
Executive Summary: Evaluation of the National Agenda for the Future of Syria (NAFS) Programme

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Introduction to the National Agenda for the Future of Syria programme

Initiated in 2012, the National Agenda for the Future of Syria (NAFS) programme was designed to develop a 'National Agenda' to meet the direct and urgent needs of post-crisis transition in Syria. The programme brought together a wide spectrum of Syrian stakeholders in a national dialogue platform to discuss options and alternatives for the future of Syria. The platform was based on the collaboration of active networks of actors in civil society, the private sector and national and international institutions, with a gender balance given due consideration.

The NAFS programme was designed as a normative, inclusive exercise to ensure the buy-in of all approached Syrians. The NAFS programme was launched at a time when polarization between supporters of the Central Authority and opposition groups was described as 'vast'. The programme was envisaged to offer an alternative narrative to one of belligerence and to explore ways to reunite Syrians around important issues facing the country.

The origins of the NAFS programme are laid out in several important documents, funded by ESCWA in the programme's inception phase¹. These reports describe and analyse the roots of the crisis, provide an overview of the major challenges facing Syria in terms of a future post-crisis transition, and outline the NAFS programme plan. Under the aegis of ESCWA, the NAFS programme, phase 1, was then implemented following funding commitments from Germany, Norway, Finland and Italy, which eventually totalled around US\$5.7 million.

Background to the evaluation

This formative evaluation of the NAFS programme was designed to be forward-looking and to assess the overall achievements of the programme, and to identify and describe lessons for the remainder of NAFS phase 1, and the upcoming NAFS phase 2. The evaluation covers the timeframe from the programme's phase 1 launch in April 2013 to May 2016, and focuses on the programme's substantive work and achievements, including its processes and organizational structures. More than forty evaluation questions were addressed, organised under the five DAC criteria (Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Impact and Sustainability).

The evaluator conducted 58 semi-structured interviews with a representative cross-section of male and female experts, stakeholders, and the NAFS programme team. Semi-structured interviews were deemed most appropriate due to the diversity of respondents, their differing degrees of involvement in the programme, the sectors in which experts worked, and respondent's political affiliations. Around 350 pages of confidential and anonymised interview data were collected and coded using ATLAS.ti software. The evaluator also attended a number of platform meetings and conferences with different types of stakeholders, which was useful for observing the programme in action. The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the principles outlined in the UNEG 'Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation' and the ESCWA 2014 Evaluation Policy, and included due consideration of human rights and gender

¹ These include The Roots of the Crisis (2012), Project Inception Report (2012) and the Project Document (June 2013).

issues. Evaluation findings were validated in a series of workshops with the NAFS programme team, where recommendations were jointly formulated.

Summary of findings

Relevance

The NAFS programme objectives were found to be highly relevant to all Syrian experts and stakeholders, as well as to external stakeholders. Respondents frequently noted that NAFS clearly differed from other platforms in that it applied a normative and technical approach, in contrast with other more political platforms. Respondents unanimously agreed that this was an intelligent approach, as it enabled Syrian stakeholders to attend meetings and forums alongside those with opposing political views, and to gradually take steps towards one another.

The NAFS approach was viewed as having played a critical role in laying the intellectual groundwork for a new social contract. The 'National Agenda' concept provided an excellent goal for Syrian stakeholders and experts to work towards together, and led to the generation of considerable data and numerous research outputs, in many cases filling knowledge gaps. Through this process, Syrian stakeholders and experts were able to clearly see that, regardless of the outcome of the crisis, there are many substantive issues that Syrians will need to face together.

The NAFS approach strove to be inclusive and participatory. At the outset, many respondents described a kind of 'natural scepticism' towards such an inclusive approach, and there were some limitations and challenges to bringing Syrians from both sides of the crisis together. However, the NAFS programme made impressive strides in building networks and inclusive relationships, and the programme was successful in bringing together a spectrum of participants, from supporters of the Central Authority through to neutral and informal opposition figures. In the end, over 1,400 Syrian stakeholders actively participated in NAFS programme activities, and 164 Syrian experts received short-term assignments to produce specific knowledge outputs.

The programme was built on a strong ethical foundation, outlined in a statement of ethics. Debate could be heated, but the ethical foundation of the programme was largely respected. The programme was also unique in that it did not promote any specific solution or scenario to solving the crisis, but rather worked to develop theoretical and practical research consistent with principles of human rights, sustainable development, democratic governance and sovereignty. This approach, which was perceived as more or less 'neutral', was also strongly endorsed, as it gave stakeholders with opposing political views an opportunity to meet and genuinely dialogue on substantive issues and explore common ground.

Many experts and stakeholders remarked that, in their experience, there is no other programme or process that has achieved so much in bringing Syrians together to work towards a common vision for the future. They also valued that NAFS is a 'Syrian platform, for Syrians, by Syrians'.

Effectiveness

The NAFS programme has made considerable progress towards the achievement of its three Expected Accomplishments (EAs), with all EAs either achieved or expected to be achieved shortly. The expected completion date of the programme has been adjusted several times in light of the changing context, the widening of the programme scope, and availability of resources to complete the 'Draft Zero' of the National Agenda document. The programme finalized the Draft Zero of the Strategic Policy Framework (the National Agenda) in March 2016, and the finalised document is scheduled for publication in July 2016.

For many stakeholders and experts the National Agenda document – the programme's first EA – is an extremely important output of the programme, and is expected to be influential in a post-crisis transition phase. The background work for the National Agenda included the contributions of 164 contracted Syrian experts. Through this wide contracting process many useful research outputs were produced, although some fell short of publishable standards. This was largely the result of involving numerous important opinion leaders from both sides, while also seeking to contract technical experts to produce high quality research outputs. Overall, the decision to contract so many experts in Phase 1 pushed experts to engage professionally with the programme, and to further develop their analysis and positions.

However, NAFS Phase 1 arguably worked on too many sub-sectors and cross cutting themes (57 in total), as the programme sought to develop its wide and inclusive vision. In Phase 2, the number of sectors and workgroups should be better balanced with programme resources, to ensure not only a breadth of focus, but also a depth of quality. Expectations of the NAFS programme have risen, and the programme must be able to deliver.

NAFS has intensified its networking activities – its second EA – since early 2014, and has strengthened its working relationships with a range of institutional partners. It is recommended that NAFS phase 2 commits considerable attention and resources to networking and partnership activities to build on the gains NAFS phase 1 has made.

Under its third EA, 'programming for reconstruction,' NAFS has developed four initiatives. These initiatives are envisioned as potential 'bridging' programmes, prior to the implementation of the National Agenda. As neither the NAFS programme nor ESCWA are implementing agencies, NAFS will need to deepen its engagement with potential partners if these are to be implemented.

The location of the NAFS programme inside ESCWA was highly valued by most experts and stakeholders. Participants felt free to express their views in a safe environment, and within a strong ethical foundation. Most participants could not suggest a better location for the programme, and it is recommended that NAFS continues under the aegis of ESCWA. Outreach, particularly to groups and individuals not comfortable coming to Beirut, will need to continue in phase 2.

Gender and human rights issues were well integrated substantively throughout the programme and its outputs, emphasising inclusion and a plurality of voices. Whilst the programme team and stakeholders both had good female representation, the programme found it challenging to identify prominent Syrian women to contract as experts. This is largely due to structural issues in Syrian society, and these issues need to be further considered in Phase 2.

Efficiency

Donors have been generous in their support of the programme. The programme budget was approximately US\$5.7m, of which Germany contributed US\$2.5m, Norway US\$1.8m, Italy US\$0.7m, and Finland US\$0.25m. In addition ESCWA allocated US\$0.25m as seed funding. Programme costs of staffing, contracts, travel and events, and overhead paid to ESCWA and UNOPs appear to be well justified and relevant.

Nevertheless, the programme team has struggled with funding flows throughout. This principally relates to contractual delays between ESCWA and donors, and the enlargement of programme scope in response to the continuation of the crisis. Funding uncertainty and administrative delays drew programme management's attention away from strategy and programming.

The NAFS programme team were a major factor in the success of the programme. They were found to be highly motivated, and possessed a good mix of technical and transferable skills. Considerable institutional knowledge was developed across the team. However, two of the senior leaders are so integral to the programme that there would be a large gap to fill were they to leave the programme. The 16-person team was almost certainly understaffed during the past two years, as the programme scope, the number of experts and stakeholders, and the number of events and activities (including international travel) all increased.

Phase 2 may require different project management structures, but how the NAFS team structure should look in phase 2 will depend largely on the nature of the work being undertaken.

Impact

The programme has made a valuable contribution to preparing Syria for various post-crisis scenarios. NAFS has produced a wealth of data and research papers, which support others working on Syrian issues, including the UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, the UN Syria Country Team, other UN and international organisations, as well as Track II negotiations.

The programme has brought together a great number of Syrian opinion leaders and experts and has sensitised them to the scale of the work that lies ahead, and the choices and trade-offs that will invariably need to be made. Many Syrian experts described that there was also a 'capacity building element' to this work, as they were encouraged to think critically, debate substantive issues and develop policy positions.

Many experts and stakeholders have come to see the National Agenda as a goal to rally around, and perceive the real value of the programme to be in its relationship building and networking outcomes

through the NAFS platform. The NAFS platform has successfully promoted ideas of equitable and sustainable development, national unity, sovereignty, pluralism and respect for human rights and gender equality. Through the programme, Syrian experts and stakeholders have come to understand that addressing the many root causes of the conflict goes well beyond a single figure or group.

Virtually all respondents agreed that the programme has positively contributed to more civil dialogue on substantive issues facing Syria and Syrians. This outcome should not be underestimated: Many respondents noted that NAFS was unique for its civility and constructive environment. The NAFS platform will need to be maintained to keep Syrian actors engaged in positive dialogue.

Additionally, the NAFS programme, with ESCWA, has created the conditions under which reconciliation can be promoted. The programme has been intelligent in the way it has worked to bring about changes in attitudes and a willingness to engage. The programme has not tried to directly tackle thorny issues such as reconciliation or political solutions to the crisis. Rather, it sought to stimulate reconciliation through an approach that was technical and normative, and hence less prone to controversy and conflict. The many NAFS meetings and sessions have helped to remind participants that there are a great many challenges that Syrians will only be able to face together, and what they share in common. This understanding is fundamental to future reconciliation efforts.

In terms of communication, NAFS intentionally employed a strategy of releasing limited information into the public domain, to ensure that experts and stakeholders were not politically exposed. Engagement with the media was thus regarded as both an opportunity and a threat. Until 2016, communications and outreach were mainly undertaken through presentations and workshops, tailored to the participants attending.

The NAFS programme became more confident working with the media as the programme evolved. Several media organisations (Al Hayat, Al Jazeera, France 24, The Boston Globe and others) have interviewed the programme team or reported on the programme. NAFS also recently worked to raise its profile in other fora, including Chatham House, Al Shaikh Group, the London School of Economics and the Carter Center, among others. NAFS has garnered respect for its essential role liaising between experts, opinion leaders, stakeholders and the public.

However, there are some concerns as to whether the present communication strategy is sufficient. A greater online presence should be developed through which programme progress can be communicated and finalised documents and presentations disseminated. The programme also has relatively little presence on social media. Communications through a viable social media strategy would be a positive approach to transparency, inclusion, and participation. NAFS could also improve its visibility at more open, public events in Beirut and elsewhere in the region.

Internal communication and management of outputs will also require improvement, as the general sentiment of stakeholders is that while there is a lot of material produced, it is not sufficiently accessible.

The NAFS programme has also had several spinoff impacts. For example, NAFS has provided technical support to the working groups of the UN Special Envoy. A second spinoff is work on developing a better understanding of the humanitarian impacts of the economic sanctions imposed on the Syrian Arab Republic, and the consequences of these measures on the future of the country.

Sustainability

The immediate priority for the NAFS programme is to finalise the National Agenda document and to hold validation meetings. This will be followed by a process of revising the draft based on feedback from a broad cross-section of stakeholders and experts. Ideally, the National Agenda should be disseminated widely, to reach Syrians who have not been privy to the NAFS programme thus far.

In parallel, the NAFS programme team should work to further develop the four initiatives of its 'programming for reconstruction' work. The programme team will need to be more proactive to garner support from potential implementing partners.

The evaluator supports the view that the programme should continue to be funded, for the following reasons: 1) The programme has been successful in its work thus far, and is building a groundswell of support for the National Agenda; 2) The achievement of remaining outputs of the EAs is within reach; 3) The National Agenda programme is widely respected as the most important platform of its type, bringing together diverse Syrian stakeholders, and possessing genuine potential to make a positive impact on the post-crisis transition of Syria; and 4) Failure to deliver on the promise of the National Agenda process could lead to disillusionment and the disintegration of many of the relationships that have been building over the course of the programme.

Through Track II diplomacy and outreach to donors, the NAFS programme has continued to promote the vision of the National Agenda and its objectives, including during the International Partners Meeting (December 2015). There are positive signs that the programme will continue to receive support, and the evaluator welcomes such developments in light of the contribution that the programme has made thus far, and its potential for impact as the crisis in Syria allows.

NAFS phase 2 should ideally focus on the implementation of the National Agenda, however this is obviously contingent on the trajectory of the Syrian crisis. Programme management should continue to build on work done in phase 1, working to update data, strengthen partnerships and communicate the National Agenda to a larger Syrian audience. The NAFS programme management should also continue to respond to requests to support the work undertaken by the UN Country Team in Syria, the Special Envoy, and other UN actors and institutions.

Finally, alongside the qualitative interviews, experts were also asked to score (from 1-5) a limited set of questions using Likert scales, with the average scores ranging from 3.7 to 4.5. The high scoring responses support the many positive statements made by respondents during the evaluation, and suggest a positive direction for the sustainability of the NAFS programme.

Recommendations

Recommendations were designed intentionally to be forward-looking and actionable, and were organised across seven thematic areas:

Approach & Focus: In phase 2, the NAFS programme team is encouraged to build on NAFS' unique approach and position, while also accounting for stakeholders' evolving viewpoints; to intensify programmatic outreach visits; and to avoid spreading NAFS' resources too thinly by balancing resources to ensure quality. NAFS donors and external stakeholders are urged to prioritise the programme's outcomes over its impact, by assessing the extent to which NAFS has positively influenced the conditions for future impact in a post-crisis transition.

Working Modalities: For phase 2, it is proposed that the NAFS programme team increase the frequency of work group meetings and to enhance the quality of expert outputs by reducing the total output. To ensure institutional memory and continuity, it is recommended to retain the present programme team. ESCWA and the NAFS programme team are also urged to hold dedicated planning meetings to improve contracting procedures and to streamline bureaucratic processes, and to further explore options to maintain the Syrian identity of the programme.

Communication: Better internal and external communication is urged for phase 2. In particular, the NAFS programme team is encouraged to develop better processes for sharing reports and documents with experts, internal stakeholders and donors, and to better manage expectations through improved outreach and information sharing about the National Agenda. It is also recommended that the NAFS team raise the programme's visibility, including online and in social media, to better manage the programme's key messaging.

Partnerships & Networking: In phase 2 it is recommended that the NAFS programme maintains and builds on already established relationships with a wide range of institutional partners; and further advances discussions with potential partners, particularly as relates to resilience and stabilisation planning. It is also recommended to further simplify the programme's unified reporting to donors.

Programme Design: In designing phase 2 of the NAFS programme, it is recommended to employ a flexible approach for the programme's logical framework, with regular revisions as necessary, in consultation with donors. The NAFS programme team is also urged to consider using a more simplified programme framework when presenting NAFS work to most audiences.

Knowledge Management: For phase 2 the NAFS programme team is recommended to employ a form of collaborative project management software to improve tracking of programme activities and outputs, for results monitoring, and to ensure the retention of institutional memory.

Gender & Human Rights: Given the NAFS programme's effective integration of gender and human rights issues, it is recommended that the programme team continue this strong ethical approach in phase 2, and continue to identify further opportunities for such integration.