

Governance
Experiences in
SYRIA

(Shedding Light on the Formation
of Local Councils and Their Work)

Local Development and Small-Projects Support
March - 2020



This report is part of **LDSPS's** contribution to the experience of local governance in Syria. We dedicate it to **Omar Aziz, the godfather of local councils in Syria.** It also could not be completed without remembering our friends and co-founders of LDSPS, forcibly disappeared: **Razan, Samira, Wael, & Nazem**

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Executive Summary

During the past six years, Local Development and Small-Projects Support (LDSPS) worked with 63 local councils (LCs) in different regions in Syria that went out of the regime's control (Eastern Ghouta, Western Aleppo Countryside, North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside, and to a limited degree, western countryside of Daraa). This work was carried out at different levels of partnership and different conditions of de-facto authorities and therefore of independence of the LCs. In addition to its direct interaction with LCs through its local teams, LDSPS conducted four community assessments (in early 2017, early 2018, mid 2018, and at the beginning of 2020), that enabled the us to form a comprehensive vision about the development of LCs, the challenges they face, as well as the mechanisms that can contribute to the development of their work (LDSPS tested these mechanisms directly through its working experience with the LCs).

After an introduction that includes a historical description of the formation of LCs in the areas that are not held by the regime in Syria; this report provides a light-shedding experience-based summary of this vision in a way that does not aspire to be comprehensive or be considered as research, but that, we hope, contributes to an understanding and lesson-learning of the experience of LCs and the situation of what remains of them in different regions.

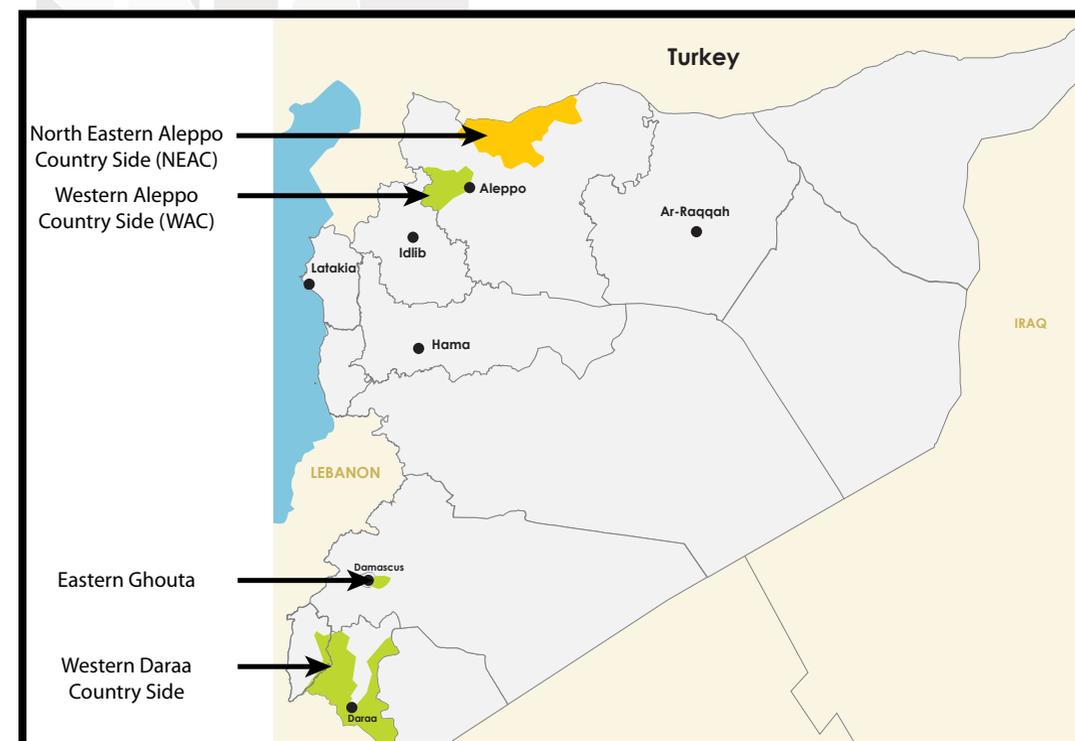
The report discusses five important aspects of the experience of LCs in areas that were no longer under the regime's control (except for the areas under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces or SDF): formation mechanisms and legitimacy; the organizational situation and available competencies; the financial and funding situation;

the provision of services; and finally the LCs interactions with their environment (local community, international, national and local organizations, provincial councils, sectoral directorates, and armed factions).

The report summarizes a set of lessons learned that LDSPS took away from this experience:

1. The concept of the local council (LC) imposed itself and proved its value. LCs became local actors recognized by all parties. 2. Local communities in areas that went out of the regime's control have lived in practice the experience having LCs in their towns/cities.
3. At the beginning of their apparition, LCs gained their legitimacy in the eyes of their local communities through the services they provided. However, soon this legitimacy became impacted by the performance, the extent of communication and the transparency of the LCs. In addition, the formation mechanism of the LCs (whether elected or appointed) became a major criterion in the community's evaluation of legitimacy of their LCs.
4. Direct elections of the LCs by the local communities are a key factor when it comes to the appreciation of the local communities of their LCs. However, having a successful elections process requires carrying out local preparation and work for a relatively long period of time (about two years).
5. The issue of women's participation in LCs requires an integrated approach that includes the local community, the local civil society and the LCs. Such an approach ensures the possibility of achieving clear and measurable progress in women's participation within relatively short periods of time (about two years).

6. The participation of IDPs in local decision-making mechanisms is an important topic and faces major challenges, but it has not been seriously addressed yet.
 7. With an integrated holistic approach for supporting the LCs and a regular (steady and continuous) funding, notable progress can be achieved in the relationship and the interactions between the LCs and their communities; this within relatively short periods of time (less than two years).
 8. The lack of comprehensive approaches and time-bound strategic plans among donors related to the question of supporting LCs resulted in wasting a huge amount of time, effort and financial resources.
 9. There are currently no more fully independent LCs in Syria as they are all operating in areas subject to de-facto authorities. There is, however, a margin that can be exploited in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside (under Turkish control) to build a relatively acceptable model of local governance.
- LDSPS provides at the end of this report its recommendations in the short, medium and long term to the LCs, to international NGOs, international donors, de-facto authorities, and experts and structures specialized local governance working on Syria.



Acronyms

- CSO(s):** Civil Society Organization(s)
- HTS:** Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, previously named Al-Nusra Front
- IDP(s):** Internally Displaced Person (People)
- ISIS:** Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
- LC(s):** Local Council(s)
- LACU:** Local Administrative Councils Unit
- LDO:** Local Development Organization
- LDSPS:** Local Development and Small-Projects Support
- NGO(s):** Non-Governmental Organization(s)
- SDF:** Syrian Democratic Forces

About the Local Councils:

The term “local council” (LC) is relatively new in Syria as it appeared in local administration terminology only with the law 2011) 107). In practice, the first LCs began to appear in late 2011 in the form of revolutionary councils in some towns or neighborhoods that were “protected” from the invasion of the security forces of the Syrian regime (Barzeh or Al-Zabadani) as a mean of coordination between the various activities that have emerged (peaceful demonstrations, protection of demonstrators, and provision of relief services to new IDP arrivals in the town/ neighborhood).

During 2012 and at the beginning of 2013, an **increasing number of towns and neighborhoods went out of the regime’s control** and, as a result of the need to compensate for the administrative and services vacuum, **the phenomenon of LCs spread but in various ways of formation, different designations and tasks, and sometimes competing** even within the same town:

- Revolutionary councils, whether they existed before the town was completely free from the presence of the regime forces, or resulting from “revolutionary” committees in the town turning into its revolutionary council once the regime forces had lost control of it;
- Councils imposed by the different factions that took control of different towns from the regime forces (such councils were mostly called Shura Councils before this name was transformed in some towns to designate the general or electoral assembly used to elect the LCs’ members in these towns as shown later);
- Councils appointed by the provincial councils that appeared when the

National Coalition for Revolution and Opposition Forces was formed. This first form of the Provincial Councils was thought of as a way to include representatives of the different Syrian governorates in the Coalition. Once these provincial councils were formed, they tried to give themselves legitimacy on the ground by appointing people in a number of cities and towns as “members of the local city’s/town’s council”. These councils quickly disappeared because they weren’t based on any real local foundation;

- Councils formed, in several towns and cities that went out of the regime’s control, from a gathering of local notables and activists under the name of the Local Council. The roles of the members of these councils were rearranged over time with the role of notables becoming more and more confined within the general assembly (in some regions this may be called the electoral assembly or, in others, the Shura council) that elects LC members, leaving the membership of the LCs for activists and qualified/experienced people as much as possible.

With time and **by mid-2014 there was a “natural selection”** of the four types (mergers or disappearance of some forms either because of their inability to obtain legitimacy or the failure to provide any added value to the population, like services for example). **The fourth model prevailed** as the quasi-general form of LCs in the vast majority of the areas that were out of the regime’s control.

This harmonization of the formation mechanism was accompanied by a **change in the duration of the “electoral mandates”** of the LCs. They started with a period of 3 months then were extended to 6 months before **becoming one-year** mandates in most cases.

In addition, an increasing awareness by the people wanting to become

LC members as well by the local community members of the potential length of the conflict led to an **increasing trend of relying** in the formation of LCs **on people who are capable of showing real performance and competencies**, especially in the services sector, **rather than relying on local notables** for their social positions and influence.

Note: In north-eastern Syria, however, the “Self-Administration” was created under the patronage of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This central administration imposed a centrally-controlled formation mechanism of the LCs under its administration. In this mechanism, LC members are appointed by the central authority rather than being chosen by the local communities. This model started in the North-East and was extended afterwards to all areas that were liberated from ISIS by SDF. This report does not cover any of the areas controlled by SDF since LDPS did not start any LCs-related action these areas.

Since 2014, except for the different model in the north-eastern regions of Syria, **the apparition and action of the community-based LCs has succeeded to impose the concept of LCs**. This concept initially derived legitimacy from the ability of the LCs to provide services to the population, preventing the complete collapse of the services and social infrastructures in the areas that went out of the regime’s control and also limiting, to a certain extent, the control by armed factions of the local administrative and services-provision’ activities in these areas. By 2015, LCs became a relatively comforting reality for the local communities and a reality that could no longer be abolished by armed factions, pushing some of them in some towns to use indirect means to

control, or at least to influence, the action of LCs rather than trying to stop or to abolish them. In addition, despite the harmful and negative effects that resulted from the delays in the recognition in practice by donor countries and international organizations of the existence and of the importance of the role of the LCs, this recognition finally happened around early 2016 when these bodies decided to work with the LCs, sometimes even forcing their partners, being local or international organizations, to coordinate with the LCs (especially on the matter of relief distribution).

In 2016, the number of LCs in areas out of the regime’s control was estimated to be around 450, not including the number of councils in the areas controlled by SDF (in early 2018, the Ministry of Local Administration of the Syrian Interim Government, which is affiliated to the Coalition of the Revolution and Opposition Forces, estimated the number of LCs at 317).

As of mid2016-, **the increasing re-control by the regime forces of areas** that had been out of its control, **the expansion of HTS** (which had different names and alliances, like Al-Nusra Front, Jaysh Al Fateh, and finally Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham or HTS) over most of the liberated areas of Idlib and of Western Aleppo Countryside in early 2019 and **Turkeys military intervention** (first indirectly in north and northeast of Aleppo to support the factions that got ISIS out and then directly in the Afrin region), 4 assessments conducted between 2017 and beginning of 2020 all led to the **complete disappearance of LCs that have a large independence from the de-facto authorities** in control of their regions (the regime, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham or HTS, The Syrian Democratic Forces or SDF and Turkey). All LCs are currently (at the time

when this report was written) affiliated in different degrees to one of these de-facto authorities.

About the report and the methodology:

The current report aims to shed a light on the work of LCs through the **experience of Local Development and Small-Projects Support (LDSPS hereinafter)** and its direct cooperation with 63 LCs (16 in Eastern Ghouta, 18 in Western Aleppo Countryside, 25 in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside and 4 in Daraa countryside) from late 2013 till the beginning of 2020 (this cooperation still continues in the North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside region). The report comes as an addition to the report issued by LACU (Local Administration Councils Unit) in cooperation with Swiss Peace entitled “Perceptions of Governance: The Experience of LCs in the Opposition Held Areas in Syria” (January 2017), which provided a descriptive work of five study-cases of five councils that LACU worked with, and were used as models or examples of the work of LCs. It comes also as an addition to the study issued by the Omran Center for Strategic Studies, which presented a study on “Crises facing LCs and mechanisms for dealing with them” (December 2015) approached the topic from a research point of view (without direct working-experience with LCs).

In this contribution **LDSPS is analyzing the LCs’ structures, action and performances based on its experience in working with these 63 LCs and also based on several local-community assessments that LDSPS organized** (4 assessments conducted between 2017 and 2019 in 63 cities/towns, during which some 3600 people were involved: the first and second assessments, conducted in early 2017 and early 2018, covered Eastern Ghouta, before it was retaken by the regime forces,

and Western Aleppo Countryside; the third assessment, that took place mid 2018, only covered Western Aleppo Countryside prior to its control by HTS, and the forth assessment of the beginning of 2020 covered the regions of Idlib, North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside and Western Aleppo Countryside almost of a year after its control by HTS). **LDSPS used also some informal research about the formation and functioning of councils with which it did not have any partnership**, in order to make some comparisons (Raqqa before its control by ISIS, Saraqeb, Eastern-Aleppo City Council).

The current report makes **comparisons between the different regions where LDSPS has worked**, and seeks to provide a picture of **a practiced reality** probably not sufficient as academic research, but that can in our views shed light on some of the recurring points that the LDSPS team observed during its -6years intervention, in four different regions that were out of the regime's control.

The report focuses on five important aspects of the LCs experience: **the formation mechanisms and legitimacy, the organizational situation and available competencies, the financial and funding situation, the provision of services, and finally, the LCs interactions with their surrounding environment.**

About the work of LDSPS with local councils:

LDSPS started to work with LCs in **Eastern Ghouta** from the end of 2013 until the regime regained control of that region in April 2018. During that time, LDSPS cooperated with 16 LCs: Douma, Harasta, Zamalka, Jisreen, Saqba, Mesraba, Irbin, Hamouriya, Kafr Batna, Al-Marj, Hazeh, Ein Tarma, Beit Sawa, Madeira, Al-Shafouniya,

As for **Western Aleppo Countryside**, the cooperation of LDSPS with the

LCs began in the first half of 2017 and continued until HTS dominated the region in the beginning of 2019. During that time, LDSPS cooperated with **18 LCs**: Daret Ezzeh, Atareb, Urem al-Kubra , Kafr Naha, Abzemo, Ainjara, Khan Al-Assal, Batabo, Hazzano, Al-Jineh, Kafr Amah, Kafr Noran, Kafr Taal, Maaret Al-Atareb, Owejel, Taqad, Aleppo City Council (that still managed two neighborhoods of the city Aleppo in 2019-2017). In **North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside**, cooperation began with the LCs in the region during the first half of 2018 and continues to this day. This cooperation included **25 LCs**: Akhtreen, Al-Bab, Al-Barozeh, Al-Rai, Al-Ziyadiya, Arshaf, Azaz, Baraghida, Bazaa, Marea Countryside, Marea, Dabeq, Ahtamilat, Kafra, Kaljabreen, Qabasin, Talalin, Roxel, Tel-Aar, Kafr Kalbeen, Shamarekh, Turkman Bareh, Kafr Ghan, Sejjo, Souran. LDSPS cooperated with **four LCs in Daraa countryside** for few months only (starting in the first quarter of 2018 and ending with the regime's regaining control of the region in July 2018): Nasiriyah, Nawa, Shaykh Saad and Inkhil.

The **types of support provided by LDSPS** to the councils included:

- covering the salaries of administrative staff (24 LCs and 1 provincial council, for periods ranging from 3 to 21 months);
- training, followed by “consulting” services, of LCs’ employees on issues related to good governance, financial management, project management, and transparency (40 councils had at least 3 training courses each with an average attendance of 12 people in every session, i.e. more than 1400 people trained in total);
- funding equipment & supplies purchasing and maintenance of buildings (or even construction of some) for the LCs (about 40 projects);
- funding projects of service-provision for the communities, implemented

- by the LCs (about 30 projects);
- funding revenue-generating projects implemented by the LCs (about 20 projects);
- continuous support and direct involvement in activities related to the coordination of the LCs’ action and their communication with their environment (communication of LCs with each other, meetings with local CSOs, public seminars and meetings with the community, meetings with provincial councils, etc.);
- advising and contributing to the local coordination, to the setup, and to the logistical costs of direct elections of 5 LCs in 5 towns (Saqba, Harasta, Jisreen and Mesraba in Eastern Ghouta in the second half of 2017 and Ainjarah in Western Aleppo Countryside at the end of 2018). Partnerships of LDSPS with LCs are made at three levels:

- **strategic partnerships** (about 18 LCs) in which all the types of support mentioned above are provided to the partner-LCs during continuous periods ranging from one and half to three years,
- **development partnerships** (about 20 LCs) during which support of capacity-building (training and equipment), service-provision projects, and revenue-generating projects is provided to the partner-LCs, in addition to coordination and communication activities with the concerned LCs, during continuous periods ranging from one to three years,
- **cooperation partnerships** (about 25 LCs) during which service-provision projects and revenue-generating projects are intermittently provided to the concerned LCs.

These partnerships were built on different levels of commitments from the side of the concerned councils: for the strategic partners:

independence, transparency and working towards direct-elections; for the development partners: independence and transparency; and for the cooperation partners: independence.

1. Formation mechanisms of LCs and their Legitimacy

As mentioned in the introduction of this report, LCs were formed into various types at the beginning of their emergence. They had short mandates (3 months) and relied on members that carried social weight but with no experience. By mid- 2014, formation mechanisms of the LCs became similar in all of the different regions out the regime's control (excluding those controlled by SDF) organized around a model of a **General Assembly** (in some cases called an 'Electoral Assembly' while some towns retained the name of 'Shura Council' for this assembly) **that elects members of the council** (in most cases the elected members are called 'Executive Bureau' members). These LC members managed the work of the LC by heading its various specialized offices/departments. The **main differences between the LCs were in the diversity of their general assembly in terms of the size** (from 30 to 500) and of the **multiplicity of the formation methods** (formation was always based on local concordances but they led to different outputs in terms of the composition of the General Assembly, from one case to another). In the countryside of Aleppo, the most prevalent consensus is a quota-based system among the big families of each town based on the relative sizes of these families. The size on one big family defines the number of its representatives in the General Assembly (and sometimes even in the Executive Bureau). Similar mechanisms existed in Daraa countryside. In contrast, in small/mid-sized towns in Eastern Ghouta, the General Assembly of a town gathered its main notables, almost

regardless of them being part or not of the main families of the town. It is important to note that there were some **very distinguished cases of General-Assembly formation, with rather sophisticated mechanisms, in some cities or urbanized areas outside of the regime's control**. In Raqqa for example, after it became free of the regime's forces in 2013 (and before ISIS took control of it), following an unsuccessful attempt of the local stakeholders to form the LC by direct community elections, an agreement was reached to form a General Assembly of 500 people, some chosen to represent the various local political sensitivities (Islamist versus secular) and some representing the armed factions on one side and the local civil society such as unions and revolutionary committees, on the other. Similarly, the General Assembly of the Eastern-Aleppo City Council (part of Aleppo which went out of the regime's control), also gathered around 500 people representing on one hand the various professional sectors (doctors, engineers, pharmacists, lawyers and teachers) and on the other, the different neighborhoods of Eastern Aleppo. In case of the city of Douma, the LC was constituted from several parallel profession-based general assemblies, each one of them electing a certain number of specialized members to head the7 corresponding specialized office/department within the LC (for example, a General Assembly of approximately 2000 teachers elected the council member, or the Executive Bureau member as we said, responsible for the Education office, while in parallel a General Assembly of lawyers and judges elected the council member responsible for the Legal office, General Assembly of engineers electing engineers for the Projects office, etc.). Representatives of these various parallel general assemblies would then elect the president of the LC.

It is also worth noting that the **sizes of general assemblies** (/electoral assemblies/Shura councils), **and even the ways of forming them** in each town **were not always constant in time**. Some towns witnessed a redefinition and a redesign of their general assemblies with the increasing “maturity” of the LCs’ work and the realization at the local levels of the need to define mechanisms that allow the choice of people more competent/experienced, more capable and more willing as LC members, especially in light of the increasing need to provide various services that go far beyond organizing the distribution of relief.

In addition, **while the role of general assemblies** (electoral assemblies or shura councils) often **ended with the election of LC members** (and therefore the members of the general assemblies being replaced after every election of the LC members), there were several cases within regions where LDSPS intervened, where **some communities recalled their General Assembly for meetings in order to solve some problems or crisis** experienced by their LC (pressure from some factions operating in or controlling the town, disputes within the LC, etc.).

It should also be noted that despite the **preference of most towns and cities for the one-year mandate** of the LCs (and thus of the re-formation cycle of General Assembly/Electoral Assembly/Shura Council being equally one year), it was **a common practice not to strictly apply this condition**. Often, LC mandates were extended to 14 months, 18 months and in some cases to more than two years (this is currently the case in the vast majority of LCs in the areas under the Turkish control or under the control of HTS).

While the Election-by-General-Assembly model became the most dominant formation mechanism of the LCs, **transitioning to LCs being**

formed by community direct elections was a primary goal of several actors working with the LCs, including LDSPS. For the concretization of this, one had to wait until the **beginning of 2016 to see such an experience happening for the first time in Zamalka in Eastern Ghouta** (the attempt of the activists in Raqqa after it went out of the regime’s control in 2013 had almost led to direct elections, but this attempt did not succeed and ended with the formation of the Raqqa LC through an expanded General Assembly as mentioned above).

Zamalka’s experience did not continue nor was it repeated nor transmitted to the neighboring LCs for two main reasons (as analyzed by LDSPS): The fact that the experience was launched based on a will largely influenced of a local military faction and did not come from a conviction of the local community, and the fact that the necessary time for the formation of such local conviction has not been passed yet in the region of Eastern Ghouta.

This first experience was followed by **direct elections of the Idlib City Council in the beginning of 2017**, after nearly two years of the city being controlled by Al-Fateh Army in 2015, in an attempt to reverse and change the negative image of its control over the city, especially in front of western donors who feared the significant impact of the Al-Nusra Front within the Al-Fateh Army. Like Zamalka, the Idlib City Council direct-elections experience didn’t last and wasn’t repeated because it did not stem from an actual will of the local community.

Saraqeb elections (southern countryside of Idlib) **came in mid2017-** as the first actual experience of direct elections resulting from the local conviction and the will of the community. Perhaps this is what prompted HTS to attack Saraqeb and control it. Despite maintaining the elected

council, HTS first limited its authorities by imposing extended roles of the directorates attached to HTS's Salvation Government, and then ended any possibility of repeating the experience of direct elections. Saraqeb elections was followed by a **series of direct elections in Eastern Ghouta**, organized with the contribution of LDSPS in the towns of Saqba, Harasta, Jisreen and Mesraba **during the second half of 2017**. Although the participation rates in these elections remained low and despite the fact that women were even excluded from participating in some of them (LDSPS succeeded in persuading the LC of Saqba to open an electoral center for women only a day before the direct elections were conducted in this town, while in the case of Mesraba, LDSPS succeeded at obtaining only a commitment to allowing the participation of women in the following electoral cycle, which has never been fulfilled due to the fall of Eastern Ghouta in the hands of the regime later); the general atmosphere of the elections in all four towns and the qualitative testimonies obtained by LDSPS showed a great and promising enthusiasm. The rest of the Eastern Ghouta councils interacted with this wave. LDSPS had developed a roadmap in cooperation with the LCs of Eastern Ghouta to conduct direct elections in most of the other towns (most importantly the city of Douma) during 2018. This local wave was aborted due to the military campaign led by the regime and its Russian ally in the region which ended by the regime regaining total control of Eastern Ghouta in April 2018.

The last direct election experience was in the city of Ainjara in Western Aleppo Countryside in late 2018, with the participation and support of a group of Syrian civil organizations, including LDSPS. This experience has made important breakthroughs (despite some documented violations

in the electoral process) in terms of candidates organizing themselves in joint lists not as separate individuals, in terms of the reasonably high participation rate and in terms of the participation rate of women. Four female candidates presented themselves for the elections and one of them succeeded to become the first woman to be elected directly by the community to become a member of a local council (composed of 15 members in the case of Ainjara). As in Eastern Ghouta, LDSPS observed a positive contagion in Western Aleppo Countryside region, when a group of partner LCs started discussions with LDSPS to help them prepare for direct elections in their towns during 2019. Ainjara's experience was aborted and the direct election wave ceased when the HTS controlled the region in early 2019.

Through its involvement in five out of the eight LCs direct-elections experiences that took place, LDSPS was able to note the following:

- **The necessity of creating a general atmosphere at the level of the surrounding region** and an environment that accepts the idea of direct elections, before starting an attempt at the town level, in order to ensure the impact of a positive contagion of neighboring councils.
- **Preparations for all of the direct elections** that were conducted can generally be characterized as being **too hasty with a lack of adequate and prior planning and a lack of good preparation** of electoral lists.
- This led to **weak voters-participation levels in general** (although Ainjara's direct elections had officially a %50 participation rate, but this number has to be considered with caution since the electoral lists had some serious short-comes). Direct elections need time for preparation that could exceed several months, during which awareness campaigns aiming at motivating community members to participate are required.

This was rarely the case for most of the direct elections that took place.

- This also led to **mistakes of various levels of importance in terms of organization, monitoring and appeals-management**. There is a need for longer preparation periods and for capacity building in organizing elections of the concerned LCs and their supervisory bodies (provincial councils).
- Generally speaking, **community members who participated in those attempts and experiences were satisfied**. This gives a great importance to the direct-elections process, not only in the development of the LCs themselves (accountability and inclusiveness), but also in providing **community members with an opportunity to exercise the right to vote freely for the first time** and through this to have the sense of involvement in the public sphere and that their votes matter.
- **The local civil society was involved in various degrees** in the preparation process: raising awareness, providing opportunity for the candidates to meet with their local community, and elections monitoring and observation. As a lesson learnt, it became clear that there is a need for building the capacity of the local civil society organizations to fulfill these roles.
- The **participation of women was generally weak** (even forbidden in Mesraba, allowed at the last minute, only one day before the elections, in Saqba while in Harasta, women represented %25 of the voters). It is worth mentioning here that the percentage of women among the voters in the elections conducted in Ainjara exceeded the half (while noting that part of this high percentage was due to short-comes in the electoral lists that had unrealistically high percentage of women). One can thus clearly say that major advances in this field are possible.

- Circumstances beyond the control of the LCs (the regime regaining control of Eastern Ghouta and the control of HTS over the other areas where direct elections were held) **did not allow any repetition of a direct election process at any town** and significantly reduced the impact of this process on the development of the action of the concerned LCs and on their communication with their local communities; thus preventing from entering into a cycle of positive development and of increased interaction between local communities and their LCs.

In a **parallel perspective, LDSPS carried out four community assessments** to explore the opinions of local communities (as well as local CSO members and some LC-members) and their evaluations regarding their LCs' formation, inclusiveness and legitimacy. These assessments took place in 63 towns (14 in Eastern Ghouta, 21 in Western Aleppo Countryside, 16 in the North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside and 12 in Idlib) during the period from 2017 to 2019 (about 3,600 people were interviewed in total) and highlighted several important points:

- A. There was some **confusion among some of the participants in the assessments**, especially in Eastern Ghouta, **between the concepts of direct elections and elections by a general assembly**: 44% of the respondents in Eastern Ghouta who were asked about the formation mechanism of their LC, chose the option "Direct elections", while 32% chose the option "General assembly" which is the option that reflects the actual reality (the third option: "Appointed by local forces and actors " received 7%, and the option: "I don't know" 17%, all these results are averages of the two assessments that included Eastern Ghouta in early 2017 and in early 2018).

B. The results of the assessments show that the **participants link legitimacy to elections:**

The following question was asked to the people who participated in the assessment: “As a member of the community, how do you evaluate the legitimacy of the LC (from 1, very low, to 5, very high) ?”. When analyzing the results, a “legitimacy score” was calculated by adding-up the percentages of answers with a rating of 5 or 4 and deducting the percentages of answers with a rating of 1 or 2. In general, the overall LCs legitimacy score, of the first three assessments that covered Eastern Ghouta and Western Aleppo Countryside, was at + %30 (a positive value indicates more of high ratings, 5 & 4, than low ratings, 1 & 2, among the respondents).

When the value of the legitimacy score is measured taking into account only the respondents who chose “Direct elections” as the formation mechanism of their LC (%27 of the respondents chose this option over the assessments 1 to 3), the legitimacy score goes as high as %49+. Similarly, the legitimacy score calculation for the respondents having chosen “General Assembly” as a formation mechanism of their LC (they represented %47 of the respondents of assessments 1 to 3) was %41+.

Comparatively, the legitimacy score calculated for the respondents choosing “Appointed by local forces and actors” (representing %25 of the respondents of assessments 1 to 3) was %12- (a negative value indicates more of low evaluations, 2 & 1, than high evaluations, 5 & 4). One can see how the different perception of the respondents in assessments 1 to 3, on the formation mechanism of their LC, impacted directly their evaluation of its legitimacy. High legitimacy scores are linked

to the perception that LCs are formed by direct elections (regardless of the reality of existence of such elections, it is the perception by the community members that influences their evaluations).

It is important to note here that **while LDSPS measured a positive evolution of the value of the legitimacy score in Western Aleppo Countryside over time, starting** from assessment 1 (early 2017) to assessment 3 (mid 2018), as its value rose from %19+ to %42+. The fourth community assessment at the beginning of 2020, which also covered Western Aleppo Countryside, showed however **a sharp decline in the legitimacy score in this region**, down to %22-. This came **almost a year after HTS took control of the region** in early 2019.

In addition to that, the percentage of respondents choosing one of the options of «Direct Elections» or «General Assembly» to the question about the formation mechanism of their LC in Western Aleppo Countryside collapsed from %70, in mid 2018, to about 13 % at the beginning of 2020 (at the same time the percentage of the respondents choosing “Appointed by local forces and actors” rose from %24 to %51 and the percentage of the respondents choosing to say “I don't know” rose from %5 to %36).

This shows how the replies of the community members in Western Aleppo Countryside reflected the impact the HTS control of their region: a sharp drop on the evaluation of the LCs legitimacy caused mainly by a change of the perception of the formation mechanism of these LCs from “community-chosen”/“elected” to “appointed” /not knowing anymore how their LC was formed.

However, despite the decrease in the percentages of the respondents choosing “Direct elections” and “General Assembly” to the question of

the formation mechanism of their LC in the 4th assessment as mentioned, the calculation of the legitimacy score among those respondents who still chose one of these two options was +31%, which remains distinctively higher than the calculated score among those who chose the option “Appointed by local forces and actors” (negative legitimacy score of -29%) or “I don’t know” (negative legitimacy score of -15%). This is the same linkage that was mentioned above in the first three assessments. **Hence, it is possible to say that community members** who participated in the all of the four assessments in different regions (see also the Note below) **tend to give higher legitimacy evaluation to their LC when they believe** (whether this corresponds to the reality or not) **that their LC is formed through direct elections**, slightly lower legitimacy evaluation when they believe that it is elected by a General Assembly and even lower legitimacy evaluation when they lack knowledge about the formation mechanism of their LC. Those who **believe that their LC is appointed by local forces tend to give very low legitimacy evaluation.**

Note: it is worth mentioning here that since the 4th assessment at the **beginning of 2020** was also conducted in **North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside**, after more than three years of Turkish influence, the value of the **legitimacy score was negative** (-23%, meaning more respondents rating legitimacy as “low” than those rating it as “high”). This negative value was very **close of that calculated in Western Aleppo Countryside** during the same period, i.e. **after the control of the HTS** inducing the collapse of the value of the legitimacy score as described above. In addition, the distribution of the respondents to the question about the LCs formation mechanism in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside was

as follows: 4% chose “Direct elections”, 8% chose “General Assembly”, %36 chose “Appointed by local forces and actors” and %52 said “I don’t know”. These answers and percentages are also close to their counterparts in Western Aleppo Countryside at the same period (beginning of 2020), after their sharp change following the HTS-control. Parallel **values measured in Idlib** (which has been under the control of HTS since 2017, but in a more inhomogeneous degree of tight control compared to Western Aleppo Countryside where HTS's control is tight), during the 4th assessment at the beginning of 2020, **were slightly higher** (%4+ for the legitimacy score and the repartition of the respondents on the formation mechanisms of the LCs being at %14 for “Direct elections”, %13 for “General assembly”, %32 for “Appointed by local forces and actors”, and %41 for “I don’t know”). However, **these values still came far below from the values that were monitored in Eastern Ghouta or in Western Aleppo Countryside before HTS-control.**

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- C. With a similar analyzing method, on top of its link to the perceived formation mechanism of the LCs, the **legitimacy score appears to be related to the evaluation values** given by the respondents on:
- the **level of performance of their LC:** the value of the legitimacy score increases among those who evaluate as “high” the performance of their LC (the performance of the LCs could itself be related to the quality of services provided, their diversity and the fairness of their distribution as we shall see later in this report),
 - the **communication of the LCs with their local communities:** the value of the legitimacy score increases among those who evaluate as “high” the community-communication of their LC

- the **transparency of their LC**: the value of the legitimacy score increases among those who evaluate as “high” the transparency of their LC.

D. There was a **clear and positive development regarding the acceptance of women’s participation in LCs**: During the assessments, the community respondents were asked the following question: «Are women allowed to run for membership of the LC ?». %33 of the respondents of the four combined assessments replied by “yes” while %67 replied by “no”. However, this low percentage conceals a noticeable positive development since the first assessment conducted at the beginning of 2017, where the percentage of the respondents by “yes” was %30, to the third assessment conducted in mid 2018, where this percentage reached %45 in **Eastern Ghouta and Western Aleppo Countryside** (in some towns it even exceeded %55, a reminder here that this evolution concerns mainly the towns where LDSPS has been operating).

When people **who answered with “no”** were asked about the **reasons for their replies**, 51% of the answers about the reason for not allowing women to participate in LCs were attributed to social norms and traditions, 17% were “I don’t know,” 14% said that “women are not suited for such a job” or cited the “inability / incompetence of women” and 5% mentioned the LCs rules and procedures of selection.

Here too, the **negative impact of HTS’ control over Western Aleppo Countryside** can be observed: the percentage of the respondents saying “yes” to the question “Are women allowed to run for membership of the LC ?” went down from 45% in mid 2018 (the 3rd assessment) to about 10% at the end 2019/beginning of 2020 (4th assessment).

Note: *The percentage of the respondents saying “yes” to the question*

*in the 4th assessment conducted at the beginning of 2020 was **33% in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside**, which is somewhat surprising because it is much **lower than the level measured in Western Aleppo Countryside before HTS’ control**, and **39% in Idlib, which is higher**, but remains also **lower than the levels that were observed in Western Aleppo Countryside and also in Eastern Ghouta in 2018** (levels that were continuing to increase at that time).*

E. It is clear that the **local communities were cautious about the participation of IDPs in the LCs**: to the question “Are IDPs allowed to run for membership of the LC ?” the overall percentage of respondents by with “yes” was 28% (23% in the 1st assessment, 31% in the 4th assessment) compared to 72% of the respondents saying “no”.

Caution was greater in Eastern Ghouta, where the percentage of the respondents saying “yes” to this question was only 18% (during the assessments that included Eastern Ghouta: the 1st assessment in early of 2017 and the 2nd one in early 2018). In **Western Aleppo Countryside**, the percentage of the respondents saying “yes” **was higher**, around 32%, and steady during the first three assessments (from early of 2017 to mid 2018). It declined to less than half of its value (14%) during the 4th assessment at the beginning of 2020 after HTS took control of the region. In the **North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside**, the percentage of the respondents saying “yes” **was even higher**, 37%, (result of the 4th assessment which included this region for the first time). Idlib (also included for the first time in the 4th assessment) had the **highest percentage of “yes”**: 43%.

The **reasons mentioned behind the answers with “no”** were: IDPs didn’t

know the local town dynamics and balances (22% of the answers), “I don’t know” (19%), the necessity of giving preference to the population of the town to become LC’ members (15%), the LCs rules and procedures of selection (13%), and the instability of IDPs in the town (12%).

2. Organizational situation and availability of competencies in LCs

Despite several attempts and joint work between the interim government and some specialized organizations (including the Local Administrative Coordination Unit or LACU and Local Development Organization or LDO) to issue standard regulations and despite the “recognition” of a large number of LCs of the interim government and their “adoption” of its regulations, there were **significant differences among the LCs in the implementation of these regulations**. Therefore, **the organizational structures of LCs differed** according to the size of the towns/cities concerned, the variety of the services provided and the LCs relationship with other local actors (especially, on one hand the local and international humanitarian organizations working with the communities of these councils and on the other hand, the provincial councils and the sectoral directorates).

However, in the vast majority of LCs the elected council members (often themselves called the “council”, elected as we mentioned primarily by a general assembly from the community) are not only heading/supervising but **are in effect managing the various offices/departments within an Executive Bureau**.

In most cases, the Executive Bureau includes the following main offices/departments: 1- Chairman or President of the council, 2- Vice-president or in some cases the Secretary, 3- the Financial office, 4- the

Legal office, 5- the Media office, 6- the Relief office, 7- the Services office 8- the Projects office.

Some LCs have **additional offices/departments that differ from one town/city to another according to the multiplicity of services provided or to the diversity of the supervisory/coordination “sectoral” roles carried out by the LCs** in their towns/cities. Such additional offices could include those of: Education, Medical/Health, Agriculture, Industry, Civil Registry, Land & Property Registry, Human Resources, Women Affairs, Citizens Complaints office.

The number of elected members ranges between ten and twenty (most frequently between 12 and 16 members). In some cases when the number of offices/departments exceeds the number of members one LC member could be running more than one office. Likewise, in few cases, if there are acceptable levels of funding resources available, the LC could contract (employ) “specialists” to manage some offices (Media, Women affairs, Citizens Complaints).

With the exception of some large city councils (such as Eastern Aleppo, Douma and currently the nine central LCs in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside) and a number of LCs of medium-size towns in Eastern Ghouta, the **LCs’ operational staff is limited its elected members, and to temporary employees and workers employed specifically for defined funded projects** (projects either implemented directly by the LCs or by a humanitarian/civil society organization, giving the LCs some coordination/needs-assessment role for which some funding is given the LCs to hire few employees, often 1 to 3). When employees and workers are hired for a specific funded project, this is done according to the need and terms of reference of the project (they are often employed

in the Financial office and/or the Relief or Services offices depending on the nature of the project) and the work of these employees and workers ends with the end of the concerned project. Since, on a different side, the mandate of the members of the council is one year; both elements (temporary employees and short-mandated members) translate in highly rotating operational staff. The lack of permanent employees (due to the lack of stable funding allowing the LCs to cover the salaries of permanent administrative employees) leads to **the lack of experience-accumulation within the LCs, especially in small and rural ones** where such experience-accumulation is almost non-existent. On one hand, this **resulted in important inefficiencies and wasted resource spent on capacity-building** workshops and trainings that took place with the LCs in the areas out of the regime's control; as these capacity-building workshops and trainings were either targeting short-mandated LC members or employees whose presence only lasted for the projects implementation periods, and on the other hand, this **prevented the accumulation of expertise in internal council process and procedures**, often unwritten, where procedures were often reinvented at each electoral cycle with the arrival of new members and the absence of fixed staff that could preserve the working methods and processes (no written processes and no process handover since the only concern during handovers was on transferring the treasury of the LC, which, one has to say, was done regularly at the term of each mandate in almost all of the LCs).

As we mentioned, **big city-councils** as well as **Eastern Ghouta's mid-sized LCs were an exception as they had managed to hire fixed employees** benefiting either from the presence of a high funding

capacity (the central LCs in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside), a high continuity of supporting projects (such as Eastern-Aleppo City Council, Saraqeb and Douma) or from part-time voluntary work of employees in the besieged Eastern Ghouta region who could volunteer, due to the scarcity of job opportunities which left them with plenty of available time.

It is also worth mentioning that despite the generally catastrophic results of the siege **of Eastern Ghouta**, and similarly but with less severe consequences, of the closure of the Jordanian borders impacting the **areas of Daraa** that were out of the regime's control, these two elements contributed to limiting the ability of competent and experienced people to leave their areas in search of safer and better livelihood conditions. These two regions therefore were **more capable of selecting members of LCs with better education levels** (high school diplomas, higher technician certificates and university degrees) **or suitable work experiences** (former employees of the Syrian public and governmental institutions). This came **in some contrast with the areas out of the regime's control in northern Syria** (Aleppo, Raqqa, Idlib, and Hama regions) where relatively easier exit ways of the country, combined also with difficult safety and livelihood conditions caused by the continuous attacks of the regime forces which resulted in lower and lower availability of competencies with time (a reminder here that SDF-controlled areas are not covered in this report).

As a **conclusion**, in the case of the **vast majority of LCs** (with the exception of some large cities including Eastern Aleppo, Douma, Saraqeb and the cities of central LCs in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside), **the lack of stable funding sources that allow covering salaries of fixed**

administrative staff led on one hand, to a **critical reduction in the ability of councils to attract and maintain competencies** (partially relying for their presence on the quasi-inability to leave due to the military circumstance) and on the other hand and more significantly, to **the lack of accumulation of capabilities and expertise within the LCs** in general.

3. Financial and funding situation of the LCs

Generally speaking, we can say that the **LCs' capabilities with regard to financial management remained limited**, and were mainly focused on some accounting procedures. The combination of: the lack of stability of the staff as mentioned above, the absence of technical competencies, the lack of monitoring bodies, and the constraints coming from the LCs having to deal with different and multiple procedures coming from the different bodies they get their projects funding from, all decreased the possibilities and the efficiency of capacity building of LCs in the field of financial management and reporting.

It is worth noticing, nevertheless, that **some LCs, especially in the last three years, managed to prepare and to publish financial reports**, either about the implementation of specific projects or about their work in general.

Weak financial management was accompanied by a **large and general shortage of financial resources** in the vast majority of the cases. LCs (in particular all the LCs of small towns/villages) relied on funding from international and national organizations (including LDSPS) for the service-provision projects they were implementing. Only few councils were able to have access to funding that could cover the salaries of permanent administrative staff independently from funding

service projects (through LDSPS in general and sometimes through some international NGOs that funded the salaries of the employees of specific offices/departments like the Citizens Complaints office).

The **NGOs support to the LCs was characterized by its irregularity** (exclusion to be made here of the LCs that LDSPS worked with as strategic partners as the support provided by LDSPS to these councils lasted for periods that exceeded two years).

There were **multiple attempts by LCs to secure self-financing sources** for their work: LC members making contribution-collection campaigns (physical visits) from local businesses in the town/city (in Douma); requesting garbage-collection and/or water-distribution fees from the communities (most LCs made this attempt with different success rates, most notably that of Jisreen, in which the LC succeeded in 2015 to reach a collection rate of more than 85% of users by lowering the value of the fees, and the LC of Atareb reaching a collection rate of 60-70% in 2018); as well as revenue-generating projects (garbage recycling into fertilizers sold to the farmers in Douma, production and sales of bread in a number of LCs in Eastern Ghouta and in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside, renting shops in public markets or in industrial-zones organized and serviced by the LC in Western and North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside). These resources were generally used to secure a minimum level of continuity of basic services provision (garbage collection and the distribution of drinking water) to compensate for the unstable funding of these services by NGOs (institutional funding had to go through either International or Syrian NGOs to reach the LCs because of the absence of direct-funding mechanisms between the donors and the LCs).

It is worth noting here that **central LCs in the Turkish controlled areas** (North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside) **have very relatively high financial resources** compared to other LCs of other regions due, on one hand, to the fact that the Turkish authorities are allocating part of the revenue of the commercial crossings that they supervise to these LCs and on the other hand, to the revenues these LCs get from the collected local fees and taxes as well as from renting shops in public markets serviced by the LCs.

It can also be noted that **in HTS controlled areas, HTS has provided the executive authority for its “Salvation Government”, which has contributed to increasing the collection-rates** of customary fees and taxes (garbage-collection and water-distribution) and of additional fees and taxes imposed on crops, car registration, etc.

4. Provision of services by LCs

One of the most **important tasks undertaken by the LCs** through which they were able to impose their presence on the rest of the actors (armed factions, civil society and humanitarian organizations, international donors), **was the partial bridging of the services gap** caused by the withdrawal of the regime, and with it the Syrian state institutions, from large parts of Syria.

In addition to the impact of the absence of the state institutions, the communities in the areas that went outside of the regime's control had to handle the increasing pressure on the services and administrative infrastructures caused, on one hand, by the systematic destruction of infrastructure by the forces of the regime and its allies and on the other hand, by the dramatic population redistribution because of large displacement movements coming from areas that were largely

destroyed, increasing thus the pressure in the host regions (population increase due to the arrival of IDPs in some areas, especially the northern areas, reached rates between 30% and 200%, during time periods that were less than two years).

At the beginning, when several regions started going out of the regime's control, the LCs in these areas tried to provide all kinds of public services to the local communities. However, due to the rapid growth of needs and the lack of resources available to the LCs, **international and Syrian-Diaspora NGOs**, either having local teams or partnering with local organizations, **took a leading role in addressing the local needs in some sectors** such as: relief, health and education. **The local private sector** (sometimes in cooperation and connection with local armed factions) **covered some other sectors** such as electricity and transportation. This resulted in the action of the LCs being reduced to: either cooperate with, be funded by, or even in some cases, just play a coordination role with the international and Syrian NGOs in several sectors.

As a result, **the main services most commonly provided by the LCs** were: garbage-collection, water-pumping, repairing and operating water and sewage networks, and contributing to the distribution of relief (by providing humanitarian organizations with distribution lists and needs assessments).

Donors treated LCs, when they were first established, with suspicion and therefore depended on international NGOs either having their local teams or partnering with local organizations. This led first to **creating an imbalanced situation between the LCs and these local entities** (local teams affiliated with international NGOs or with their local partners),

then later **to competition between the LCs and these local organizations** over the definition of local service delivery priorities and the over the implementation of service-provision projects. The **distribution of local roles began to change to more cooperative and coordinated form** starting 2016, after the donors realized the importance of the role of LCs within their local communities.

In addition, **the quality of the provision of the basic services** mentioned above **was very diverse** among the different regions as a result of: the donors' irregular and inhomogeneous funding policies per region (besieged regions, southern Syria and northern Syria), the diverse sizes of the towns/cities, the diverse infrastructure destruction rates, and the uneven availability of local resources and competencies.

In addition to the basic services, some LCs also provided administrative services (such as civil registry or land & property registry), organizational services (agricultural office, office of women affairs, chamber of industry, chamber of commerce) or coordination services (relief in general, health, education).

The four community assessments carried out by LDSPS showed that:

- A. **Community-respondents in Eastern Ghouta mentioned a higher number of different services provided by their LCs (meaning a perception of a wider variety of services), compared to the respondents in Western Aleppo Countryside:** 17% of the respondents of Eastern Ghouta (during the 1st and the 2nd assessments conducted in early 2017 and 2018) could identify **more than four different types of services** provided by their LC, compared to only 6% in Western Aleppo Countryside. **It was also noticed that in Western Aleppo Countryside that the perception of the diversity of services was decreasing:** the percentage of respondents

who were able to identify **three or more types of services** provided by their LC dropped to about 11% in 4th assessment (beginning of 2020) down from 19% in the third assessment (mid 2018) and 31 % in the second assessment (beginning of 2018). This is the reflection of the **decline in donors-support for the region as of 2018, and then the inability of the Salvation Government, affiliated with HTS, to provide enough services** since the beginning of 2019, when it took control of the LCs in the region. It is worth noting here that the percentages of respondents who could identify three or more types of services during the 4th assessment (beginning of 2020) in Idlib and in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside were 20% and 19%, respectively.

- B. **Satisfaction indicators** of the services provided (the percentage of answers with 5, very good, or 4, good, minus the percentage of answers with 1, very bad, or 2, bad) **were quite high** in the assessments carried out by LDSPS in Eastern Ghouta (1st and 2nd assessments) and Western Aleppo Countryside (1st, 2nd and 3rd assessments in early 2017, early 2018 and mid 2018): +62% (much more of high evaluations than of low ones) for the satisfaction indicators of the quality of the services provided ("How do you evaluate the service in terms of quality?"); +47% for the satisfaction indicators of the quantity of the services provided ("How do you evaluate the service in terms of quantity?"); and +47% for the satisfaction indicators of the accessibility to the services provided ("How do you evaluate the service in terms of accessibility?"). When comparing them with the reality of the rather low levels of quality, quantity and accessibility, that can be achieved under the very hard working and funding conditions of the LCs, these high values of the services-satisfaction indicators are a **clear sign of the understanding by**

local communities of the working conditions of LCs and a sign of their pragmatic levels of expectations. Hence, the feasibility, currently and in the future, of gradual approaches of service delivery acceptable to the local communities as long as they that the providers of these services are representing them and accepted by them, i.e. by LCs emanating from their communities.

It is worth noting here that the 4th assessment conducted at the beginning of 2020 **showed a decrease in the values of the satisfaction indicators of the services provided in Western Aleppo Countryside after HTS took control of the region** (the satisfaction-indicator of the services-quality has decreased from +75% to +50%, that of the services-quantity from +58% to +17% and that of services- accessibility from +66% to +37%). The values of satisfaction indicators of the quality, quantity, and accessibility of services provided by the LCs of this same 4th assessment in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside were +50%, +44% and +44 respectively; and in Idlib +64%, +45% and +58%, respectively. In both regions, these values were below those measured in Western Aleppo Countryside prior to the HTS-control.

C. Likewise, regarding the local communities views on the performances of the LCs ("How do you assess the performance of the LC and are you satisfied with this performance (from 1, very low, to 5, very high) ?"), when calculating the satisfaction score in a similar way (percentages of the responses of 5 and 4 minus the percentages of 1 and 2), for the first three assessments (Eastern Ghouta and Western Aleppo Countryside regions, in early 2017, 2018 and mid 2018), **this indicator was positive (+14%)**. However, **its value was clearly lower than the indicators of satisfaction of the services provided** (all were above +47%) **and the**

indicators of legitimacy (+30%, prior to Western Aleppo Countryside being controlled by HTS and prior to the regime retaking control of Eastern Ghouta). This perhaps reflects the desire of local communities for LCs to play a role that goes beyond providing services: may be a role as a local administration and not only as a municipality. It is to be noted here that the **ability of the council to provide a wider range of services also affects the level of satisfaction with its performance**. This indicator of satisfaction rises to levels that exceed +40% for people who were able to identify three or more different types of services, against a value of +4% for people who could only identify two different types of services provided or less.

Similarly to what was seen for the levels of satisfaction with the services provided, the level of **satisfaction with the LCs performances in Western Aleppo Countryside declined starting** from the 3rd assessment conducted in **mid 2018** (from +26% in the 2nd assessment to +11% in the 3rd assessment) due to lesser services-provision projects by the LCs **coming from the decrease in donors support. This decline of this indicator in the region with it becoming negative** during the 4th assessment (-10%, meaning more of negative evaluations than of positive ones) **after HTS took control of the region.**

The indicators of the community-satisfaction of the LCs' performances during the 4th assessment were also low in Idlib (+4%, a rather neutral evaluation) and in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside (-14%). Combined with the results of the 4th assessment in Western Aleppo shown here-above, this reflects a **general dissatisfaction, at the beginning of 2020, of the local communities with the performances of their LCs in all HTS held areas** (Idlib and Western Aleppo Countryside) **and Turkey-**

held areas (North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside). One can compare this dissatisfaction with the acceptable/high community-satisfaction rates of the LCs' performances that were previously seen in Eastern Ghouta before being retaken by the regime, and in Western Aleppo Countryside before being controlled by HTS.

D. There is **an additional factor affecting the level of local communities' satisfaction with the performances of their LCs which is the communication/outreach of the LC with the community.** The combined results of the four assessments in all the covered regions show that: the level of community-satisfaction with the performances of the LCs among the people who rated highly (4 or 5) the community-communication of their LC was very positive (+71%), while it becomes very negative (-53%) among those who gave the community-communication of their LC a low rating (1 or 2).

Two final points are worth pointing out regarding the services provision by LCs:

- a distinguished organizational model appeared in Eastern Ghouta with the presence of the Unified Services Office (a civil gathering of engineers and technicians that later became the Directorate of Services of the Free Damascus Governorate, a year before the regime retook control of Eastern Ghouta). This organization implemented cross-towns service projects and contributed to the implementation of service projects that some LCs, especially those of small towns, were unable to manage. It did so with a high level of cooperation with and sometimes in joint-implementation with the LCs.
- the emergence of a number of specialized sectoral directorates affiliated with provincial councils (especially in Aleppo, Idlib and

Daraa) and the significant improvement in their performance, which decreased the need for the LCs to provide a number of important services: Health, Education, Civil and Land & Property registries.

5. The LCs' interactions with their environment

Relationship with local communities:

Within the four community assessments that it carried out in Eastern Ghouta (included in assessments 1 and 2 in early 2017 and early 2018), Western Aleppo Countryside (included in all of the four assessments in early 2017, early 2018, mid 2018 and at the beginning of 2020), North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside and Idlib (both included in the 4th assessment at the beginning of 2020), LDSPS monitored two additional indicators related to the relationship of the LCs with their local communities (on top of the indicators mentioned previously: evaluation of the legitimacy of the LCs, the community-satisfaction with the LCs performances and the evaluation of services provided by the LCs). These two additional indicators were: the LCs' community-communication (outreach) evaluation indicator (the percentage of answers with 4 or 5 minus the percentage of answers with 1 or 2 to the question: "How do you evaluate the LC's communication with the local community (from 1, very low, to 5, very high) ?"), and the LCs' transparency evaluation indicator (the percentage of answers with 4 or 5 minus the percentage of answers with 1 or 2 to the question: "How do you evaluate the transparency of the LC (from 1, very low, to 5, very high) ?").

The **LCs' community-communication evaluation** indicator was **rather negative in Eastern Ghouta** during the 1st and 2nd assessments (-9% in average, meaning more of negative evaluations than positive ones).

In **Western Aleppo Countryside**, this indicator turned from **negative** at the 1st assessment (-10% in early 2017) to **positive in 2018** (+20% in early 2018 and +9% in mid 2018), **before it became very negative** in the 4th assessment (-34% at the beginning of 2020) **almost a year almost after the HTS control of the region**. During this 4th assessment, the LCs' community-communication evaluation indicator was close to zero in Idlib (positive evaluations equal to positive ones) and **clearly negative in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside** (-22%).

The **LCs' transparency evaluation** indicator was **clearly more negative values in all regions**: -17% for Eastern Ghouta over the 1st and 2nd assessments; -24% in the 1st assessment (early 2017), -5% in the 2nd (early 2018) and +2% in the 3rd (mid 2018) in **Western Aleppo Countryside**, **with a clear progression before this indicator fell strongly** to -39% in the 4th assessment (beginning of 2020) **after the HTS control of the region**; -18% in Idlib and -43% in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside in the 4th assessment.

Note: *These low values should not conceal the presence of towns where communication and transparency indicators were high, such as Daret Ezzeh, Atareb and Babekkeh in Western Aleppo Countryside, Jisreen in Eastern Ghouta, Arshaf and Dabeq in the North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside, Binnesh and Ariha in Idlib.*

The levels of these two indicators, especially when compared with the levels of the indicators of satisfaction of the LCs' performances and of the services provided, as well as of the legitimacy of LCs, reflect a clear **weakness in LCs' communication (outreach) with their communities**

in addition to what appears to be a **lack of confidence by the the communities in the information available** to the communities about the action of their LCs (low evaluation of the transparency).

It is important to note here that the value of both indicators increased among the respondents with a "yes" to the question: "Did the LC publish annual reports last year?". In other words, **community members knowing that their LC published annual reports significantly increased the levels of their evaluations of their LC's community-communication** (overall indicator value jumps from -7% to +41%) and **of their LCs' transparency** (overall indicator jumps from a -21% to +29%). A similar effect could be seen when analyzing the respondents' replies on the question: "Is there a complaints mechanism at the LC?". The values of the indicators of the LCs' community-communication evaluation and of the LCs transparency evaluation for the respondents with "yes" were +18% and +1%, respectively, while their values were -48% and -57%, respectively, for the respondents with "no". This means that **community members knowing about the existence of a complaint mechanism at their LC evaluate significantly at higher levels the communication and the transparency of their LC** than those who do not know about the existence of such a mechanism.

Based on its cooperation with a large number of LCs, LDSPS attributes the low **values of the indicators of community-communication and transparency of the LCs to: the weak capacities of the LCs** (preparing reports, financial analysis), the **continuously changing staff (rotating) in the finance/communication/outreach offices** (caused by the LCs' inability to hire permanent employees as mentioned above), the **lack of financial monitoring bodies** that could encourage the LCs to issue

comprehensive public reports, and the **weak means of outreach of LCs towards their local communities** (insufficient number of public meetings, and uneven and irregular use of social media like Facebook). **De-facto authorities' interferences in the work of the LCs** appear to be **a further impediment** to the ability of these LCs to be transparent and to communicate openly with their local communities.

Relationship with international, national and local organizations:

The **United Nations agencies as well as other donors hesitated to work with LCs** in the years 2013-2015 as we mentioned before. This forced the LCs in the north and south of Syria (with some exceptions: the LCs in Eastern Ghouta and several large city councils such as the Eastern-Aleppo City Council and the LC of Saraqeb) to **depend on NGOs (international or Syrian)**, that provided relief distribution and funded some projects that contributed to services provision (like water supply or repairing water and sewage networks). This dependence **negatively impacted the development of LCs and reduced their ability to build their own capacities, and subsequently, created power imbalances between these NGOs and the LCs** whose role became to implement the service-provision projects "imposed" by these organizations (based on their funded programs), **not the projects that the LCs needed to give priority to based on their own assessment and knowledge of the needs of their communities**. Starting 2016, funders began first to impose the coordination with the LCs on all international and Syrian NGOs (especially those working in the humanitarian sector) and then to accept funding some service-provision projects that were proposed and initiated by the LCs. The **unbalanced situation** between the international and national NGOs on one hand and the LCs on the

other **was thus reduced since 2016 but only to an extent**.

The four community assessments carried out by LDSPS included a sample of more than 250 local members of various organizations (including the local teams of national and international NGOs). The analysis of their feedback indicates that the **members of the local CSOs generally had more positive evaluations of the LCs than the rest of the local community**. The only **exception to this was in Western Aleppo Countryside in the 4th assessment after HTS took control of the region** where the evaluation levels of the members of the local CSOs were below those of the community members. Apart from that exception, the levels of the indicators of legitimacy, performance, transparency, communication, and quality of the provided services of the LCs were higher of more than 20 points within the sample of local CSO members compared to those obtained within the much larger sample of the local community members. This can be explained with the fact that **local CSO members are in more frequent contact with the LCs** and therefore have a more precise view of their capabilities and the challenges that they face, as well as more knowledge about the mechanisms of formation of the LCs and about their funding. This also strengthens the idea **that though more regular communication and more information about their work and the difficulties they face (as done with the local CSO members), LCs should be able to improve the overall "average" image that the local communities have of them**.

Relationship with provincial councils and sectoral directorates:

The relationship between the LCs and the "free" provincial councils (formed by the Syrian opposition) began at the end of 2013 when these provincial councils were created, as representatives of the

“ground”, for the needs of forming the National Coalition for the Revolutionary Forces and the Syrian opposition. The relationship **was bad in general** (almost inexistent), and was affected by the attempts of these provincial councils to appoint councils' members in different towns/cities in a top-down process. The LCs that were appointed by the provincial councils had no connection with the reality of work on the ground.

This “inexistent” relationship continued **until the end of 2014/beginning of 2015, when the provincial councils were reconstituted with the participation of LCs**, using various mechanisms: representatives of the LCs of the areas of each governorate that were out of the control of the regime would either form a general assembly that would elect the members of the concerned “Free” Provincial (or Governorate) Council, or the representatives of the LCs themselves directly become the members of the concerned “Free” Provincial (or Governorate) Council. In both cases, individuals representing the areas of the governorate that were either under the control of the regime or that of SDF would also be included either in the general assembly or in the Provincial Council. As a result, **larger numbers of members of the provincial councils**, being originally representatives of the LCs, **were physically present on the ground** especially for the governorates that had large proportions of areas out of the regime's control (Damascus Countryside, Daraa, Hama, Idlib and Aleppo). An **improvement in the relationship between LCs and provincial councils could thus be observed**.

Provincial councils then wrongly thought that, by copying what the LCs did and therefore by **implementing service-provision projects**, they

could **gain popular legitimacy**, on one hand, and on the other hand, have **access to projects-funding** of which a part could be used **to cover the salaries of some required fixed administrative staff**. In reality, this attempt led to **a kind of competition for funding with the LCs** (by that time taken into account more favorably) and sent contradictory messages to donors, which contributed to limiting any financial support of provincial councils and thus their capabilities of action. This made it **more difficult for the provincial councils and the LCs to lay down practical foundations for the repartition of roles and responsibilities** (despite serious attempts funded by the European Union to define this repartition).

After the **regime regained control of the central and southern regions** that used to be out of its control, **in 2018**, only the “free” provincial councils of Aleppo and Idlib remained with some relevant geographical areas. In addition, the **increased expansion of HTS in Idlib** imposing the authority of its “Salvation Government”, contributed to an almost total marginalization of the role of “Free” Idlib Provincial Council. In parallel, the division of the parts of the countryside of Aleppo that was out of the regime's control into two main geographically separated blocs (Western and North-Eastern parts of the countryside of Aleppo) quite different in terms of needs and of available resources, has led to the disruption of the “Free” Aleppo Provincial Council (supposedly representing both areas) from playing any important role in the work of the LCs in both. **The control by HTS over Western Aleppo Countryside in early 2019** on one side, and the **direct connection of the “central” LCs in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside with the Turkish authorities** in control of their region, on the other side, resulted in an almost

complete disappearance of the role of “Free” Aleppo Provincial Council. Consequently, there is currently **no longer any effective role of any provincial council**, which resulted in the almost complete end of the LCs’ relationship with provincial councils at the time of writing of this report.

On a different level, we should mention the **good successes in the distribution of roles and responsibilities and the positive cooperation between LCs and some technical (“sectoral”) directorates**: Health Directorates in the governorates of Aleppo, Idlib and Rural Damascus, Education Directorates in Aleppo, Idlib, and Daraa, the Directorates of Civil Register and of Land and Property and Property Register in Aleppo, and between the LCs and some similar actors that played similar roles to the roles of directorates: the Unified Services Office, the Unified Medical Office and the Education Association in Eastern Ghouta, and the Stabilization Committee of the Aleppo governorate in the North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside region.

Relationship with the armed factions:

The relationship between the LCs and armed factions either present or controlling their towns varied widely both geographically and chronologically. **A significant number of councils were able to maintain significant independence towards any military faction** (Douma Council in the years 2014-2015; the rest of the Eastern Ghouta LCs, until the regime regained control of the region; the LCs of the southern and western parts of Western Aleppo Countryside, before the HTS-control; Eastern-Aleppo City Council, before the regime regained control of it; some strong LCs in the countryside of Idlib like Saraqeb and Kafranbul before the control by HTS). **In other towns/cities, there were some kind of**

“consideration” by the LCs towards the locally present armed factions or sometimes even some indirect interference of these armed factions in the work of the LCs (Douma starting from 2015; Daraa LCs before the regime regained control of the region; the LCs of the northeastern part of Western Aleppo Countryside, before the control by HTS; the LCs of the northern countryside of Hama, before the regime regained control of the region). **Several LCs in Idlib suffered from significant interferences and even direct control by armed factions**. This was the case for all **the areas controlled by HTS** which currently has almost a complete control over the whole of the areas of Western Aleppo Countryside and of Idlib that are still out of the regime’s control.

As for the **areas under the Turkish authorities** (starting 2016), **armed factions were prevented from directly interfering with the work of the LCs** (which does not prevent indirect influence through personal individual relations between the members of some councils and some factions). **The case of Afrin is considered as a special case**, since the ability of action of all of its seven LCs is almost non-existent in light of the dominant role and authority of the armed factions in this region. Based on LDSPS’s experience, we can say that **the independence of the councils and their ability to deal with the armed factions as were proportional to the accumulation of experience of the LCs and their ability to provide services, and therefore on their ability to obtain the necessary funding to do so**. This independence usually ended at the moment when the armed factions resorted to the use of arms (as HTS did).

Lessons learned and recommendations

During more than six years, Local Development and Small Projects Support (LDSPS) worked with 63 local councils (LCs) at different levels of partnership, in different regions that were out of the regime's control (except SDF-held areas), and under different conditions of de-facto authorities and of independence for the LCs. Through this work and through several community assessments (four in total, in early 2017, in early 2018, in mid 2018 and at the beginning of 2020), **LDSPS was able to form a good vision about the development of LCs and the challenges they face**, as well as the mechanisms that can contribute to their development currently and in the future (LDSPS tested these mechanisms in practice during its experience with the LCs):

1. The first lesson that was observed was that **the concept of LCs imposed itself and proved its value**. This concept was not tested in practice before several areas in Syria went out of the regime's control in 2012, where this concept, never tried in Syria, was brought to life by local communities aiming at filling the void of administrative and public services, caused by the withdrawal of the Syrian state institutions when the military and security forces of the regime withdrew from several regions. The experience of LCs was able to **make the term "Local Council" enrooted, and make this entity (this institution) a local actor recognized by all parties**: starting from the local community to civil society and humanitarian organizations, armed factions, de-facto authorities, and finally, to international donors and UN agencies. It is interesting to note here how even the Syrian regime, after regaining control of important areas in 2018 (Eastern Ghouta, Daraa, and northern countryside of Homs), conducted the first "elections" of LCs

(even though they were more of a formality than real elections), in all the regions under its control. A step that was supposed to take place much earlier following the Decree No. 107 in 2011. It can also be noticed that HTS and the Turkish authorities have not abolished the LCs (as institutions) in the regions of the north when they took control of them, but rather let them continue to work under their control.

2. The second lesson learned is **that local communities, in the areas that went out of the regime's control, have lived in practice the experience having LCs** in their towns/cities. While these communities show a clear understanding of the limited resources available to the LCs when evaluating the quality of the provided services, the LCs in general failed to gain an adequate community satisfaction regarding their performances, due to the weak variety of the services provided, and to the poor communication and transparency of these councils towards their communities (nevertheless, one should acknowledge here the existence of some very good examples that could serve as study cases/models to build upon for the future).
3. **While the LCs gained legitimacy from their local communities at the beginning by providing basic services, soon the performance, the level of communication/outreach, and the degree of transparency affected this legitimacy**. The **formation mechanism of the LCs**, whether they were elected (especially if this was thought to be through direct elections) or appointed (controlled) **became a crucial factor** that influenced not only legitimacy evaluations but also all the indicators reflecting local communities appreciation of the LCs (performance, community-communication and transparency). This has been clearly demonstrated by the collapse of all indicators of community

satisfaction with the LCs after HTS took control of Western Aleppo Countryside, or by the current levels of these indicators in North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside.

4. **Direct elections of the LCs by the local communities are considered a key factor** impacting the level of local communities' appreciation for their LCs. This is despite the fact that no direct election experience has occurred more than one time in the same town/city in any of the areas that were out of the regime's control (mainly due to either the regime's restored control over some of the concerned towns, or because HTS took control of the others). However, **success in creating a local dynamic** that, on one hand, goes beyond having direct LC elections in a specific town into spreading in a region that includes 15-20 adjacent LCs and that, on the other hand, **ensures a high participation of local community at the town level; requires local work in the whole concerned region for a relatively long period of time** (about two years) with a global approach that includes working with the local communities, the local civil society and the LCs. Within such an approach, there is necessity to plan for adequate preparation periods (several months) for the elections of each council, as well as developing a regional roll-out plan of elections in different towns. This comes without neglecting the need for learning and adapting during implementation that requires flexibility and fast reactivity on the side of the donors and the parties contributing to the process (requiring in turn fast decision-making mechanisms and local teams that are fully aware of, and that adhere to such plans).
5. Similarly to that of direct elections, the issue **of women's participation in LCs requires an integrated approach** that includes the local

community, local civil society and LCs, and that translates into a work-plan covering several areas: supporting the employment of women in LCs, supporting local initiatives led by women, supporting women empowerment initiatives, and supporting the participation of women in direct local elections both as voter and as candidates. LDSPS' experience in this field shows that **it is possible to achieve a clear and measurable progress in this area within relatively short periods of time** (about two years).

6. **Participation of IDPs in local decision-making processes** (including within LCs) **remains a topic that has not been seriously worked on**. It is an important issue that faces great social and administrative challenges at the same time.
7. Based the experience of LDSPS and on the clear positive evolution in the indicators obtained through community assessments in the towns where LDSP has been working in Western Aleppo Countryside, we can say that **when there is: an integrated holistic approach** (that includes: funding of operational costs, capacity building through constant local interaction, local support, and local follow up, funding service-provision projects and revenue-generating projects, working on local coordination with local CSOs and technical directorates, and insisting on the independence, inclusiveness and transparency), **and a regular (steady and continuous) funding** for the process of supporting LCs, **notable progress can be achieved in relatively short periods of time** (less than two years) in positively developing the relationship and the interaction between the LCs and their communities.
8. Taking into account the importance of regular funding (steady and continuous), and of large amounts to address the needs of all the LCs,

all indicators show that the **lack of comprehensive approaches and time-bound strategic plans among donors** to support LCs **has resulted in wasting a huge amount of time, effort and financial resources, that were** spent in ways using LCs as tools to provide services to local communities rather than considering them as institutions for local administration, emanating from their local communities and accountable to them, and work with these LCs and invest in them as such.

9. After the regime regained control of Eastern Ghouta, Daraa and the northern countryside of Homs during 2018 and after the HTS took control of Western Aleppo Countryside in early 2019, **there are no more of independent LCs in Syria that operate in areas that not subject to de-facto authorities** established using military force. Nevertheless, on the date of publishing this report, LDSPS estimates that **there is a margin that can be worked on in North-Eastern Aleppo** (under Turkish control) to build an acceptable model for an action, a role, and positive and inclusive interaction of LCs with their local communities (while awaiting for the final outcome for HTS, as well as for the remaining parts of Idlib and Western Aleppo Countryside that are still out of the regime's control).

Based on these lessons learned and conclusions, LDSPS makes the following recommendation:

To local councils (currently and for the future):

- LCs should insist on keeping their independence vis-à-vis the de-facto authorities. This is key to maintain credibility with local communities.
- While respecting electoral mandates periods, LCs should extend them for a period of two years to allow for useful accumulation of experience.

- LC's should work on employing permanent staff and investing in training them as much as possible (while trying to ensure the required funding for that).
- LCs should aim at direct elections and prepare for them with defined timelines that include sufficient preparation periods. This is crucial to gain/strengthen the legitimacy from the local communities and strengthening thus the LCs position towards the de-facto authorities controlling their regions.
- LCs should increase communication/outreach with their local communities, show a high degree of transparency towards them, assess their opinions, and establish mechanisms to ensure the participation of the community members in local public affairs (local needs assessments, opinion polls, elections, etc.).
- LCs should avoid submitting to the programming priorities of the NGOs that fund the service-provision projects and insist on implementing the projects based to the LCs' own need assessments obtained using local community consultation and participation processes.
- LCs should seek to secure self-funding sources that could guarantee at a minimum the employment of fixed administrative staff. • LCs should raise the level of women's participation in the councils, either by hiring women as employees (preferably in atypical positions, not always at the Women Affairs Office) or through elections.
- LCs should examine mechanisms of involving IDPs in the local decision-making process and work on solutions designed communally by the IDPs and the host communities.
- LCs should cooperate with regional administrative and technical structures (directorates, provincial councils). A first step should be

defining an operational distribution of roles and responsibilities of these different parties.

To international NGOs and donors (currently and for the future):

- International NGOs and donors should consider LCs and deal with them as local structures emanating from their societies and therefore should work on strengthening them as institutions and not as “tools” used to provide or to facilitate the provision of services to local communities.
- International NGOs and donors should be working with LCs within integrated strategic approaches and provide regular funding that includes covering LCs operational costs.
- International NGOs and donors should put as much pressure as possible on the de-facto authorities to stop their interference in the LCs work and to allow well-prepared direct elections to take place in entire regions (that could include 15-20 towns but not necessarily happening simultaneously).
- International NGOs and donors should insist, when talking to the de-facto authorities, on the independence of any LC they consider cooperating with, as a precondition of funding in all fields (including relief distribution). At the same time, they should provide all possible support to the exceptional LCs that could show an acceptable degree of independence towards these authorities.
- International NGOs and donors should encourage and support cooperation with regional administrative and technical structures (directorates, provincial councils) starting with the defining of the distribution of roles and responsibilities of these different parties.

To de-facto authorities (currently):

- The de-facto authorities should not to interfere in LCs' work and

should allow well-prepared direct elections to take place in entire regions (that could include 15-20 towns but not necessarily happening simultaneously), in order to guarantee stability over the mid and the longer term.

- The de-facto authorities should put in place a gradual, slow and well planned transfer of responsibilities to the LCs, leading to transferring to them some executive authority.

To experts and structures specialized in local governance (future Syria):

- Experts and structures specialized in local governance should in-depth study of the most important successful as well as failed experiences of LCs in order to define some general key success and failure factors.
- Experts and structures specialized in local governance should use the lessons learned from the current experiences to review and redefine the distribution of roles and responsibilities among the various actors of local governance.
- Experts and structures specialized in local governance should work on amending the Law 107 based on the results of these studies and experiences.
- Experts and structures specialized in local governance should take advantage of the currently present margins in the North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside to test some models and ideas that could be good for the future local governance model in Syria.

Conclusion

This report aims to **provide a non-comprehensive overview based on a practical experience that continued over a period of 6 years during which Local Development and Small Projects Support (LDSPS) cooperated with 63 LCs in four different regions and at multiple degrees of engagement.** The description within the report is not the result of a “pure” research effort, but is the **results of direct work with the LCs and of several local community assessments.** It reflects LDSPS's views on the reality of the work of the LCs in regions that were/are out of the regime's control (except SDF-held areas where LDSPS did not intervene).

The views of LDSPS on: the importance of LCs, their formation mechanisms, their organizational situation, the competencies within the LCs, their financial and funding situation, the types of services they provide and their interactions with their environment (local communities, NGOs, provincial councils, directorates and armed factions), were presented. Some results of the community assessments concerning the evaluation by the local communities of the legitimacy, performance, service delivery, communication and transparency of the LCs, were exposed, as well as some of the factors affecting these evaluations, **leading to the lessons and recommendations that can be drawn.**

Currently, **LDSPS continues to work with LCs only in the North-Eastern Aleppo Countryside** after the regime regained control of Eastern Ghouta and Daraa, and after HTS took control of Western Aleppo Countryside. **Perhaps the biggest challenge facing LCs currently is not to submit to authoritarian de-facto powers that could negate their first and main source of legitimacy on which their ability to play their role is based: their free selection by their local communities.**



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