



**CHILD RETURNS
IN SYRIA:
PROSPECTS FOR
DURABLE SOLUTIONS**



Save the Children

Annex 4 – ‘Achieving Durable Solutions for Returnee Children: What Do We Know?’

1 Returns contextualized

Seven years of armed conflict in Syria have displaced millions of people inside and outside the country, sparking an international humanitarian crisis. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 5,6 million Syrians were registered as refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt by early 2019 and an additional 6.2 million people, including 2.5 million children, have been displaced internally since the conflict began in 2011.¹¹ Today, some of these displaced are starting to return: 750,000 IDPs and tens of thousands of refugees returned to their area of origin in the first half of 2018 alone – as many as chose to do so during the whole of 2017.² Sending women and children back to Syria, where the cost of living is lower, while men stay behind to work appears to have become a common coping mechanism in countries such as Lebanon. However, stakeholders on the ground allege that these returns may not have been fully informed, safe, voluntary, or sustainable.³ While there is no clear picture of the conditions in places of return and progress towards achieving solutions, patterns of renewed displacement have been confirmed with hundreds of thousands of returnees displaced again upon their return.⁴

Children make up over 40% of the people in need in Syria today.⁵ If little is known about the return conditions in general, even less is known about the conditions for children in return areas. Syria is now often referred to as the world's most dangerous country to be a child⁶ – one in three Syrian children have known nothing but a lifetime shaped by conflict. This demographic has specific needs, defined by its unique experience of the crisis. Immediate concerns persist over the possible loss of a generation due to a combination of child protection risks⁷. The “No Lost Generation” approach has placed these issues at the center of humanitarian needs analysis in the context of the Syrian crisis.⁸

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by Syria in 1990, is the main human rights treaty in international law that guarantees the protection of children. A number of domestic legislative measures and mechanisms were established in Syria prior to the conflict to uphold and protect child rights, namely the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs (SCFA) which was created in 2003 as the main authority responsible for monitoring and coordinating efforts to implement the CRC, and a National Child Protection Plan which in 2005.⁹ Yet since the outbreak of armed conflict, little information has been generated on child protection mechanisms in Syria.

Using Save the Children's Child-Sensitive Durable Solutions Indicators, this paper assesses the information available on return conditions in Syria. It sheds light on data available, and data gaps, for the population as a whole and child returnees in particular.¹⁰ It summarizes what is known of the conditions of children generally, and then analyses conditions of returnee children in Syria in the relevant dimensions, and consequently presents recommendations in terms of support needed, and information required to better monitor respect of international obligations in regards to child rights. This report provides stakeholders with the knowledge needed to better support vulnerable returnee children and improve their access to rights. It should be used in combination with information regarding associated key drivers of solutions, namely public attitudes, the policy environment, solutions programming in place, as well as the input of the displaced themselves in shaping the policies and programmes designed to benefit them.

2 Return conditions: available information and data gaps

The 4 dimensions of the child-specific durable solutions assessment are material, physical and legal safety as well as psychosocial well-being. Each of these dimensions is in turn composed of a number of individual indicators. The following section sheds light on those relevant indicators and dimensions where reliable data is available, ideally disaggregated not only by migration status but furthermore by age. Offering a comprehensive view of the various domains that support the welfare of a child, this indicator framework is designed to help the user understand the extent to which the general environment is conducive to the achievement of durable solutions for children. The indicators were not developed with the objective of assessing protection thresholds or informing status determination, but rather as a generalized baseline which can enable prioritized reintegration support, and assist stakeholders in their quest to minimize migration-specific vulnerabilities of young returnees.

Caveat: No primary data was collected for this brief. The data presented is based on a thorough review of the available literature, but does not claim to be exhaustive of all information in the public domain. It was aggregated from different sources which on occasion adopt their own definitions of indicators, and sometimes figures do not cover the entire country but are rather reflective of a particular local context within Somalia. This is pointed out in the text where applicable. Sources are provided for all figures cited.

Physical Safety



States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation.

CDC

Article 19

The lack of physical safety is the main driver of displacement in and out of Syria. Indiscriminate attacks by most, if not all parties to this complex conflict have directly targeted civilians, including bombardments of residential areas, schools, market areas and medical facilities, with barrel bombs, artillery, aerial attacks and mortars, resulting in mass civilian casualties. It is also widely believed that chemical weapons have been used in Syria. From March 2011 to May 2018, a total of 189,229 conflict-related deaths, two thirds of them civilian, were officially recorded¹¹, though credible estimates for total number of casualties since the beginning of the conflict exceed 500,000.¹² According to UNICEF, in 2017 alone, close to 1,000 children were killed in conflict.¹³ In mid-2018, whilst the violence appears to be abating in many areas, it continues to worsen in enclaves which remain disputed.¹⁴

Protection against violence and abuse

In the first half of 2017, the Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict verified over 1,000 grave violations, including 75 instances of detention of children for alleged association with armed actors, and 524 instances of killing and maiming of children.¹⁵ The 2017 Secretary-General report on *Conflict-related Sexual Violence* states ‘that sexual violence continues to be used by parties to the Syrian conflict as a systematic tactic of warfare, terrorism and torture’¹⁶. Although in mid-2018, as the civil war winds down, violence is abating in many (but not all) areas, recent data suggests that abuse remains common. In one in three communities assessed as part of the 2018 *Humanitarian Needs Overview* data collection exercises, respondents reported that sexual violence was occurring. While trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation and forced labor is allegedly rampant, the 2017 US Department of State *Trafficking in Persons* report notes that the Government “did not investigate or punish traffickers, including officials complicit in recruiting and using child soldiers, nor did it identify or protect any trafficking victims.”¹⁷

No data of violence suffered disaggregated by migration status exists, but sources indicate that returnees are at a risk of particularly harsh treatment as a result of imputed political opinion¹⁸, particularly if they are from regions with more opposition activity/fighting.¹⁹ Reports exist of a number of returnees from Europe having been killed upon return to Syria.²⁰ Young men in particular are commonly imprisoned and subjected to interrogation, before being conscripted into the army.

Protection of child rights

States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of 18 years do not take a direct part in hostilities.

Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict

Article 1

The use of young children in the Syrian conflict has been well documented over several years. The Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism verified 1,940 cases of recruitment and use of children by parties to the conflict in Syria between March 2011 and March 2017. The 2017 report by the Secretary General on *Children in Armed Conflict* found 20% of 300 verified cases involved children under the age of 15, many of whom are reported to have engaged in active combat roles.²¹ In close to half of communities surveyed for the recent *Humanitarian Needs Overview*, child recruitment was perceived as occurring in their community.²²

According to Syrian domestic law, it is unlawful to employ young men and women before they complete their basic education or reach the age of 15 (whichever comes second). Nonetheless, child labor is reported in eight out of ten (and is “common” in three out of ten) of the 4,185 communities surveyed for the HNO, including in its most dangerous and hazardous forms such as begging and scavenging for scrap metal. It is difficult to contrast this number with the situation pre-conflict, but it is clear that child labor was already an issue in Syria prior to the crisis – in 2000, a study of 20,000 households found that family businesses, agriculture, manufacturing, trade, hotels, restaurants and the construction industry were the main employers of children.²³

Although the minimum age for marriage under Syria’s Personal Status Code is 17, seven communities out of ten reported the occurrence of early marriage, exposing girls to loss of self-esteem, significant personal protection risks and health issues as well as depriving them of an education.²⁴

Protection from other incidents

We passed through a mine land, we had to let the sheep pass before us ... they died because of the mines. Those sheep were all that we had.

Returnee interview
Aleppo, 2017²⁵

Syria's disasters are man-made rather than natural. In the first half of 2017 alone, over 23,000 individual explosive events were registered in the Clash database, including IEDs, bombardments and incidents of heavy weapons fire.²⁶ In four communities out of ten assessed for the recent HNO, respondents reported the presence of explosive hazards. A third of respondents reported knowing cases of injury or death as a result of explosive hazard contamination. Children are also reported to be exposed to threats while playing. The heavy use of explosive weapons and high level of contamination in some inhabited areas, or areas to which children and their families want to return, can prevent girls and boys from accessing basic services such as healthcare and education.²⁷

Material Safety



Every child has the right to the highest attainable standard of healthcare and treatment of illness and rehabilitation, and to safe drinking water, nutritious food, and a clean and safe environment.

CRC
Article 19

For the population to enjoy material safety, basic needs in terms of water / sanitation, nutrition, healthcare and shelter need to be covered in line with the minimum SPHERE standards. Furthermore, and particularly for children, access to education must be ensured. For such material safety to be available in the long-term and in a self-reliant fashion, livelihoods must be sustainable.

WASH

Before the start of the conflict, the population of Syria was served by well-developed, state-owned, centrally-managed water systems. The cities had sewage systems and treatment plants, while other parts of the country relied on more traditional technologies. Today, many systems only operate at a fraction of their original design capacity, and others are non-operational.

Families in some areas of the country are now spending up to a fifth of their income to secure access to water.²⁸ It is estimated that some 13 million people lack sustained access to water. Efforts to repair facilities are hampered by a scarcity of spare parts (due to sanctions) and access challenges.²⁹

In 2017, 96% of returnees returned to their own houses, many of which remain damaged and in need of extensive repair.³⁰ Regarding sanitation, the HNO finds that almost all of the surveyed population has access to a functioning toilet. Sewage networks thus generally appear to have remained intact, although wastewater treatment plants are often damaged. Sanitation needs in Syria are considerably higher among displaced populations living in informal settlements (0.01%), collective temporary shelters or in camps compared to the rest of the population. In addition to general issues of over-crowding and cleanliness of sanitation facilities, assessments confirmed that protection issues, such as the lack of door locks and lights, lack of gender segregated facilities, long distance to the facilities as well as the lack of privacy and harassment on the way to facilities are considerable concerns for women and girls.

Nutrition

Prior to the conflict, the Syrian Government subsidized several basic goods, including bread. Bread subsidies have remained in place, while those for other commodities have fluctuated due to a reduction in resources.³¹ In parallel, the proportion of income spent on food has soared as incomes and household food production have decreased, while food prices have increased dramatically. Before the crisis, about a quarter of Syrian households spent over half their annual income on food. In 2017, an estimated 90% of households are spending more than half of their annual income on food. Half of all households have been forced to reduce the number of meals consumed each day.³²

Today, the HNO finds that 4.6 million girls and boys under five years of age (as well as pregnant and lactating women) are at risk of under-nutrition and in need of preventive and curative nutrition services in 2018. Close to 85,000 children under the age of five are suspected to be acutely undernourished, and close to 900,000 are deemed to suffer from nutritional deficiencies.³³ Four million people are at risk of becoming food insecure due to the depletion of assets to maintain food consumption.³⁴ While overall statistics regarding the food security of households disaggregated by migration status do not exist, it is of note that many of the sub-districts said to be facing critical problems in terms of nutrition are located in areas of high return, including Aleppo, Al Hasakeh and the rural outskirts of Damascus.

Housing

Shelter and infrastructure damage has taken place on a massive scale, especially after the heavy bombardment of densely populated urban environments such as Aleppo, Al Bab, and Ar-Raqqa. According to a recent study by the World Bank covering eight governorates, a conservative estimate is that one third of all housing stock in the governorates has been impacted by the conflict, with 9% destroyed and 23% partially damaged.³⁵ The damage and destruction varies across locations and between rural/urban areas, with some neighborhoods completely destroyed beyond repair, and others with the potential to be salvaged.

4.2 million people remain in need of shelter support in Syria, while 5.3 million people live in inadequate shelters facing issues including lack of necessary bathing or cooking facilities, inadequate space, lack of privacy, lack of heating, lack of insulation, the inability to securely lock their home, and others.³⁶ Up to 1.2 million families cannot afford rent costs, with a recent NRC report on Housing, Land and Property (HLP) issues in northwest Syria reporting ‘unaffordable housing’ as a concern in 100% of sub-districts surveyed.³⁷

Returnees are not more prone than other Syrians to suffer from damaged shelters *a priori*: a recent Durable Solutions Platform/Samuel Hall assessment of return conditions in areas of high return found that the majority of respondents found their shelter situation to be comparable to that of others around them. However, they face a heightened risk of disputed ownership (see civil documentation section). The Economist notes that “*a decree, called Law 10, allows the regime to grab property from Syrians unless they can prove their ownership – hard for those who have fled.*”³⁸ Indeed, the fear of not being able to reclaim property appears to be one of the factors pushing returns in the first place. In areas of northwest Syria, disputes over ownership, rental and hosting arrangements were reported as the most common cause of HLP related challenges.³⁹

Healthcare

In 2000, Syria ranked 108 out of 190 in the *Global Health System Performance Index*, and 15 out of 19 among Arab countries.⁴⁰ The health system in Syria has since been severely disrupted by the conflict. Healthcare facilities, including hospitals and ambulance bases, have been repeatedly targeted in eastern Ghouta among other places. In opposition-held east Aleppo, the healthcare network was destroyed before the area was captured by government forces in late 2016.⁴¹ In 2017, the Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict verified attacks affecting health workers and facilities.

Compared to pre-crisis coverage rates for polio, diphtheria-pertussis-tetanus, and measles (which stood above 90%), the WHO and UNICEF estimate that vaccination coverage may have fallen to the 60–70% range.⁴² The last available data puts the under 5 mortality rate at 18 in 2016, compared to 11 in pre-conflict 2010.⁴³ A 2017 assessment of return conditions in Aleppo, Idlib and Homs found that health needs are higher among the internally displaced (53%) and refugee returnees (47%) than their non-displaced peers (42%). When asked if they could access psychological care if needed, 64% stated that it was inaccessible.⁴⁴

Education

According to Syrian domestic law, education in Syria is free of charge at all stages and compulsory until the age of 15.⁴⁵ Before the conflict, more than 90% of primary school aged children were enrolled – one of the highest rates in the Middle East. The rate for secondary education enrolment was 67%, and the literacy rate stood at around 94%.⁴⁶ After seven years of conflict, the formal education system has lost 180,000 teachers or over one third of education personnel. Damage or destruction are estimated to have affected 40% of school infrastructure.⁴⁷ The Syria Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict verified 26 attacks on educational facilities in the first half of 2017 alone.

The latest confirmed enrollment figures following the commencement of the conflict date back to 2013, when enrollment had dropped to 63% at the primary and 46% at the secondary level.⁴⁸ The last available data (2008–2012) puts male youth literacy at 96%, female literacy at 94% and overall adult literacy at 84%.⁴⁹ Inside Syria, an estimated 1.75 million children, or almost one third of school-age children (aged 5–17 years) from the school-year 2015/16 are out of school. A further 1.35 million are at risk of dropping out, particularly in displaced communities.⁵⁰

Livelihoods

Securing a livelihood is one of the most critical challenges faced by people in Syria, with over half of the 5 million pre-crisis jobs no longer existing.⁵¹ There has been widespread destruction and contamination of agricultural infrastructure and value chains, as well as a general depletion of productive assets.⁵² Owing to distribution and concentration patterns of explosive hazards in Syria, displaced farmers and herders are likely to be particularly vulnerable, with a third of communities reporting that agricultural land was contaminated.⁵³ This is reflected in an estimated unemployment rate of 53%, reaching as high as 75% among youth (15–24 years). Against this backdrop, the proportion of the population living in extreme poverty, or on less than US\$1.90 a day, soared to 69% by 2016 – over twice the pre-crisis rate.⁵⁴

For displaced families, access to income generating opportunities has been further diminished due to the breakup of families, with one third of all families reporting at least one absent member since 2011, often the main breadwinner.⁵⁵ A 2017 assessment of return conditions in areas of high return found that little more than half of respondents were currently employed, and the majority of returnees stated that employment opportunities did not meet their needs.⁵⁶ In Syria, child labour was reported as a coping mechanism in 82% of assessed communities.⁵⁷ Households are further resorting to harmful coping strategies that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable segments of the population, specifically children, youth and adolescents. These mechanisms include cutting back food consumption, spending savings and accumulating debt.⁵⁸

Access to electricity

Before the conflict, electricity provision was relatively stable. Electricity production, transmission and distribution have been heavily affected by ongoing hostilities, leaving much of Syria's electricity infrastructure non-operational. In 2017, less than 20 billion kilowatt hour were produced, down from 50 billion in 2011.⁵⁹ According to the recent sector severity analysis, almost 13 million people, roughly 70% of people in Syria, lack sustained access to electricity.⁶⁰

Legal Safety



Within the dimension of legal safety, child-appropriate durable solutions imply that the population of concern has some kind of legal identity/civil documentation. Society does everything in its power to keep children and parents from being separated, and to reunite them should such need arise. People feel that they have access to fair justice mechanisms, and their movement is not restricted.

Civil documentation

Legally registering children in their family booklet is critical in Syrian society. Registration provides official recognition of the child's existence, identity and nationality. Without registration, it is not possible for children to obtain other critical documents such as an ID card or passport. Other civil documentation such as residency papers or marriage certificates, which also require proof of identity, may become difficult or impossible to obtain. Prior to the conflict more than 95% of children were registered at birth.

Two recent assessments by NRC and UNHCR found that currently over half of children under five years old were not listed in their family booklet, and 13% of children under five years old in the north-west of Syria, and 25% in the south, had no proof of any kind of their birth. Syria amended its legislation in February 2017 to increase financial penalties for delaying registration, which has only created additional barriers for IDPs and returnees to register their children. The 2018 HNO data collection exercise indicates that in 83% of assessed communities the lack/loss of civil documentation is an issue of concern.

People on the move are both less likely to have legal, valid documentation,⁶¹ and more likely to lose it. Confiscation of identification documents upon arrival at check-points or transit centers by military authorities is widely reported and persisting. The disordered storing of documents while security procedures are conducted increases the risk of loss and damage, while delayed restitution has sometimes led IDPs to leave sites without their documentation.⁶² Access to documentation services is "non-existent", particularly in rebel-controlled areas of the country, notably in Aleppo.⁶³

Family (re)unification

Family separation is common in Syria, and was witnessed in over half of the communities assessed within the 2018 HNO. Youth are more likely to be separated from family members than others⁶⁴, with adolescent boys (41%) and girls (38%) between 12–17 years reported to be the most affected child population group. Save the Children found in a survey in 2017 that "77% of adults said they know of children who have lost one or both parents and, while the majority are taken in and cared for by grandparents, uncles and aunts, 18% said they know children who are living alone with no choice but to fend for themselves with little community or institutional support."⁶⁵ Syria does not have a comprehensive law that addresses legal issues around alternative care.⁶⁶

Justice mechanism

Demand for a functioning justice system in Syria is high, particularly for "mundane" justice (which covers the everyday needs of citizens such as housing, property rights, access to public services, and official documents).⁶⁷ It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of housing disputes will need to be resolved once large-scale returns commence from Lebanon and Jordan alone.⁶⁸ Yet Samuel Hall's assessment of return conditions in Idlib, Aleppo and Homs found that over 40% of interviewed households did not feel that they could turn to the courts or the police for help.

Freedom of movement

Movement is very restricted in Syria, particularly in the 'hard to reach' areas.⁶⁹ Violence has led to the suspension of commercial flights, road closures, and restricted access to border crossings. Temporary checkpoints are set up in places where many people gather, such as markets, and universities, to capture young persons who have evaded or abandoned military service.⁷⁰ State employees and military personnel require authorization prior to any travel. Those leaving the country without authorization are reportedly treated in accordance with the laws applicable to military deserters. Children require the written consent of the father in order to travel abroad (even when travelling with their mother).⁷¹ The law also allows certain male relatives to place travel bans on women.⁷²

Mental health and psychosocial safety



Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse. (...) Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.

CRC

Article 39

The psychological effect on young generations who have spent at least half of their lives in conflict, deprived of adequate food, education and healthcare, is among the most difficult risk categories to gauge.⁷³ In order for child-sensitive durable solutions to be ensured, mental health needs should receive particular attention. Any child-friendly return environment must feature spaces where children can safely socialize and thrive. Children must be respected as part of the community and, free from discrimination, have a sense of inclusion. Reconciliation programs should be available to those wishing to benefit from them. Children with special needs or suffering from mental health disorders/trauma have a right to benefit from adequate care.

Nurturing environment

As noted in Save the Children's *Invisible Wounds* report on Syria, having a safe place to play and socialize is crucial for normal childhood development. Although further follow-on research is needed, initial results are concerning. Nearly 40% rarely or never feel safe playing, even right next to their house, while nearly 60% of 13–17 year olds said they do not feel safe when they are without their parents.⁷⁴ In the same study, close to three in ten households reported that domestic tension was an everyday phenomenon for them. One in four children said they rarely or never have a place to go or someone to talk to when they are scared, sad or upset.⁷⁵

Community and family support, professional support

When I asked about the availability of psychologists, they made fun of the question and didn't understand it. (...) They were unaware of the role of such specialists in dealing with psychological strain. They claimed that psychological issues cannot be dealt with.

Researcher's notes

Interviews with children aged 11–14; rural Damascus⁷⁶

Before the war there were only two public psychiatric hospitals in Syria, for a population of more than 21 million people.⁷⁷ Seven years into the crisis, additional support is urgently needed to scale up services to address increasing mental health needs. The WHO states that over 27,000 people are estimated to be in need of mental health services through health centers, over 61,000 people need outpatient psychiatric care and almost 12,000 require inpatient psychiatric care. The WHO estimates that one in thirty people in people living in Syria suffers from severe mental health conditions (such as severe depression, psychosis, or disabling anxiety) and at least one in five suffers from mild to moderate mental health conditions (such as depression or anxiety disorders).⁷⁸

Some two-thirds of children in Syria are said to have lost a loved one, had their house damaged, or suffered conflict-related injuries. Children who have endured these experiences and have been exposed to significant violence are susceptible to profound mental distress.⁷⁹ Save the Children found that close to half of all respondents noted that children regularly or always have feelings of grief or extreme sadness, yet "in some regions of more than 1 million people interviewees said there is just one professional psychiatrist."⁸⁰

3

Conclusions

This paper has provided an analysis of gaps, obstacles and opportunities for the criteria of the Child-Sensitive Durable Solutions Indicators, in the domains of physical safety, material safety, legal safety and psychosocial well-being.

Even with the scarce information available, we can conclude that Syria today does not constitute an environment conducive for returns. It is clear from the information presented in the previous sections that while security and the coverage of basic needs might improve as the conflict abates, returnees are at a serious risk particularly in terms of access to justice, documentation and freedom of movement. Like all others, Syria's children are entitled to a life in dignity and respect of their individual rights. Syria's children are particularly prone to vulnerabilities, including malnutrition, exploitation, abduction and recruitment into armed groups and fighting forces, sexual violence, early marriage, trafficking and lack of opportunity to participate in decision-making. From the available data, it is clear that child labor and child marriage are rampant in the Syrian context. The crucial mental health component is understudied. The processes and support necessary to ensure sustainable returns for children are not in place, and it is likely that a large share of child returnees to Syria will re-migrate in the years to come.

In addition, the brief summary of available data shows considerable data gaps in regards to the status of children, and the status of child returnees in particular, along a range of important dimensions. A more comprehensive mapping of returnee needs and local contexts is needed to make tailored reintegration programs more effective. Monitoring and evaluation of returnee outcomes is also needed to better understand what is working and in which contexts. Where monitoring is not feasible due to conflict and insecurity, returns should not be occurring.

The following steps are recommended with a view to allowing the international community to compile the information necessary to achieving durable solutions:

- It is difficult, based on available data, to compare the vulnerabilities of the displaced with those of the general population. Similarly, additional risks related to disabilities or to unaccompanied minors have been difficult to ascertain from existing data sets. Data collection should adopt a displacement focus, and data collection instruments should be standardized. Once collected, raw (anonymized) data should be shared among stakeholders rather than just presented in a report in the form of summary statistics.
- Respecting the Age, Gender and Diversity approach, information must be collected and presented disaggregated by age – lest the plight of the most vulnerable become lost in the aggregate of the population as a whole, or (in the case of selected areas and selected indicators) the returnee population as a whole.
- Child-sensitive indicators must feature more prominently in future rounds of data collection targeting both the displaced, and the population as a whole. While some relevant metrics (such as trafficking, child recruitment etc.) suffer from notorious underreporting, many are measurable and should be collected as a matter of course, by all, disaggregated by migration status and age. Those include the prevalence of child labor and child marriage, child malnutrition and school attendance rates, as well as data on the prevalence of children without any type of legal documentation.

Rather than a one-dimensional checklist for local integration, a more appropriate – and realistic – approach is to consider minimum standards of acceptable conditions for people of concern. These minimum standards should naturally not only apply to the child-sensitive indicators but to the durable solutions frameworks as a whole. Important indicators of successful (re)integration must include whether returnees are safe, that they can return to a place where they have networks, and that they are able to support themselves and their families.

These minimum standards currently only exist (in a measurable fashion) in one of the two frameworks covered by the child-sensitive durable solutions indicators: the SPHERE standards represent the most widely known and internationally recognized set of common principles and universal minimum standards in life-saving areas of humanitarian response and then additionally the UNHCR protection thresholds.



However, still in all four domains of physical safety, material safety, legal safety and mental health, not only is it hard to know how the displaced fare with respect to the non-displaced and if this forms the basis of a longer-term integrated solutions. While it is not universally agreed when a solution has indeed been reached, it is certainly also not agreed in the context of Syria, which seems a most urgent need given the increasing return dynamics. It is recommended that a monitoring scheme be developed which standardizes the generation of relevant 'solutions' data. Such data, disaggregated by age and migration status, should inform a broad stakeholder dialogue (including humanitarian and development actors along with Government, regional administrations and local authorities) on the topic of minimum standards in the Syrian returns environment.

Finally, differences in the different dimensions are subject to considerable regional disparities though this does not clearly show from this analysis. This calls for area-based solutions to displacement affected communities, and urgently needed, more granular research particularly in the regions where high returns numbers are anticipated – enabling pragmatic advocacy, locally anchored response strategies and programming inclusive of and accountable to returnees, IDPs and host communities... and their children.

Endnotes

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⁹ War Child Holland, 2014, *Syria: Child Rights Situation Analysis*. Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria%20Child%20Rights%20Situation%20Analysis.pdf>

¹⁰ NB: This brief focuses on IDP returnees and refugee returnees, with the understanding that given that many of the returnee households try, and fail to, re-settle in their original homestead, they might de facto be considered returnee-IDPs.

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