

CROSSROADS: THE SYRIAN CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND THE GLOBAL REFUGEE FORUM

17-year-old Jameela* is displaced in a camp in northwest Syria. But the journey to seek safety negatively affected her psychological state. So, she decided to enroll in our implementing partner's psychological support sessions to deal with any negative emotions and stress.
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Based on a World Vision's desk analysis of child protection and education pledges by selected international actors at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum (GRF), this briefing highlights the unequivocal failure of key Syria actors to address the protection needs of Syrian children. World Vision calls on all actors and world leaders to ensure the soaring needs of Syrian children, in Syria and in host communities, are not overlooked. **For the millions of Syrian refugee children, returning to their country is not an option, and will not be for years to come. Syrian children are at breaking point.**

INTRODUCTION

The December 2019 GRF was hailed as an unprecedented milestone increasing support, effort and action for refugees and the communities and countries hosting them. It was the first time that some 3,000 representatives of governments, donors, and civil society came together¹ to discuss the needs of 79.5 million forcibly displaced people, including 26 million refugees;² making pledges towards building sustainable and durable solutions to support the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). In 2019, 25 per cent of people seeking refuge came from the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria). Two years on, the number of people fleeing conflict, violence and climate change exceeded 84 million in the first half of 2021,³ with the number of refugees reaching nearly 21 million women, men, girls and boys.⁴

The GRF took place in a context of a crisis of solidarity, with a political deadlock at the root of Europe's migration crisis, that toughened its migration policies and relied on countries outside the Union to enforce the measures to do so. In addition, Turkey had marked

three years of its landmark agreement with the European Union (EU), through which the government would take steps to prevent new migratory routes from opening to limit the number of asylum seeker arrivals after hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants had transited to reach EU soil.⁵ Furthermore, 2019 marked the grim 8th anniversary of the Syrian conflict that led to the largest refugee and displacement crisis in modern history.⁶

When the GRF took place, the child protection needs of Syrian children were already overlooked and underfunded.⁷ "Donor fatigue" was setting in over the crisis, resulting in funding cuts for life-saving assistance for Syrian refugees despite their growing humanitarian needs, both inside and outside Syria.⁸ New refugee crisis's were also emerging in, for example Central America, making Syria less of an acute priority for donors.

Syria remains the country with the largest number of internationally displaced people (6.8 million)⁹ for whom pervasive violence in their country continues to make safe returns impossible. Today, Syrian refugees who

return¹⁰ face grave human rights violations, including torture, arbitrary detention, kidnappings, extra-judicial killings and sexual violence. They also struggle to survive and meet their basic food and other essential needs.¹¹ Syrian children experience immense trauma, with recent reports¹² providing horrifying accounts of violations of children's rights, that include torture, sexual violence, arbitrary detention, and unlawful killings. Furthermore, Syrian children are denied humanitarian access, that puts at risk their survival. In April 2021, the UN Secretary General reported that there had been 137 verified incidents denying humanitarian access between July 2018 and June 2020. 49 of these incidents were attacks on humanitarian facilities, personnel and transports and 42 were instances of deliberate denial of humanitarian access.¹³ The report also highlighted that schools had been targeted, hampering access to education for Syrian children, with 90 schools attacked and 30 others used by military groups in just two years.¹⁴

COVID-19 has further exacerbated the needs of Syrian children, who are in greater need now than ever before, both inside Syria and in host countries. In Syria, the worst wave of COVID-19 hit the country in October 2021,¹⁵ and has been spreading ever since, with children whose health needs are already severely comprised due to limited access to hospitals and medical treatment, is becoming even more vulnerable.

In the face of an increasingly alarming situation for the Syrian population, there is now a resounding recognition that the only option available to refugees and internally displaced persons is to stay where they are.¹⁶ For Syrian refugee children, the hope of a safe haven remains a distant option, "an impossible dream" Syrian children told us,¹⁷ who are now at risk of facing staggering protection challenges. In summary, the needs of Syrian children now far surpass their needs of two years ago when the GRF took place.



The displacement journey was heart-wrenching for 10-year-old Yousef*. After settling in an internally displacement camp in northwest Syria, little Yousef saw the financial hardships his family are going through. He took it upon himself to go searching for plastic bottles to sell on the streets. After being referred to our local implementing partner's centre in Syria, and attending psychological support sessions, he now has hopes for the future. © Action for Humanity (AFH).

2019 SYRIAN CRISIS SNAPSHOT



12
million

Nearly **12 million people required humanitarian assistance**, including 5 million with acute needs.¹⁸ Yet, just a few weeks before the GRF, only 52 per cent of the \$3.29 billion required under the 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) was funded.¹⁹



At the end of 2019, **only 42.5 per cent** of the 2019 Regional Refugee Response Plan (3RP) Syria **had been funded**.²⁰



During 2019, at least **657 Syrian children killed and 324 children injured**. At least 519 children were recruited or used in combat.²¹



The UN verified **145 attacks on schools** and military use of 20 schools in Syria in 2019.²²



Over 2 million children (one third of Syria's child population) **out-of-school** and 1.3 million children at risk of dropping out of school in Syria during 2019.²³



In 2019, about **40 per cent of displaced persons**, both in Syria and in host countries, were children.²⁴



There were over **2.5 million of registered refugee children** in host countries in need of humanitarian assistance in 2019.²⁵



80 per cent (Jordan) and 64 per cent (Turkey) of Syrian refugees were **living in poverty** in 2019.²⁶



43 per cent of the 1.7 million school age Syrian refugee children were out-of-school by the end of 2019.²⁷



In Jordan, **nearly half of Syrian children under the age** of five did not have access to proper health services that year.²⁸

2021 SYRIAN CRISIS SNAPSHOT



13.4
million

Humanitarian needs in Syria are greater than ever, with an estimated **13.4 million requiring assistance**, the highest number since 2017,²⁹ and a 21 per cent increase compared to 2020.³⁰ Yet, as of 25 November 2021, only 45 per cent of Syria's 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan had been funded.³¹



Nearly **90 per cent of children in Syria** need humanitarian assistance,³² a 25 per cent increase from 2020.³³



In 2021, more than **90 per cent of Syrians** live below the **poverty line**.³⁴



In June 2021, the **highest number of verified grave violations against children** was recorded in Syria, including high numbers of recruitment and use of children as combatants, killing and maiming of children, especially in the northwest (e.g., Idlib) that hosts large numbers of internally displaced populations (IDPs).³⁵



This year, more than **70 per cent of Syrian refugees live below the poverty line** and an additional one million have been pushed into poverty during COVID-19.³⁶



In 2021, **35 per cent of Syrian refugees** have permanently **lost their job** and over 92 per cent of Syrian households have seen their income decrease because of COVID-19.³⁷



Over **2.5 million of registered Syrian refugee children** in host countries remain in need of humanitarian assistance this year.³⁸



Today, there are **1.5 million school-aged Syrian refugee children** living in Jordan and Turkey, but approximately half of them do not have access to formal education.³⁹



As of 25 November 2021, **only 27.3 per cent** of the Regional Refugee Response Plan (3RP) Syria **had been funded**, with Jordan one the least funded host countries.

GRF PLEDGE ANALYSIS

This analysis assesses the GRF pledges made for child protection in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, with a particular focus on Jordan and Turkey where World Vision has been responding to the needs of displaced populations since the beginning of the crisis (2011). The analysis focused on the 1,593 pledges committed and submitted to the UNHCR GRF dashboard as of 26 November 2021.⁴⁰ It specifically concentrates on key Syria crisis donor states of Canada, European Union (EU), France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Sweden, United Kingdom (UK), United States (US), and UNICEF. In so doing, the analysis seeks to support international actors, especially those delivering change for Syrian children, to strengthen their advocacy efforts with world leaders for the greater inclusion of the needs of Syrian forcibly displaced children in their progress report and next commitments.

When analysing the data challenges were encountered due to the level and inconsistent information submitted to the dashboard. A majority of donor financial pledges were not country or crisis specific. Instead, the “designated region” for the pledges was primarily “Global/Multiple,” with many of the commitments being for UNHCR or IOM.⁴¹ Global donor pledges that did not include specific information about Syria or hosting countries were not included in our analysis. Although some of the global pledges may benefit Syrian children, the lack of specifics in the global pledges make it difficult to know.

UNPROTECTED – SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN HAVE BEEN LEFT OUT OF THE GRF PLEDGES

With a couple of exceptions, which the analysis will detail below, the pledges on child protection for Syrian children made by the selected international actors of this analysis were totally inadequate. When searching for specific key terms, only 16 per cent of pledges focused on providing protection for refugees, of which, 11 per cent (29) specifically referred to child protection. Out of these 29 pledges, **only 4 were received⁴² by Syria or host countries of Syrian refugees (1 by both Syria and Jordan, 3 by Jordan and none by Turkey). Safeguarding displaced Syrian children is thus an absent commitment from political and humanitarian priorities.**

One positive example was provided by Ireland and the EU (along with Switzerland, Czech Republic and Denmark) which committed specific support to young Syrian refugees in Jordan that included, strengthening the capacities of the Ministry of Youth to “*address child protection, sexual and gender-based and child labour, and strengthening awareness among youth at community level*”. However, most pledges are non-conflict specific and more generally focused on enhancing inclusion of refugees. The Government of Sweden’s pledge has a specific focus on providing “*financial support/advocacy to enhance child protection in education including psychosocial support*”, referring to refugees in the Syrian region as well as Afghanistan and Uganda; thus making it difficult to identify the proportion pledged specifically to Syria/Syrian refugees.

UNICEF, one of the strongest actors of the Syria crisis, also made a “global pledge” on child protection which was not received specifically, by Syria, but contained relevant commitments on supporting “*host countries to cope with large refugee movements*”, transforming and strengthening “*child protection for refugee and host community children and their families*” and “*increasing refugee children’s access to national social protection schemes*”. This, however, aligns with the different initiatives UNICEF has been promoting, including child protection and national social protection system strengthening priorities of the ‘No Lost Generation’ and the ‘Refugee, Resilience Regional Plan’, for Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon.

Despite these isolated positive commitments, the analysis highlighted the lack of appropriate pledges in 2019 also reflected donors’ funding cuts for Syria, which subsequently impacted the allocations for specific sectors, such as protection. This was compounded by “donor fatigue” for the Syria conflict more generally, which was superseded by emerging refugee crises in Africa, and Europe.⁴³ Whilst significant additional funding for refugee responses and a commitment to an effective and efficient use of resources, particularly in major refugee-hosting countries, was announced at the GRF, an initial analysis conducted by InterAction indicates that:

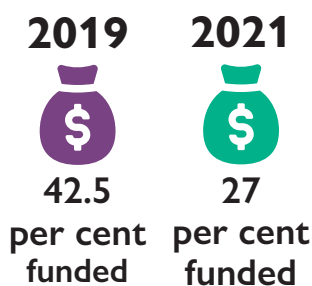
- * Only 14 per cent of the 390 financial pledges were for the MENA region
- * Of the 67 pledges for Syria⁴⁴, 39 were financial (22 from states)
- * Of the 47 for Jordan⁴⁵, 26 were financial (11 from states)
- * Of the 31 pledges for Turkey⁴⁶, 15 were financial (7 from states).

Relating specifically to child protection pledges, out of 4 relevant pledges received by Syria or host countries, only 2 were financial:

- * The only financial pledge for child protection received by Syria (through a keyword search for “child protection” on the dashboard) was by World Vision Korea and not by any of the state donors or international actors considered in this analysis
- * Two child protection pledges⁴⁷ received by Jordan were financial contributions, including one joint pledge from Ireland and the EU under the Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP) for the Middle East. The joint pledge focused on supporting skills-training and livelihood opportunities and strengthening capacities to address child protection, sexual and gender-based violence and child labour at the community level. According to the dashboard, the RDPP for the Middle East has an overall budget of EUR 51 million over 39 months, and is supported by the EU and the Government of Ireland (along with other states, not being considered by this analysis). However, it is not specified what percentage of this funding was allocated specifically to the Syrian crisis.

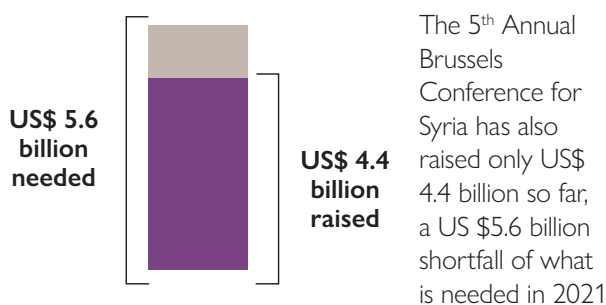
The lack of attention to child protection at the GRF was also highlighted in an August 2021 UN stocktaking report,⁴⁸ which emphasized the need for more states to take action to respond to the needs of children during its implementation. This includes increasing protecting specific investments and pledges for displaced children, and addressing the child protection crisis exacerbated by the pandemic. The report also notes the critical lack of pledges on child-friendly solutions,⁴⁹ which makes it challenging for the international community to monitor and evaluate the impact that the GRF has had on children’s well-being, especially those forcibly displaced.

Data shows that the funding situation for the Syrian crisis, and in particular child protection, has significantly worsened since the GRF, whilst children’s needs have increased exponentially:



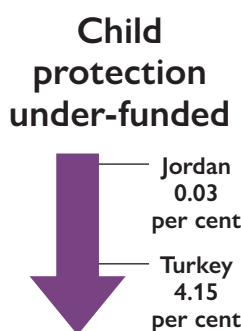
In 2019, the 3RP Syria was only 42.5 per cent funded, and funding towards the 3RP has been decreasing each year ever since.⁵⁰ As of November 2021, the 2021 3RP was only 27 per cent funded.⁵¹

COVID-19 has reportedly caused humanitarian funding diversions and cuts, including for Syria.



to fully support Syrians and refugee-hosting countries. This includes at least US \$4.2 billion for the humanitarian response inside Syria and US \$5.8 billion to support refugees and host communities in the region.⁵²

The lack of child protection pledges in the context of the Syria crisis at the 2019 GRF was also symptomatic of the chronic underfunding of child protection for Syrian children, including refugee children (and more generally of the child protection sector as a whole).



In 2019, the child protection sector of the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan was 88 per cent under-funded. Similarly, child protection in the 2019 3RP was significantly under-funded: in particular, only 0.03 per cent of funding went to the child protection sector in Jordan, and 4.15 per cent of funding went to the protection sector in Turkey (there was no specific funding presented for child protection).⁵³

the protection sector in Turkey (there was no specific funding presented for child protection).⁵³

- Two years on, the child protection component of the 2021 3RP and Syria Humanitarian Response Plan only received 2.8 per cent and 13.4 per cent of funding required respectively (as of 25 November 2021).⁵⁴

This leaves a huge gap in addressing their deepening vulnerabilities in a continuously volatile environment.

EDUCATION PLEDGES DID NOT GO FAR ENOUGH TO MEET THE NEEDS OF SYRIAN CHILDREN

The desk analysis also considered pledges made on education for Syrian children in Syria, Jordan and Turkey. Although overall, children’s education received more attention compared with child protection, the data analysed emphasized that learning needs of Syrian children were not adequately addressed at the GRF.

This is despite the chronic challenges and gaps children face in accessing school, both in Syria and in the host countries of Jordan and Turkey.

In November 2019, over two million children within Syria and 800,000 refugee children in host countries were still out of school completely.⁵⁵ These figures drastically fall short of the pledges. The international community is also far from the promises made three years before the GRF that all Syrian refugees in the region would be enrolled in school in the 2016-2017 academic year.⁵⁶

A keyword search of “education” in the dashboard identified



262
(16 per cent)
of the total
pledges focused on
expanding access to
quality education
for refugees

with **38**
per cent of these
made by states.

Education pledges received

6 by Syria (with none of these being supported by the states or international institutions being considered in this analysis)



25 by Jordan (with 8 of these supported by states including 2 by Canada and Ireland respectively, and 2 by the EU)



16 by Turkey (with 4 of these being supported by states not included in this analysis, and 1 by the EU).



Of the total 262 pledges that related to education, 94 of these were financial, 48 of which were supported by states. Yet, only 6 pledges relating to education were received by Syria, 4 of which were financial (none of which were pledged by the international actors identified for the analysis; 25 pledges were received by Jordan, 13 of these being financial pledges (including from Ireland and the EU); and 16 pledges were received by Turkey, 9 of these being financial (including from the EU).

When it came to Jordan, one pledge from Canada committed to *“continuing supporting comprehensive refugee responses that involve both humanitarian, development and stabilisation actors” and noted specifically its response to the Syrian crisis and the “education needs of both refugee and host community children by supporting the Government of Jordan”*.

The Regional Development and Protection Programme pledge received by Jordan from Ireland, the EU and others (noted above in relation to protection), also included a focus on education for Syrian refugees. The only pledge received by Turkey supported by international actors included in this analysis (the EU) related to the EU policy framework on Education in Emergencies and Protected Crisis, committing more generally to *“strengthen education systems and partnerships for inclusive and equitable quality primary and secondary education” and support to “globally coordinated, timely, predictable and flexible financing for education in emergencies and protected crises, promoting proactive and rapid response mechanisms so that children return to learning within 3 months of emergency situations”*. The pledge notes that since 2016, EU support has included €1.8 billion in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey €93 million of development funding for education globally, and €450 million of humanitarian funding on education in emergencies between 2015 and 2019. It further notes that the share of EU humanitarian aid allocated to education in emergencies increased from one per cent in 2015 to 10 per cent in 2019, and that the EU supported the ‘Education Cannot Wait’ initiative with €16 million, to which a further €5 million was added in 2019.

The GRF pledges on education for the Syria crisis reflected an ongoing funding crisis for Syrian children’s education. In 2019, only 39.7 per cent of Syrian children’s education needs were covered in the 2019 Syria Humanitarian Response Plan; whilst only 1.3 per cent of the education sector in Jordan and 0.05 per cent in Turkey were funded by the 2019 3RP.

Since the GRF, Syrian children’s learning seems to have become even less of a priority, despite the devastating effect of COVID-19 on education for Syrian children who have been disproportionately impacted and affected by school disruptions, such as school closures. In 2020, the organizers of the Brussels Conference on Syria did not list education on the official agenda,⁵⁷ and in 2021, no specific commitments were made to address the education crisis. This was reflected in funding,⁵⁸ Whereby, as of 25 November 2021, only 16.7 per cent and 12.3 per cent of the education requirements in the 2021 Syria HRP and 2021 3RP have been met, respectively. Whilst, only two per cent of Jordan’s education sector for Syrian refugees has been funded.⁵⁹

The analysis highlights that even before COVID-19 and prior to the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Syria, the protection and related education needs of Syrian children were not met. Two years on, the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the protection needs of millions of Syrian refugee children to critical levels of concern.

Where were the children?

The 2019 GRF should have been a refugee led and owned process,⁶⁰ that put children's participation as one of its core outcomes. Child-focused actors, such as World Vision, made multiple requests for the increased inclusion and participation of affected populations under the premise **Nothing About Us Without Us**. However, only 70 out of the 3,000 participants were refugees whose attendance was facilitated primarily by civil society organizations,⁶¹ and the number of children refugees who participated is unclear.

Resettlement Pledges for Syrian Refugees

In 2019, 85 per cent of the world's refugees lived in low and middle income countries, with Turkey hosting the largest number of internationally displaced populations - more than all EU Member States combined.⁶² Yet, out of 1593 total pledges, only 136 (8.5 per cent) were categorized as "resettlement and complementary pathway" pledges. Just 66 (48 per cent) of these were pledged by states - Canada (8), France (2), Germany (2), Ireland (2), Japan (2), Sweden (2) and UK (3), as well as the EU (2). UNICEF (with UNHCR) pledged to accelerate action towards the inclusion of refugee children under "responsibility sharing arrangements".

Of the 136 'resettlement pledges', 4 related specifically to child protection. The content of these pledges ranged from *"working together as inter-faith and non-faith actors...providing support for resettlement and complementary pathways with a specific focus on at-risk groups including unaccompanied minors"* and *"increasing response capacity to support UNHCR in reaching its resettlement and complementary targets"* to *"deploying Resettlement and Complementary Pathways Experts to field operations to identify and refer refugees for resettlement (i.e. women and girls and risk; survivors of violence or torture; child and adolescents at risk)"* and *"facilitating family reunification"*.

None of these pledges were made by the international actors included in this analysis and none were received by Syria or Turkey. Only 1 pledge was received by Jordan.⁶³ Thus, the resettlement pledges for Syrian refugees were already woefully insufficient to address their protection needs, and this has been worsened by COVID-19.

In 2020, globally, fewer than 35,000 refugees out of 20.7 million (0.16 per cent) were resettled and around 80 per cent of the refugees from the MENA region originated from Syria.⁶⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the deterioration of the conflict in Syria, led to a reduction in returns, with 38,000 Syrian refugees returning in 2020 - a 60 per cent decrease compared with 2019.⁶⁵ The alarming level of violence in Syria also led to an even smaller number of Syrian refugees returning home this year (14,774 as of 31 May 2021).⁶⁶ Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR identified almost 1.45 million refugees as particularly vulnerable and in need of resettlement, a figure that has almost doubled since 2010.⁶⁷

The status of most resettlement pledges is unclear, as the implementation status of many pledges is unknown. The following (limited) information was available from the dashboard:

- The UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) launched in March 2021
- Canada and Ireland have expanded their resettlement programs, and the European Union (EU) is promoting complementary pathways to the EU alongside resettlement initiatives⁶⁸
- UNICEF's pledge has led to the development in January 2020 of a 'Blueprint for Joint Action'⁶⁹ with UNHCR. This is a critical step towards implementing their common GRF pledge to ensure the inclusion of refugee children and their families in national systems and plans across protection, education, and water, sanitation, and hygiene, with the objective to reach 20 per cent of the world's refugee children. Lebanon is included in the first round of focus countries, with a strong emphasis on education.

UNHCR estimates that in 2022, and for the sixth year in a row, Syrian refugees will have the highest resettlement needs. Resettlement for the most vulnerable Syrian refugees must be a much greater priority, supplemented by complementary pathways as alternative means of achieving a temporary and potentially durable solution.

COVID-19 HAS SEVERELY DEEPENED VULNERABILITIES FOR SYRIAN CHILDREN

The pandemic has severely affected Syrian children inside Syria and in the region. It has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, created new ones, and significantly worsened children's protection needs. The complete shutdown of schools, movement restrictions and COVID-19's socio-economic aftershocks have disproportionately impacted most vulnerable children. In particular, prevention and mitigation measures, including lockdowns, have limited the delivery of critical health and psychosocial support and the operation of case management services.

Violence, including child marriage, and child labour, has become the new normal

A September 2021 Global Protection Cluster update warned that child marriage, psychological distress, gender-based violence (GBV), violence against children, and the risk of family and child separation were classified as “extreme” in Syria.⁷⁰ The ongoing conflict, combined with the worsening economic situation, greater restrictions of humanitarian actors, a reduction in aid, and COVID-19 has made meeting the growing protection needs of Syrian children increasingly challenging as families resort to harmful coping strategies to survive.⁷¹ Child labor has also increased, with some children being forced into exploitative jobs in their communities.⁷² In March 2021, 82 per cent of people surveyed in northwest Syria reported that children engaged in child labor instead of attending school.⁷³ Child marriage has also become very common,⁷⁴ especially in northwest Syria.⁷⁵

“I quit school a long time ago. I am now working long hours in a factory for a small amount of money as a salary. I spend half of my salary on transportation”, explained Mahdi*, a 10 years old boy from northwest Syria

“I think that [early] marriages are taking place for the sake of protection but this has a very negative impact ... it's an education that protects a girl. They are marrying their girls off to protect their honor, so people do not bad-mouth them.” – Yusra*, a 13-year- old displaced Syrian girl in northwest Syria



12-year-old Zaid* was surrounded by the safety and warmth of his grandmother's home when armed people broke into the house in order to arrest his father. Suddenly his legs simply did not work anymore, and ever since, he has been using a wheelchair to move around. © Bahar Organisation.

A similarly worrying trend is happening in Jordan and Turkey. Child labor, already prevalent before COVID-19, has increased significantly. A 2020 World Vision survey, carried out before the COVID-19 pandemic, found that the number of children working has more than doubled in Turkey.⁷⁶ Another assessment found that the percentage of children working rather than attending school in Jordan has increased from one per cent in 2019 to more than 13 per cent in 2020.⁷⁷ In Turkey, which continues to host the largest number of Syrian refugee children⁷⁸, more families are marrying girls early to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on families' income and reduced access to employment support.⁷⁹ Similarly, Jordan has seen an increase in child marriage, which was already endemic before the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸⁰ The number of child marriage cases registered in Sharia courts in Jordan increased by almost 12 per cent between 2019 and 2020,⁸¹ and in Jordan's Azraq refugee camp, latest data reveal a 57 per cent increase in the harmful practice.^{82 83}

Widened education gap and increased protection risks

Out-of-school displaced Syrian children are one of the most vulnerable groups to violence. They face multiple child protection risks. The COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in more children out of school, with many at risk of never going back into a classroom, especially girls, which has compounded the protection crisis.

The protection needs of Syrian refugee children in Jordan and Turkey has also grown considerably due to

school closures and lack of access to distance learning, which significantly heightened their risk and experience of violence, child labor and child marriage as families found themselves without enough money to survive, let alone to pay for education supplies and uniforms when schools re-opened. In December 2020, Save the Children reported that COVID-19 had pushed an additional 50 per cent of Syrian children in northern Syria out of school,⁸⁴ resulting in two thirds of children not having access to education in that region. Poverty was cited as the main reason for children dropping out of school. A 2021 World Vision survey⁸⁵ found that more than 75 per cent of all children interviewed across Syria, Jordan and Lebanon were not attending school or any other educational institution, with many lacking access to digital equipment to continue learning.

“I long for the day I can sit at my desk, attend classes, and just go to my school. I wish I can help my siblings and buy them milk; life is hard here, everything is very expensive,” says Mohammad*, a 13 years-old Syrian boy who lives in a camp in northwest of Syria.

Disruption to child health services, including Mental Health and Psycho social Support (MHPSS)

The pandemic has severely disrupted child health services in conflict settings⁸⁶ and globally because of, for example, health workers and funding being diverted to COVID-19 activities, health workers being infected

and people's reluctance to access services due to fear of infection. Increased poverty has also led to families spending less on basic expenses, including health.

In Syria, COVID-19 has had a knock-on effect on healthcare interventions, worsening children's access to lifesaving health services, already under strain due to the conflict and attacks on health facilities.⁸⁷ In 2020,⁸⁸ routine child vaccinations in the country were reduced by 40 per cent, and other essential health services for children were also severely disrupted such as newborn care, childhood infectious diseases and support for mental health care.⁸⁹

In host communities, access to child health services has also been severely impacted by the pandemic, with immunisation and nutrition services suspended or reduced, just as families' ability to feed their children became harder after losing their jobs, and daily wages. As schools shut down and parents and caregivers lost their income generating activities, school meals also became unavailable for Syrian refugees attending school, increasing financial pressure on families to feed their children. As a result, families are forced to reduce meals to cope or/and resort to eat less nutritious foods.

A 2020 Relief International assessment on the impact of COVID-19 outbreak on Syrian Refugees in Turkey found that before the pandemic⁹⁰ 87 per cent of survey participants had access to health services, but only 25 per cent still had access since COVID-19. The main barriers to accessing healthcare were fear of getting infected, government advice to stay at home, and financial constraints.⁹¹ Similarly in Jordan, health services for Syrian refugees, including children, were also



disrupted as a result of, for example, increased financial hardship, existing structural and legal barriers such as poverty,⁹² and lack of documents.

“I wish my height would increase, I am 13-years-old and I don’t like the way I look. I wish I could grow up like everyone else. I long for the day when I can sit at my desk without getting tired, attend classes regularly, and just enjoy school.” – 13-year-old Mohamad* who suffers from stunting in northwest of Syria.

The reduction in healthcare services and school closures made it harder for providers to identify and protect children, as their risks to violence greatly increased and the pandemic further worsened their mental health.

COVID-19 and Syrian Children’s Mental health

Mental health issues are some of the additional protection challenges faced by Syrian children in Syria and in host countries, which have worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2021, OCHA reported that 27 per cent of assessed households reported that their children were showing signs of distress, a 14 per cent increase since 2020.⁹³ And in April 2021, Save the Children reported that almost one in five of all recorded suicide attempts and deaths in northwest Syria were children during the last three months of 2020.⁹⁴ An October 2021 World Vision survey with MHPSS staff in northwest Syria found that child neglect, child marriage, child labor and lack of educational opportunities were the main protection issues impacting children’s mental health and wellbeing.⁹⁵ Similarly, in Jordan, a 2020 UN Multi-sectoral Rapid Needs Assessment⁹⁶ found that 41 per cent of all respondents reported that COVID-19 had a negative impact on their children’s well-being, worsening existing mental health issues experienced by Syrian refugee children.⁹⁷

Yet, MHPSS services were already insufficient and underfunded before COVID-19, especially in Syria, and pandemic related disruptions have further reduced children’s access to support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

An entire generation of Syrian children are losing a part of their childhood every single day that passes, and their chance of a better life and to grow as healthy, happy, and productive members of society fades away.

The war, and now COVID-19, threaten their well-being and healthy development, causing immediate and longer-term consequences.

The protection of Syrian displaced and refugee children must be a priority. Protecting children from violence, abuse, and harm is non-negotiable and not optional.

World Vision is calling on all actors to hold with a higher regard the needs of Syrian children displaced as part of the GCR as a whole, and immediately prioritize their protection needs before the next GRF in 2023. Donor governments must also strengthen their commitments, and financial support to avoid further loss for the future generations to be lost.

Donor governments and humanitarian actors should make targeted, measurable and specific funding and technical support commitments for Syrian displaced and refugee children, prioritizing protection. This includes:

- * Scaling up child protection and care services, delivered by skilled service providers
- * Identifying child protection gaps and challenges, with a focus on violence, child labor and child marriage, to ensure the planning and delivery of child protection needs based interventions
- * Expanding mental health and psychosocial support programs for Syrian displaced and refugee children in host countries.

Donor governments must prioritize Syrian children’s education through funding and educational support and ensure that every action is taken to prioritize the continued learning and return to school of children who had to drop out of school due to COVID-19. This includes:

- * Funding humanitarian interventions (e.g., cash transfers) to support Syrian families to keep children in school and prevent child labor and child marriage
- * Special attention should be paid to girls who are more likely not to be able to continue learning and not go back to school

- * Identifying and targeting children who are being left behind and not receiving any education, including children who have been forced to work. Extra support must be provided to ensure they are able to resume their education, to school due to child marriage and other gender-related vulnerabilities, as well as to boys dropping out of school for child labour.

The international community must immediately step up their ambitions and commitments on responsibility sharing and durable solutions for Syrian displaced and refugee populations. This includes:

- * Fully funding child protection needs in relevant humanitarian response plans
- * Increasing long-term investments to prevent and tackle child violence, including child marriage, child labor and other forms of physical and emotional violence
- * Scaling up sustainable durable solutions for refugee children by fully funding child needs in the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan
- * Significantly increasing commitments on and effective processes on resettlement for Syrian refugees.

Donor Governments must also explicitly state how they will support Syrian displaced and refugee children in Syria and host communities to ensure that their protection needs are adequately met. This includes:



Yasmeen* holding a bottle of clean water after finally filling it from a water tank which provides water to internally displaced Syrians like her. © Uluslararası İnsani Yardım Derneği (IYD)

- * Ensuring that children are meaningfully involved in program design, implementation and evaluation
- * Ensuring that children and young people are adequately represented and participate meaningfully at the next 2023 Global Refugee Forum.

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