

Summary Report

“Building a Victim- and Survivor-Centered Investigative Mechanism for Afghanistan

Lessons from Victims and Civil Society Engagement in Syria and Myanmar.”

Official Side Event of the 61st Session of the Human Rights Council, 27 February 2026, Geneva



Introduction

The Center for Dialogue and Progress – Geneva convened a panel titled “Building a Victim- and Survivor-Centered Investigative Mechanism for Afghanistan: Lessons from Victims and Civil Society Engagement in Syria and Myanmar”, cohosted by the Permanent Mission of Afghanistan, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, and cosponsored by permanent missions of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Iceland, Luxembourg, and Spain, and the Center for Human Rights Advocacy.

The panel was framed as a practical discussion on how the newly established Independent Investigative Mechanism for Afghanistan (IIM-A) can:

- Meaningfully engage victims and survivors
- Work with Afghan civil society as partners, not just sources
- Draw detailed lessons from the International Independent Impartial Mechanism - Syria (IIIM) and the International Independent Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM)

Speakers included Michelle Jarvis, the deputy head of IIIM, Beatriz Balbin, Head of Human Rights Inquiries Branch of OHCHR, a senior representative from the IIMM, Fadel AbdulGhany, CSO representative from Syria, Dr. Huma Saeed, transitional justice expert, and two survivors of human rights violations from Afghanistan.

This brief distills key lessons and concrete recommendations for the design and implementation of IIM-A, based on the panelists' contributions.

Update

on Afghanistan Mechanism (IIM-A): Civil Society and Victim Consultations in its setup stage and future



Drawing on the role of the OHCHR in the setup stage, Beatriz Balbin focused on OHCHR's preparatory work.

Beatriz Balbin highlighted that the preparations for the recruitment of the Mechanism's head are underway, with a timeline of weeks. Meanwhile, operationalisation of the trust fund is well advanced, and the Office can already receive dedicated voluntary contributions.

On the panel's specific focus, she reported that, so far, OHCHR has held consultations with CSOs from Afghanistan on the 8th of December 2025, consulted international NGOs, and requested written submissions.

The office also held bilateral exchanges with NGOs to provide updates and gather views. To date, however, they have not been able to contact survivors living inside Afghanistan due to safety risks, but it will be included in the future. The two existing mechanisms were also consulted in the development of the TORs, a process that will also continue once IIM-A is operational, in addition to the Permanent Mission of Afghanistan and the OHCHR, which itself possesses a wealth of expertise in this regard.

The recommendations were integrated into the IIM-A's terms of reference and will guide its future work and provide the basis for effective cooperation with all stakeholders. This document, however, remains flexible, so the mechanism itself maintains full control.

Lessons Learned from Syria & Myanmar

1. Overarching Principles



Michelle Jarvis, Deputy Head of IIIM-Syria, drew on nine years of IIIM experience:

Peace-Justice Nexus

The work of investigative mechanisms is about laying inclusive foundations for future justice that can support reconciliation and peaceful, rights-based societies. Victims' and survivors' priorities for justice must inform these foundations from the start.

Mindset Shift for Accountability Actors

A genuinely victim- and survivor-centered approach requires:

- Viewing victims and survivors as the “North Star” guiding priorities and decisions.
- Moving away from a model where justice actors set priorities “for” victims toward one where priorities are co-defined “with” them.

Layered Engagement

The IIIM created a regular platform of engagement, the **Lausanne Platform**, focused on documentation-oriented Syrian CSOs. However, they learned that was not enough as it was limited to 25 organizations, and gender imbalance and other structural representational gaps existed.

Thus, they expanded engagement to include:

A second **annual consultation with victim and survivor associations** and individuals to hear their direct views and justice priorities.

Ad hoc online engagements to reach Women facing participation barriers, youth, and marginalized regions/communities whose experiences had been under-documented.

Written bulletins several times a year to explain IIIM's work in an accessible language.

Use of Feedback

Inputs from these engagements feed directly into IIIM's planning and prioritization. Approaches are adjusted as circumstances in Syria change.

Lessons Learned from Syria & Myanmar

2. Circumventing Access Constraints by Working through CSOs

The Senior Representative of the IIMM emphasized that due to a lack of direct access to the territory (Myanmar), engagement with communities occurs through CSOs on the ground. They play a critical role as first responders & first observers of violations, primary documenters and evidence collectors, and key connectors to victims and witnesses.

Trust as a Core Operational Asset

CSOs have longstanding relationships of trust with affected communities. If the mechanism builds trust with CSOs, that trust is more easily transferred to victims and witnesses, which is especially critical for SGBV survivors who require very careful, sensitive approaches.

Contextual Expertise in Staffing

IIMM deliberately recruits staff who have lived or worked in Myanmar. They know the languages, cultures, history, and politics. These staff are front-facing in engagement, which facilitates trust and nuanced communication and helps avoid cultural missteps.

Managing Expectations and Avoiding Extractive Engagement

Transparency about mandate limits is essential: IIMM consistently clarifies that it is not a police force and cannot arrest. It is not a prosecution service and cannot itself charge or indict. It is not a court and cannot try or convict anyone. This clarity prevents false expectations and resentment.

IIMM's Terms of Reference restrict the sharing of detailed evidentiary materials solely with judicial authorities in the context of criminal proceedings. CSOs are made aware of this, which helps align expectations.

Regular Dialogues and Feedback

IIMM holds annual Civil Society Dialogues, in person, to update CSOs on how their information has been used and share progress without jeopardizing investigations. It also uses frequent online engagements as investigations proceed.

Civil Society's Perspective

3. Insights from Syrian Civil Society on Collaboration



Fadil AbdulGhany, Executive Director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), offered the Syrian CSOs' experience.

Recognizing the Value of Pre-Existing Documentation Work

CSOs like SNHR began systematic documentation years before the IIIM was created (2016). The IIIM recognized the value of this prior work and sought to engage and formalize cooperation.

Binding Agreements and Data Sharing

SNHR was the first organization to sign a bilateral cooperation agreement with IIIM and begin formal data sharing. Such cooperation supported a nearly 300-page IIIM report on detention and torture and contributed to universal jurisdiction cases in Europe.

Complementarity Between Mechanism and CSOs

Fadil stressed that neither IIIM nor credible local CSOs can succeed alone: Mechanisms bring mandate, legal expertise, and access to international justice forums. CSOs bring long-term documentation, contextual insights, and proximity to victims.

Beyond International Fora to Domestic Justice

Cooperation has extended to universal jurisdiction cases in Europe. Following changes in Syria, collaboration now also looks at preparing case files for accountability within Syria itself.

Concerns and Pitfalls

“Star victims” phenomenon: where the same victims are repeatedly invited to multiple forums and events. This leaves out “ordinary” victims and distorts representativity. Need for specialized, credible engagement with CSOs and inclusive victim participation beyond a small circle.

Meaningful Victim Participation must run through every stage of the justice process, not just consultation. It requires awareness and education of victims about the processes they are asked to join. It must also account for socio-economic realities and psychological well-being.

Demands of Afghan Victims & CSOs



Drawing on victim testimonies and the analysis from Dr. Huma Saeed, some of the main demands are:

- **Recognition and Truth**

Victims consistently demand recognition of the suffering and harms they endured across decades of conflict. They want the IIM-A to document their experiences to create a historical record that is accurate and independent.

- **Acknowledging the Complexity of Victimhood**

Victimhood in Afghanistan is multi-layered and overlapping: Individuals and communities may have been harmed multiple times by different actors over different periods. Lines between the victim and perpetrator are sometimes blurred. Mechanisms must resist simplistic binaries and adopt a nuanced understanding of who is a victim and in what ways.

- **Prioritization of Gender-Based Crimes and Crimes Against Children**

There is a strong demand to address gender-based crimes, including structural discrimination (apartheid-like conditions) against women and girls, and to document crimes against children. Victims stress that these are not peripheral issues, but central to any credible justice process.

- **Holistic and Context-Specific Approach**

Afghan victims and CSOs call for an approach that:

- Captures the full spectrum of violations (civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights; international crimes).
- Avoids privileging certain periods, geographies, or categories of victims.
- Pays attention to intersections: gender, ethnicity, religion, class, disability, displacement status, and more.

- **Participation, Safety, and Agency**

Victims want safe avenues to share their stories and evidence; clear information on how their testimonies will be used, stored, and protected; opportunities to shape priorities, not merely provide information. The need for psychosocial support and trauma-informed approaches in any engagement was stressed.

- **Assuring Inclusivity and Avoiding Elitism**

Echoing Syrian experiences, over-reliance on a small number of prominent CSOs or “star victims”—Urban and elite bias are deemed counterproductive.

V. Recommendations

Drawing from the panel insights, several recommendations emerge for IIM-A and Afghan civil society:

- Recognize Afghan victims/survivors as rights-holders by giving them a say in shaping IIM-Afghanistan's priorities and approach to justice.
- Document harms across all phases and actors of Afghanistan's conflicts, reflecting complex victim-perpetrator narratives.
- Treat recognition of harm and establishing an accurate historical record of what happened as core justice outcomes.
- Establish regular, structured engagement mechanisms with Afghan civil society and victim/survivor groups (such as Afghan advisory bodies, and dedicated in-person and online consultation and information sharing platforms)
- Ensure inclusive, non-elitist participation by adopting modalities that prevent the creation of "star victims", allow rotation, and enable the participation of underrepresented and less visible groups.
- Formalize cooperation, empower, and use Afghan civil society and diaspora networks as primary partners for safe access, analysis, and outreach when direct access is restricted.
- Provide clear, regular information in local languages on IIM-Afghanistan's capabilities, limits, and use of evidence to enable making informed engagement decisions.
- Embed gender-responsive and intersectional approaches so that crimes against women and girls and harms to children, persons with disabilities, IDPs, and minorities are central in investigations.
- Guarantee trauma-informed, voluntary, and protection-driven procedures for all contact with victims and witnesses.

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