POLICY BRIEF

Shrinking civic space in Syria: a call for independent media and CSOs to join efforts.

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FREE PRESS UNLIMITED

BACKGROUND

According to <u>Freedom House</u> on the Global Freedom Index, Syria ranks first as a country that experiences the most repressive levels of civil and political freedoms. During 10 years of the Syrian conflict, media, journalists and civil society face enormous challenges such as a continuous limitation to their freedom of expression, weak resources, threats to their lives and work, the absence of structural and institutional development, and political polarization. Despite the ongoing repression and instability, an independent civil society was developed from the grassroots by local Syrian citizens who envisioned to build a professional and ethical environment. However, the civic space for media and civil society has been shrinking, after it had expanded since the conflict started, and has resulted in geographic and socio-political divides, a lack of security, and lack of coordinated efforts between media and CSOs to assist the local communities.

Changemakers in Syria, through independent journalism and civil society action, have been crucial in the path towards creating awareness among Syrian people about human rights, providing reliable information, and bridging gaps within a divided society. **The continuous challenges faced by civil society increase the need for joint cooperation between independent media and CSOs to provide services, independent information and ethical journalism which can be fundamental in restoring post-conflict stability and bridging deep divides.**

Free Press Unlimited organised a forum on shrinking civic space in Syria which brought together different actors from Syrian civil society (including journalists and representatives of CSOs) recognizing their common goals to serve the Syrian audience and advocate for human rights. This forum marked a milestone in dialogue by engaging people from different backgrounds and geographies to collectively discuss steps forward to benefit society with non-polarized information and to present solutions for the future of media and CSOs collaboration.

This policy brief summarizes the main issues discussed during the forum to bring solutions for action and policy-making by strengthening the collaboration within Syrian civil society.

KEY QUESTIONS RAISED DURING THE FORUM

- Perceptions of media and CSOs collaboration – Do we see each other?
- How can media and CSOs complement each other to work towards solutions for Syria?
- What is the future for collaborative work and advocacy in Syria?

Numerous media outlets, institutions, and civil society agents are in exile which has made it more difficult to engage in cooperation, in the exchange of information, and to build independence from big international agencies. However, to build their capacity under such a challenging environment has led media and CSOs to engage in dialogue to bridge the gaps and discuss how they could better complement each other's work.

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CREDIBILITY GAP

Currently, there is a lack complementarity between media and civil society organizations in the big picture of the conflict, yet despite the disconnection, 85% of participants of this forum agreed on the statement that "Regardless of the current situation, press institutions are part of civil society". This set a clear tone of the participants that highlighted the relevance for collaboration within the sector.

The conditions in which these institutions work under are far from ideal, however during the forum consensus was built that coordinated steps must be taken towards the protection of freedom of speech, the implementation of realistic policies and direct dialogues between actors and organisations.

Working together can be challenging given the hardships of the conflict, the political scenario, the distance between the donor money created, the scarcity of projects aimed to build cooperation between both parties, and the territorial diversity. To bring more reliability and to inform Syrians effectively, it was agreed that media and CSOs should foster their interaction and exchange of information which will lead to building a trustworthy and legitimate alliance.

These goals could be achieved by organizing events, training, projects, opening space for dialogue between media and CSOs to organize strategy and guidelines in the absence of formal media and civil society legislation that promotes ethical principles and human rights.

DEFINE THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND OTHER CSOs IN SOCIETY

Answering the first question of this forum 'do we see each other', particpants concluded that more awareness is needed about each others' work. Despite the different roles played by independent media and CSOs, both strive to address human rights and the need of Syrians, in the country and outside the country, as either news providers or providers of services.

The role of CSOs is fundamental to access local communities, gather field data and media and journalists can amplify awareness of these issues by verifying, researching and reporting. As a consequence of the divided territory, some barriers for dialogue between these actors exist. The participants present in the forum agreed that more dialogue is needed as well as raising awareness on the added value of cooperation to achieve a more unified environment.

LACK OF DOMESTIC LEGAL FRAMEWORK

While emerging 'Syrian self regulatory' institutions are increasing their presence, the lack of domestic legal media framework that are ==professional and fair== has a huge impact on the work of independent media and also on the fieldwork of civil society in Syria. Establishing relations with official institutions within the current de facto powers, especially the Syrian government is highly risky. Retaliation, deprivation of liberty, and other cruel treatments can be consequences of having a different opinion from the government and de facto powers.

To answer the second question, on 'how media and CSOs can complement each other', it was concluded that they need to rely on ==building trustworthy relationships== and use ethical principles for journalism to promote human rights and deliver impartial news to the people. Coordination could be developed between media and CSOs and a focal point or group could be appointed consisting of their representatives to develop joint events, to put an annual action plan together, and to initiate spaces for dialogue.

INCLUSIVENESS

The civilians in Syria have suffered from injustice, human rights violations and displacement. Within this context, collaboration between civil society and media outlets would enable the population to receive reliable information and local information provided by CSOs on the ground to rebuild the pillars of a ==united society.==

In addition, participants emphasized the audience's need for inclusive language in the news with different points of view, away from the polarization and focused on meeting the needs of the citizens. Women and people with special needs should be ==fairly portrayed== in the news and also participate more actively in the production of media content as it can have an impact on their inclusion within society. For exmaple, a recent report produced by Hiber Media Foundation in cooperation with a CSO discussed the challenges that impede the effective participation of women in the political and civil leadership in Syria. To gain more impact and attention for a more inclusive and cohesive Syria, media outlets and CSOs should offer capacity building opportunities for their employees and engage women to participate in their events and work.

POLARIZATION IN MEDIA OUTLETS AND CIVIL SOCIETY REPRESENTATIVES

The discussion on polarization in the media and society was prominent as a consequence from the conflict and the human rights violations suffered by the population. Both journalists and representatives of the CSOs claimed that this harms their work as it prevents ==collaboration== to be properly conducted.

The role of the media in the conflict is not only to inform people of the recent news but also to bring awareness of their rights and combat hate speech. Hence, there was consensus that impartial news in combination with providing information that is closer to the people would be crucial to enhance coordination between civil society actors.

Answering the final question in this forum 'what is the future of for collaborative work in Syria', it was concluded that this would be achieved by implementing ==joint planning,== and developing rational responsibility with structured guidelines that both CSOs and journalists commit to deliver ==impartial content== based on the guarantee of freedom of speech, avoiding hate speech, promoting accountability for organisations, and justice for society.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Define the roles of Media and other CSOs in society

Provide dialogue, cooperation and raising awareness of each other's role within Syrian society.

Build trust and expand cooperation

Promote events, joint projects and work based on ethical principles.

Create Best Practices Guidelines

Produce a guideline together through dialogue that ensures agreed upon principles and can be used in the lack of legal framework.

Avoid Polarization

Use impartial language to guarantee access to information and awareness of rights.

Inclusiveness

Use accessible language for everyone and promote women's participation.

Media and CSO representatives in the forum discussed that to enhance cooperation between media and civil society organizations, strategic planning needs to be done by both parties, avoiding polarization, adding an inclusive policy for women and the diverse ethical and religious groups in Syria. These steps would lead to building a trustworthy relationship that even without local legislation would still reinforce the role of both within the Syrian society.

There was especially interest in continuing to build ethical principles and a good practices guideline under the accordance of both media and civil society representatives. Expanding cooperation is key to strengthen the independence and the survival of media and CSOs and provides further credibility and outreach in the international and local environment to contribute to a more united Syrian society.

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