

CSSR Thematic Working Groups: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What are CSSR Thematic Working Groups?

The United Nations (UN) Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE-Syria) established the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) in January 2016 as an inclusion mechanism that enables civil society actors and a broad range of Syrians to meet, interact, and engage with the Special Envoy for Syria (SE) and his team, relevant UN actors, and international stakeholders on questions related to the political process and UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254 (2015). The CSSR also provides a “common space” for concerned Syrians to have their say and an opportunity for intra-Syrian civil society dialogue.

CSSR Thematic Working Groups (TWGs) are established as a response to requests from many CSSR participants to leverage their sectoral expertise and contribute to the Syrian-owned and -led political process facilitated by the OSE-Syria. Civil society TWG participants are part of the CSSR and participate in the work of the TWGs on a voluntary basis.

What is the objective of the Thematic Working Groups?

TWGs have been introduced to leverage Syrian civil society’s broad range of expertise, strengthen Syrian ownership of the CSSR, and enhance intra-Syrian civil society dialogue on substantive issues. TWGs are also aimed at facilitating more substantive engagement with the SE and the OSE political team and providing broader opportunities for civil society advocacy on key thematic issues.

TWGs are established through the CSSR online collaborative platform and will allow civil society actors to engage each other and the UN regardless of their geographic location and ability to travel.

How are TWGs participants selected and what kinds of issues do they deal with?

Selection of participants

Participation in the TWGs is voluntary and based on expressions of interest by individual CSSR actors and networks, and on a survey sent by the OSE-Syria to all CSSR participants.

Participants in CSSR TWGs must be Syrian and must be engaged in civic activities either as individuals or through a civil society organisation or civic initiative.

TWG participants are individuals with specific thematic expertise or a specific interest that is relevant to the Syrian political process. All participants must be committed to making constructive contributions to the political process and helping to find a lasting political solution to the conflict in Syria.

Existing and prospective TWG participants must also not belong to any official delegation, political party or military grouping. Civil society participants are not formally part of the official political process facilitated by the UN SE.

The OSE-Syria will endeavour to maintain balanced participation in all TWGs in terms of members' gender, age, thematic backgrounds, and geographical diversity.

TWG participants are required to adhere to a Code of Conduct that emphasises mutual respect, non-discrimination, non-attribution of participants' TWG input and respect for civic dialogue.

Thematic areas and issues

Various key thematic areas have been identified (see below), and participants in a specific TWG will focus on that TWG's thematic area and identify issues and develop briefing papers and policy options that are of relevance to UNSCR 2254 (2015).

While the OSE-S has proposed a number of TWGs and will propose more as the need arises, CSSR participants can put forward suggestions for additional TWGs. Thus far the OSE-S has identified the following potential thematic areas:

- legal/constitutional issues;
- electoral issues;
- civil society space/civic values;
- protection priorities for Syrians, within a humanitarian framework;
- economic recovery and development perspectives;
- governance, and the relationship between citizens and the state; and

- how to address human rights violations committed during the conflict.

External thematic experts can be nominated to assist TWG members in their work on substantive issues (see “Technical and expertise support”, below).

How soon will TWGs be implemented?

The OSE-Syria will adopt an incremental approach to the implementation and operationalisation of the TWGs in order to ensure that new processes within the CSSR are integrated and managed in an orderly and systematic way. The first TWG was launched in June 2021.

The TWGs will be conducted virtually for the foreseeable future and will run in parallel to one another. Each TWG will have a three-to-four-month working period, but could be extended upon request by the TWG (see more under “Term limits and rotation”, below). One physical meeting in Geneva could also be envisioned to finalize the work of each TWG, depending on COVID-19 restrictions as well as financial and logistical requirements.

How exactly will TWGs work?

TWG participants will be required to dedicate a few hours each week to TWG work, which will include online meetings and activities to coordinate the work of all the participants in each TWG.

The participants in each TWG will collaboratively use the CSSR online platform to organise their own work and work schedule, and to interact with their fellow group members. A dedicated username and password will be needed to allow participants in each TWG to go online and access that TWG’s workspace.

Participants can decide to nominate one or more rapporteurs or a small coordination group for each TWG. Rapporteurs/coordinators are expected to dedicate more time to TWG coordination work, including liaison and substantive exchanges with other TWGs.

Term limits and rotation

Each TWG is envisaged to have a minimum of three-to-four-month working period, at the end of which its outputs will be made available to the OSE-Syria. The conclusion of a TWG’s work does not mean that the group will be disbanded. Rather, at the end of each TWG’s working period, another batch of participants covering the same theme could be constituted if needed.

The next batch of participants in the same TWG could include a few members of the previous batch to ensure continuity.

The terms and rotation of TWG membership can be modified on the basis of consultations among members of a TWG and the OSE-S, and in circumstances where any suggested changes are considered to be beneficial to the group's work.

Language

The TWGs will use Arabic for their work. The online CSSR platform used for collaboration purposes is available in both English and Arabic; however, the working language used for discussion and communication purposes and the sharing of content will only be Arabic.

Professional translation and interpretation services will be provided to TWGs when necessary.

Technical and expertise support

In order to support the TWGs' work, the OSE-S will provide appropriate technical support to each TWG. The OSE-S will assign to each TWG a political officer who will act as a focal point for that group, and this officer will engage participants on substantive issues being discussed within the TWG on a regular basis.

If requested by the members of a TWG, the OSE-S can invite relevant experts to a TWG meeting to assist the group in its work and help members to organise and structure an output document's language, format and substance.

Editorial responsibility for output documents

Participants will be solely responsible for the output documents the TWG produces, including their format and content.

Should sufficient agreement on the content of output documents be impossible to achieve, the OSE-Syria will not sift through individual position papers in order to find common ground. Rather, rapporteurs are encouraged to report on both key diverging views *and* areas of agreement in the briefing note they will send to the OSE-Syria on behalf of the group.

Participants should draft these outputs in accordance with the TWG Code of Conduct, without naming either the author(s) or participants.

Who sets the agenda for each TWG?

Participants in each TWG will draw up the group's agenda and discuss substantive issues related to the TWG's thematic area. The group rapporteurs will ensure that group members follow the agenda points, coordinate participants' inputs and contributions, ensure that the discussion is productive, and seek feedback from the OSE-S if and when necessary.

What is the role of TWGs in relation to the political process?

TWGs are meant to facilitate more substantive engagement with civil society actors, and generate more opportunities for substantial and meaningful exchanges with the SE and the OSE political team, relevant International Syria Support Group member states, and UN agencies.

The SE and Deputy SE (DSE) will be regularly briefed on the progress of the various TWGs' work.

Documents produced by TWGs, relevant extracts or key elements will be shared with the SE and DSE and the OSE political team for the purpose of contributing to and informing the OSE-Syria's mediation efforts.

It remains the prerogative of the SE to determine which TWG outputs he may choose to share with the parties of the political process, including when and how to do so.

Does the OSE-Syria expect TWG participants to reach consensus in their discussions?

The OSE-Syria will not be seeking consensus from TWG participants and accepts that sufficient agreement on thematic issues may or may not exist among them. For this reason, the rapporteurs of each TWG are encouraged to reflect the varieties of views within a group when they report on the group's outputs at the end of each working session.

What is the relationship among the CSSR, the TWGs and the Constitutional Committee?

There is no formal relationship between the Constitutional Committee (CC) and the CSSR. It is up to the CC co-chairs and members to decide on their wider engagement with Syrian civil society and the Syrian public. The OSE-Syria will seek to update CSSR participants on the CC's work in line with the terms of

reference and core rules of procedure, and facilitate interactions and dialogue with members of the CC if and when possible.

What is the relationship between the TWGs and the Women’s Advisory Board?

The Women’s Advisory Board (WAB) is composed of 17 Syrian women from diverse backgrounds and affiliations; its purpose is to ensure that diverse women’s perspectives and the gender equality agenda are considered throughout the political process. The OSE-Syria will continue to encourage regular interactions between the WAB members and CSSR participants, including with the TWGs. A dedicated space for WAB on the collaborative platform is also envisioned.

Who supports the implementation of the TWGs?

Responsibility for the overall supervision and guidance of the CSSR and its TWGs rests with the OSE-Syria. The OSE-Syria has mandated swisspeace and NOREF Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution – two international peacebuilding non-governmental organisations with longstanding experience of facilitating the inclusion of civil society in peace processes – to provide methodological expertise, technical support and operational support to stakeholders when necessary, all in close coordination with the OSE-Syria.

How does the CSSR online collaborative platform function?

The CSSR platform is an access-controlled digital space that is accessed via the internet. Each TWG will have its own dedicated work space on the platform, and this work space will only be accessible to the TWG’s pre-selected and pre-approved participants. Outsiders will not be able to access either the platform or the dedicated work space of each group.

Individual TWG members will not be able to add new participants or remove existing ones.

Each group will have one or more rapporteurs who will have the same access and rights as others on the platform.

The technical moderation and administration of the platform remains the responsibility of the implementing partners.

Each participant will have a login username and password and is expected not to share this information with anyone else. Once they have accessed the group, members will identify themselves with their names and surnames. Each group will have a technical administrator from the CSSR team who will not participate in discussions. This person will act solely as the focal point for technical support and ensure that the Code of Conduct is adhered to, if prompted to do so.

The platform will enable TWG participants to work collaboratively. Participants will be able to:

- initiate discussions on a given topic;
- identify interests and debate them;
- share documents, pictures, text, attachments, etc.;
- jointly develop and write texts;
- chat in one-on-one formats or with a group;
- plan events and upload them onto their personal calendars; and
- access a Zoom room dedicated to TWG digital meetings.

What happens if I cannot or do not wish to participate in a TWG?

If you do not wish to be a TWG participant or are unable to participate for whatever reason, please contact the operational support team (see the email address below) as soon as possible to seek the best option for you and the group.

Participants will be disabled (prevented from logging on to the group) after a silent period during which they do not contribute to TWG discussions. Please also see the Code of Conduct.

How do I get in touch?

You can contact the CSSR team at the following email address: contact@cssrweb.org