

#NOLOST
GENERATION

#لا_لضياع_جيل

NO LOST GENERATION ADVOCACY BRIEF

THE SYRIA CRISIS

March 2021

TEN YEARS SINCE THE WAR STARTED IN SYRIA,

the triple crises of continued conflict, economic downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the situation for Syria's children, adolescents and youth, pushing them and their families to the brink, inside Syria as well as in the five refugee host countries.

In 2020, the situation of Syria's children deteriorated significantly.

In Syria, the number of **people in need** has increased by

20% in the last year alone



with **65%** of families reporting they cannot meet their **basic needs**

and nearly **80%** of people living in **poverty**



More than **13 million people** need support and half of them **over 6.1 million are children**

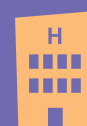


There has been an **increase in the price** of the average food basket of over

230%

between January and December 2020

More than **half a million children** under the age of five in Syria suffer from stunting as a result of chronic malnutrition,



while **half of the health care facilities** in Syria function **partially or are not functioning at all** ^{#3}

25%

of the population are living with disabilities.



For many children in Syria, war is the only thing they know.

Nearly **6 million children** (**1 million** of them outside Syria) have been born since the war began in 2011⁵

Grave violations against children

inside the country also reflect on the extreme insecurity in which girls and boys live:



50% increase in Syrian children **killed** over a six-year period (since 2014)



almost **300%** increase in child soldier recruitment between 2014 and 2019,

and attacks on schools doubling since 2017



Between 2011 and 2020 the UN verified almost **12,000 children killed or injured**

(more than three per day), and 1,211 of them during last year alone.



The situation in northern Syria is particularly alarming. **75%** of the total of child casualties across Syria last year were recorded in the northwest, while in the Al-Hol Camp and across the northeast of Syria, there are nearly **25,000 children** from at least 60 nationalities and thousands of Syrian children **associated with armed groups** who languish in camps and detention centres

^{#6}

Close to 12 million Syrians remain uprooted from their homes due to the ongoing conflict.



Over **6.2 million** have been **internally displaced**,

while **5.6 million** have sought refuge in **Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt** ⁷



These countries host **83%** of the total

number of Syrian refugees globally, placing further economic and political strain on these countries ⁸



Since 2012, the number of refugee children in

neighbouring countries **has increased more than ten-fold to 2.5 million registered child refugees** ⁹

The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis have further compounded the situation of Syrian children, the protracted and multiple displacement of Palestinian refugee children from Syria as a pre-existing refugee population, as well as of their host communities, adding new challenges for children to access quality education, for adolescents, youth and their families to get jobs, pushing increasing numbers to child labour and child marriage and further aggravating a serious mental health and psychosocial wellbeing crisis.

In this context, No Lost Generation partners continue to provide support to children, adolescents and youth, within the framework of the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), committed to ensure that a whole generation of children is not lost while the search for an end to the conflict and durable solutions continues. Despite the grim picture above and the increased challenges faced in 2020, we do not give up, as Syrian children themselves are not giving up. Moving ahead, NLG is prioritizing work in the four areas described below.

KEEP LEARNING GOING FOR ALL SYRIAN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS



The decade long war, aggravated by domestic economic decline, continues to put tremendous stress on the overstretched education systems in both Syria and the host countries, undermining previous investments and progress made in the education sector. Despite continued efforts made by national governments and their partners, the number of out of school children in Syria and the five host countries remains high at an estimated 3.2 to 3.6 million children.

At least one third of Syria's children are not in school, deprived of education and other support. Inside Syria, an estimated one in three schools cannot be used because they are damaged, destroyed, sheltering displaced families or used for military purposes. In neighboring countries, nearly 850,000 Syrian refugee children are out of school. That is approximately 40 per cent of Syrian refugee school-aged children.

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated vulnerabilities and worsened inequalities among Syrian children. While online platforms and distance/home-based education interventions were launched across Syria and host countries, challenges including limited connectivity, high costs, restrictions in movement and access to basic services, have led to a digital divide which further excludes the most vulnerable children from accessing education. Moreover, the disruption of learning for children and prolonged school closures expose children to increased protection risks, such as gender-based violence, domestic abuse, child marriage, child labour, and exploitation, including cyber bullying and limited online safety.

In refugee hosting countries, displaced families are heavily affected by the financial pressures as a result of loss of livelihoods and COVID-19 preventive measures undertaken by governments. This impacts children as they no longer have the means necessary to attend educational classes and need to financially support their families.

However, despite all those challenges, and thanks to the generosity of host countries and communities, donors and partners, and the unwavering commitment from teachers, parents, caregivers and students themselves, over 5 million Syrian children are still learning inside and outside Syria, remotely, face-to-face or through blended approaches.

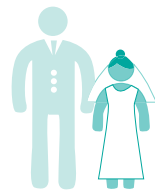
Without the continued engagement from the international community, children are at risk of not returning to or completely dropping out of school. We must collectively remain committed to the education and learning of all Syrian children and youth.
We need to:

- ▶ **Ensure continuous support to education in Syria, taking it out of the realm of politics impacting humanitarian aid and building on its transformative agenda.** With most Syrian children learning in the public education system inside Syria, investments in schools and their teachers are imperative for continued learning both for children in and out of school.
- ▶ **Build inclusive, resilient and flexible education systems that promote sustainable approaches on access and quality and support certified and recognized learning for all,** ensuring that vulnerable children and young people are reached and develop foundational, life and technical skills for further learning, employment, active citizenship and personal empowerment. Support practices ensuring that refugee boys and girls whose families have expired documents or residency permits are granted access to schools and are supported to sit for national exams and earn recognized qualifications.
- ▶ **Prioritize support to teachers:** Over this past year, teachers have emerged stronger than ever as frontline workers for the education sector, ensuring learning to continue, often at risk of their own health and wellbeing. Teachers require training to navigate online and blended learning that contribute to ongoing professional development, psychosocial support to deal with their own stress and trauma and that of their students, and that they are adequately remunerated for their efforts.

ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE AND CHILD LABOUR



Child marriage and child labour, which tend to spike after age 12, are a manifestation of underlying vulnerabilities.



Prior to the war,
13% of Syrian girls aged
15-19 were subjected
to early marriage



Outside of Syria,
x3 child marriage
has tripled
compared to the latest data
available in Syria in 2006- among
most communities

Child marriage
affects as many as



According to latest reports, almost all girls in Northwest Syria confirm knowing someone or personally experiencing early marriage. The disruption to education, increased poverty and extra caregiving burdens that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought are further pushing more and more children and especially adolescents to those harmful coping mechanisms.

Out-of-school children are one of the most vulnerable groups and face multiple child protection risks, including child labour. Poverty is known to incentivize the entry of children into the labour market at an age they would normally be attending school, and this has been exacerbated by COVID-19. Syrian refugee children have been found working in various sectors, occupations, and activities, which vary by location, and these can be fluid in contexts which are rapidly changing. Around 90% of the working children in the region work 6-7 days a week and for more than 8 hours per day on an informal and illegal basis. Hazardous forms of child labour appear to be widespread. While child labour affects various nationalities of refugees as well as host community and IDP children, the majority of child labourers in 3RP countries are Syrian.

In Lebanon there are reported increases in child labour for all population groups, whereas in Iraq lack of access to sustainable employment and livelihood opportunities is the main vulnerability reported by Syrian refugees and has also led to refugees seeking relocation to camps. In North-West Syria, child Labour has been widely reported as a key reason preventing children from attending schools. Exploitation of adolescents can also take the form of grave violations such as child recruitment. Moreover, child labour is notoriously underreported and peaks during agriculture season, and the relatively well captured prevalence of child labour among boys should not hide the largely unaccounted burden of domestic chores usually carried out by girls.

One in four Syrian refugee households are headed by women, with no man present. However, Syrian children born outside of Syria can only acquire nationality through the father. As such, children are at risk of statelessness if left without legal documentation of their paternity. Women and girls who are stateless and/or without civil documentation such as a birth certificate may face a higher risk of human trafficking, child marriage and other violations. Stateless or undocumented children also face risks of family separation and illegal adoption.

In response to COVID-19 related safety measures and restrictions, specialized partners have adapted activities to provide for online coordination among partners and both in-person and remote case management. Dedicated hotlines for reporting incidents have been reinforced and expanded. Activities such as awareness raising, parenting skills, women and girls' empowerment and psychosocial support have been provided remotely as well as in person, inside schools, child-friendly spaces, community centres, safe spaces for women and girls and public spaces.

To address child labour, partners are implementing recreational and sensitization activities in the places that children work, engaging with their employers and providing safety equipment for children exposed to hazardous work. Such programs engage a network of employers to influence other employers that

are not aware of the risks and consequences of child labour. Interventions and referral services to support high-risk, out of school children are ongoing. Non-formal educational opportunities, GBV and protection services, welfare support, and skill development are offered to those in most severe hardships.

In 2020, efforts to prevent statelessness continued. In the 3RP context, interventions by relevant organizations were able to significantly reduce the percentage of Syrian refugee children born in the region each year without any form of identity documents (either a birth certificate or medical birth notification), from approximately 35% in 2012 to 1% in 2020. Resolving challenges related to civil status documentation and legal status are central to facilitating the enjoyment of rights to family unity and access to durable solutions, in line with the preferences and informed decisions of refugee communities and individuals.

Activities such as identification and protection of unaccompanied and separated children via the best interests' procedure, case management and referral, provision of alternative care, and family reunification continue to support the displaced children in the region.

.....
In order to expand these interventions, we need to:

- ▶ **Invest in integrated programmes to prevent and respond to child labour and child marriage**, addressing family poverty holistically, working across education, livelihoods/economic strengthening, nutrition/food security, case management, sexual and reproductive health, and social protection, including cash-based assistance.
- ▶ **Reduce statelessness**, ensuring that every child has all key civil documentation needed through his/her lifecycle starting with birth certificate, serving as proof of its identity, parentage and nationality.

HELP SYRIAN ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH IN THE TRANSITION FROM EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT



While poverty, informal employment and unemployment rates among refugees were high prior to COVID-19, they are now facing even greater challenges in earning a livelihood to cover basic needs, such as shelter, food, and health services, owing to employment loss or reduced income during the pandemic.

Youth employment in MENA was already the highest in the world before the COVID crisis, at 29.4 per cent in Northern Africa and 24.7 per cent in the Arab States, with the unemployment rate among conflict affected youth being much higher than the average. Female youth unemployment in MENA (ages 15-24) stood at a staggering 42.8 per cent in 2019. While the situation is very difficult for host communities and refugees alike, young refugees cope with additional barriers. The COVID 19 pandemic and the economic crisis have made things worse, interrupting education and training, bringing additional job losses, shifting families back into informal unemployment and underemployment, and making it more difficult for governments to open up more sectors for young refugees. Refugees have been faced with barriers with regard to access to education as well restrictions with regard to the sectors they are allowed to work, which are usually those that realize low added value and yield low wages and are overall more dangerous, unhealthy and precarious. They also experience restrictions in terms of physically accessing access education, market-relevant training or work due to their refugee status and/or economic situation. Digital solutions to address this are currently insufficient because of limits to connectivity, access and availability of education, training and work opportunities that are accessible remotely, and for children with disabilities.

However, the importance of this issue has been recognized by governments and stakeholders, and there has been progress at different levels. At the policy level, advocacy and policy work enabled Syrian children and adolescents to access education and for refugees (including young refugees) to access work permits in some sectors which allowed them to move from informal to formal employment. At the programme level, training and skills interventions have allowed adolescents and youth to access learning through different modalities. Other programmes aim to link young people to skills that are more relevant to the labour market and to create jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities for young people, including young women.

.....

Much still remains to be done in this regard, both on the supply and demand side of the labour market and investing in human capital to support the development of hosting states. **We need to:**

- ▶ Invest in an enabling environment, partnerships and collaborations to **increase employment opportunities and life skills** development for both refugee and host community youth and to create pathways to link young people with decent work (jobs and self-employment / entrepreneurship), including investments in digital jobs and digital skills.
- ▶ **Advocate to increase the number of sectors refugees have access to** (for both employment and self-employment) and support innovations in those sectors as well as innovations in skilling for work in that sector.
- ▶ **Invest in short term emergency job creation**, skill training and building bridges between education and the job market through increased work-based learning opportunities, including targeted actions to link young women to jobs.

PROVIDE SYSTEMATIC AND SUSTAINABLE MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT



The reported numbers of children displaying symptoms of psychosocial distress has doubled in 2020. Research on the impact of war on the mental health of displaced Syrian boys and girls revealed painful accounts of the exposure to traumatic events, violence and displacement, destroying supportive environment and sense of safety while heightening a sense of fear. Long term displacement, ongoing conflict, chronic stressors, uncertainty of the future, lack of access to basic needs for children and youth are continually increasing the severity and scale of mental health needs, with various access barriers impacting genders differently. Access to MHPSS services is further compounded by broad societal stigma attached to mental health seeking behaviour.

COVID-19 and related lockdown measures have created new vulnerabilities resulting from physical distancing and social isolation. This has exacerbated psychosocial distress in refugee children, adolescents and youth, resulting in a rise in harmful coping mechanisms, substance abuse, suicidal behaviour, and lack of access to appropriate care for those with pre-existing mental health conditions. High numbers of children and youth are continually presenting/referring to MHPSS services with serious but highly preventable mental health conditions. Additionally, an overall experience of fear due to helplessness, of separating from loved ones, of becoming ill, or of social exclusion may create feelings of stress, worry, and powerlessness.

Changes in daily life and routine (such as school interruption), fear, anxiety, separation from family/caregiver, friends and familiar places, socio-economic hardship of parents and care givers pose detrimental effect on the mental health of refugee children, adolescents, and youth. Research on the impact of war and conflicts on the mental health of displaced Syrian boys and girls, and male and female adolescents in the last years revealed painful accounts of the exposure to traumatic events, violence and displacement, destroying supportive environment and sense of safety while heightening a sense of fear. Long term displacement, ongoing conflict, chronic stressors, uncertainty of the future, lack of access to basic needs (including green, sporting and safe recreational spaces) for children and youth are continually increasing the severity and scale of mental health needs, with various access barriers impacting genders differently.

However, there has also been progress in this area in 2020. Promising research on evidence-based and scalable psychological interventions for Syrian adolescents is currently being piloted in Turkey and Lebanon. Several NLG partners have provided mental health and psychosocial support remotely in 2020, which is proving to be pivotal as a response intervention. These services include online psychosocial support activities for children via social media, radio programs, Psychological First Aid for children, sensitization on positive parenting skills and home schooling. Others have developed Tele-MHPSS guidelines for use by mental health service providers to be able to safely and effectively continue providing MHPSS services remotely.

There are also efforts underway to integrate MHPSS into primary healthcare and other sectors including GBV, child protection, sexual reproductive health and education. Additionally, providing training for mental health service providers on brief psychological interventions, such as Problem Management Plus. In terms of capacity building and community awareness, successful interventions have included conducting community-based awareness raising sessions on MHPSS services, stress management, positive coping skills and techniques, psychoeducation related to the more common mental health issues experienced by refugees.

.....
A substantial step forward and long-term funding is required in this area.
We need to

- ▶ **Increase MHPSS services and strengthen their accessibility for refugee and displaced children, adolescents and families**, including those most at risk, with disabilities, pre-existing mental health conditions, in situations of separation or displacement. This requires a whole-of-society and cross-sectoral approach with the integration of mental health and psychosocial programs across health, education (formal and non-formal) and child protection services.
- ▶ **Invest in capacity building with long-term trainings and frequently diversified supervision modalities.** Focus on scalable and recognized psychological interventions, adapted to roles and responsibilities of specialists (psychosocial workers, psychologists, psychiatrists) and non-specialists (GBV case workers, health workers, teachers).
- ▶ **Advocate for tailored gender and age sensitive MHPSS interventions that address adolescents' specific psychosocial vulnerabilities.** Adolescent is a period of heightened psychosocial vulnerability and protection risks (bullying by peers, gender-based violence, recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups, forms of child labour, child marriage), and the socio-economic effects of the pandemic have also aggravated the existing vulnerability of young people.



AZRAQ CAMP

©WORLD VISION/WV1880629/SAINOVSKI

FINALLY, WE CALL FOR:



End the war.

The longer the war continues, the longer Syria's children will suffer. Peace and diplomacy are the only way out.



Protect children. All parties to the conflict must cease all violations against children and be held accountable by the international community for violations they committed.

We also urge all parties to protect not only children, but the civilian infrastructure that children and their families need: schools, hospitals and water systems. Continue to support the United Nations-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism for Syria.



More predictable and flexible funding to protect and scale up durable solutions for Syrian children, in Syria and in host countries, ensuring humanitarian access across borders, and strengthening national systems.



Expand cash and voucher assistance and other social protection schemes linked to national systems and case management to ensure that children, adolescents, young people and families are resilient and can cope with the multiple challenges they face.

Endnotes

- 1 OCHA - Syrian Arab Republic 2021 Needs and Response Summary- Feb 2021
- 2 OCHA - Syrian Arab Republic 2021 Needs and Response Summary- Feb 2021
- 3 OCHA - Syrian Arab Republic 2021 Needs and Response Summary- Feb 2021
- 4 HNAP (2020). Summer 2020 Report Series: Disability Overview
- 5 OCHA, 2020 & 3RPs – Regional Refugees and Resilience Plan ,2019.
- 6 Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict (2013 - 2019) & UNICEF MRM 2021.
- 7 UNHCR 2021
- 8 UNHCR Data Portal 2021 and UNHCR Global Trend 2019.
- 9 UNICEF Humanitarian Situation report End of Year 2012 - 2020, & UNHCR portal for 2021.

For more information

José Bergua

UNICEF | jbergua@unicef.org

Alexandra Matei

World Vision International | Alexandra_Matei@wvi.org

To find out more about No Lost Generation,

 www.nolostgeneration.org

 https://twitter.com/NLG_Syria