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THE MISSING LINK

THE CENTRALITY OF PROTECTION IN
EARLY RECOVERY IN SYRIA

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DISCLAIMER

The Missing Link policy paper was developed collaboratively by three International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs)—the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Oxfam, and INTERSOS—over the period from March to October 2024, before the collapse of the former Syrian government on December 8, 2024.

Although significant changes have occurred in Syria's governance, many of the protection threats highlighted in this paper remain rooted in structural issues, such as the need for policy and legal reforms, insufficient funding, and the limited capacity of public services and the aid response. This paper was finalized by DRC, Oxfam, and INTERSOS in November 2024, and subsequently updated and revised to reflect the change of context before its planned dissemination. The revisions were limited to changing select present-tense statements to past tense and replacing references to the "government" with "former government", as well as introducing essential changes in the context. However, the core content and recommendations of the paper remain unchanged, including those addressed to national authorities. It is essential to highlight that the paper's development was informed by evidence gathered within the operational and regulatory scope permitted by the former government at the time. As such, the protection risks addressed in the paper are risks identified by the programs of the three signatory organizations, with emphasis on those relevant to the early recovery landscape at the time of writing. While these risks are significant, they do not cover the full spectrum of protection risks across areas previously under GoS control.

This paper is intended to serve as a resource for the current caretaker government,¹ the transitional government and future Syrian government, as well as the donors, the United Nations (UN) agencies and international and local NGOs. It calls upon new governing authorities, donors, legislators and humanitarian actors to implement key modifications to facilitate and support the protection and recovery of Syrian communities.

¹Following the fall of the Syrian President, Bashar Al-Assad and of its government, Ahmed Hussein Al-Sharaa, the HTS leader, appointed Mohammad Al-Bashir as Prime Minister on December 9, 2024, and tasked him to form a caretaker government until 1 March 2025.

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All photographs used in this report are the property of DRC/Oxfam/INTERSOS and were taken and used with the informed consent of all individuals depicted.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the crisis began in March 2011, Syria has been ravaged by conflict - both international and internal - further exacerbated by the February 2023 earthquakes, the ongoing climate crisis, a continuously declining economy, and various other regional stressors. Poverty continues to rise, with the potential for further shocks and stressors in the coming years.² Meanwhile, the complex political and security landscape could increase pressure from neighbouring countries for Syrian refugees to return, even when the conditions are not yet conducive to a safe and voluntary return,³ as recently seen in Lebanon, where rising violence has led to a new wave of people fleeing the country, including Lebanese and Syrian families. Alongside heightened protection risks, this could further escalate social tensions in an environment already strained by resources and high numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs). In 2024, 16.7 million people require humanitarian assistance, the largest number since the onset of the crisis.⁴

The Syria crisis remains a protection crisis, representing the world's second-largest displacement emergency, with 7.2 million IDPs.⁵ Violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) have been documented across areas experiencing active fighting since 2011, and hostilities continue to be reported in parts of Syria,⁶ while the protracted socio-economic situation continues to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities that drive protection risks. The conflict in Syria has exacerbated a spectrum of protection risks, including enforced disappearance, torture and inhumane treatment, attacks on civilians and other unlawful killings, assaults on civilian objects, restrictions on humanitarian access, the presence of explosive ordnance, restrictions on freedom of movement, siege conditions, and forced displacement, among other pre-existing risks.⁷ The socio-economic crisis has exacerbated the vulnerability to protection risks such as child abuse, gender-based violence (GBV) and a deterioration of the mental health and psychological well-being of Syrians. Child protection risks are especially prevalent, with more than 6.4 million children in need of child protection services in 2024.⁸

As public infrastructure and services are on the brink of collapse, compounded by energy shortages, prolonged electricity blackouts, inefficient governance of basic services, sanctions, funding shortages, and a weakened public sector, Syrian society is grappling with severe economic hardship intertwined with existing protection risks. Poverty has reached alarming levels, with over 90 percent of the population affected.⁹ Limited income opportunities and livelihoods are pushing individuals and communities to the edge of destitution, overshadowing their hopes for stability and progress. Extreme poverty and prolonged, unaddressed trauma heighten risks of child marriage, the worst forms of child labour, and other violations against children.

The persistent exposure to protection risks, alongside other stressors, has significantly diminished Syrians' capacity to absorb, adapt, and recover from shocks—key elements of any resilience-building process. Given the risks and stressors are shaped by such a complex web of internal and external dynamics, it is essential for the caretaker government, transitional government and the future Syrian government,¹⁰ as the primary duty bearers responsible for protecting civilians, to lead efforts to reduce Syrians' exposure to these risks and stressors, with the support of donors and the larger aid community.

Syrian communities commonly report that their increased exposure to protection risks stem from their inability to meet their basic needs, including food, shelter, healthcare services, access to education for children and functioning public services, including water and electricity infrastructure. To effectively support Syrian communities, early recovery and resilience-building programmes must address the intersection of these needs with the protection risks Syrians face. A holistic response is essential for the recovery of the Syrian population.

Unfortunately, early recovery efforts in Syria are often politicized and conflated with reconstruction which donor governments link to achieving political settlement. Before December 8th, 2024, funding remained insufficient, with the peace process stalled and no political solution in sight.

² [Syrian Humanitarian Needs Overview 2024](#), UN OCHA (2024)

³ [Syria Situation - Global Focus](#), UNHCR

⁴ [Syrian Humanitarian Needs Overview 2024](#), UN OCHA (2024)

⁵ [Global Trends Report](#), UNHCR

⁶ [Syrian Arab Republic: Flash Update No. 8 - Recent Developments in Syria](#), UN OCHA (23 December 2024)

^{7/8/9} [Syrian Humanitarian Needs Overview 2024](#), UN OCHA (2024)

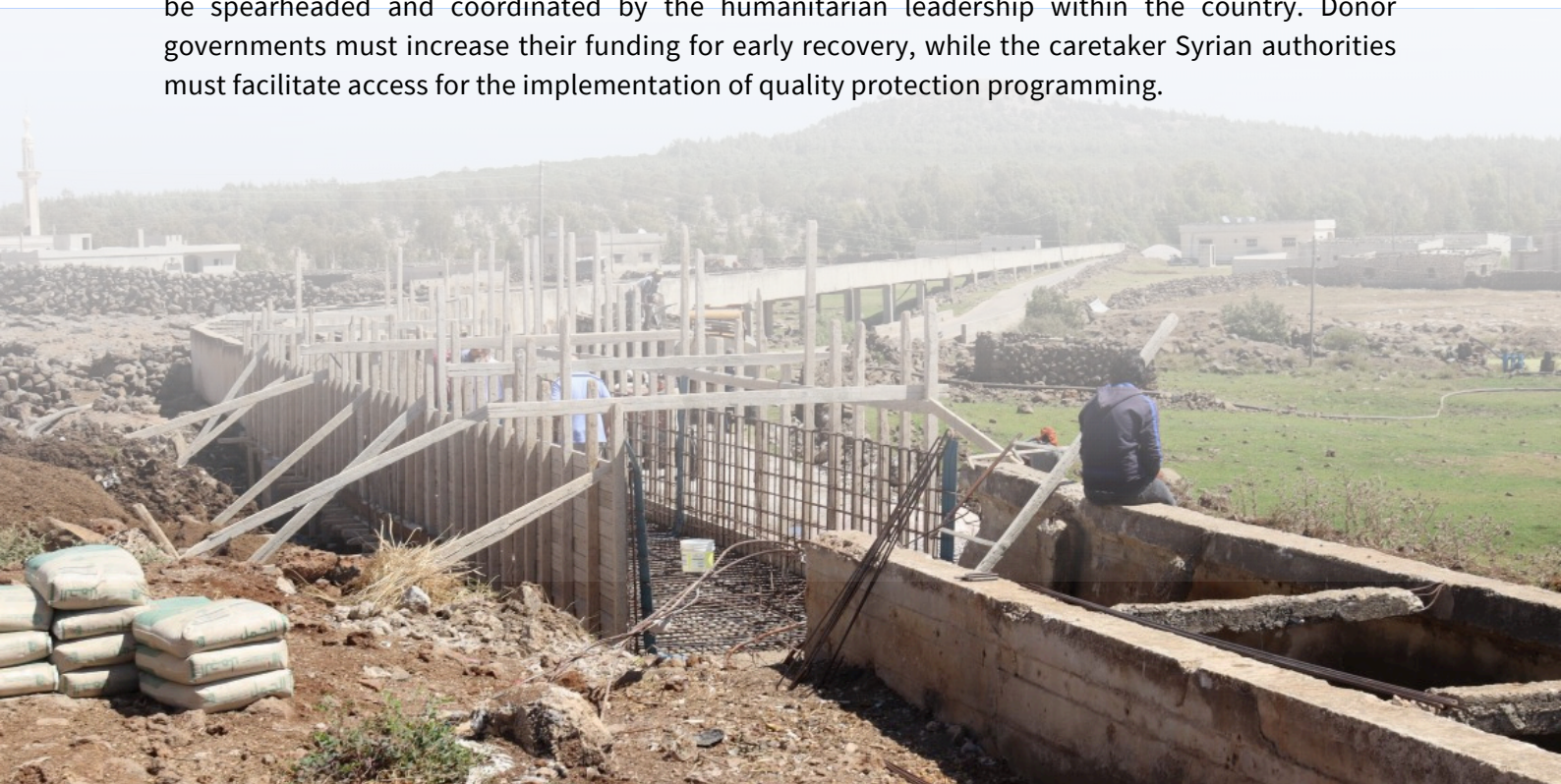
¹⁰ Language adjusted post to December 8th

Traditional donors had limited their engagement with the former state authorities until a political resolution was reached, limiting the aid provided - particularly in the areas of resilience and development. As a result, the humanitarian response remained focused on addressing basic needs, without adequately tackling critical protection threats, as needs continued to rise.

Despite these challenges, humanitarian actors in Syria have increasingly expanded their early recovery efforts, transitioning from emergency assistance to more sustainable interventions aimed at achieving long-term outcomes. Early recovery programming aims to break the cycle of aid dependency by building their resilience to adapt and recover from shocks, such as by improving public sector functionality and promoting income-generating activities. To achieve this, a shift from short-term interventions to a long-term approach is necessary, applying programming through a 'resilience' lens to foster sustainable outcomes.

Addressing protection risks is crucial for the effectiveness of early recovery programming in Syria. However, discussions on early recovery programming so far in Syria have paid limited attention to protection concerns. For example, without protecting housing, land, and property (HLP) rights, people cannot fully exercise their right to adequate housing. Without civil documentation, people will struggle to access services and exercise their rights to inheritance. If GBV continues being pervasive, women will face limited, and potentially unsafe access to the labour market, along with long-term emotional stress. If children are forced to work to access additional income for the household, they will remain vulnerable to exploitation and be denied an education.

This paper argues that protection must be at the forefront of early recovery programming for it to be sustainable, principled, and effective in strengthening the resilience of Syrian communities. This approach requires the support of the humanitarian actors to strengthen the connection between protection and early recovery and integrate it more effectively into programmes. These efforts must be spearheaded and coordinated by the humanitarian leadership within the country. Donor governments must increase their funding for early recovery, while the caretaker Syrian authorities must facilitate access for the implementation of quality protection programming.



INTRODUCTION

Communities in Syria continue to face a myriad of protection risks in their daily lives which significantly hinder their ability to recovery. Children continue to suffer from psychological distress due to the economic and environmental stressors prevalent in their daily lives, which, in some cases, coincide with instances of abuse they may face within the home, and the unaddressed trauma due to the IHL violations that they have witnessed. GBV remains prevalent, with 7.9 million women¹¹ and girls in need of GBV prevention and response services. The lack and/or loss of civil documentation as well as the lack, loss or destruction of housing, HLP documents have contributed to several protection risks experienced by IDPs. Lack and/or loss of civil documentation was reported by 50 per cent of households interviewed across Syria as captured in the Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) last updated in 2024, with a heightened risk of statelessness and loss of property.¹² Damaged infrastructure and energy shortages increase vulnerabilities to protection risks. A highly bureaucratic access system had hindered humanitarian delivery, frequently delaying vital aid. Furthermore, unilateral coercive measures further limited access to essential services that communities critically need. Addressing protection risks is essential for creating a safe and stable environment that allows individuals and communities to rebuild their lives.

Early recovery and resilience programming is not unique to or new in Syria.¹³ The Global Cluster of Early Recovery (GCER) defines it as:

— “ **Addressing recovery needs that arise during the humanitarian phase of an emergency, using humanitarian mechanisms that align with development principles. It enables people to use the benefits of humanitarian action to seize development opportunities, build resilience, and establish a sustainable process of recovery from crisis** ¹⁴

Recent developments and strategic approaches aimed at promoting early recovery and resilience-building emphasise the importance of integrating protection measures within humanitarian response plan (HRP) that introduces its third strategic objective focusing on lifesaving assistance and protection, since 2015. Since then, notable progress has been made, including a transition from an activity-based approach (e.g. rehabilitation of bakeries) to a more comprehensive response aiming to address a broad spectrum of immediate and long-term needs.

In 2016, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) adopted its Policy on Protection in any Humanitarian Action globally which defines the centrality of protection in humanitarian action around six elements.¹⁵ The third element discusses protection integration that goes beyond protection mainstreaming, and the importance for humanitarian actors to address protection issues that intersect with their formal mandates and sector specific responsibilities. By intertwining strategies that enhance the restoration of basic services and livelihood opportunities while protecting people from risks to their safety and dignity, including the ones committed by spouse, caregiver, employer, landlord and/or the wider communities, and upholding their right of redress in line with the Syria laws and regulations, the groundwork for sustainable recovery and improved protection outcomes for the distressed communities can begin to materialise.

In July 2023, the UN Secretary-General approved a United Nations Executive Committee decision emphasising the significance of early recovery and the importance of related fundraising and resource mobilisation for Syria.¹⁶ This decision reflects the growing consensus on the need for proactive and coordinated actions to promote recovery and resilience-building in the country. Recently, the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) introduced an Early Recovery Strategy (ERS), underscoring the necessity of a collective effort—aligned with the UN Secretary-General's guidance—to develop a medium-term, integrated, and multidimensional approach to early recovery and resilience as part of the humanitarian response, ultimately laying the groundwork for sustainable and inclusive recovery.¹⁷

11/12 [Syrian Humanitarian Needs Overview 2024](#), UN OCHA (2024)

13 The importance of early recovery interventions has been emphasized by the United Nations Security Council, through Resolutions [2585 \(2021\)](#), [2642 \(2022\)](#), and [2672 \(2023\)](#).

14 [The Global Cluster of Early Recovery](#), UNDP (n.d.)

15 [Protection in Humanitarian Action](#), IASC (2016)

16 [Resolution 2672 \(2023\)](#), United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (adopted 9 January 2023)

17 [Early Recovery Strategy 2024-2028](#), Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC), UN OCHA (4 November 2024)

Despite these developments, protection and early recovery have not yet been effectively incorporated into the Syria response. The question then arises as to:



How the humanitarian community can operationalise an integrated approach of protection and early recovery efforts to address diverse protection threats and build the resilience of the crisis-affected population in Syria?

This paper seeks to illustrate that the limitations or absence of effective protection response in Syria further exacerbates the challenge to achieving self-reliance and resilience outcomes in crisis-affected communities.

METHODOLOGY

While protection risks and violation of IHL have characterized the Syria conflict, this paper is primarily based on the findings and analysis of a study commissioned by DRC, Oxfam and INTERSOS in March 2024 and completed in June 2024, exploring the protection response and its gaps and intersections with early recovery programming in former government-controlled areas of Syria where DRC, Oxfam and INTERSOS operate and can draw evidence from.

14 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved in the humanitarian response in Syria, including including local NGOs, INGOs, UN agencies, former national authorities, umbrella organisations¹⁸ and donors.

These interviews took place between April 4 and June 6, 2024, both in person in Damascus and online. In addition to the interviews, a desk review of existing literature from reputable international organisations was completed, and data from DRC, Oxfam and INTERSOS programmes was also integrated. Any potential data limitations encountered are noted in the body of the paper where relevant. The data was assessed as accurate at the time of writing; however, given the dynamic context in Syria and the ongoing publication of new analyses, this information is subject to change.

18 Before December 8th, INGOs registration for operations in former government-controlled area of Syria required registration under one of the two umbrella organisations, Syria Trust for Development (ST) or the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). A limited number of INGOs were directly registered with technical line-ministries.

The protection risks discussed in this paper are drawn from the 2024 HNO, as well as insights from DRC, Oxfam, and INTERSOS based on their programme activities and interviews with key informants. This focus does not imply the absence of other protection risks, including those that may be widespread. Limitations arise from the lack of comprehensive methodology and data collection processes that align with the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) Protection Analytical Framework (PAF). Challenges such as lack of, or delayed approvals and self-censorship within communities complicate community engagement and hinder in-depth protection assessments. Consequently, the protection organisations have been unable to conduct protection-focused needs assessments, limiting the design of protection programmes and impeding efforts to address the urgent needs of vulnerable groups. The absence of consolidated data hinders thorough analysis of protection risks, limiting understanding of the current protection environment. Instead, humanitarian organisations have largely relied on secondary data, consultations with local leaders, and formal community governance structures, often excluding vulnerable groups, including women and people with disabilities. Inadequate protection analysis limits credible analysis of the threats, vulnerabilities and local response capacities essential for reducing risks and building resilience, while protection risks continue to rise.

1. PROTECTION ENVIRONMENT

A. Protection risks in Syria

The Syrian crisis is fundamentally a protection crisis, ranking among the most significant humanitarian crises globally, marked by widespread forced displacement. Across Syria, civilians have been endured violations of IHL, including disproportionate attacks in urban areas and the targeting of civilians and civilian objects such as ambulances, schools, water infrastructure, and markets. The current landscape is characterised by ongoing hostilities in some parts of Syria, cross-border and internal displacement, and an escalating regional conflict since the latest war in Gaza.¹⁹

This environment is exacerbated by:



Accumulated stress



Unresolved traumas from prolonged conflict



Humanitarian funding shortages and restrictions



Unilateral coercive measures



Local governance issues

Limited access to legal aid services also constrained abilities to claim rights.²⁰ Critical infrastructure and services are severely damaged and operate at reduced capacity due to electricity outages and local governance issues.²¹ The interviews conducted showed that a lack of infrastructure significantly increases existing protection risks and introduce new threats to the safety and dignity of the Syrian population.



It's impossible to envision a future amidst risks like conflict, and displacement. Such fears, limited job prospects, combined with almost non-existent access to basic services, leave us mentally drained. How can we plan a future when we are just trying to get through each day in sanity?

26-year-old male community participant²²

¹⁹ UN Commission warns Syrian war is intensifying amid continuing patterns of war crimes and fear of large-scale regional conflict, United Nations Human Rights Council (10 September 2024)

²⁰ Interview with humanitarian organization representative

²¹ [Recovery of Services and Infrastructure in Syria: Not If, But How?](#), UNHABITAT (July 2022)

²² Assessments, Oxfam, Aleppo (March 2024)

During daily humanitarian activities,²³ community members explained that recovery is a critical step towards rebuilding their capacity for self-protection; without access to their rights, including the right of redress that is enshrined in Syrian legal frameworks, true recovery is unattainable, and without recovery, their ability to assert and protect their rights remains compromised, creating a causation dilemma.

Although the protection risks faced by the Syrian population extend beyond those outlined in this paper, the risks highlighted here have been selected for analysis based on their potential for effective reduction through early recovery programming in Syria. On the one hand, not addressing these risks could further impede the early recovery process. Conversely, early recovery and resilience-building interventions - characterised by strategic planning, long-term solutions, support to local humanitarian leadership, and principled collaborations with the national social protection²⁴ system among other public sector actors - would be effective in tackling these threats at their root.

Psychological and emotional distress

Psychological and emotional distress hinder early recovery and resilience-building by disrupting mental well-being, impeding effective coping mechanisms, and undermining efforts to adapt and rebuild in conflict and post-conflict environments.

In most areas in Syria, where a national social protection system has been eroding, the Syrian people carry unaddressed traumas alongside the daily struggles they face. The drastic deterioration in living conditions and in the capacity of the social protection system took place in a relatively short period, exacerbating the impact of the trauma experienced by the population. Deteriorating essential social services and general insecurity have significantly compromised social bonds, divided families and communities, as well as displaced populations. This environment is compounded by traumatic experiences, such as the loss of family members and the involvement in, or witnessing of, violent acts. The accumulated stress experienced by Syrians due their unaddressed wounds from such past traumas, unemployment, and the financial incapability to meet basic needs has gradually eroded their sense of well-being²⁵ and intensified a persistent feeling of being on edge, ultimately resulting in increased levels of distress. The economic crisis has added additional pressures, leaving many families needing to share housing with extended family and/or community members (with IDP's being at a higher risk), which compromises privacy and places additional stressors upon the household, resulting, in some instances, in cases of child sexual abuse and exacerbating risks of GBV.²⁶ Prolonged power outages reawaken unaddressed traumas from either the past or active hostilities in Syria.²⁷

Not only are the mental health needs of a majority of the Syrian population unmet, but recent events have also deepened the levels of trauma experienced by individuals, further complicating their psychological well-being. As events unfolded after December 8th, the prisoners held in the various prisons run by the former government were released. The reports and accounts of the political prisoners freed indicated cases of forced disappearance, arbitrary detention, and in many cases, torture and inhumane treatment, a clear violation of IHL. Initial reports speak of nearly 15,000 Syrians tortured to death by some former government officials.²⁸

23/24 Programme Guidance: Strengthening Shock Responsive Social Protection Systems, UNICEF (2019)

25 Assessments, Oxfam, Aleppo (2023)

26 Case Management data, Intersos (2024), Assessments, Deir-Ez-Zor and Aleppo, Oxfam (2023, 2024), Referral caseload analysis, Oxfam (2023, 2024)

27 Assessments and Referral caseload analysis, Oxfam, (2023, 2024)

28 Syria: Survivors of Detention Need Urgent Support, Center for Victims of Torture (2025)

The final numbers of people subjected to torture and abuse is still to be determined. However, those that have been released from prison will need psychological support, and where possible, to re-establish their livelihoods. As indicated above, the recognition and support for the mental health needs of survivors of torture, abuse and violence experienced by Syrians across the country is critical since, if left untreated, can result in serious impairments, as well as having long-lasting, intergenerational impact.²⁹ As the caretaker and future governments navigate the transition in Syria, it is crucial to not only provide resources for addressing the mental health needs of all survivors of torture and violence but also to establish accountability mechanisms. These mechanisms are vital for reinstating a sense of justice among survivors, a key factor in achieving enduring mental health recovery and rebuilding the psychological resilience of survivors. Infrastructural issues, such as barriers to accessing a sustainable water supply for domestic and irrigation purposes, combined with instances of unauthorised water abstraction by certain community members as a coping mechanism for the limited water supply, exacerbated by misgovernance, not only limits communities' equitable access to resources, but also erodes their trust in governing systems, which has had detrimental effects on their mental, psychological and emotional well-being, as well as sense of justice.³⁰ With gaps in mental health care provision by the public sector and in humanitarian organisations' capacity to address these needs, emotional and psychological distress poses a significant risk in Syrian society.

Impediments to accessing rights

The absence, destruction, or loss of civil documentation and HLP documents³¹ poses significant challenges for more than half of the Syrian population.³² Such impediments hinder abilities to access services like:



Health



Shelter



Education



Seek redress
for violations of
rights
protected by
Syrian laws



Restoration of
rights and
protections

All are crucial components for recovery and resilience building.

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and Syria Trust for Development (ST) were the only two local organisations authorised by the former government of Syria to provide legal information and counselling on how to obtain civil documentation in Syria, while few LNGOs support legal protections for juveniles. There is a gap in the provision of legal assistance for GBV survivors or in cases of child rights violations, in the judiciary. Involvement of humanitarian actors to assist Syrians in claiming HLP rights, remained prohibited by the former government.

The presence of only two organisations authorised to support with registering vital civil documentation significantly hinders the provision of legal assistance at the scale required. The demands placed on them exceeded their current capacity. A growing unmet demand for legal aid to obtain civil documentation, has led to delays in children's education access, widowed women registering their children, and GBV survivors completing divorce registration.³³ Furthermore, displaced households were frequently denied access to humanitarian aid during emergencies, due to their inability to provide the necessary legal identity documents for registration with SARC, a prerequisite for accessing assistance during emergencies.³⁴

In Syria, people with disabilities are identified with a card issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MoSAL). To obtain this card, which also facilitates their access to humanitarian assistance that prioritizes people with disabilities, individuals must undergo tests to determine their eligibility.

29 *Syria: Survivors of Detention Need Urgent Support*, Center for Victims of Torture (2025)

30 Assessments, Oxfam (2023, 2024)

31/32 *Syrian Humanitarian Needs Overview 2024*, UN OCHA (2024)

33 Interview with humanitarian organization representative (2024)

34 Interview with humanitarian organisation representative (2024)

These tests primarily focus on medical conditions rather than the impact of medical conditions on daily functionality, contrary to recommendations from international health standards.³⁵ For instance, an individual with a lower limb amputation who uses a prosthetic limb and functions without much difficulty may be deemed eligible by the system based solely on their medical condition. However, this condition may no longer affect their daily lives, and they may not be recognized as a person with a disability according to international standards that assess actual difficulties an individual encounters in their daily activities. Reliance solely on the medical approach can limit the efficient utilization of the already-constrained resources within the national social protection system.

However, while the card gives access to the National Financial Aid Fund among other benefits,³⁶ the criteria limit it to those with severe medical issues due to limited resources within the national social protection system.³⁷ For example, a person experiencing a lot of hearing difficulty may be identified as a person with disability under international standards due to its significant impact on their daily activities and exposure to risks. However, they might not be eligible for the card if their medical condition is not classified by the social protection system as 'severe'. The two scenarios show that individuals who meet international standards, but not medical criteria, may be denied access to the card, while individuals who do not meet international standards but meet medical criteria may be included in aid programs even though their medical condition does not significantly affect their daily activities but is deemed potentially disabling from a medical perspective. With that said, MoSAL introduced a new national classification for disabilities on November 15, 2017,³⁸ following collaboration with relevant ministries, associations, and private institutions. This classification, crucial for the national disability plan's implementation, widens the eligible group, provides guidance, and standardizes training for medical committees testing the eligibility. Aligned with international disability standards, it emphasizes functional performance as a key criterion. Enforcing and monitoring this system, which again requires resources that MoSAL lacks, would improve the identification of people with disabilities and enable them to receive the card that facilitates their access to essential services. Also, the Syria national disability plan offers inclusive programs to combat discrimination and enhance access to education, healthcare, employment, fee exemptions, and reduced transportation and communication expenses.

Worst forms of child labour

Child labour is perpetuated by cycles of poverty, exploitation, and vulnerability, hindering education and access to opportunities for children engaged in labour.

Factors which contribute to engagement in child labour include extreme poverty within families, loss of livelihoods, loss of main financial breadwinner, lack of access to specialised support for children with learning difficulties leading to school drop-out, inadequate education facilities resulting from extensive damage during conflict and unwillingness by donors to rehabilitate at the scale required due to conflation with reconstruction, cultural norms (such as early marriage),³⁹ energy shortages exacerbated by Unilateral Coercive Measures (UCMs).⁴⁰ Socio-economic vulnerabilities are the primary driver of child labour in Syria, and children within.⁴¹

35 World Health Assembly, with Syria as a member state, recommends International Classification for Functioning (ICF) and Washington Group Questionnaire as the only tools to identify people with disabilities.

36/37 Oxfam meetings with local case management actors specialized in assisting people with disabilities

38 *New National Classification of Disability*, Syrian Expert.net (2017)

39/40 Interview with humanitarian organization representative (2024), Assessments, Oxfam (2023), Community Mapping Exercise, INTERSOS (2024)

41 Case Management database, INTERSOS (2024)

The National Social Assistance Fund was established by the former government of Syria under the Decree No. 9 of 2011. There is no specific form of financial aid supported by the National Social Aid Fund,⁴² generally available to families with children, even though child rights law⁴³ stipulates that:

“**Every child is entitled to family compensation according to the relevant laws.**⁴⁴

While the National Social Aid Fund has been under strain during the crisis, it continued to operate at a minimal level, striving to continue subsidising some basic needs of Syrian families, such as fuel, diesel, and essential food items.

The former government's institutional mechanisms are under-resourced making it challenging, if not impossible, to enforce the existing child protection laws.⁴⁵ For example, the absence of the pre-crisis child protection unit⁴⁶ which operated within MoSAL, with inspectors to assess and monitor children's safety and well-being while enforcing child protection laws, worsened the situation. Penalties had been enforced by the former government of Syria to tackle non-compliance with laws regarding compulsory education and with child rights regulations. However, the lack of compliance with these laws today is evident given the ongoing issues with school dropout and child labour.⁴⁷

All the contributing factors together result in a situation where children across the country⁴⁸ are engaging in labour categorised among the ‘worst forms of child labour’, which according to the International Labor Organization (ILO) definition involves work which poses, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, risk to the health, safety, and well-being of children. The Syrian Labor Code and the 2021 Syria Child Rights Law to align with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); acknowledging the same definition of ‘worst forms of child labour’ and providing protective provisions against this protection risk.⁴⁹ However, due to limited institutional resources, the implementation of these laws and regulations faces challenges.⁵⁰ Examples of worst forms of child labour in Syria include scrap metal collection, car mechanics and long hours in agriculture depriving them of education and risking their safety and wellbeing.⁵¹

GBV and gender inequality

GBV and gender inequality are widely prevalent, with harmful social norms and inadequate laws perpetuating each other.⁵² Women in Syria continue to face discrimination in marriage, divorce, child custody, labour, and inheritance under the Criminal, Personal Status and Labor Laws.⁵³ The former government's careful approach to abolishing or amending certain laws that reflect entrenched traditions across various areas in Syria, was implemented to prevent the escalation of existing tensions. Moreover, the challenges and constraints faced by civil society actors in resuming, or establishing new, presence were significant. The civil society actors play a key role in advocating for the enforcement of existing, Syrian legislation in place to protect women, as well as in challenging

⁴² *Establishment of the National Social Assistance Fund, Decree No. 9 of 2011*, NRC (2011). Also, the right to social support is contained in the Constitution (Article 25, Constitution) as well as the Labor Code and other laws.

⁴³ Article 15, 2021 Syria Child Rights Law.

⁴⁴ In addition, public servants should receive an additional salary increment per child

⁴⁵ *Guide to Child's Rights in Syria*, NRC, Syria Trust for Development (ST) (2023)

⁴⁶ The child protection unit within the Syrian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor was responsible for coordinating the national response to prevent and address issues of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children across the country

⁴⁷ *Guide to Child's Rights in Syria*, NRC, Syria Trust for Development (ST) (2023)

⁴⁸ Assessments, Oxfam (2022, 2023, 2024)

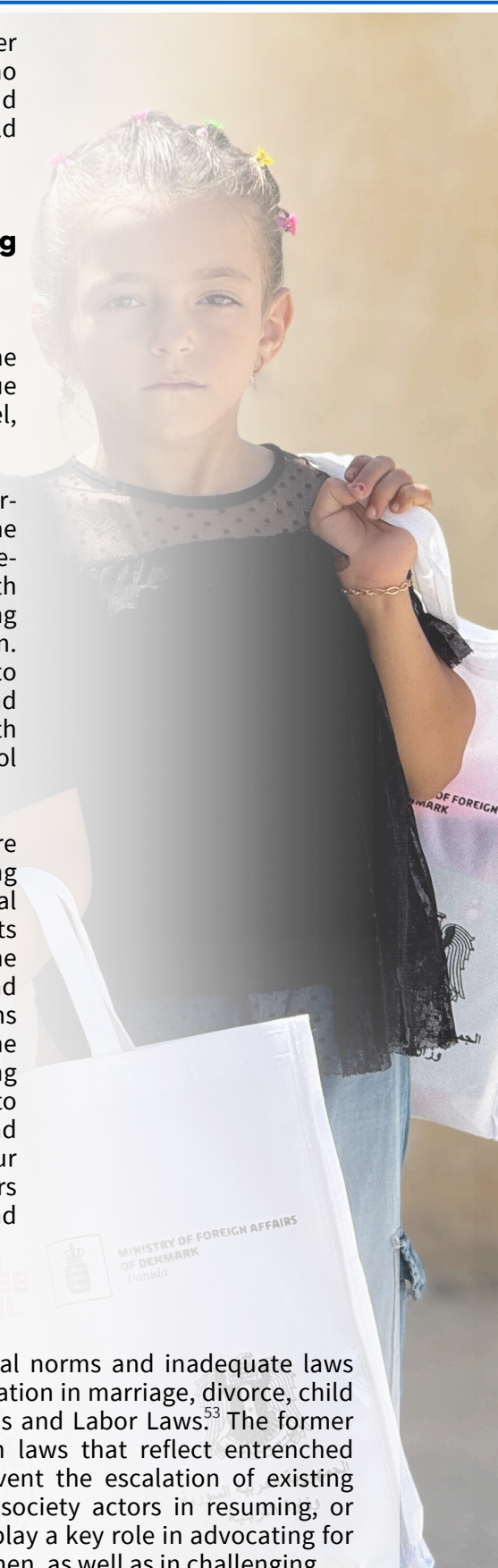
⁴⁹ *Guide to Child's Rights in Syria*, NRC, Syria Trust for Development (ST) (2023)

⁵⁰ Interview with humanitarian organization representative (2024)

⁵¹ Assessments, Oxfam, INTERSOS (2024)

⁵² Interview with humanitarian organization representative (2024)

⁵³ *Gender Justice and the Law Syria, Summary.19.Eng.pdf (undp.org)*.



harmful laws and traditions, ensuring community buy-in without causing sudden changes that could lead to tensions. Therefore, these limitations faced by these actors, if not addressed, would continue to impede successful regulatory reforms crucial for protecting the rights of women.

In addition, disclosing GBV incidents can endanger women and girls, which discourages reporting, hence seeking redress. Insufficient training of law enforcement officers creates additional barriers to effectively and safely responding to GBV cases, leading to inadequate support and hindering access to justice.⁵⁴ Moreover, overcrowded, shared housing and energy blackouts within homes and in public spaces have increased risk of sexual harassment and assault.⁵⁵ During dark hours, due to insufficient street lighting, the risk of sexual harassment increases for boys, girls, and women commuting between their homes and critical facilities like bakeries, schools, healthcare centres and pharmacies.⁵⁶ In some communities where the water infrastructure is decimated, women are compelled to undertake arduous journeys to fetch water, increasing their exposure to sexual harassment. The double burden of unfair distribution of care work among household members and an unsafe environment not only poses risks to women's physical and mental well-being but also hampers their recovery efforts, as it diverts time and energy away from activities that could contribute to their recovery and resilience-building like education, skills development, engaging in the labour market and self-care.⁵⁷



Given the societal expectations placed upon us as women, we endure, mentally and physically, heightened repercussions of electricity shortages, including the need to stay awake all night to fulfil household chores

As expressed by women members in more than one community.⁵⁸

Moreover, GBV survivors with limited financial resources are trapped in abusive relationships as they are unable to afford living expenses nor rent fees, and do not have access to safe houses, due to the limited resources within the national social protection system and the protection sector within the humanitarian response.⁵⁹

In addition to the widely prevalent instances of GBV across Syria, sexual abuse, had been used as a form of torture by some former government. Accounts of widespread sexual violence to male and female political prisoners have been recorded and documented.⁶⁰ Sexual violence is a topic still

attached to widespread stigma across families and communities in Syria, underscoring the importance of thoughtful and meaningful interventions at community level. Continued support for all survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, including facilitating access to their right to seek redress and justice, will be critical in healing from these violations and reinstating their confidence within their communities, essential for enabling their meaningful participation and contribution to the future transition in their country as a whole, on an equal basis with others.



54 Interview with humanitarian organisation representative (2024)

55 Community Mapping Exercise, INTERSOS (2024)

56 Interview with humanitarian organisation representative (2024)

57 Assessments, Oxfam (2023)

58 Community Mapping Exercise, INTERSOS (2024), Assessments, Oxfam (2024)

59 Interview with humanitarian organisation representative (2024)

60 [Submission to the Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment: Thematic Report on Crimes of Sexual Torture](#), All Survivors Project (23 April 2024).

Child marriage

The ongoing economic crisis intertwined with harmful gender norms are exacerbating risks of child and early marriage in Syria. Families are viewing early marriage as a means to alleviate economic burdens. This is particularly true for households, with girl members, suffering from poverty, and for households headed by female and elderly.⁶¹ Child marriage often leads to Intimate-Partner-Violence (IPV), in addition to risks and complications from early and unintended pregnancy.⁶² Child marriage perpetuates cycles of violence and abuse of women and girls when unaddressed, and can further contribute to socio-economic burdens, trapping women and girls in cycles of vulnerability, diminishing their capacities for resilience.

Some progress has been made with the age of capacity for marriage in Syria raised from 17 to 18 years old for both boys and girls.⁶³ However, adolescent children of at least 15 years of age may be married if they meet certain legal conditions.⁶⁴ The judge granting permission has discretion⁶⁵ to see if these conditions are met, namely that the parties:



- **Must be sincere**
- **The bride must give her approval**
- **Must have the consent of their legal guardian**
- **Must be physically able to have sexual relations**

A judge may also require couples to attend sessions on marital life. Moreover, a judge may withhold permission if there is a disparity in age or if the judge can see no benefit of the marriage. Despite such clearer provisions introduced by the former government in 2021, civil society actors continue to express concerns regarding the practical implementation of the law; the judges' exercise of discretion in accurately evaluating these legal conditions and enforcing the law with precision. Moreover, there are concerns about the protection of children,⁶⁶ given that sexual relations involving minors are inherently non-consensual.

B. Protection operating environment

Coordination of humanitarian protection assistance

Partnerships between INGOs and LNGOs is an area which has witnessed some improvement. It went from being formally prohibited by the former government in the early days of the Syrian Humanitarian Response to now UN agencies and many INGOs are able to form these partnerships. This shift sets the stage for further embedment of local humanitarian leadership and increased opportunities for collaboration among LNGOs and INGOs, to secure new formal partnerships and establish a consistent understanding of the approval process. However, unclear process and procedures for establishing formal and informal partnerships with local actors is still limiting effective collaboration between LNGOs and INGOs.⁶⁷

On the humanitarian coordination mechanism, there are ongoing concerns about gaps in service provision and service duplication. Unequal aid distribution is problematic, with some sub-districts receiving multiple forms of assistance while economically affected areas without direct crisis impact lack sufficient services. The service overlap has prompted growing requests from the former government for UN and INGOs to share identifiable information of project participants, under the pretext of aiming to reduce duplication. Equally, humanitarian actors in Syria are in some instances approached with requests by some donors to disclose identifiable information of project participants, prompted by the necessity to comply with vetting rules.

61 Community assessments, INTERSOS, Assessments, Oxfam assessments (2023)

62 [GBV Advocacy Brief](#), UNFPA (2024), Case Management Database, INTERSOS (2024)

63 Articles 15(1), 16, Syria Personal Status Law; Article 19, Syria Child Rights Law

64/65 [Guide to Child's Rights in Syria](#), NRC, Syria Trust for Development (ST) (2023)

66/67 Interviews with humanitarian organisations representatives (2024)

If these requests are fulfilled, it would undermine the commitment of humanitarian actors to GDPR compliance, national laws and the protection mainstreaming standard that emphasises safety, dignity, and the "Do No Harm" principle. Such commitment requires respecting the confidentiality of project participants' information - which should not be shared with any party.⁶⁸ Therefore, humanitarian actors refrain from sharing such information. However, the elimination of duplication or overlap in humanitarian assistance is not only crucial for humanitarian and early recovery programming. It becomes increasingly important in the evolving context where a higher number of humanitarian organizations will gain access to new areas that were previously inaccessible due to geopolitical divides and former access impediments being lifted. This scenario implies that more organizations might potentially be serving the same locations, necessitating even more robust coordination systems from the UN-led coordination platforms. These systems are essential to ensure that there is no duplication or overlap in assistance and that all areas and populations in need are supported based on needs.

An example of how gaps in timely coordination impede service delivery include where local actors are reliant on UN agencies for service provision. A local case management actor is handling a protection case that requires urgent support from medical (MiKA) or general in-kind assistance (GiKA) programs, the local actor has the option to refer the case to the UN program holding the GiKA/MiKA budget. However, the acceptance/ approval required from the relevant UN program to assist each case leads to a cumbersome process, resulting in significant delays in delivering assistance to survivors of protection risks.⁶⁹

The operationalisation of the interagency (IA) referral mechanism, an essential component for timely coordination and comprehensive response, developed by the protection sector in Syria in 2022, was pending discussions of the Protection sector and MoSAL to secure acceptance and approval. As a result, unconventional referral procedures have been seen in the sector, leading eventually, and unintentionally, to compromise the existing efforts to strengthen local humanitarian leadership. An example to clarify is that a local case management actor funded by a humanitarian agency must seek approvals from the agency before referring protection cases to other humanitarian actors including those providing Cash for Protection assistance. They must wait for approval from the funding agency without a clear understanding of the rationale or process for referral, reducing LNGO agency and hindering timely assistance to urgent cases.⁷⁰ Notably, this approval requirement does not apply if the local case management actor refers cases to another humanitarian organisation that is funded by, or partnering with, the funding agency. This example not only exhibits the nature of the donor-recipient relationship, working against the localisation agenda, but also highlights the unconventional practices for referrals that hinder timely and safe assistance to survivors of protection risks. This practice has not been endorsed nor advised by the Protection sector. When asked about the rationale for this additional approval layer, the funding agency provided various explanations.⁷¹ This layer may be intended to assess the risks associated with protection referrals to specific humanitarian programmes, to understand their capacity to handle cases, or to evaluate the safety of such referrals. However, local case management actors should have a role in decision-making and risk assessments of referrals. Given their expertise in the sensitive nature of protection work, they possess the necessary skills to evaluate relevant aspects and make informed decisions, or at the very least engage in deciding on such issues. The local case management actors remain receptive to referring cases to other humanitarian services in a principled manner, as it aligns with the survivor's best interests and supports effective implementation of their case management plan. The IA referral task force was reactivated by the Protection sector in November 2024, but its first meeting is awaiting discussions among the entire Whole of Syria Protection sector staff. This delay is due to the evolving post-December 8th context and the potential opportunities it presents. These opportunities include either consolidating efforts to establish an IA referral mechanism for the Whole of Syria now that the geopolitical division has been lifted or building upon some existing and already consolidated referral mechanism implemented in the Northwest to create a unified referral mechanism for the whole of Syria.

An additional challenge to providing protection-centred, holistic humanitarian assistance is, is that the targeting strategy of multi-sector actors prioritises socio-economic vulnerabilities and overlooks protection risks, leading to a lack of capacity to address protection cases, including those referred to them by case management actors within the same locations. As a result, referrals are

68 [Donors' Conditions and Compliance for Humanitarian Response](#), Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (2016)

69/70/71 Interview with humanitarian organisation representative (2024)

only made on an ad hoc basis, and case management plans frequently face challenges to close successfully. In addition to the operational concerns, the overall strategic discussions, such as the nationalisation of the case management system or the shaping of the country-level Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) mechanisms and procedures, are largely led by UN agencies in coordination with MoSAL when relevant, with INGOs occasionally consulted when documents require review or when their attendance to ad-hoc training sessions is required. LNGOs are involved to an even lesser extent, further hindering the localisation agenda.

In conclusion, effective coordination, which is the mandate of the UN-led coordination platforms, is a critical area for improvement, especially when it comes to coordinating early recovery with protection interventions that adopt area-based approaches, where quality coordination is essential to maximize the impact.⁷²

Navigating the interplay

To achieve collective protection outcomes, humanitarian actors must engage beyond the humanitarian system, particularly with the caretaker authorities and future Government of Syria, as primary duty-bearers.

However, in Syria, such engagement and collaboration are limited. Stringent regulations of the former government often led to lengthy approval processes for humanitarian projects, shifting the focus towards obtaining approvals and rushing through implementation to meet project deadlines. An over-emphasis on approvals frequently overshadowed the necessity of establishing a genuine collaborative relationship with the former government. Consequently, the interaction can become transactional, with the former government serving merely as an approval authority rather than a situation of all parties working towards a shared goal. It is a lesson learned that establishing this spirit of collaboration is especially crucial at the field level with local government departments, where projects are initiated, implemented, and monitored.⁷³

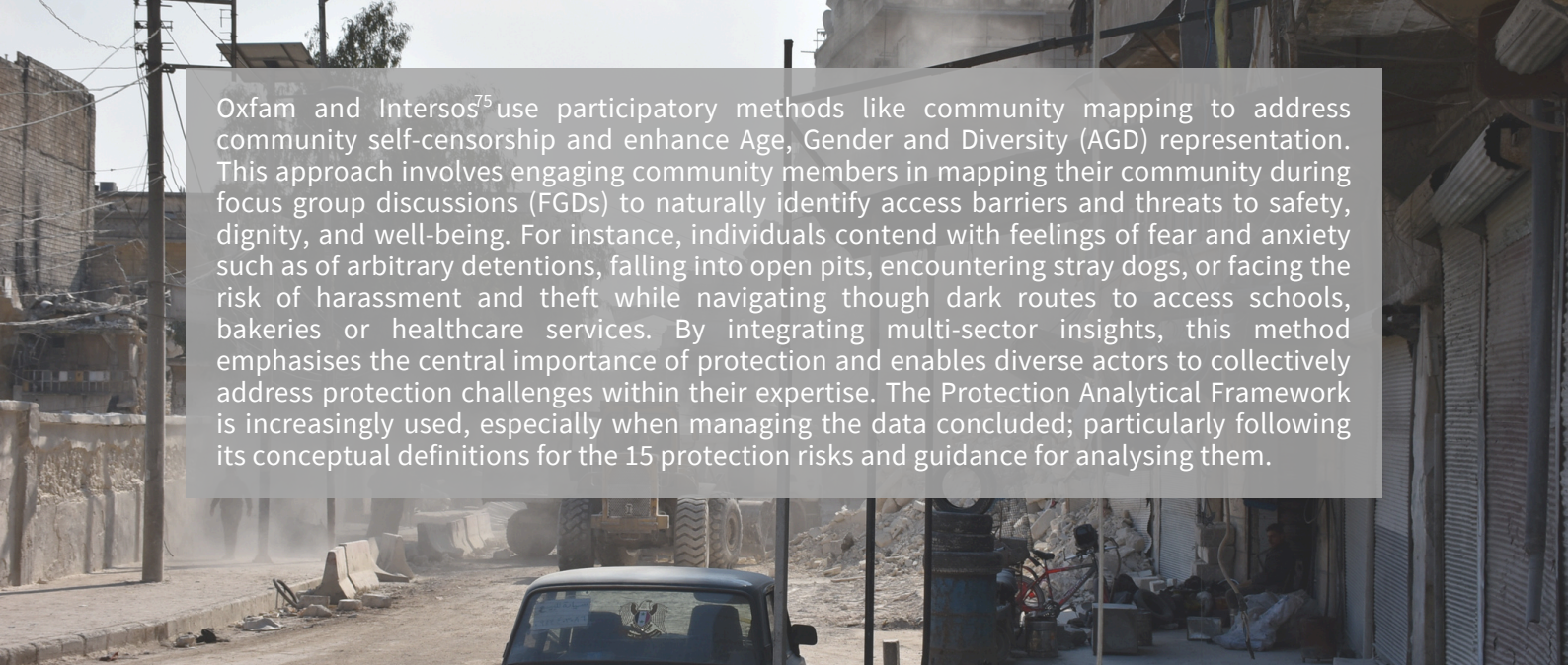
Equally, donor rules restrict the flexibility of humanitarian actors in designing programs involving deeper coordination with the former government, such as through joint training or workshops. As a result, collaboration efforts often centered around meeting minimal project implementation requirements, rather than enabling an effective exchange of ideas, expertise, and capacities. These constraints were further complicated by the former government's sensitivity towards international humanitarian assistance. This sensitivity, influenced by the political landscape and strained relations with donor governments, had resulted in a reluctance to engage and collaborate between international actors and the former government, especially in addressing protection concerns. This has also led to oversight or scrutiny of protection activities. The scrutiny of humanitarian activities' design, particularly protection assessments and programs like case management, has consequently

limited international organisations' ability to implement protection programs that are needed in Syria and are aligned with their global mandate but facing challenges in implementation within Syria, or even prohibition in the use of protection monitoring programs. Coupled with concerns about potential repercussions, self-censorship within humanitarian organizations have arisen over time, leading to limiting or modifying their actions, expressions, or decisions,⁷⁴ and impeding their ability to effectively address critical issues with the former government. Therefore, in the post-December 8th scenario, it is crucial to establish and maintain transparency and openness in the relationship between aid actors with a protection mandate, and national authorities, who bear the primary responsibility for protection of the civilian population. Active engagement beyond the approval process is essential. Donors should also recognize the remaining challenges in enforcing national protection provisions due to resource constraints, ultimately impacting the protection of Syrian communities the most.

In conclusion, previously strained relations between donors and the national government should not impede transparent coordination with new authorities or hinder essential early recovery funding for humanitarian organisations, ensuring the principles of independence and neutrality are upheld.

Engagement with the Syrian community

Protection actors are skilled at conducting assessments and, in line with humanitarian principles, must consult with communities to ensure their voices are heard and integrated into programmes. However, communities and individuals often face difficulties in expressing their protection concerns due to self-censorship. This self-censorship stems from a reluctance to challenge deeply rooted traditions or beliefs that discourage discussing private experiences with non-family members, out of fear of retaliation, blame, shame, or pre-judgment. This reluctance is often linked to the apprehension of confronting societal or political taboos or acknowledging the risks they face. Denial, as one facet of a broader spectrum of defence mechanisms employed to manage distress and external stressors, is often resorted to by individuals in such situations.



Oxfam and Intersos⁷⁵ use participatory methods like community mapping to address community self-censorship and enhance Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) representation. This approach involves engaging community members in mapping their community during focus group discussions (FGDs) to naturally identify access barriers and threats to safety, dignity, and well-being. For instance, individuals contend with feelings of fear and anxiety such as of arbitrary detentions, falling into open pits, encountering stray dogs, or facing the risk of harassment and theft while navigating through dark routes to access schools, bakeries or healthcare services. By integrating multi-sector insights, this method emphasises the central importance of protection and enables diverse actors to collectively address protection challenges within their expertise. The Protection Analytical Framework is increasingly used, especially when managing the data concluded; particularly following its conceptual definitions for the 15 protection risks and guidance for analysing them.

Furthermore, approval was necessary for in-depth needs assessments, which means that such assessments – across all sectors, not just protection – were typically conducted only after programme design, which means that final project design cannot be informed by thorough protection and context analysis. Therefore, facilitating pre-design, rapid primary data collection practices is essential to avoid overlooking protection threats and failing to represent the perspectives of women, people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY RECOVERY & RESILIENCE PROGRAMMING IN SYRIA

In Syria's prolonged and complex crisis, years of humanitarian aid have had limited impact on the recovery of the affected population, with needs continuing to rise annually.

Since 2011, donors have contributed approximately:



Significant investments were made in providing emergency aid such as:



However, as of 2024, over 16.7 million people⁷⁷ in Syria still require lifesaving and life-sustaining assistance, underscoring the limited impact of humanitarian aid on crisis-affected populations and the inability to support long-term recovery. Early recovery and resilience efforts were seen as essential approaches to reducing reliance on aid and helping affected populations to adapt and recover from shocks and stresses. In the current context, with renewed authorities, early recovery and resilience programming must be central in the upcoming phase of humanitarian assistance.

Progress over the past ten years

Early recovery and resilience programming is not new in Syria, and there have been significant advancements over the past decade. Initially, efforts focused on simple repairs of infrastructure such as water, sewage, health and education infrastructures, and bakeries. However, this has evolved into a more holistic framework that aims to address multifaceted humanitarian needs. Early recovery was introduced into the HRP in 2015,⁷⁸ and became the third strategic objective in 2016:

Increase resilience, livelihood opportunities, and access to basic services, particularly for vulnerable households and communities.

Initially, the interventions designed under the Early Recovery and Livelihood (ERL) sector were intended to support the efforts of other sectors by creating an enabling environment for humanitarian aid delivery. For instance, rubble removal and solid waste management were considered as early recovery activities but would be more appropriately classified under shelter activities.⁷⁹

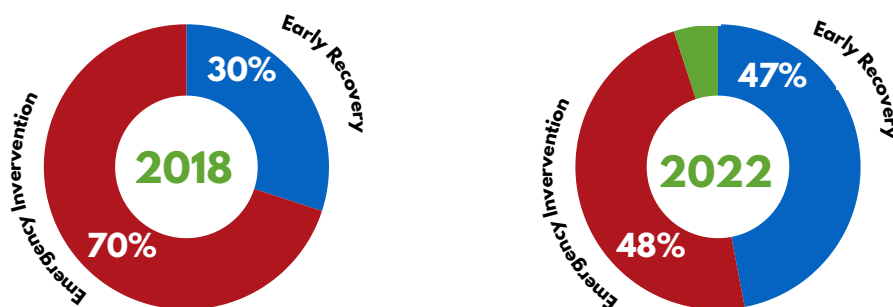
⁷⁶ Financial Tracking System: Syria Summary, UN OCHA

⁷⁷ Syrian Humanitarian Needs Overview 2024, UN OCHA (2024)

^{78/79} Humanitarian Response Plan, UN OCHA (2015)

Although the context in Syria evolved and became protracted and the needs of the population changed, the response did not shift from emergency assistance to more sustainable interventions with longer-term outcomes across all former government-controlled areas until well into 2020 due to donors conflating early recovery with reconstruction and perceiving early recovery programming as supporting the former government of Syria. Gradually, more standalone activities were planned under early recovery programming such as vocational training to support small businesses and entrepreneurship, as well as initiatives aimed at fostering social cohesion through tailored community projects.

Over the years, humanitarian actors have significantly expanded their early recovery efforts.



By 2022, these interventions made up 47% of the activities conducted by Damascus-based INGOs (DINGOs), compared to 48 percent dedicated to emergency response.⁸⁰ This had marked a substantial increase from 2018, seven years after the onset of the conflict, when early recovery interventions comprised only 30 percent of the overall response, with emergency interventions accounting for 70 percent.⁸¹ At the beginning of 2024, the RC/HC introduced a new ERS for 2024-2028, encompassing the Whole of Syria response. This strategy envisions "multi-year, medium-term planning, funding, and programming aimed at promoting transformative and measurable change adapted to the diverse operational contexts across Syria".⁸² It builds on early recovery efforts initiated under the HRP, aiming to consolidate and further strengthen local capacities. The goal of the strategy is to reduce recurrent humanitarian needs and the long-term costs of humanitarian assistance. The ERS was officially launched in November 2024⁸³ and a five-year Early Recovery Trust Fund (ERTF) was designed to enable longer-term planning and transformative programming. This fund will complement existing pooled resources, including the Syria Humanitarian Fund (SHF). The ERTF was awaiting registration by UN Headquarters, however many donors were skeptical about the ability of humanitarian actors to implement principled, conflict-sensitive, and needs-based early recovery programs in Syria, leading to historically politicized discussions around early recovery. Despite this, recent conversations among donors have become more structured and open, with an increasing number recognizing that early recovery interventions may offer more sustainable and cost-effective solutions for a protracted crisis like in Syria.⁸⁴ With the recent political developments, the ERS and associated trust fund are likely to receive more interest and subsequent funding from donors. Moving forward, the ERS should be reviewed and adjusted to align with the new circumstances, including more space for reconstruction interventions.

Best practices for early recovery programming

Past and ongoing experiences in Syria show that early recovery interventions can take various forms. In 2016, the GCER released a guidance note⁸⁵ to help humanitarian actors design and implement these programs. Key principles include integrating cross-cutting issues, addressing the root causes of the crisis, and fostering synergies among different actors.⁸⁶ In Syria, early recovery efforts have largely adopted a multi-sectoral approach. Aid organisations have focused on addressing interconnected needs rather than targeting a single issue. For example, shelter and economic recovery teams collaborate to rehabilitate partially damaged infrastructure, such as shops, while providing micro-grants or asset replacement to help business owners restart their activities and generate income.⁸⁷ Early recovery initiatives also emphasise participatory practices,⁸⁸ encouraging local communities to articulate their needs and take part in the design of interventions.

80 Forum Profile, Damascus INGO Forum (2022) (Note: in 2023 figures are not representative due to the response to the February 2023 earthquake)

81 Forum Profile, Damascus INGO Forum (2018)

82/83 [Early Recovery Strategy 2024-2028](#), Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC), UN OCHA (4 November 2024)

84 Dialogue series on humanitarian recovery in Syria (January 2022)

85 [Guidance note on Inter-Cluster Early Recovery](#), Global Cluster for Early Recovery (2016)

86 Guiding principles 4, 10 and 11, [Guidance note on Inter-Cluster Early Recovery](#), Global Cluster for Early Recovery (2016)

87 Interviews with humanitarian organisations' representatives (2024)

88 Guiding principle 2, [Guidance note on Inter-Cluster Early Recovery](#), Global Cluster for Early Recovery (2016)

Recently, multi-sectoral interventions have been coupled with an area-based approach (ABA) – a strategy that focuses on the holistic needs of a population in a specific geographic area - as this is considered one of the most effective approaches for achieving multi-sectoral, integrated, and sustainable outcomes through inclusive, participatory, and community-led processes. One example of a programme using an ABA is the United Nations Joint Program (UNJP), implemented from 2019 to 2023, which brought together six UN agencies to improve infrastructure, services, livelihoods, and social protection in Dar’a and Deir ez-Zor through urban area-based and neighbourhood action planning. The final narrative report⁸⁹ highlights the programmes’ achievements, particularly in fostering participatory, community-led processes that emphasised rural-urban connections and gender-responsive, inclusive planning through the application of ABA. Joint efforts by Participating United Nations Organisations (PUNOs) strengthened resilience in both urban and rural areas, enhancing social cohesion by providing safe access to rehabilitated public spaces, facilities, and markets. The involvement of community stakeholders in the planning and implementation stages strengthened local buy-in and advocacy. Economic capacities were also increased as diverse livelihoods were revitalised, leading to reduced reliance on aid. As livelihoods improved, school dropout rates decreased, and urban-rural interventions led to better overall health through enhanced access to clean water, rehabilitated sewage systems, and improved health services, particularly benefiting women and girls.

Access challenges and opportunities

Despite improvements in the access environment over the last years, challenges continued to persist in terms of bureaucratic and lengthy approvals processes.⁹⁰ These delays were caused by different factors, including the very limited state capacity of former Syrian authorities – which they acknowledged themselves:

“**There is a shortage of resources within our Ministry to properly evaluate and distribute the work, resulting in poor coordination quality. With sufficient capacity and time, we could achieve better coordination, thoroughly review each project approval, and establish stronger connections between the INGOs**⁹¹
As expressed by a former government representative.

Early recovery programmes offer significant opportunities for increased engagement with local and national authorities and ultimately creating sustainable outcomes that empower communities to manage future challenges independently. Interview informants agreed that more entry points should be explored, and greater engagement is necessary at both national and local levels.⁹² By investing in a multi-sectoral, integrated, coordinated and participatory early recovery programming, humanitarian actors can navigate challenging access constraints, and ultimately advocate for more principled humanitarian access. Increased engagement is also required to build trust between humanitarian actors and authorities, creating more opportunities for dialogue, foster increased understanding of authorities’ concerns, advocate for adjustments, and improve relevant processes, policies and their enforcement in a coordinated and principled manner. However, many humanitarian organisations were hesitant to challenge decisions, fearing potential repercussions.⁹³ There are some successful examples of such dialogue leading to multi-agency, multi-sector, multi-area, and annual approvals which humanitarian actors could draw lessons from. For instance, in 2019, Oxfam managed to secure a two-years approval for all its programs nationwide and renewed for an additional two years once the approval expired. In conclusion, it is event that regular engagement will be required between the caretaker government, the transitional government, future government and humanitarian organisations to



better demonstrate the mutually beneficial situation. If the future Government of Syria allows organisations more flexibility to operate and is more responsive to their requests, humanitarian actors would be better positioned to attract increased funding and deliver better and more sustainable responses.

89 UN Joint Programme Syria Final Narrative Report, UNDP (2024)

90 Forum Profile, Damascus INGO Forum (2023)

91 Interviews with former Syrian government representatives (2024)

92 Interviews with humanitarian organisation representatives (2024)

93 Interviews with humanitarian organisation representatives (2024)

3. PROTECTION PRINCIPLES, CONSIDERATIONS AND SERVICES SHOULD BE AT THE CORE OF EARLY RECOVERY PROGRAMMING

It is widely recognised that early recovery should adopt a multidimensional approach, building on humanitarian efforts with the aim of stabilising communities and enhancing their resilience.⁹⁴ Livelihood activities are a key feature in resilience programming, building self-reliance and supporting the shift away from dependence on humanitarian aid. However, given the protection threats prevalent in Syria, which are exacerbated by socioeconomic vulnerabilities, such as loss of livelihoods and food insecurity,⁹⁵ protection must be integrated into livelihood activities, with examples highlighted below. Furthermore, resilience-building activities which aim to strengthen the capacities within groups experiencing several and often specific vulnerabilities (GBV survivors, female-headed households, people with disabilities, former detainees and those at risk of labour exploitation, among others, should be integrated with protection services such as case management), PSS activities and MHPSS to ensure that an adequate response can be provided, tackling both the root causes of protection risks and promoting meaningful and safe access to resilience-related activities.

To strengthen communities' capacity for recovery effectively, resilience programming must incorporate protection principles from the outset in the planning phase. This requires comprehensive protection analysis of at-risk populations that may face barriers to accessing and planning to mitigate these obstacles. Key considerations for programming should include:

- **Have the risks been assessed to ensure that the design does not inadvertently cause harm or create new risks?**
- **Can non-discriminatory, safe, and dignified access to services be guaranteed?**
- **Does the design encourage community participation and empowerment?**
- **Does the design enhance community self-protection capacities?**

Building adaptive capacities involves fostering the resilience and self-reliance of Syrian society through a holistic programming model. This includes ensuring access to basic services, improving protection, and increasing opportunities for income generation, especially for the most vulnerable groups. Without centering⁹⁶ protection in resilience-building programmes, organisations risk causing harm or failing to adequately address protection risks, undermining their ability to achieve more sustainable outcomes.

Integrating Livelihoods and Protection services

The interviews revealed that livelihood programming in Syria currently overlooks protection risks in programme design. Protection considerations tend to emerge only after implementation, by which time protection became apparent,⁹⁷ but the necessary services are not in place to provide an effective response. Moreover, livelihood programmes in Syria typically target

94 UNDP Policy on Early Recovery, UNDP (22 August 2008)

95 Case Management Databases, INTERSOS (2024)


96 It is in the six elements of Centrality of Protection that humanitarian actors should address protection issues that intersect with their formal mandates and sector-specific responsibilities. This includes protection mainstreaming, protection integration, and specialised protection activities.

97 Interview with humanitarian organization representative (2024)

the general population based on vulnerability criteria, which are primarily socio-economic⁹⁸ without utilisation of a PAF which support organisations to safely address protection risks and build resilience through an informed analysis of those protection risks.

Currently, there is no clear linkage between livelihood and protection services, and referrals are often ad-hoc, rather than an integrated part of programming with clear mechanisms for referrals between services. The result is that the services provided are often not ‘proportionate’ to the case. One of the participants interviewed used the example of a GBV survivor who had been referred to protection services after protection risks had been identified through the livelihood project. GBV case management and psychosocial support were not included in the project, and the project participant was living in an area without access to specialised referral services. As a result, the organisation could only provide MiKA to respond to the beneficiaries' hearing difficulties, without being able to provide an adequate response to the GBV risks or improve livelihoods outcomes; they were only able to respond with the minimum of in-kind assistance.⁹⁹

To support resilience-building, particularly among people who face protection risks, livelihood programming should be integrated with protection services. A suggested model for targeting at-risk groups with resilience programming could include an integration of livelihoods programming with case management. If we consider the example of targeting GBV survivors through livelihood interventions, but without protection services in place to respond to risks, it is apparent that ‘resilience’ building would not be safe, meaningful or sustainable. Findings have shown that new economic opportunities can increase women and girls’ risk of GBV, but that resilience programming can mitigate risks, if designed in a way which recognises how the programme may expose women and girls to risk, and then build upon the protective elements.¹⁰⁰ Such an approach would build upon a protection analysis, conducted at proposal stage in which the community is consulted, ensuring that women, girls and people with disabilities are consulted to identify the risks and threats which could arise through the programme, and how to identify and engage safely with survivors.



Protection and livelihood activities would be integrated, with survivors being provided with protection services such as psychosocial support (PSS) and, referrals, into specialised services and followed up by caseworkers, with referrals into livelihoods programmes within the same geographic area, to enhance income generating opportunities safely.

Such a model would support in ensuring that the survivor has access to services which address the GBV risks, building personal resilience through PSS programmes and would ensure access to safe income-generating opportunities which are not likely to cause further harm to the survivor. However, such a model requires a good level of coordination between livelihood and protection actors following an area-based approach.

98/99 Interview with humanitarian organization representative (2024)

100 [Integrating Protection/GBV Mitigation into Livelihoods Programmes](#), Refugee Women’s Commission (2012)

Other examples of integration of livelihood services with case management (and wider protection services) would be beneficial in supporting meaningful resilience building, including those with MHPSS conditions, which have hindered access to income generating opportunities, or are exacerbated by heightened distress stemming from unemployment. Through the provision of protection services, including psychological and psychosocial support services, the project participant can be supported with accessing livelihood activities whilst simultaneously being provided with services to address and monitor their mental health and well-being, reducing the risk of dropping out of livelihoods programmes. This approach can monitor whether resilience building includes an integrated approach which considers the mental-health and psychosocial wellbeing of individuals as a key factor in engaging with livelihoods opportunities.

Bridging relief and recovery

Cash for protection (CfP) and Multi-Purpose Cash (MPCA) can be utilised as helpful tools for promoting resilience providing a critical link between relief and recovery. Individuals with specific nature of protection risks could be provided with CfP - examples include GBV survivors provided with CfP to access private medical examination for survivors, and/or could be provided with MPCA to access their basic needs while attending a vocational training that aims to help them restore their income-generation capacity. Other examples are when MPCA provided in cases of child labour where basic needs must be met at household level to reduce the likelihood of a child dropping out of school and engaging in the worst forms of child labor as a negative coping mechanism, or when basic needs must be met at household level for a period of time to reduce the impact of labour exploitation when work-related injuries are not compensated by employers, whilst simultaneously referring into livelihoods services to transition from relief to recovery. Currently, MPCA is utilized in Syria, but there is limited collaboration between the Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA), working group, Protection sector and the ERL sector to explore entry points for integration towards sustainable solutions. One area for integration could involve incorporating additional expenditures into the Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) calculation - particularly those essential for nearly every Syrian household. Examples of such expenditures include transportation costs to access specialized services and life-saving assistance, fees associated with obtaining essential legal documentation, and session fees for consistent psychological support—a crucial need, particularly in post-conflict areas. Narrowing down the identification and response to these massive needs, solely, to CfP actors could prove challenging. Therefore, there is a growing necessity to incorporate these expenses into a more comprehensive package with a broader targeting strategy and reach, ideally provided over multiple months. By addressing these needs at a larger scale, the MPCA could reduce reliance on negative coping mechanisms.

Additionally, the current targeting strategy of MPCA focuses solely on socio-economic vulnerability and does not accommodate for referrals from case management services, where MPCA is identified in the case management plan as a service needed to meet the basic needs of a survivor of protection risk. Meaningful coordination between the CVA, ERL and Protection sector would enhance resilience programming in Syria and would allow for a sustainable shift from relief to recovery.

Moreover, CfP is frequently utilized to enable survivors to access private psychologists or psychiatrists. However, people in need are struggling to identify trusted, private specialists in Syria. Therefore, it has been often suggested by community members that humanitarian actors identify the specialists and compensate them. The argument is that such humanitarian services are not always available, and even when they exist, people prefer to have a pool of specialists to choose from rather than being limited to one option (presented as a need to select based on personal comfort, as it entails opening up and sharing a lot of private details with these specialists). This acts as a potential entry point for market evaluation and the implementation of a voucher system that securely links survivors with reputable specialists within the private sector post thorough vetting.

Catalysing integration

Catalysing integration includes the example of enhancing coordinated and integrated efforts among shelter and protection practitioners. This integration involves supporting households to claim valid deeds or lease agreements, along with provision of cash for rent or shelter rehabilitation.

This support can take the form of referrals for legal information provision or for cash assistance to cover the fees of lawyers when needed,¹⁰¹ or a coordinated advocacy led by the protection sector/HLP technical working group and the Shelter sector in Syria to re-activate and enhance HLP assistance in Syria.

Another model is integrating community-based protection with livelihoods programming to enhance self-protection capacities, safer environment, and social cohesion. For example, a community-based social enterprise¹⁰² can assist individuals facing denial of resources, caregivers with children in the worst forms of child labor, or even GBV survivors recovering and seeking community reintegration and financial independence. Another example involves the community-based installation of street solar lighting to reduce the risk of sexual harassment along specific routes, where integrating community-based protection and shelter (infrastructure) expertise is needed for alleviating fear and anxiety during nighttime movement. Similarly,¹⁰³ securing a communal or school latrine facing GBV risks identified by Protection actors, by providing certain adjustments or locks/lights, even when such latrines are not identified as a water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) target according to sector-specific criteria, would¹⁰⁴ require the integration of WASH and Protection within an area-based but also community-based approach, contributing to an improved sense of safety and well-being.

Such an integrated approach would require longer-term funding to be able to effectively identify and analyse the protection risks, design multi-sector intervention to reduce them and build resilience, as well as to implement and monitor the outcomes of these interventions. High quality, comprehensive protection interventions such as case management, PSS programmes, legal services, community-based protection etc., integrated with other sector interventions like Shelter or Livelihoods, require more than one year of implementation and follow-up, including what it implies of regular interactions between protection-specialized staff, the staff from the other sector programs in integration, and other staff to monitor progress and measure impacts. This is often difficult to achieve and impossible to measure in one year, especially given the current lengthy approval times, lead in time for recruitment employing adequate human resources and kick-off of projects and to ensure proper implementation of activities. Longer-term funding is also required to monitor the cumulative outcomes towards measuring the impact on individuals and to assess whether the overall resilience-building programme has been effective in reducing the protection risks and improving resilience.

Therefore, multi-year funding is required to support organisations in tackling the origins and effects of protection threats, and livelihood or other sectoral issues, rather than just focusing on short-term service delivery. Organisations will be able to ask key questions to evaluate their services, such as ‘have capacities of individuals at risk of protection issues or those experiencing vulnerabilities been targeted/ strengthened through the intervention, have participants been able to meaningfully engage in livelihood interventions, and have the protection risks been reduced?’ These questions will help to define whether a ‘resilience building’ intervention has realised its goals. This type of integrated approach will strengthen resilience outcomes but will also focus on a smaller number of project participants.

101 Data, Oxfam (2023, 2024)

102 Early recovery programming, Oxfam (2024)

103 Example from community-based record, Oxfam (2023, 2024)

104 Programmes integrating WASH and Protection, Oxfam (2024)

4. ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PUBLIC SECTOR



Humanitarian actors must mobilise actors within and beyond the humanitarian system to achieve collective protection outcomes. Addressing protection risks often exceeds the capacity of the humanitarian community, requiring engagement and advocacy with a broad range of stakeholders such as public sector staff, including social and health care services.¹⁰⁵

For early recovery programming to have a lasting impact and avoid duplication of existing public services in Syrian society, engaging with local authorities and the public sector is essential. The public sector plays a vital role in ensuring sustainable outcomes as it is the foundation for long-term service provision. Strengthening collaboration with local authorities is crucial not only for exchanging technical expertise and enhancing local capacity to sustain services in sectors such as WASH, health, education, and agriculture, but also for ensuring a conflict-sensitive approach. A conflict sensitivity approach emphasizes the need for a clear analysis of how short-term actions can either support or hinder long-term solutions, potentially reinforcing conflict dynamics and causing negative impacts on people's lives. For instance, addressing protection risks—such as challenges in accessing civil documentation, barriers to women's rights, and the worst forms of child labour—will not lead to sustainable outcomes unless government officials, as the primary duty bearers, are trained and actively engaged.

The involvement of public institutions ensures ownership, accountability, and the integration of recovery efforts into national systems, making them more resilient and sustainable over time. Although there is broad recognition that engaging with local authorities is essential – and a commitment stated in the Good Humanitarian Donorship principles¹⁰⁶ donors were concerned about the potential consequences of such involvement. During a series of roundtables with donors and INGOs on humanitarian recovery in Syria,¹⁰⁷ participants highlighted key risks associated with engaging the former local authorities. One key concern was to scale up efforts while a political settlement that is facilitated by the UN has not yet been achieved in Syria.¹⁰⁸ Additional risks included aid diversion, where aid distribution may not be based on need.

However, following December 8th, the status of these risks remains unassessed, and the perception of donors towards these risks is not clearly stated. In any case, by drawing on lessons learned from the experiences of humanitarian actors navigating through these risks and by leveraging their expertise and capacity, these risks can be effectively mitigated, making safe engagement with the public sector, when necessary, always possible.

¹⁰⁵ 5th Element of Centrality of Protection, IASC (n.d.)

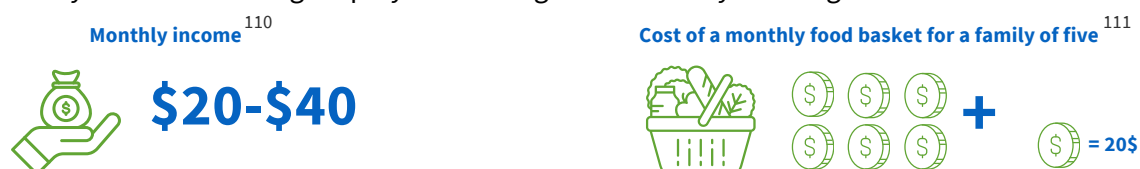
¹⁰⁶ [Good Humanitarian Donorship: Strengthen the Capacity of Affected Countries and Local Communities to Prevent, Prepare for, Mitigate and Respond to Humanitarian Crises](#), 24 Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship (n.d.)

¹⁰⁷ Dialogue series on humanitarian recovery in Syria (January 2022)

¹⁰⁸ The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 was unanimously adopted on 18 December 2015. It calls for a ceasefire and political settlement in Syria. This document describes the roadmap for Syria's political transition.

Public sector engagement is critical for raising awareness and increasing accountability

Engaging and strengthening the public sector in Syria is now more essential than ever. This engagement allows for mutual awareness building and learning which is critical to ensure a comprehensive long-term capacity enhancement of the public sector. The ability of the humanitarian actors to learn from the experience and knowledge of the public sector and reflect it in the capacity enhancement plan is what would make it a success. The public sector in Syria has been severely weakened by conflict and a brain drain, with many public administration offices destroyed and remaining employees earning unsustainably low wages.¹⁰⁹



Nonetheless, the public sector still has a strong technical capacity but struggles with having enough capacity to meet the acute and increased scale of needs of the population without the support of humanitarian actors. Public sector officials, especially at local level, are eager for this support, and there is consensus among the humanitarian community that trainings are critical for enhancing long-term capacity.¹¹² This collaboration necessitates engaging with the public sector personnel and enhancing the exchange of capacity, ideas and expertise to sustain positive outcomes beyond project closure. This engagement not only involves providing the public sector with the resources necessary to sustain project outcomes but also ensuring that no harm is done. For example, in solid waste management interventions, humanitarian organisations provide garbage bins. However, if the municipality lacks the essential trucks for waste collection and transportation and is not supported in this area, garbage accumulates around the bins, attracting rodents and insects. This scenario compromises the safety and dignity of the communities involved.

There are several successful examples of capacity-enhancement efforts that could yield long-lasting impact if supported over the long term. For instance, community governance structures such as farmer associations or WASH committees, trained by humanitarian actors alongside governmental officials, in principled operation and maintenance, good governance, and efficient water resource management could contribute to sustain the knowledge, skills, and principles introduced during humanitarian interventions and trainings.¹¹³ Additionally, humanitarian organisations teams have conducted training sessions for the farmer association and staff from the water directorate on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the agricultural sector. These sessions offered practical tips on safely including people with different types of disabilities into the sector, demonstrating that while challenging, inclusion is indeed feasible. The goal was to achieve a mindset shift necessary to challenge environmental and attitudinal barriers, enabling people with disabilities to participate on an equal basis with others in their community. Training efforts must go beyond task handover and must also include trainings to address longer-term service governance and management beyond the closure of humanitarian projects.

Humanitarian organisations and local authorities must also collaborate to improve accountability of the humanitarian response to the affected population. This requires more proactive and regular dialogue between humanitarian actors and authorities. However, several interviews with former government ministries revealed that humanitarian actors often only approach them when problems arise.¹¹⁴ They recommended greater involvement in the planning phase of projects to increase engagement and address access challenges. Such ongoing dialogue could significantly increase the effectiveness of support throughout the project cycle.

In Syria, community engagement while possible is still limited not only by access restrictions but also by the lack of trusted community-based structures. To overcome these obstacles, humanitarian organisations have established informal community-based protection structures to mobilise communities in decision-making processes and improve accountability to those they serve.

¹⁰⁹ [The Syrian Economy at War: Part 2 – Labor Pains Amid the Blurring of the Public and Private Sectors](#), COAR (2020).

¹¹⁰ [Syria Raises Salaries for Public Sector Workers by 50%](#), Al Mayadeen English (6 February 2024).

¹¹¹ Monthly Market Bulletin, WFP, Syria Country Office (2024).

¹¹² Interviews with humanitarian organisations and Syria Government representatives (2024)

¹¹³ Information from Oxfam's programming (2024)

¹¹⁴ Interviews with Syrian Government representative (2024)

For example, as part of UNDP's 2021 Participatory Local Recovery Plan projects in Aleppo and Hama, voluntary committees were formed to encourage community participation in decision-making.

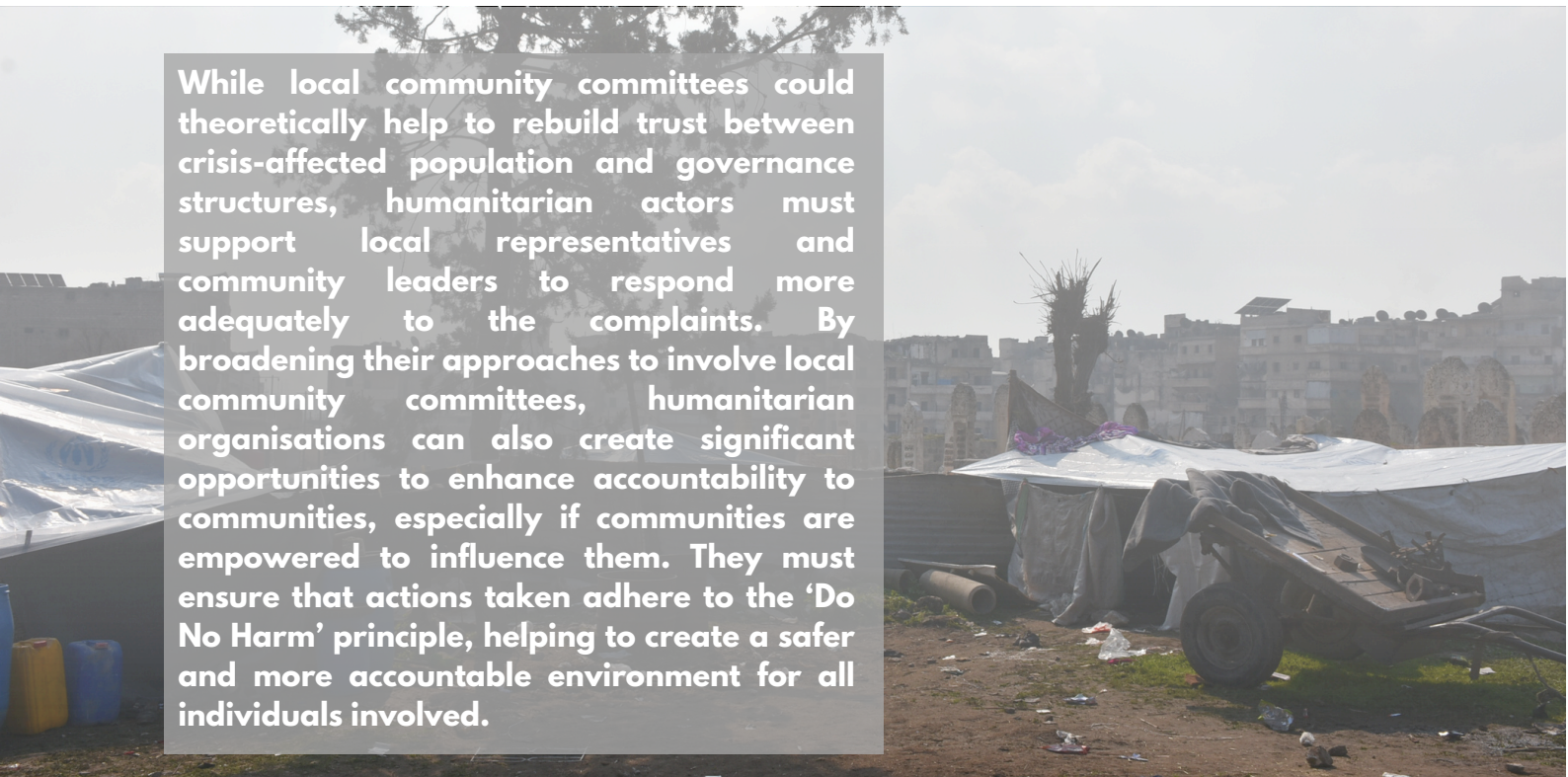


While humanitarian actors already focus on consultation with communities, the range of approaches to enhance community engagement can be expanded. Participatory Local Recovery Planning can transform this dynamic, transcending consultation and instead empowering and mobilizing communities to participate in the decision-making and implementation of local responses to the challenges affecting their lives.¹¹⁵

UNDP received positive feedback regarding the local recovery committee's collaboration with local authorities. For example, after the committee rehabilitated a garden, the authorities contributed by collecting the garbage, demonstrating a joint effort that supports long-term recovery and local ownership of initiatives.

Another example from Oxfam involves the support provided in 2023 to consolidate two existing committees established years ago by a humanitarian actor in Der Ez Zor, followed by supporting their expansion to include members with disabilities. It aimed to focus their efforts in promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities not only within their communities but also within the broader humanitarian sector and the agricultural sector. The committee's implementation of street solar lighting for high-risk routes and a universal bus stop in locations of their choice was the outcome of a close collaboration between the committee and the municipal leadership, in addition to the support offered by Oxfam. The municipality demonstrated a strong commitment by granting autonomy to the committee members to make decisions regarding the design of these initiatives. They also offered technical advice, guidance, and human resources to help them effectively shape and implement their initiatives.

However, where they do exist, formal local community committees are often composed of community leaders and local representatives, which can pose challenges. Crisis-affected populations may be hesitant to engage with local community committees which may not always be considered as representatives of their communities.¹¹⁶

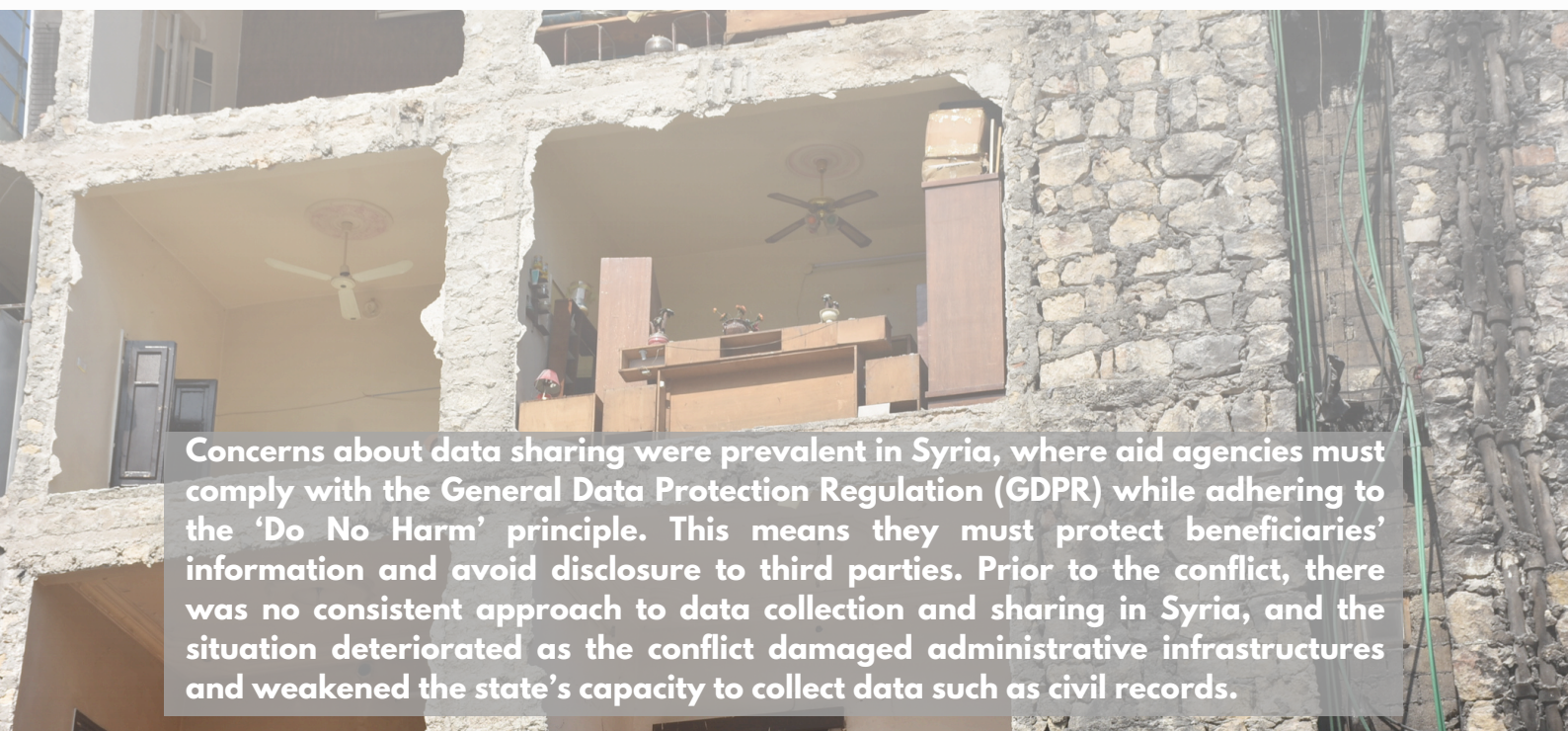


While local community committees could theoretically help to rebuild trust between crisis-affected population and governance structures, humanitarian actors must support local representatives and community leaders to respond more adequately to the complaints. By broadening their approaches to involve local community committees, humanitarian organisations can also create significant opportunities to enhance accountability to communities, especially if communities are empowered to influence them. They must ensure that actions taken adhere to the 'Do No Harm' principle, helping to create a safer and more accountable environment for all individuals involved.

¹¹⁵ Participatory Community Recovery Plan, 2022-2024, UNDP (2022)

¹¹⁶ Interviews humanitarian organisations representatives (2024)

Data protection



Concerns about data sharing were prevalent in Syria, where aid agencies must comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) while adhering to the ‘Do No Harm’ principle. This means they must protect beneficiaries’ information and avoid disclosure to third parties. Prior to the conflict, there was no consistent approach to data collection and sharing in Syria, and the situation deteriorated as the conflict damaged administrative infrastructures and weakened the state’s capacity to collect data such as civil records.

Humanitarian agencies faced challenges about independent data collection without principled engagement with affected communities. With no clear governmental policy or regulation on data collection and data sharing, humanitarian agencies were sometimes asked to share beneficiary data with former authorities seeking to prevent aid duplication. For example, during the February 2023 earthquake response, the Operations Room¹¹⁷ requested that humanitarian agencies share beneficiary data for cash assistance to prevent duplication and avoid community tensions. This raised concern among INGOs and UN agencies, about how the Operations Room would treat and store the data, prompting a broader discussion between the former Syrian authorities and the Cash Working Group on data-sharing protocols. Resolving the issue proved challenging, as data sharing and collection are governed by Syrian law.¹¹⁸ Extensive advocacy and dialogue with authorities were necessary to balance compliance between regulatory requirements in their countries of registration and the need to protection of individuals’ data, as per humanitarian standards.

Data collection for a humanitarian response requires engagement with local communities from the design phase to the post-implementation phase. This had been a major challenge in Syria due to a reluctance from the former Government of Syria to allow international aid agencies to conduct protection needs assessments at household and individual levels.¹¹⁹ As indicated by the Protection Cluster, no protection-focused needs assessment has been conducted since 2017 due to the difficulty in securing approval for such assessments.¹²⁰ INGOs with a Memorandum of Understanding with a technical line-ministry, such as the Ministry of Education, were able to conduct technical assessments but only in schools, or under MoSAL only in the community-centers.¹²¹ INGOs who used to operate under SARC had to seek approvals for needs assessments, which were more easily granted to other sectors. Consequently, protection needs assessments were integrated into other sector assessments, limiting their scope. The restrictions on protection assessments limit the ability to design data-driven protection programmes, with implications not only for protection but also for addressing the most urgent needs of vulnerable groups across various sectors. Without protection monitoring humanitarian actors are unable to monitor prioritised protection risks in different locations can change (or do not change). These assessments are critical for identifying and addressing protection risks to inform an effective protection response. Protection monitoring at community, household and individual level, should be facilitated including engagement of a wide cross-section of protection actors.

¹¹⁷ The Operations Room was established after the February Earthquake and was chaired by the Governor of Aleppo and includes technical line-ministries as well as SARC and ST. OCHA was part of it as an observer, and INGOs didn’t have a seat.

¹¹⁸ Under Syrian law, the Central Bureau of Statistics holds exclusive control over data, and sharing raw data is prohibited as it contains identifiable information. Additionally, only the Bureau’s enumerators are authorized to collect data, and all aspects of data management—including entry, cleaning, and storage—are handled solely by the Central Bureau of Statistics.

¹¹⁹ *Hard Lessons*, Oxfam and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) (2020)

¹²⁰ Interview with humanitarian organization representative (2024)

¹²¹ Interviews with humanitarian organization representatives (2024)

Furthermore, project monitoring activities that evaluate early recovery interventions outcomes require sustained access to communities. The ability of INGOs to conduct such monitoring activities varies among projects. Most outcome monitoring activities take place during project implementation – for example, during a survey or a distribution, or spot checks during the repair of a water network or school.¹²² For example, MoSAL during their visits on the field noticed that some livelihoods kits get sold and regrets that INGOs are not conducting more outcome monitoring visits to ensure effective implementation of their projects. There are opportunities for INGOs to gather information to seek funding for scaled up programming and to potentially gain longer-term access to conduct post-implementation monitoring.

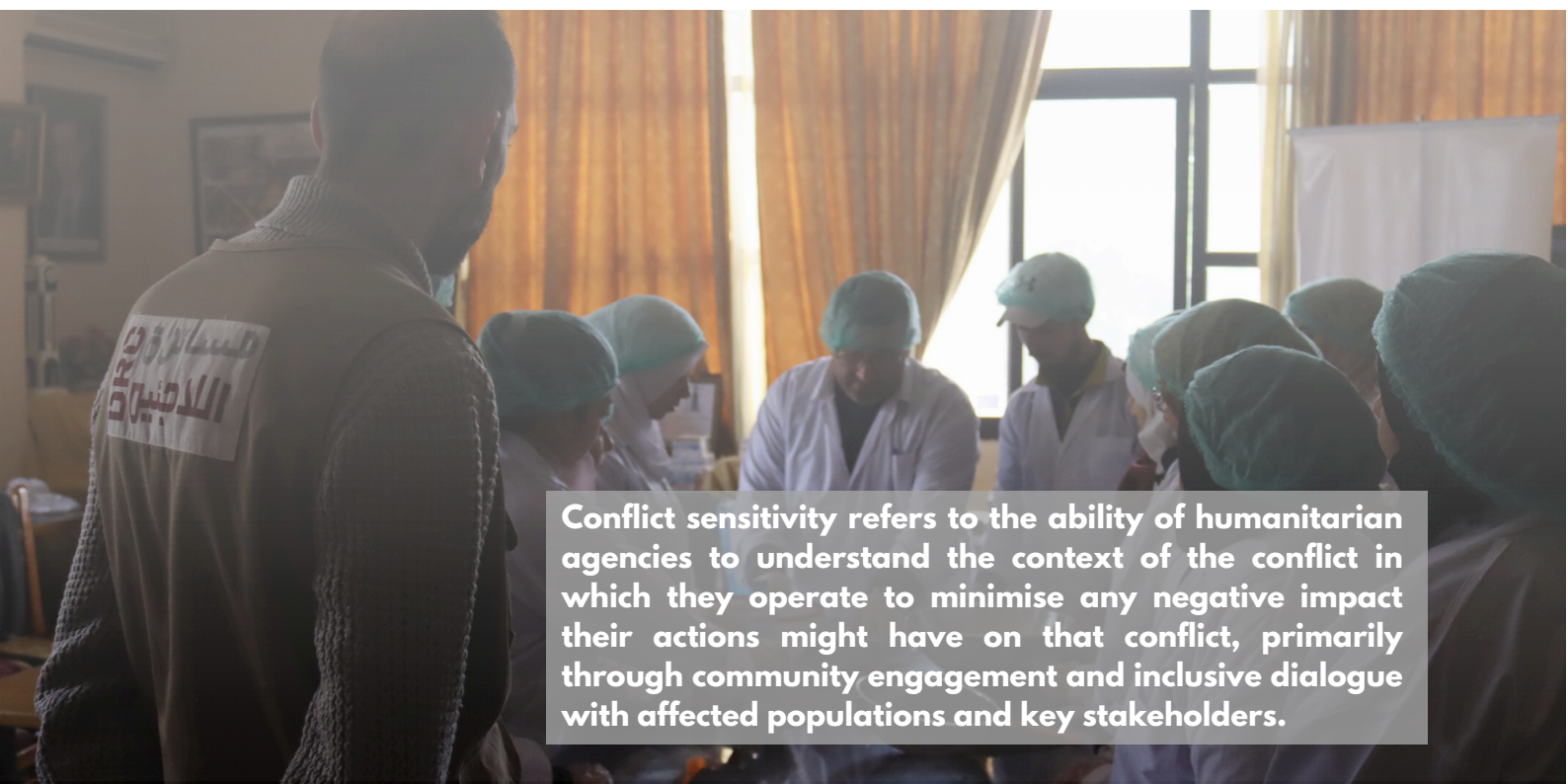


There is a strong ground to prove to donors that the needs are important, and that individual approaches are not enough nor sustainable”

notes a representative of a ministry.

¹²³

Conflict sensitivity



Conflict sensitivity refers to the ability of humanitarian agencies to understand the context of the conflict in which they operate to minimise any negative impact their actions might have on that conflict, primarily through community engagement and inclusive dialogue with affected populations and key stakeholders.

The interviews highlighted a recurring dilemma¹²⁴ in engaging with authorities in Syria:



Aid agencies must either choose to work with public authorities, potentially conflicting with donor red lines, or opt to avoid engagement, which would not be possible in the context of Syria and can lead to the creation of parallel systems, compromising the ‘Do No Harm’ principle and duplicating services.

Despite the challenges, humanitarian agencies believe that principled engagement with future authorities is possible, even for international organizations and protection programmes which tend to be more sensitive due to the nature of the issues faced by the affected population. Principled engagement should be the foundation of all work in Syria, guided by the humanitarian principles and following a conflict-sensitive approach that prioritizes protection and adheres to the Do No Harm framework.

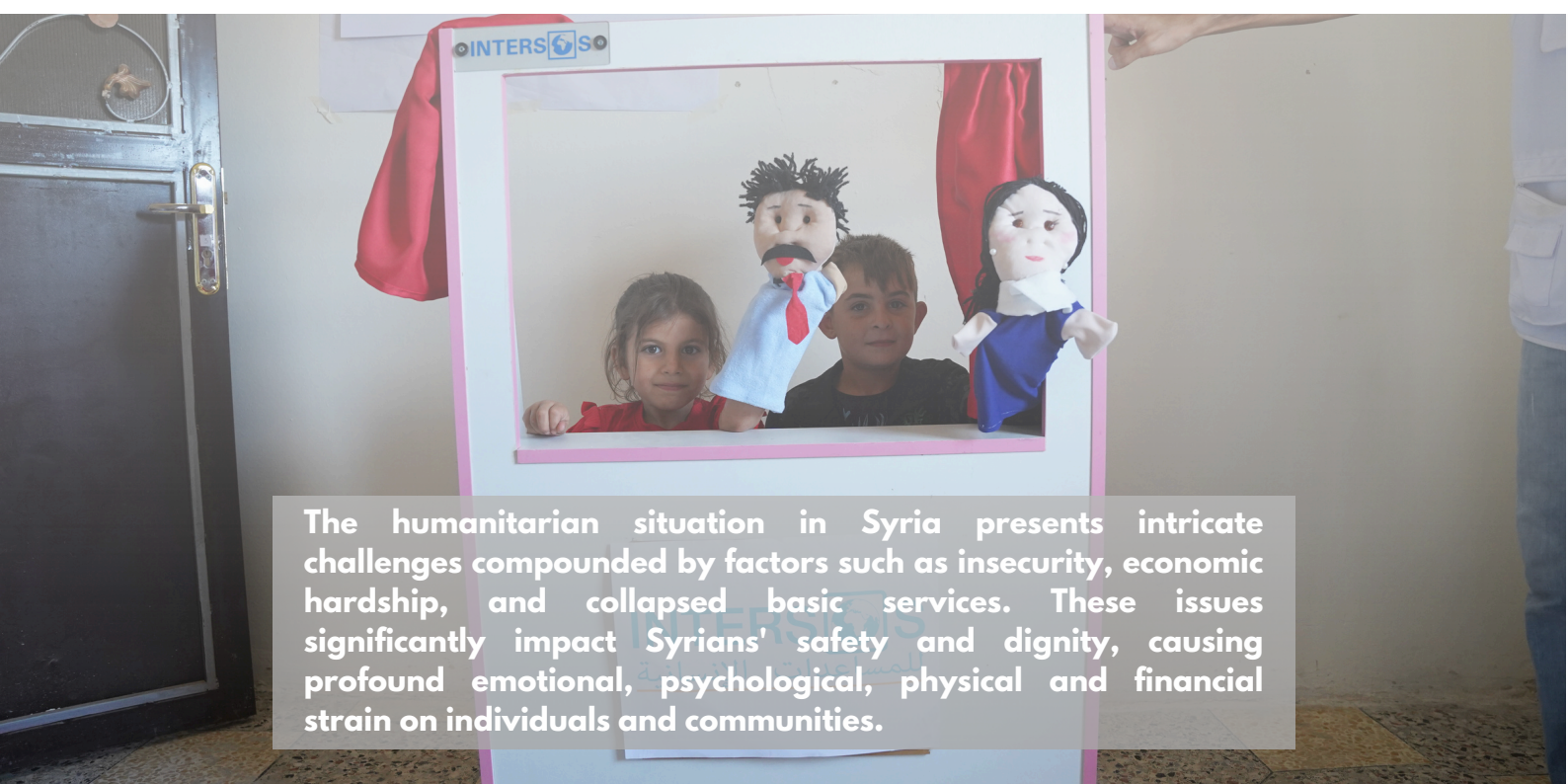
¹²² *Hard Lessons*, Oxfam and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) (2020)

¹²³ Interview with Syria government representative (2024)

¹²⁴ Interview with humanitarian organisation representative (2024)

At the local level, humanitarian actors can benefit from the public sector and authorities' deep knowledge of community needs and response gaps, enabling them to gain valuable insights into the connectors and dividers within each area of implementation. The 'Do No Harm' principle should be a cornerstone in organisations' programmes, and a guiding principle for early recovery interventions.¹²⁵ To avoid causing harm, humanitarian actors should be able to conduct localized detailed analysis necessary to gain an in-depth understanding of risks and social tensions that they should avoid exacerbating by their interventions. Substantial investment in context sensitivity analysis is essential. This includes an understanding of context including population displacements, connectors or dividers within communities. This is essential to help agencies understand the community relationships, identify potential drivers of dividers or connectors, and accordingly ensure that the design and implementation of early recovery programmes are safe and do support social cohesion outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS



The humanitarian situation in Syria presents intricate challenges compounded by factors such as insecurity, economic hardship, and collapsed basic services. These issues significantly impact Syrians' safety and dignity, causing profound emotional, psychological, physical and financial strain on individuals and communities.

Addressing these complexities necessitates sustained efforts across sectors, with an emphasis on protection, including legal aid and GBV prevention and response programmes, and other resilience-building interventions. Collaborative partnerships among international and local actors, bolstered by improved coordination mechanisms and enhanced donor engagement, are indispensable for delivering effective and sustainable humanitarian assistance.

The adoption of a community-based, multi-sectoral approach in early recovery programming represents a critical shift towards more effective and sustainable humanitarian aid in Syria. By involving local communities and public authorities, early recovery programming would not only meet immediate recovery needs but also foster resilience and self-reliance among crisis-affected populations. A community-based approach would leverage existing capacities and services, thereby reducing dependence on humanitarian aid while promoting inclusive decision-making and community participation. However, challenges persist, including bureaucratic obstacles and centralised approval processes that delay implementation and hinder timely responses. Overcoming these hurdles and fostering transparent dialogue with the caretaker, transitional and future Syrian government are pivotal steps toward achieving meaningful progress in supporting the recovery efforts of the Syrian population.

¹²⁵ Guiding Principle 5, Guidance Note on Inter-Cluster Early Recovery, Global Cluster for Early Recovery (2016).

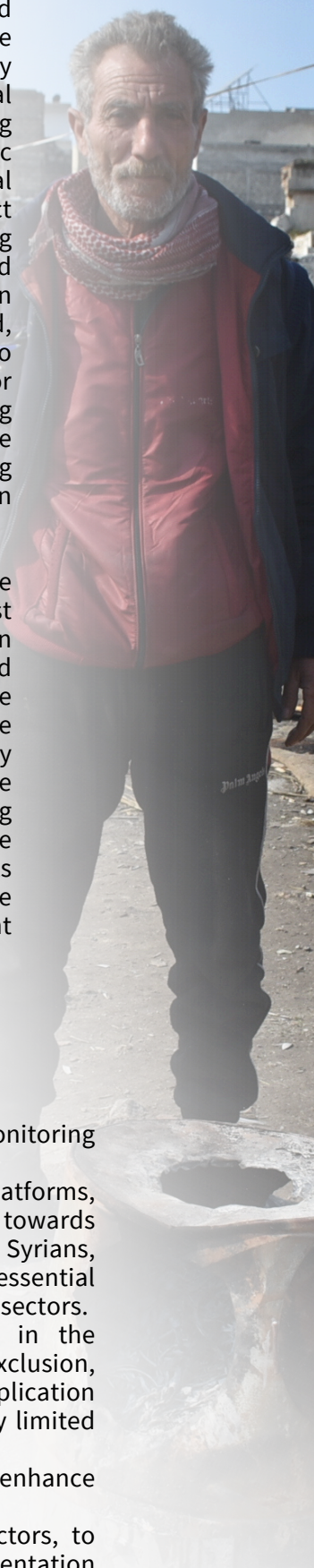
Prioritising multi-sectoral collaboration and integrating protection principles and services into humanitarian interventions can amplify the impact of efforts and contribute to long-term stability and peacebuilding in Syria. It is crucial to embed protection principles and services into resilience programming to confront the intricate challenges faced by People with Specific Needs, including at-risk elderly people, women, and children, people with disabilities or with serious medical conditions, and those with specific legal and physical protection needs. The ongoing crisis exacerbates pre-existing protection risks, underscoring the necessity for holistic interventions that combine livelihoods support with case management and essential services. Additionally, in a very uncertain and fragile context, with hard to predict displacement and return trends for both IDPs and refugees from neighboring countries and beyond the region, including possible increase in both voluntary and involuntary returns, it is paramount to better coordinate and mainstream protection activities in early recovery programming for all vulnerable populations in need, factoring in also possible increase in return trends or further displacement due to instability. Adopting a community-based, multi-sectoral approach is essential for tailoring interventions to local needs, ensuring sustainability, and fostering community engagement throughout the intervention process. Long-term, flexible funding plays a vital role in building trust, assessing impact, and achieving enduring improvements in economic stability, social cohesion, and protection outcomes in Syria.

Lastly, effective engagement with the authorities and the public sector is imperative for sustainable early recovery programming in Syria. Humanitarian organisations must navigate donors' political redlines to strengthen the capacity of local authorities in delivering essential services and supporting recovery efforts. Building trust and facilitating regular dialogue between humanitarian actors and the public sector are critical for efficient coordination and effective program implementation. To ensure coherent and principled engagement, aid agencies must always be guided by humanitarian principles. No interventions should take place that do not align with the principles of impartiality, independence and operational neutrality. Overcoming challenges related to data protection and ensuring robust community engagement are essential for informed decision-making and responsive programming that respects local contexts and is informed by conflict dynamics. Embracing a conflict-sensitive approach and upholding the 'Do No Harm' principle are fundamental to prevent exacerbating tensions and promote lasting peace and stability in Syria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the caretaker, transitional and future Government of Syria

- Facilitate access, grant permissions, and allocate space for protection monitoring programs.
- Engage humanitarian actors, including through the UN-led coordination platforms, especially civil society actors, to explore and input to the risks related to HLP, towards designing/implementing a national mechanism or action plan supporting all Syrians, including women, to access civil and HLP documentation. This collaboration is essential to mobilize and employ the limited resources within the public and humanitarian sectors.
- Support the UN-led coordination platforms to identify and rectify gaps in the humanitarian coordination mechanism, aiming to reduce errors of inclusion/exclusion, enhance the quality and efficiency of humanitarian operations, and prevent duplication or overlap in assistance efforts. This collaboration is essential given the already limited resources within the humanitarian sector.
- Explore efficient ways to expedite response timeframes for civil registry offices to enhance timely assistance during emergencies.
- Create a space for additional humanitarian actors, especially civil society actors, to provide legal aid to be able to respond at the scale required to civil documentation needs.



- Facilitate humanitarian actors' access to communities throughout the project cycle management from needs assessments, design, implementation to project monitoring and evaluation activities by reducing bureaucracy around approvals
- Assess the feasibility of reactivating the child protection unit within the MoSAL in coordination with the UN-led child protection coordination platform and jointly evaluate the potential for efficient mobilization and optimal utilization of limited resources across both the public and humanitarian sectors regarding this issue. This collaboration can explore the feasibility of utilizing early recovery programming to jointly address structural threats to child protection that require active, government institutional mechanisms to address.
- Encourage the UN-led Child Protection coordination platform, especially civil society actors, to engage and set a national action plan for revisiting the application of provisions in the 2021 child rights law concerning the scenarios where judges are granted discretion to approve marriages for children aged 15-18. Involving civil society is essential for initiating behavioural changes at the grassroots level, which are crucial for ensuring that legal reforms are embraced by the community, thereby supporting sustainable recovery efforts.
- Urge the enhancement of the ongoing collaboration with the different UN-led coordination platforms to operationalize and monitor the *Syria National Action Plan for Disability Inclusion*.
- Engage with UN-led coordination platforms to focus efforts on creating a monitoring framework for the application of the *National Disability Classification* to ensure functional performance is a key criterion determining eligibility for the disability card.
- Encourage public sector staff to attend trainings and workshops with humanitarian actors to enable exchange of expertise between humanitarian and public sectors, and to ensure humanitarian principles are owned and are central to the collaborative effort.
- Encourage and facilitate partnerships between INGOs and a wider range of NNGOs by reducing bureaucratic obstacles. This is essential for supporting the local humanitarian leadership and the secure of exit strategies for international actors in the future.
- Support humanitarian measures intended to remove duplication or humanitarian assistance overlap, in alignment with GDPR, IHRL, national laws and humanitarian principles that uphold the rights and confidentiality of beneficiary lists.

To the donors

- Decouple funding for principled early recovery and resilience programs from political agendas. Early recovery is a core component of any humanitarian response and donors' decisions should prioritize humanitarian needs. This would enable humanitarian organizations to collaborate more effectively with the public sector and authorities in providing essential public services, which is essential for strengthening the resilience of vulnerable communities.
- Un-restrict principled engagement and exchange of expertise with the technical authorities and the public sector, including through workshops and training programs. This is essential to have in-depth understanding of existing capacities, gaps and priorities, as well as opportunities for principled collaboration, acknowledging the necessity of public sector inclusion in early recovery programming, for sustainable protection and early recovery outcomes.
- Create the space for early recovery programs to collaborate with the future authorities to enhance institutional mechanisms for enforcing protective Syrian provisions, as well as to improve preparedness and response to future emergencies, including displacement or IDP return. This is essential for addressing protection risks, introduced in this paper, at their core, contributing to sustainable protection and early recovery outcomes.
- Increase longer-term, humanitarian funding to at least 24 months, and provide more un-earmarked funding. This is important to allow flexibility for humanitarian organizations to address urgent needs and adapt to changing circumstances. It is also inevitable to design interventions with community-based approach, sustainable protection outcomes, and longer-term integration between various sectors.
- Explore strategies to maintain the consistency of humanitarian funding amounts in response to the instability and variations in exchange rates.

- Encourage implementing humanitarian organizations to prioritize evaluation, accountability and learning by promoting the adoption of tailored indicators to assess early recovery progress effectively.
- Allocate support and funding to research/evaluations aimed at enhancing learning processes towards successful and efficient integration of protection as a core element in early recovery efforts in Syria.
- In line with good humanitarian donorship principles, ensure readiness to offer support to the implementation of humanitarian action, including the facilitation of safe humanitarian access, decoupling these efforts from political agendas.
- Systematically support the use of cash transfers, within early recovery projects, including Cash for Protection, alongside other in-kind modalities in Syria. This is essential to meet the protection needs of individuals in line with their preferences and unique circumstances.
- Prioritize funding early recovery programmes which focus on provision of integrated and quality resilience programming with protection principles, assistance and services at their core, which will create solid foundations for Syrian people to sustain livelihoods while prioritizing their protection needs and subsequently improve resilience.
- Ensure that counterterrorism and unilateral coercive measures align with GDPR, IHRL, national laws and humanitarian principles to uphold rights and protections. This includes avoiding the request for beneficiary vetting or screening of final beneficiaries.¹²⁶
- Ensure that risk management measures, including counterterrorism and unilateral coercive measures support rather than hinder the work of national and local humanitarian actors.¹²⁷

To the United Nations Agencies

- Reaffirm the Centrality of Protection commitment in a dedicated Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) Protection Strategy, for Syria, that focuses on addressing the protection risks introduced in this paper, alongside others, and prompts collective action in complement to the Humanitarian Response Plan and the protection sector strategy.
- Facilitate deeper engagement of LNGOs in decision-making processes towards strengthening a local humanitarian leadership. This is vital for instigating behavioural shifts and ownership at the community level, crucial for advocating for necessary legal reforms to support sustainable recovery and resilience-building endeavours.
- Continue to promote the adoption of a Protection Analytical Framework in protection analysis at sector and inter-sector levels.
- Continue a consistent engagement with MoSAL for the operationalisation of the interagency referral mechanism initially designed in 2022. This is essential to facilitate seamless referrals between LNGOs and INGOs and encourage principled referrals among all humanitarian actors to maximise the impact of the limited available resources through coordinated efforts.
- Engage with the caretaker, transitional and future government of Syria and humanitarian actors across all sectors to review and enhance the quality of existing coordination mechanisms at both sectoral and inter-sectoral levels to mitigate overlap and duplication of assistance. This is essential to enhance multi-sector coordination necessary to create a conducive and reliable operating environment for designing and managing early recovery interventions that require a stronger coordination function that goes beyond mere coordination to avoid overlap in assistance.
- Improve effective engagement of all sector partners through consultation, information sharing, dialogue, and harmonisation of guidelines and case management tools within and across sectors. Addressing these gaps sustainably and systemically demands ongoing sector efforts, rather than isolated training sessions or initiatives.
- Enhance coordination and integrated programming between shelter and protection sectors/practitioners. This integration involves supporting households to claim valid deeds or lease agreements, along with provision of cash for rent or shelter rehabilitation. This support can take the form of referrals for legal information provision or for cash assistance to cover the fees of lawyers when needed. This can also entail coordinated advocacy led by the protection sector/ HLP technical working group and the Shelter sector in Syria to re-activate and enhance HLP assistance in Syria.

- Harmonize and consolidate the Cash for Protection and Individual Protection Assistance expertise and standards, across the Protection sector.
- Enhance coordination and integration between the Cash and Voucher Assistance, the Early Recovery and Livelihoods, and the Protection sector, towards shifting from relief to recovery.
- Review procedures to enhance timely provision of general and medical in-kind assistance needed by survivors of protection risks.
- Grant LNGOs more autonomy in decision-making, including on principled referrals of protection cases to other humanitarian actors, enhancing holistic and timely responses to the needs of survivors of protection risks.

To LNGOs and INGOs

- Advocate for principled, unhindered, and sustainable access as essential for effective resilience programs and leverage the area-based and community-based approaches, to maximise positive impacts and increase local engagement.
- Improve regular, transparent, and open dialogues with donors and the caretaker, transitional, and the future Syrian government, focusing on addressing protection issues. Ensure these discussions are distinct from contracting, reporting, and approval procedures and occurrences.
- Design and implement early recovery programmes in which livelihoods, WASH, Shelter and other services are operational alongside protection services within the same area and/or consider transportation costs to allow people to access programmes and services in areas where there is a complete lack of services.
- Adopt a comprehensive approach to designing early recovery interventions by considering the varied impacts of electricity shortages, climate change, and damaged infrastructure on individuals, households, community dynamics, and their protection environment. This is essential to identify capacity gaps at different levels and to design tailored, relevant, and targeted interventions.
- Design and implement early recovery programs that enhance engagement with private/public sector to disincentivise child labour across various value chains including contractual commitments on child labour regulations on minimum age, hazardous work, and the worst forms of child labour.
- Enhance donor engagement at the capital level to focus on the practical aspects of humanitarian response and depoliticize discussions on early recovery and protection efforts.
- Scale up robust case management and other individual protection assistance within early recovery programs to ensure that protection remains central to holistic, multi-sector humanitarian responses.
- Tailor programs and interventions based on the specific service history and contextual barriers to accessing civil documentation in targeted locations to optimize legal assistance outcomes in resilience-building programs.
- Design and implement capacity-building programs, dialogues, and workshops with the public sector to exchange expertise and enhance service delivery capacity within both sectors. This is crucial for strengthening accountability to Syrian communities, especially within the early recovery interventions carried out by humanitarian sectors and sustained by the public sector in the long term.
- Design and implement interventions that ensure Syrian households are supported to claim valid deeds or lease agreements, while being assisted with cash for rent or shelter rehabilitation. This support can take the form of referrals for legal information provision or for cash assistance to cover the fees of lawyers when needed.
- Revisit the traditional monitoring and evaluation approach and include resilience specific indicators to better measure the impacts of the programs through resilience lenses, questioning inclusivity, protection, behavioural and institutional changes.
- Design and implement interventions that prioritise community-led interventions which promotes the community-led planning, implementation and monitoring of interventions to ensure that the programme is relevant and tailored to the specific needs of the community, as well as owned and sustained by them.

DRC DANISH
REFUGEE
COUNCIL



INTER**S**
HUMANITARIAN AID

