heard. Many desired and demanded more visibility for the work of the CSSR and the recommendations they produced.

The study explores in detail all the design elements of the CSSR and the ways to improve them in Section 5. Eighty

percent of respondents want the CSSR to continue even if the peace talks fail, and most of them they would like the OSE to continue to manage the CSSR. They believe that CSSR helped to create an inclusive civic framework through which Syrian civil society could play a larger role in the future.

We developed our recommendations believing that it would be a missed opportunity not to build on the achievements of the CSSR and that other peace processes could learn from the CSSR experience.

#### General findings and recommendations on civil society inclusion in any peace-making process

1. From the very start of any peace-making initiative, formally mandate and design a civil society track that is linked to official negotiation processes but is valued as a process in its own right.
  2. Understand how civil society inclusion can support the work of mediators by signposting the way forward on key issues and areas of agreement while also by providing a third countervailing narrative.
  3. Capitalize on the ability of inclusion mechanisms to increase connectivity between policy level and grassroots levels, providing for improved analysis of the changing dynamics and perceptions that can affect the prospects for peace-making while also facilitating humanitarian action.
  4. When designing inclusion mechanisms, start with a broad conception of civil society and extend inclusion beyond formally constituted CSOs. It is an ideal platform to include those with technical expertise in the country in order to feed into effective analyses of key topics while promoting productive dialogue on them.
  5. Develop flexible and iterative processes that involve participants in the design, agenda development, and outreach in order to promote local ownership, transparency, and consensus-building.
2. CSSR activities should not be limited to running concurrently with political talks. This created huge discontinuities in progress and reduced the potential cumulative of the impact of CSSR.
  3. There is a need for a stronger mandate to include women and civil society through a UN Security Council Resolution, one that can provide for a mechanism akin to a track II process, to allow it to meet more frequently and develop a longer-term approach that can build on achievements and meet the varied objectives desired by civil society.
  4. The CSSR should provide input into a constitutional committee, if established, given its ability to promote consensus-building on foundational issues, which will be needed to underpin any constitutional process. The CSSR can also be seen as a mechanism to widen participation in the constitutional process.
  5. Given the value that all participants placed on the CSSR for the opportunity it provided to create an inclusive civic framework to shape the future of Syria, it is important to leverage the CSSR and invest in its potential to provide the foundation or backbone for a larger national dialogue process.
  6. Aligning the participation criteria to the selection priorities chosen by participants can help undermine the sectarian narratives that inform and shape the conflict and international responses. These priorities are commitment to human rights, and the ability to express the priorities of civilians. The least important criteria they cited was sectarian and ethnic identity.
  7. To widen the impact of the CSSR, create and support mechanisms to ensure improved outreach and transparency.
  8. Reinforcing and scaling up the participation in the CSSR, including from the Kurdish Syrian civil society, can help combat or balance the geopolitical rivalries and extensive forces to meet demands for a Syrian-led solution and support locally-led approaches to peace.

#### Key findings and recommendations for the CSSR

1. It is important to continue the CSSR and build and capitalise on its valuable achievements to:
  - a. increase the peacebuilding impact of the CSSR as a space for dialogue across conflict divides and engaging in collective problem-solving, and building consensus on shared principles and pathways forward,
  - b. support the role of the UN Special Envoy in mediation,
  - c. facilitate conflict analysis and humanitarian action on the ground.

## 1 Introduction

The conflict in Syria began with civic protests in March 2011 demanding rights, freedom and dignity that evolved into massive demonstrations by mid-year. Fuelled by long-standing grievances against the regime's repression and kleptocratic rule, the Syrian uprising called for fundamental changes in the relationship between the government and the governed. The regime's subsequent violent reaction to quell the initially peaceful and unarmed demonstrations contributed to the transformation of the civil uprising into an armed rebellion. As the conflict became increasingly militarized and more complex with intensifying external involvement, the violence soon mutated into a full-scale civil war intertwined with a regional and international proxy war that has been increasingly narrated and interpreted through sectarian lenses. Eight years into the war, the conflict has claimed more than half a million lives, produced more than 5.6 million refugees, and internally displaced nearly seven million people.

The extreme violence of the Syrian war, and how it has been represented has shifted attention from the civic roots of the Syrian uprising and the underlying drivers of conflict. Although complex and multi-layered, the conflict is often portrayed as a struggle between two sides - the regime and the armed opposition. This portrayal is flawed not least because the protagonists themselves are fragmented with the regime dependent on several external parties with differing agendas for its survival and an opposition with many components, each itself supported by foreign actors with diverse agendas. Importantly, however, such binary narratives have effectively worked to silence civic voices and render invisible the rich diversity of experiences and perspectives of Syrian citizens that could help deepen understanding of drivers and solutions to the ongoing conflict. For armed parties, these narratives strengthen their power and authority as they claim to authentically represent their constituencies while keeping communities divided, afraid and engaged in zero-sum politics. As a result, spaces for citizens and civil society to collaborate, network, and work together across conflict and spatial divides have narrowed dramatically.

The quick shift in the conflict's narrative, from a civil

uprising that unified Syrians in their quest for political and economic change to a sectarian civil war pitting community against community, has shaped international and local attitudes and threatened the prospects for a peaceful and pluralistic Syria. The escalation of the conflict by external actors, who focused more on arming the opposition, weakened civic elements of the opposition and contributed to the sectarianisation of the conflict. This fed into strategies used by the regime and some of the increasingly well-armed jihadi groups able to marshal war-making resources to control different geographies. Many efforts by the United Nations (UN) and other actors to negotiate an end to the war with the main conflict parties have started, stalled and failed. Today, even as violence subsides and the Syrian regime claims 'victory', a newly appointed UN Special Envoy, Geir Pederson, is attempting to re-start political talks this year.

Amidst this grim picture is the persistence of Syrian civil society and the work of the Civil Society Support Room, established under the leadership of Staffan de Mistura, the third UN Special Envoy for Syria. The Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) is the first formal mechanism to involve civil society in UN-led intra-Syrian talks, an initiative developed after years of active lobbying by Syrian civil society for an independent role. Alongside the establishment of the CSSR, a Women's Advisory Board consisting of 12 Syrian women from different backgrounds (WAB) was also formed as a result of the calls from Syrian women organisations which were met by a receptive and willing Special Envoy.<sup>1</sup>

As a novel approach to rendering talks more inclusive, the CSSR process has not been without its challenges or its detractors but it can be seen as a qualified success by legitimating civil society and increasing its influence while slowly diluting and breaking dominant representations of the conflict. Indeed, the impact of the CSSR on Syrian civil society not only questions prevailing sectarian narratives of the war, providing evidence that Syrians from different backgrounds can come together, it has also created space for constituencies of change across divided communities to develop a shared vision for a future Syria. Importantly, as the track I negotiations stalled with the opposition and government parties refusing to sit with one another, the CSSR (and the WAB) assumed the 'undeclared role' of creating track II processes to express

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Women's Advisory Board, please see <https://bit.ly/31BLymH>

the interests, needs and preference of diverse communities on the ground (Albouzi, 2017, p.2), while signposting the way forward on the critical issues that need to be addressed as well as the possible areas of agreement.

This paper presents and analyses findings of ongoing research conducted by the Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The research involved an online survey of 118 CSSR participants, focus groups, interviews, secondary sources, and discussions with policy-makers. The online survey included 28 questions in Arabic designed to capture the impact of the CSSR on those who have participated, and to elicit their perspectives on specific design elements of the CSSR and how best to improve it moving forward. The LSE team sought external advice and the input of key members of the CSSR in the design of the survey questionnaire as well as soliciting feedback from the UN Office of the Special Envoy (OSE) and its implementing partners, swisspeace and NOREF. Moreover, the team previewed some of the survey findings at a meeting of the CSSR in Geneva in November 2018 and at the LSE conference in December 2018.

## 2 The case for civil society inclusion

Dominant approaches to peace-making usually involve a narrow set of actors, often armed and male, meeting behind closed doors to negotiate a peace deal to end the conflict. Until recently, negotiators and mediators have tended to prefer smaller negotiating tables and favour the exclusion of civil society from peace negotiations, believing it unnecessarily complicates efforts to reach an agreement and can undermine the durability of an agreement. Indeed, only one-third of peace agreements between 1989 and 2004 had some kind of involvement from civil society, whether through direct or indirect inclusion (Nilsson 2012).

While there has been a surge in negotiated peace settlements since the 1980s, practice and research have demonstrated the fragility of peace agreements. World Bank figures indicate that more than 50 per cent of all peace agreements fail and violence resumes within five years of signature (WDR 2011). This failure is often explained by the narrowness of peace agreements, able

to end violence and buy peace among armed actors in the short-term but unable to address the drivers of violence and its effects in the long-term. Recent efforts to include women and civil society have become part of an increasingly global movement, backed by UN Security Council Resolutions (1325, 2419 and 2282) and a growing body of research that strongly indicates that peace settlements are more durable when they involve a fuller range of stakeholders, including:

- A 2008 study of 25 peace treaties reports a strong correlation between high or moderate civil society involvement in negotiations with sustained peace in the peacebuilding phase (Wanis-St. John and Kew 2008). The study states that this holds true even when civil society is not at the negotiating table but exercises influence over the negotiations. Conversely, the study argues that war resumed in cases not characterized by direct or indirect civil society involvement in peace-making (2008, p.30).
- A 2012 study assessing 83 peace agreements between 1989 and 2004 comes to similar conclusions and argues that civil society involvement in peace-making reduces the risk of peace failing by 64 per cent (Nilsson 2012, p.258). It suggests civil society inclusion may be stronger under particular conditions, most importantly in non-democratic contexts, like Liberia where warring parties are more likely to be warlords than democratic contexts like South Africa, where the apartheid government and ANC leadership were both elected.
- A 2015 study of 182 signed peace accords over two decades that measured the presence of women as negotiators, mediators, witnesses and signatories, showed that these accords were thirty five per cent more likely to last at least 15 years when women were involved (O'Reilly, Suilleabhain and Paffenholz 2015).

These studies, in line with dominant debates, have focused on the merits of civil society inclusion or exclusion, largely leaving aside design considerations and the various ways in which civil society can and should participate. A range of different techniques and modalities to increase citizen participation in peace processes exist, including negotiating structures created to permit direct and indirect access to peace talks by

various interest groups (e.g., Northern Ireland or Guatemala) or neutral advisory bodies to allow a review process for draft accords by marginalized groups or civil society (e.g., Darfur). Today, with many peace agreements failing and peace initiatives stalling, more attention has recently focused on the 'how' of inclusion and under what conditions (Paffenholz 2014).

### 3 Background to the CSSR: From Exclusion to Inclusion

Until 2014, UN mediation attempts focused on working only with the main conflict political and armed parties and their regional and international backers despite the active lobbying efforts of Syrian civil society calling for an inclusive process since 2012. In June 2013, these civic efforts culminated in a conference organised in Lebanon by Syrian civil society and the LSE about the strategic role for Syrian civil society in resolving the conflict<sup>2</sup>. The conference which was also attended by a member of the Arab League and the second UN Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, called for Syrian civil society *'to play a leading role in presenting solutions, becoming a key partner on the negotiation table on all tracks and playing a role in decision-making on issues facing the country.'* In 2014, in response to lobbying by Syrian civil society organisations, including the organisers of the conference, UN Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi agreed to form a small diverse group comprised of civil society figures to act as a sounding board of ideas to the Special Envoy. He held a four-day consultation in Montreux with his team and this group in April 2014. The group announced itself after the meeting as the Syrian Peacebuilding Advisory Unit.<sup>3</sup> While this represented a positive step, Syrian civil society still had no formal role in the political process. Despite calls for civil society inclusion and women's participation in particular, efforts led by mediators Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi have been described as *'exclusionary processes'* (Hellmüller and Zahar, 2019).

A shift to a more inclusive process began under the leadership of the third UN Special Representative, Staffan de Mistura, who seemed to be more appreciative of the value of including women and civil society from the outset. After his appointment, members of Syrian civil

society began lobbying him, and one group of Syrian organizations sent him a proposed plan outlining how civil society could be included in Geneva.<sup>4</sup> The plan proposed the formation of a Civil Advisory Forum composed of members of Syrian civil society and coordinated by the UN. Members of the Syrian Peacebuilding Advisory Unit also met with the Special Envoy and called for a more formal and wider inclusion of civil society in the Geneva process and rejected the inclusion of women and civil society as part of the existing delegations of the main conflict parties. Within the framework of the 'Geneva consultations', De Mistura began a wide consultation process and met with a broad range of stakeholders, including women and civil society. In parallel, Syrian women organisations came together under the Syrian Women Initiative for Peace and Democracy and lobbied the UN and the Special Envoy for a role for women in the process. When intra-Syrian political talks resumed under his auspices in January 2016, De Mistura creatively interpreted UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which speaks of an inclusive process, to institutionalize civil society's participation in the political talks through the establishment of the Civil Society Support Room and the Women's Advisory Board.

The CSSR started with a small meeting in January 2016 and represents a unique initiative to include civil society actors formally within a UN-led process in the early stages of peace talks. It was initially set up as a physical room at the *Palais des Nations* in Geneva to convene civil society actors from across conflict lines during official UN-led political talks, and as a space to facilitate dialogue, networking and advocacy among civil society and with the OSE mediation team, UN member states, UN agencies, international experts, and officials from other delegations. Over time, the CSSR has expanded in size and scope, and has included several outreach meetings in the region (Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan) as well as teleconferencing with civil society in hard-to-reach areas.

It is important to note that there was significant resistance against the inclusion of civil society by the government delegation and the opposition delegation,

<sup>2</sup> See <https://bit.ly/2K9V3Eq> for more information on the conference

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.salamsyria.org>

<sup>4</sup> Copy of the plan which was sent on 10-12-2015 is available at: <https://bit.ly/2Rkclj3>

fearing it would undermine their positions.<sup>5</sup> De Mistura's invitation for civil society to take part in the Geneva process generated anxiety and even prompted the head of the Syrian National Coalition, which is the leading opposition party in Geneva, to invite Syrian CSOs in Turkey to a meeting to talk about '*Syrian CSOs representation in the negotiations*'. As one participant in a focus group stated, 'the negotiating teams dislike the civil society room because they think that they should be the only representatives of the Syrian people.'

In fact, not all Syrian CSOs favoured an independent role in the Geneva process, and some argued for supporting the political opposition delegation instead through their inclusion within the same delegation. A group of pro-opposition Syrian CSOs met in Gaziantep soon after the announcement to invite Syrian civil society to Geneva and issued a statement<sup>6</sup> to declare that only civil society that was part of the public movement and struggle against the regime should be invited. Many of those who signed the statement eventually warmed up to the idea and became regular participants in CSSR with some of them becoming leading proponents of inclusion.

Officially, the CSSR plays an advisory role to the UN Special Envoy and his team, and is not conceived as a third party to the talks. It is an attempt to bring civil society from all sides together in order to promote different perspectives in the talks but also, in some ways, to demonstrate that people from very different political and geographic backgrounds can sit at the same table together. According to UN documents, the CSSR specifically seeks to strengthen civil society participation in peace talks in six ways: (1) sharing local knowledge and expertise; (2) acting as prominent advocates for a political solution; (3) providing unique perspectives and insights on a range of thematic topics; (4) enhancing transparency of the political process; (5) expanding the space for a cohesive civil society in Syria; and (5) building the foundations for civil society participation in peace processes in other contexts.<sup>7</sup>

The CSSR's design as an iterative and flexible process, capable of adapting to changing conditions on the ground and to participant input on agenda restructuring, has

helped generate a sense of ownership among participants, even with its challenges. It began with only twelve participants, and expanded to include nearly 500 civil actors from a range of backgrounds, expertise and geographies, but with the notable exclusion of civil society from Kurdish-controlled areas.

The CSSR is funded by the foreign ministries of Switzerland, Norway and Sweden, as well as the European Union. It is managed jointly by swisspeace and the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF).

### 3.1 Who Participates in the CSSR?

The selection of participants can be crucial to creating a productive and inclusive dialogue and can impact the quality of discussion and potential peacebuilding effects of any civil society dialogue process. The CSSR suffered from several challenges that created an imbalance in participation especially in the first few rounds of the CSSR. Over time, however, as the conveners developed new approaches to resolve this imbalance, the CSSR grew to include more diverse perspectives with attention paid to gender and geographies within Syria and among those actors outside Syria.

In the first few rounds of the CSSR, nearly all participants were male and represented only the views of the political opposition and those living outside of Syria. Some of the initial participants were reluctant to involve civil society from regime-controlled areas out of the belief that they could not hold independent views. Travel and visa restrictions by the regime further prevented civil society organizations registered in Damascus to travel to Geneva for the CSSR meetings. Over time, however, the CSSR created a demand for participation particularly among members of civil society who were side-lined by the polarized and violent landscape. As an increasing number of people demanded to take part, especially from government-controlled areas, the designers and managers of the CSSR built sufficient trust in the process to broaden participation and get the regime to ease the travel restrictions it imposed on some participants. The most significant imbalance, however, has been the continued exclusion of civil society operating in Kurdish-

<sup>5</sup> See for example "What is behind De Mistura's insistence on including civil society in Geneva" available at <https://bit.ly/2MIIOM6>

<sup>6</sup> Text of the statement available at: <https://www.baladi-news.com/ar/news/details/3168/>

<sup>7</sup> From the Q&A document provided by the OSE to participants of the CSSR

majority territory, an imbalance also reflected in the political talks.

The OSE broadened participation through several approaches, including reliance on recommendations by INGOs and UN agencies operating with civil society, consultations with a wider range of activists, recommendations by CSSR participants themselves, and a rotating process and changing the list of participants.

The background information reported by survey respondents generally reflects the make-up of the Civil Society Support Room, as confirmed by interviews.

- Most respondents came from NGOs or organized sectors of civil society (74 per cent), including several large umbrella organizations and networks that work on different issues within the peacebuilding, legal, and humanitarian fields both inside and outside of Syria. Approximately 26 per cent of respondents participated as technical experts (e.g. law), individual activists, or prominent community figures.
- Over half of the participants (52 per cent) were above the age of 40 years old, and only 16 per cent under the age of thirty years old. The age disparity may also reflect that over half (56 per cent) of the respondents were the leaders or heads of their organizations.
- Approximately 67 per cent of respondents were men, and 33 per cent were women.

Over time, the CSSR progressively involved more women, young people, prominent public figures and experts, including legal and constitutional experts, university professors, and former government advisors.

## 4 The Multiple Impacts of the CSSR

The results of the survey and interviews show that the CSSR has had impacts on multiple levels, even beyond the intended ones, with varying degrees of success. What clearly emerges from these results, however is the need to think about peace-making beyond a track I political process that includes complementary civil society role

feeding into elite negotiations. The research demonstrates that the CSSR was far more than a complementary process to the political track. It has created a process in its own right and has its own value independent of political negotiations between the government and opposition delegations. It also reveals how participating in the CSSR was a transformative process that helped participants to soften their views and become more in favour of inclusion (see Figure 3).

This makes it important to account for both policy and process impacts when assessing the CSSR. While any civil society mechanism linked to political negotiations may be used as a tool for achieving concrete outputs (e.g. thematic reports to feed into the talks) or outcomes at the negotiating table, many have a wider process and change impacts than their initial intended purpose. These process impacts are difficult to measure but may have a longer-term transformative effect by strengthening the capacities of society to engage in visioning and collaborative action, as seen in Figure 4.

### 4.1 Peacebuilding Effects: Breaking Barriers and Finding Common Ground

The violence and increasing sectarianisation of the conflict has had immense consequences for Syrian civil society and the conflict itself, limiting civil society's ability to mobilize a broad-based movement rooted in universal grievances and reinforcing cycles of fear and violence. In Syria, sectarianism became a political tool by the regime and jihadi militias, as a way of ruling populations under their control and preventing opposition through fear and division.

A challenge for civil society and the prospects for peace has been the division of the country's society into three different civil societies, each perceived as associated with or influenced by the narrative of the political authority controlling their area (regime-, opposition-, or Kurdish-controlled). While some organizations operate across communities, the conflict has made it increasingly difficult for broad-based civic movements to survive and mobilize across conflict divides. This has been accentuated by both external and internal narratives that describe the conflict in broad geopolitical or sectarian terms, which renders invisible the agency and diverse interests of civic Syrian actors.

**Participant views on the impact of CSSR on peace talks**

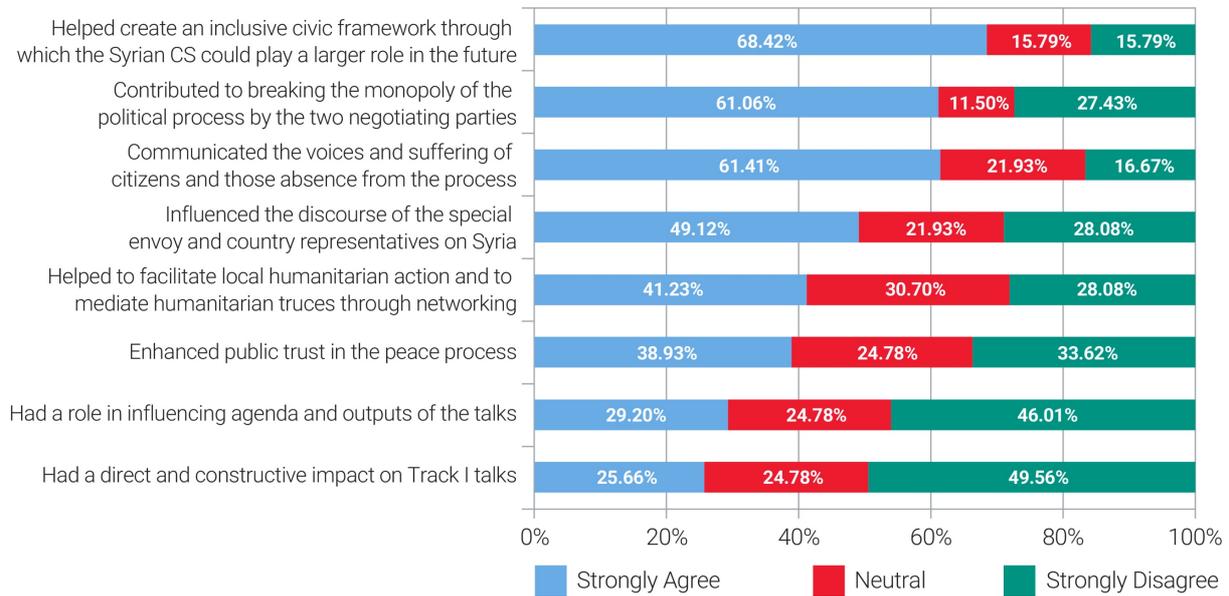


Figure 1 participants' views on the impact of CSSR on peace talks

The survey found that the greatest impact of the CSSR was on participants and civil society itself, helping to strengthen their role and influence. In contrast to the delegations at the political negotiations, civil society from different geographies and perspectives were able to sit together and debate critical issues, even if discussions became acrimonious at many times. According to respondents, the process of coming together helped dilute binary narratives, break stereotypes of the 'other', and expand opportunities for dialogue and networking across conflict lines. Participants interviewed reported that many found it initially difficult to be in the same room with those who held different views on the conflict or

lived in geographies controlled by the opponent. As one CSSR participant remarked at the LSE conference,

*'It was challenging at first for all participants to put aside their political positions in order to envision together a peaceful future for Syria. There was tendency to blame others for everything that has happened. There was also a prevailing atmosphere of deep distrust and conspiratorial thinking with participants questioning the legitimacy of others in the room.'*

As seen in Figure 2, a majority of respondents (81 per

cent) reported that CSSR participation was able to break barriers and converge conflicting viewpoints, with only 4 per cent stating it resulted in divergent opinions. As one participant stated, *'the most important impact was connecting Syrians from different areas and with different viewpoints'* while another noted, *'before [the CSSR], we didn't have a way to do so... [even if] we already believed that we had to work with civil society across conflict lines'*.

**4.2 Influencing the Political Process: facing deadlock and signposting the way forward**

While most respondents did not believe that participation in the CSSR significantly impacted the political process or helped generate public trust in the process, they pointed to the progress the CSSR made in signposting the way forward on key issues by demonstrating the possibilities for consensus-building and areas of agreements. Overall, as seen in Figure 1,, only 26 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that the CSSR has had a direct and constructive impact on political talks, with half strongly disagreeing with it (50 per cent). Similarly, 46 per cent did not believe that the CSSR influenced the agenda and outputs of the talks, while 29 per cent did. Not one respondent believed that the CSSR contributed to creating an environment of trust among negotiating parties.

These results are unsurprising given the political deadlock between the negotiating parties. Although the Syrian conflict parties may have accepted UN mediation and participation in the Geneva process, structured as 'proximity talks', they did so purely pro forma and were never willing to enter into substantive negotiations. Representatives of the conflict parties consistently refused to sit down together beyond the opening of intra-Syrian talks, and the UN mediator, unable to convince them to directly engage with one another, held separate talks with the regime and opposition delegations.

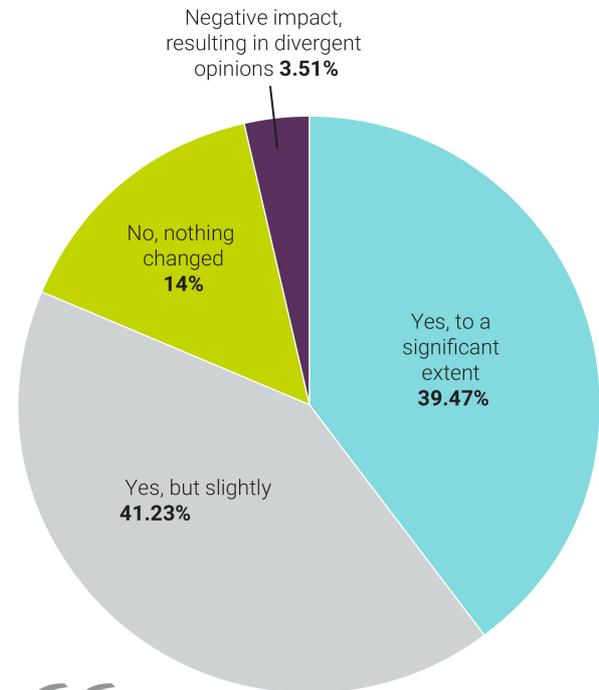
Even so, participants believed that their participation in the CSSR helped them re-shape the narratives that have informed the way in which the UN and external actors perceive the conflict and shape the political process. In contrast to the political parties, the CSSR made significant progress bringing together those across dividing lines to build consensus on key challenges and to substantively debate some of the key elements that could shape the prospects for peace; in this way, signposting the way forward on potential areas of agreements. In the survey, nearly half (49 per cent) reported that they believed they influenced the discourse of the UN Special Envoy and other country representatives, while over 61 per cent agreed with the statement that the CSSR helped end the monopoly of representation by negotiating actors, and their monopoly of political process (Figure 1). Moreover, 61 per cent credit the CSSR for providing the space for civil society to express the voices of citizens who have been marginalized by the political process (Figure 1).

Furthermore, in interviews and focus groups, participants highlighted how the inclusion of legal and constitutional experts in the CSSR played an important role in the political track through their valuable input on constitutional change. One participant said:

*'The groups of CSSR members who worked on the constitution provided a paper on the constitutional options that are available for Syria, which was submitted to the Special Envoy. They discussed the different alternatives and options such as drafting a new constitution based either on the 1950 constitution, or the 2012 one, or declaring a provisional constitution.'*

Interviews at the OSE confirm these participant

**Participant views on the ability of CSSR to break barriers and converge conflict viewpoints**



*The most important impact was connecting Syrians from different areas and with different viewpoints; crystallising CS role in expressing people's interests.* ”

**A participant**

**Figure 2: participants' views on the CSSR's ability to break barriers and converge views**

perspectives, and highlight how the CSSR deepened the Special Envoy's understanding of realities on the ground, civilian perspectives and desires, and contributed to changes in his approach to the political process. Indeed, in our correspondence with the UN Special Envoy, De Mistura stated, 'over the years, both in Afghanistan and in Syria, I have seen the substantial impact on peace building by civil society, and in particular women. This has been especially useful recently in the establishment of the Civil Society Support Room and the Women Advisory Board in the context of the Syrian political process. The advice, creative ideas and approaches I received were invaluable.'

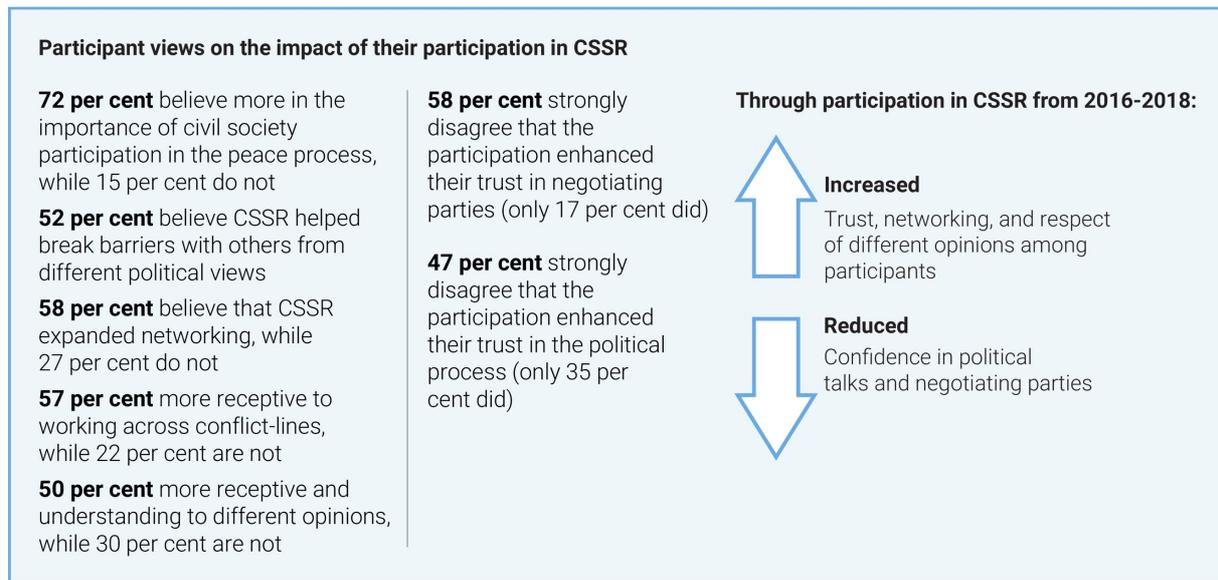


Figure 3 participants' views on the impact of participating in the CSSR

OSE team members also emphasised how the CSSR was considered an important player in Geneva and was valued by many actors, including the Humanitarian Task Force and the Ceasefire task force, as well as the delegations of member states who participate in Geneva. Indeed, some of the recommendations and discussions with Syrian civil society were reflected in the periodic briefings of the UN Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, to the United Nation's Security Council.<sup>8</sup>

For Syrian respondents, participation in the Geneva process through the CSSR reduced confidence in the political talks and the negotiation parties but it increased trust and respect among participants, and their belief in the important role that an inclusive civil society can play in peace-making and peace-building. As one respondent wrote,

*'I was surprised how easily the different participants accepted each other, opposite to what happens at the political tracks.'*

Respondents valued participation in the CSSR for the opportunity it provided to elevate and legitimate the role of an inclusive civil society in the peace process through

bridge-building, creating empathy and respect for difference, and deepening their own understanding of the importance of a civil society that is inclusive of different

**Quotes from participants on the issue of trust**



*Actually, my trust in the parties was completely eroded after participation.*

*Negotiation parties; regime and opposition prefer power over people.*

*If I trusted the negotiation parties, I would not have requested participation and playing monitoring role in the first place.*

*The political track is managed by regional international interests, and if they want CS to be prominent then this is also for their interests.* ☺

<sup>8</sup> De Mistura mentioned the meetings with civil society and some of their recommendations in his briefings at the Security Council in June 2017, August 2017, September 2017 and November 2017. Please see <https://www.un.org/undpa/en/speeches-statements/27062017/syria>; <https://www.un.org/undpa/en/speeches-statements/30082017/syria>;

<https://www.un.org/undpa/en/speeches-statements/27092017/syria>; <https://www.un.org/undpa/en/speeches-statements/27112017/syria>.

perspectives and geographies. They credited the CSSR with creating the space for a divided civil society to build trust and respect, and develop the relationships that can push the boundaries of the conflict lines (see Figure 4).

The CSSR can be seen as allowing a fragmented civil society to carve out more self-consciously autonomous spaces to help generate conditions for a different type of politics: when asked about the different impacts of the CSSR, most participants agreed (68 per cent) with the statement that it *'formed an opportunity to create an inclusive Syrian civic framework through which the Syrian civil society could play a bigger and more constructive role in the future'* (see Figure 1). In this way, the CSSR's direct link to the political process helped to legitimize a role for civil society as an actor in a broader political process that supports but goes beyond its impact on elite negotiations. It created multiple opportunities for Syrian civil society with diverse views to build bridges and substantively think through some of the key elements that could preserve and shape a pluralistic, democratic Syria in the future.

### 4.3 Facilitating Humanitarian and Operational Impacts on the ground

Minimal UN presence in Syria, combined with the difficulty of civil society networks to work across conflict-divides (geographic, sectarian, ethnic, etc.), has not only hampered humanitarian efforts on the ground but it also has limited effective conflict analyses and allowed the main conflict parties to dominate representations of the conflict.

The CSSR provided an opportunity for external engagement with a broader spectrum of Syrian society beyond armed actors with vested interests in limiting access to activists, dissenting voices, and potential constituencies for change. The survey found that CSSR participation helped thicken contacts and networks between civil society and with relevant international actors and delegations, including the UN's Humanitarian Task Force, the Ceasefire Task Force and members of the so-called International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in which all relevant international and regional actors, including Iran, were represented. Several participants cited examples in which contacts made through the CSSR helped facilitate positive action on the ground, including humanitarian access, temporary ceasefires, and negotiated evacuations. One suggested, *'the UN can't*

#### Impact of CSSR on the ground

**41 per cent** believe CSSR helped facilitate humanitarian action on the ground

**BUT**

**75 per cent of those under 40** felt CSSR positively impacted humanitarian action on the ground



*CSSR impact was more direct on humanitarian issues, ceasefires, and humanitarian access than on political talks.* ”

**A participant**

*work without our knowledge'* but it also *'proved helpful for us to operate in various sites of the country now that we know we have colleagues across different areas.'* Yet, given the level of atrocities committed in the country, many respondents felt that these positive examples were few and raised expectations that could not be met. While only 41 per cent believe the CSSR helped facilitate humanitarian action on the ground, 75 per cent of those under 40 felt it positively impacted humanitarian action on the ground. This could be explained by the fact that younger participants tend to be more connected to the ground. As one respondent stated, *'CSSR impact was more direct on humanitarian issues, ceasefires, and humanitarian access than on political talks'*.

### 4.4 Positive Impact of Women's Involvement

Integrating a gender dimension into the political process was the mandate of the Women's Advisory Board rather than the Civil Society Support Room, although both groups networked with one another and some of their members overlapped. However, it is interesting to note that the survey found significant differences between the perspectives of male and female participants in the CSSR. Overall, women were more positive than men about the CSSR and its potential impacts both on civil society itself and on the broader political process. For example, women are:

- 25 per cent more likely to say that the CSSR had a significant impact in bridging perspectives;
- 27 per cent more likely to say that the CSSR helped



Figure 4 participants' responses on the CSSR's most important achievements

break stereotypes and reduce prejudice;

- 55 per cent more likely to say that CSSR increased networking between those who do not normally interact;
- 71 per cent more likely to say that CSSR was able to communicate the voices and sufferings of those civilians absent from the peace process;
- 52 per cent more likely to say that the CSSR contributed to breaking the monopoly of the political process, and monopoly of representation by negotiating actors;
- 50 per cent **less likely** to say that the CSSR enhanced trust in the negotiating parties.

Further research is needed to unpack these findings, but some suggested that the previous exclusion of women on political issues, combined with the fact that the direct talks are currently dominated by men, make them more willing to engage in the political process.

## 5 Perspectives on Design: Opportunities & Challenges

The design of any inclusion mechanism is a complex political, psychological and technical process that must reflect local realities such as political culture, institutional

weakness, and level of exclusion of different groups.

Designers and conveners inevitably face difficult choices with regard to participation, design and objectives, which are often inseparable from the political dynamics in the country but also important in order to optimize civil society's impact and influence on peacemaking and peacebuilding. Process design is fundamental as it can either enable or constrain the ability of civil society actors to build consensus, exercise influence, create coalitions for change based on normative and strategic arguments, and raise the critical issues that need to be addressed for sustainable peacebuilding.

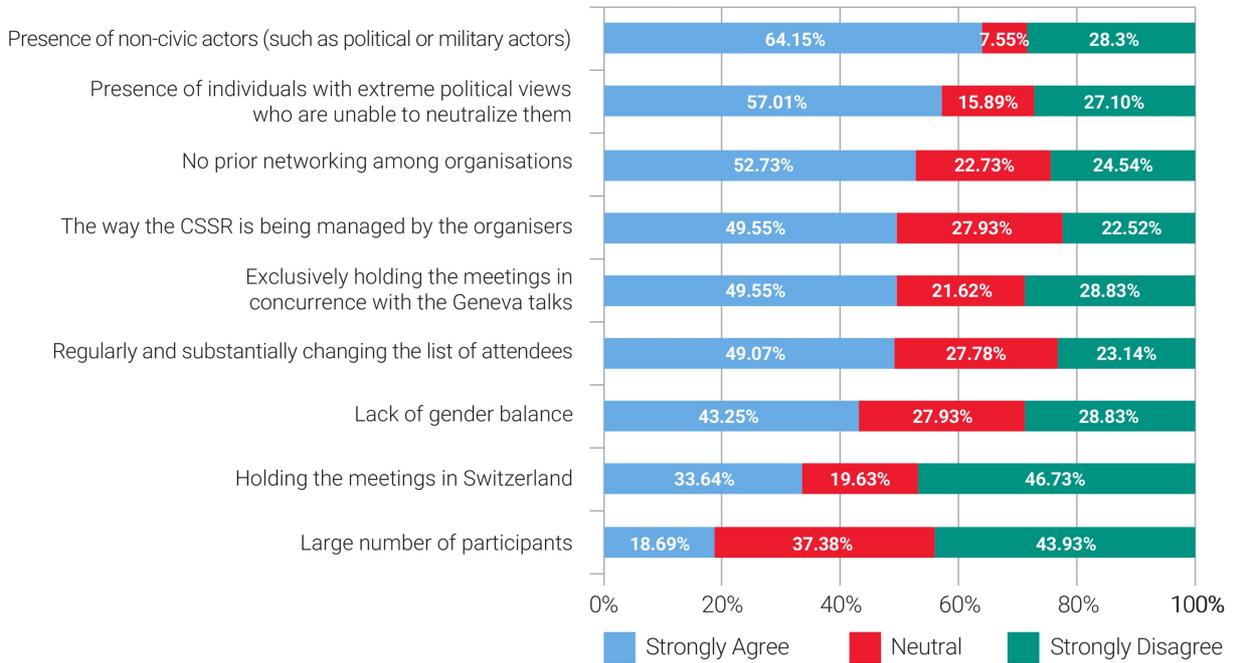
We asked participants views on the design of the CSSR and how they would like to see it in the future.

### 5.1 The Importance of Ownership

Strengthening a sense of collective ownership among participants is often difficult but important for legitimizing the process and outcomes of any inclusive mechanism. An important element that emerged from interviews, and reviews of CSSR reports and self-evaluations is the strong feeling of ownership most participants had of the CSSR. Many do not perceive it as a top-down initiative but as a mechanism they lobbied for and earned. This created a positive, more proactive attitude by participants who took upon themselves to produce their own internal reports of the CSSR meetings<sup>9</sup> as well as to organise their own evaluation exercises between rounds and propose

<sup>9</sup> A copy of all the CSSR internal reports is available at <https://bit.ly/2WAcI3r>

**Participant views on the most significant obstacles impeding the success of CSSR**



**Figure 5: Participants’ views on the most significant obstacles**

new ideas for the design. Going through the correspondence between members of the OSE and the CSSR members who initiated the evaluations, we observed how some of the ideas they proposed were taken onboard in the design of the future rounds. One example is the idea of holding regional CSSR meetings such as in Turkey and Lebanon in order to improve the CSSR’s inclusivity and to create opportunities for participation by those unable to travel to Geneva. Members also played a role in choosing methods of facilitation and at times they facilitated their own meetings.

Participants were not passive users or beneficiaries of the CSSR, and at one point, some even exercised the use or threat of boycotting meetings as a tool to be heard. One example that stands out was in November 2017 when Syrian CSOs received invites to participate in a CSSR meeting to be held later that month. Ten Syrian CSOs responded by issuing a public statement complaining that their previous recommendations on design and substance had not been integrated into the process:

*‘The results of the discussions that took place during*

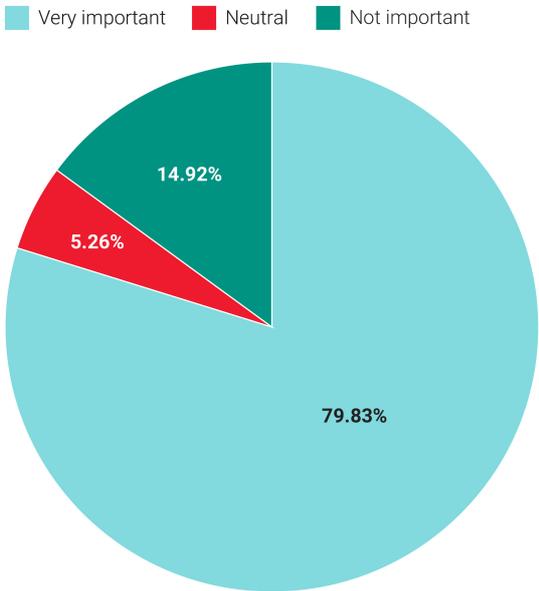
*previous CSSR meetings were not fully reflected in the periodic briefings of the UN Special Envoy, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, to the United Nation’s Security Council...The topics of the meetings of the Civil Society Support Room are chosen in a manner that is not systematic. This process lacks a specific methodology that follows up on, builds upon, deepens and addresses previous discussions. In addition, the invitations are not based on clear work programs for the meetings, but rather on general titles for the different issues.’<sup>10</sup>*

While emphasizing their commitment to supporting the Geneva process and ‘the importance of participation of civil society’, they declined the invitation and provided a number of further suggestions on how to improve the process and its outputs. Although they did not attend the November 2017 meeting, they accepted an invitation by the OSE team to come and discuss their concerns, and continued to participate within the CSSR at later stages.

Their position echoes some of the views raised by some participants in our focus groups who felt that threatening to boycott meetings could be used as a tool for pressure.

<sup>10</sup> Full text of statement available at: <https://bit.ly/31tlwRv>

**Participant views on the importance of CSSR's continuation even if peace talks were to stop**



**Figure 7: Participants' views on who should manage the process**

While these attitudes could be interpreted as negative, participants suggest that they actually reflect the ownership they felt over the CSSR and the value they placed on their participation and ideas for improvement. Many desired and demanded more visibility for the work of the CSSR and the recommendations they produced.

### 5.2 Design Obstacles

Many of the obstacles cited by participants in the survey related to the design of the process including selection of participants, the presence of political and military actors and a rotating participant list; as well as the lack of support and outreach mechanisms to prepare participants and allow them to build on the achievements in the room (see Figure 5).

A key question for this research is how can a UN-mandated civil society process be designed to support and strengthen the prospects for peace that go beyond a simple need to demonstrate inclusivity and participation. Research into the Civil Society Support Room provided an important opportunity to think through the ways in which greater inclusivity could be achieved from the perspective of civil society itself, specifically those who have already participated in and helped shape the CSSR. Questions asked of participants focused on the role that the CSSR

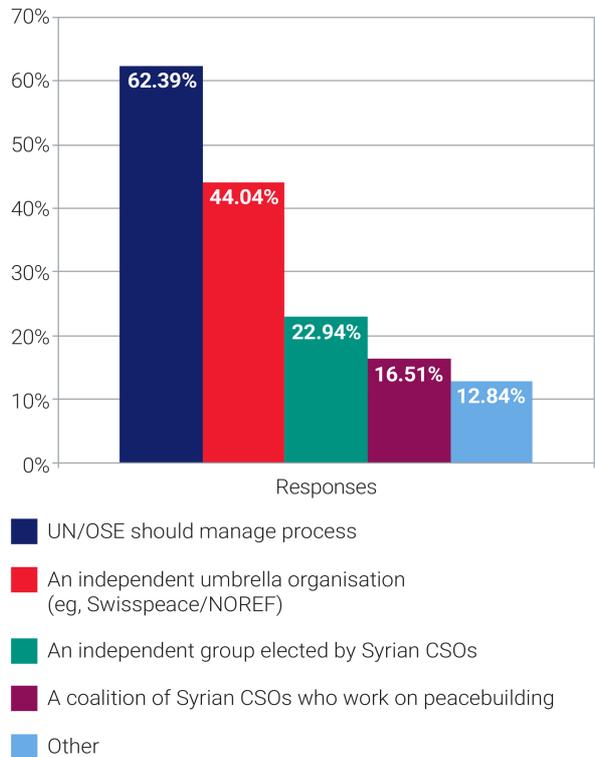
should play, its relationship to the political process, and the key design elements that could enable it to be a productive space for civil society.

In analysing survey findings, we identified several key design elements that effects the functioning and impact of civil society inclusion processes, including but not limited to: (1) mandate and link to broader political process; (2) management and support structures; (3) criteria for participation; (4) rules and format; (5) agenda setting and topics for discussion; and, (6) outreach and education.

### 5.3 Mandate, Link to Political Process, and Ideal Role

Civil society inclusion processes must be closely linked to broader political processes in order to strengthen their legitimacy and overall effectiveness. One-off initiatives to convene civil society may infuse new energy in the short-term, but transformative processes normally require long-term engagement and support. A continuous UN-mandated process directly linked to the Office of the

**Participant views on the best format for CSSR to continue operating independently of peace talks**



**Figure 6: Participants' views on continuing the CSSR even if peace talks stop**

### Participant views on the ideal role CSSR could play in Syria peace talks

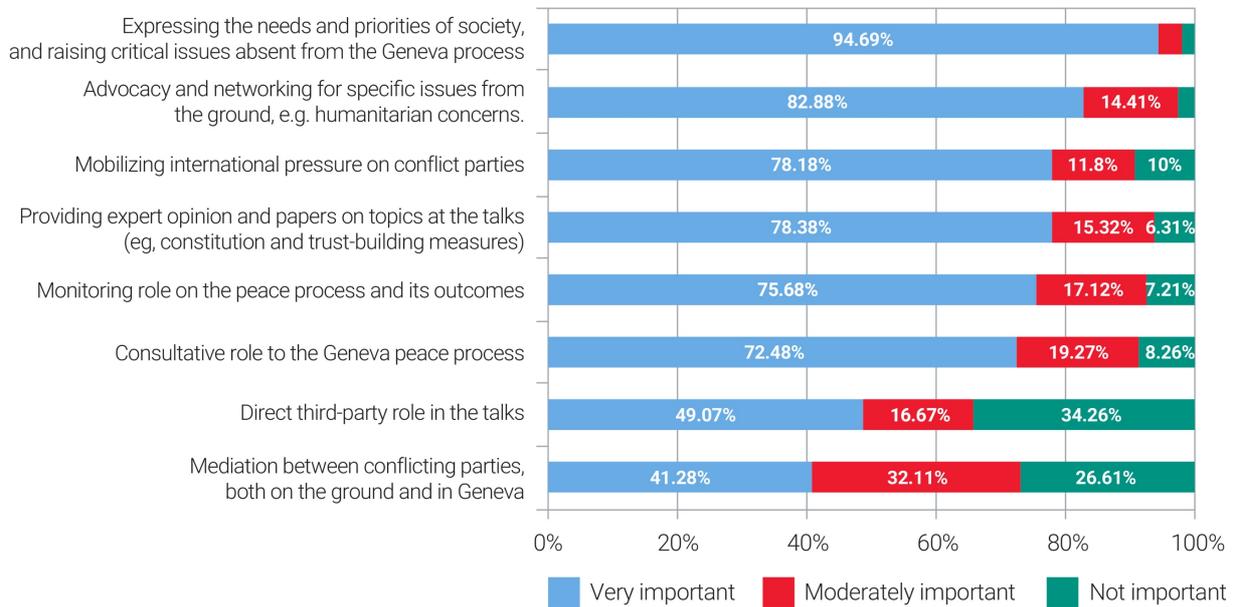


Figure 8: Participants' views on the ideal role of the CSSR

Special Envoy is widely seen by those surveyed as legitimating and strengthening the role that civil society can play in both peace-making and reconstruction processes. Nearly two thirds of participants surveyed felt it should continue to operate under the auspices of the United Nations (Figure 6).

The mandate of the Civil Society Support Room, however, has been interpreted as confined to operating when political talks are held or ongoing, rather than a more expansive role such as an ongoing track II process that can feed into a broader political process and support a longer-term transformative process. Nearly 80 per cent of participants surveyed believed it very important for the CSSR to continue even in the absence of political talks (see Figure 7).

In their response to the question on the ideal role that the CSSR should play, respondents favoured a variety of roles to influence peace-making and longer-term peacebuilding that went beyond direct inclusion in political negotiations as either third party actors or mediators. They saw the value of the CSSR as an independent platform for civil society to influence the political process and those tasked with mediating it, while shaping larger transformation processes and ground-level dynamics in the country. As

seen in Figure 8, the three most critical roles chosen as 'very important' were as a mechanism to express citizen perspectives and raising critical issues (95 per cent); to mobilize international pressure on the armed parties (78 per cent); to provide expertise (78 per cent) and to monitor the process (76 per cent). In contrast, less than half saw the role of the CSSR as a mediator between parties or as a direct third party actor at the negotiating table as 'very important'.

### 5.4 Views on legitimacy and representation: participant selection

Designers and conveners often seek to select participants in such a way so as to either represent different groups within society or ensure a diverse range of interests, views and perspectives. Broadly speaking, two contrasting approaches to participant selection can be identified in dialogue processes: representative or targeted selection. Representative participation means applying quotas to ensure that specific proportions of society are represented. In contrast to 'percentage focused' representation approaches, targeted participation may focus on specific stakeholder groups (e.g. peacebuilding CSOs), thematic experts, or individuals of prominent standing in order ensure a diversity of views, interests and perspectives.

### Participant views on the best way to ensure fair representation in CSSR

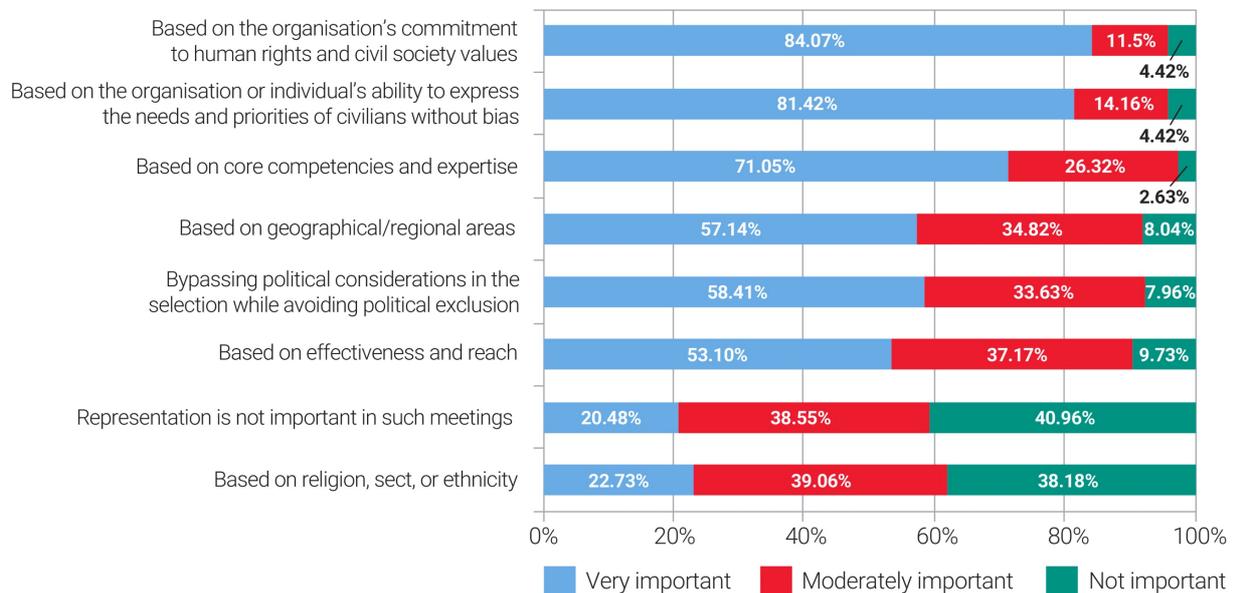


Figure 9: Participants' views on ensuring representation

The conveners of the CSSR took a mixed approach to address the issue of imbalanced gender and geographical representation while also targeting specific groups, such as peacebuilding NGOs, humanitarian organizations, and umbrella networks, and to a lesser

extent, prominent figures, including legal and constitutional experts, university professors, and former government advisors. Their approaches to widen participation were viewed as partially successful while raising other challenges. For example, 62 per cent of participants surveyed believed that regional meetings improved participation and inclusion but nearly half of respondents (49 per cent) reported that regularly and substantially changing the list of participants created a challenge of continuity in discussions. Some have suggested this challenge could have been off-set by other mechanisms to encourage prior networking and commitment to outreach.

For Syrian participants, the question of 'who is representative' overlapped with perceptions of 'who is legitimate' and raised a number of concerns, not least because the Syrian conflict has geographically divided society and there are few, if any, legitimate representatives or institutions that can fully represent the

interests and preferences of the citizenry. As one respondent wrote, 'the death of Syrian civil society is in the crisis of representation: no matter how many mechanisms we put in place to ensure fair representation, there will always be those that oppose...'

Instead, most respondents favoured a selection process informed by a set of common principles while also reflecting a diversity of opinions, geographies and backgrounds over selection criteria based on religion, sect or ethnicity. Among participants, as seen in Figure 9, civil society legitimacy was largely associated with their commitment to human rights and civil society values (84 per cent) and the ability to articulate the needs and priorities of citizens without bias (81 per cent). Recognizing the limitations of primarily involving NGOs, respondents gave near equal weight to the inclusion of prominent individuals (68 per cent) and organized sectors of civil society (67 per cent).

Interviews emphasized how the CSSR provides a space for Syrian experts, who preferred to remain independent, to utilize their technical and subject-matter expertise on specific agenda items in a non-political manner, thereby promoting productive dialogue and creating the capacity for effective analysis of the issues. In one interview, a

### Participant views on the most important criteria for selecting CSSR participants

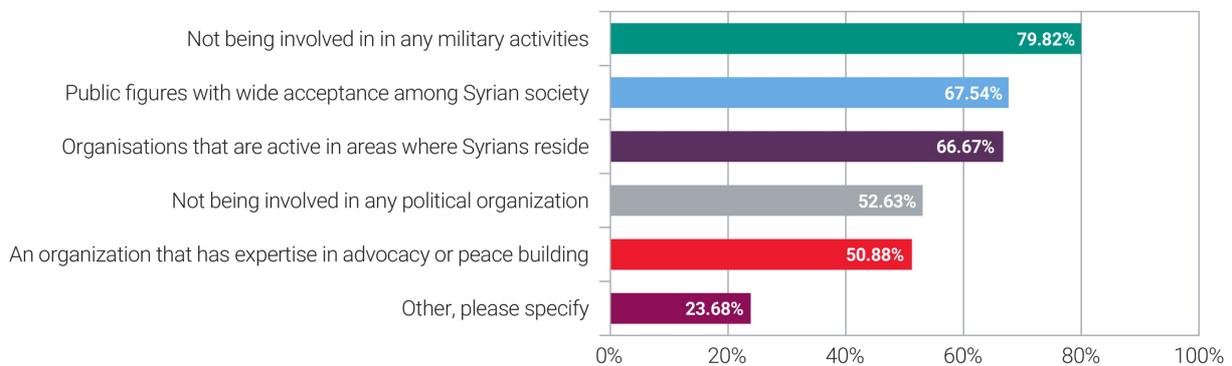


Figure 10: Participants' views on selection criteria

legal expert stated that the CSSR provided him the only opportunity to participate in Geneva and have a say in the process as political parties would never consider someone like him – a view echoed by most participants with high technical expertise.

For example, participants explained that selection of participants should be based on:

- *'Putting public interest above private interests'*
- *'Commitment to civil principles that can include everyone'*
- *'Civil society should have positions regarding political decisions and practices but not adopt a certain political line (loyalist or opposition for example)'*
- *'Effectiveness not reach, reach is unconnected to effectiveness'*

Indeed, the survey found that the main obstacles that impeded the CSSR and the quality of discussions were the presence of non-civic actors (66 per cent) and those with extreme views (56 per cent). Accordingly, most participants preferred that criteria for selecting participants should include 'no military involvement' (80 per cent) with more than half (53 per cent) also recommending 'no involvement in a political organization' (as seen in Figure 10).

## 5.5 Agenda-Setting and Topics for Discussion

While the agenda of any dialogue depends on the goals it

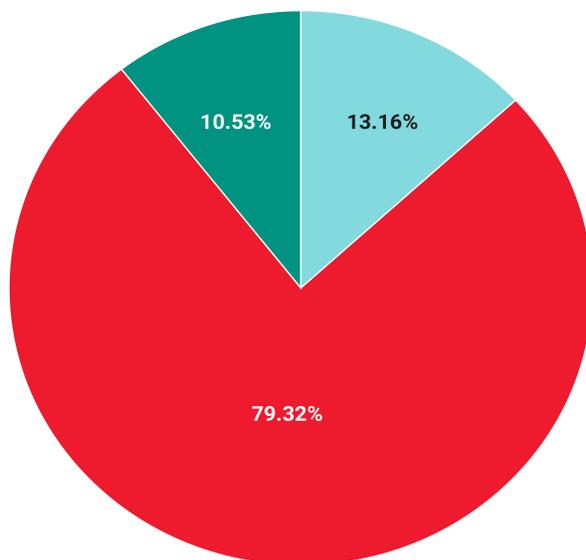
seeks to achieve, the process by which an agenda is developed can influence discussions and outcomes. A purely fixed and externally-imposed agenda can undermine the legitimacy of the dialogue while consultative processes for generating agenda items can contribute to it. The research found that throughout the CSSR process, agenda development and identification of topics for discussion were marked with substantial differences in opinion among participants, with some desiring a fixed agenda and others a broad, more participatory approach to agenda development.

The conveners of the CSSR took a mixed approach, distributing a broad agenda prior to the meeting with suggested topic items related to the agenda for the political talks but also providing space during the first half day of each CSSR meeting for agenda restructuring by the participants. Indeed, agenda items varied considerably at each meeting, and have included, for example, detainees; humanitarian work; constitution; human rights and transitional justice; institutional reform and mechanisms for a democratic transition; as well as discussions on how to improve the CSSR itself. Participants produced several reports on thematic subjects, including on the constitution and human rights, to feed into the political process.

When asked what topics they would prefer to discuss, most survey respondents indicated preference for a broader range of topics than those tackled at the political talks. For example, the survey found that:

- 94 per cent said civic topics
- 91 per cent said humanitarian issues

Participant views on the best way to organise CSSR meetings



- One meeting that gathers all participants in one room
- Plenary sessions with breakout parallel meetings divided according to different subject-matters (eg, Human Rights, Humanitarian, Peace Building, and so on)
- Separate meetings divided according to different subject-matters (eg, Human Rights, Humanitarian, Peace Building, and so on)

Figure 11: Participant's views on format

- 48 per cent said political topics
- and only, 11 per cent stated military topics

## 5.6 Format and Facilitation: A space for dialogue among Syrians

The flexible architecture of the CSSR helped create conditions for building trust and reasoned deliberation, while also providing a microcosm of the diversity that exists within the country. Survey respondents indicated that adherence to principles and ground rules that foster civility and respect for difference is what makes the CSSR different from adversarial debate and back-and-forth negotiations.

Constructive facilitation, format design, and the inclusion of both Syria experts and those grounded in the community was seen as helping create the capacity for effective analysis of drivers and solutions as well as forge consensus on foundational principles of a peaceful Syria.

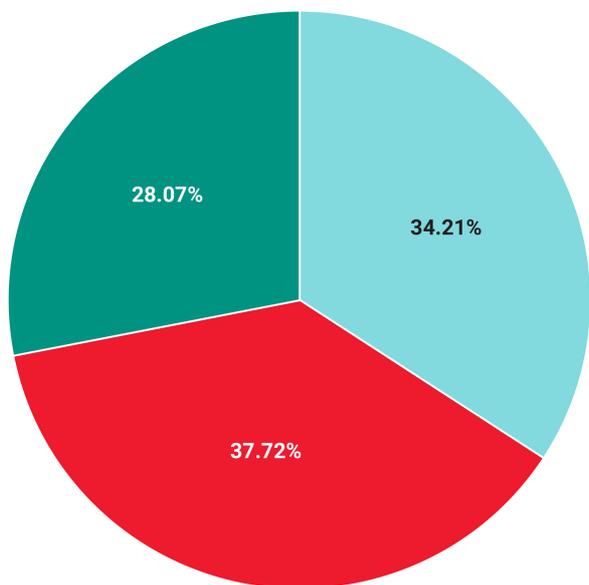
Unlike the Women's Advisory Board, however, the Civil Society Support Room did not have a dedicated, professional facilitation team that worked with participants over time and could shape and capture change processes. Meetings were at times facilitated by Syrian professionals, and at other times, participants nominated facilitators from within the group. In some interviews, participants suggested that professional facilitators with Syrian backgrounds were able to constructively move conversation forward and away from adversarial debate and stereotype recriminations. Survey respondents believed that a dedicated Syrian or Arabic-speaking facilitator who was low-level but knew the nuances of the context would be best placed to encourage intra-Syria dialogue (Figure 11).

The basic format desired was plenary sessions bringing together the whole group with breakout sessions on specific topics running parallel to one another (Figure 12). While meetings with external actors was seen as beneficial for outreach purposes, their unscheduled presence *'in the room'* was seen as disruptive to their internal dialogue. Interviews with participants and organizers reveal that participants often preferred the room to themselves in order to allow for open and honest dialogue without the presence of external actors that can change the dynamics of the group.

## 5.7 Supporting consensus on foundational principles and shared values

The value of an intra-Syrian civil society dialogue for peacebuilding can be seen in the emphasis that survey participants placed on forging consensus on foundational principles and shared values over negotiations to resolve specific issues. In a context where violence has damaged social cohesion and cross-community trust, most respondents (72 per cent) believed that the CSSR should focus consensus-building on common goals and shared values that can create the blueprint for a peace process and far-reaching political reform. CSSR participants interviewed described how consensus-seeking on specific subject items would undermine the diversity of opinions and interests, while also creating the potential for politicization and backlash towards them. They did not claim nor want to be seen as formally representing constituencies but felt that they were closest to expressing the grievances and aspirations of society. Indeed, only a minority – 12 per cent - found it necessary

Participant views on the best way to facilitate CSSR's work



- An Arabic facilitator who is familiar with the Syrian context
- A Syrian facilitator from outside CSSR

Figure 12 Participants' views on facilitation

to try and reach consensus on specific subject items (Figure 13). As one participant summarized, 'we should be united on values but should also protect the right to be different on other issues.'

### 5.8 Outreach and Education

The CSSR conveners provided opportunities for participants to engage with UN actors and relevant member states, allowing participants to raise critical issues and deepen analysis of local contexts while at times, facilitating humanitarian action on the ground through the creation of these relationships. Moreover, the CSSR organized and designed new outreach mechanisms to engage civil society in between meetings through regional meetings and video-conferencing in hard-to-reach areas as well as assigned interlocutors from swisspeace who speak with CSSR members in between activities.

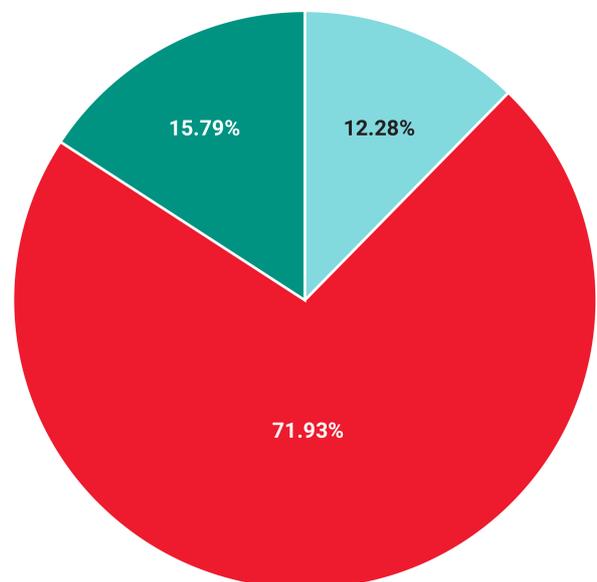
At the same time, more attention could have been paid to creating mechanisms for outreach, advocacy and support across the CSSR process. The lack of such structures hindered the ability of the CSSR to widen its impact and engage civil society beyond its participants. At times,

participants came under attack for their participation or collective outputs; situations which, in part, could have remedied by better communications and engagement around the process. Moreover, only some participants communicated the discussions and findings to their own networks and communities after participating in the CSSR.

## 6 Where inclusion fails: Kurdish representation at the CSSR

The CSSR has suffered from a serious lack of inclusion of civil society from the Kurdish-majority region in northeastern Syria. The primary challenge has been political, mainly Turkish opposition to the inclusion of Kurdish participants who are seen as close to or sympathisers with the Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (PYD) party in either the political or civil society processes. Moreover, organisations operating in Kurdish-held areas are hard to reach and have limited representation in both Gaziantep and Damascus, because of restrictions

Participant views on the importance of reaching consensus in CSSR meetings



- It is necessary to reach consensus on all subjects under discussion
- It is preferable to reach consensus on values and common goals but not necessary to reach consensus on all subjects under discussion
- It is not necessary to reach consensus around any subject-matter or around values and common goals

Figure 13: Participants' views on consensus-seeking

imposed by the Turkish and Syrian governments. An example of the difficulty of traveling is described in another report: 'the WAB [Women Advisory Board] member from a PYD-held area, for example, must cross the border illegally, timing her trip during dark nights, and then walk for hours to reach Sulaimaniyya in Iraq in order to be able to come to Geneva' (Alzoubi 2014, p.4).

The under-representation of Syrian Kurds in the CSSR was widely criticised by the Syrian Kurdish media<sup>11</sup> which stressed that the absence of these organisations is hindering their ability to network and to be aware of what is happening in Geneva. In response, the OSE organised regional meetings for the CSSR in Erbil in the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. While this step helped bring some Kurdish voices into the CSSR, the issue of excluding organisations and activists that are perceived to be close to PYD continues, as many of those are unable to make it to Erbil.

The LSE research team interviewed eight civil society activists, five female and three male, who lead civil society groups based in Kurdish-majority areas but that also work in eastern Syria in areas newly-liberated from the Islamic State. Of the five female activists, two had no prior knowledge of the CSSR while two had heard of it but never knew of anyone invited from their areas to the CSSR or to any other peace-building platform. They had been briefed by a Syrian civil society activist that came to their area to organize a roundtable and share information on the Geneva process, the CSSR and the Women's Advisory Board. The one female activist from the area who had participated in the CSSR had been invited once and had some limited communications with the OSE.

All interviewees attributed the marginalization of civil society from Kurdish-majority areas to political pressure from external actors particularly Turkey. The few Kurds allowed to participate in the Geneva processes, especially within the political negotiations, are perceived as close to Turkey and Turkish interests. They point to the fact that these Kurdish representatives refrain from referring to violations committed by Turkey inside Syria, especially in Afrin, to substantiate and confirm these perceptions of bias. Several expressed disappointment with the 'thin' promises of the US and UN to include Kurdish representation, and explained that the exclusion of large

segments of Kurdish civil society would de-legitimize any outcomes achieved in the Geneva process in their communities.

In addition to their political exclusion, interviewees also believed that their marginalization extended to civic and humanitarian spaces, limiting their engagement and coordination with UN agencies, international actors, and other Syrian civil society spaces. They described civil society as not only '*very far from the political process*' but also from '*the whole humanitarian and development mechanisms and platforms*.' They explained how they could not usually participate in INGO or donor conferences, trainings and workshops, because they are often held in Turkey.

This made them sceptical of the prospects of any internationally-mediated political process or the influence of civil society on the negotiating parties but they still believed that their inclusion in the CSSR would be valuable. It would provide them the space '*to connect*' and '*break the barriers and stereotypes*' with civil society across Syria's geographically-divided communities and international bodies. Some highlighted the opportunity that a platform like the CSSR could provide to exchange information, learn lessons, share experiences and coordinate activities with other Syrian civil society. The only one interviewee that attended viewed her experience as productive both in networking and engaging a range of other Syrian CSOs but also by having the opportunity to confront biased ideas from attendees about Kurdish civil society, noting how '*alienation from the political process inflates preconceived ideas and social rifts*.'

In addition to the direct participation of women and CSOs operating in Kurdish-majority areas and eastern Syria in the CSSR and wider political process, they recommended CSSR consultations with civil society to gather community needs, perspectives and ideas to feed into the CSSR meetings and de-briefing sessions via teleconferencing or meetings in more accessible neighbouring countries, like Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. Other communication networks or mechanisms for engagement suggested include the establishment of focal points and coordinators responsible for maintaining ongoing communication and coordination with

<sup>11</sup> See for example: "Persistent absence of Kurdish organisations from the CSSR at the Geneva talks", published

by ROK on 16-8-2017, available at: <http://www.rok-online.com/?p=7447>

humanitarian and development organizations. Most importantly, however, they called for political courage by the UN and other international actors to withstand Turkish pressure to exclude Kurdish representation and influence over the political process.

## 7 Reflections and Recommendations

The goal of our research was to gain insight into the Syrian Civil Society Support Room from the perspective of its participants, and to elicit their ideas on how to improve its design moving forward. Specifically, it sought to explore the impact that participation in the CSSR has had not only on the political process but also on civil society itself. The research finds that the CSSR took an innovative approach that allowed it to respond to and develop with each round of meetings to take its current shape. While it could benefit from further improvements to its design, the CSSR has still had multiple positive impacts. The findings highlight several issues with important implications when thinking about the value of civil society inclusion and how best to design a process that can most optimize its impact.

Firstly, the inclusion of civil society in peace-making should not be seen as simply a matter of principle given its realpolitik consequences. Conflicts and the processes that seek to resolve them have multiple levels and interweaving strands that tend to reinforce one another. Building consensus and peace in highly divided societies is a dynamic process that moves backwards and forwards. The CSSR became a space for civil society actors from different backgrounds, geographies, and perspectives to challenge themselves and the dominant narratives that sustain conflict and shape international action. Their collective experience of coming together despite deep mistrust and difference of opinions, and building consensus on shared values and principles that could underpin a future Syria could be described as form of *'pre-figurative politics'* or reimagining of the social contract. Strengthening the capacities of civil society to bridge divides and engage in productive dialogue and collaborate action make it paramount to include them from day one in any peace-making effort.

Secondly and related, the CSSR demonstrates that structures to include civil society in peace-making should not be seen as simply complementary or an add-on to

elite negotiations. Civil society processes have their own value and positive peacebuilding impacts. When thinking about designing an inclusive mechanism, it is important to note that involving civil society is not simply about giving voice to citizens or sourcing different perspectives through one-directional methods and platforms, for example, public hearings, web-based tools or portals, and so forth. The value of civil society engagement lies in the impact that informed dialogue, deliberation and face-to-face interactions can have on re-articulating conflict narratives, fostering connections and building a shared vision for the future.

When designed appropriately, civil society processes can:

- Build coalitions among diverse actors based on normative and strategic arguments
- Forge consensus on foundational principles that can underpin a legitimate settlement and align stakeholders behind the public interest
- Deepen understanding and attention to the underlying drivers of conflict, and how the conflict has mutated over time through violence and strategic use of sectarian narratives
- Create the conditions to make the voices of citizens and marginalized communities heard
- Reshape conflict narratives and discourses among the participants themselves and those in charge of resolving the conflict

While negotiations to end active hostilities may ultimately require a relatively small group of actors wielding raw power, larger discussions about the future direction of a country and expanding political and economic opportunities require a more diverse group of stakeholders. The survey findings support the conclusions of other studies that civic inclusion processes can create new opportunities for citizen engagement, allowing multiple perspectives to develop a shared vision, shape priorities, generate agenda items and potentially legitimize an agreement. Most importantly, such processes can help to address the original drivers of the conflict (e.g. issues of political reform and justice) and to reverse the conditions generated by violence that serves to sustain the power of political and military actors (e.g. sectarianism, low social trust, etc.).

Thirdly, civil society inclusion can help support the work of mediators and signpost the way forward on key issues

by presenting a microcosm of society and the possibilities for consensus-building and areas of agreement. In contrast to the negotiating parties, the CSSR exposed the readiness of Syrian civilians to engage with those with opposing views and connect across conflict lines. The fact that the most important factors highlighted by Syrian participants were commitment to human rights and justice over sect and identity demonstrates its future potential to push negotiating parties to moderate their positions and/or address the issues most important to citizens. At early stages of peace-making processes, for example in the cases of Northern Ireland and Guatemala, civil society has helped identify root causes, generate agenda items and create momentum for peace even when the political level has stalled.

Finally, design matters in generating a sense of ownership, legitimizing the role of civil society, and producing positive outcomes. The issue of mandate, timing and how it relates to the political process raises questions on how various elements in a political process are interpreted and sequenced. Civil society must be closely linked to official processes to elevate the role of civil society and its outputs. The research findings also suggest that designers should adopt a broad conception of civil society that goes beyond NGOs and the formally organized sectors of civil society to include prominent community figures, intellectuals and experts. In Syria, a key question is how to preserve and build a pluralistic democratic Syria where citizens from all backgrounds feel included and protected. While selection of participants should aim to be inclusive and diverse, a focus on those grounded in communities and willing to engage across conflict-lines can prepare the intellectual ground, bolster the *'moderate middle'*, and better express the voices of citizens.

### Key takeaways and recommendations

In response to the insights generated from the research, we have developed two sets of recommendations. The first set of recommendations relates to civil society inclusion in peace-making processes in any conflict-affected contexts while the second set is specific to the Syrian CSSR and context.

#### *Key findings and recommendations on civil society inclusion in peace-making process*

1. **From the very start of any peace-making initiative, formally mandate and design a civil society track** that is linked to official negotiation processes but is valued as a process in its own right. Process impacts may be difficult to measure but they often have wider change impacts than originally intended and can support longer-term transformative processes.
2. **Understand how civil society inclusion can support the work of mediators and negotiators** by signposting the way forward, potentially creating political dynamics that obliges conflict parties to account for their positions, and by empowering the mediator with a third countervailing narrative to break the monopoly of narratives.
3. **Capitalize on the ability of inclusion mechanisms to increase connectivity between policy level and grassroots levels**, deepening analysis of the changing dynamics and perceptions that can affect the prospects for peace-making while also facilitating humanitarian action.
4. **When designing inclusion mechanisms, start with a broad conception of civil society** and extend support and inclusion beyond NGOs and formally constituted organizations. It is also an ideal platform to include those with technical and subject-matter expertise in the country in order to feed into effective analyses of the issues in the political process while also promoting productive dialogue on substantive topics.
5. **Develop flexible and iterative processes** that involve the participants in design, agenda development, and public outreach. This can help promote a sense of collective ownership, transparency and improve the prospects of the process contributing to a larger national consensus on the war forward.

#### *Key findings and recommendations regarding the Syrian Civil Society Support Room*

1. The CSSR has had multiple positive impacts across different levels that will affect the prospects of peace in Syria and should therefore continue as a key

element of a broader political process. It is important to build and capitalize on the valuable achievements of the CSSR, this will help:

- a. increase the peacebuilding impact of a space for dialogue among civic actors across social, ethnic and geographic divides to jointly analyse realities and rearticulate them, engage in collective problem-solving, and build consensus on shared principles and directions forward,
  - b. support the role of the UN Special Envoy in mediation,
  - c. facilitate conflict analysis and humanitarian action on the ground.
2. The meetings and activities of the CSS should not be limited to running concurrently with political talks. Limiting the CSSR activities only to the political talks created huge discontinuities in the room, and reduced the potential cumulative impact of its dialogues and activities.
  3. There is a need for a stronger mandate for the inclusion of women and civil society through a UN Security Council Resolution, one that can provide for a mechanism akin to a track II process, to allow it to meet more frequently and develop a longer-term approach that can build on achievements and meet the varied objectives desired by civil society.
  4. Reinforcing and scaling up the participation of civil society in the CSSR can help combat or balance the geopolitical rivalries and extensive forces to meet demands for a Syrian-led solution and support locally-led approaches to peace.
  5. The CSSR should provide input into a constitutional committee, if established, given its ability to promote consensus-building on foundational issues, which will be needed to underpin any constitutional process. The CSSR can be seen as a mechanism to widen participation in the constitutional process.
  6. Given the value that all participants placed on the CSSR for the opportunity it provided to create an inclusive civic framework to shape the future of Syria, it is important to leverage the CSSR and invest in its potential to provide the foundation or backbone for a larger national dialogue process.
  7. Aligning the participation criteria to the selection priorities chosen by participants can help undermine the sectarian narratives that inform and shape the conflict and international responses. These priorities are commitment to human rights, and the ability to express the priorities of civilians. The least important criteria they cited was sectarian and ethnic identity.
  8. To widen the impact of the CSSR, create and support mechanisms to ensure improved outreach and transparency.
  9. More efforts are needed to improve on inclusivity including having wider representation in the CSSR from the Kurdish Syrian civil society.

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