Syria Civil Society Evaluation

This evaluation was conducted between 06/23/2017 and 10/17/2017, and the final report was submitted 11/6/2017.

Purpose of the Evaluation and Questions Addressed
NEA/AC sought a review of its Syria Civil Society Organization (CSO) support programs in order to guide the direction of civil society programming for FY18 and beyond. This independent evaluation of civil society programming serves the following purposes: 1) To provide the USG with concrete evidence of the extent to which projects supporting capacity building of CSOs and activists in Syria have achieved stated goals and objectives; 2) Review, analyze, and evaluate stakeholder views of the outcomes and any impact of NEA/AC civil society programming; 3) Determine any recommended course adjustments in the ongoing projects; and 4) Provide programmatic recommendations that take into account the new focus on Defeating ISIS (D-ISIS) and other designated terrorist organizations (DTOs), and countering violent extremism (CVE); and how NEA/AC can tailor its civil society assistance activities in this new environment (both in terms of operating platform and the capability of our partners to work in this realm).

Methodology
The evaluation used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods that reflect the program logic, research questions being addressed, and constraints on the ground. The evaluation team conducted 30 interviews in the United States and Turkey with U.S. State Department officials, related donors, NEA/AC implementers, and partner organizations. More than 100 field surveys reached staff members from 11 CSOs and their beneficiaries in Syria. The survey questionnaires administered in Syria included 18 fixed-choice quantitative questions and one open-ended question, and surveyed community members who had benefited from a CSO-provided capacity building training or who had visited a community center. Survey questionnaires for CSO staff who had received capacity building support from NEA/AC programming were administered primarily in Gaziantep, and consisted of 27 fixed-choice quantitative questions and one open-ended question.

Recommendations

Tailored Support
The evaluation team recommends more tailored support to NEA/AC CSO partners based on organizational capacity assessments and CSO input. NEA/AC could consider providing different tiers of capacity building support to CSOs to reflect their diverse profiles and needs. For instance, well established CSOs with relatively strong operations and administration capabilities could be offered enhanced mentoring and coaching to address their unique needs. Smaller and emerging CSOs with basic capacity needs could be offered more general support, e.g. on grant compliance and the establishment of internal systems. NEA/AC could cluster support to these CSOs by need, location, or other defining
feature. General trainings should be conducted in a small group setting when possible and when resources permit.

**Learning Approach**
The evaluation team encourages NEA/AC to maintain its commitment to learning and adapting. This could take the form of a trial-and-error process where different approaches are piloted and, if successful, scaled. For this approach to work, stronger monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems are needed. Implementers should be encouraged to develop M&E systems and tools that are appropriate for the ground realities and that do not unduly burden CSO partners. Similarly, NEA/AC should identify ways to ease reporting requirements and information requests to CSO partners.

**CSO coalitions/ networks**
The evaluation team encourages NEA/AC to test the “Hub & Spokes” model (i.e., focused support to a large CSO that in turn provides support to smaller organizations) as a way to expand the project reach, build CSO networks, and increase CSO capacity. This model should be carefully scaled to match NEA/AC and implementer management capacity (e.g., each new civil society partner will need to be vetted).

**Local buy-in and ownership**
Local buy-in and ownership are key to project success in the short and long-term. NEA/AC and its implementing partners should prioritize this going forward, making sure to balance USG priorities with local views. There should be consistent opportunities for CSO partners to provide input to the project design and the selection of training topics, and a mechanism for their input and feedback throughout the grant period.

**CVE and D-ISIS**
The evaluation team recommends an indirect approach to CVE and D-ISIS as part of civil society support. There should be an emphasis on do-no-harm principles, locally-driven approaches, and flexibility. This includes prioritizing the safety of project partners and beneficiaries, allowing local partners to frame the issues, and recognizing the contributions of efforts already underway but not branded as CVE and D-ISIS. NEA/AC should continue efforts to anchor civil society in communities and promote civic engagement (e.g., through community center activities.) NEA/AC could also explore opportunities to scale up public information on democratic principles to counter extremist rhetoric, and resilience efforts.

**Donor messaging/ coordination**
NEA/AC should coordinate with other USG donor agencies to delineate the scope of their support to civil society (e.g. geographically or thematically). USG donor agencies should also aim for more targeted information sharing with each other, e.g., focusing on synchronized roll-out of support where donors are working in the same location, debriefings by their respective implementing partners, and lessons learned (rather than focusing on broad project updates.)