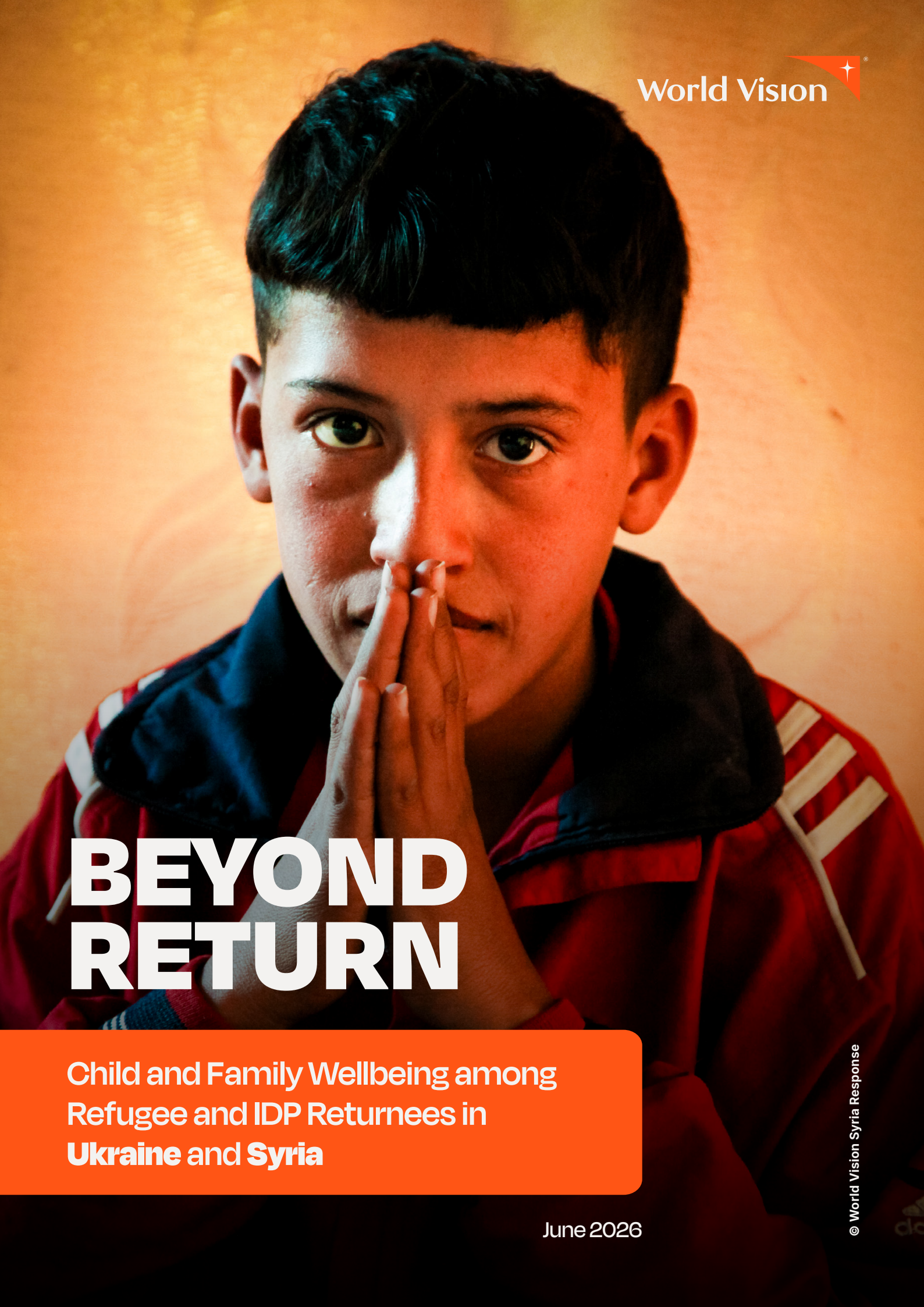

World Vision

BEYOND RETURN

Child and Family Wellbeing among Refugee and IDP Returnees in **Ukraine** and **Syria**

June 2026

This brief draws on rapid qualitative research conducted with caregivers and young people who have returned to their areas of origin or home countries in Ukraine and Syria.

WHAT CAREGIVERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE TOLD US

Families are returning for a complex mix of reasons. Across both contexts, family reunification, belonging and hopes for a better future were important drivers, alongside economic pressures in displacement. In Syria, return was also shaped by efforts to reclaim homes and livelihoods and by changing political and security conditions.

Return often brings important emotional benefits, including reconnecting with family, friends and communities. For many families, however, return has not marked the end of hardship. Instead, children and caregivers often described rebuilding their lives in communities where insecurity, economic pressures, damaged infrastructure and limited support continue to shape daily life.

In Ukraine, most families were able to access basic public services after return, including schools, healthcare and local government support, and were generally aware of where to seek assistance. While services were largely available, many families continued to face affordability challenges, insecurity and the ongoing impacts of war.

In Syria, families are returning not to recovery, but to devastation. Homes, schools, health facilities, water and electricity systems, and livelihoods have been destroyed or severely damaged by years of conflict.

Return has not marked the end of hardship for many children. Across both contexts, children continue to face challenges affecting their safety, wellbeing, learning and future opportunities, although the nature and severity of these challenges differ significantly between Ukraine and Syria:

In Ukraine, returnees continue to live with the threat of active hostilities, including missile and drone attacks, air raid alerts, and damage to civilian infrastructure.

In Syria, the primary physical hazards include explosive ordnance and landmine contamination, damaged and unstable infrastructure, and other dangers associated with years of conflict.

Young people consistently emphasised the importance of friendships, belonging, education, safety and opportunities to participate in community life after return, highlighting that feeling connected to their communities remains central to their wellbeing and sense of hope for the future.

WHAT IS NEEDED

- **Donors and Funding Institutions:** Increase flexible, multi-year funding that bridges humanitarian assistance, early recovery and development; invest in integrated, child-centred and gender-responsive programming, including targeted support for women-headed households; and prioritise support to high-return areas, local actors and underfunded crises, particularly Syria.
- **European Union and European States:** Uphold non-refoulement obligations and ensure that any transition away from temporary protection frameworks, or policy changes affecting refugees, do not create pressure to return before conditions are safe, voluntary and dignified, while investing in the conditions that enable sustainable return.
- **UN Agencies and Humanitarian Actors:** Strengthen integrated, area-based, child-centred and gender-responsive responses in return locations; systematically incorporate children's and young people's perspectives into assessments and planning; scale up protection, mine action, mental health and psychosocial support; and strengthen coordination across humanitarian, recovery and development actors.
- **National and Local Authorities:** Strengthen or establish local child protection and social service systems; restore access to schools, healthcare, water and other essential services; address documentation and legal barriers; and ensure that return policies uphold children's rights and best interests.
- **INGOs and NGO Partners:** Deliver multi-sectoral and child-centred programmes that support wellbeing, recovery and resilience beyond initial return assistance, with a focus on education, livelihoods, psychosocial support, community-based protection and meaningful participation of children and young people.


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BACKGROUND

Ukraine and Syria remain among the world's largest and most protracted displacement crises. Across both contexts, millions of children and families face the cumulative effects of years of conflict, repeated displacement, economic hardship, disrupted access to essential services and multiple protection risks.[1]

While displacement remains widespread in both Ukraine and Syria, 2025 and 2026 have also seen increasing return movements. Yet for many children and families, return has not marked the end of hardship. Instead, it has exposed the fragile realities of rebuilding lives amid ongoing conflict, unmet humanitarian needs and uncertain recovery prospects.

In Ukraine, while large-scale displacement has continued throughout the war, return has also remained a consistent feature of population movements since the full-scale invasion. An estimated 4.2 million returnees are currently present in Ukraine, accounting for approximately 14% of the population living in government-controlled areas.[2] Many returns in Ukraine however have been partial, temporary or highly localised.[3] Despite the ongoing hostilities, and the heavy toll of war on civilians, growing numbers of families are returning home to areas close to active hostilities. Around 1.55 million returnees (37% of all returnees) are located in frontline areas,[4] and highly concentrated in urban centres, with Kyiv City alone hosting over one million returnees.[5]

1 OCHA (2026a) Ukraine Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026 (January 2026). Available at: https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2026-january-2026-en; OCHA (2026b) Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (April 2026). Available at: https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-2026-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-april-2026

2 IOM (2026a) Ukraine Return Report – General Population Survey Round 23 (May 2026). Available at: https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-returns-report-general-population-survey-round-23-may-2026

3 Ibid.

4 IOM (2026a), supra at 2.

5 Ibid.

In Syria, the political changes that unfolded in December 2024 profoundly reshaped displacement dynamics across the country and the wider region, reviving hopes among many displaced Syrians that return might finally become possible after years of conflict and uncertainty.[6] Following more than fourteen years of war, mass displacement and regional instability, the transition contributed to significant new return movements both from within Syria and from abroad. Since December 2024, approximately 2 million IDPs[7] and more than 1.67 million Syrian refugees[8] from neighbouring countries, primarily Türkiye and Jordan, have returned home.

The escalation of the Middle East crisis has added another layer to these dynamics, serving as an additional and distinct trigger for return on top of the December 2024 political transition. Particularly through movements from Lebanon into Syria, the new escalation, which began on 28 February 2026, rapidly accelerated cross-border flows that had already been underway since the regime change. Between 2 March and 25 May 2026, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) recorded 366,719 individual crossings from Lebanon into Syria, of which approximately 97% were Syrian nationals and 3% Lebanese nationals.[9] The pace of crossings was highest in early March 2026 immediately following the escalation, before declining after a ceasefire in Lebanon was announced on 17 April 2026. The cumulative figure nonetheless represents a substantial additional movement layer on top of the return flows already underway since December 2024.[10] As with all crossing data however, this figure captures total border movements and is not equivalent to the number of durable returnees.[11]

What return really means: the gap between going home and recovery

Across both contexts, return movements are unfolding alongside severe and increasingly protracted humanitarian needs. While growing numbers of families are returning to their communities, many are doing so in environments where the conditions required for safe, dignified and sustainable reintegration remain deeply fragile.

In Ukraine, the war continues to generate severe and increasingly protracted humanitarian needs across the country. 10.8 million people require assistance, including 2.2 million children.[12] Humanitarian needs remain particularly acute in frontline and northern border regions[13] where continued shelling, missile and drone attacks, damage to civilian infrastructure and disrupted services continue to affect daily life.[14] In 2025, civilian harm reached its highest level since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, while conflict-related humanitarian needs and displacement continued to escalate across the country.[15] Winter further compounds challenges for those in frontline and conflict-affected areas.[16]

6 Relief International (2026) Diagnosing Return: Health Conditions and Experiences of Returnees in Syria, Executive Summary (May 2026). Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/diagnosing-return-health-conditions-and-experiences-returnees-syria-enar

7 UNHCR (2026a) Comprehensive Overview of IDPs and IDP Returns Dashboard (As of 4th Jun 2026). Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/comprehensive-overview-idps-and-idp-returns-dashboard-4th-jun-2026

8 UNHCR (2026b) Comprehensive Overview of Refugee Returns (as of 4 June 2026). Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/comprehensive-overview-refugee-returnees-4th-june-2026

9 As with all crossings data, this figure captures total border movements and includes short-term visits and transit, not only durable returns. Source: IOM (2026b) Syrian Arab Republic — Emergency Mobility Tracking and Cross Border Monitoring Situation Update - Round 12 (25 May 2026). Available at: https://dtm.iom.int/reports/syrian-arab-republic-emergency-mobility-tracking-and-cross-border-monitoring-situation-10

10 Ibis.

11 UNHCR interviews with Syrians crossing from Lebanon into Syria during the March–April 2026 escalation found that approximately half intended to remain permanently in Syria, while the other half described their stay as temporary, pending improvements in security and living conditions. The UNHCR 2025 Regional Intentions Survey similarly found that over 70% of Syrian refugees across the region described return movements as temporary or exploratory, often conditional on economic feasibility, safety, and access to basic services. UNHCR (2026c) Over 200,000 people cross into Syria after a month of hostilities in Lebanon (7 April 2026). Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-over-200-000-people-cross-syria-after-month-hostilities-lebanon; UNHCR (2025) Regional Intentions Survey, cited in IOM Syria Regional Refugee Resilience and Response Plan 2026. Available at: https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/syria-regional-refugee-resilience-and-response-plan-2026

12 OCHA (2026a), supra at 1.

13 Ibid.

14 OCHA (2026a), supra at 1.

15 OHCHR Ukraine (2026). 2025 Deadliest year for civilians in Ukraine since 2022, UN Human Rights Monitor find (12 January 2026). Available at: https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/2025-deadliest-year-for-civilians-in-Ukraine-since-2022-UN-human-rights-monitors-find

Approximately 3.7 million people also continue to be displaced, often multiple times,[17] while more than 5.6 million Ukrainians remain outside the country seeking protection.[18] Children remain heavily affected by these dynamics. Humanitarian needs across Ukraine remain severe, yet the response continues to face significant funding shortfalls: as of June 2026, the 2026 HNRP was only 42.7% funded.[19] Returnees in frontline areas have urgent needs, particularly financial hardship, and alongside IDPs, face greater needs than the non-displaced population.[20]

In Syria, increasing return movements are unfolding within a context of severe and widespread humanitarian need. An estimated 15.6 million people require humanitarian assistance, 44% of them are children.[21] Since early 2026, the country has faced multiple overlapping shocks, including drought, the continued effects of the February 2023 earthquake, renewed hostilities in Aleppo and the north-east, severe flooding across several governorates, and the regional repercussions of the escalation of the Middle East crisis.

Many returnees are therefore arriving in communities where basic infrastructure and essential services remain damaged, disrupted or inaccessible, while humanitarian assistance is increasingly limited due to shrinking funding.[22] As of June 2026, the 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) for Syria was only 18.8% funded,[23] including across sectors central to children's wellbeing. As a result, many return areas remain largely beyond the reach of both humanitarian assistance and recovery investments.

About this Brief

This brief has been compiled by World Vision Middle East and Eastern Europe, with the support of Field Offices in Syria and Ukraine, as well as Research Consultant Delphine Valette, to mark World Refugee Day 2026. It focuses on Ukraine and Syria, two of the most significant displacement and return contexts affecting Europe and the Middle East. Drawing on the experiences of refugee returnees and IDP returnees, it provides a snapshot analysis of return dynamics and their implications for children and families.

The briefing is organised around the key factors shaping families and children's wellbeing after return, including food security and nutrition, health, protection, education, mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, and access to services and assistance. It concludes with recommendations for key policy actors, including donors, humanitarian actors and national authorities, to strengthen support for returnee children and families and promote sustainable reintegration.

At its heart, this briefing amplifies the voices and experiences of caregivers and young people navigating return and reintegration. Their perspectives must inform humanitarian, recovery and policy responses.

16 OHCHR Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (2026) Ukraine: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict (January 2026 Update). Available at: https://ukraine.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2026-02/Ukraine%20-%20protection%20of%20civilians%20in%20armed%20conflict%20%28January%202026%29_ENG.pdf; World Vision (2026a) Surviving the Freezing Cold under Fire: How winter is disrupting Ukrainian children's education and mental health: Evidence from displaced families in frontline areas. Available at: https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2026-02/Surviving%20the%20Freezing%20Cold%20Under%20Fire%20Final%201.pdf

17 IOM (2026c) Ukraine Crisis Response Plan 2026. Available at: https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/ukraine-crisis-response-plan-2026

18 Ibid.

19 Source: OCHA Financial Tracking Service. Available at: https://fts.unocha.org/countries/234/summary/2026 (as of 12 June 2026).

20 IOM (2026a), supra at 2; International Federation of the Red Cross (2025) At a tipping point - How financial strains are driving Ukrainians abroad back home. Available at: https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/At%20a%20tipping%20point-How%20financial%20strains%20are%20driving%20Ukrainians%20abroad%20back%20home.pdf

21 OCHA (2026b), supra at 1.

22 IOM (2026d) Syrian Arab Republic - Emergency Mobility Tracking and Cross Border Monitoring Situation Update - Round 11 (18 May 2026). Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-emergency-mobility-tracking-and-cross-border-monitoring-situation-update-round-11-18-may-2026

23 Source: Financial Tracking Service. Available at: https://fts.unocha.org/countries/218/summary/2026 (as of 12 June 2026).

METHODOLOGY

This briefing draws on qualitative primary data collected by World Vision in May 2026 in frontline and conflict-affected areas of Mykolaivska oblast – with one participant living in Kiyv, Ukraine, and Aleppo governorate, Syria. Data collection consisted of household interviews (HHs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with returnee caregivers and young people.[24]

Ukraine

- 7 HHs with returnee refugees (3 women-headed households and 4 men-headed households). One participant was in Kyiv.
- 1 women only FGD with 6 participants both internally displaced and returnee refugees.
- 1 mixed FGD with young people aged 14-18 with 6 participants composed of internally displaced returnees and returnee refugees.

Syria

- 5 HHs with returnee refugees and one internally displaced returnee (3 women-headed households and 2 men-headed households).
- 1 women-only FGD with 8 participants (5 returnee refugees and 3 internally displaced returnees).
- 1 men-only FGD with 7 participants (4 returnee refugees and 3 internally displaced returnees).
- 1 mixed FGD with young people aged 11-17 with 7 participants composed of internally displaced returnees and refugee returnees.

The qualitative research seeks to present return experiences, perceptions, priorities and challenges from the perspective of caregivers and young people. As such, the findings are not statistically representative of all returnees in Ukraine or Syria, nor of the areas where the research was conducted.

To situate participants' experiences within broader trends, the primary findings are triangulated with second sources, including World Vision's reports including needs assessments in Ukraine and Syria; OCHAT's 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans for both countries; as well as additional sources from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR), and other relevant thematic analysis.

24 Througout this brief, "home" is used as a synonym for areas of origin or home country, recognising that many returnees are coming back to communities where homes have been destroyed or damaged by conflict.


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I. FINDINGS FROM UKRAINE

Why families are returning

In Ukraine, return decisions are influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including household-specific circumstances, emotional and personal considerations, and with broader regional and economic realities that ultimately outweighed the perceived benefits of remaining displaced. Yet, the decision to return home is taking place against a backdrop of continued conflict, insecurity and strained public services. Displaced families have returned to frontline and conflict-affected areas where they have to contend with daily danger and insecurity.

Family reunification emerged as the strongest and most consistent driver of return, with caregivers repeatedly emphasising the desire to be reunited with spouses and for children to see their fathers, aligning with broader evidence.[25]

"Before the war, my husband, our children and I were always together, both on holidays and at home. We had never been separated from our family for a long time, so it was very difficult for us and we decided to return home."
(Woman FGD participant)

25 IOM (2025) Returning home from abroad: Trends, drivers and reintegration challenges among Ukrainians Returnees from abroad (July 2025). Available at: https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1461/files/reports/IOM_UKR_Returning%20Home%20From%20Abroad_July%202025_0.pdf?iframe=true

Caregivers – most of them women - described the strain that prolonged separation placed on family relationships. The desire to restore family life, reconnect with wider family networks and friends, and re-establish a sense of normality was a powerful factor shaping return decisions.

"We were very happy when we returned, so much that we did not want to leave anymore, because here are acquaintances, and friends, many who returned, we missed home very much, everything is yours here, you are the hostess in your own home, this is the main thing."
(Woman FGD participant)

Economic pressures in host countries also played a significant role. Rising housing costs, utility bills, and barriers to employment placed considerable pressure on households, particularly women-headed households with fewer income-generating opportunities. A smaller number of participants pointed to factors within Ukraine that enabled or encouraged return, including the resumption of employment opportunities and, in one case (Kyiv HH participant), de-occupation.

Children's well-being and education also emerged as important drivers of return for some participants. Return, in these cases, was seen as essential to children's emotional, social, and learning needs.

"The main problem is water. There is only technical water in the tap; it is very salty and rusty. The authorities have improved the situation where possible by opening water points where people can collect water. But there is also a problem: when there is no electricity, the pumps do not pump water." *(Woman FGD participant)*

As expected: returnee's experience of coming home

For most participants, the realities of return are broadly aligned with their expectations. Many families had remained in close contact with relatives and friends who stayed in Ukraine and therefore returned with a relatively clear understanding of local conditions, including ongoing insecurity, damage to infrastructure, disruptions to services, and the wider impacts of the war. As a result, few participants reported being surprised by the physical conditions they encountered upon return.

Contrary to common assumptions, most households found their homes largely intact, with only one household reporting significant housing damage and another reporting broken windows. However, participants described returning to communities that had been profoundly altered by the war and with challenges around education and learning for smaller children and livelihoods opportunities.

Several noted that neighbourhoods felt noticeably emptier, with many residents having left and social networks fragmented by displacement. Others highlighted the continuing psychological impact of living in a conflict-affected environment, including persistent fear, air raid alerts, explosions and uncertainty.

While access to water, electricity and education had largely been restored, services often remained disrupted. These findings are consistent with World Vision's recent winterisation research in frontline areas, which documented widespread power outages and heating challenges among conflict-affected families.[26]

26 World Vision (2026a), supra, at 16.

Young People's Voices: coming home

Many young people described return as a joyful experience because it allowed them to reconnect with their hometowns, friends, and a sense of normality that had been missing during displacement. Several participants spoke about missing their peers while displaced and feeling isolated in unfamiliar environments where they struggled to build friendships. Returning home meant being able to see friends in person again, rather than communicating only online, and regaining a sense of belonging.

> ***"Before the war, I lived in Mykolaiv. When the war started, we went to Romania, then we were in Poland, then in Italy, then back in Romania. When I returned home, I felt happy to see my friends again. It was very joyful to come back home."*** (Young person FGD participant)

At the same time, return was accompanied by uncertainty and anxiety. Several young people explained that they did not know what to expect when they came back. While they hoped to reunite with friends and restart familiar routines, many found that some friends had moved elsewhere in Ukraine or remained abroad. As a result, expectations of returning to pre-war social networks were often only partially fulfilled. For some, the loss of friendships and the fragmentation of peer groups remained a source of disappointment and sadness.

> ***"When I returned, I did not know what would happen next, but I felt joy, it even felt easier to breathe. At the same time, I was worried whether my friends would still be here and whether I would be able to spend time with them."*** (Young person FGD participant)

> ***"I expected that I would return home and go out with my friends, but I could not return to my actual home; my friends are not in that village now. I stopped communicating with most of my friends; only one friend lives near me, and that is all."*** (Young person FGD participant)

Enough food, but growing economic pressure: the impact of return on children's access to food, nutrition and health

While food availability has improved across much of Ukraine, food security remains a significant concern for conflict-affected households, particularly in frontline and border regions, with 2 million people requiring food security and livelihoods assistance in 2026.[27] These pressures are particularly acute in frontline oblasts such as Mykolaiv.[28]

Despite ongoing food security concerns across conflict-affected areas of Ukraine, food availability or physical access did not emerge as major concerns among participating returnee households. The most pressing issue was affordability. Participants consistently reported that local shops and markets were well stocked and that essential food items were readily accessible. However, they also frequently highlighted the impact of rising food prices and broader economic pressures on household budgets, with one participant sharing that "you go into a shop, look at the prices, and realise that every day you are becoming poorer".

"In the first period after the war began, it was difficult; shops were empty and it was impossible to buy things. Now the shops have everything, but prices are very high. I'm not saying that children are sitting hungry, but if you want to buy, let's say, a kilo, you can't buy a kilo, you go and take 300 grams." (Woman FGD participant)

This reflects wider evidence from Ukraine showing that food is generally available for returnee households compared to before they left, but economic pressure remains acute, linked to loss of income, limited livelihood opportunities and rising living costs. Food prices have increased sharply since 2022, and with cumulative increases reaching 80–90% in many regions by 2025. The escalation of conflict in the Middle East may further exacerbate these challenges by contributing to rising energy, transport and food costs, placing additional pressure on already stretched household budgets in Ukraine.[29]

Despite financial pressures, caregivers reported that children had regular access to food following return and were generally able to maintain a varied diet. In terms of health, some caregivers reported concerns linked to the broader impacts of living in a conflict-affected environment, including disrupted sleep caused by air raid alerts and frequent periods spent in poorly ventilated bomb shelters. Seasonal illnesses and declining energy levels were also noted. These challenges were compounded by winter conditions and energy insecurity, with several households describing power cuts that disrupted cooking and daily routines. As highlighted in wider evidence from frontline areas, disruptions to electricity and heating during winter can place additional strain on children's health and wellbeing.[30]

Finally, some caregivers reported that the impacts of war and displacement on children's health often extend beyond illness, manifesting in both physical symptoms and reduced wellbeing, including frequent headaches and episodes of unusually high blood pressure, fatigue and exhaustion, in particular due to overcrowded and poorly ventilated bomb shelters during air raids.

27 OCHA (2026a), supra at 1.
28 IOM (2026a), supra at 2.
29 ACAPS (2026) Ukraine: Impacts of the Middle East Conflict (April 2026). Available at: https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20260422_ACAPS_Ukraine_-_Impacts_of_the_Middle_East_conflict.pdf
30 World Vision (2026a), supra at 16.

Young People's Voices: food, nutrition and health

Young people's accounts are broadly aligned with those of caregivers. They generally reported that their families had enough food and that basic needs were being met, while also recognising that prices had become very high. Their reflections reinforce the wider finding that the main issue was not food availability, but the pressure rising costs placed on household spending. As one young person noted, families sometimes had to give up entertainment in order to buy basic things.

One young person acknowledged the improvement in being able to access a wider range of food and goods, particularly when compared with displacement in a remote rural settlement to now residing in a city.

> ***"We lived in a settlement where there were chickens, a vegetable garden, and a household plot, so we had everything. But there was nothing in the shop because the village was very remote, and only basic necessities were available. Still, all the basics were there. You could go to a larger village to buy some treats. It was shocking after living in a city with a supermarket."***
> (Young person FGD participant)

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Returning to ongoing danger: physical safety risks for children

Despite continued return movements, the protection environment in Ukraine remains extremely challenging for children. Returning to unsafe areas prematurely is a key protection risk, increasing the likelihood of secondary displacement and compounding existing vulnerabilities.[31] Since 2025, intensified hostilities, the expanded use of drones, and continued attacks on civilian infrastructure have increased risks for civilians across the country. Millions of people have returned – temporarily or permanently – or still live in frontline areas. Mykolaiv oblast continues to experience the cumulative effects of prolonged conflict and regular security incidents, while Kyiv city – which hosts 25% of returnees[32] - remains exposed to recurring missile and drone attacks, and suffered the largest combined missile-and-drone attack to date on 23rd and 24th May 2026.[33]

Decisions to return to frontline and conflict affected areas therefore present a fundamental paradox. Families knowingly return to areas where protection risks persist and where children's safety cannot be guaranteed.

Many participants explained this, sharing that created significant emotional strain and family disruption. Return therefore represented an attempt to restore a sense of normality and reconnect children with husbands, family, community and home, even when protection risks remained. For many caregivers, the benefits of family reunification and social belonging outweighed the dangers associated with going back to unsafe areas.

Explosive hazards, including mines and unexploded ordnance, emerged as one of the most consistently reported protection threats facing children, and the need for increased mine risk education at school identified as required. Children's exposure to contaminated or potentially dangerous areas was commonly cited as the main concern, with participants emphasising the need for continued mine risk education, especially as children frequently spend time in locations perceived as unsafe.

More broadly, caregivers described children's continued exposure to conflict-related insecurity (e.g. air raid alerts), echoing World Vision's recent needs assessment in five frontline oblasts including Mykolaivska. Among 558 children surveyed, 59% had seen or heard shelling or attacks, 39% had experienced displacement, and nearly half (49%) reported feeling worried or scared due to bombing or shelling near their area.[34]

31 OCHA (2026a), supra at 1.
32 IOM (2026d) Ukraine Returns Report – General Population Survey – Round 22 (January 2026). Available at : https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1461/files/reports/IOM_UKR_Returns_Report_GPS_R22_January_2026_1.pdf?iframe=true
33 UN News (2026) Security Council LIVE: Mounting attacks and Russian threats prompt emergency Ukraine meeting (28 May 2026). Available at: https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/05/1167597#:~:text=On%20the%20night%20of%2023,range%20missiles%20and%20600%20drones.
34 World Vision (2026b) Needs Assessment: Integrated Education, Psychological Support and Child Protection for Conflict-Affected Children in Ukraine. Unpublished.

Young People's Voices: feeling safe

Young people's perspectives largely echoed those of caregivers, displaying strong awareness of the continued presence of conflict-related risks following return, and accepting a lower level of physical safety than they experienced during displacement. Several explicitly contrasted safety now and before they returned, describing displacement settings as safe places because there was no war, whereas return meant living with the knowledge that air attacks, drones or falling debris remain a possibility.

> ***"Safety means understanding that there is a 100% chance nothing will hit me. Abroad, you understand that there is no war there, so there is a full sense of safety."*** (Young person FGD participant)

At the same time, one participant described having become accustomed to air raid alerts and ongoing insecurity, despite finding the initial period of heavy shelling – prior to moving - extremely stressful. This suggests that, for some children, prolonged exposure to conflict has led to a degree of normalisation of risk, with dangers that would once have been extraordinary becoming part of everyday life.

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Learning through disruptions: access to education upon return

Ukraine's education system continues to operate under the pressures of protracted conflict. Millions of children remain affected by attacks on civilian infrastructure, displacement, insecurity, and repeated disruptions to schooling.[35] In conflict-affected and frontline regions, including Mykolaiv oblast[36] and, ongoing shelling, air raid alerts, damage to education infrastructure, and disruptions to electricity and other essential services continue to affect children's ability to access safe, continuous and quality education.

Access to learning was however not identified as a major return-related concern in spite of the location of the participants. Caregivers reported that children re-entered education following return, either through in-person (a majority) or online schooling, and generally point to regular attendance, mirroring World Vision's 2026 needs assessment.[37] Schools also appear to be geographically accessible for in-person learning, and with risk-mitigation measures in place, including shelters.[38]

A few caregivers however described significant barriers affecting regular access, affecting the quality of children's educational experiences, including regular attendance, in particular, shelling and air raid alerts, that also cause sleep disruption, and in some cases, the limitations of online learning, were also raised.

Young People's Voices: learning after return

Young people's experiences broadly reflected those reported by caregivers, with most describing continued access to education following return and few reporting major barriers to learning.

Some young people described how displacement had disrupted their ability to learn. One participant explained that while displaced in a rural area there was no internet connection and "no things to learn", making education difficult and contributing to feelings of isolation. Returning home therefore represented a return not only to friends but also to a more familiar educational environment.

However, some participants reported that their education has been affected by the wider impacts of the conflict, including insecurity, power outages, and damaged school infrastructure. Some also expressed frustration with the limited opportunities for extracurricular and social activities.

35 OCHA (2026a), supra at 1.
36 World Vision (2026b), supra at 36.
37 Ibid.
38 See also UN Ukraine (2026) Denmark and UNOPS facilitate access to safer education in Ukraine's frontline Mykolaiv region (29 May). Available at: https://ukraine.un.org/en/316377-denmark-and-unops-facilitate-access-safer-education-ukraine's-frontline-mykolaiv-region

Home again, but bearing the mental scars of war and displacement: returnee children's psychological well-being

Nearly four years into the full-scale war, the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of children in Ukraine remain under severe strain. Repeated displacement, exposure to violence, family separation, challenges in hosting countries and communities,[39] and ongoing insecurity have had profound impacts on families' and children's emotional wellbeing, displaced and returnees especially.[40]

For participants, return has created a complex picture for children's wellbeing. While many children have returned to environments where physical dangers are severe, return also appears to have generally improved children's and caregivers' emotional wellbeing in some important ways, particularly through family reunification, being home, and restoring a sense of belonging.

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> ***"My children are happy that they are at home. Of course, they saw nicer European parks and a higher standard of living, but communication there is completely different, and the children are different. Here, they are living at home."*** (Woman FGD participant)

Several caregivers felt that their children were happier and safer, while others reported that children appeared less stressed after returning home than they had been during displacement. Caregivers also frequently described being reunited with relatives, rebuilding family routines, and regaining a sense of belonging and stability. Several caregivers identified being together as a family as their primary source of emotional support.

At the same time, emotional recovery is incomplete. Several caregivers reported that their children continued to talk about their displacement experiences, recall difficult memories, or display occasional sadness, withdrawal, anxiety or behavioural changes. Sleep disruption emerged as one of the clearest indicators of ongoing distress, particularly in households affected by air raid alerts and explosions.

Beyond the immediate impacts of conflict, one participant reflected on the longer-term social and emotional effects of growing up during war, noting that children are "growing up very quickly because of the war". Combined with exposure to social media and images of life elsewhere, this may contribute to changing expectations and aspirations among young people, adding another layer of pressure and uncertainty to their everyday lives.

39 UNHCR (2025) Displacement patterns, protection risks and needs of refugees from Ukraine: Regional protection analysis #6 – Trend analysis, Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/displacement-patterns-protection-risks-and-needs-refugees-ukraine-regional-protection-analysis-6-trend-analysis-august-2025

40 IOM Ukraine (Updated) Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS). Available at: https://ukraine.iom.int/mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-mhpss

Young People's Voices: well-being and belonging

Caregivers tended to focus on signs of distress and ongoing worries, whereas young people themselves primarily highlighted the emotional benefits of being home and the importance of social relationships in helping them cope.

Several young people shared that returning home improved their wellbeing because it allowed them to reconnect with friends, familiar surroundings, and a sense of normality. At the same time, return did not remove emotional distress entirely. Several participants spoke about uncertainty, anxiety, and fear when returning, describing concerns about what they would find, whether life would return to normal, and whether their friends would still be there. One young person explained that they were happy to return but remained afraid because they remembered the stress and fear associated with leaving.

The conflict continued to affect young people's sense of wellbeing after return. Participants frequently referred to living with ongoing insecurity and stress linked to shelling and the possibility of attacks.

Young people also highlighted the importance of social relationships as a source of resilience, turning to family members, friends or other trusted people when experiencing difficulties, and emphasising the importance of friendship, communication and spending time with others to cope with stress, together with clubs and activities that provide distraction and opportunities for social interaction.

They also repeatedly called for more clubs, extracurricular activities, excursions and language courses, highlighting the importance of spaces where young people can build friendships, develop skills and spend time with their peers.

About World Vision Ukraine Crisis Response's work:

World Vision Ukraine Crisis Response (WV UCR) has been supporting children and families affected by the war since March 2022, reaching more than 2.3 million people, including over 1 million children, across Ukraine and neighbouring countries. In 2025, our work focused on providing multi-purpose cash assistance, education, child protection, mental health and psychosocial support, livelihoods, winterisation assistance, food security and basic needs services. Operating across most regions of Ukraine and through a strong network of local partners, WV UCR helped families meet urgent needs while strengthening resilience and supporting early recovery. The response has placed particular emphasis on protecting children from the long-term impacts of war through safe spaces, education support, mental health services and community-based protection programmes, while continuing to assist internally displaced people, returnees and conflict-affected communities.


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II. FINDINGS FROM SYRIA

Why families are returning: between choice and pressure

Syrian returns are being driven by a mix of pull factors inside Syria and push factors in places of displacement. The strongest pull factors are family unity/reunification, perceived improvements in security, the wish to recover or reoccupy housing, land and property, and renewed hope linked to political change and recovery prospects – aligning with broader evidence on return dynamics in Syria.[41] While Syrians have returned to several areas of the country, Aleppo is one of the primary governorates of return for both refugee returnees and IDP returnees.[42]

Across both refugee and IDP returnees, the findings point to several important commonalities in the drivers of return. In particular, both groups frequently referred to returning after "the regime changed" or following the "liberation" of their villages, suggesting that shifts in conflict dynamics and perceptions of improved security played a critical role in enabling return decisions.

"The decision was mine, made without hesitation. I decided to return to my country and my land to work there. I didn't face any pressure to leave Jarabulus."
(MHH Interview)

41 UNHCR (2026d) Syria: Protection and Reintegration Insights - Voices of returnees and host communities across Syria (January - March 2026). Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-protection-and-reintegration-insights-voices-returnees-and-host-communities-across-syria-january-march-2026

42 Ibid.

However additional economic hardship and exhaustion with displacement also emerged strongly across both populations. Participants repeatedly described displacement, whether in camps, informal settlements or abroad, as increasingly unsustainable due to poverty, instability, lack of opportunities and dependency. Many returnees acknowledged that conditions in Syria remained extremely harsh, but nevertheless felt compelled to attempt rebuilding their lives at home. Some women-headed participants were heading households because husbands were injured, disabled and unable to work. For these households, return decisions were often shaped by intersecting pressures.

At the same time, the findings suggest important differences in the factors shaping refugee and IDP returns. While some Türkiye-based refugees described returning voluntarily, others reported documentation and legal challenges. However, post-December 2024 policy shifts in several host countries – including tightened refugee status determination processes and changes to temporary protection frameworks in some European countries – appear to have added new pressures on some refugee populations, reinforcing the involuntary character of some returns.[43]

Refugee returnees were generally aware of the difficult conditions awaiting them and often described return as a cautious and uncertain decision, weighing deteriorating circumstances during displacement against known challenges in Syria.

By contrast, IDP returnees more commonly framed return around reclaiming land, restoring livelihoods, and re-establishing a sense of stability in their place of origin. Their decisions appeared to be driven less by expectations of improved services or living conditions, which many acknowledged remained extremely poor, and more by the need to rebuild economic survival strategies linked to land, agriculture, work opportunities, and local support networks. Some IDP returnees reported that the scale of destruction and lack of services they encountered upon return exceeded their expectations.


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"One of the main reasons that prompted me to return was homesickness and some hardship in Türkiye due to the lack of official documents for myself and my family. Although the conditions weren't suitable for living in the village, I chose to return of my own free will, even though the information I received from those who had gone before me wasn't positive about the village. But I made the decision and returned without hesitation."
(MHH Interview)


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43 UNHCR (2026d), supra at 43.

Worse than expected: the shock of coming home

The Aleppo governorate received the highest number of returnees of any governorate in Syria between December 2024 and July 2025, despite protection, child protection, health, education and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) needs reaching catastrophic severity levels - the highest classification used by the UN. Against this backdrop, one of the most striking findings was the significant gap between returnees' expectations and the realities they encountered upon arrival.

While many participants were aware that conditions remained difficult, the scale of destruction, the absence of basic services and the limited opportunities to rebuild livelihoods often exceeded their expectations. For some, the optimism and relief associated with returning home quickly gave way to disappointment and distress. As one woman-headed household reflected: "At first, I was excited and happy to be returning to my land, but as soon as I arrived and saw the destruction, I was overcome with disappointment and sadness." (WHH Interview)

At the same time, some participants – particularly IDP returnees – described an immediate sense of relief at no longer living in tents or temporary accommodation, highlighting the complex and often contradictory emotions associated with return.

Caregivers unanimously reported the widespread absence of basic infrastructure, services and assistance. They consistently described electricity, water, health facilities, telecommunications and other basic services as unavailable, inaccessible or non-functional. These accounts reinforce and add depth to findings from World Vision's 2025 multi-secoral needs assessment (MSNA) which documented widespread challenges in accessing electricity, water and other essential services across Aleppo governorate and highlighted the heightened vulnerability of returnee households.[44] Although the MSNA did not provide returnee-specific data for these indicators, participants in this research consistently described severe service gaps following return, suggesting that returnee households may face particularly acute challenges in accessing basic infrastructure and essential services.

> ***"We live without electricity or sanitation. The school is destroyed, there are no markets nearby, and there's not even mobile phone coverage or health centers."*** (MHH Interview)

Some caregivers also compared the conditions in their areas of return with those experienced during displacement. Refugee returnees contrasted return areas with life in Türkiye, where basic services were generally available despite economic challenges. Similarly, many IDP returnees compared their home communities with displacement locations where markets and services were more accessible.


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44 World Vision (2025) Multi-Sectoral Needs Asessement, Final Report, Whole of Syria (11 October 2025). Unpublished.

Young People's Voices: coming home

Young people's experiences of return were generally aligned with those of adult caregivers in one important respect. Return was experienced as an emotional contradiction. Like adults, most young people described feeling happy to be home while simultaneously feeling sadness and shock about what they found upon return.

However, there are also important differences. Whereas adults tended to frame return through concerns about housing, livelihoods, and services, young people described experiencing return much more through the lens of relationships, identity, belonging and social loss.

> ***"The weather changed. The school changed, and my friends changed. This is difficult."*** (Young person FGD participant)

Too little food, too few options: the impact of return children's access to food, nutrition and health

Returns are taking place against a background of severe food insecurity crisis and widespread malnutrition. More than 13 million people across Syria are food insecure, with 7.2 million acutely food insecure.[45] Years of conflict, economic decline and climate shocks have pushed Syria into a severe food security crisis. Damaged agricultural infrastructure, repeated droughts, land contamination,[46] weak economic conditions, including rising living costs, and lack of livelihoods – including for returnees[47]- have made it increasingly difficult for families to access affordable, nutritious food, while shrinking humanitarian funding further deepens vulnerability.[48]

Child malnutrition is also soaring. The ongoing economic downturn in Syria continues to erode families' capacity to provide nutritious food, quality care, and essential services for their children. An estimated 587,000 children require life-saving treatment for acute malnutrition, including almost 97,000 children with severe wasting, while more than 17% of children in Syria suffer from stunting.[49]

Many participants described a significant deterioration in food access following return, particularly when compared to their experiences during displacement. These findings are consistent with World Vision's 2025 MSNA across Syria which found that 71% of households in Aleppo (regardless of their displacement status) cited food security as a key challenge,[50] and with returnees more likely to be food insecure,[51] including due to limited livelihoods opportunities.[52] Returning families are therefore arriving into communities where food insecurity is already near-universal and humanitarian assistance is virtually absent.

45 OCHA (2026b), supra at 1.
46 Mine Advisory Group (2025) A new landmine crisis in the Middle East. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/new-landmine-crisis-middle-east
47 Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET) (2026) Insecurity, drought, and economic constraints drive outcomes aligned with Crisis: Syria Food Security Outlook, February 2026 – September 2026. Available at: https://fews.net/middle-east-and-europe/syria/food-security-outlook/february-2026
48 UN News (2026) Funding shortfalls force deep cuts to Syria food assistance: WFP (13 May 2026). Available at: https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/05/1167499
49 OCHA (2026b), supra at 1.
50 Ibid.
51 World Food Programme Syria Country Office (2025) Food Security Assessment 2025 - Syria: Summary of Results. Available at: https://api.godocs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000171571/download/
52 FEWSNET (2026), supra at 49.

Refugee returnee participants contrasted the relative availability of food markets in Türkiye with the scarcity and isolation they encountered after returning to Syria. For many families, return has meant facing a combination of limited food availability, long distances to markets, lack of income and unaffordable prices, all of which have significantly reduced their ability to provide nutritious diets for their children.

"Previously, when we were in Türkiye, my children ate three meals a day, and those meals were rich in protein and vitamins, such as fish, eggs, and fruits. But today, because of their high prices and unavailability in our society, my children and I are deprived of them." (WHH Interview)

Many participants described diets consisting primarily of bread, potatoes, bulgur and other inexpensive staples, while meat, fruit, vegetables and other nutrient-rich foods were largely unaffordable or unavailable. Families repeatedly reported that children were eating less diverse diets than before return and that nutritious foods had become luxury items beyond their reach.

"Since returning from Türkiye, we have faced many difficulties in securing food for our children. With no job opportunities, high prices, distant markets, and last year's crop failures due to drought, we are unable to provide adequate nutrition for our children." (WHH Interview)

The consequences for children's health were widely observed by caregivers, who described children becoming weaker, thinner and more susceptible to illness following return. However, women generally provided more detailed accounts of the impacts on children's health and nutrition, reporting weight loss, poor immunity, frequent infections, vitamin deficiencies, dental problems and concerns about malnutrition, evidencing the wide-ranging effects of poor nutrition on children's immunity and higher susceptibility to disease. Several mothers also highlighted the impact of food insecurity on infant feeding practices, describing difficulties producing sufficient breastmilk due to their own poor nutritional intake.

"My children's health is declining. I've noticed two of them have lost weight and are frequently suffering from viral illnesses due to weakened immunity and poor diet. They don't eat eggs, meat, or fruit because of their high prices and my husband's inability to afford them. I'm afraid my children will become malnourished because there are many cases in the village that haven't been treated yet." (Women FGD participant)

"I've noticed my 16-year-old daughter's hair falling out due to vitamin deficiencies." (WHH, Interview)

Poor health outcomes are further compounded by limited access to healthcare in Aleppo, where years of conflict have devastated the healthcare system.[53] Renewed hostilities in Aleppo governorate since January 2026 have placed additional pressure on already fragile services and further restricted access to medical care. At the same time, the destruction of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure continues to increase the risk of disease, creating a vicious cycle in which food insecurity, malnutrition and inadequate healthcare reinforce one another and undermine children's health and wellbeing.

For returnee families, access to healthcare is further limited by the cost of treatment, transportation barriers and the absence of nearby services, particularly in rural areas. Many

53 Insecurity Insight & Safeguarding Health in Conflict (2024) Syria: Violence Against Health Care in Conflict 2023. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-violence-against-health-care-conflict-2023-enar

participants described returning to villages where health facilities, markets and other essential services were either absent or located far away, creating additional financial and physical barriers to accessing treatment and nutritional support. Women repeatedly linked children's deteriorating health to the absence of nearby healthcare services and the inability to seek timely medical care.

Despite the scale of need, humanitarian assistance was frequently described as absent, insufficient or limited to one-off distributions shortly after return. Families reported receiving little or no sustained food assistance despite ongoing food insecurity and worsening living conditions. As a result, many returnee households are struggling to meet even their most basic nutritional needs, placing children at heightened risk of malnutrition, illness and long-term developmental harm.

Young People's Voices: food, nutrition and health

Young people consistently described a deterioration in the quality and diversity of their diets following return, but most reported that they continued to eat two or three meals a day. They highlighted the absence of fruits, vegetables, meat and other nutritious foods, often describing their diets as repetitive and lacking nutritional value. Several expressed frustration at having to rely on the same foods repeatedly, while others noted that food preparation had become more difficult due to the lack of electricity and the need to cook over wood fires. For many, the challenge was not the complete absence of food, but limited access to diverse, nutritious and desirable foods.

Young people also drew a direct connection between these dietary changes and their physical wellbeing. Several reported feeling less healthy and having lower energy levels since returning,

Young people also compared their current situation with their experiences during displacement, often perceiving return as having reduced their access to diverse and nutritious foods.

"I miss a lot of food from when I was displaced. Here, there is nothing to eat except the food my mother makes." (Young people FGD participants)

Returning to ongoing danger: physical safety risks and hazards for childrenfood, nutrition and health

Children returning to Syria face a complex and overlapping environment of protection risks that have become increasingly systemic and household-driven due to prolonged economic hardship and the collapse of institutional support.[54] While millions of families have returned since the political transition in December 2024, they have encountered a landscape defined by lethal physical threats, legal exclusion, and harmful coping strategies, including in Aleppo governorate.[55] Returnee children arriving in Aleppo are therefore entering one of the most protection-compromised environments in Syria.[56]

Return has significantly increased children's exposure to environmental and structural protection risks, while simultaneously reducing access to protective services and safe spaces. All caregivers reported being worried about their children's safety, often more than before they returned. They consistently shared that children face heightened risks because they are living in environments characterised by damaged and unstable buildings; open and uncovered wells; venomous snakes and environmental hazards; lack of lighting and electricity; absence of safe play spaces; and limited supervision opportunities due to long distances and insecure environments, for example when walking to school.

"There are no safe spaces for children to play, amidst numerous dangers, including landmines, snakes, and open wells." (Male FGD participant)

In line with broader evidence,[57] unexploded ordnance (UXO) and landmine contamination[58] were consistently identified by caregivers as among the most serious threats facing children following return. They face a particularly acute risk of harm from explosive ordnance due to the intersection of age[59] and returnee status.[60] Their limited awareness of contamination risks combined with increased exposure as families return to damaged homes and public spaces, creates distinct vulnerabilities. Participants described fears that children could encounter explosive devices while playing, walking to school, or moving around their communities, particularly in areas where contamination is poorly marked and information is limited.

Beyond the immediate risk of injury or death, contamination also restricts children's freedom of movement, limits access to education and recreational activities, and contributes to caregivers' fears about allowing children to move safely within their communities.

"Neither I nor my children have ever experienced violence, but we've heard of children who have been abused, subjected to violence, and suffered terrible accidents like landmine explosions and snake bites. Two incidents involving children have terrified us: one child was injured by a landmine, and another was bitten by a snake. Therefore, we are worried and fearful about both snakes and unexploded landmines." (MHH, Interview)

54 Medecins du Monde - Turkey / Dunya Doktorlari Dernegi (2026) Protection Risk Assessment Report (April 2026). Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/protection-risk-assessment-report-april-2026
55 Ibid.
56 World Vision (2025), supra at 46.
57 Medecins du Monde - Turkey / Dunya Doktorlari Dernegi (2026), supra at 56.
58 World Vision (2025), supra at 46.
59 HALO Trust (2026) "Explosives Kill Seven Children in One of Syria's Deadliest Weeks" (5 February 2026). Avaialble at: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/explosives-kill-seven-children-one-syrias-deadliest-weeks
60 World Vision (2025), supra at 46; SARD (2026) UXO Challenge in Syria and Awareness Campaign (11 March 2026). Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/uxo-challenge-syria-and-awareness-campaign

Young People's Voices: feeling safe

Young people's perceptions of safety risks largely mirrored those of adult caregivers. Mines, unexploded ordnance, open wells, damaged buildings and snakes were consistently identified as threats within their communities.

However, young people described these risks through their impact on everyday life. Several explained that they avoid certain areas because they are unsafe, while others said that there are few places where children can play safely.

Education under pressure: access to learning after return

While there are up to 3 million children in Syria out of school, post political transition, millions of children returned to school, with enrollment outpacing functional facilities.[61]

However, 14 years of conflict, displacement and under-investment have severely weakened Syria's education system. Aleppo is among the worst affected.6[2] Returnee children are attempting to re-enter a system that was already in crisis before they arrived, with a lack of functioning schools, overcrowded classrooms, and shortages of teachers and school supplies[63] often representing their reality.

While many school-aged children were reported to be enrolled in school, caregivers consistently described barriers that affect attendance, learning and children's ability to participate fully in education.

This is reflected in what caregivers described. The most consistent challenge was the lack of functioning local schools in areas of return. Several caregivers reported that village schools were destroyed, dilapidated or still under renovation, requiring children to attend schools in neighbouring villages. This often means walking around two kilometers each way, with attendance affected by bad weather, distance and safety concerns. One IDP household reported that all school-aged children were enrolled, but frequently absent because of the long walk and poor weather conditions. Similarly, one refugee returnee household reported that all school-aged children were attending school, but that the school was far away because the village school had been destroyed and only recently renovated.

Even where children were enrolled, caregivers raised serious concerns about the quality of education. Reported challenges included overcrowded classrooms, combined classes, teacher absences, shortages of teachers, and insufficient textbooks, with one book sometimes shared between two students.

For refugee returnee children and children displaced in northern Syria, reintegration into school is further complicated by curriculum and language changes. Caregivers reported that children who had previously studied Turkish and English now face difficulties with French as a second language. This has contributed to learning gaps and difficulties keeping pace with peers. Some also reported bullying and social exclusion linked to differences in dialect, language, behaviour and experiences during displacement, affecting children's integration with their peers and their sense of belonging within the classroom.[64]


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61 OCHA (2025) HNRP Syria 2025. Available at: https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1276/document/syrian-arab-republic-humanitarian-response-priorities-january-december-2025/article/34-education-6
62 World Vision (2025), supra at 46.
63 Ibid.
64 Syria Community Consortium (2026) Education at the Heart of Syria's Recovery: The Role of Schools in Return, Resilience, and Social Cohesion in a Changing Syria. Available at: https://recovery.preventionweb.net/media/116047/download?startDownload=20260529

Young People's Voices: learning after return

Young people described numerous challenges that affected their ability to learn and participate fully in education, in particular long distances to school, followed by shortages of books, desks and teachers, and overcrowded classrooms.

Refugee returnees also described difficulties adapting to a different curriculum, language of instruction and social environment. Some felt they had fallen behind their peers academically, while others reported bullying and exclusion because of differences in language, behaviour or experiences during displacement.

65 World Vision (2025), supra at 46.

"There's a difference between us and the children who haven't left the place in terms of how we speak, and dress, their behavior is bad; they swear and bully. I don't like them, and this makes me hate school." (Young person FGD participant)

Rebuilding lives while carrying trauma: women's resilience and children's psychological well-being after return

Mental health needs among Syrian refugees and IDPs are widespread and deeply entrenched, shaped by more than a decade of conflict, repeated displacement, exposure to violence, and the daily pressures of extreme poverty and collapsed services. Millions of Syrian children face severe trauma, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. World Vision's 2025 MSNA found that 64% of households surveyed in Northwest Syria identified psychosocial support as a priority community protection need, the highest of any region, while 34% reported at least one household member experiencing psychosocial distress.[65]

This severe level of needs is reflected in what the research participants described, and which shows that psychological distress among returnee families is driven not only by past experiences of conflict and displacement, but also by the interaction between these unresolved traumas and the daily hardships encountered after return.

For some participants, returning home provided an important sense of stability and emotional comfort. Being reunited with family members, returning to familiar places and regaining a connection to their land and community were frequently described as positive aspects of return.

However, these feelings often existed alongside worry and stress due to financial pressure, unemployment, and living conditions. Several caregivers reported becoming more irritable and experiencing greater tension within family relationships since returning, children also affected directly, and contributing to a tense home environment.

"All family members feel constant pressure and frustration, especially the children, due to the lack of basic necessities at home". (Male FGD participant)

Some also described tensions with the spouses, and divorces.

"When we were in Türkiye, our relationships with family, spouses, and children were better than they are now. We were kinder and calmer in our dealings with them. Now, the difficult living situation has increased stress and psychological pressure. Divorce and family disputes have also increased after returning from the country of asylum." (Woman FGD participant)

"We feel stable now; we are in our country, on our land, working and helping ourselves." (MHH, Interview)

A recurring theme across interviews was also the emotional impact of loss and separation. Women refugee returnees in particular, spoke about leaving behind friends, relatives and social networks built over many years in Türkiye. For some, return reopened painful memories associated with conflict, displacement and bereavement:

"I'm finding it difficult to adjust to the new reality. The most emotionally challenging part of returning is leaving behind my friends and the body of my son, who passed away in Türkiye, and not being able to visit his grave."
(WHH, Interview)

Children appeared to be experiencing many of these pressures alongside their caregivers. Whether displaced within Syria or as refugees abroad,[66] return often required children to adapt to unfamiliar environments, disrupted social networks and communities that remained heavily affected by conflict.

Caregivers frequently reported emotional and behavioural changes among children following return, including nightmares, sleep disturbances, sadness, crying, irritability, withdrawal and increased anxiety. Nightmares were one of the most commonly reported concerns, particularly those linked to conflict, explosions, mines and other dangers present in the return environment.

Caregivers adopted different emotional coping strategies, with notable gendered differences in how stress and responsibility were expressed. Women participating in the focus group described consciously trying to ignore distressing circumstances and encouraging both themselves and their children to believe that conditions would improve in the future.

While male caregivers explicitly described feelings of helplessness and frustration when trying to support their children's emotional wellbeing, women more frequently described assuming the emotional work of helping children cope through reassurance, patience, and efforts to maintain hope despite difficult living conditions. They also highlighted practical efforts to reduce children's stress, including organising family visits, spending time in safe outdoor spaces, and exercising patience despite their own hardships. This suggests that while both women and men experience significant psychosocial strain, women often assume the emotional labour of sustaining hope and managing children's wellbeing.

Women also emphasised the importance of informal support networks, including relatives, friends, and religious institutions, as key sources of emotional support. Such networks were not raised by male caregivers during the discussion, suggesting potential differences in how women and men access and draw upon social support to cope with stress.

"After we returned [from Türkiye], the nightmares and anxiety increased. I noticed that two of my children were afraid at night and sometimes screamed in their sleep: "Bomb! Dog! Snake! Blood!" At first, my children were withdrawn and didn't want to sit with anyone or play outside because there were no playgrounds or parks. They often talked about their displacement, life in Türkiye, and their experiences with their friends. Teenagers generally tend to be secretive."
(WHH, Interview)

66 World Vision (2025) After 14 years of crisis, Syrian children face unprecedented challenges (12 March 2025). Available at : https://www.wvi.org/stories/syria-crisis-response/after-14-years-crisis-syrian-children-face-unprecedented-challenges

Young People's Voices: well-being and belonging

Young people described a gradual process of adjustment following return, characterised by a growing sense of familiarity, belonging and stability despite continuing challenges. While many recalled experiencing mixed emotions upon arrival, they reported that some aspects of daily life had become easier over time as they adapted to their new circumstances. Their responses frequently focused on rebuilding friendships, settling into school, reconnecting with their communities and regaining a sense of routine, suggesting that the initial disruption associated with return had begun to ease.

For some, emotional wellbeing was closely tied to regaining a sense of place and belonging, reflected in comments about being settled at home, knowing where family land was located, reconnecting with their village and feeling more optimistic about the future. Several participants also linked their wellbeing to the gradual rebuilding of social connections and the prospect of improved services and educational opportunities.

> ***"We've made some connections and friendships here, and next year our school will be ready and things will get better."***
> (Young FGD participant)

At the same time, young people's views and experiences suggest that recovery remains partial rather than complete. Most respondents described feeling only "somewhat" comfortable or stable, while continuing to face challenges associated with damaged infrastructure, limited services, disrupted education and the loss of friends and familiar environments during displacement. In particular, they highlighted the need for basic conditions that would allow them to feel safe, attend school, and enjoy a normal childhood. Their priorities included access to electricity and water, support to reach school, functioning schools, and child protection centres where children and adolescents can feel safe and supported.

Hardship is however not taking their hopes away. Some young people said they dream of becoming teachers or doctors, helping others in their communities, and seeing their villages restored, with repaired homes, safe roads, functioning schools, and communities free from mines, open wells, and other dangers. Their aspirations reflect both a desire for personal achievement and a strong commitment to rebuilding their communities and creating a better and safe future for all.

> ***"I hope to become a teacher in the future, and I hope that all the fields will be green, the roads will be in good condition, and the houses will be restored."***
> (Young FGD participant)

About World Vision Syria Response's work:

World Vision Syria Response (WVSR) has been delivering humanitarian and early recovery assistance across Syria, Jordan and Türkiye since the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011. In FY2025, WVSR reached more than 4.22 million people, including 2.53 million children, through integrated programmes in health and nutrition, education, child protection, mental health and psychosocial support, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), livelihoods and food security. During the year, WVSR expanded access to previously unreachable areas inside Syria, strengthening its support to vulnerable children and families affected by conflict, displacement, poverty and economic instability. Working through a combination of direct implementation and local partnerships, the response focused on meeting urgent humanitarian needs while supporting longer-term resilience, recovery and opportunities for children and communities to rebuild their lives.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Across both Ukraine and Syria, return is often portrayed as a marker of progress, stability and recovery. Yet the experiences of returnees captured in this research reveal a far more complex reality. While return has enabled many families to reunite with loved ones, reconnect with their communities and regain a sense of belonging, it has often not marked the end of vulnerability or humanitarian need.

While the types and severity of reintegration challenges differ considerably between Ukraine and Syria, the broader conclusion is the same: return does not equal recovery, with children's wellbeing depending not on the act of return itself, but on the conditions they return to. The duration of displacement also plays a critical role in shaping reintegration outcomes, and the contrast between the two contexts in this brief is striking. Syrian refugee returnees from Türkiye, many of whom spent more than a decade outside the country, faced some of the most acute reintegration challenges documented in this research.

Across both contexts, children's wellbeing is shaped by a combination of factors that extend beyond physical return. Access to nutritious food, safe housing, education, healthcare, protection services, psychosocial support, livelihoods and social connections all influence whether reintegration is sustainable. Critically, physical safety itself remains an unresolved condition of return in both contexts whether in the form of active missile and drone attacks in Ukraine or landmine contamination and collapsed infrastructure in Syria, children are attempting to rebuild their lives in environments where the threat of harm has not been left behind.

The findings reinforce that return should not be understood as the end of displacement, but as the beginning of a new phase of recovery. Success should not be measured by the number of people who return, but by whether children and families are able to rebuild safe, healthy and dignified lives once they arrive.

As humanitarian crises become increasingly protracted and return movements continue, policymakers, donors and practitioners must recognise that return is only one step on the pathway towards recovery. Sustainable reintegration requires long-term investment in communities, services and local systems, alongside continued protection and assistance for those who return. Child-centred, area-based and locally informed approaches will be essential to ensure that return contributes to recovery rather than exposing families to renewed hardship, vulnerability and the risk of future displacement.

Recommendations

Donor Governments and Funding Institutions must:

- Increase flexible, multi-year funding towards integrated responses that bridge humanitarian assistance, early recovery and development programming that meet returnees' most urgent needs and build their resilience and longer-term reintegration.
- Prioritise funding for high-return areas while ensuring support is based on needs rather than return status alone, recognising that returnees, IDPs and host communities often face overlapping vulnerabilities.
- Invest in integrated, child-focused and gender-responsive programming rather than siloed interventions, combining education, child protection, mental health and psychosocial support, nutrition and livelihoods assistance, while recognising and responding to the distinct roles, responsibilities and barriers experienced by women-headed households following return.
- Increase support for local and national actors, who are often best positioned to understand local return dynamics, identify emerging needs and deliver context-specific responses.
- Ensure funding allocations reflect the realities of underfunded crises, particularly in Syria, where severe funding shortfalls risk undermining reintegration prospects and increasing the likelihood of secondary displacement.

In addition, European Union Member States must:

- Uphold their obligations under international law, including the principle of non-refoulement, and ensure that any transition away from the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainians, and the normalisation of EU-Syria relations, does not create direct or indirect pressure on refugees to return before conditions are safe, voluntary and dignified.
- Apply the same standards of protection and the same commitment to post-return support, regardless of a returnee's country of origin.
- Ensure that the framework for transitioning out of the Temporary Protection Directive, agreed by the Council in September 2025, places the reintegration needs of returnee children at its centre. Voluntary return programmes, Unity Hubs and coordinated information campaigns must be matched by concrete investment in the conditions that make return sustainable: access to education, psychosocial support, mine risk awareness, and economic opportunity in areas of return.
- Guarantee that Syrian refugees who wish to return to their country are able to do so in a genuinely voluntary and well-informed manner. For those who choose to remain in Europe, whether as recognised refugees or asylum seekers, member states must guarantee effective access to asylum procedures, protect against refoulement and collective expulsion, and end practices that trap families and their children in prolonged uncertainty and hostile conditions.

UN Agencies and Humanitarian Coordination Bodies must:

- Strengthen integrated area-based approaches in return locations that bring together food security and livelihoods, health, nutrition, WASH, protection and education.
- Systematically incorporate children and young people's perspectives and experiences into return monitoring, needs assessments and reintegration frameworks.
- Prioritise child protection and safe environments by expanding explosive ordnance risk education, child protection services and safe spaces for children in return areas where environmental hazards, insecurity and damaged infrastructure continue to place children at risk.
- Prioritise inclusive mine action and explosive ordnance risk education in return areas where contamination and environmental hazards continue to place children at risk.
- Strengthen coordination between humanitarian, recovery and development actors to address structural barriers affecting reintegration and reduce the risk of repeated displacement.

National and Local Authorities in Ukraine, Syria and Host Countries, must:

- Uphold their obligations under international human rights law, including the right to non-refoulement, and to ensure that no Syrian or Ukrainian refugee is returned to conditions that are unsafe, involuntary or incompatible with a life of dignity.
- Prioritise rehabilitation of schools, health facilities, water systems and other essential infrastructure in areas experiencing significant return movements.
- Expand access to affordable and quality services for children and families, particularly education, healthcare, nutrition services and mental health support.
- Develop targeted support measures for vulnerable households, including women-headed households, families caring for injured or disabled relatives, and households facing severe economic hardship.
- Address administrative, documentation and legal barriers that prevent children and families from accessing education, social protection and public services following return.
- Fulfil obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by strengthening national and local systems to ensure returnee children can access documentation, education, healthcare, protection and psychosocial support services.
- Support municipalities and local service providers in areas of return to restore and expand access to essential services for returnee children and families, including education, healthcare, child protection, water and sanitation services, and safe recreational spaces.

INGOs and NGO Partners must:

- Design multi-sectoral programmes providing sustained support beyond initial return and reception assistance.
- Adopt child-centred and family-centred approaches that address interconnected needs across protection, education, nutrition, livelihoods and psychosocial wellbeing.
- Scale up community-based MHPSS interventions for both children and caregivers, recognising the cumulative impact of conflict, displacement and reintegration challenges.
- Invest in safe spaces, recreational activities, peer support networks and youth engagement initiatives, reflecting the importance young people place on social connections, belonging and participation.
- Strengthen livelihood and economic recovery programming to help families meet basic needs, reduce negative coping mechanisms and support longer-term resilience. This should include integrating gender, age, disability and household composition as key considerations, ensuring that programmes account for the influence of intersecting identities on access to livelihoods and income generating activities.
- Ensure continuity, quality and safe access to education for returnee children, including school rehabilitation and protective infrastructure where needed; flexible in-person, hybrid and online learning modalities to minimise disruption during periods of insecurity; and targeted support for children facing language, curriculum and learning gaps following displacement and return.
- Prioritise locally led responses by investing in and partnering with community-based organisations, local NGOs, youth groups and faith actors that are often the first and most trusted responders. This should include providing flexible, multi-year funding, strengthening local capacities where requested, and ensuring local actors, including returnee and displaced communities themselves, are meaningfully involved in programme design, implementation and decision-making.

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