

Social Cohesion from the Perspective of Youth in Northern Syria



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Badael is a rights-based organisation founded in 2013 with a mission to foster transformative justice as the basis of a genuine and sustainable peace in Syria. Championing locally-owned alternatives, we endeavour to buttress the scope and impact of inclusive grassroots civic action and foment the development of holistic truth and understanding within and around the Syrian context.



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Background

Creating spaces that foster learning, activism, co-thinking, and civic engagement among young people is a top priority for Badael. Such spaces are crucial for the development of societies. This emphasis arises from the need to protect and empower the excluded majority in Syria, especially youth, enabling them to lead grassroots citizen movements and initiatives within their communities. It is under this strategic priority that Badael initiated a youth platform to empower and mobilize young Syrians as pivotal change agents, whose perspectives are integral to the growth of a robust grassroots civil society.

The youth platform also aims to enable Syrian youth in cultivating greater social resilience and enhancing their ability to shape discourse and thinking on topics and priorities key to young people within the Syrian civil society. During the platform's establishment meeting, five topics, "Safe Spaces", "Social Cohesion and Inclusion", "Militarism and Destructive Spaces", "Formal and Informal Education" and "Political Participation and Civic Engagement", were identified by participants as urgent issues for Northern Syria's youth. These issues were addressed through think spaces, and the outcomes have contributed to the development of 5 knowledge papers.

The think spaces served as non-prescriptive, deductive environments where 16-20 youth from Al-Atareb, Darat Azza, and Killi, aged 18 to 30, unpacked the conceptual and practical aspects of each issue. They built on their lived experiences, creativity, and peer exchange in a space facilitated by Badael. This paper reflects the outcomes of the first think space, focusing on the youth's conceptualization and analysis of the topic "Social Cohesion from the Perspective of Youth in Northern Syria."

Limitations

Northern Syria was bombarded by the Syrian government and its Russian allies right before the session. Participants were still dealing with the impact of the bombardment on their context and the individual triggers it caused to them and their family members.



Social Cohesion - Conceptual Unpacking

Participants in the social cohesion think space grew up in socially incohesive environments horizontally (social relations) and vertically (between individuals/communities and institutions). They struggled to tackle the concept conceptually, nevertheless, they highlighted issues along the lines of SeeD’s framework of Resilient Social Cohesion below, and emphasised equity and inclusivity with forward looking perspectives.

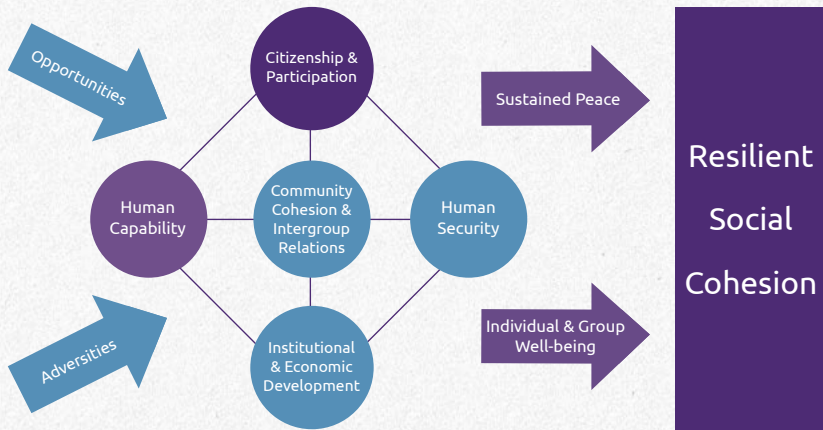


Figure 1: Resilient Social Cohesion – Social Cohesion Hub framework¹

“ If I want to achieve social cohesion, I (as an individual) need to be engaged and active in my community.”

Participants unpacked the definition social cohesion from their perspective as follows:

Social cohesion starts from the private space (the individual, the family) to the public space (the state and civil society - local to national level). It expresses itself when communities and authorities are working together for the public good in the short and long term in an environment that celebrates diversity and is characterised by rule of law and equitable access to services and resources.

1 Original graph can be viewed on: <https://www.socialcohesion.info/concepts/concept/christopher-louise-dr-alexandros-lordos-alexander-guest-dr-ilke-dagli-hustings>

Prerequisites of Social Cohesion

Participants identified 7 prerequisites for social cohesion:

1. Building the confidence of individuals (youth, particularly women) is key for their participation in the closest circle of family to the national level.
2. Respect for people's freedoms including freedom of religion.
3. Solidarity and connectedness between the individual and the group, and the community embraces all its individuals.
4. The participation of individuals in decision-making and incentivising those who do not usually participate.
5. Ensuring excluded groups and communities can access and exercise their political and civic rights, especially women and Persons with Disabilities (PwD), as they are the two groups under stringent restrictions by social norms and stigma.
6. Good governance: ensuring equitable access to basic services and rule of law.
7. A sense of physical and psychological safety for opposition and divergent views and a space for communities to grow and evolve together.

Social Cohesion indicator

Brief Examples from Lived Experience

One participant shared: “When I moved to a new city, the neighbours offered me assistance as a newcomer in securing utilities and key missing items in my residence. They did not care where I was moving from and did not make me feel obliged to change my original dialect to feel accepted.”

Another participant mentioned: “When I do my grocery shopping from the local vendors without considering who is who (IDP, Sunni/Shai, Arab/Kurdish, etc), it means I trust the community where I live, and I do not make my daily decisions along any political, socio-economic or ethnic divisions.”

Actors responsible for promoting social cohesion



Figure 2: actors responsible for social cohesion and inclusion from youth' perspective

Civil society organisations are seen as facilitators of breaking misconceptions and barriers between communities by facilitating spaces to meet and raising awareness about the importance of participation in public life especially for those most excluded (women, PwD).

The government is considered responsible for ensuring rule of law and equitable services and policies, a role that is currently seen to be absent. In the context of Northern Syria, local committees are considered as a bridge between communities and local authorities, who can ensure no community is neglected with basic services and infrastructure.

Furthermore, tribal leaders, village chiefs (mukhtar), Imams, and community leaders enjoy reach and legitimacy in their community and can use their platforms to promote social cohesion. The diaspora is also viewed to play a role in social cohesion, for example, in the wake of the earthquake, it was evident that assistance remittances did not flow according to divide lines but rather to the most affected regions.

Hindrances to social cohesion in Northern Syria

War and displacement negatively impact social cohesion. The fear and trauma resulting from war and displacement can make individuals withdraw from society and increase mistrust and insecurities. 10 hindrances to social cohesion from youth perspective were outlined as follows:

1. The fragmentation of de facto authorities and prioritising individual gains over public good hinder creating a national-level sense of cohesion as the governance experience is significantly different from one area to another.
2. De facto authorities are unfavourable towards inter-community activities or learning and often obstruct such efforts.
3. Sense of tribal, ethnic, religious, or even sub-regional belonging overriding national identity.

4. Poor and exclusionary governance; administrative corruption and nepotism, politicising cohesion as an “in and out” group and creating a sense of threat from outsider groups and exhibiting tolerance towards violence exerted against IDPs.
5. Lack of empathy for the losses of other communities under different rule/authority due to widespread generalisations about each other at the national level along political lines (Thugs/terrorist) which contributes to dehumanising the other.
6. Misaligned governance model aspirations and national interests imply a vastly different relationship between the authority and individuals.
7. Previous experience of exclusion which normalises the absence of certain groups (women, PwD) from public life and the lack of awareness among youth about their role in social cohesion.
8. Shrinking civic space.
9. Lack of trust in youth capacities coupled with sexism and ablism.
10. Economic hardship and economic practices fuelling misconceptions. For example, raising rental values during displacement waves channels blame and resentment towards victims of displacement from the host community.

Participants viewed ageism and sexism as two factors weakening social cohesion and leading to excluding youth from decision-making, particularly young women. Furthermore, while participants believe women’s political participation is a right, society (in their community) views it as heresy, or at best, a domain women are unfit to occupy.

Notably, the level of participation is viewed as an indicator of social cohesion with a deep realisation among participants that exclusion based on gender, ability or other denominators (such as ethnicity, legal status, place of birth, etc) leads to isolation and propagation of misconceptions. Those layers of exclusion lead to “Rule of the fittest” instead of an equitable rule.

All of the above, further isolates youth, drives them to withdraw from public life, and leaves their potential untapped.



Current pro-social cohesion capacities

Despite the challenges listed above, participants highlighted a number of experiences and capacities in their communities which contribute to strengthening social cohesion.

Example 1 Despite low and delayed salaries, teachers filled in the lack of education staff in different areas outside their place of residence, which contributed to social cohesion by breaking misconceptions and building trust.

Example 2 After years of conflict and in the absence of rule of law institutions, the tribal reconciliation council's role in Northern Syria became prominent in resolving local community conflicts² and preserving civil peace.

Example 3 During a displacement wave to Ma'arat Al Numan, the host community relied on its social capital to respond to displacement, in light of the lack of humanitarian aid organisations, offering shelter, information and basic needs.

Example 4 Social traditions such as Faza'a³ and responding to emergencies regardless of who the person in need is. This tradition was prominent during the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2023 earthquake. People checked on each other and responded to needs during Covid-19. During the

2 Including blood conflicts or familial feuds which are often settled through revenge unless a tribal council issues an accepted judgement by the feud parties.

3 When someone is in need, their surrounding environment rapidly responds to their need be it protection, financial aid, medical aid, or any other type of need.

earthquake, the entire population participated in search and rescue efforts, offering transportation and shelter regardless of ethnic, religious, or socio-economic background.

Example 5 Civic education sessions offered by civil society organisations create awareness of rights and responsibilities in society and lead to youth civic engagement. A number of volunteer groups emerged as a result, responding to a myriad of issues from planting trees to peer tutoring.

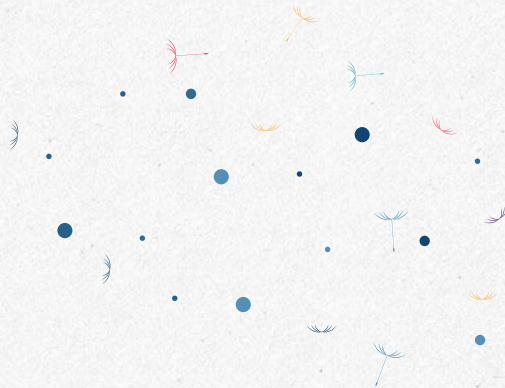
Example 6 Civilians' sense of shared humanity grew over the past few years of the conflict, partially due to conflict fatigue. It became more visible that civilians who expressed sympathy towards the civilians under bombardment or under extreme economic conditions or destitution, across the conflict divide in Syria, were recognised as people of consciousness. Earlier such expressions were viewed as negligible exceptions.

Example 7 Having psychosocial support units in hospitals assists the healing of individuals within local communities which can be an enabling factor to enhancing social cohesion.

In fact, all spaces that contribute to breaking the isolation between communities were mentioned as enablers of social cohesion. For example, the book fair in Idlib, regardless of the titles on offer, was a space where people from different backgrounds met.

Personal experience

“In 2012, we (Arab family) were displaced and were hosted by a Kurdish family for two weeks. The hospitality and generosity of the Kurdish family made us feel like part of their family and community. This left a lasting impact on me. We are indeed united and genuinely care for each other despite the prevalent narratives today that conflate and people with armed or political bodies, and pass judgements accordingly.”



Youth Perspectives on Enhancing Social Cohesion

Youth perspectives on enhancing social cohesion cover a wide range of issues including equipping the individual on navigating social norms-related challenges to enhancing the population's access to existing services, supporting the role of civil society as a legitimate actor to convene inter-community spaces, activating existing structures for social cohesion, making full use of mainstream and social media, and trauma-informed cultural and recreational activities to break the layers of isolation in the community.

Below is a comprehensive list of ideas that emerged during the think spaces:

- Gender-transformative civic education sessions that can equip youth to respond to the pressure of social norms.

For example, a female law student managed to convince her father to study law but society kept pitying her for “wasting” her time and criticising her for choosing a male domain to the point of bringing her morale down to the point of almost considering quitting her education.

- Civil society organisations, volunteer groups, and student committees that enjoy the trust of local communities and have the legitimacy to convene inter-community meetings, should be supported to do so. This includes but is not limited to dialogue sessions and social integration projects between host and displaced communities.

Social media and mainstream media should be intentionally utilised to promote pro-social cohesion content.

- Trauma-informed cultural festivals and inclusive recreational activities

for diverse communities (rural-urban, IDP, resident, etc) to share their histories and practices.

- In-person and virtual youth exchange for young people from different localities.
- Creating maps of services listing what services exist where and how to access them in order to bridge the information gap and enable all people to access those services.
- Supporting projects that foster a sense of shared purpose.
- Activating the role of informal leaders (religious, tribal, familial, and other community leaders). For example, Imams can encourage social cohesion through the Friday sermons.
- Developing an equity code of conduct for service provision institutions.

In times of peace

In times of peace social cohesion is key for sustaining peace. Youth realise that the absence of inter-community violence is not an indicator of social cohesion or peace. They consider social cohesion as essential in times of peace as well because:

- It's essential for the country's preparedness to respond to natural disasters.
- It's essential to expand the civic space, improve social relations and enable inter-community learning.
- It supports wider public participation
- It safeguards justice.

Badael's Facilitators' Reflections

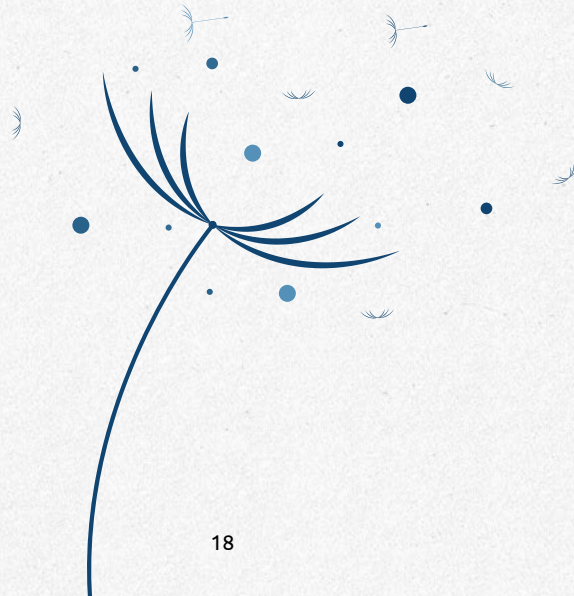
- The majority of participants found it difficult to relate to the national level due to isolation and lack of exposure to the lived realities outside their community.
- The awareness among youth about the importance of breaking gender stereotypes as an enabler of social cohesion was notably high.
- The political and ideological polarization by power holders as a technique of control contributing to dismantling cohesion was absent from the analysis.
- Recognising the rigidity in introducing the concept of social cohesion by international and local civil society actors, and the lack of localisation of this concept as to how it shows up in communities and daily life.
- Although the participants reflected on the contribution of the safe dialogue environment in the Think Space and its contribution to increasing their political awareness through peer learning.

Process reflection: opening the think space with an introduction exercise linked to the topic of the meeting was impactful. The introduction exercise physically illustrated human connectedness with yarn threads passed on between participants as they introduced themselves. Some participants held on to their threads as a physical reminder of social cohesion.

Conclusion

Participants grew up in conflict-divided communities, and their experience of a cohesive society is almost non-existent. Nevertheless, putting the concept of social cohesion in front of them to dissect, challenge, grapple with, and reflect on together in a conducive environment not only produced a nuanced understanding rooted in their lived realities but also ensured young participants own this knowledge and are able to transfer it beyond the think space in action and information forms.

It is worth reiterating that this Think Space was held shortly after the bombardment of participants' areas by the Syrian government and its Russian allies. The openness, clarity, commitment, and eagerness to co-learn of young people in Northern Syria while struggling with physical insecurity, repression by de facto authorities, and stereotypical social norms is an expression of leadership that is immensely commendable.





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