

PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST: Toward a Brighter Future for Syrian Children

SYRIA CRISIS ADVOCACY BRIEF



Photo by Bruno Col @ World Vision 2019

'A lot of countries experienced war and came out of it stronger. After war there is always peace, and we should work toward that peace.' Emad, 17

Now entering its ninth year, the conflict in Syria is the largest humanitarian crisis in decades. Over 6 million Syrians are internally displaced within Syria and over 5.6 million have been forced to seek refuge outside of Syria. In Syria alone, almost 12 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, 5 million of whom are children.¹

In January and February of 2019, World Vision conducted focus group discussions with Syrian refugee children in Jordan and Lebanon in order to better understand their fears and dreams. Children talked about the distress caused by the conflict and their flight from Syria. Many of the children who lived through bombings are still afraid of the sound of airplanes. Those who still have family and friends in Syria fear for their safety.

At the same time, children talked about their dreams. They want to become doctors, dancers, pharmacists, bakers, engineers, and fashion designers. They dream that the conflict will end soon and that Syria will be peaceful and prosperous again.

However, without the sustained support and engagement of the international community in Syria and in the host countries, many of these dreams will remain out of reach.

Ahmad, age 15, loves school but spends his days working in the fields around Mafraq in Jordan. Like many other Syrian children around the region, he isn't able to go to school because his family depends on the income he earns through child labour. When asked about their wishes and how the international community can help Syria, Ahmad and other children speak of functioning hospitals, schools, and other essential services, but their dreams remain unmet year after year.²

World Vision welcomes the opportunity to engage in the third Syria Donor's Conference in Brussels and amplify the voices of children and youth affected by this crisis. World Vision calls on international and national decision makers to prioritise the best interests of children, by:

1. Protecting children from grave violations, forced returns, and other forms of violence;
2. Meeting children's basic needs, especially education and psychosocial needs to equip them for the future and help them overcome distress;
3. Supporting principled humanitarian action inside Syria so that humanitarian actors can continue to provide life-saving assistance to the most vulnerable children, families and communities.

PROTECT CHILDREN FROM GRAVE VIOLATIONS, FORCED RETURNS, AND OTHER FORMS OF VIOLENCE

Protecting children and their families in Syria from grave violations

Eight years of conflict have caused irreversible harm and suffering to children and their communities. The UN Secretary General's most recent Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict found that 2017 saw the highest number of verified grave violations against children ever recorded in Syria. Any further escalation of the conflict, particularly in Idlib which hosts large numbers of internally displaced persons, risks having a devastating impact on already vulnerable communities. Of particular concern is the fact that, in the past, international law and humanitarian principles have not been fully respected by parties to the conflict. The indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force in contravention of International Humanitarian Law has caused the unnecessary deaths of thousands of children and their families in Syria.³ Any further bloodshed and grave violations against children must be prevented.

Attendees at the Brussels Conference should:

- Press for an immediate and peaceful resolution to the conflict, including an extension of the demilitarised buffer zone agreement in Idlib;
- Demand that all parties to the conflict fully comply with their obligations under International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law to protect children at all times, including by respecting the principles of distinction and proportionality;
- Pressure all parties to the conflict to develop strong, transparent mechanisms to monitor and report any harm caused to civilians, including children, and hold to account those found responsible for violations of international law.

Protecting refugee children and their families from forced returns

Over 5.6 million Syrian refugees have sought protection in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Almost half of them are children. Current UNHCR

assessments hold that the conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified returns of these refugees to Syria are not currently met. The vast majority of Syrian refugees do not intend to return in the next twelve months, if at all, and according to UNHCR's assessment concerns about safety and security are the most cited barrier to returns.⁴ For some refugees, resettlement to a third country remains the only viable durable solution, but resettlement opportunities continue to decline.

Destruction of housing and critical infrastructure also poses a barrier to returns, and sustainable interventions that would support the resilience of affected populations and help to prepare the way for safe and dignified returns are underfunded. In 2018, the early recovery and livelihoods component of the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Syria was funded at less than 30 per cent.⁵

Attendees at the Brussels Conference should:

- Work with governments in host countries to ensure that the rights of refugees are respected and that refugee children and their families are not forcibly or otherwise involuntarily returned to Syria where their safety and security may be at risk;
- Ensure that any returns to Syria that may occur are safe, dignified and voluntary, and that refugees have access to reliable information on which to base their decision about whether to return to Syria;
- Acknowledge that some refugees will choose not to return to Syria and increase opportunities for resettlement to third countries for the most vulnerable, ensuring that they receive adequate support throughout the resettlement process including in the country of resettlement;
- Acknowledge that early recovery is necessary to support the resilience of affected populations in Syria and is a prerequisite for large-scale returns that are safe, voluntary, and dignified;
- Ensure that funding for early recovery programming is allocated on the basis of need alone and that all programming is consistent with International Human Rights Law, International Humanitarian Law, and the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality.⁶

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MEET CHILDREN'S BASIC NEEDS, ESPECIALLY EDUCATION AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Humanitarian needs of children and their communities

After years of conflict, over half of the population of Syria has been displaced, and many of those internally displaced have been displaced more than once. However, funding for the HRP for Syria and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) remains inadequate⁷, and critical humanitarian needs remain unmet.

This is the case both inside Syria, particularly in the most recently conflict affected areas, and in host countries, where many refugees are forced to rely on negative coping strategies. For some of these refugees, resettlement to a third country is the only viable durable solution, but resettlement opportunities continue to decline.

Attendees at the Brussels Conference should:

- Fund critical humanitarian needs through the 2019 HRP for Syria and the 3RP, with a special focus on child protection and other life-saving interventions that support the well-being of children and that actively engage children in their design and implementation.⁸

Formal and informal education in Syria and in host countries

Since the start of the conflict, enrolment rates for children across Syria have plummeted from 85 per cent in 2010 to 61 per cent in 2018.⁹ Enrolment rates for refugee children in host countries are even lower¹⁰ with fees for transportation, uniforms, and other materials constituting a significant barrier.

'When children see killing, they will feel like it is okay to kill someone. If they see a bullet on the ground, they will pick it up and think it's okay to use it. Children will get used to killing.'

- Zena, 16

'When we were back in Syria we all lived right beside each other, after the war we all separated, some of us stayed alive and others died.'

- Mohammad

Both in Syria and in host countries, quality of education when children do manage to enrol also remains a concern.¹¹ Education is a human right, and children who are not able to access quality education will face severely constricted opportunities for the rest of their lives.

Attendees at the Brussels Conference should:

- Recognise that the evolving situation in Syria will require a renewed approach to working with the Government of Syria to ensure that children across Syria have access to quality education;
- Fulfil previous pledges to support education inside Syria and in host countries so that all children have access to accredited, quality, and safe education. This includes working with the government of Syria and governments in host countries to strengthen national education systems;
- Provide financial support to refugees in host countries so that financial barriers — such as the cost of transportation to school — do not prevent children from accessing education;
- Acknowledge that the right to education extends to children who have missed periods of school and ensure that opportunities for non-formal and remedial education are fully funded, including inside refugee camps.

Psychosocial support

Funding cuts and consequent reductions in services have had a significant effect on children in host communities. Refugee children are affected by multiple daily stressors and many also carry distressing memories of conflict and displacement.¹² Over half of children in a recent World Vision survey in Azraq Camp demonstrated higher than normal emotional, conduct, and peer problems. Unsurprisingly, 55 per cent of caregivers identified psychosocial support as the most important element to facilitate education.

Attendees at the Brussels Conference should:

- Affirm the importance of mental health and psychosocial support programming (MHPSS) for children and integrate it into schools, child friendly spaces and health services by fully funding such activities under the 3RP and HRP;
- Prioritise funding of MHPSS interventions for the most vulnerable children in Syria and host communities, including children in refugee camps whose mobility is limited.

Early childhood development

Investments in early childhood development provide stronger returns than investments at any later developmental stage. However, funding for early childhood education continues to constitute only a fraction of funding provided through the 3RP and the Syrian HRP.

Attendees at the Brussels Conference should:

- Prioritise funding for early childhood development;
- Advocate for host governments to establish formalised early childhood services that are inclusive and open to refugees.

SUPPORT PRINCIPLED HUMANITARIAN ACTION INSIDE SYRIA

Donor Restrictions

Parts of Syria are still affected by active conflict. However, as control of areas shifts from one party to the conflict to another, humanitarian organisations have experienced heightened donor scrutiny as well as donor suspensions of aid. Humanitarian organisations have well established, extensive due diligence procedures and continue to require conducive donor policies to fulfil their humanitarian obligations to the affected communities.

Attendees at the Brussels Conference should:

- Fully fund all necessary training, capacity development, and staffing to equip humanitarian organisations to comply with donor requirements;
- Ensure that any suspensions of aid are made on a case-by-case basis on the grounds of specific, documented concerns;
- Protect the neutrality and independence of humanitarian organisations by not suspending aid in an area solely on the basis of which party to the conflict exercises control of the area;
- Guarantee that decisions about geographic targeting of assistance inside of Syria are made on the basis of vulnerability and needs, in full respect of humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity, regardless of which party to the conflict controls a geographic area where vulnerable children, families and communities are located.

Humanitarian Access and Protection of Humanitarians

Humanitarian access has been restricted by all parties to the conflict. This has included bureaucratic impediments and delays as well as denials of access to affected populations. As a consequence, the most vulnerable children and their families and communities are often left without critical, life-saving assistance. Further impeding the delivery of aid is the lack of safety and security for humanitarian workers, most of whom are Syrian.



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Attendees at the Brussels Conference should:

- Demand that parties to the conflict provide unfettered and continuous humanitarian access to all areas of Syria for humanitarian organisations, including the demilitarised buffer zone in Northwest Syria;
- Continue to advocate with all parties to the conflict to guarantee the safety of humanitarian workers, including a guarantee that humanitarian workers will not be subject to reprisals in the short or long-term for their humanitarian work;
- Require that all grants explicitly describe duty of care obligations to partners and staff inside of Syria and ensure that these obligations are fully met and funded.

ENDNOTES

- [1] OCHA, "2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic," March 2019. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019_Syr_HNO_Full.pdf; UNCHR, Response Portal, Total Persons of Concern, updated January 2019. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.
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- [3] Over seven hundred deaths of children due to indiscriminate or disproportionate use of force have been documented by the UN over the course of the conflict in Syria. UN Secretary General report to UN Security Council, "Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic," October 2018, sec. 27 <http://undocs.org/en/s/2018/969>
- [4] UNCHR, "Fourth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria," July 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/66198.pdf>
- [5] OCHA, "Regional Funding Update – Syria Crisis," January 1, 2019. https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/regional_funding_update_1_january_2019_190131_en.pdf
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- [7] In January 2019, the HRP was only funded at 63.5 per cent. OCHA, "Funding Overview," January 2, 2019 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/hrp_weekly_funding_status_180102.pdf 3RP 2018 – 2019 Quarterly Update, November 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/67548.pdf>
- [8] In January 2019, the HRP was only funded at 63.5 per cent. OCHA, "Funding Overview," January 2, 2019 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/hrp_weekly_funding_status_180102.pdf 3RP 2018 – 2019 Quarterly Update, November 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/67548.pdf>
- [9] World Bank with UNHCR, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis," 2019. Page 149-150. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/9781464814013.pdf>
- [10] World Bank with UNHCR, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis," 2019. Page 154. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/9781464814013.pdf>
- [11] No Lost Generation Initiative, "We Made a Promise: Ensuring Learning Pathways and Protection for Syrian Children and Youth," April 2018. https://www.nolostgeneration.org/sites/default/files/webform/contribute_a_resource_to_nlg/511/brussels-conference-education-report.compressed.pdf World Bank with UNHCR, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis," 2019. Page 150. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/9781464814013.pdf>
- [12] World Vision International, "Beyond Survival: Seven Years of War on Syria's Children," March 2018. https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/Beyond%20Survival_7%20years%20of%20conflict%20in%20Syria_low%20res.pdf

