

Statement on Supporting Community Resilience in Syria coinciding with the launch of the United Nations Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2017-2018 in response to the Syrian Crisis in Helsinki on January 24, 2017

We, the civil society organisations working with Syrian communities, welcome the launch of the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2017-2018 in response to the Syrian Crisis (3RP) and the sharing of the key humanitarian priorities for Syria in 2017 in Helsinki on 24 January 2017. We endorse the focus of 3RP on integrating a development approach with humanitarian assistance activities and echo the key features of the plan, such as the emphasis on educational opportunities and the need for boosting the use of national and local capacities for service delivery. However, we express our concern at the untapped opportunities to integrate local stakeholders with humanitarian processes. We encourage the international community to involve Syrian communities and civil society more closely into the planning, implementation and evaluation of all processes in order to support stabilization and resilience. Their active involvement is needed to move the international response to the Syria tragedy from a humanitarian response to one of developing the inclusive economic and political conditions for building a sustainable peace and usher the dignified return of Syrian people to their homes. In the meantime, it is also important to work with host countries to formulate comprehensive strategies to accommodate Syrian refugees and to support host communities.

A year ago, the international community agreed on a comprehensive new approach to address the crisis in Syria and in the region. Now, in reviewing the financial commitments and policy changes made by donors and the international community in London, it is essential to assess whether the situation of people on the ground in Syria has improved. In working to alleviate suffering in Syria, the international community has so far operated according to planning and strategizing mechanisms done internally within its humanitarian coordination and programming capacity. Most efforts by the international community have focused on dealing with the humanitarian disaster in the region emanating from the Syrian conflict. This is essential for effective action during the conflict stage, but as the Syrian war is almost entering its seventh year, **it is time to amplify this approach by better connecting with and coordinating among all actors working on Syria.**

Also, in order to address the regional refugee situation effectively it is crucial to work on the situation inside Syria, and to create stability and resilience in the local communities so that people would not need to leave their homes and communities. In addition to dealing with the impact of the conflict, it is important that all activities contribute to the support of confidence building and conflict resolution. It is of particular importance that Syrian grass root actors across the political division lines are involved in strategizing, planning and implementing all processes. **Working together with the local actors is essential** as they are the ones who create resilience on the ground and shared incentives for peace. Consultation with Syrian stakeholders should go beyond defining humanitarian needs and cover all aspects from participation in planning to the implementation of priority investments.

Education is one of the key sectors where the future and capacity of the Syrians is being built. The inclusion of both education and economic opportunities in the Syria response is both welcome and necessary. However, given the exceptionally high youth unemployment rates in the region and a lack of future prospects for youth as a fuel for instability noted in the recent Arab Human Development Report by UNDP, more

attention must be paid to linking these two aspects of the response to each other. In order for that to happen, the response should:

- 1) Provide for **uninterrupted educational paths** (incl. secondary, vocational and higher education). Thus far the educational solutions have strongly focused on primary education, which alone is not enough to provide for economic and opportunities, not to speak of prerequisites for reconstruction;
- 2) Support **teacher training** which reflects and responds to the rapidly changing needs;
- 3) Enhance **dialogue with the private sector** and 3RP actors to ensure the relevance of the education for labor market needs and
- 4) Increase **entrepreneurial training** as well as funding possibilities for young start-up entrepreneurs and deconstructing bureaucratic barriers hindering their aspirations.

For the sake of social cohesion and addressing the problem of youth unemployment, the chosen measures should target both Syrian refugee youth and local host community youth who are at risk of being marginalised. Such measures need to be complemented by psycho-social support for children and youth in vulnerable life situations.

Humanitarian and development aid to Syrians should be conducted in both host aid countries as well as in Syria to encourage stabilization and the dignified return of refugees. Programming should focus on supporting local livelihoods and community resilience to build local ownerships for solutions. Especially when working in Syrian cities, development aid needs to be coordinated and harmonized with potential or ongoing political processes. All aid processes should strive for the same goal: sustainable and inclusive peace in Syria.

As the Charter for Change stated, at least 20% of humanitarian funding should be directed to local actors. Furthermore, it is crucial that the international partners include all Syrian parties and geographic localities and, through this, help dissolving the already polarized political division lines. We see this as the minimum requirement. **We urge the United Nations and its partners to increasingly support Syrian communities, local governance structures and Syrian civilian actors across the political divide to take ownership of all processes from meeting humanitarian needs to supporting potential peace negotiations and reconstruction.**

