

A photograph of a man in a brown leather jacket holding a young child in a yellow and grey jacket. They are looking out of a window at a damaged, multi-story building in a war-torn area. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an overcast day or a shaded interior.

INTO THE UNKNOWN: LISTENING TO SYRIA'S DISPLACED IN THE SEARCH FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS

“

We live in the unknown and
head towards the unknown

Internally displaced man in northeast Syria

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Cover photo:

Hussein*, a 38-year-old tailor originally from the suburbs of Aleppo, faced multiple displacements with his family. After the conflict erupted, he was forced to stay in a besieged village in rural Aleppo, with no income and harsh living conditions. After a while, Hussein decided to make the dangerous trip to Lebanon in the hope of building a better life for his family there, while his family remained in Syria. Hussein worked for several months on a construction site in Lebanon, while Hussein's wife and five children moved to rural Damascus, where Hussein eventually joined them. Hussein is now running a tailoring shop. Holding his youngest daughter Mariam, he hopes his children will be able to receive a good education so they can get a chance at a better life. Rural Damascus, January 2020. Photo: Rafel Al-Yasseri/DRC

***All names in this report have been changed to protect identity.**

None of the quotes in the report are related to the people in the pictures.

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Alghad Charity

Amals Healing and Advocacy Center

Ataa Humanitarian Relief Association

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INTRODUCTION

Over 12 million women, men and children have been forcibly displaced from their homes in Syria since 2011, fleeing conflict which has engulfed the country for the past nine years. Over 6 million are displaced internally, 5 million are registered as refugees in neighbouring countries and over a million more have fled to Europe or elsewhere. The majority of these people have no viable prospect for a durable solution – safe return and reintegration, local integration or resettlement – to end their displacement in the near future. Only a small proportion of the overall refugee population in the region have returned to Syria or have accessed resettlement in third countries.¹ The Syrian conflict is now in its tenth year with over 2 million new displacements in the last year. Many internally displaced people (IDPs) in Syria as well as Syrian refugees and Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS) feel that they are stuck in limbo with conditions around them worsening. This situation is currently exacerbated by the impacts of COVID-19 and the spiralling economic decline in Syria and much of the region. At the same time, the factors which led them to flee in the first place – conflict and risk of persecution – remain.

The Brussels IV Conference at the end of June 2020 is a key opportunity for states, donors, international organisations and civil society actors to commit to a holistic approach to durable solutions. This approach must recognise that all three durable solutions for people displaced in and from Syria are relevant; acknowledge and seek to mitigate the current difficulties in pursuing them and, most importantly, be guided by the views and wishes of the displaced people themselves.

This report, based on interviews and focus group discussions with displaced women, men and adolescents, seeks to draw on their views and voices regarding the factors required to rebuild their lives and society in a safe, dignified and sustainable manner.

International attention is currently focused on return as a ‘preferred solution’ to displacement. While this research, alongside UN-led quantitative intentions surveys of refugees and internally displaced people, continues to show a desire among many (but by no means all) to return to their areas of origin one day, few see this as a viable option any time soon.² The sheer scale and the protracted nature of the displacement in and from Syria means that there is no single route to ending displacement. The pursuit of these different options by Syrians should be actively and simultaneously supported.

Qualitative interviews conducted by twelve Syrian and international NGOs for this report in April and May 2020 demonstrate the impossibility for IDPs and refugees alike of making definite, informed decisions on return, resettlement/relocation or local integration, when none of the options appear feasible to most and uncertainty overwhelmingly pervades their future. An overemphasis on return without acknowledgement of the need to create options for other durable solutions risks forcing people into making decisions that they do not want or to continue life in stasis simply because they believe there are no other options.

BRUSSELS CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS’ ROLE IN THE SEARCH FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS

This report addresses recommendations to participants of the Brussels IV Conference, however, it acknowledges that working alone, these actors do not hold the keys to ending displacement inside Syria. The primary responsibility for the changes required to unlock solutions in Syria lies with the government of Syria as well as other actors in control of territory and governance structures. Political will is a prerequisite for durable solutions, both inside and outside the country. Dedicated and coordinated efforts over the long term are required to align interventions across the political, human rights, humanitarian, development and peacebuilding spheres if displaced people are to realise their rights and achieve sustainable reintegration or integration into society. This will inevitably be a long-term and complex process that can only be achieved through a multi-stakeholder approach to influencing necessary policy changes and providing appropriate support to people seeking to end their displacement.

1 See: UNHCR. 2020. Syria Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions

2 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme. December 2019. IDPs: Past, Present & Future Intentions, and United Nations High Commission for Refugees. March 2019. 5th Regional Survey on Refugee Perceptions & Intentions <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/68443>

Responsibility-sharing among states will be key, both in relation to providing a lifeline through resettlement to individuals and families likely never to be able to return to their homes, as well as funding for the response inside Syria and for refugees. Humanitarian needs are on the rise at an alarming rate in Syria and Lebanon, with the prices for basic goods soaring due to their respective currencies losing value. At a time when donor countries' budget planning is in flux, given the unprecedented impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic on the world economy, it is a difficult time to discuss long-term development support for Syria and the countries that are hosting massive numbers of refugees in the region. Yet, with no sign of a political solution to the Syria conflict, countries in the region will continue to hold the responsibility to host millions of people still seeking their protection for years to come.

Without substantial international donor support, the fallout appears stark: refugees and vulnerable host communities will be the victims of rising poverty and tensions in the region as economies falter. Development cooperation focused on supporting the inclusion and self-reliance of refugees alongside their hosts, fostering protection and social cohesion is essential to help protect the massive investment made by donor governments to meet the needs of refugees over the last 9 years. The world jeopardises the Sustainable Development Goals³ if it does not adequately support people affected by conflict and displacement.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BRUSSELS IV CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

Participatory durable solutions planning:

- Brussels Conference participants should support a dialogue track based on community consultation inclusive of the displaced, women, youth and persons with disabilities, designed to support the development of a joined up 'programme of action' on durable solutions to guide practitioners' interventions and advocacy of decision-makers across the peace-building, humanitarian, human rights and development spheres in Syria.

Solutions in Syria:

- Donor governments should sustain adequate funding to all pillars of the Humanitarian Response Plan and consolidate a collective approach across all donors to directly engage with relevant technical line ministries and sponsoring entities in Syria to support the negotiation of access for principled humanitarian and recovery interventions, including a central role for community engagement, conflict sensitivity and inclusion criteria to ensure a 'do no harm' approach.
- In preparing for engagement on future reconstruction, alongside the broader efforts required to pursue a more peaceful, fair, accountable and just future for the country, most notably through a negotiated political settlement, donor governments should start work on the development of a robust human rights due diligence policy for future reconstruction interventions (including a monitoring framework with specific indicators related to human rights standards), in close cooperation with Syrian civil society actors. Over time they should seek to influence participatory localised reconstruction planning processes inclusive of women, young people, returnees and the displaced.

Long-term hosting and solutions outside Syria:

- Resettlement states should set targets over five years for a substantial uplift in resettlement pledges and access to complementary pathways, based on a strengthened analysis of which refugees are likely to have an enduring well-founded fear of persecution in Syria, whilst maintaining the resettlement lifeline to those who meet traditional criteria, including families with complex medical needs and survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) and torture.
- All governments that are hosting refugees and asylum seekers must uphold *non-refoulement*, end deportations to Syria and explicitly limit any coercive measures which incentivise return - such as setting targets and quotas for return, restricting legal residency in the location of

3 Sustainable Development Goals: 1- No Poverty; 2 – Zero Hunger; 3- Good Health; 4 – Quality Education; 5 – Gender Equality; 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation; 17 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions; 18 –Partnership.

displacement, or shrinking the protection space (including by carrying out evictions or other measures specifically targeting refugees), or limiting access to services. Temporary protection schemes should be renewed or refugee status should be granted.

- All host governments must uphold the basic rights of refugees and asylum seekers, including to healthcare and education, while seeking to improve their ability to contribute to society including through legal and decent employment, focusing on greater inclusion of refugees within national strategies and policy frameworks.
- Donor governments should ensure multi-year, predictable and flexible humanitarian and development aid for refugee and host communities, through dedicated mechanisms. This should ensure access to humanitarian assistance and basic services in the medium-term for the growing proportion of vulnerable people, enable the necessary investments in livelihoods generation and include funding to human rights and peacebuilding initiatives addressing issues facing refugees and host communities.

What is a durable solution to displacement?

A durable solution is reached when a displaced person no longer has any protection or assistance needs related to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement. There are three internationally recognised durable solutions for IDPs and refugees: voluntary return to country/area of origin in safety and dignity, resettlement in a third location or country and local integration in the places of displacement. Each solution should result in a person's sustainable reintegration or integration into society. The search for durable solutions is acknowledged to be a long and complex process that addresses human rights, humanitarian, development, reconstruction and peace-building challenges, requiring timely and coordinated engagement of different actors.⁴

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES FOR THIS REPORT

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 63 individuals (32 women, 31 men) in April and May 2020, including:

- IDPs in south (Daraa governorate), northeast (Al Hol camp, Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hassakeh governorates) and northwest (Idlib and Aleppo governorates) Syria
- Syrian refugees and Palestine Refugees from Syria in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Greece, Sweden and the United States
- Returnees (former IDPs and refugees) to rural Damascus, Homs, Raqqa and southern Syria.

A qualitative methodology was selected in order to explore some of the nuances of decision-making, supplement the existing quantitative studies by UNHCR, HNAP, and others and to avoid overloading a larger numbers of interviewees while families were struggling to grapple with the implications of COVID-19. It should be noted that the timing of interviews during the global pandemic will likely have influenced respondents' answers. A total of 12 Syrian and international NGOs conducted interviews as part of this process, ensuring an appropriate spread of age (18-years-old and above) and gender across locations, incorporating persons with disabilities. In addition, analysis of the priorities of adolescents and children is based on unpublished data from Save the Children, consisting of focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews with 168 refugee children within the region during 2019. Further analysis of gendered concerns of women refugees relating to voluntary return is drawn from unpublished research by Women Now for Development, conducted in November 2019.

In addition, NGOs collaborated to conduct a desk review of available literature containing the views and perspectives of displaced people related to the future, including research studies, such as reports by DSP, academic articles, unpublished NGO programme data and Syrian civil society statements. These sources have been drawn on alongside the qualitative interviews to underpin the recommendations in this report.

4 See Brookings Institute and University of Bern. April 2009. Framework: Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons. Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Durable Solutions. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/iasc_framework_on_durable_solutions_for_idps_april_2010.pdf, and UNHCR. 1989. Conclusions adopted by the Executive Committee on the International Protection of Refugees. No. 56 (XL)56 (XL)56 (XL)56 (XL)56 <https://www.unhcr.org/en-my/578371524.pdf>

1. DISPLACED PEOPLE AND RETURNEES' REFLECTIONS ON PREFERENCES AND AVAILABLE CHOICES

"A return to Syria is impossible, but staying in Jordan in the long-term is also impossible. This frustrates us very much - we just want to live."

Male refugee in Jordan

1.1 IDPS AND REFUGEES

Uncertainty about the future was consistently raised by IDPs and refugees who were interviewed for this report. Return to Syria and moving abroad beyond the immediate region were the primary future preferences identified by refugees, with two thirds of the refugee respondents split equally between these options. A smaller number of refugees, one quarter of the sample, indicated their intention to stay in their current location in the long term. IDPs, on the other hand, overwhelmingly indicated their intention to return to areas of origin, but only when specific conditions have been met. They commonly cited both 'political change' and 'the end of the conflict' as required conditions. IDP intention to return may be influenced by considerations about the viability of leaving Syria given border closures, restrictive entry and asylum regulations and further movement restrictions related to COVID-19, as a number of those interviewed showed a high level of awareness about the challenges of moving to Europe or other Western countries.

Clear preferences, limited options

The interviews showed a clear discrepancy between people's preferred plans for the future and the options they considered available to them in the next 5 to 10 years. While the preference to return or move abroad if certain conditions were met were made clear, almost no one considered these to be realistic options in the medium-term.

As a result, the only option both IDPs and refugees widely considered available to them in the next 5 to 10 years was to stay where they are. Refugees noted that this option still presents challenges and concerns, as they require the legal ability and political will of the state to remain in that country. They are aware that a decision to stay is not exclusively theirs to make.

Refugees and IDPs also responded differently when they were asked whether they had a clear preference for the future or if they were unsure about their preferred future plans; approximately two thirds of refugees reported having a clear preference on what they would want to do if it were possible, compared to half of the IDPs interviewed. These findings are in line with findings from UNHCR and HNAP data on intentions.

"It is impossible for us to return. A few weeks ago, one of the villagers went very close to our village in order just to remember the place and take some photos, but she was hit by a sniper and killed immediately."

Male IDP in northwest Syria

"In general, life here is not easy or comfortable. If conditions improve, I intend to return to Syria, but only with guarantees that none of my family or me will be exposed to danger, provided that the current government does not exist and stability and safety are available."

Male refugee in Jordan



Syrian refugees living in Lebanon's Bekaa valley grapple with dwindling resources to meet their basic needs, including food and rent. Photo: Joshua Berson, 2018

Precarious conditions and uncertainty take a toll

Precarious displacement conditions exacerbate the challenges of planning and deter some from making longer-term decisions. One refugee woman, who is the sole head of household in Lebanon, said “Every now and then we get evicted as a result of failing to pay the rent. That’s why it’s not clear yet where we might end up.”

Many of those who were interviewed cited their inability to tell what will happen in the future in the geographical areas to which they would prefer to go to – including areas that currently seem relatively stable. A female IDP in northwest Syria said “Our entire future depends on political changes”.

The emotional toll of being caught in limbo in displacement also came through clearly in multiple interviews. This was also highlighted by numerous children and caregivers in interviews with Save the Children. A male IDP in northwest Syria said “The problem is the psychological pain that we have. My mother cannot stop crying when we mention our village. We not only left our home, lands and belongings behind, but we also left our loved ones buried and we cannot visit them.”

Many of the interviewed IDPs and refugees are weighing up multiple factors in their thinking about the future. A female refugee in Jordan said “Our parents tell us to come back but they have no gas and are using donkeys, like in old times. We could manage despite this, but two things are impossible to live with: the lack of safety, like the kidnapping of children and women, and the expensive prices for food, gas, and everything we need”.

No hope of return, challenges elsewhere

A few of the interviewed refugees indicated that they held no hope for returning to Syria and saw alternative plans as necessary in the long term. A female refugee in Jordan said “We will never return to Syria. This is not an option for us. We will not improve the lives of our children and there we can do nothing for them. Also, it will be insecure. We are waiting to be able to immigrate; it will be wonderful if we can travel. But, in the worst case scenario, we’ll live here. This is not bad for us: for me, Jordan is safe and Jordanians mostly have the same traditions and values. The main issue here is only jobs.”

A small number of Syrian refugees living beyond the immediate region were included in the sample. Syrians in Greece and the United States highlighted some concerns for the future, linked to their prospects of gaining full refugee status. Others in Sweden and Greece shared a desire to move on to other locations for education, language or cultural reasons. Another two individuals intended to stay where they currently are, in order to provide some stability for their children.

1.2 RETURNEES: PUSH AND PULL FACTORS WEIGHED

Returnees highlighted a number of push and pull factors that led to their return. A male returnee in rural Damascus said “After experiencing the negative aspects of displacement, the high costs, and the alienation one feels as a result, you realise that the best place to be is the home in which you were born”. For most returnees who were interviewed, there was not one standalone reason which drove them to return, but rather decision-making was based on weighing the hardships experienced in displacement against the situation in their areas of origin, particularly with regards to security, availability of services and jobs, as well as a longing for a feeling of connectedness to home.

“The encouragement of our neighbours convinced us to return - they told us that there was security here and that humanitarian organisations were providing aid to the residents of Raqqa.”

Female returnee in Raqqa

Several IDP and refugee returnees referred to economic reasons as well as hostility from host communities as push factors from their place of displacement. Numerous interviewees described focusing on a ‘least bad option’ in their decision making. A male returnee in rural Damascus said “When I came back, the situation of the house was miserable, but I had to accept it. Even though the living conditions are bad, it is way better than Lebanon.” Whereas a male refugee in Jordan stated “Staying in Jordan, compared to returning to Syria, is the lesser of two evils.”

The improved security situation in areas of origin was confirmed as an essential factor for return. However, several returnees pointed to concerns that they may be forced to flee again. A male returnee in Aleppo said “The security situation in Aleppo is still concerning and I’m worried that something might happen and then I would be displaced again, and I will regret my decision to return in such a scenario.”

“We feel safe in our house and among our families, but always fear the unknown, we don’t know how long this calmness would last particularly with this extreme poverty.”

Female returnee, southern Syria

A number of IDP and refugee returnees were optimistic for their future, based on employment prospects in their geographic areas and a sense of community. Various returnees remarked “I am optimistic that there will be projects in the city and there will be more work opportunities.” “Arbin is a good place; it is being rebuilt and there is a carpenter, workshops, and many job opportunities.” “I am comfortable here, and if people return here, it will return to its former glory; people in this neighbourhood are kind.”

1.3 GENDERED AND YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

The preferences expressed by men and women were similar, with the exception of more women respondents preferring ‘staying where they are’, whilst men were more inclined towards relocating within Syria or abroad. The vast majority of respondents indicated a preference to keep at least their immediate family together in the near future. Nonetheless, several men and women referred to the need in some cases to purposely divide families, either as part of a planned return movement or if they were to seek asylum in a third country. A younger female refugee in Lebanon said “If we decide to return to Syria, we might stay in different places for a while, until the overall situation improves. My husband may go to Syria while I stay in Lebanon with my daughter, or vice versa. If there is any possibility of resettling to Europe, then we will all travel together.”

Recent interviews with women refugees and Syrian feminist activists by Women Now For Development highlights multiple factors hindering voluntary return of Syrian women refugees.⁵ These include:

- fear of arrests and conscription of male family members or themselves
- lack of access to family property
- threat of gender-based violence
- absence of laws to protect and empower them
- lack of basic services and livelihood opportunities
- lack of a meaningful political process as a primary barrier, which could provide credible guarantees for safety, security and human rights protection



Areesha Camp in northeast Syria repeatedly floods in winter and was partially destroyed in 2019. This makes the living conditions even harder for families who have already had to flee conflict multiple times. Photo: Soulнар/IRC

Examples were cited of family members that had returned and been arbitrarily detained simply for their family name or place of origin. Widespread risk of GBV and impunity inside Syria was also cited, with concerns raised that the Syrian authorities have drastically limited the number of organisations authorised to provide legal aid including to assist or advise survivors of such violence. The research also highlights how women and girls face specific gendered challenges in their legal status; both as refugees and as returnees. Refugee women are less likely to possess legal residency in Lebanon or have Syrian identity cards or passports. This lack of legal documentation puts them at heightened risk of extortion and sexual harassment.

Adolescent Syrian refugees overwhelmingly prioritised three topics when asked about their long-term priorities in unpublished qualitative interviews conducted by Save the Children; feeling safe, being part of a community and 'belonging', and having access to a quality education as a pathway towards future opportunities. Freedom from violence, criminality and other risks to personal safety were typically brought up as a key decision-making factor when thinking about immediate choices for the future and the potential of returning to Syria. Although both girls and boys proactively brought up severely distressing memories from the time before fleeing Syria, their current fears and concerns primarily relate to high risks of criminality, social tensions, lack of rule of law and GBV inside the country.

While some adolescents mentioned a desire to return in order to reunite with their families and be where they feel at 'at home,' others were concerned about not being able to assimilate back into the culture and societal norms inside Syria. This was raised by adolescent girls in particular, who perceived the host countries in the region to offer them more opportunities due to perceived

5 Women Now for Development. November 2019. Unpublished report: "VOLUNTARY" RETURN: Between International Law and the Experiences of Syrian Refugee Women in Lebanon.

stronger rights for women and more liberal cultural norms. On the other hand, many adolescents spoke about experiences of discrimination in host countries that have had a negative impact on their sense of self and ability to socialise, or even attend school.

What changes did interviewees identify as required to enable their preferred solution?

Return to areas of origin: increased safety and security upon return, with introduction of guarantees for those who fled, availability of jobs and services to meet basic needs, removing the mandatory military conscription, 'change in government', 'political transition' or 'system change', and changes in the governance of local areas.

Relocating abroad: increased availability of legal, safe and affordable routes to move, or increased possibilities for being considered for resettlement.

Remaining in host countries (for refugees): improvements to access legal documents and ability to remain legally in the country, greater opportunities to earn sufficient income to meet basic needs and lead a dignified life.

Syrian civil society perspective on safe, voluntary and dignified returns to Syria:

In a paper on returns to Syria issued ahead of the Brussels IV conference,⁶ 70 Syrian NGOs (many of whom are co-authors of this report) underlined their perspective that a comprehensive political solution is necessary to overcome the enormous challenges that hinder a safe and conducive environment for repatriation to Syria. The paper reflects that the nature of the current spontaneous returns to Syria "to be grounded in hopelessness and vulnerability, and thus they cannot be described as "voluntary", "dignified", or "safe". Dire conditions inside Syria coupled with extreme "push factors" in host countries lead us to believe that the overwhelming majority of returnees to Syria thus far did not do so voluntarily, but rather they were forced to take the return decision based on their difficult circumstances. Syrian refugees living in neighboring countries often experience legal, economic, and social marginalization, and at times active discrimination, in their places of residence. Return decisions that were taken to escape such conditions cannot be considered voluntary or dignified. Furthermore, the overall situation in Syria remains highly unconducive for the safe and dignified return of displaced Syrians.'

6 Syrian civil society written submission to the consultation ahead of the Brussels IV Conference on the future of Syria and the region. <https://janawatan.org/blog/syrian-civil-society/>

2. SOLUTIONS INSIDE SYRIA: IMPROVING CONDITIONS IN AREAS OF RETURN, RELOCATION AND SETTLEMENT

“Return is not the journey back. The journey is the easy part.”

Female refugee in Jordan

In the absence of a comprehensive political solution underpinning an inclusive, people-centred peace process and meaningful and accountable security and justice reforms, durable solutions to displacement remain a distant prospect for many. However, half a million IDPs and refugees have already made a physical journey back to their areas of origin in Syria in the last year.⁷ COVID-19 restrictions aside, which have seen borders closed and restrictions on movement in Syria, some more people are likely to return or relocate this year including due to increasing economic hardship functioning as a push factor in Lebanon⁸ and the pull factor of improved perceptions of security in parts of northwest Syria. It is important, though, not to conflate the physical movements themselves with the successful realisation of a durable solution. For displacement to end inside Syria and for refugees to return to the country, conditions need to be made conducive for the sustainable reintegration of displaced people in the areas to which they return or choose to locally integrate or relocate to. Any increase in pressure on refugees and IDPs to prematurely return or relocate carries a significant risk of creating ‘unsafe returns’, compounding suffering, precipitating cyclical displacement and discouraging others from returning.

Over nine years into the conflict, there are no easy answers to ending displacement in Syria; political will is a prerequisite. The primary responsibility lies with the Syrian state authorities in order to bring about the changes required in Syria to enable people to realise their rights and live dignified lives. In the parts of the northwest and northeast of the country that the government does not control, the responsibilities lie with other actors that are in control of territory and the respective governance structures. Affected people often remain far from the negotiating table in situations where the future of Syria is discussed. Local-level initiatives between power-holders have sometimes included explicit discussions on the return of displaced populations; but deals reached thus far are widely distrusted by civilians, with significant evidence that the rights of people in these areas have not been respected.⁹ Four of the displaced women interviewed for this report were displaced as a result of local reconciliation deals in Eastern Ghouta, Aleppo, Darayya, and Quneitra.

“I stayed during the siege of Darayya but was then displaced towards northern Syria by the green buses in 2016, due to the reconciliation agreement. I stayed two months in the camp then entered via smuggling to Turkey. We worry that Syria could be considered safe at any moment [by governments], but it is still not so. We’re worried about cancelling the temporary protection and forcing us to return, even though the conflict is not over.”

Female refugee in Turkey

A multitude of state and non-state actors continue to be involved in active conflict or offering support to warring parties, as well as many others engaged in the humanitarian response. This complex landscape reinforces the need for multi-stakeholder cooperation to end displacement,

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- 7 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme. May 2019 – May 2020 Mobility Data. It should be noted that this data refers to individuals who have remained in their area of return for one month and therefore does not take into account onward displacement after this time.
- 8 Lebanon NGO Forum. June 2020. Taking on the Triple Crisis: Civil society perspectives on supporting Lebanon in its response to the concurrent Syria, economic and health crises.
- 9 See for example: COAR. October 2019. Intermediaries of Return. <https://coar-global.org/2019/10/07/intermediaries-of-return/> This report notes that facilitated returns, often after reconciliation agreements, do not necessarily guarantee that return movements will be safe, dignified, voluntary, and sustainable, using Dara’a Governorate as an example. See also: Syria Direct. July 2019. A year after ‘reconciliation’: arrests and disappearances abound in southern Syria. Research report. <https://syriadirect.org/news/a-year-after-%E2%80%9Creconciliation%E2%80%9D-arrests-and-disappearances-abound-in-southern-syria/>

incorporating action across the political, peace-building, human rights, humanitarian and development spheres. This is a long-term endeavour and goes well beyond the scope of any single existing process inside Syria or beyond its borders, but links elements of the agendas of the Geneva and Brussels conference processes. Refugee hosting countries and the international donor community also have a crucial role to play with regards to solutions inside Syria, through addressing push factors, maintaining a commitment to non-refoulement and providing dignified conditions in displacement that will help prepare people to eventually realise solutions. The voices of Syria's displaced need to be at the centre of all these efforts.

“My message to all those who have power in Syria is to end the war so that everyone can return to their homes. Ten years of war is enough and people are exhausted. Generations of Syrian children have been destroyed after being out of school for years”.

Female IDP in northeast Syria

Based on interviewees' testimony, this section of the report explores key barriers and required changes relating to physical safety and access to justice, as well as meeting basic needs, access to services and housing, land and property rights. Finally, it asserts a key role for international actors in supporting a rights-based approach to recovery and reconstruction in Syria, necessary to support durable solutions in the long-term.

How do you assess whether progress towards durable solutions is being made?

Authoritative international frameworks exist to guide the assessment of solutions in Syria.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Framework on Durable Solutions for IDPs identifies a number of criteria that determine to what extent a durable solution has been achieved: long-term safety, security and freedom of movement, enjoyment of an adequate standard of living including access to basic services, access to livelihoods, mechanisms to restore housing, land and property (HLP), access to personal and other documentation without discrimination, family reunification participation in public affairs, access to effective remedies and justice.

UNHCR's Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy applies internationally-accepted standards to the context in Syria to develop a set of protection thresholds by which to assess whether conditions in Syria are conducive for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees.¹⁰

Currently no systematic, joined-up monitoring of durable solutions criteria¹¹ or protection thresholds in Syria exists, due primarily to significant constraints on humanitarian access. This is in itself a telling indication of engrained barriers to solutions.¹²

10 UNHCR. February 2018. Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Returns to Syria. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63223>

11 This should be supported through the durable solutions coordination architecture in the humanitarian response. A civil society-led project to collate evidence against durable solutions indicators in Syria across multiple stakeholders will begin in June 2020, convened by the Durable Solutions Platform. This project will draw on the approach of the Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (REDSS) in East & Horn of Africa. <https://regionaldss.org/>

12 World Bank. 2019. The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic & Social Analysis. This report notes that “although UNHCR keeps a record of registered refugees who returned to Syria, access constraints and the spontaneous nature of returns make it impossible to systematically trace these returnees; it is not known if they returned to their original place or whether they were arrested, killed, or became displaced again.”



A young man walks down a street in Eastern Ghouta, where most of the neighbourhood is in ruins. Photo: Karl Schembri/NRC

2.1 PHYSICAL SAFETY AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

“Before returning, the risk of immediate detention was the most important issue for us, then to be sure that the place we will be living is free from landmines and remnants of war, as we’ve heard about many cases of people losing their lives or limbs.”

Female returnee in Homs, western Syria

Many of the IDPs and refugees interviewed for this report will not voluntarily return to areas of origin or make long-term decisions regarding relocation until they have greater confidence that they would be safe if they did so. This relates not only to the absence of active conflict but also the removal of explicit or implicit threats from the government, militias and other groups. Frequently raised fears, beyond active fighting, include arbitrary arrest by security forces, forced conscription, kidnapping by armed groups and the risk from unexploded ordnance.

While interviews with displaced people and returnees identify trends, what constitutes ‘safety’ is highly dependent on individual circumstances and is also localised depending on the situation in the village, town or city of origin. For example, in accessing essential services at neighbourhood level, a danger is presented by armed and influential groups in control of specific areas and managing the risk from unexploded ordnance. The localised security clearance required for a range of processes including accessing civil documentation, housing, land and property rights, registering children at school and moving around the country¹³ can act as barriers to return to areas of origin. In addition, collective identity factors such as gender, age, civil status, political affiliation, religious or ethnic background, previous participation in armed conflict are also key factors that people take into account relating to their own experiences and the risks they may incur.

“If the government took our husbands for military service and returned them to us in good shape, then we would return to Syria. But the reality is that we will not know where they are stationed or how long they have to serve for. We will also not be able to have any contact with them. My sister’s husband is in hiding in Syria because he is wanted for military service.”

Female refugee in Jordan

13 NRC, Save the Children et al. 2018. Dangerous Ground: Syria’s refugees face an uncertain future. https://drc.ngo/media/4260971/dangerous-ground_email_single_pages.pdf

“I cannot return right now because of the tribal sponsorship requirement [for people living in camps to leave] and the fact that my husband will be wanted for conscription.”

Female IDP in northeast Syria

People’s ability to realise their rights and co-exist peacefully in Syria – in whichever areas they choose – will require a combination of guarantees and safeguards from the relevant governing authorities including in the form of legislative change, strengthening the rule of law, security reform, redress to those who have suffered losses and improved infrastructure and equitable access to services. With thousands of people registered as ‘missing’ during the conflict, many families will need their right to the truth fulfilled to be able to re-build their lives.¹⁴ For some interviewees, accountability for the injustice they have individually or collectively experienced¹⁵ is essential in ensuring that the past will not be repeated.

“To go back to my hometown, we would need to have international agreements that can guarantee the safety of the people and the area as well”

Male IDP in northeast Syria

“Syria is not safe to return, returnees face discrimination and are subject to human rights violations. The most important thing for many returnees are Syrian laws which give the Government of Syria absolute, undisputed and unceasing authority and full impunity from accountability”.

Syrian refugee in Germany

Guarantees of non-repetition ‘on paper’ are not trusted. Displaced Syrians point to examples of refugees being arrested and detained on return to Syria despite amnesties for military deserters or local reconciliation agreements. In order for measures such as these to be trusted, they must be implemented throughout the Syrian territory in a consistent manner and visibly born out through the lived experiences of Syrian people, both individuals that did not leave the country as well as those returning or relocating. When asked what was required from international actors to support the search for solutions in Syria, a number of interviewees for this research pointed clearly to the international oversight needed to underpin guarantees if they are to be upheld:

“We need international organisations to supervise the real application of agreements between the Syrian government and the returnees.”

Female refugee in Lebanon

“Right after the border crossing opened, people were keener to return to Syria. Now, very few are thinking about it in [Azraq refugee] camp, because of the bad news that came from those people who have returned - and those from who we never hear again.”

Male refugee in Jordan

2.2 MEETING BASIC NEEDS, ACCESSING SERVICES AND HOUSING, LAND AND PROPERTY (HLP) RIGHTS

“I wish my children could return to university and school so that they don’t lose their future. I try to show I am optimistic because I want to avoid people around me feeling stressed and pessimistic. Despite this, I am anxious because of the lack of stability.”

Male IDP in northwest Syria

“We thought that with the [fighting] ending in our city, life will return to what it once was, but in reality we haven’t seen any changes in services and livelihoods and prices are still high. What is needed? To generate employment opportunities for young people and to start the reconstruction and compensation for the families who lost their homes.”

Male returnee in Homs

14 International Committee of the Red Cross. 2019. Untold Numbers of People are Missing or Detained. <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/update/2013/09-30-syria-missing.htm>

15 This concept is explored significantly in interviews with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon in the following report: Carnegie Middle East Centre. 2018. Unheard Voices: What Syrians Need to Return Home. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/04/16/unheard-voices-what-syrian-refugees-need-to-return-home-pub-76050>

The need to be able to sustain livelihoods, access services and rebuild homes and neighbourhoods were frequently identified by displaced Syrians and returnees alike in interviews as essential for enabling future solutions.

Almost all the interviewed returnees cited struggling to meet basic needs, the high cost of living and how this is being exacerbated by fluctuations in the value of the Syrian Pound and the COVID-19 measures limiting people's ability to work. A female returnee in Raqqa said *"I feel really concerned if the current expensive prices continue, especially for food items. We started borrowing money from the grocery store in our neighbourhood in order to subsist"*. Another female returnee in rural Damascus added *"I feel anxious about providing the food we eat"*.

A number of those interviewed underscored that accessing electricity is a significant problem and that basic services are inadequate to meet their needs, although several of those living in Raqqa and rural Damascus stated that there had been some improvements since they returned. Some returnees reported that either they or a family member have disabilities, which ranged from spinal injuries to blindness to partial paralysis. Three of these interviewees reported being unable to access current health services in their location, and two mentioned hoping to move to Europe in order to access better healthcare.

Interviewees in southern Syria partly attributed harsh living conditions to delays in the restoration of services as well as a reduction in aid available from humanitarian organisations- specifically pointing to the fact that many humanitarian organisations can no longer operate there, with one claiming that *"the Syrian government only allows its affiliated organisations to operate"*. NGOs note that since the change in territorial control and discontinuation of cross-border assistance to the south, organisations operating from the Damascus hub have been unable to maintain the same scale of previous operations, while the re-escalation in localised violence has caused further access constraints. Many people have also lost their livelihoods.

Refugees are acutely aware of the challenges that are presented to people inside Syria. One unpublished study by an NGO based on focus group discussions in Azraq camp in Jordan found that respondents in every group raised the issue of inflation, increased prices, and lack of supplies inside Syria as barriers to their return. Another unpublished study based on the views of Palestine Refugees from Syria found that more than 70% of respondents stated that their property in Syria had been destroyed, damaged or rendered uninhabitable. Some areas have seen systematic demolition of homes, preventing people from returning, such as in Qaboun. Interviews of refugee women by Women Now For Development found that none had land or property registered in their names. Without title deeds, women are also unable to benefit from the 'Home Repair Loans' in theory offered by Syrian banks. Most participants in Women Now's research also highlighted that their homes had either been destroyed or seized by government-linked powerholders.

2.3 RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO RECOVERY AND RECONSTRUCTION

"My biggest wish is that the schools were open as before, that all children can return to school, and that everyone's dreams come true. I would like to become an English teacher but I don't think that will be possible because of our tragic situation."

13-year-old female IDP in northeast Syria

The rehabilitation of vital services, including water systems, hospitals and schools, regeneration of local economic development and eventual reconstruction of Syria's war-torn infrastructure, establishment of good governance and the rule of law will be essential to the country's recovery and reconstruction.

There are currently many challenges facing recovery programming within the wider humanitarian response in Syria. Community participation in the identification of needs and the design of projects is crucial to delivering an effective and relevant response, and should include all segments of the community, ensuring people differently affected by displacement are given the necessary space.

Operational actors involved in the delivery of humanitarian assistance, recovery and development programming in Syria (such as the rehabilitation of hospitals, schools, water infrastructure and the development of livelihoods projects) require greater support from the donor community to engage in access negotiations with government ministries and sponsoring entities in Syria, including the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, to improve the prospects for the delivery of assistance. It is of course essential that any cooperation does not enable the government to use aid for military or political purposes. Recovery and rehabilitation activities under Pillar III of the Humanitarian Response Plan, which must be conflict sensitive, are currently hugely underfunded and require greater donor support. States and intergovernmental organisations should also ensure that humanitarian exemptions to sanctions regimes are made available in an effective, timely and coordinated manner to INGOs seeking to respond to needs across Syria.

Looking ahead to reconstruction

While the primary responsibility to rebuild civilian infrastructure and re-establish adequate service provision and effective governance in Syria lies squarely with the state authorities as well as other actors involved in the conflict, there is a clear role for donor governments and inter-governmental organisations to play to support Syrians' equitable access to services to meet their basic needs. Reconstruction projects that are not conducted in an equitable way and serve to deny certain people's rights and further alienate marginalised communities, for example in areas previously held by armed opposition groups, could act as a source of prolonged or future conflict. Since the beginning of the conflict, land has, at times, been used as a means to consolidate the forced displacement of populations. Land has been confiscated by different parties to the conflict, occupied by private individuals and grabbed opportunistically for financial gain.¹⁶

International engagement to prepare for long-term reconstruction processes in Syria should aim to complement broader efforts required to pursue a more peaceful, fair, accountable and just future for the country, most notably through a negotiated political settlement. States should begin work on putting in place a robust human rights due diligence policy on which basis any financial support for reconstruction would be dependent, in the pursuit of an enabling environment to secure widespread rights protections. The meeting of human rights standards, against an agreed framework, should underpin decisions regarding future assistance packages including to ensure that funding does not contribute to securing political capital for individuals or entities committing human rights abuses. Pushing for a system of governance reforms that seek to mitigate corruption and other facets of the engrained war economy will be essential to ensuring an equitable, rights-based approach to reconstruction. An inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people (United Nations Resolution 2254) and addresses the root causes of the violence, will be the key to unlocking the viability of such an approach.

Participatory reconstruction planning processes inclusive of women, young people, persons with disabilities and the displaced will be an important component of underpinning an equitable approach to reconstruction in the future. Women have been historically under-represented in planning processes in Syria and their ability to claim their rights (e.g. inheriting land or property) is often compromised by social norms and customs.¹⁷

16 M. Clutterbuck. 2018. Property Restitution in Post-Conflict Syria. Forced Migration Review. <https://www.fmreview.org/syria2018/clutterbuck>

17 Syrian women's property rights are recognised in a variety of legal sources, including the Constitution and the Civil Code. However, as in many other countries in the Middle East, women's ability to effectively realise their rights tends to be strongly linked to family laws (in particular those related to marriage, divorce and inheritance), which determine who has control over assets, who has the ability to make economic decisions in their own name, and who can own, administer, transfer or inherit property. See various reports by Norwegian Refugee Council.

Recommendations: Solutions in Syria

- Brussels Conference participants should re-iterate their commitment to the protection thresholds as outlined in UNHCR's Comprehensive Protection Solutions Strategy as the cornerstone of international policy on refugee return to Syria, by which to assess whether conditions in Syria are conducive for the safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return of refugees.
- Under the leadership of the UN, humanitarian, human rights, peacebuilding and development actors should seek to systematise learning and analysis of conditions in areas of destination in Syria. This should be based on international human rights standards and UNHCR's protection thresholds, in order to inform targeted operational interventions and advocacy towards authorities in Syria.
- Donor governments should sustain adequate funding to all pillars of the Humanitarian Response Plan and consolidate a collective approach across all donors to directly engage with relevant technical line ministries and sponsoring entities in Syria to support the negotiation of access for principled humanitarian and recovery interventions including a central role for community engagement, conflict sensitivity and inclusion criteria to ensure a do no harm approach.
- In preparing for future reconstruction, alongside the broader efforts required to pursue a more peaceful, fair, accountable and just future for the country, most notably through a negotiated political settlement, donor governments should start work on the development of a robust human rights due diligence policy for future reconstruction interventions (including a monitoring framework with specific indicators related to human rights standards), in close cooperation with Syrian civil society actors. Over time they should seek to influence participatory localised reconstruction planning processes inclusive of women, young people, returnees and the displaced.



In a camp for displaced people in the northern Idlib countryside, services are scarce making it difficult to adopt necessary hygiene measures to protect from the risk of coronavirus. Photo: Abdullah Hammam/IRC

3. STRENGTHENING FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS OUTSIDE SYRIA

As it is inside Syria, doors remain overwhelmingly closed to durable solutions outside the country for the majority of refugees from Syria at this time. Resettlement and complementary pathways, which were already an option for all too few until this year, have largely stalled given global restrictions on movement with no guarantee of when programmes can resume. The rhetoric from some government and non-governmental actors in Lebanon (including political parties and public figures) and Turkey creates an uncertain environment for refugees, with many feeling pushed to return or worried about their ability to stay in their country of asylum. Some host countries, including European states providing temporary protection to asylum seekers, are already signalling an intention to hasten their return to so-called 'safe' governorates, despite the unpredictable and volatile personal security threats and lack of national safeguards in the country.¹⁸

However, this return, if it is to be sustainable and safe, is a distant prospect and for many the conditions they are living in are worsening. In addition, many refugees will never be able to return, maintaining a well-founded fear of persecution. Others have built lives in countries of asylum and contribute to the societies that host them.¹⁹

3.1 DESPERATE CONDITIONS HINDER PLANNING FOR SOLUTIONS

"In short, when they cut us off from cash assistance we stopped breathing."

Female refugee in Lebanon

In recent years, refugee households' vulnerability has increased, with lack of income limiting autonomous choices. Two-thirds of Syrian refugee households in Jordan, and nine out of ten Syrian refugee households in Lebanon report of being in debt.²⁰ A rapid assessment conducted in late March 2020 in Jordan revealed that 9% of Jordanian and 6% of Syrian surveyed households had savings, with the majority of which expected to last for less than one month.²¹ Some refugees have mentioned debt as an obstacle to return to Syria, as they are unable to pay back creditors. Refugees interviewed for this report in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan pointed to cash assistance as the primary form of support they require, underlining the economic hardships experienced in hosting countries, with one female respondent in Lebanon highlighting that this "will help to pay the bills, rentals fees and schools fees". Hunger is on the rise among Syrian refugees in Lebanon: according to UNHCR protection monitoring in March-April 2020, 78% of Syrian refugees reported difficulties buying food due to lack of money, making adults more likely to restrict consumption so children can eat.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already caused a serious global economic downturn with short-term economic impact likely to translate into reductions in long-term growth for low- and middle-income countries, means that many of these needs are at further risk of not being met.²²

18 See for example Washington Post. December 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/12/18/denmark-denied-refugees-asylum-by-arguing-its-safe-them-go-home-syria/#comments-wrapper>

19 See for example 11.11.11. December 2019. Durable Solutions for Syrian Refugees in Turkey. <https://www.11.be/en/home/item/durable>

20 UNICEF, UNHCR and WFP. 2020. Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon 2019. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/73118>, A. Tiltner, H. Zhang, J. Pedersen. 2019. The living conditions of Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Results from the 2017-2018 survey of Syrian refugees inside and outside camps. Fafo Foundation. <https://www.fafo.no/index.php/zoo-publikasjoner/fafo-rapporter/item/the-living-conditions-of-syrian-refugees-in-jordan>

21 Danish Refugee Council. March 2020. Rapid Basic Needs Phone Survey. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Rapid%20Basic%20Needs%20Phone%20Survey%2C%20DRC%20March%202020.pdf>

22 D. Evans and M. Over. 2020. 'The Economic Impact of COVID-19 in Low- and Middle-Income Countries'. Center for Global Development. https://www.cgdev.org/blog/economic-impact-covid-19-low-and-middle-income-countries?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=cgd_weekly

“Being insured [working formally] has both positive and negative sides. When I am insured, I will benefit from private hospitals’ discounts and my employer will have to pay me compensation when I leave my work. The harm of getting insurance is that I will stop receiving the financial assistance I currently get from the Turkish Red Crescent [ESSN].”

Male refugee in Turkey

In Jordan and Lebanon, research by the DSP demonstrates that Syrian refugees and vulnerable host communities experience similar structural challenges.²³ For example, host communities and refugees both grapple with pervasive structural issues including poor work conditions, limited availability of jobs, poor transportation infrastructure and concerns around quality of education. However, refugees often face amplified vulnerabilities due to their status. Restrictions on open jobs or sectors in Jordan and Lebanon, the ability to access work opportunities outside of the areas where refugees originally registered in Turkey or the lack of legal residency altogether in Lebanon, contribute to increased difficulties across the different contexts in refugees’ ability to meet their needs and pursue opportunities. The bottom line is that even when refugees have all their papers in order, they often remain afraid to access government sectors and institutions, which can reduce their ability to seek protection, justice, and essential services. Critically, refugees who stay informally face even greater challenges to meet their needs and access services.

“Living in this location, I cannot move freely outside my area for I do not have papers, and this is my ultimate concern when it comes to safety issues.”

Male refugee in Lebanon

3.2 BUILDING LIVES IN HOST COUNTRIES IN THE REGION

Some refugees have built full new lives in exile, contributing to the society around them through work, community and family life, and say they would struggle to adjust to a place that they do not feel they belong to or have a connection to anymore, with their homes and everything they used to own now destroyed or lost. Some families have spent eight years in camps, depending on humanitarian assistance, and would struggle to assimilate in current conditions in Syria. Over a million children of Syrian refugees and PRS born in exile have never set foot in Syria, and many of those who grew up in asylum express that they feel significantly different from their peers inside Syria.²⁴

“I don’t have any desire to return to Syria under the current circumstances because I am required for military service. At present, if our conditions improve here in Jordan and we are allowed to stay here for a longer period, I would prefer to stay because we adapted to life here. Even if the conditions remain as they are now, I don’t have any other choices at the present time.”

Younger male refugee in Jordan

In research conducted in Turkey by the DSP and IGAM Research Centre on Asylum and Migration,²⁵ most Syrian respondents voiced hope for remaining in Turkey in the foreseeable future, with Syrian employees with work permits and business owners expressing the most positive views about staying in Turkey. Some Syrian respondents hoped to one day become Turkish citizens, and viewed formal employment as well as higher education as pathways to achieving that goal. Syrians who had formalised employment status were better able to express long-term plans, in contrast to those who were working informally or who were unemployed. The data suggests that economic integration provides Syrian refugees with an outlook for the future, which in turn helps them become productive members of society.

23 Durable Solutions Platform and Program on Forced Migration and Health, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. January 2020. “In My Own Hands”: A Medium-Term Approach towards Self-Reliance and Resilience of Syrian refugees and Host Communities in Jordan. <http://dsp-syria.org/my-own-hands> and Durable Solutions Platform and Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. February 2020. ‘Addressing Protracted Displacement in Lebanon: A Medium-Term Outlook for Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Host Communities.’ <https://www.dsp-syria.org/addressing-protracted-displacement-lebanon>

24 Save the Children. June 2020. Psychosocial safety: Pathways to psychosocial safety for Syria’s displaced children and adolescents: policy brief.

25 Durable Solutions Platform and IGAM Research Centre on Asylum and Migration. 2019. Syrian Refugees’ Economic Participation in Turkey. https://www.dsp-syria.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Working%20towards%20Self-Reliance_English.pdf



Working in a shoe-shop to provide for his family in Turkey, Usman* fled Syria after shelling destroyed their home. Sasha Nicholl/ Save the Children

“In Syria, I used to have a shop, a car and a house. I lost everything in the war. In Turkey, I started from scratch. I set up a mechanical repair shop, which is doing well, but because I cannot get a driving license as a Syrian, I cannot improve my business. My two youngest sons go to school in Turkey and do not write Arabic. How could I take them back to Syria? They feel more Turkish than Syrian.”

Male refugee in Turkey

Research by the DSP and IMPACT Initiatives in 2019 in the Kurdish Region of Iraq found that 37% of assessed Syrian refugee households wish to integrate locally and become part of the community in the long term.²⁶ Meanwhile, another 2019 research study by the Middle East Research Institute (MERI) found that the overall majority of refugees interviewed in camps in the Erbil Governorate preferred resettlement to third countries because local integration in KRI was identified as restricted by the lack of legal regulation, lack of employment, cost of living and political instability, while voluntary return was not viable.²⁷

3.3 CONTRIBUTING TO REFUGEES’ SELF-RELIANCE AT A CRUCIAL TIME

At a time when many peoples’ income streams have shrunk – if not entirely disappeared – by the impact of measures put in place to limit the outbreak of COVID-19, it is critical to intervene in order to maintain gains made so far in improving displaced populations’ access to livelihoods and to support sustainable livelihoods in the immediate and medium-term. For example, over the medium-term, strengthening the resilience of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) run by and employing displaced people, decent work interventions and equal access to jobs all present important strategies to support households and economies to overcome the economic shock.²⁸ The

26 Durable Solutions Platform, IMPACT Initiatives, Norwegian Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee and Danish Refugee Council. January 2019. Far From Home: Future Prospects for Syrian Refugees in Iraq. <https://dsp-syria.org/far-home-future-prospects-syrian-refugees-iraq>

27 Abdullah Yassen. 2019. Durable Solutions for Syrian Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. <http://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Durable-Solutions-for-Syrian-Refugees-in-the-Kurdistan-Region-of-Iraq.pdf>

28 See for example: DSP, DRC, IRC, Mercy Corps, NRC, Save the Children. May 2020. What Next for Livelihoods Programmes in Lebanon? Responding During Economic Crisis and COVID-19. <https://www.dsp-syria.org/what-next-livelihoods-programmes-lebanon>

current challenging context also presents an opportunity to expand displaced people's access to labour markets and expanding sectors with growth potential, such as the agro-food and renewable energy sectors. This could translate into generating new jobs, contributing to tax revenue and increasing consumer spending. Expanding social safety nets, including for those with no means to work, remains crucial.

“They teach a person how to fish...then they throw him in the desert...taught how to fish in the desert!”

Male refugee in Jordan

In some contexts, the role of area-based approaches and integrated service delivery mechanisms for displaced and host communities can help to create a conducive environment fostering displaced people's self-reliance in a manner that promotes resilience and social cohesion with host communities. For example, research conducted in Jordan demonstrates that integrated schools are crucial to improving positive education outcomes.²⁹ Prioritising this approach practically means strengthening data collection and coordination mechanisms to capture accurate data on school capacity, enrollment and attendance, which can help distribute children more evenly across schools. It also means investing in school and transportation infrastructure not least to accommodate the demographic growth in Jordan.

3.4 RESPONSIBILITY-SHARING THROUGH RESETTLEMENT AND LONG-TERM FUNDING SUPPORT

Active responsibility sharing among states to support medium-term hosting of refugees and the pursuit of solutions outside Syria continues to be key. Discussions on supporting solutions for those who cannot return to Syria need to begin with a substantial increase in resettlement and access to complementary pathways such as humanitarian admissions or migration schemes. Since 2014, only 176,561 refugees from Syria – just 3% of the overall refugee population – have been able to access resettlement submissions, with the numbers decreasing in recent years.³⁰ In 2019, fewer than 0.5% of Syrian refugees had their cases submitted for resettlement. Resettlement remains a powerful mechanism for resolving the acute protection needs of vulnerable persons and families and for providing a durable solution to their displacement. Resettlement remains a lifeline for vulnerable refugees requiring long-term specialised services and those with difficulty surviving in their current host context in the region, including those with complex health needs, survivors of torture and GBV.³¹

Drawing on positive examples of economic and social integration in countries such as Canada and Germany, governments outside the region should set realistic resettlement quotas for the next 5-10 years in order to offer certainty to individuals requiring this lifeline. Governments and operational actors should expand their focus within resettlement schemes on individuals with limited prospects for return due to their personal situation, while also seeking to support individuals fulfilling traditional resettlement criteria (including those with complex medical needs, survivors of torture and GBV and women and children at risk).

Moreover, the concept and practice of responsibility sharing has enormous purchase in Jordan and the rest of the region. It lies at the core of the Jordan Compact, which frames Jordan's decision to host large numbers of refugees as an international good that the international community is obliged to support, with the aim of providing refugees the means and conditions to exercise the right to education and legal employment. The reality is that the majority of refugees will still need many years before leaving their current hosting countries and, inevitably, some refugees will require long-term protection and the international obligation of states remains.

29 Durable Solutions Platform and Program on Forced Migration and Health, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. January 2020.

30 UNHCR. April 2020. Syria Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions

31 Durable Solutions Platform, Danish Refugee Council and International Rescue Committee. April 2020. The Strategic Use of Resettlement. <https://www.dsp-syria.org/strategic-use-resettlement-lessons-syria-context>

In the spirit of responsibility-sharing, sustainable, flexible and collaborative financing models to address medium- and long-term needs, along with host countries' development priorities remain critical over the coming years. The current space for dialogue between host governments and donors, including international financial institutions (IFIs), on development funding and concessional financing³² in the wake of COVID-19, should include a consistent focus on support for system-strengthening, rebuilding livelihoods and delivery of quality services accessible for all vulnerable people in host countries in the long-term, including refugees. This, together with the implementation of required policy and practice reforms by host countries to ensure the inclusion in social and economic life and protection of refugees, including appropriate legal status, can chart a viable path ahead.

If previous investments are to be capitalised on, accountability for meaningful outcomes should be integrated into interventions and policy frameworks, to emphasise metrics that capture the quality and conditions of services and vulnerable populations' situation, beyond numerical targets. For example, in Jordan the focus on the number of issued work permits for Syrian refugees needs to sit alongside action to expand work permits to more sectors, mitigate protection risks and decent work deficits experienced by both Syrian refugees and Jordanians alike, as well as the socio-political dynamics and vested interests that drive the informal sector.³³



Following the devastating winter storms in Lebanon last year, Syrian refugees prepare 1,500 meals for 300 families evacuated from their homes. Photo: Racha El Daoui/NRC

32 See Global Concessional Financing Facility, <https://globalcff.org/>.

33 Durable Solutions Platform and Program on Forced Migration and Health, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. January 2020.

Recommendations: solutions outside Syria

- Resettlement states should set targets over five years for a substantial increase in resettlement pledges and access to complementary pathways, based on a strengthened analysis of which refugees will have an enduring well-founded fear of persecution in Syria, while maintaining the resettlement lifeline to those who meet traditional criteria, including families with complex medical needs and survivors of GBV and torture.
- All governments hosting refugees and asylum seekers should uphold *non-refoulement*, end deportations to Syria and explicitly limit any coercive measures which incentivise return - such as setting targets and quotas for return, restricting legal residency in the location of displacement, or shrinking the protection space (including by carrying out evictions or other measures specifically targeting refugees), or limiting access to services. Temporary protection schemes should be renewed or refugee status granted.
- All host governments must uphold the basic rights of refugees and asylum seekers, including to healthcare and education, while seeking to improve their ability to contribute to society including through legal and decent employment, focusing on greater inclusion of refugees within national strategies and policy frameworks.
- Donor governments should ensure multi-year, predictable and flexible humanitarian and development aid for refugee- and host communities, through dedicated mechanisms. This should ensure access to humanitarian assistance and basic services in the medium-term for the growing proportion of vulnerable people, enable the necessary investments in livelihoods generation and include funding to human rights and peacebuilding initiatives addressing issues facing refugees and host communities. In line with aid effectiveness principles, efforts to ensure transparent monitoring and reporting of funding and implementation outcomes as well as mutual accountability among international partners and host governments should be strengthened.
- Operational actors should prioritise integrated programming and area-based approaches to foster better linkages between sectors, including education and social assistance, as well as self-reliance and sustainable livelihoods options in host countries. An integrated approach and cross-sectoral collaboration are needed to effectively address complex issues within the long-term displacement response.

4. PARTICIPATION OF DISPLACED PEOPLE IN PLANNING FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS

The need to ensure the effective inclusion of displaced people in the search for solutions is a thread that must run throughout the efforts of states and operational agencies.

4.1 INFORMED DECISION MAKING AND PREPAREDNESS

Informed decision-making about the future at the individual and family level is central to the pursuit of durable solutions. Displaced people rely primarily on family and friends for information about areas of return or relocation. However, interviewees in this and other studies continue to point to a lack of reliable and/or impartial sources regarding the security and protection situation inside Syria, given that security risks, government restrictions and fast-moving developments often hinder the sharing of accurate information. For those refugees and IDPs wanting to move abroad, the majority said they need information about legal processes, the availability of scholarships or other travel permits/schemes, and about the living conditions in Europe or other locations they intended to move to. Several interviewees with disabilities or chronic health conditions identified their preferred option as moving abroad (usually to Europe) to seek treatment in the short term and said they required information about how to do this.

“I made the decision to come here under pressure. The important factor to decide where to go is safety. There is not enough information on safety.”

Male IDP from Daraa, in northwest Syria

“The encouragement of our neighbours convinced us to return - they told us that there was security here and that humanitarian organisations were providing aid to the residents of Raqqa.”

Female returnee in Raqqa

Supporting decision-making by refugees relating to voluntary return to Syria should be underpinned by legal preparedness for return, meaning that they are aware of their rights, obligations and entitlements, as well as the relevant exit and re-entry procedures, and have the necessary support and documentation to be able to claim their rights.³⁴ IDPs should be able to make a voluntary decision on the durable solution they would like to pursue, based on adequate information and ability to fully participate in the planning and management of their solutions.

4.2 INCLUSIVE APPROACHES TO SUPPORTING PEOPLE IN DISPLACEMENT

Strengthening the inclusion of displaced people in national and local systems, strategies, and policy frameworks during displacement is also crucial. Governments and even operational actors often fail to appropriately communicate and consult displacement-affected communities on policies and developments aimed at realising their rights in displacement. Localised approaches to provide services to both refugees and host communities can play a role in ensuring that interventions are better tailored to their needs. For example, research demonstrates that the integrated approach of Social Development Centres (SDCs) in Lebanon is popular with Syrian refugees. Syrian refugees, and increasingly Lebanese citizens, reported that access to health services, such as dental care,

34 M. Clutterbuck, L. Cunial, P. Barsanti and T. Gewis. October 2019. Legal preparedness for return to Syria. Forced Migration Review. Issue 62. <https://www.fmreview.org/return/clutterbuck-cunial-barsanti-gewis>

paediatrics and gynaecology at SDCs were particularly useful. Through their provision of basic healthcare services, SDCs can provide complementary protection services, including on psychosocial support activities, safe spaces for women and case management.³⁵ Supporting the capacity of national and local civil society organisations with strong relationships in communities to implement responsive interventions based on participatory design will also help to increase the sustainability of the response.

“As a woman I was liberated from many restrictions in displacement especially concerning work, though not many suitable jobs were available... Despite hardships, women have gained their own identity.”

Female returnee, Raqqa

Critically, the economic empowerment and social inclusion of women must remain a cornerstone of responses created to support increased self-reliance. As more women have entered the labour market in Syria and host countries as a result of conflict and displacement,³⁶ their often-newfound freedoms are sometimes marred by regret over having to undertake undignified work. Displaced women inside Syria report feeling empowered as they discover their potential through ensuring their family and their own survival as well as feeling unwilling to go back to conservative norms, whilst feeling extremely stretched as both breadwinner and primary caregiver of children.³⁷ Refugee women similarly report feeling happy about the opportunities to work and earn incomes, which has increased their self-confidence and feelings of self-worth, despite the intense pressure resulting from these new roles.³⁸ As more displaced women are entering the labour market, GBV risks, lack of decent work standards, and the burden of domestic and caretaking chores should be urgently addressed.



Many Syrian refugees have settled in East Amman neighborhoods in Jordan to find affordable housing and have access to humanitarian assistance. Photo: Mais Salman/DRC

35 UNICEF. 2017. Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices of the Lebanese; Syrian and Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon <https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/reports/knowledge-attitude-and-practices-lebanese-syrian-and-palestine-refugees-lebanon-2017>

36 See for example: C. Cornish. January 2019. Shortage of men sees more Syrian women enter workforce. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/14b8708c-1eeb-11e9-b2f7-97e4dbd3580d>

37 CARE. 2020. Understanding resilience: Perspectives from Syrians. https://www.care-international.org/files/files/CARE_Understanding_Resilience_Perspectives_from_Syrians_2020.pdf

38 CARE. 2020. Syrian Refugee Women's Roles. https://www.care-international.org/files/files/Syrian_Refugee_Women_Roles_25_02_2020.pdf. See also: Durable Solutions Platform and IGAM Asylum and Migration Research Centre. March 2019. Working towards Self-Reliance: Syrian refugees' economic participation in Turkey: Syrian refugees' economic participation in Turkey. <https://www.dsp-syria.org/working-towards-self-reliance-syrian-refugees-economic-participation-turkey>

4.3 ESTABLISHING LONG TERM PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES TO SUPPORT SOLUTIONS

Coordination structures designed to support durable solutions planning within the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis - through information and analysis exchange to inform appropriate interventions – require urgent attention to make them more inclusive of Syrian civil society actors.

Beyond the humanitarian response, international actors should seek to support a dedicated dialogue track on durable solutions in Syria that prioritises the early engagement of IDPs, refugees and resident communities in areas of displacement, destination and settlement to identify what is required to support solutions over the next ten years. The process should inform a ‘programme for action’ by actors across the political, humanitarian, development and peace-building spheres, to develop appropriate and joined-up interventions contributing to common outcomes. Such a process should seek to draw learning from existing bottom-up approaches that support peace-building and community cohesion involving Syrian civil society actors and community representatives - for example neighbourhood committees, women’s and youth groups. Through consolidating a set of women’s, men’s, and youth priorities related to durable solutions, as well as learning related to successful localised approaches, such a dialogue process could contribute to identifying the foundations for future discussions between citizens, duty bearers and international actors. This potentially includes linking community-identified priorities into local recovery and development planning as well as informing dialogue between Syrian and international actors at future Geneva and Brussels conference track events. The process should draw on the IASC Framework for Durable Solutions for IDPs and the protection thresholds set out in UNHCR’s Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy, against which developments in policy and practice could be tracked for discussion.



Hundreds of thousands of children have been displaced from their homes as a result of the conflict and humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib. Photo: Abdullah Hammam/IRC

Recommendations: Participation of displaced people in planning for solutions

- Brussels Conference participants should support a dialogue track based on community consultation inclusive of the displaced, women, youth and persons with disabilities, designed to support the development of a joined up 'programme of action' on durable solutions to guide practitioners' interventions and advocacy of decision-makers across the peace-building, humanitarian, human rights and development spheres in Syria.
- Operational actors should invest in joined-up systems (across geographical locations and sectors) to better communicate with IDPs and refugees regarding their choices and share information regarding conditions, rights and processes to enable informed decision-making about the future. Such communication should be tied to support to access civil documentation and appropriate service provision both in areas of displacement and destination; for example, GBV protection and other specialist services to refugee women at risk of being forced to return by relatives.
- Donors, host governments and operational actors should work to include the perspectives of displaced people and analysis of their needs in recovery and development planning, identifying required policy change to contribute to the inclusion and self-reliance of crisis-affected people within national systems and to better enable them to pursue their preferred solutions.
- Donors should accelerate aid localisation efforts and commitments, including adequate support for overhead costs to cover national civil society organisations' safety, health insurance, severance pay and other risk management priorities.





