

## Mapping Methodology

### Introduction

During an offensive in North-East Syria (NES) in October 2019, Turkey-led armed groups took control of the border cities of Tel Abyad and Ras El Ein / Serekaniye. More than 200.000 people were forcibly displaced and to this day, local communities have not been able to return, fearing for their safety. Reports say that some of their properties have been confiscated and redistributed to family members of armed groups and IDPs resettled from other parts of the country.

PAX and its partner PEL-Civil Waves working in NES have identified the need to better track HLP violations that have occurred in the city of Ras El Ein / Serekaniye. By thoroughly documenting original property ownership and HLP violations that have been witnessed, it will be possible to raise attention of decision-makers towards the need to support displaced communities in securing their HLP rights and take a first step towards protecting these rights by showing that communities themselves can play a role in this process.

As the area is currently under the control of Turkey-led armed groups, security concerns make it impossible for PAX or its partner PEL to visit Ras El Ein / Serekaniye and collect primary source data. PAX has identified an opportunity to collect first-hand information by engaging with displaced persons from Ras El Ein / Serekaniye who have re-settled in other cities and camps across North-East Syria. PAX and PEL seek to foster a bottom-up process and pilot with an innovative community-based methodology: by actively engaging with local communities, it will be possible to gather knowledge, individual and collective memory, in order to facilitate the mapping of properties' ownership.

In August and September 2020, the PEL team, in charge of conducting the community mapping in the field, was extensively trained by the organization Syrians for Truth and Justice on housing, land and property rights. Over 8 days, capacity building was provided online by a Syrian judge, a Syrian lawyer and human rights expert and an international human rights expert to provide an understanding of existing frameworks protecting HLP rights in the international law system, shed light on the judiciary system in Syria specifically related to HLP rights, and introduce the documentation of human rights violations and HLP rights in particular. Training sessions allowed participants to discuss and design a methodology to adopt in order for the PEL team to conduct the mapping.

This pilot project and the designed mapping methodology were further discussed with a number of experts in the field of HLP rights including the director of the Global Land Tool Network for North Africa and the Middle East, a GIZ consultant working on the Syria program expert on HLP rights, a Syrian civil society activist heading the Urban Research Centre conducting mapping on HLP issues in Syria and a UN-Habitat employee working on an HLP community-based mapping project in Sinjar, Iraq. Feedback was received, and ideas and points for attention in regards to designing the mapping methodology were shared.

This document details the methodology that has been designed to conduct data collection and the community mapping. It also outlines risks and constraints that have been identified that could present challenges for the data collection process and explains what steps will be undertaken to address them. Additional points for attention to ensure a sound data collection and mapping process have been identified as well.

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## Purpose of the community mapping process

The community mapping exercise seeks to conduct a mapping of properties in the city of Ras El Ein / Serekaniye based on first-hand information collected from community members who were inhabitants of the city before October 2019. The process seeks the active engagement of communities and will rely on the individual and collective memory, knowledge and availability of relevant documents to map the ownership of properties in Ras El Ein / Serekaniye before October 2019.

The mapping process will seek to highlight existing legal issues and help community members to gather and store relevant needed documentation that helps to prove and claim ownership of properties.

The process will seek to identify the fate of mapped properties post-October 2019 and gather information about whom the lost properties are now occupied by.

The community mapping process will focus on one particular district of the city of Ras El Ein / Serekaniye called Zaradesht district.

Since the community mapping is taking place in the frame of a pilot project with limited means and a short timeframe, it is expected that only a few community members will take part in the exercise. Although the amount of data collected might be limited, it is expected that it will be possible to identify patterns of HLP rights violations that have taken place in the city of Ras El Ein / Serekaniye. Furthermore it will provide lessons on how to improve the process.

The data collection process will try to collect, as much as possible, comprehensive documents and evidence that are needed to build legal cases, including collective claims. In case it is identified as relevant, and in case it is a wish voiced by community members participating in the mapping process, it will be possible to work further at filing legal claims.

The findings of the mapping process will be used to conduct advocacy when and where judged fit. Advocacy has been identified as useful when directed towards the following actors:

- The Autonomous Administration in North-East Syria, in order to provide additional support to community members to build and file legal claims when relevant, as well as to ensure digitalization and safe storage of HLP documentation across North-East Syria.
- The representatives in the political negotiations, in order to ensure they address HLP rights and integrate it as part of their agenda within Geneva talks.
- The International Community, in order to foresee the developments of special mechanisms to help community members to claim their assets and properties, and ensure that HLP rights issues are an integral part of discussions in Geneva. Information-sharing about this current pilot, methodology used and findings could also provide an example of needed programming in other parts of Syria.
- Syrian communities and Syrian Civil Society, in order to raise knowledge and awareness on the importance of ensuring documentation of HLP rights and HLP rights violations that have occurred since 2011.

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## Data Collection Methods

In order to be able to collect rich and detailed information about the status of ownership of housing, land and properties and rights violations that may have occurred in the city of Ras El Ein / Serekaniye post-October 2019, in-depth qualitative interviews will be conducted with individuals who were originally living in Ras El Ein / Serekaniye prior to October 2019 and who have been deprived of their HLP rights. Interviews will allow for the collection of detailed information about assets and properties that were owned by individuals and better understanding of their personal experience in losing their right over these properties. The use of open qualitative interviews is a data collection method that enables the gathering of in-depth information about participants' experiences, points of views, perceptions and interpretations of specific events. Individual interviews will be preferred over group interviews, as it provides the opportunity to explore the details of the story shared by the participant and gives an opportunity to the participant interviewed to bring forward issues and topics s/he deems important as part of her/his personal story.

### 1) Interview Team

The project team in charge of organizing and proceeding to conduct the interviews as part of the data collection process is composed of 1 coordinator, 3 project assistants and 10 community mobilizers working as volunteers.

The project coordinator is responsible for piloting the mapping process in the field, engaging with stakeholders and checking the quality of interviews and data collected. She will also conduct interviews with identified and selected participants from the data collection process together with the 3 project assistants.

The three project assistants will be in charge of conducting interviews and collecting the required data with selected participants, together with the project coordinator. The four persons in charge of conducting interviews make up two teams of two persons: one team is based in the city of Qamishli, the other team is based in the city of al-Hassakeh. This will allow the team to reach out to diverse community members from Ras El Ein / Serekaniye who are currently displaced and living in majority in both cities. The project assistants are also in charge of conducting the mapping of individuals who might be interested in being interviewed.

Ten community mobilizers, who are mainly young people learning to engage with civil society working as volunteers, support the teams in the cities of Qamishli and Hassake by facilitating the interviews from a logistics perspective (making appointments, coordinating transportation, ensuring that technological aspects are set to start the interview, updating databases of contacts, etc). Community mobilizers will receive a nominal compensation for their work.

### 2) Identifying and selecting participants

As part of the team in charge of collecting the data, two team members who were originally residing in Ras El Ein / Serekaniye have been recruited. One of them used to live in Zaradesht district, the area of focus of this mapping. This means that team members hold a detailed understanding of the context, as well as personally know diverse community members and social leaders who will be able to help in identifying participants to the mapping process and enjoy trust. One of the team members is currently settled in the city of Hassake, while the other is settled in the city of Qamishli. This also eases the reach towards community members who have resettled in diverse cities across North-East Syria, although the majority are in the cities of Hassake and Qamishli.

Both team members, supported by the rest of the project team, will undertake a mapping of their own acquaintances who are originally from Ras El Ein / Serekaniye and currently living in Hassake and Qamishli. A number of individuals identified through this mapping will be approached to participate in the study. The technique of snowballing will then be used to identify other participants, as interviewees will be asked to recommend other community members who might be interested and willing to participate in the study.

Two main criteria are used to identify participants to be interviewed: the individual must have been an inhabitant of Ras El Ein / Serekaniye prior to October 2019; the individual must have owned housing, land or property in

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the city and has been deprived of exercising such right as a result of the October 2019 offensive. Any individual ready to come forward to share his/her personal story will be encouraged to plan an interview with the project team.

Particular attention will be given towards reaching out to the diverse ethnic and religious communities in order to ensure documentation of stories of individuals from Kurdish, Arab, Christian and Yazidi communities. Women will be highly encouraged to share their stories too. Some specific dispositions will be taken to encourage women's participation when needed: safe transportation will be provided (see point 3: access to participants) and interviews could be conducted by a woman only interviewer.

### 3) Access to participants

Interviews will be conducted face to face with participants. It is important that a location considered as safe and comfortable by the participant is identified. PEL will propose to conduct interviews either in PEL centres in the city of Hassake and Qamishli or at the home of the participant. A preference goes towards the use of PEL centres which offer privacy, but which are also equipped with computers and internet and make the process of interview easier. Choice will be given to interviewees to select their preferred location.

An agreement will be made by PEL with two taxi drivers (in the city of Hassake and in the city of Qamishli) to ensure transportation to participants from their homes to the PEL centre so that interviewees do not have to bear the cost of commuting.

### 4) Interview methodology

Interviews will be guided by a set of pre-defined questions that address topics and issues that are important to address in order to be able to draw a comprehensive picture of the situation in regards to HLP rights.

The set of pre-defined questions has been designed by the project team during the capacity building training sessions received by the team and provided by Syrians for Truth and Justice prior to the launch of the data collection process. This means that the interview guide has been designed with the support of experienced human rights researchers and lawyers and in cooperation with the project team. This has allowed for building a common understanding among the project team about the purpose of the data collection process and the purpose of each question part of the guide. This step is seen as essential in order to ensure coherence within the data collection process.

Most questions which are part of the interview guide are formulated as open questions and allow for a conversational character to the interview. The questions can also be reformulated or re-sequenced as deemed appropriate by the interview team to fit the course that the interview takes.

The interview guide can be found in annex to this document, it has been translated to English only for use in this document.

The questions aim to better understand the personal story of the people interviewed: circumstances in which they were forced to leave their homes, properties and assets they had and left behind and their locations, specific characteristics of these properties, current known status of these properties and assets.

Through the interview, participants will be asked about specific documents they hold that can prove ownership, whether it is deeds, property official registration, invoices of purchase, rental contracts, electricity or water bills, generator or internet subscription, official document registration from the mayor of the district, but also videos or pictures taken at or with the property. Participants may hold original documents with them or may have digital or paper copies of the documents. The interview team will ask for the possibility to keep a copy of the documents presented.

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Interviews will preferably be recorded to facilitate the documentation process. However participants will be duly informed and permission requested. In case the participant doesn't give approval to record the interview, the interview team will only take written notes.

## 5) Language

Arabic and Kurmanji Kurdish are the two languages commonly spoken in North-East Syria. The interviews will be conducted in the language preferred by the interviewee. All team members collecting the data speak fluently both Arabic and Kurdish and will therefore be able to conduct interviews alternatively in both languages.

## 6) Data collection timeframe

The data collection will take place between mid-September 2020 until October 30, 2020.

## 7) Ethics

It is important to ensure that data collection and design of the mapping methodology abides by relevant ethical standards and carefully takes into account the existing safety and security risks linked to the participation of individuals in the process.

Full information regarding the data collection exercise, its purpose and the way data collected will be used, will be provided to possible participants before the launch of the interview by the project team members. Guidelines regarding privacy and confidentiality will be applied and the option for anonymity will be made available for participants so that their name is not disclosed if they do not wish so, along with other information gathered during the data collection that may be judged private or too sensitive to disclose.

A consent form has been designed that will be signed by each interviewee approving the use of information provided during the interview. In the consent form, the participant is asked to clearly indicate whether he provides authorization to use his/her picture, recording of his/her voice, use of his/her real name.

## 8) Team Review process

The data collection method presented above was designed by the project team after following several capacity building sessions. It is however necessary for the team to test the methodology and ensure it is adequate to collect the needed data smoothly, and refine the data collection method as needed to ensure an optimal process. Two reflection sessions facilitated by the organization providing the capacity building training, Syrians for Truth and Justice, will be organized alongside the data collection process. They will provide an opportunity for project team members to share reflections, lessons learned, as well as obstacles and challenges met during the interviews. This will allow the sharing of tips and tricks to the team, as well as to adapt or review the methodology in case it is needed to ensure that data collection is conducted in the best possible way.

## 9) Documentation, storage and analysis of information

Data collected as part of the interviews will be typed up by the project team in a word document in order to document and save the data. Each interview conducted will be transcribed in a separate word document.

An agreement has been made with the Formera organization that provide dedicated online spaces to store, manage and analyse data in a secure way. PEL has opened an account which allows for uploading the interview data. The online tool allows for storing the data in a database and will further facilitate the analysis of the data. Functions allow for identifying key words that can be used to code the data. The tool allows for conducting dynamic researches to be able to support in reviewing and analysing the data.

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## Risks and Points for attention during data collection process

In the process of designing the mapping methodology, several risks and additional points for attention have been identified by the project team. While certain measures have been identified to mitigate existing risks, other points for attention have been highlighted that could represent additional steps needed for the project team to undertake during or after the data collection process in order to benefit the purpose of the project.

- **Gaining trust of participants**

Due to the political and conflict-sensitive nature of the context, it might be challenging to gain the trust of participants to share personal information with the project team in regards to rights violations they might have suffered from. In order to facilitate gaining the trust of participants, several strategies have been identified: two of the project team members hired are originating from Ras Al Ein / Serekaniye and one of them was living in the district of focus. This means that they have personal connections with community members and hold previously-established trust relationships with community members. Participants will be identified among the personal network of team members. The snowball method to identify additional participants will be used and will allow for widening a trusted network of contacts. As participants are identified and selected, an introduction meeting will be conducted with them to explain in detail the purpose of the project and clarify the use of the data collected. These meetings will provide a chance for participants to ask questions and raise possible concerns related to their participation before giving their approval to be interviewed. These open discussions will favour the development of a trusted atmosphere between participants and the project team, and at all times participants will be able to retract from the process if they wish to do so.

- **Managing expectations of participants**

It will be important to ensure not to raise expectations of participants during the data collection process. The project aims to illustrate the occurrence of HLP rights violations in the city of Ras El Ein / Serekaniye and in no way does PEL nor PAX have the capacity to ensure that the data collection process will lead to the return of properties and assets to participants interviewed. This has to be clearly communicated with interviewed participants. The introduction meetings organized prior to the interview with each participant will aim to manage expectations of participants and clarify the importance of the documentation process as a first step in possibly engaging in legal action in the future. It will be stressed during the introduction meetings that at this current stage, no legal action will be undertaken.

- **Ensuring security of researchers and data**

Due to the highly sensitive nature of the context and the topic researched, it will be essential to ensure that appropriate steps are taken to ensure the security of researchers, participants and the data. No immediate security threats were identified for the researchers and the participants in North-East Syria who are currently living in areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration. However, a safe and neutral space has been identified as PEL offices to conduct the interviews, unless participants request to conduct the interview in their homes. It is however of utmost importance to safely store the data collected and ensure security of participants in the use of their data. A dedicated safe online space has been secured by PEL, by making an agreement with the Formera company to digitally store the data. No data will be kept on computers in PEL offices in North-East Syria. Each participant will be requested to sign a consent form to specify whether they authorize the use of their names, documents, pictures, etc.

- **Impact of COVID-19 crisis**

The COVID-19 crisis might impact the data collection process. While face-to-face interviews is the data collection method seen to be the most appropriate, basic safety measures will be taken during meetings and interviews: masks and hygienic gel will be provided to participants and interview team, and social distancing rules will be applied considering that only a limited number of people will be allowed to attend the interview depending on the interview location and room space. Lockdowns have been applied by authorities in North-East Syria and might prevent the occurrence of face-to-face interviews. In this case, when possible, online interviews will be organized. PEL will use their Zoom account to conduct the online interviews. As an

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alternative, the Whatsapp application may be used as it is the most widely used communication app by community members in North-East Syria, however it may be judged insecure. When needed, an assessment of what online tool can be used will be made.

- **Organizing learning as part of the data collection process**

Since this is the first experience of the project team in documenting HLP rights violations, it is necessary to ensure and integrate learning in the course of implementation of the mapping process. As part of the capacity building provided to the team members, support and review sessions facilitated by Syrians for Truth and Justice have been planned in the course of the process. Twice during the data collection timeframe, the project team members will gather with STJ to share challenges and obstacles faced during the documentation process. This will allow for needed reflection and review of the methodology, and will allow for modifying the design if needed and adapting interview techniques in order to ensure sound data collection throughout the process.

At the end of the data collection process, it will be important to organize a lessons learned session in order to review the process, the quality of data collected and the methodology used. This will allow for identifying where improvements and changes are needed for the conduct of future community mapping processes. These lessons learned will be shared as part of the policy brief to be issued by the end of the data collection process.

- **Relationship with local authorities in North-East Syria**

It is expected that local authorities in North-East Syria represented by the Autonomous Administration (AA) will welcome and be supportive of the project since it will document rights violations that occurred in a city that was under the control of the AA until the offensive launched in October 2019. A meeting with representatives of the AA will be set up before the launch of the data collection process in order to inform them about the project and its purpose, and needed approvals to conduct the mapping are expected to be obtained quickly.

The project team has however been reflecting on the need to continue building relationships with the AA on the topic of HLP rights as some opportunities exist for conducting awareness-raising of the AA. HLP rights violations were witnessed in the district of Afrin, which was previously under the control of the AA until Turkey and Turkish armed groups launched an offensive in January 2018. Lessons should have been learned from that experience in regards to the need to ensure appropriate documentation of HLP rights of community members and safe storage and digitalization of existing property documents. When another offensive was launched in 2019 on the cities of Tel Abyad and Ras El Ein / Serekaniye, documents were lost and destroyed.

- **Visualization of mapping findings**

It was initially planned to use the STDM program (Social Tenure Domain Model) in order to help store collected data and enable visualization of findings through digital maps. However, following several discussions with HLP experts working with the GLTN and GIZ, advice was received that STDM is a program that may be too complex to utilize in our setting. The STDM software is a specialized software that helps to establish tenure relationships by linking a land parcel to a person or a group of people through attaching supporting evidence. In most cases, the software is used to secure tenure and provides certificates of occupancy. Those certificates, in some cases, can be registered with local authorities and are then considered certificates of ownership giving specific rights to a person for a specific period of time.

In the context of this project, the purpose is not to produce tenure certificates but rather outline violations of HLP rights that have occurred. The visualization of the mapping conducted can be done in more simple ways and the use of STDM was therefore judged too complicated considering the limited means and timeframe. PAX and PEL will investigate further to find another appropriate means to produce digital visualizations of the mapping at the time of the data analysis. PAX has remote sensing expertise including possible access to satellite images, relevant colleagues will be approached to understand how their expertise could be put to use. Google maps is a tool that could also prove useful to produce simple maps.

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## About the program

Violations of Housing, Land and Property rights committed across Syria represent a serious obstacle to peace and justice. PAX and partners are committed to ensure that HLP rights are addressed by policy-makers and put at the center of negotiations for a political settlement.

This pilot project, financially support by KMF, seeks to foster a bottom-up process to engage forcibly displaced communities from the city of Ras El Ein / Serekaniye in securing their HLP rights by mapping ownership of lost properties.

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