

Learning Guide: Social Cohesion in Action

Why social cohesion matters


Over a decade of conflict and economic instability have drastically reshaped Syria's social structures. Displacement has uprooted entire communities, damaged social bonds and values, and altered gender relations. Insecurity has deepened as mistrust and new lines of conflict have developed among individuals, communities, and clans in both urban and rural areas due to limited livelihood opportunities, restricted access to community decision-making, and an overall loss of social networks. Discrimination and exclusion are now more visible against internally displaced persons (IDPs), ethnic minorities, and women -- who despite having entered several new economic activities remain unprotected in unaccommodating working environments. Furthermore, decision making at the community and local level continues to be dominated by middle-aged and older men. Women (especially those who are uneducated and displaced), people with disabilities and returnees have few opportunities to contribute to community decision making or to participate meaningfully in peacebuilding and social cohesion efforts. The youth are similarly excluded because of social norms and perceptions that they are "inexperienced" or "reckless", such that even when the opportunity to raise their concerns arises, they are uncomfortable speaking up in the presence of older people as it is considered "shameful".

The SRC believes that to achieve cohesive, inclusive, equitable, safe, and resilient communities, all groups, including marginalized and vulnerable groups, need agency and confidence to exercise equal social and economic influence and to participate meaningfully in decision making that impacts their lives. Inclusion and social cohesion are keys to decreased discrimination, one of the major shocks and stresses that SRC activities seek to address. Thus, SRC's resilience programming takes a collaborative approach that works to build positive, constructive relationships between marginalised groups and host communities. The consortium's methodology to promoting cohesive communities – developed and

championed by SRC member Mercy Corps -- defines social cohesion as "a sense of shared purpose and trust among members of a given group or locality and the willingness of those group members to engage and cooperate with each other to survive and prosper."

The SRC firmly believes that strengthening social cohesion among Syrians greatly improves the ability of programming to foster resilient communities, while also contributing to the creation of preconditions for long-term, sustainable recovery. SRC interventions encourage positive attitudes and behaviours within and between communities. The capacities of communities to manage grievances, ease tensions and resolve disputes is strengthened, and bridges are built with other communities of diverging political, religious, ethnic and socio-economic (including rural/urban) backgrounds, as well as among host and internally displaced communities.

SOCIAL INCLUSION ACROSS SYRIA



	Government of Syria controlled areas	Northwest Syria	Northeast Syria
Women	23%	18%	40%
Youth	33%	43%	15%

Source: 2022 UN Humanitarian Needs Overview for Syria

How social cohesion programming is implemented in Syria

A 'one size fits all' approach to social cohesion is impossible in a complex and heavily fragmented context like Syria. Implementing resilience programming without understanding the diversity of Syria's various ethnic groups, tribes, religions, languages, displacement status, social norms and power relations can reinforce vulnerability for certain groups who are already marginalized within their communities. Recognising that conflict remains a part of Syrians' everyday life, the SRC undertakes

in-depth assessments to better understand the dynamics of the communities it supports to ensure that its programming does not put participants at risk, exacerbate tensions or divisions between groups, and that it builds upon existing connections and restores pre-conflict links between groups through both economic recovery and social cohesion activities.

Experience from Mercy Corps' social cohesion interventions in Syria and other crisis settings has also shown that building or rebuilding relationships torn by conflict requires facilitation of sustained positive interactions across conflict lines. Through sustained interactions, opposing groups can break down stereotypes, steadily improve inter and intra group perceptions, build/rebuild trust, strengthen collaboration and cooperation, and ultimately develop positive and constructive relationships. Furthermore, sustained positive interactions are effective when they engage group members at all levels and across all key demographic categories. This mitigates the risk of overlooking or exacerbating existing grievances, generating new grievances, and mobilizing peace spoilers. SRC programming therefore prioritizes inclusion of women, youth, persons with disabilities, IDPs and other vulnerable groups in community decision-making and community initiatives. Interaction, mediation, and dialogue among the different identity groups is facilitated to build trust, and consensus-building with the goal of instilling a sense of safety,

strengthening social relationships at the local level, and building mutual trust. Key aspects of SRC's social cohesion programming include:

1. Empowering civil society to lead social cohesion interventions

To ensure relevance and sustainability of interventions, the SRC works closely with local civil society actors to reinforce community-driven solutions to dispute resolution, reconciliation and civic participation. Support for local organisations that are explicitly tackling drivers of conflict is prioritized. In building their capacity, the SRC also seeks to preserve and expand civic space to the extent possible in the varying contexts in Syria. Partner organizations benefit from capacity building support that includes training in conflict sensitivity and stakeholder analysis; interest-based negotiation (covers critical thinking and negotiation); mediation principles (covers the mediation process and the characteristics and responsibilities of the mediator); and safeguarding (covers the SRC's policies on child protection, protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, and reporting mechanisms). Local partners also receive mentoring in the use of participatory learning and action methods. Equipped with this training, they embark on context analysis (conflict analysis, sensitivity analysis, stakeholder analysis) of the project area, the findings of which inform all project activities.

THE SRC'S APPROACH TO SOCIAL COHESION



2. Engaging key dispute resolution actors

Having been trained on how to conduct participatory assessments, the local partners identify key dispute resolution actors from various identity groups in the community -- including women, youth, persons with disabilities, IDPs, and ethnic minorities. These potential leaders then receive dispute resolution, negotiation, and mediation training, to increase their confidence and ability to contribute to community affairs. Mercy Corps' social programming in the region has shown that leaders with conflict resolution skills are crucial to promoting the view that peaceful resolution of disputes is possible and accessible – a critical step towards ensuring that tensions and disputes do not escalate into wider conflicts.¹

3. Ensuring youth participation

The SRC's social cohesion interventions take a strong focus on youth and on encouraging them to play an active and positive role in the society. Local partners select youth -- male and female, including persons with disabilities -- from different identity groups and backgrounds in the host and displaced

communities. Core youth group members are also trained in facilitation skills and facilitate community dialogues. They play a significant role in leading the activities and community project.

4. Community activities

The SRC uses community mobilization and the results from the conflict analysis to enable various identity groups – especially those that are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion -- to jointly identify local issues and design and implement community improvement projects that address shared needs. Participating in a community-led process breaks down stereotypes, exclusion, and mistrust, leading to stronger social relationships, or social capital, and increased empathy and trust across traditional divides. To ensure that the wider community benefits from the infrastructure projects, priority is placed on reducing real and perceived constraints to services that drive tensions between communities, and on providing or rehabilitating communal facilities that promote social interaction, such as parks and playgrounds. In addition to providing needed improvements to public infrastructure, these projects mobilize

CREATION OF SAFE SPACES

Before rehabilitation



After rehabilitation



Al-Tala'a Roundabout is the connection point between Al-Dahiya and Al-Tala'a neighborhoods in Al-Hasakeh city, Northeast Syria where about 10,000 people from various identity groups and ethnicities, including Arabs, Kurds and Assyrians, live. The rehabilitation project provided lighting to the roundabout and surrounding areas to reduce theft, harassment, and drug abuse – all issues of concern that were raised in the community dialogue sessions. In beautifying the roundabout, the community also gained a safe space to meet, share concerns and build relationships. For the IDP community, in particular, this space is now a place of respite from the pressures of living in collective centres amidst poor economic conditions and tensions with the host community.

¹ *Seeking Stability: Evidence on Strategies for Reducing the Risk of Conflict in Northern Jordanian Communities Hosting Syrian Refugees*, Mercy Corps, 2014.

communities around transparent and inclusive consultation, planning, and implementation practices.

Impact of the SRC's social cohesion programming

Learning and evidence from SRC programming and project evaluations demonstrate its strengthening of social cohesion based on four parameters, developed by Mercy Corps: trust, interaction, collective action, and inclusion.

Trust: Infrastructure projects and cultural activities had a more positive and statistically significant impact on building trust than even mediation and livelihoods-related interventions. Participants reported more empathy for other groups and greater desire to work together on activities of common interest.

Interaction: Positive interaction – especially when facilitated, and when groups were working towards a common goal – resulted in higher intergroup trust and tolerance.

Collective action: Programming revealed that communities have a deep need to participate in matters that affect them even if there is no monetary compensation. Through dialogue, community members built consensus on projects that benefited the entire community, not just their identity group.

Inclusion: There are numerous stories of change arising from the dialogue sessions and community projects. As one participant noted:

“ My participation in the supervisory committee pulled me out of isolation. At the beginning, it was hard for me to engage as an IDP and a stranger, but through the project I entered a new world where I met people from different groups. We participated in trainings and discussion sessions and became friends. We learned a lot and shared new experiences. We became like a family, made a WhatsApp group for communication, and met regularly which was what I really needed.”

The SRC's experience shows that social cohesion programming is not only feasible in Syria, but that it is also particularly effective if locally led, and if it

supports greater inclusion of women and youth. Following the various project activities (training, dialogue sessions, events and community service projects, most participants (73%) reported increased resilience. The project activities also doubled as an economic intervention as some youth obtained meaningful employment with the skills they gained in training. Additionally, once the youth -- male and female -- underwent training and began working together, their perceptions of gender norms changed. Prior to the project, only 8% of the interviewed youth agreed that young women and men should have the same opportunities, this number increased to 100% at the final assessment. In the words of Muhammad, a male youth group member:

“ We have a stereotypical view of working women or female employees as unsuitable for marriage because they engage with men in the workplace, and for this reason we don't want to educate girls. We want uneducated women who will sit in the house. Through the project training and activities, however, I got acquainted with women in the core group, and I saw how they help their families at home while making a living. Before this I did not want to marry an educated woman, but now I appreciate educated women.”

And Sara, a female core youth group member noted:

“ When I participated in the activities, I felt like I was born again; that I could discuss and put forward ideas and play a role in the community through work. I was able to present my ideas and express my opinions and become an effective performer in my community like a man, no less important than him.”

About the SRC: The Syria Resilience Consortium was formed by six International NGOs to equip individuals, families, and communities in Syria with tools and skills for a better economic future. Between 2016 and 2023, the SRC assisted 2.98 million people across the whole of Syria to rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

