



A BETTER TOMORROW

SYRIA'S CHILDREN HAVE THEIR SAY



Save the Children
100 YEARS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Credit: Save the Children



- Almost eight years into the crisis in Syria, half of children have grown up knowing nothing but conflict¹ and 5 million are in need of humanitarian assistance.² Many live in areas where basic services are almost non-existent and the infrastructure they rely on has been decimated, and at least 2.5 million children are internally displaced.
- Ahead of the Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region in March 2019 (Brussels III), Save the Children canvassed the views of hundreds of children in four governorates of Syria about their challenges, priorities for recovery and hopes for the future.
- The overwhelming message from children is that they want and need security and stability with their families. More than half of children identify violence, family separation, the destruction of homes and vital infrastructure and lack of access to basic services like education and healthcare as “very serious” challenges facing them and their communities.
- As a result of the reverberating effects of the conflict, more than a third of children say they ‘often or always’ feel unsafe, and many also feel distressed, alone and untrusting. Being uneducated and ‘left behind’ due to lack of access to schooling is also a commonly expressed concern.
- Despite this, the children surveyed are overwhelmingly optimistic about the future and their role in creating a better Syria, provided there is peace and stability. They identify a number of priorities for their recovery, including rehabilitating schools and improving access to education for all, repairing vital infrastructure and recreational facilities, and removing explosive remnants of war.
- Save the Children is calling on delegates to the Brussels III donor conference to publicly commit to supporting child-focused early recovery in Syria and provide targeted and sustained funding for key sectors on the basis of further consultations with children and youth. Parties to the conflict and the international community must also take concrete steps to create the conditions for peace and protect children, while ensuring equitable access to basic and life-saving services.

INTRODUCTION

“If we invest in the next generation, we can restore our country to its former glory. I ask the international community to help Syria build a better tomorrow,”

Sami³, aged 13

A generation of Syrian children has had their childhoods shaped by a war which has torn apart the physical and social fabric of their society. As we approach the eighth anniversary of the conflict, attention is turning to issues of early recovery and rehabilitation, despite ongoing violence and displacement inside Syria. This process is led by adults, but ultimately it is today’s children who will shape their communities and rebuild their country tomorrow.

This is a pivotal moment in the crisis, with half of Syria’s children having grown up knowing nothing but conflict⁴ and living in areas without proper access to basic services.⁵ If urgent action is not taken to help them and their families to begin the process of recovery – including returning to school and healing psychological wounds – then prospects for peace and stability in Syria will remain distant. It is therefore vital that we listen to and act on the priorities of children and young people for themselves and their communities, priorities which are outlined in this report.

After eight years of war, the scale of the challenges facing the next generation in Syria is immense. Whole neighbourhoods in Syria’s towns and cities lie in ruins, littered with explosive remnants of war (ERW) including deadly cluster munitions and landmines. With infrastructure decimated, more than half of children now live in areas where they are deprived of basic services and require humanitarian assistance. A third of their schools have been damaged, destroyed or occupied, and 46 percent of the health facilities they rely on are not fully functioning.⁶ Widespread use of explosive weapons in populated areas throughout the war has destroyed housing and water networks, leaving millions without proper shelter and the majority of sewage untreated.⁷

In addition to the physical destruction, and even more importantly to many children, ties of family and community have been ripped apart. More than half the population has been forced to flee their homes, with 6.2 million people currently internally displaced and 5.6 million refugees.⁸ Many children have lost a close relative or have a parent or sibling in detention, missing or disappeared, and thousands have been orphaned or separated from their families in the chaos of war.

Poverty and unemployment created by the conflict has eroded family stability, and forced girls and boys who would previously have been in school into unsafe jobs and child marriage.

The impact of this on children – more than 4 million of whom were born after the start of the conflict in 2011⁹ - is hard to quantify. Attacks on education, displacement and child labour have contributed to a situation in which 2.1 million children are out of school, depriving them of basic skills and a safe and protective environment. Rates of malnutrition, disease and disability have increased markedly over the course of the conflict. In surveys, children report feeling afraid, anxious and sad, with many showing signs of emotional distress.¹⁰

Despite the devastation wrought on their communities and lives, the children surveyed for this report were overwhelmingly positive about the future of Syria and their role in it. Through focus group discussions and questionnaires with 365 children in four governorates in Syria, they identified a clear set of issues, including violence and insecurity, family separation, substandard housing and lack of basic services.

They also mapped out ways forward to address those concerns, including rehabilitating schools and hospitals, opening community centres and services for unaccompanied and orphaned children and those with disabilities, and repairing parks and recreational facilities. Underpinning all this is an overwhelming plea to their leaders and the international community to lay down their arms and create the conditions for peace.

This survey only provides a snapshot and more needs to be done to listen to the views and facilitate the participation of girls and boys across Syria. However, the message from the children who took part is clear - after eight years of war and untold suffering, they still believe a better tomorrow is possible. They see a Syria in which violence has no place and children can play in parks and go to school without fear, where the poor and sick get the help they need and women and girls have an equal chance in life. It is the role of the international community, donors and the Syrian authorities to support children long-term to make their vision a reality.

LISTENING TO THE NEXT GENERATION

Methodology

In the lead up to the Brussels III donor conference and amid growing questions about how best to support Syria's population in the midst of a protracted and complex crisis, Save the Children identified a need to consult with children and youth to inform global funding decisions, programme design and policy positions.

Questionnaires, focus group discussions, role-play activities and in-depth interviews were conducted with children aged 10-18 in Idlib, Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh governorates in February 2019 by Save the Children and Hurras Network.

These locations were identified as areas significantly affected by the conflict (50% of the child population identified by the UN as in need of humanitarian assistance live in these four governorates¹¹) and areas where Save the Children currently has most of its programming and access. However, this only provides a limited insight and while there are commonalities in the needs of children across Syria, there are also likely to be differences. The intention is that this survey can provide a template for further in-depth consultation with children and young people across Syria to inform funding decisions and programme design.

In total, 365 children (193 females, 172 males) completed individual questionnaires identifying the key issues facing their communities and their priorities for change and 189 girls and boys took part in focus group activities. In addition, 11 children were interviewed for in-depth case studies and 10 key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with local officials and experts in child protection and education.

The group activities were broken down into three parts:

1 – Draw Your Future, in which children draw where they see themselves in the future and describe it to the group

2 – Leader for the Day, in which groups of children imagine they are leader of their camp/village/town and identify priorities for helping their community

3 – Race to the Finish, in which the groups pick their top priorities from the suggestions and map out how they would achieve the goals.

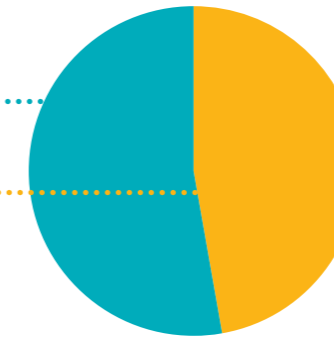
This report sets out the key challenges and issues that they identified through this process, their perspectives on the future and their proposals for change.

Child participant profiles

Gender

Female 53%

Male 47%

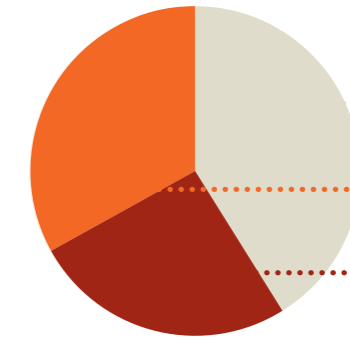


Age

10-12 41%

13-14 33%

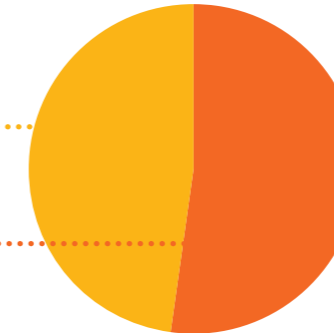
15-18 26%



Residence Status

Displaced to this area 48%

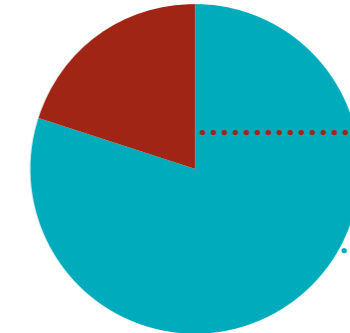
Originally from this area 48%



School Attendance

I dropped out of school 20%

I am still in school 80%



Challenges facing children and youth

Survey participants were asked to rate ten pre-selected key issues facing their community, from very serious to not serious at all. Reflecting the impact of the ongoing conflict on social and physical structures, insecurity, family disruption, poor housing, lack of basic services and poverty came out as priority issues. Children particularly highlighted the need to repair homes, schools and infrastructure such as water, electricity, and sewage networks, and to provide assistance to the poorest and most marginalised.

For some of the 'social' issues such as child marriage and family separation, girls were more likely to identify these as issues than boys – e.g. approximately 65% of girls said child marriage was a 'serious' or 'very serious' problem in their community, compared to 50% of boys.

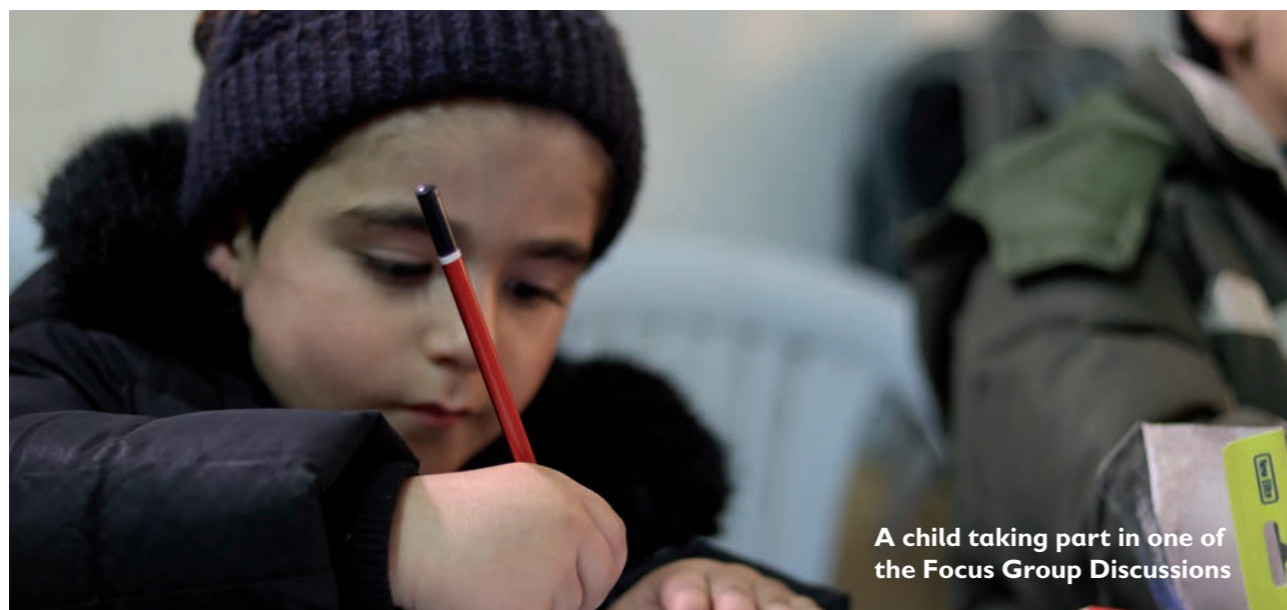
Many girls and boys reflected in group discussions and interviews that they face a range of interconnecting challenges which impact their lives and frustrate their potential, with violence and insecurity running like a thread throughout. Grave violations against children, tracked through the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) for Syria, have progressively increased each year since reporting started in 2013.¹² Attacks on schools and hospitals, killing and maiming of children, recruitment and use of children in conflict, abduction and sexual violence against children are all common violations.

In addition to ongoing conflict and fighting, explosive remnants of war¹³ and landmines are a growing problem in Syria and impact children's ability to access their homes, playgrounds and schools. According to the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO), 20 percent of victims of explosive hazard accidents were children, and almost half of those were hurt or killed while playing. Boys are reported to be particularly vulnerable, due to the gendered division of labour and their increased mobility.¹⁴

Lina*, 13, fled the siege in Eastern Ghouta and is now displaced with her grandmother, uncle and younger brother in Idlib:

"We spent the last year in Ghouta in shelters because many schools were bombed. Both of my parents were killed when our house was shelled and I hoped I would follow them, but God had other plans. What is left of my family is my brother, grandmother and my disabled uncle. Now we stay in a house without heating or running water. I wish the war would stop so I can go back to my old house in Ghouta and finish my education and become a teacher. I wish I did not lose my parents."

Lina's fears about the disruption of her education and the impact on her future was echoed time and time again by children and young people in narrative interviews and focus group discussions. They repeatedly expressed concerns about being left without an education, unable to achieve their hopes and



A child taking part in one of the Focus Group Discussions

Credit: Hurras - a Save the Children partner organisation

dreams, and the wider implications that would have for their generation and for the future of Syria.

Children in Syria face multiple barriers to going to school. Girls and boys are prevented from accessing safe, quality education as a result of displacement, insecurity, lack of accessible schools and qualified teachers, the impact of psychological distress on their ability to learn, lack of civil documentation and limited official certification for qualifications.

Nour*, 12, who has a chronic kidney condition (F):

“The war has affected my education as schools and universities close whenever there is unrest. When we hear bombs falling we have to stay inside. I also stopped going to school when I was too sad after my dad was killed – but I never stopped dreaming. My mother and brother keep

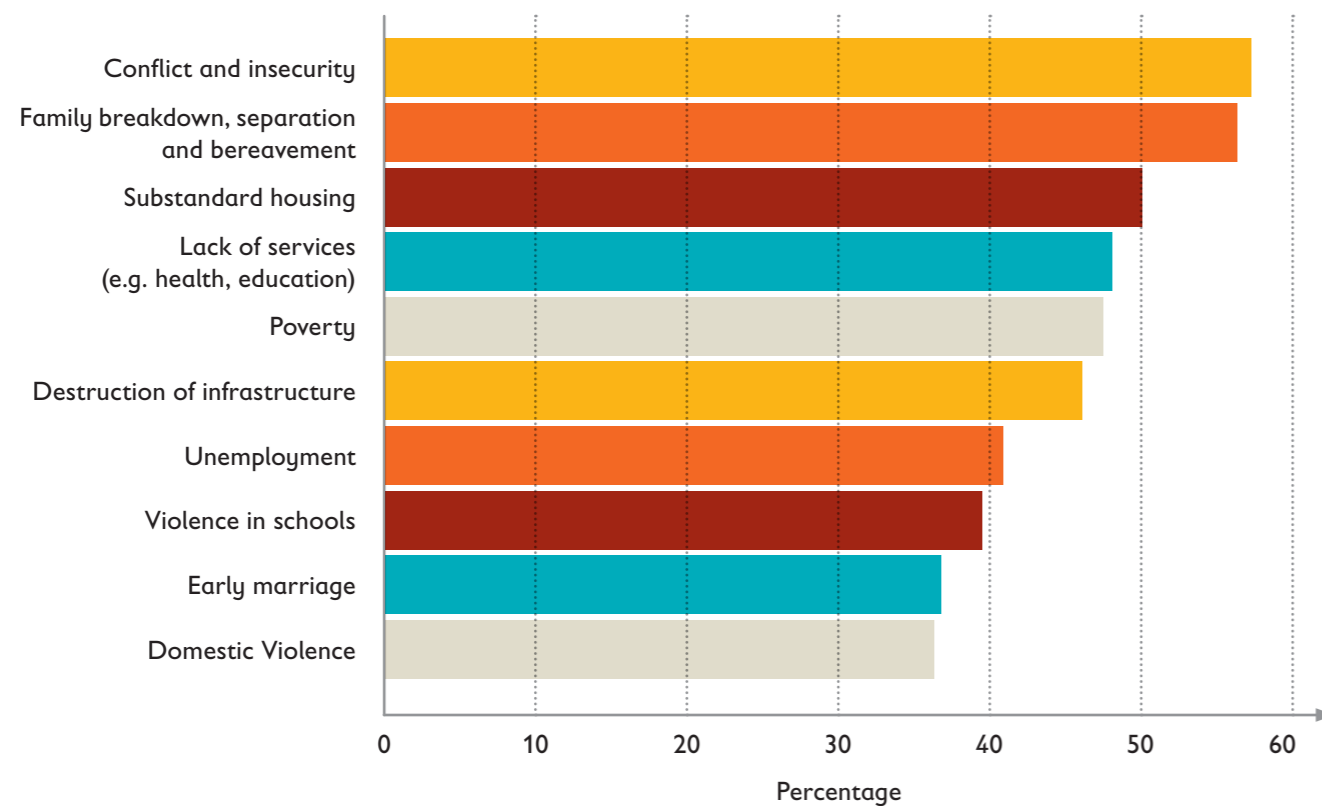
encouraging me to continue my education, so I continue to work hard and learn new subjects.”

Faisal*, 14 (M):

“The war has affected my education. I used to know how to read and write in Arabic and English, but now I forgot everything.”

The prominence of concerns about being separated from family and substandard housing also reflects the massive internal displacement crisis in Syria – particularly in the four governorates where this survey was conducted, but also in areas like rural Damascus – and destruction of housing stock. According to the latest UN Humanitarian Needs Overview, the number of people in need of shelter assistance has increased by 14 percent over the last year to 4.7 million.¹⁵

Percentage of children who said the following are “very serious” challenges facing their community



For all the major challenges identified, it was noted that some groups are more vulnerable to these than others – particularly people with disabilities, girls and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). In Key Informant Interviews for this report, all experts highlighted the rise in the number of children with disabilities due to conflict-related injuries, the concurrent decline in specialised services, facilities and medical treatment available to them, and the unique

challenges children with disabilities have living in camps and informal settlements.¹⁶ Women and girls face distinct protection risks, including various forms of gender-based violence such as sexual exploitation and early and forced marriage. The UN also notes that women and girls with disabilities are exposed to stigmatisation and discrimination, as well as forced marriages, and face specific challenges in accessing assistance.¹⁷

Personal challenges facing children and youth

In addition to reflecting on the shared challenges facing children across Syria, girls and boys were asked to rank how often, if ever, they personally feel or experience certain emotions or challenges. They highlighted feeling insecure, alone, restricted and untrusting. More than a third of those taking part also said they feel scared (of being alone, the future, bombing, death and darkness) and sad (including because they have lost a loved one or do not feel loved).

There were differences according to gender, with girls more likely to feel distressed, alone, unsafe and angry, and boys highlighting a lack of self-confidence and limited personal freedom. The impact and experience of conflict can be different for girls and boys, who face varied risks and have different coping mechanisms for dealing with the effects of crisis and displacement. In childhood and adolescence, in response to stress boys are found to exhibit more externalizing behaviours (e.g. rule breaking) whereas girls are more likely to have internalizing problems (e.g. anxiety and depression).¹⁸

Incidence of all negative feelings except insecurity came out significantly higher among respondents in North-East Syria than North-West Syria. In addition to variations in the context, this may reflect the profile of participants – in the North-East, a higher proportion of respondents were displaced rather than host community children, and a higher proportion were out of school.

Rani*, 15 (M):

“I have so many hidden feelings; I suffer in silence; my feelings come out as headache, pain and anxiety.”

These responses tally with the findings of Save the Children’s 2017 research on mental health and psychosocial needs in Syria, “Invisible Wounds”, which found that many children show signs of emotional distress.¹⁹ Currently, there are inadequate professional mental health services available to support girls and boys across Syria.²⁰ Even for those who do not require specialised help, the conditions that would help children to recover such as stability, family support and access to quality education are not in place for millions of children and young people.

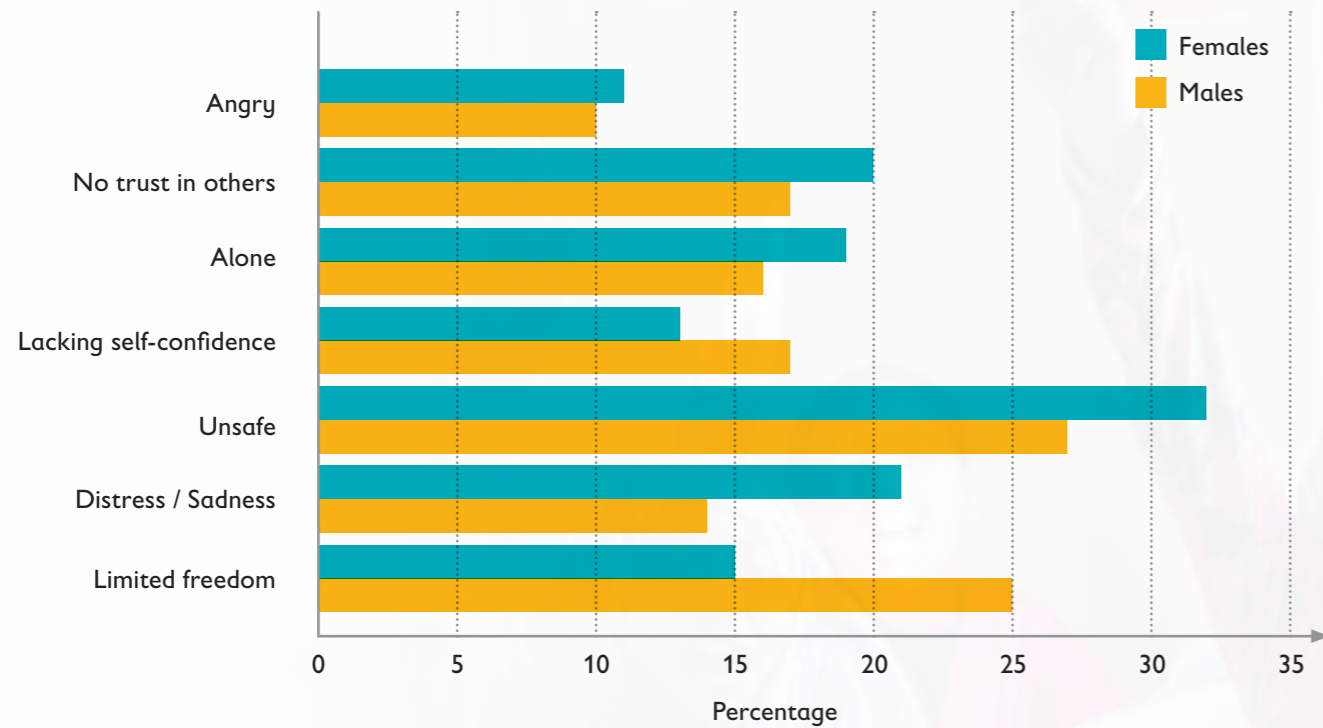
Sami*, 13 (M):

“The past few years were ugly... ugly... I saw my brother killed, my cousins, my neighbours. I was in the market and a bomb fell on everyone; that is when I lost my friends. I was injured and I feel really sad.”

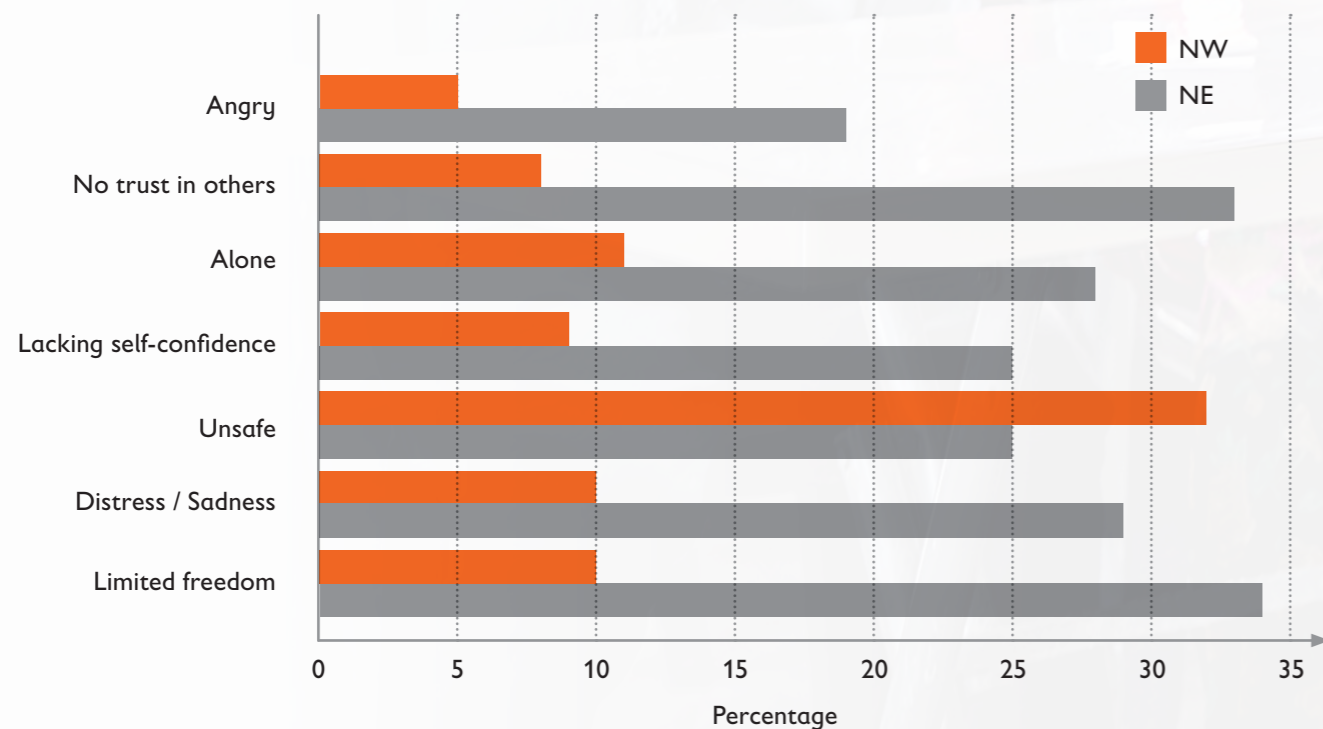


Credit: Save the Children Partner Organisation

Percentage of children who 'Always' or 'Frequently' feel the following emotions, by gender



Percentage of children who 'Always' or 'Frequently' feel the following emotions, by region



Belief Against the Odds

Despite the myriad challenges that children and young people in Syria face, respondents in this survey were overwhelmingly positive about the future and their role in helping their community and country to recover.

Eman*, 16 (F):

"I wish for a better life. Right now we have very limited opportunities for schools, universities and jobs. But where there is a will, there is a way"

Hala*, 17 (F):

"I am 17 years old now and my society says I am ready for marriage and starting a family. I prayed not to get engaged before I achieve my dreams. I want to experience life, graduate from university, I want job opportunities. Tomorrow we will grow up and become doctors and engineers, but we cannot do that without your help."

SAMI*, Aleppo (13)

"IF WE CONTINUE ON THIS PATH, THERE WILL BE NO FUTURE FOR SYRIA – THINGS MUST CHANGE."

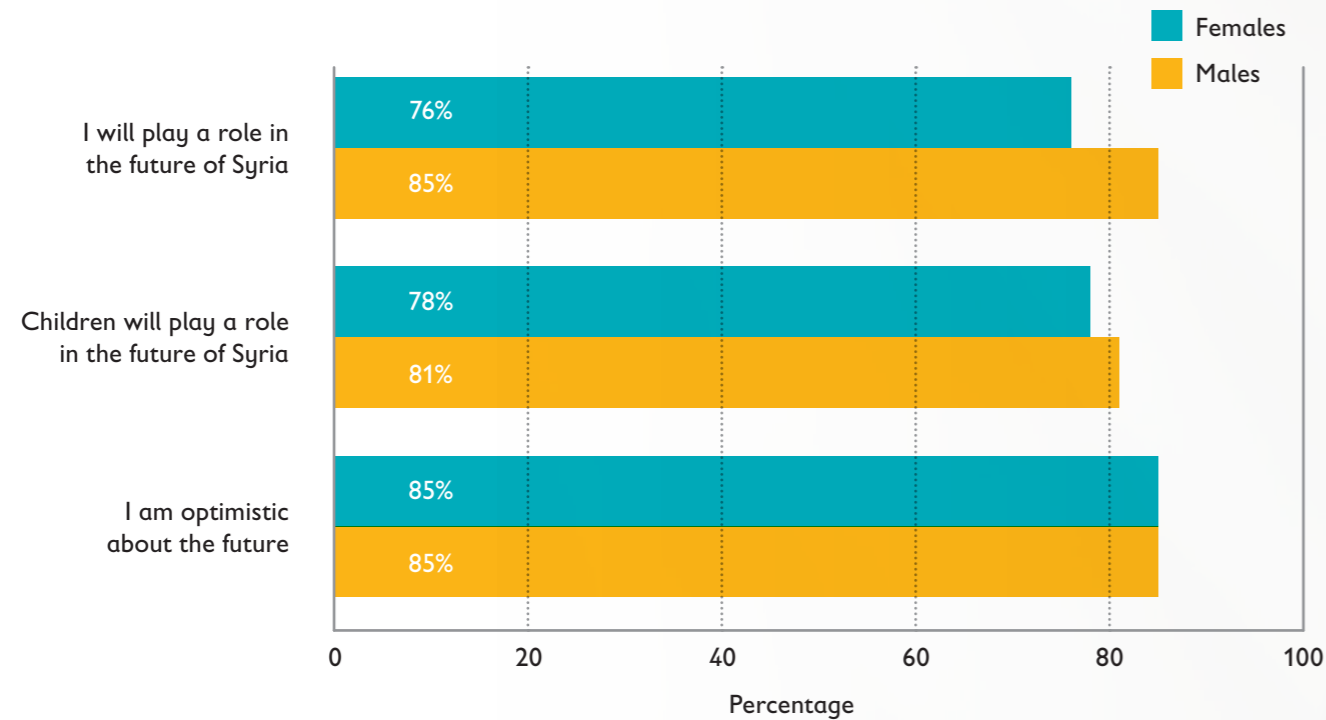
In recent years, the war has made my life very bad. Two of my brothers and most of my cousins have been killed, and the situation is getting worse. The war makes us fear for our lives on a daily basis. One day I was walking in my town and saw a plane flying overhead. It dropped a bomb on my neighbourhood and I was injured. I lost many friends and neighbours that day.

People just look out for themselves now and don't care about their communities. Some people are benefiting from corruption, while other families

can barely survive. I think that we can only overcome our challenges if we restore peace and love. If we put an end to the war, we have a better chance of achieving our dreams. We must rebuild Syria again so we can go back to school and have more opportunities in life.

We have to educate the new generation about peace. If we invest in the next generation, we can have doctors and engineers who can rebuild Syria and restore our country to its former glory."

Percentage of children answering 'Yes' to following questions



In focus group activities, participants started by drawing pictures of where they see themselves in the future and explaining their vision to their peers.

The vast majority of children who took part said they wanted to be a medic (including gynaecologists, nurses and paediatricians) or a teacher. Many explicitly referenced a desire to help those who have been injured in the war or are too poor to access medical treatment, and to ensure the next generation is educated.



Karim*, 14 (M):

"I want to become a teacher and educate students who didn't receive a good education because they were displaced due to bombing and destruction. They are the future generations."

Judi*, 12 (F):

"I'd like to be a doctor because there are a lot of war injuries and we need hospitals to treat them, as we don't have hospitals in our area."

Bassam*, 14 (M):

"I drew people standing on two mountain tops and a deep cliff separates them. There is a bridge between the mountains so people won't fall. The bridge represents teachers. The rope holding the bridge together represents engineers. Teachers shape generations. I wrote 'knowledge raises nations'."

Children also saw themselves as architects, engineers, police officers, artists, lawyers and journalists.

Muaz*, 14 (F):

"I would love to become an engineer to build homes for people. I drew a graduating female student with many awards around."

Some children drew themselves standing in front of houses, expressing their desire to return home, or depicted scenes of nature, peace and security.

Ahmad*, 14 (M):

"I wish that I lived a happy life and all children live safely so we can go wherever we want without coming across armed men and criminals. I wish that we become united, not divided. I want children to live in safety in the future. All countries are fighting us and we are fighting each other."

Anas*, 13 (M):

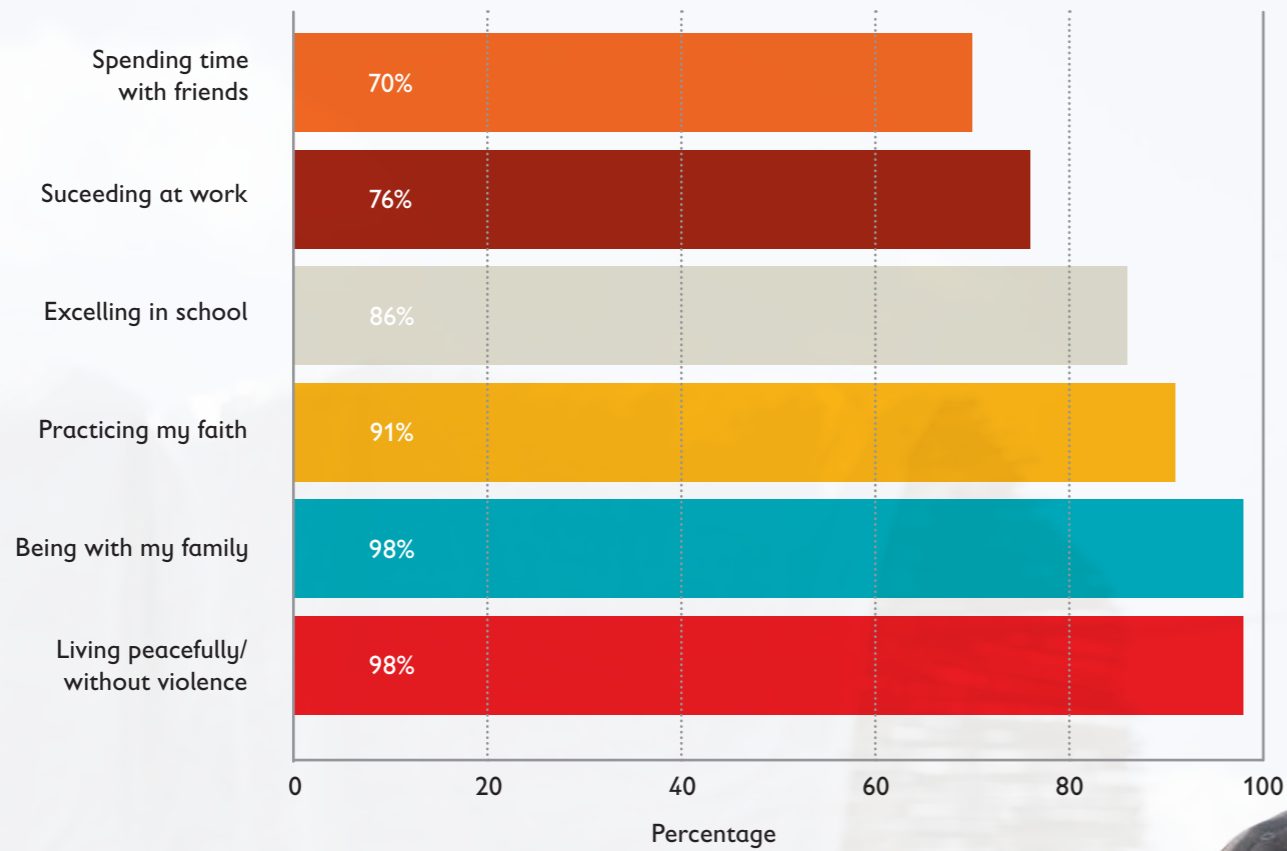
"I drew nature and a swing where children are playing safely. That's all. Children build societies."

Children were also very clear about what brings them happiness and fulfilment. As part of the questionnaire, participants were asked what made them happiest in their lives from six pre-selected options. Living in peace and being with their families came out as the top two priorities, with almost all girls and boys identifying these as important.

This basic and simple right is currently denied to millions of Syrian children, who are living under the shadow of conflict or separated from their loved ones.



% of children who said the following were 'very important' or 'important' in making them happy



SARA*, Deir Ezzor (14)

“TWO YEARS AGO, I WAS WATCHING TELEVISION WHEN MY STREET WAS BOMBED AND MY HOUSE COLLAPSED.”

When I escaped from my home, I got chemical dust in my eyes which burned, and I couldn't see anything. After the attack, I had to keep my eyes closed for a whole month. I couldn't get specialist care and I still can't see in the distance two years later.

Before the war my life was very beautiful. I was happy with my family and my friends. I am not so happy anymore. My life and the war are one now. I hear warplanes and missiles falling all the time. Whenever I hear a plane in the sky I still get so scared.

When I first came to this camp, I felt lonely and like I didn't have any friends. But now I have lots of friends and a football team! I play goalkeeper and my team always beats the boys' team because I save all the goals. I think the Child Friendly Space is important as it makes me feel like I have a future.

I loved taking part in the survey and I think it's important to ask children about our lives. It's hard to imagine the future of my country when we don't even have a home, but I'm still optimistic. In the future, I want to help my family and rebuild our home. I would tell the world's children not to go too far from your families and don't play with anything dangerous.”



Children's Proposals for Change

The girls and boys consulted for this survey identified a clear set of priorities for improving their lives and their communities.

In focus group discussions (FGDs), **rehabilitating and building schools** was the most commonly cited priority.

Female FGD, Idlib NW Syria:

“Our first suggestion, which is a key issue and the most urgent, is restoration of schools. Some schools were destroyed during the bombing. We also need extra classes for children who don't know how to read, write, or do maths, and qualified teachers who are dedicated to their jobs.”

Karim*, 14, (M):

“I was thinking of becoming a doctor but after the war I started working with my brother repairing cars, which affects my time for study. My dreams were ruined. The international community should cooperate in building schools, renovating them and ensuring their safety and that the needs of children are met, including windows for classrooms, chairs and stationary.”

Children identified a particular need to provide specialised schools and adapted facilities for **students with disabilities**.

Female FGD, Idlib, North-West (NW) Syria:

“We want to build a school for the disabled, because they have the right to obtain an education just like us and they need our support to achieve their dreams.”

In addition to providing education facilities, **repairing health facilities** and providing medical services at affordable rates were widely chosen by participants as a top priority.

Children expressed their concern about the **proliferation of Explosive Remnants of War (ERW)** and the need for this to be removed. Parks, schools and homes are littered with cluster munitions, mines and other unexploded ordinance – 1 in 2 people across Syria are believed to be at risk from explosive hazards.²¹ To small children, these can look like toys and countless young people have lost their lives or limbs to ERW. In a number of focus groups, participants also highlighted the need to provide housing **and repair roads and electricity and water networks**.

Mixed FGD, Derek North-East (NE) Syria:

“We need to provide apartments for displaced families who are coming from other parts of the country, to help them stay off the street in case they can't afford to pay landlords the rent.”

Male FGD, Aleppo NW Syria:

“The first mission is to remove all the remnants of war in our country and stop the airstrikes. Sometimes in the countryside we find land mines... We believe the first task is to post warning signs so people won't be injured.”

The final issue that featured prominently was the **lack of places for girls and boys to freely and safely play** and enjoy leisure activities. In a number of the focus group discussions, participants proposed rehabilitating parks and playgrounds and building recreational facilities for young people.

Male FGD, Idlib NW Syria:

“Attacks and the crowding of people in cities have left children without any play areas – they need space for recreational activities to forget about the violence.”

LINA*, 13, Idlib

“THE WAR HAS TAKEN EVERYTHING FROM CHILDREN AND LEFT US WITH NOTHING: NO EDUCATION, NO FUTURE.”

When the fighting started, we couldn't visit our friends or play in the street because of the bombs. We have suffered a lot during this war. My parents were killed four years ago when a shell landed on our house. After I lost them, I hoped that I would follow them but god had other plans.

My parents were killed four years ago when a shell landed on our house. After I lost my parents, I hoped that I would follow them but God had other plans. What is left of my family is my brother, grandmother and my disabled uncle. Some of my friends fled our home and others were killed.

Now we stay in a house which isn't livable – the windows are covered in plastic and there is no heating. After my parents died, I couldn't go to school for three years as there were so many bombings. I regret losing three years of my education and wish the war would end so I can finish school and become a teacher.

I've seen that the war has changed our communities a lot - people have lost their souls. They have become greedy and now fight each other to take over new land. I wish I hadn't lost my parents, but I thank god that I still have my grandmother by my side.

I want the war to end so we can return home and rebuild our country. We need to rebuild schools for the next generation who have been stripped of their right to an education. As for me, I don't want anything in the world except for an education. I hope that the world can see us and help us.”



MAI*, Deir Ezzor (11)

“LIFE WAS HARD ONCE THE WAR STARTED.

When ISIS arrived in our town they started shooting at houses, forcing people to leave so they could move in instead. They burned our home to the ground to force us out.

We weren't allowed to go to school and they raised the price of vegetables, so we were always hungry. I always tried not to look when there were beheadings, I would hide behind my mum.

I like coming to the Child Friendly Space in this camp as it helps me forget the war, the bombs, and ISIS. I was very happy to fill out

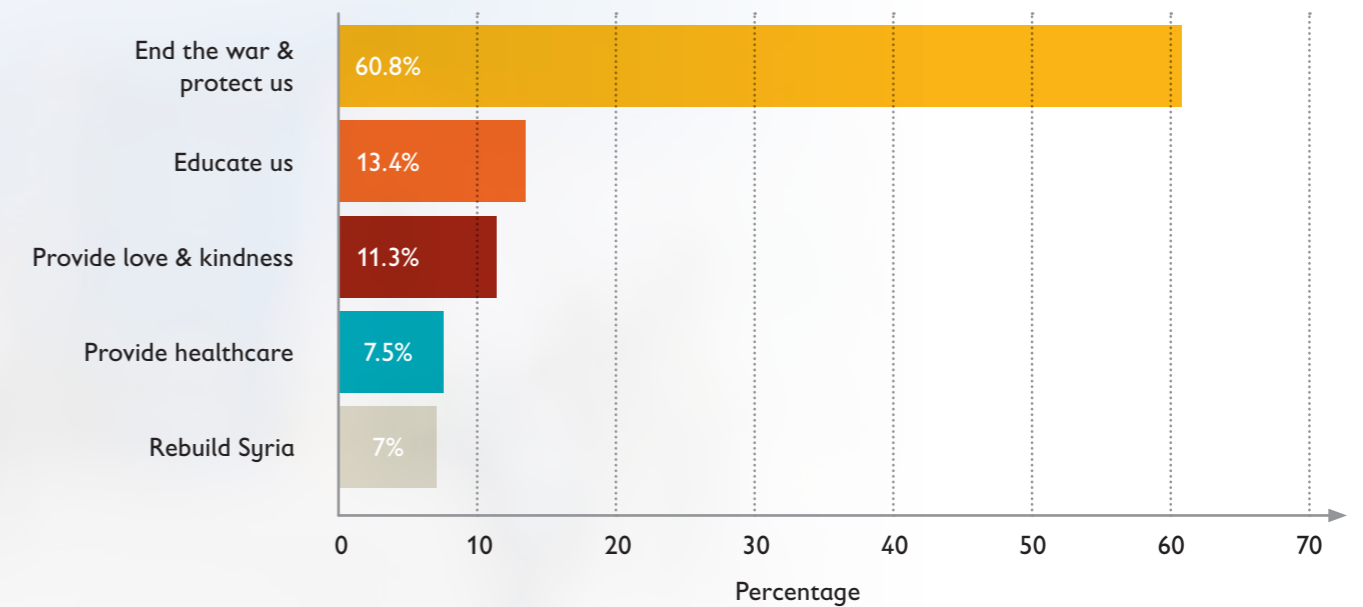
the survey, it was a good activity to do. I think it's important to ask children about their lives. I hope that people will soon be allowed to come back to Syria and that there is no more destruction. I wish that we could all live in peace and safety and love each other.

I hope that in the future, we could all live in our old towns and life could be as good as it used to be – or even better! If we lived in our old house, it wouldn't flood every time it rains like it does in the tent. I also want to go to school again, to study with my siblings so we are not illiterate anymore, unable to read and write.”

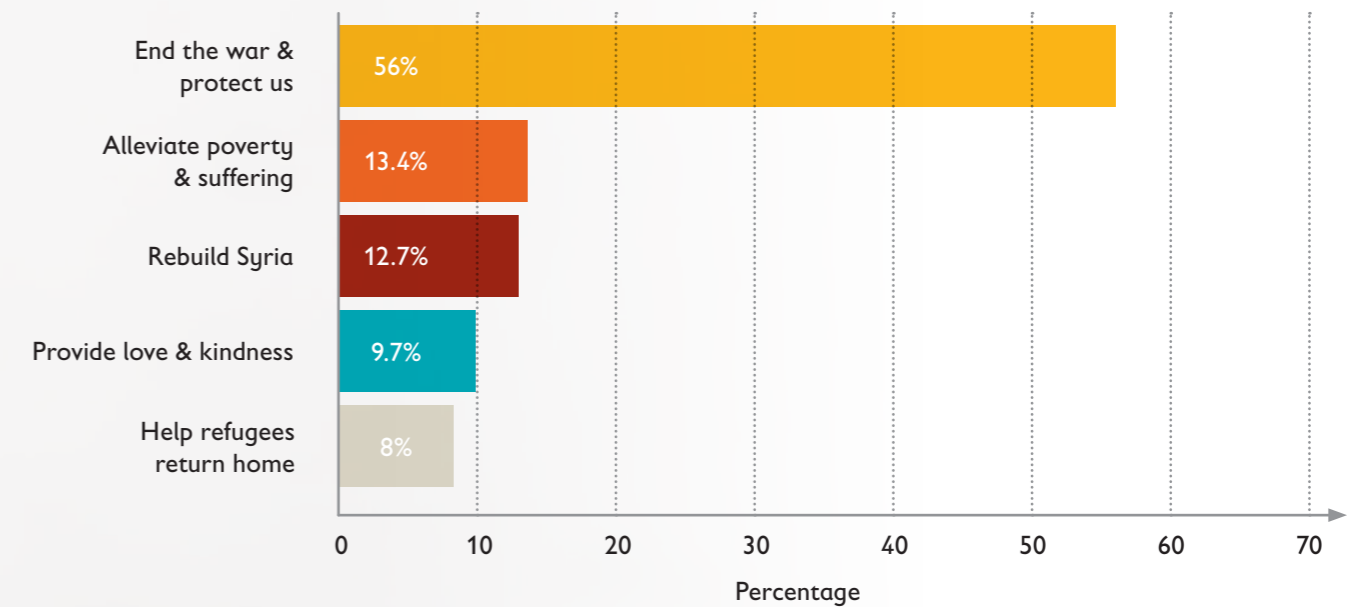
Credit: Save the Children

As part of the questionnaire, children were also asked about what they want from their leaders and communities in Syria and from the international community. Overwhelmingly, what they wanted from both was to **end the violence and protect children**. In interviews and focus group discussions, they recognised that while they can work to improve their own lives, the war is waged by adults and must be ended by them.

Expectations of adults in Syria



Expectations of the international community



TOWARD THE FUTURE: CHILD-FOCUSED EARLY RECOVERY IN SYRIA

After eight years of brutal and destructive conflict in Syria, this anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on where we are and how we can better support children going forward, in partnership with them and their communities.

The catastrophic violence which has wracked Syria for the last eight years has abated in the last six months, but insecurity and conflict is still widespread, and a negotiated political solution remains elusive. Shelling, clashes between armed groups, explosions and arbitrary detentions are near-daily occurrences and the fragile truce holding across the frontline in North-West Syria could collapse into renewed warfare at any time.

Between December 2018 – February 2019, more than 30,000 people fled the last remaining ISIS-held areas in North-East Syria, with at least 61 children dying on route of hypothermia and illness, indicating the ongoing instability in the country.²² Poverty is endemic and worsening for many communities, and the UN estimates that a third of the population in Syria is food insecure with pockets of acute and chronic malnutrition.²³

Life-saving humanitarian and protection needs therefore remain acute, and the international community should continue to support the humanitarian response wherever there is a need in Syria. At the same time, **every child under the age of 16 has now lived more of their childhood in the shadow of war than outside of it** – this is a critical moment to ensure they and their communities are equipped with the skills and opportunities to create a better future. **We must therefore take steps toward a child-focused early recovery in Syria.**

Early recovery is broadly defined as “an approach that addresses recovery needs that arise during the humanitarian phase of an emergency, using humanitarian mechanisms that align with development principles.”²⁴ Within the framework of the UN Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria, early recovery focus on three inter-related themes: basic social services and infrastructure, livelihoods, and community security and social cohesion.²⁵

A child-focused early recovery approach would ensure that the benefits from these activities are sustainable and long-lasting, by addressing the needs of the next generation. Further consultations are needed across Syria to fully understand the priorities of children and their communities in each area of need, but the insights of Save the Children and other agencies on the ground and the responses from this survey provide a good framework.

The key elements identified are outlined below:

Child-focused Early Recovery in Syria

- Create a safe environment and facilitate family unity
- Ensure access to safe, quality education, including for girls, IDPs and children with disabilities
- Provide basic services, including healthcare, electricity and clean water and sanitation
- Clear explosive remnants of war
- Support mental health and psychosocial support services
- Provide livelihoods and other support for the poorest and most marginalised, including child-headed households
- Rehabilitate parks and recreational facilities for girls and boys
- Early recovery must be needs-based, community-led, transparent and accountable

Conflict, displacement, loss and poverty have not dimmed the optimism of Syrian children – but they are calling on the international community and their leaders to create an environment for them to flourish. The overwhelming message was that children want nothing more than to live in security with their families. In order to do that, they need an end to violence, insecurity and displacement and a return to stability.



Credit: Hurras - a Save the Children partner organisation

KARIM*, Idlib (14)

“BEFORE THE WAR, LIFE WITH MY FAMILY WAS BEAUTIFUL AND WE COULD HAVE ANYTHING WE WANTED.”

People used to love each other, but with the war they became divided and disillusioned, and our societies collapsed.

It became hard to play or learn, and I could feel the emotional impact of the conflict. I get scared when I hear planes flying above villages, ready to hurt people. My brother was hit and killed during a big attack. My dreams have been shattered because of the bombing, destruction, and the loss of my friends.

I hope to become a doctor but the war has

impacted my education and damaged my chances. Now I repair cars with one of my brothers to pay for my education. I believe that international community should cooperate in building and renovating schools and roads, ensure the safety of children, and secure jobs. Adults who missed out on education should be able to return to school.

If this war continues, nobody will survive. If the international community works together to save Syria, then our country will recover and our future will be as good as it was in the past.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Donors and the international community

Provide child-focused, flexible and long-term funding

- Fully fund the 2019 Syria Humanitarian Response Plan and officially commit to a response that prioritises the needs and recovery of children and youth at the Brussels III conference.
- Work with INGOs and civil society to meaningfully and systematically consult with girls and boys across Syria on their needs and priorities, as part of any funding or policy decisions or programme interventions that affect them.
- Prioritise children and young people's needs in any early recovery planning or response. Key programme areas for this population, namely education, child protection, nutrition, health and mental health and psychosocial support programming, must be fully funded and supported.
- Ensure humanitarian funding decisions are de-politicised and made on the basis of need, with long-term, flexible commitments to allow aid actors to meet the needs of the most vulnerable through the most effective routes, and make a sustainable impact.
- Wherever possible, invest in inclusive community-led recovery and rehabilitation projects, which are conflict sensitive, transparent, accountable and safeguard against corruption.

Address the needs of the most vulnerable girls and boys

- Prioritise the recovery of the education sector, enabling girls and boys to safely access quality and equitable learning opportunities at all education levels. Schools must be safe, disability accessible and adequately resourced to ensure children have access to appropriate and flexible support, particularly if they have missed years of school. Education provision should be properly certified, enabling children and young people to study with confidence that their achievements will enable them to progress throughout the education system, at home or abroad.
- Ensure that girls and boys are safe and secure at home, at schools and in the community by increasing support for the removal of explosive remnants of war and other hazards.
- Provide funding for long-term, flexible, multisectoral, inclusive, age- and gender-appropriate mental health and psychosocial programming, recognising it as a core component of the emergency response, as well as in the stabilisation and recovery phases of development.
- Support child and youth-led initiatives that empower children and young people to be agents of change in their own local communities, building their skills, expertise and leadership abilities.
- Support gender and age-appropriate programming that addresses the specific needs of adolescents, including programmes that provide capacity-building and vocational-training activities, and help build skills for creating work and livelihoods more broadly.
- Ensure recreational facilities for children and youth to play and socialise safely are adequately resourced.

Help protect children and create the conditions for peace

- Continue to actively support efforts to find a peaceful, negotiated and inclusive resolution to the Syria crisis which avoids further bloodshed and suffering in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and other relevant UN Security Council resolutions. Support the effective implementation and continuation of the De-Militarized Zone agreement for NW Syria.
- Urge parties to abide by international humanitarian law, ensure the protection of civilians and immediately cease attacks on schools, hospitals, and other critical civilian infrastructure, including by ending to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.
- Take immediate steps to hold all parties to the conflict accountable for breaches of international law, in particular ensuring full accountability for crimes against humanity, war crimes, grave violations of child rights and other serious human rights violations to counter impunity and help deter future violations. Support ongoing accountability tracks such as the International, Impartial Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM) and efforts at the national level to launch criminal proceedings through universal jurisdiction.
- Support the UN Secretary General in elevating children's rights above politics and ensuring a complete and credible listing of perpetrators in the Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict.

SAVE THE CHILDREN IN SYRIA

Since the start of the crisis, Save the Children has worked to reach the most vulnerable children in Syria and in the refugee-hosting countries.

Inside Syria, Save the Children has supported 3.1 million people, including 2 million children to date, providing health and hygiene services, food and nutrition support, psychosocial support and child protection activities, and restoring children's access to education and adults' access to a sustainable income. Save the Children supports:

- Seven fixed primary health care clinics with integrated nutrition services and a maternity hospital
- More than 100 education facilities, including formal schools, informal learning centers and tents, Early Childhood Care and Development centers and vocational training schools to support education at all levels
- Child Friendly Spaces, child protection awareness raising and psychosocial support, case management for the most marginalized and vulnerable children including unaccompanied and separated children, and Family Tracing and Reunification
- Food Security & Livelihood activities, such as agricultural support and kitchen garden training for vulnerable families in Syria, particularly targeting female-headed households
- Emergency response activities to regular rapid-onset emergencies and displacement crises including multi-purpose cash grants, Ready to Eat Rations, New Arrival Kits (blankets, solar power lamps, kitchen kits), and child protection activities.

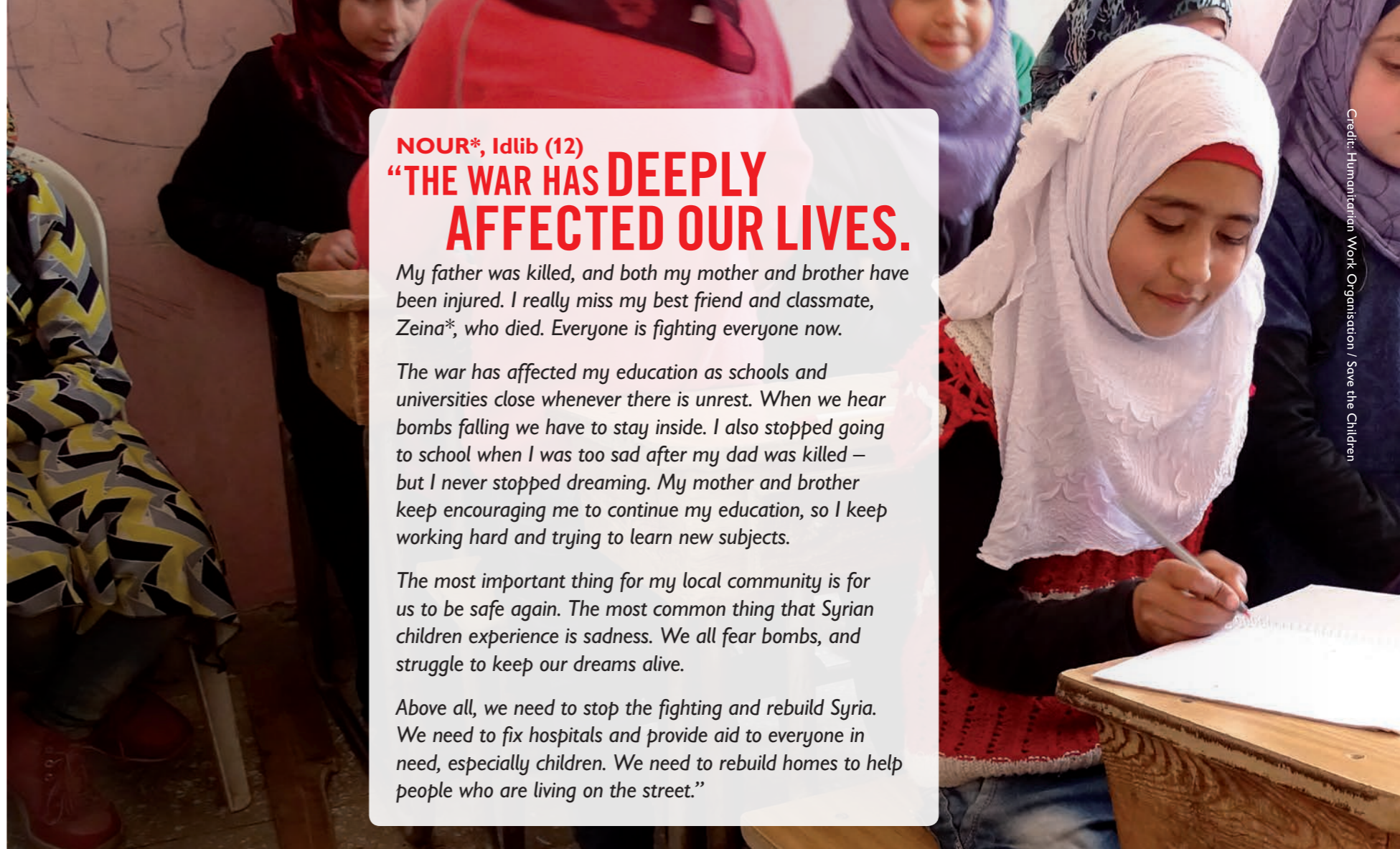
Parties to the Conflict

Protect children, end the violence and create the conditions for peace

- Further de-escalate the conflict and enter into internationally-supported negotiations to reach a peaceful, negotiated and inclusive resolution to the crisis in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and other relevant UN Security Council resolutions.
- End grave violations against children, including killing and maiming, attacks on schools and hospitals and recruitment and use of children.
- Protect civilian infrastructure, including schools, healthcare facilities, homes and playgrounds from the impact of the conflict. End the use of prohibited cluster munitions and landmines.
- Allow free movement for civilians and end arbitrary arrests and detentions, including of youth.
- Facilitate the meaningful participation of children and youth from across the country in decision-making on issues that affect their lives at the local and national level.

Provide and facilitate vital services

- Allow unfettered humanitarian access wherever there is need, including to conduct impartial needs assessments and deliver medical aid and other services, such as child protection case management.
- Provide services that are vital to children and their families without prejudice or distinction on the basis of location, religion or perceived political affiliation, including education, healthcare and sanitation.
- Promote pathways back to learning, integration into education, and acknowledgement of previous learning through supportive policies (accreditation, certification, examinations and documentation) which encourage children to return to or continue their education.
- Prioritise the clearing of explosive hazards and share accurate information with civilians about safety issues, including the locations of landmines and unexploded ordnances, as well as information about the availability of basic services.
- Recognise the damage done to girls and boys in Syria as a result of the conflict and commit to enact policies which support their long-term recovery. Provide safe spaces for young people to reconnect with each other and be actively involved in civic life.



NOUR*, Idlib (12) “THE WAR HAS DEEPLY AFFECTED OUR LIVES.”

My father was killed, and both my mother and brother have been injured. I really miss my best friend and classmate, Zeina, who died. Everyone is fighting everyone now.*

The war has affected my education as schools and universities close whenever there is unrest. When we hear bombs falling we have to stay inside. I also stopped going to school when I was too sad after my dad was killed – but I never stopped dreaming. My mother and brother keep encouraging me to continue my education, so I keep working hard and trying to learn new subjects.

The most important thing for my local community is for us to be safe again. The most common thing that Syrian children experience is sadness. We all fear bombs, and struggle to keep our dreams alive.

Above all, we need to stop the fighting and rebuild Syria. We need to fix hospitals and provide aid to everyone in need, especially children. We need to rebuild homes to help people who are living on the street.”

Endnotes

- 1 UNICEF: [Half of Syria's children have grown up only seeing violence](#)
- 2 UN Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019
- 3 *Names changed to protect identity
- 4 UNICEF: [Half of Syria's children have grown up only seeing violence](#)
- 5 UN Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) 2019: 5 million children are in need of humanitarian assistance, or 55% of the total estimated child population.
- 6 HNO 2019
- 7 HNO 2019: At least 70% of sewage is untreated and 50% of sewage systems are affected by the conflict and not useable.
- 8 HNO 2019
- 9 UNICEF: [Half of Syria's children have grown up only seeing violence](#)
- 10 Invisible Wounds: The Impact of Six Years of War on Syrian Children's Mental Health. Save the Children March 2017.
- 11 2,501,810 million children are in need of humanitarian assistance across these 4 governorates, out of a total child population in need of humanitarian assistance of 5 million (50.04%) – UN HNO 2019
- 12 The purpose of the MRM is “to provide for the systematic gathering of objective, specific and reliable information on grave violations committed against children in situations of armed conflict”. There are six grave violations: killing and maiming of children; recruitment or use of children as soldiers; sexual violence against children; abduction of children; attacks against schools or hospitals; and denial of humanitarian access for children.
- 13 According to the [Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor](#), Explosive Remnants of War are defined as “explosive munitions left behind after a conflict has ended. They include unexploded artillery shells, grenades, mortars, rockets, air-dropped bombs, and cluster munitions”
- 14 UN HNO 2019
- 15 UN HNO 2019
- 16 According to the 2019 HNO, there are 3 million people in Syria living with physical disabilities and over 60% of persons with disabilities surveyed state that their disability has been exacerbated by the crisis, with a lack of access to health care and difficulties in meeting their basic needs listed as the most common reasons.
- 17 UN HNO 2019
- 18 “[The relationship between internalizing and externalizing problems in adolescence: does gender make a difference?](#)” Ana Paulo Matos et al, 2016
- 19 Invisible Wounds: The Impact of Six Years of War on Syrian Children's Mental Health. Save the Children March 2017.
- 20 Before the war there were only two public psychiatric hospitals in all of Syria and there were estimated to be around 70 psychiatrists working in the entire country, most of them in Damascus. Attacks on health facilities and displacement/emigration of professionals is likely to have further affected mental health service provision (ABAAD (2016) [Self-care needs and resources of mental health and psychosocial support workers in Syria](#): Rapid Participatory Assessment, April 2016)
- 21 HNO 2019
- 22 OCHA Flash Update 2: Displacement from Hajin, Deir-ez-Zor Governorate 20 February 2019
- 23 UN HNO 2019: 83% of Syrians live below the poverty line, 6.5 million people are food insecure.
- 24 [Global Cluster for Early Recovery](#)
- 25 UN HNO 2019

**“I WISH THAT ALL
CHILDREN COULD BE
HEALTHY AND HAPPY.
I WISH THAT THEY CAN
GROW UP, STAY SAFE,
AND LIVE THEIR LIVES.
THIS IS MY DREAM.”**

Layla*, 13



مركز العالم العربي للبحوث والتنمية
Arab World for Research & Development



شبكة حراس
Hurras Network



Save the Children
100 YEARS

This report was prepared by Save the Children's Syria Response Office, with field research carried out in February 2019 by staff from Save the Children and Hurras Network. The methodology and data analysis was done by Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD) and the report was written by Caroline Anning.

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