Municipal administration and anti-corruption policies
Dara’a 19-23 February 2018
Concept paper

After almost 8 years of armed conflict, governance in Syria has almost completely collapsed. What remains is mostly driven by the needs of war rather than the needs of the population. Basic services such as food, electricity, shelter and heating, as well as security and justice, are managed and delivered throughout the country by a patchwork of different de-facto local authorities. Consequently, the governance systems and mechanisms which emerge from this patchwork are varied and operate out of sync with each other, leaving the civilian population exposed to the daily challenges of the conflict.

The conflict has determined a severe collapse of local authorities’ capacity to administer their towns and provide services to their constituencies; this applies both to the areas under the control of the Damascus Government and in the areas controlled by the opposition. This country-wide governance vacuum is filled by a multitude of actors, both armed groups and civilians.

The forms through which towns and villages are managed vary area by area and are dependent on the presence of civil society, the level of civil activism and the attitude and role of armed groups. Nonetheless, a developed culture of consultation between local councils and governing bodies on the one hand and local communities on the other is lacking. While this is certainly a legacy from the period prior to 2011, the conflict has only worsened these conditions. In terms of the ability to influence local governance, NGOs might have an element of power over the Local Councils (LCs) as they are often more organised and have more funding from and a better relationship with donors. However, this sometimes results in a situation where civil society groups substitute LCs in providing basic services to the population. In other places, instead of working separately from LCs, CSOs support and work with them on certain relief projects and in this way CSOs have a say within local governance without substituting the LCs.

Now more than ever, those in executive positions frequently believe they possess the authority to do as they want, yet they often lack the tools, knowledge and intention to provide good governance. Accountability of those in governance positions is usually vague and remains largely unimplemented. There is an absence of formal accountability systems for the population, leaving corruption and nepotism rampant in the whole country. Different kinds of institutions are set up on an ad hoc basis and often without coordination, therefore the relationship between them is unclear and blurred, reducing their effectiveness and the capacity of Syrian citizens to monitor their work, further worsened by the overlapping capacities between CSOs and LCs about who should deliver services. This means that the population can be ignored, or worse mistreated, without challenge where civic activism is weak, or, where the population is more organised, LC’s operate under the directions of these more powerful groups.

In the long term, local governance promotion represents one of the key elements on which Syrian civil society organisations can contribute to the future of Syria, in particular on issues and themes related to the rights of the State and the rights of the individual, and the relation between local autonomy, institutional devolution and local democracy.

No Peace Without Justice (NPWJ), in cooperation with Jusoor - Training Centre, is organising a workshop on “Municipal administration and anti-corruption policies”, to be held in Dara’a between 19 and 23 February 2018, to build knowledge and increase awareness on the basics of local
administration and on the tools and mechanisms that could make governance processes more effective and efficient and to develop local accountability mechanisms to measure performances and results of the local administrations.