“Who gets to define post-conflict reconstruction priorities?” Reflections from Syria, Iraq and Yemen

Insights from a Roundtable Discussion hosted by the Nabni Building for Peace Facility
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A consistent lesson from decades of peacebuilding and development practice is that post-conflict reconstruction is sustainable only when people affected by it have a meaningful role in shaping its priorities. Reconstruction is not simply about rebuilding infrastructure or restoring services, it is also about rebuilding trust and relationships between communities, civil society and the State.

These questions were at the centre of a roundtable hosted by Nabni, bringing together the Facility's civil society partners, government representatives and international actors to reflect on experiences from Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

1. From community consultation to influence: what does an inclusive reconstruction process look like?

"If you ask local civil society to get the local perspective [...], you will get a totally different answer. And if you let them determine the intervention based on the needs the community articulates, you will get a totally different project."

- Donor representative

The difference between consulting local actors and enabling them to shape reconstructions priorities is not only a process question: it can fundamentally change what questions are asked, how problems are understood and which solutions are prioritised. But meaningful engagement requires creating safe dialogue space for local actors to share their visions, articulate their own priorities and influence decisions from the outset.

“Before infrastructure rehabilitation begins, dialogue helps strengthen residents’ sense of ownership of shared spaces and enables them to agree on how those spaces should be used.”

- CSO member, Syria

The difference between consultation and inclusion is particularly visible when considering physical reconstruction in post-conflict settings: here, physical space is not socially neutral. Decisions about what to rebuild and where can either reinforce existing divisions or help restore connections and build peace.

“Places that hold positive shared memories offer an easier starting point for communities to engage with the past. Before rehabilitating a place associated with painful memories, we need to give people space to talk about those memories freely.”

- CSO member, Syria

On one hand, community dialogue can reveal priorities that would not necessarily emerge from conventional needs assessments, including the importance of places that hold memories, divisive or shared meaning across different groups. The discussion also highlighted that without local dialogue as a precursor and approach, the sustainability and ownership of any development initiative would be jeopardised, as would be its potential to foster reconciliation and peace.

2. From competition to cooperation: how can civil society and State actors reinforce one another?

"We need to be very careful when we do localisation [...] to not ignite conflicts that were not there before."

- Donor representative

Shifting resources and responsibilities to local civil society without accounting for existing power dynamics can unintentionally reinforce divisions or create new competition. In in post-conflict settings, relationships between civil society and State actors are rarely straightforward. While civil society often provide essential services where State institutions have limited reach or capacity, represent community concerns or facilitate dialogue, there is a risk of exacerbating or generating competition.

"Trust issues. Both parties in many cases do not trust each other. Competition. Over resources and legitimacy as well, in the eyes of the served community."

- CSO member, Syria

The discussion highlighted the need to foster dialogue and adopt approaches that move beyond competition and encourage the respective contributions to be mutually reinforcing.

"We know that no matter what we do, unless there is support from the local authorities, we cannot succeed. So, they are partners and they are needed. At the same time, they need civil society."

- CSO member, Syria

This requires a careful balancing of roles.

"It is necessary to develop a legal framework that governs the relationship instead of leaving it to multiple powers to intervene."

- CSO member, Syria

Civil society can bring local knowledge, trust as well as accountability, while public institutions provide longer-term institutional continuity and mandates. Clear roles can help create the conditions for cooperation, with both parties (and their international partners) needing to accept each other's renewed mandates after conflict.

"Authorities should accept that civil society does not only do service delivery, but also does monitoring, oversight and accountability. And civil society should accept the transformation: they used to fill the gaps in the past, new governments have to take their responsibilities now."

- CSO member, Syria

3. From "implementing partners" to strategic, equitable partnerships: what needs to change?

"Strengthening civil society's role in reconstruction requires more than capacity building. It requires a shift in how civil society is recognised, resourced and involved in decision-making. Local organisations bring a deep understanding of local needs, but their contributions remain limited when they are treated as implementing rather than strategic partners."

- CSO member, Yemen

Localisation has become a central ambition of international development cooperation: it is not only normative, but also reputational.

"[Working with civil society] is not an altruistic endeavour for us as donors. We have seen in many parts of the world where reconstruction had no sustainability because local actors were not part of the process. For us it is also a reputational thing, to ensure that in the future there is no empty shell with a logo on it."

- Donor representative

Local civil society continue to face a familiar contradiction: they are valued for their knowledge, access and community trust, but they continue to implement priorities defined far away from their own realities.

Meaningful locally led peacebuilding, development and reconstruction require a change in practices, mindsets and –crucially – funding mechanisms.

"An intermediary structure [such as Nabni] is needed by many partners such as KfW, but it should be an enabling structure, based on a shared understanding of localisation."

- Donor representative

Lean structures committed to equitable partnerships with local civil society point to an important opportunity for international cooperation. Funding mechanisms such as Nabni can do more than transfer resources and ensure compliance. They create the conditions to strengthen local capacities, support collective learning and enable local organisations to contribute meaningfully to shaping peace promoting and conflict-sensitive reconstruction processes.

Ultimately, the discussion underscored an important message: inclusively defining post-conflict priorities requires more than consultation of affected communities. It calls for giving them an equal seat at the table and for recognising the distinct and complementary roles of civil society, State actors and international partners. Reconstruction priorities are most likely to be legitimate, sustainable and peace-promoting when they are shaped through inclusive processes that bring together local communities, civil society, public authorities and international partners in relationships based on mutual trust and shared responsibility.

Funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through KfW Development Bank and hosted by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the Nabni Building for Peace (B4P) Facility supports locally led peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts in conflict-affected communities across the Middle East and North Africa. Working exclusively with local civil society organisations, Nabni combines grant funding, technical assistance and knowledge sharing to improve essential services, support livelihoods, and promote peace and social cohesion.

To watch a summary video of the Roundtable, click here.

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