Voices of adolescents on education and ICT during the Syrian conflict

Hope under Siege

Disclaimer:

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January 2022

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Acronyms

AA	Autonomous Administration
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
GoS	Government of Syria
ICT	Information and communication technology
IDP	Internally-displaced person
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SCPR	Syrian Center for Policy Research
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNOHCHR	United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner
UNPFA	United Nations Population Fund
WEF	World Economic Forum

Acknowledgments

Executive summary

This research used an innovative and participatory mixed-methods approach to assess the challenges and expectations of adolescents in relation to education and ICT, within the context of ongoing conflict in Syria. The research adopted a blended conceptual framework including human rights, and the rights of children and adolescents in particular, capabilities and opportunities, and political economy frameworks. The research methodology is a gender-sensitive, rights-based, equality-focused, and takes a life-cycle approach.

The research assessed the realisation of adolescent girls' and boys' rights, and analysed key aspects of gender-based inequalities and abuses. It used qualitative methods to assess the immediate, underlying and structural causes of any lack and/or violations of girls' and boys' rights in the armed conflict context.

The research methods included in-depth consultations with 642 adolescents, girls and boys between 13-18 years old, in 11 areas of Syria (Idleb, Hasakeh, Aleppo city, Al-Bab, Homs, Tartous, Damascus, East Ghouta, Al-Tal, Sweida and Raqqa); 71 semi-structured interviews with key informants in the study areas; and focus group discussions with 206 parents and caregivers.

The sample of adolescents was 67 percent female, 63 percent from urban areas, 87 percent enrolled in school, 16 percent working, 17 percent orphaned, 26 percent internally displaced (IDPs), and 8 percent disabled. Although the sample framework was designed to be inclusive, it is not statistically representative of the study areas.

The adolescents and caregivers who participated in this research drew a gloomy picture of the current situation in Syria as a result of the devastating conflict. They highlighted their suffering from the dynamics and effects of the armed conflict that was represented in a fearful, insecure, exclusionary and unstable environment. They had experienced or witnessed several grave violations including the targeting of civilians, kidnapping, injury, torture, the destruction of infrastructure, forced displacement, pillage, siege and the deprivation of food and basic services.

The formative and development childhood years of this young generation took place entirely during the current war. They have been living in an environment of conflict that enforces fear, animosity and subordination, while enduring destruction and collective punishment.

Although many of them have aspirations for a better future, they were frustrated by the current ongoing conflict associated with poor institutional performance, indecent living conditions and social degradation. Many young people of both sexes expressed their wish to travel outside of Syria to study, work and live.

The findings of the research showed the severe inequalities that have been created during the conflict. Although all of the study areas have suffered from the consequences of war, they experienced uneven impacts. Some were subject to intense military battles, sieges and displacement, while others suffered from social and economic degradation. Moreover, inequality based on gender has expanded during the conflict, as girls witnessed discrimination due to social norms, fanaticism, or the fear of abuse, kidnap and harassment. Boys were subject to conscription or child labour to support their households. Other forms of inequality can be tracked in the findings including between IDPs and host communities; disabled and non-disabled; rural and urban communities; and poor and rich people.

Poverty and lack of jobs were common obstacles for adolescents in all areas and from all groups. Economic deterioration has continued to deepen, despite the decline of intense armed conflict, and public services have decreased in quantity and quality. This has caused heightened suffering and deprivation in terms of access to food, clothing, housing, heating, electricity, transportation, health and education for the vast majority of Syrians. This has forced many families to stop enrolling their children in schools: many boys dropped out in order to work and support their families; and many girls dropped out to reduce costs and, in some cases, were married young for economic reasons.

The educational process was also severely disrupted by COVID-19, which increased the health burden on the population and the entire fragile public health system. Mitigation measures

forced physical distancing, quarantine and the closure of educational facilities for extended periods over 2020 and 2021. The majority of adolescents described substantial education losses resulting from the pandemic and highlighted the failure of education administrations to offer sound digital alternatives, while allowing promotion to the next grade without final exams or completing the school syllabus.

Adolescents, caregivers and key informants told of severe losses of the education system during the conflict. First, fragmented education systems have emerged over the last decade, categorised by distorted and politicised governance, lack of qualified teachers, different curricula, and poor quality. Second, infrastructure and equipment have been subject to severe destruction or used for other purposes such as shelters for IDPs. Third, siege and discrimination policies further restricted the access of children and adolescents to school. Fourth, COVID-19 increased the challenges for education including the closure of schools, health fears and a lack of precautionary measures. Finally, insecurity and an increase in household poverty contributed to an increase in school dropout rates. Furthermore, the deterioration of public education services led to an expansion of the role of civil society and the private sector in education, although this was a humble contribution compared to the substantial education loss.

The adolescents were aware of the importance of digital learning, especially in the conflict context. However, most of them expressed a lack of access to learning through the internet due to a lack of Arabic content and platforms, poor access to the internet and electricity, costly internet and equipment. Also, labs in schools are not equipped or used to develop their skills in digital learning. Adolescents debated the pros and cons of ICT. They appreciated access to information, knowledge, learning sources, communicating with family friends and people from different cultures, developing their life and social skills, and finding jobs and generating income. But many of them highlighted cons such as wasting time, bullying, hacking, loss of privacy, exposure to bad content including violence and pornography, addiction, isolation, and misleading information.

The research concludes with examples of alternative policies and programmes based on the priorities of adolescents. These alternatives address the underlying and intermediate causes of conflict, deprivation and inequality, to avoid reproducing the same challenges and grievances. The alternative policies include: Promoting adolescents as active actors in the design and implementation of policies and interventions that target young people's learning; developing learning interventions to counter polarisation within and between Syrian communities; and upgrading the education and development nexus. Finally, the research assesses the relevance and importance of the EDGE programme for adolescents, especially girls, in the Syrian context. The research annex includes a detailed analysis for each studied area, to be used in future tailored interventions.
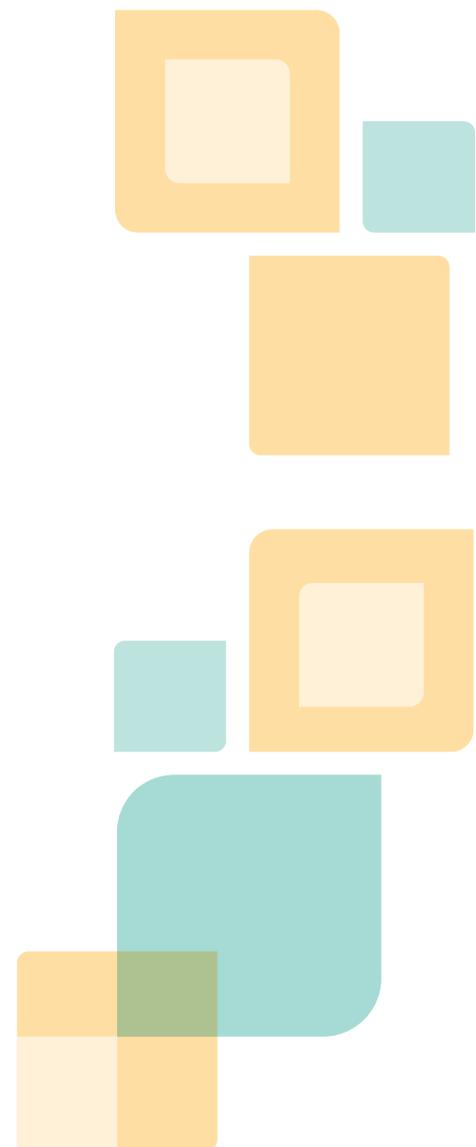
Introduction

This research studies the situation of adolescent girls and boys in Syria, to assess the challenges and potential opportunities they face to access education and digital resources in a highly complex context. The research engaged young people and their caregivers from across diverse contexts in Syria, to better understand their choices, aspirations and opportunities, and analyse the challenges that they face in the conflict context of Syria, with a special focus on education and digital platforms. The research also investigates the policies and factors that affect adolescents' learning performance and information communication technology (ICT) skills. This aims to provide a basis for dialogue to design alternative policies and interventions that invest in adolescents' capabilities and opportunities.

This research was conducted in cooperation between the British Council and Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), as part of the British Council's global 'English and Digital for Girls' Education' (EDGE) programme. The research adopted an innovative participatory approach to engage adolescents through inclusive consultations, complemented by intensive interviews and focus groups with caregivers and relevant experts. As such, the research draws on the voices and perspectives of boys and girls, parents and other adults working with adolescents and their issues. It is worth mentioning that the research teams were drawn from the participating communities.

Gender was a core focus of the research, to explore the differences in circumstances between boys and girls, and this has been reflected throughout the research process: from the formation of the research team, selection criteria for caregivers and experts, and design of the consultations with adolescents. Furthermore, the research design followed high standards for research ethics; and took into account the conflict context and impact of COVID-19.

The regional scope of research was wide. The research covers eleven different geographical areas and diverse communities across Syria: Idleb; Hasakeh; Aleppo city; rural Aleppo/Al-Bab; Homs; Tartous; Damascus; East rural Damascus/Harasta; West rural Damascus/Al-Tal; Sweida; and Raqqa. The diversity of research areas allows a comprehensive analysis and understanding of the complexities of the challenges faced by the adolescents in the Syrian conflict, as it entered its eleventh year.

The Syrian Context

The 2011 Syrian social movement echoed the "Arab Spring" demands for freedom and social justice, and reflected accumulated political and developmental grievances which the ruling authorities had failed to address or mitigate. The authorities violently suppressed the movement, triggering a vicious cycle of armed conflict that created unprecedented levels of injustice, human rights violations and deprivation.

This intractable armed conflict in Syria reflects a critical failure of international, national and local mechanisms to enforce the right to protection, and millions of Syrians have been killed, injured, kidnapped, tortured, displaced and deprived of basic living conditions. The conflict has massively squandered people's rights, capacity and opportunities, and distorted institutions, social relations, the economy and environment. It has also had dangerous implications for the region and the world, including the aggravation of transnational conflict economies, identity politics and extremism, oppression and unaccountable political power, the normalization of grave human rights violations (SCPR, 2020a).

Although the last two years have seen a decline in the intensity of armed battles and conflict-related deaths and injuries, the country continues to endure severe socioeconomic deterioration, as a result of distorted and fragmented conflict-centred governance regimes across the country. This has been exacerbated by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the emerging Lebanese economic crisis and the implementation of new sanctions, namely the Caesar Act (SCPR, 2020b). By the end of 2020, economic losses due to the conflict exceeded US$ 600 billion, prices surged in 2020 by more than 150 percent compared to 2019, and the overall poverty rate reached 96 percent of the population (SCPR, 2020a, 2020b).

The Syrian conflict has forced around half of the population to leave their homes. In 2020, more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees were located in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and other neighbouring countries (UNHCR, 2020), while the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) reached 6.1 million, of whom 2.5 million were children (UNICEF, 2021). Forcibly displaced Syrians experience multiple forms of injustice, including mobility restrictions, disempowerment and deprivation of status, voice and representation (SCPR, 2020a). These cumulative levels of insecurity, destruction, displacement, depletion of resources, poverty and social and economic exclusion have contributed to the deteriorating situation for Syrian children and adolescents, who have become one of the most vulnerable and critical groups affected by the conflict.

Children and adolescents have been exposed to several rights violations throughout the conflict, of varying severity and risk. These include child labour, food insecurity to the extent of malnutrition, forced displacement including family separation or missing family members, poverty, poor living conditions, lack of access to health and education services, and social degradation. Moreover, many children and adolescents are subject to kidnapping, detention and arrest, recruitment into armed conflict, sexual violence and besiegement (Save the Children 2018; SNHR 2020). Finally, many of them have been killed or injured by military means (SCPR, 2018).

1.1 Education and digital platforms

One of the most devastating impacts of the conflict on children and adolescents is the serious deterioration of the education system and outcomes, and frequent disruptions to schooling (SCPR, 2020a). These violations against children and adolescents include attacks on schools, and 1,189 schools have been fully or partly destroyed since 2011 (SCPR, 2018). In addition to the 2.4 million school-aged children in Syria who remained out of school in 2019, 40 percent of whom are girls, 1.6 million students are at risk of dropping out and more than one in three schools have been damaged or destroyed. These estimates increased in 2020 due to the impact of

the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated financial challenges and the disruption of education in Syria (UNICEF, 2021).

The conflict fragmented the country into different zones, which are controlled by different political and military de facto actors. In 2021, there are four main zones in Syria:

1 The areas controlled by the Government of Syria;
2 The area controlled by the Autonomous Administration in the northeast;
3 The area controlled by the Turkish backed opposition in the north; and
4 The area controlled by HTS in the northwest.

Each of these authorities has adopted and enforced a different education system in terms of management, curriculum, language, human resources, infrastructure and finance.

Primary data from SCPR (2018) indicates that access to education closely correlates with security and conflict-related challenges in each region. For example, the average enrolment rate in Lattakia is 92 percent and in Sweida 95 percent, while in Idleb it is 64 percent and in Raqqa 27 percent. Moreover, qualitative data reveals that most school dropout occurs in the second cycle of primary education (Grades 7–9), at the peak of adolescence, with a slight increase in dropout among boys attending school at Grade 7 due to early child labour, while girls tend to remain in school until Grade 9, which is the end of primary school. Higher dropout also occurs among IDPs in comparison to host communities in regions affected by internal displacement.

The education system in Syria has become increasingly fragmented due to the various warring actors, power dynamics and de facto authorities controlling different areas. For example, in opposition-controlled areas, school-aged children face higher levels of fear, instability and insecurity due to the continuation of military operations, coupled with increased poverty and financial hardship which contribute to low access to education. Autonomous Administration areas experience additional educational challenges around the lack of qualified teachers who can teach in the Kurdish language, and the non-accreditation of certificates issued by Kurdish-led schools (SCPR, 2018, 2020a). The state of

fragmentation in Syria is further deepened by the creation of different educational curricula reflecting the ideological agenda of each controlling authority, leading to issues of identity politics (SCPR, 2020a). The alarming low overall rate of access to education is also related to the quality of education being offered to Syrian children, from a shortage of classrooms and inconsistencies and interruptions in educational operations, to the depletion of resources and human capital. According to SCPR (2018), "The number of teachers available for basic education dropped substantially by 31 percent from 221,000 in 2010 to 151,000 in 2018, of which the number of female teachers dropped from 156,000 in 2010 to 124,000 in 2018.", and "the lack of proper training and capacity building for teachers during the conflict has negatively affected the ability of teachers to perform effectively."

It is worth noting that these educational discrepancies in Syria predate the conflict. While the conflict has clearly contributed to the deterioration of educational services, the education system was already suffering from challenges such as literacy inequalities by region and sex. Before the conflict, the illiteracy rate was estimated at 20.4 percent in rural areas (compared to 11.8 in urban areas), the majority of whom were female (CBS, 2010; SCPR, 2018).

More critically, the conflict is depriving the adolescent generation of educational opportunities that would ensure the continuity of their educational path and help them to acquire the skills and knowledge they need for a safe and productive future. The continuous disruption of education for adolescents negatively impacts social capital by destroying social cohesion, leading to further fragmentation and polarisation among Syrian youth, and the population in general (SCPR 2018, 2020a).

The ongoing conflict, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, increased the importance of digital platforms for adolescents to access digital learning programmes, general knowledge and skills, as well as to communicate with friends, colleagues, families and other communities. Several studies have argued for the effectiveness of digital education by showcasing the untapped potential of digital solutions. However, recent studies (Hallgarten et al., 2020; Dahya, 2016;

Burde et al., 2015; Carlson, 2013) highlight the limitations and gaps of tech-based education in conflict areas, including issues for procurement, deployment, maintenance and training to effectively operate such programmes. Furthermore, recent primary data indicates that Syrians face low-quality and relatively costly access to the Internet, and many difficulties in using it, including poor access to electricity and lower income (SCPR, 2021).
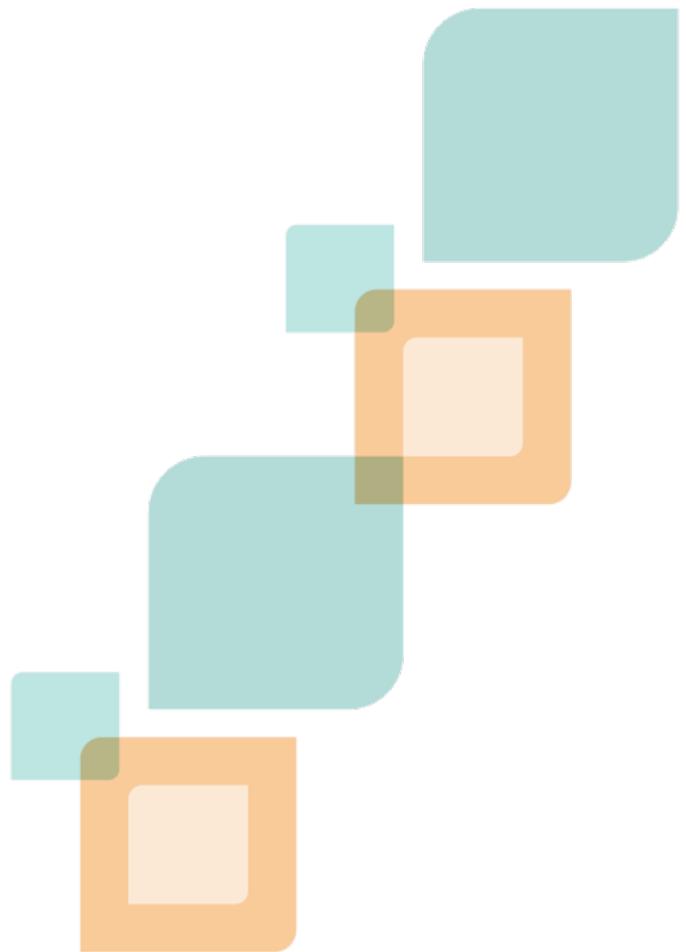
Methodology

The research adopted a mixed conceptual framework including human rights in general, and the rights of children and adolescents in particular, capabilities and opportunities, and political economy frameworks. The research methodology followed a gender-sensitive, rights-based, equality-focused, life-cycle approach, with a focus on education and digital capabilities and opportunities for adolescent girls and boys. It assessed the realization of adolescent girls' and boys' rights, and analysed key aspects of gender-based inequalities and abuses. It used qualitative methods to assess the immediate, underlying, and structural causes of the lack and/or violations of girls' and boys' rights in the armed conflict context.

1.2 Research tools

The research adopted a gender-sensitive, rights-based, equality-focused, life-cycle approach, with a focus on education, digital capabilities and opportunities for adolescent girls and boys. It assessed the realization of adolescent girls' and boys' rights, and analysed key aspects of gender-based inequalities and abuses. It used qualitative methods to assess the immediate, underlying and structural causes of the lack and/or violations of girls' and boys' rights in the conflict context.

The research used the following four tools for the analysis:

Literature review

The literature review assessed shortfalls and inequalities in the manifestations and outcomes of girls' and boys' rights, reviewing surveys relating to adolescents, secondary data and studies to identify indicators relating to adolescent education and digital landscapes with a gender lens. It also included a brief assessment of the conflict context, including the dynamics of military operations, conflict economies, social degradation, forced displacement, poverty and deprivation. Furthermore, the review highlighted the direct and indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational and digital landscapes of adolescents. This context analysis aimed to identify the potential causalities of girls'

and boys' deprivations and marginalisation during the war.

The literature review used relevant research on adolescents and conflict in Syria to assess the education system in terms of its readiness, efficiency, quality and equity, and distortions in formal and informal learning institutions. Additionally, ICT infrastructure, accessibility and quality were assessed based on available data and reports. Data analysis was sex-disaggregated, with additional characteristics considered such as age, location, geography (urban/rural), displacement, class or wealth, educational levels and disability status.

Consultations with adolescent girls and boys

Consultation workshops were designed to collect primary data from adolescent girls and boys about their experiences and perspectives, through an interactive and participatory approach which was age-appropriate, inclusive and conflict-sensitive. All exercises were interactive and did not require participants to write, allowing them to express themselves and their perspectives through drawing, acting and discussion. This enabled adolescent of different literacy levels and capacities to participate fully and equally. The aim of using creative communication methods, including art-based, was to create a safe, relaxed and fun environment for adolescents to open up and express their needs, concerns and their aspirations. The consultations with adolescents were comprised of four main activities:

1. **My Identity**: participants introduced themselves and expressed who they are through writing or drawing, reflecting on what defines them. The objective was to set a friendly tone and safe space for open discussion, and build trust among the participants.
2. **My Ambition:** participants were invited to reflect on their "future identity" by sharing their aspirations and views on the most enabling factors as well as the most important challenges and/or obstacles that impact the possibility of achieving their aspirations and life goals.
3. **The Balance of Knowledge:** adolescents shared digital experiences through reflective exercises and group discussions about the

pros and cons of using ICTs.

4. **The Café:** participants deduced solutions and proposals for the challenges of education and digital learning and the relevance of English language and digital skills outside of formal school settings.

Each consultation lasted on average four hours. The activities, led by the facilitator, included different methods such as individual tasks (writing and drawing) for adolescents, group work and ranking. At the end of each activity, they shared their contributions and drew conclusions. The SCPR team recruited and trained facilitators, note-takers, and coordinators to conduct consultations with adolescents and caregivers in each area. Note-takers and facilitators were assigned to document adolescents' statements, expressions, drawings, notes and images. These outputs were cleaned, coded, and analysed using qualitative methods, as the main input for this report (see Annex 1 for detailed results of workshops and interviews in each area). The SCPR core team supervised the work through field visits when possible, or monitored implementation virtually.

Figure 1: Dimensions of the adolescent consultation analysis
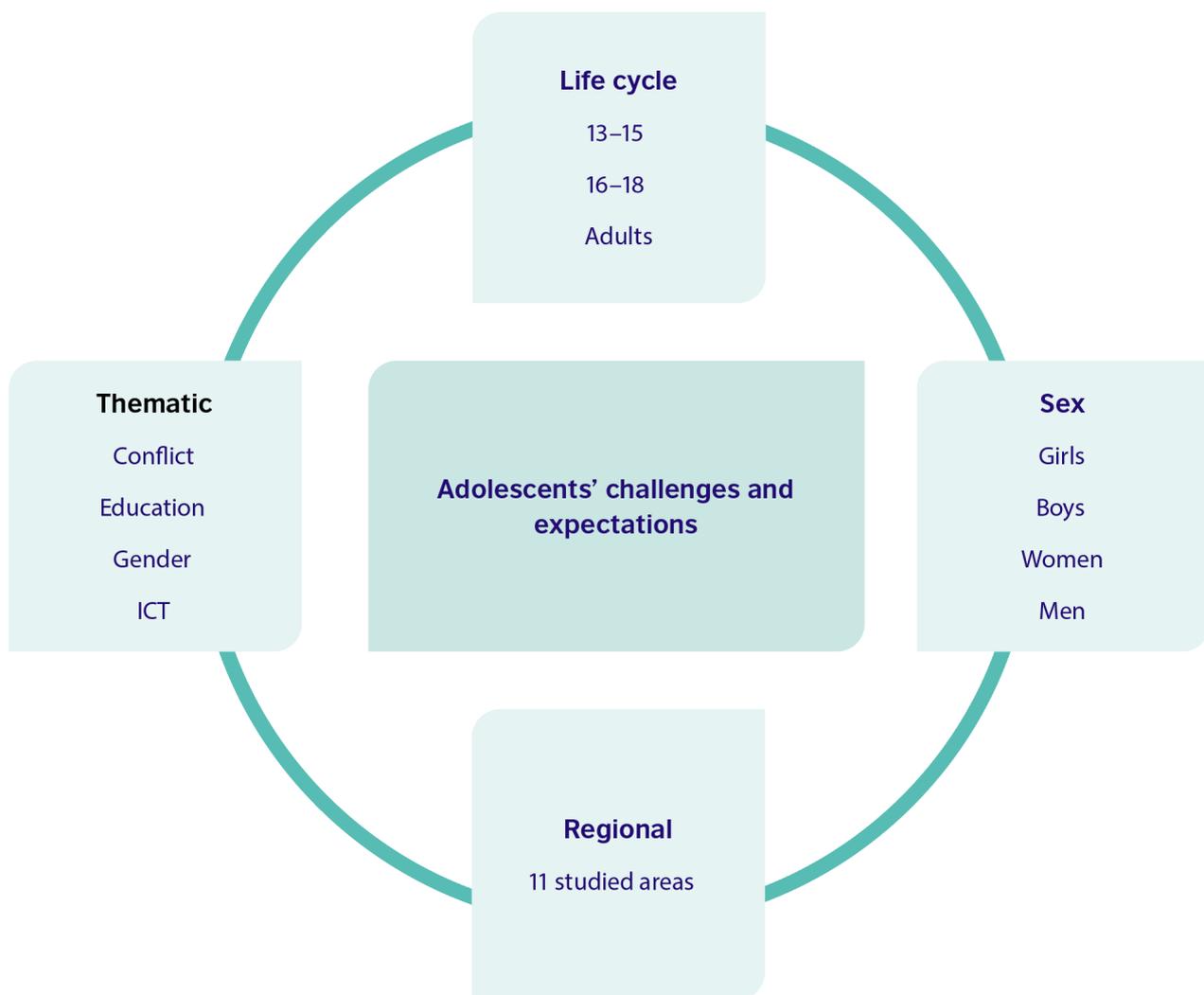
Key Informant interviews

The research engaged key actors in the Syrian context, including from the public sector, private sector, civil society, United Nations agencies, research community and media, working in the fields of education, protection, ICT, gender, children and youth. Semi-structured interviews were held with key representatives, experts and active members from these fields, identified in each study area based on their relevant experience, engagement in public work and objectivity, with consideration to cultural, social and political diversity and gender balance. The interview guide covered the challenges and priorities for adolescent girls and boys, and potential options or initiatives that could feasibly be implemented under the current circumstances. On average, seven key informants were selected in each location.

Focus groups with caregivers

These discussions aimed to understand the challenges that adolescent girls and boys face from a parent or caregiver's perspective. Questions focused on the education system and ICT skills, and the impact of the conflict, COVID-19 and the deterioration of living conditions on adolescents' digital skills and educational opportunities. Two groups were held in each area, each with 8-12 participants, including parents and caregivers, teachers, social workers and administrators in the educational and psychosocial support sectors. An equal number of male and female participants were selected for the focus groups in each study area. Questions for the caregivers included:

- The most critical threats that affect adolescents during the ongoing conflict in Syria;
- The biggest challenges that adolescents face in accessing and remaining in school;
- The impact of COVID-19 on adolescents' lives;
- The causes of economic, social and institutional challenges facing adolescents, girls in particular;
- The challenges and benefits of adolescents' use of the Internet as a means of communication, learning and access to information;
- The relevance of informal programmes teaching English language and digital skills.

- Recommendations and implementable solutions that develop adolescents' digital skills, improve the quality of their education and work best for the specific area.

1.3 Analysis and reporting

The outputs of these four research tools were analysed to develop conclusions, recommendations and alternatives. Reported results from engagement with adults and adolescents were disaggregated by theme, study area, age and sex, to enable comparison from different lenses. Data included texts from the note-takers and researchers, including descriptions of engagement, reactions and quotes, written texts from participants, drawings by adolescent participants and groups, images of the workshops, and facilitator comments and assessments.

The research team followed several steps for data analysis. First, data was entered, cleaned, and organised by age, sex and other criteria (school enrolment, place of residence, work, displacement, disability, orphan status). Then data was coded based on the proposed major themes, and emerging themes added, with subthemes added and coded. The data was analysed according to:

- Key challenges, needs, threats and rights violations;
- Key advantages and aspirations;
- Causes and factors affecting adolescents;
- Options and intervention areas; and
- Comparisons between different groups/areas/criteria;

The emerging results were then discussed with local researchers and actors at local, national, regional and global levels.

An analysis framework was designed to identify adolescents' goals and ambitions, and the actual outcomes of engaging in education and digital platforms. Causality analysis was used to explain the factors that led to poor outcomes from education and usage of digital platforms. The causes were categorised as intermediate causes, represented in the performance of education and informal learning systems, and underlying causes, such as the political system, social norms, economic policies, armed conflict, or the COVID-19 pandemic among others.

Figure 2: Causality analysis framework

Intermediate Causes

Education system
- **governance**
- **infastructure**
- **human capital**
- **curriculum**
- **equity and accessibility**
- **finance**
- **Informal accessibility and quality**
- **ICT accessibility and quality**

Uderlying Causes
- **Political system**
- **Economic policies**
- **Armed conflict**
- **Inequality**
- **Social norms**
- **Covid-19**

Outcome
- **Quantity human capital**
- **Quality human capital**
- **Social communication and interaction**
- **Productive labor**

1.4 Research ethics

The research team gave high priority to assuring that the research design and implementation were in line with high standards for research ethics. This ensured the effective participation of adolescents and their communities in developing the research and engaging with the dialogue and initiatives emerging from the results. Special attention was given to the sensitivities of conducting research in an active conflict context, with adolescents and children, with girls and boys, and under COVID-19 circumstances. Annex 2 provides detailed instructions for ethical considerations.

Girl (age 16-18 group) in workshop, Homs

1.5 Challenges and limitations

Implementation challenges included COVID-related issues (finding venues to accommodate the related restrictions, and lockdowns in al-Hasakeh and Raqqa), transportation for adolescents, and the timing (close to end of year exams) leading some adolescents to drop out of the process. Mitigation measures included the rescheduling of some activities in lockdown areas, updating the selected sample to compensate for drop-outs, and providing transportation or reimbursements when needed. Other challenges were specific to local areas. For example, specific authorisation protocols for the Turkish authorities in Al-Bab, or security fears and concerns which impeded the identification of participants and community participation in Damascus and Sweida. The workshops were eventually conducted with some delay, but without any reported complaints or abuses.

Research processes

This research is based on in-depth consultations with a diverse range of 13-18 year-old girls and boys between April and June 2021, as well as semi-structured interviews with key informants, and focus group discussions with parents and caregivers in the 11 selected areas in Syria.

The process was largely implemented by local teams, supervised and managed by the core team and partner (Hamzet Wasl), and co-funded by the British Council and SCPR. 11 local teams were established and trained, and the approach piloted, before developing their implementation plans and participant lists. These were then reviewed by the core team and feedback provided regarding the selection of participants, logistics, quality of data, with suggestions for modification where necessary.

1.6 Sampling and selection of participants

The local teams mapped relevant local actors and institutions working with adolescents' rights and care, from civil society, public sector and international humanitarian organisations including United Nations agencies. These key actors were consulted to develop lists of adolescents meeting the defined criteria, and their caregivers. The teams built substantial long-lists (sampling frameworks) of 3,425 adolescents across the 11 areas, with data on their age, sex, school enrolment, place of residence (rural/ urban), disabilities and education status. These local sampling frameworks were used by the SCPR core team to randomly select participants (adolescents and caregivers) within each category, to avoid potential bias of the local team. This comprehensive process was crucial to ensure the inclusivity of the research and minimise researcher bias.

Selection criteria for adolescent participants

The selection criteria for adolescents aimed to capture the diversity of circumstances, and ensure that the process captured the voices of adolescents who were:

- male / female (twice as many girls as boys were selected to participate, to give more emphasis to girls' situations and circumstances - Annex 6 gives detailed characteristics of the sample by sex);
- in school / out-of-school;
- from urban / rural areas;
- displaced / from host communities;
- facing good / poor access to social services;
- from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds;
- with strong representation from adolescents living with disabilities, orphaned, working and/or married.

Girl (age 13-15 group) in workshop, Raqqa

Selection process for adolescent participants

The core team selected participants through a complicated process involving some reiteration of the local frameworks. First, they identified the strata for each area, split it based on age/sex groups and ensured the existence of different marginalised groups, and then chose randomly from the resulting list. 777 adolescents were selected in this way, and their families were contacted and informed about the project, and asked to provide written consent from parents and verbal consent from the adolescents themselves. The rejection rate was relatively low at 19 percent, and the main reasons given were exams and the risk of the COVID-19. Overall, 642 adolescents agreed to participate, on average 58 in each of the 11 study areas (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Number of adolescents in framework, selected sample and actual sample by studied area

Total framework, selected and actual sample

Framework, selected and actual sample by studied areas
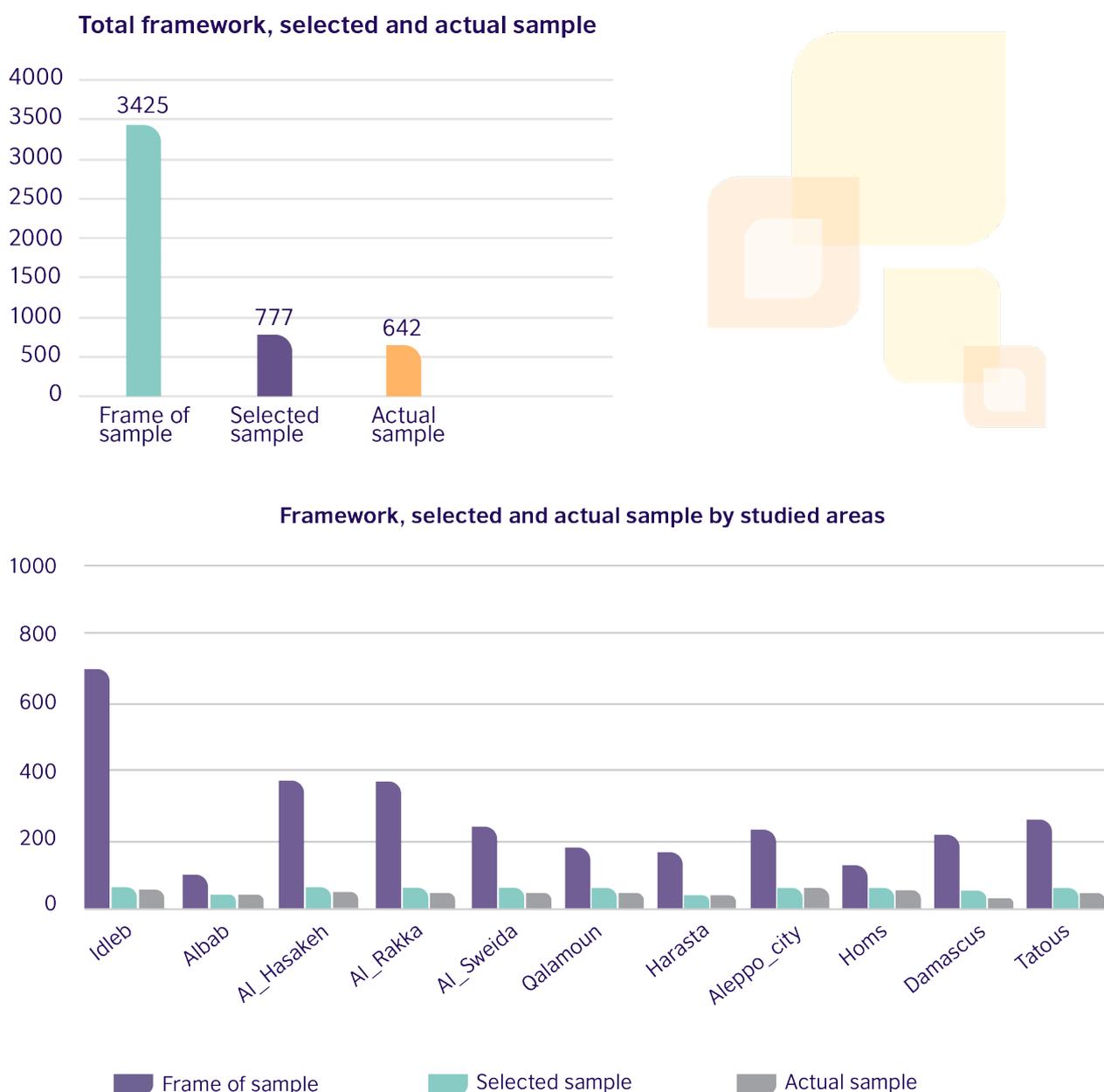
Source: SCPR, 2021: "Adolescent's Consultations on Education and ICT in Syria".

Participating adolescents were distributed into six groups: (two for girls 13-15 years old, one for boys 13-15 years old, two for girls 16-18 years old, and one for boys 16-18 years old). Two 12-year-olds joined the younger groups, and 14 of 19 year-olds joined the older groups (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Number of adolescents in framework, selected sample, and actual sample by age and sex

Framework, selected and actual sample by age and sex

In terms of residence, 63 percent of the adolescents were from urban areas and the rest from rural areas. The engagement of adolescents from rural areas was challenging as all consultations were conducted in urban sites, presenting challenges in terms of the availability of transportation and hesitation from parents. In the actual sample, 26 percent were displaced adolescents and the rest from host communities (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Adolescents in framework, selected sample and actual sample by rural/urban and displaced/host communities
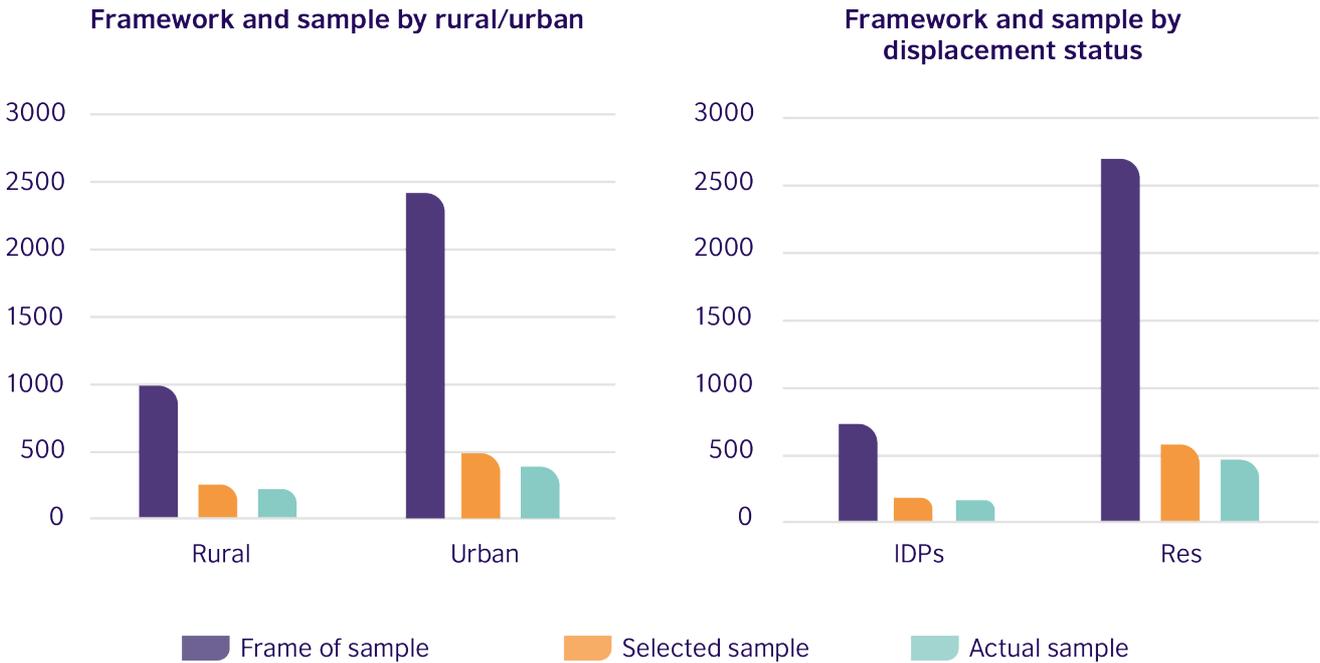
Source: SCPR, 2021: "Adolescent's Consultations on Education and ICT in Syria".

The majority of participating adolescents were enrolled in school (87 percent) while 13 percent were not (Figure 6). It was difficult to include adolescents who were working or not enrolled in school, as many of them are not engaged with any of the actors working with adolescents.

Figure 6: Adolescents in framework, selected sample and actual sample by school enrolment
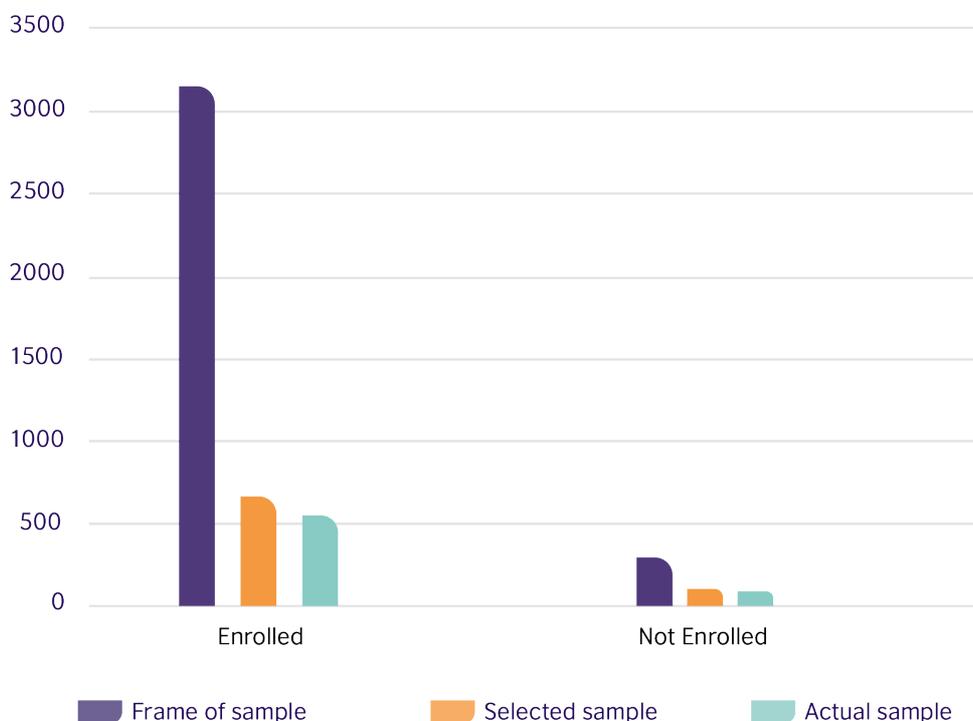
17 percent of the sample was orphaned adolescents, and 8 percent was adolescents with disabilities, including physical disabilities, visual and hearing impairments, among others (Figure 7). The research team provided these participants with facilities to enable their full participation in the consultations.

Figure 7: Adolescents in framework, selected and actual sample by orphan and disability status
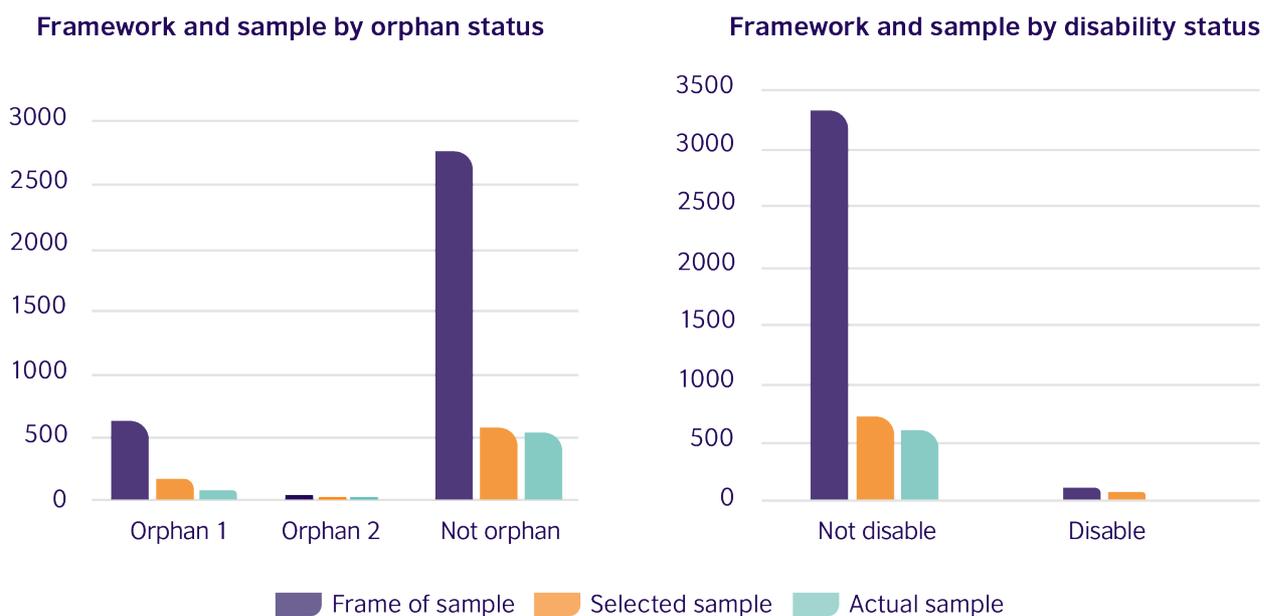
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Overall, the sample included different vulnerable groups of adolescents, however, their representation was underestimated compared to the secondary data estimation of their share of the adolescent community. For future research, expanding the scope to conduct the research in more areas, in rural as well as urban areas, and in IDP camps, is highly recommended. Additionally, expanding the exercise of forming the sampling framework is important to include all segments of adolescents.

Selection of caregivers and experts

In each area the sample framework was used to select parents of adolescent girls and boys, and key actors on the stakeholder map were consulted to select caregivers and experts. 343 caregivers and experts were identified, of which 206 were selected to participate in the focus group discussions (66 percent female and 34 percent male). 96 were parents of participating adolescents and 110 were experts. These included teachers in the formal and non-formal education sectors, education administrators (mentors, supervisors, school principals etc.), psychological support specialists, workers in institutions and associations concerned with adolescent affairs, and those with work experience related to the research. 21 focus group discussions were conducted in the 11 geographical locations, with 10 participants each.

Selection of key informants

135 key informants were identified by local researchers in the 11 areas, and 71 (36 female and 35 male) were selected for interview based on criteria including education background, practical experience related to the research, objectivity, work in public affairs, gender balance and diversity of cultural and political affiliation and residence. The majority worked with local civil society organizations focusing on education, others with the local council or civil defence, and some with the stabilization committee of northern Syria. Some were teachers and school managers, or worked in private education, ICT institutions, or companies, and one with the digital learning centre of the local administration of northeast Syria. Others worked in cultural centres, orphan

centres, or in child protection and education programmes of international organizations, or were community or religious leaders. Psychologists and computer and digital learning experts also participated.
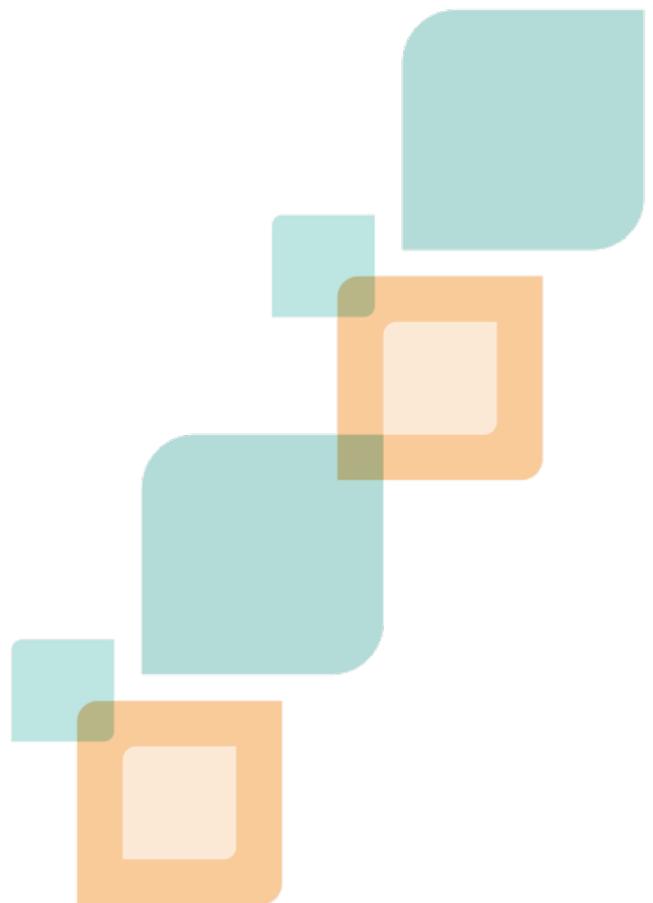
Findings

This section draws key themes, similarities and differences emerging from the data from the individual area results. The results for each local area are provided at the end of this report, as Annex 1, and provide a detailed profile of each specific community and its particular context for adolescents and education, with the inputs from adolescents disaggregated by age and sex. This detailed local information can be used to build relevant local policies and initiatives.

Across Syria, adolescents have been subject to grave violations to their basic rights to life, protection, education, health, food security, healthy social relations, and decent living conditions. In this research, adolescents, experts and caregivers provided substantial evidence on the catastrophic status of education and digital platforms for adolescent girls and boys.

In terms of access to education, between 2011-2020 almost half of the adolescent generation dropped out of the formal education system, and over 29 million school years in basic education were lost (compared to the counterfactual scenario without the conflict) (SCPR, 2021). Furthermore, the research shows a substantial deterioration in the quality of education, in terms of knowledge and skills gained for adolescents who remained in the education system.
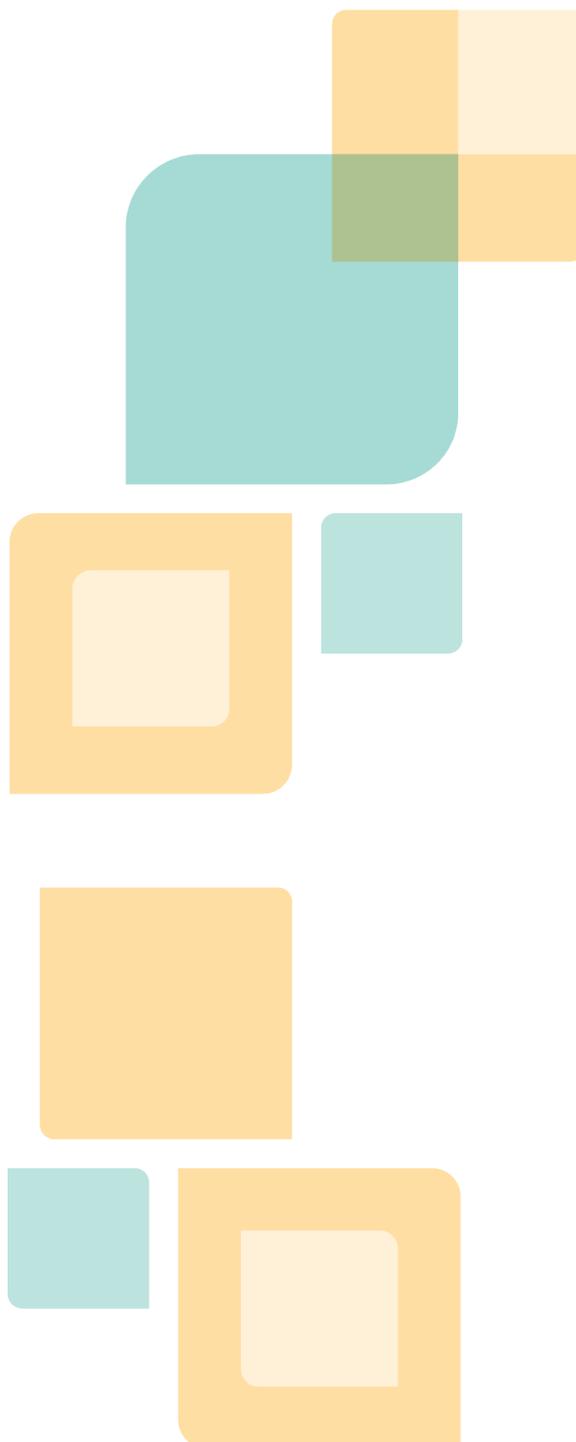
1- The conflict context for adolescents

1.1 Hope under siege

While most adolescents still expressed hope and aspirations for their future, the majority see emigration as the only path to realise their dreams.

Most adolescent participants voiced their hope for a better future. Despite the enormous constraints they face, most articulated their hopes for a decent education, career, welfare and life. Many aim to achieve university degrees and work in prestigious conventional professions such as medicine, engineering or law, as well as in the increasingly popular online sector. They talked about hobbies in many different areas such as social media, visual arts, music, sport and reading. However, this hope was always balanced by the prominent reference to the constraints evoked by war and insecurity, relating to the damaged and collapsing institutional, social and economic context.

Many of the adolescents alluded to their vanished hope of seeing an end to the conflict and a pathway to peace. A wish to leave the country to pursue their goals and seek a better life somewhere else was expressed by adolescents from all regions, whether girls or boys, displaced or from a host community, enrolled in education or not.

"صعب كتير نفكر بطموح وهدف لأننا ما نعرف بكرا شو بيصير"

It is so difficult to think of our ambition and goals because we are not certain what will happen tomorrow" (Tartous girl 13-15)

Many groups, especially adults, explained how the war distorted social values and affected the psychological health of adolescents and their vision for the future. For example, key informants in Idleb told how the long-lasting military escalation had caused the disintegration of the social fabric, fragmentation of families, disconnection of networks and disruption of family ties, affecting the physical and psychological state of adolescents, especially those subjected to forced displacement. Adults in several areas noted that the conflict had killed many men, leaving families without a breadwinner and adolescents out of control. This has substantially increased the pressure on adolescents, causing depression, a sense of insignificance, loss of hope and purpose and led many to wish to migrate. Displaced adolescents are disproportionately affected, constantly expressing feelings of isolation, despair, hopelessness.

"التحدي الأساسي الذي يعاني منه اليافعين في المرحلة الحالية هي عدم الشعور بالأمان فالنشوء في بيئة غير مستقرة بشكل عام أدى إلى انعكاسات سلبية عليهم وعلى طريقة تفكيرهم حيث يسيطر عليهم حالة اليأس والإحباط وانعدام التفكير بالمستقبل وفقدان الأمل"

"Growing up in an unstable environment, in general, led to negative repercussions on them and their way of thinking, as they suffer from despair, frustration, loss of hope and lack of thinking about the future" (Al-Tal key informant)

Some of the girls (e.g. Al-Tal, Damascus) were outspoken and demonstrated a sense of independent thinking and self-confidence, optimism and a positive outlook towards the future. They had diverse interests and goals that may have seemed far-fetched due to the difficult living conditions and educational challenges they face. In Idleb, the younger girls showed sadness, timidity and insecurity, while the older girls expressed confidence, maturity and openness. Other older girls (e.g. East Ghouta) were already out of school and married, some were mothers or pregnant, or even divorced. One mother of two, whose husband did not allow her to leave the house, had been a high-performing student until she left school in grade 9. Some girls had already started work to support their families, while others were contemplating leaving the country. Many of the older boys were already working (e.g. East Ghouta), though many were also still at school. Some girls expressed their interest in education, as well as challenges in terms of mobility, insecurity and lack of family support, while some older boys (e.g. Homs) expressed their fear of failure in education at this critical stage of their lives.

Girl (age 13-15 group) in My Identity exercise, Homs

Dreams of high-status or exciting careers

"بحب كون صيدلانية لأنني أحب مساعدة جميع الناس المحتاجين وخصوصا الأيتام المحرومين من أهلهن بسبب الحرب"

"I'd like to be a pharmacist because I love helping all the needy people, especially the orphans who have been deprived of their families because of the war" (Idleb girl 13-15)

Nearly all girls and boys in both age groups expressed their hopes to achieve a high level of education and occupy prestigious conventional professions, such as doctors, dentists, pharmacists, engineers and lawyers, even though some of them have difficulties in their education or are already out of school. These are careers that have higher pay, the approval of parents and respect of society. Some mentioned others such as criminal investigator, information technology engineer, architect, or psychiatrist or business owner. Older girls in Homs mentioned they would like to hold a PhD in mathematics or English literature and one hoped to be an archaeologist. In some areas (e.g. East Ghouta), the younger boys who were still in school had higher aspirations (e.g. to go to university) than those who were already working and aimed for more vocational jobs. Older boys in Al-Tal mentioned a lack of motivation to continue their education and reach their dream jobs.

"هدف اليافعة أن تصبح باحثة آثار ... وذكرت في التحديات أن الأهل غير مشجعون لها لأنهم يرون أنها مهنة لا تناسب الفتيات وليس لها مستقبل مهني جيد"

"One girl (16-18) said she wanted to become an archaeologist, and mentioned that her parents are not encouraging her because they see that it is not a profession that suits girls and it has no prospects" (Homs workshop)

Practical focus

Many adolescents focused on more practical careers, such as cook, hairdresser or dressmaker, and many of the older girls (e.g. Aleppo, Raqqa) were already working in these types of jobs due to a lack of support for their education, or the impact of insecurity and harassment on their mobility. Some older girls mentioned the importance of generating income from online jobs. Many of the older boys (e.g. Idleb, Raqqa) were focused on income-generating professions such as owning and driving a truck, managing a car maintenance shop, maintenance of mobile phones or blacksmith. Some were already working in trade and construction (e.g. Tartous) and one younger boy in Damascus had a clear goal of becoming a professional carpenter as he was already working in carpentry with good support from his employer.
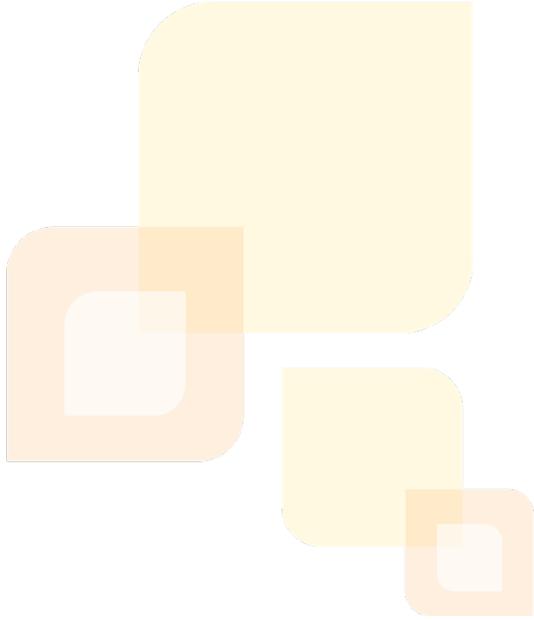
Girls from both age groups and most areas said they would like to work or volunteer to support people in need and challenge injustice, or defend women rights. Some expressed awareness of women's rights, the importance of equality between girls and boys in accessing education, appreciation for women's economic independence (e.g. Sweida, Tartous), and frustration with cultural and family limitations to girls' education and mobility. Some boys (e.g. Idleb) expressed a wish to contribute to rebuilding their country after the destruction of the war.

Creative dreams

"ركزت اليافعة على أنها تحب دراسة الإعلام، التحديات لا يوجد فرع إعلام في حمص والمواصلات صعبة بالإضافة تخشى لأنها محجبة ألا تحصل على فرص إعلامية كما تريد"

"I like to study media, but there is no university branch for media in Homs and transportation is difficult, and I am afraid that I will not get media opportunities because I wear the hijab"
(Homs girl 16-18)

Some adolescents in all groups mentioned their desire to engage in more creative and less conventional jobs, including acting, singing, writing, makeup, graphic design, software developing, painting, journalism, fashion design or music. Several mentioned their ambition to be YouTubers or influencers (e.g. Al-Tal and Homs). Younger boys in several places mentioned that they wanted to be professional football players, but mentioned challenges in enrolling in teams or receiving coaching. One of the older boys from Idleb wished to be an astronaut, even though he had already left school.

Desire to help and rebuild

"طموحي كون محامية اذا خلوني كمل دراستي. لانو حلم أمي ولأقدر دافع عن حقوقي"

"My ambition is to be a lawyer if they let me complete my studies. Because it is my mother's dream, and to defend my rights"
(Tartous girl 16-18)
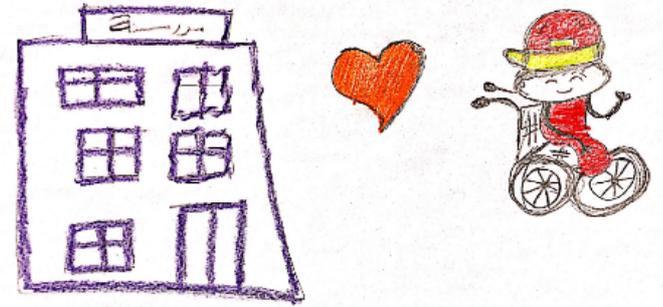
Girl (age 13-15) My Identity exercise, Aleppo.

"طموحي أن أترك بصمة في التاريخ. أريد أن أبني مركز لحماية حقوق الانسان السبب لم أرى من يدافع عن أحلامي وحقوقي لذا قررت أن أكون من يدافع عن الناس الذي ظلمتهم الحياة والمجتمع والحرب"

"My ambition is to leave a mark in history. I want to establish a centre for human rights because I did not find anyone fighting for my dreams and rights, thus, I decided to defend people who have been exposed to injustice from life, society and war" **(al-Hasakeh girl 16-18)**

Interests and hobbies

Adolescents from all age groups shared different interests and hobbies like sport, music and singing, hanging out with friends, drawing, cooking or playing digital games. Many of the boys, and some girls, mentioned a love of nature and the outdoors. Girls and boys in some areas (e.g. Idleb and Al-Tal) mentioned the important role of religion in their lives, and some mentioned reading and listening to the Quran. In Sweida, three boys mentioned using the Internet to learn programming and computer maintenance, or design games.

Desire to travel

"الطموح السفر لأي بلد لأن الوضع العام في البلد يفتقر لأبسط مقومات الحياة"

"The ambition is to travel to any country because the general situation in the country lacks most necessities of life" (East Ghouta boy 16-18)

Many young people of both sexes expressed their wish to travel outside of Syria to study, work and live, and some expressed an interest in learning foreign languages for this purpose, noting the difficulty to access language learning (e.g. Damascus). The younger girls in Sweida and Tartous were interested in learning English, French, Russian and Korean. While older girls expressed an interest in discovering the world, some (e.g. al-Hasakeh, Tartous) mentioned the difficulties of travelling for Syrians due to the war, and the lack of support from their families. Older boys (e.g. East Ghouta, Al-Bab) saw travel as a means to avoid military service as well as to access opportunities.
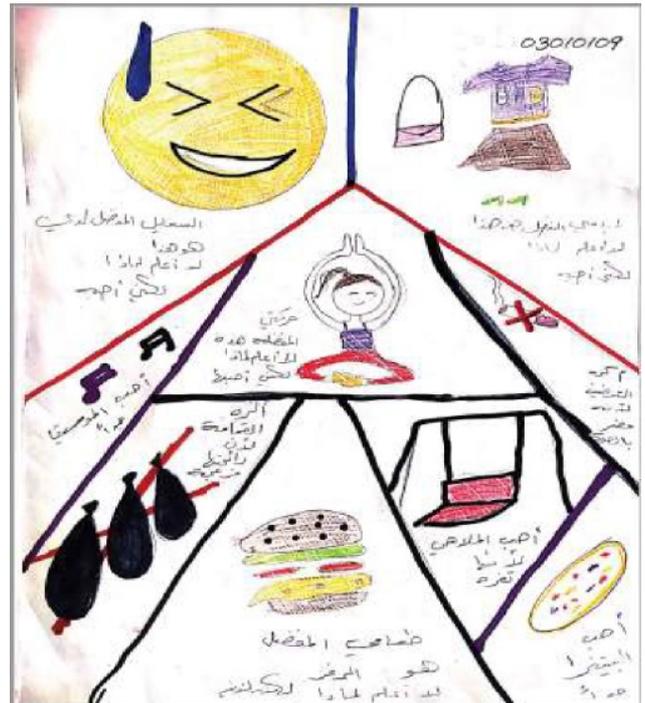
Hopelessness, lack of space and uncertainty

"رسمت اليافعة قفص وداخله عصفور وحول القفص أغصان خضراء، عبرت أنها تشبه العصفور، سجينة، أعاقتها بتر الطرف، لا تستطيع الذهاب بعيداً بمفردها، وترى جمال العالم كله من حول القفص الذي يمنعها من التمتع بجمال الطبيعة"

"One girl (13-15) drew a bird inside a cage and green branches around the cage. She expressed that she resembles a bird, a prisoner, hampered by the amputation of her limb, cannot go far alone and sees the beauty of the whole world around the cage, which prevents her from enjoying the beauty of nature" (Homs workshop)

Several key informants noted the social and psychological pressures on adolescents due to the war, exacerbated by cultural norms and traditions, which worsened for those out of school with increased uncertainty for the future. Social threats and problems such as drugs, conscription to military service, domestic violence and harassment (e.g. al-Hasakeh), alongside poverty and instability, create a feeling of hopelessness and pessimism (e.g. Damascus). Some adults (e.g. Raqqa) noted that this is exacerbated by the marginalisation of adolescents, and lack of space to meet and express themselves. Key informants

in some areas (e.g. Damascus, Raqqa) noted that adolescents feel lost, anxious, stressed and pressured, preferring to travel abroad regardless of their qualifications, competencies, abilities and ambitions.

"أريد أن أصبح ربة منزل وليس لدي طموح بالدراسة أو العمل، لأن الدراسة لا تنفع الفتاة"

"My goal is to get married and create a family, I do not have ambitions to study or work, and I want to become a housewife I believe that the study does not benefit girl" (Aleppo girl 16-18)
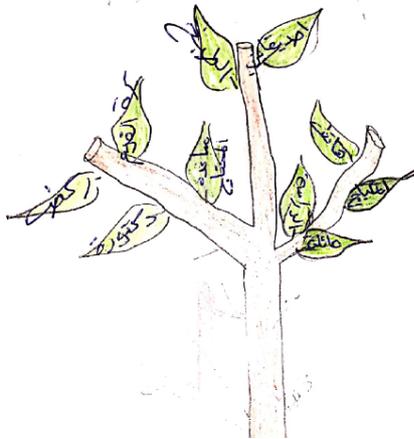
Girls (age 13-15) My Identity exercise, al-Hasakeh.

1.2 The war generation

The adolescents of today have grown up in the context of conflict, impacting every aspect of their lives and development, although fear affects their confidence to discuss this situation.

"اليافعون هم أكثر الأشخاص تأثراً بظروف الحرب"

"Adolescents are the most affected by the war conditions" (Homs key informant)

Participating adolescents were between three and eight years old in 2011 when the social movement began and deteriorated into the devastating armed conflict. This means that their formative childhood years took place entirely during the current war. They have been living in an environment of conflict that enforces fear, animosity and subordination, while enduring destruction and collective punishment. They have witnessed many violations and experienced tragic repercussions on their lives, such as losing family members to the conflict, suffering injury or disability, displacement, kidnap, torture, siege or gender-based violence. More critically, this generation has been targeted for armed recruitment, trafficking and child labour, with an absence of comprehensive and consistent protection, in addition to deprivations of food
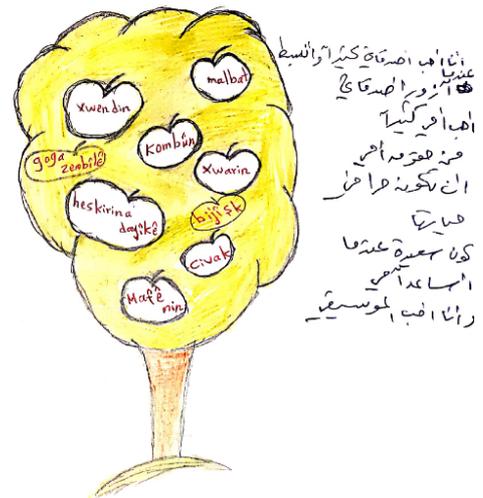
security, education and health services and decent living conditions.

"اليأس نتيجة الظروف التي يمرون ويشعرون بها والأوضاع التي عاشوها، فمثلا كلمة الموت رافقتهم في كثير من أيامهم عكس الجيل السابق الذي لم يكن يعرف الموت في عمر المراهقة"

"Death is a word that accompanied them in many of their days, unlike the previous generation who did not know death in adolescence" (Aleppo key informant)

25

With access to virtual and digital spaces, this generation has been able to access news about the war and its violations on a daily basis. They understand that the war is not over and many regions are under the threat of further armed conflict as key political and military actors are still adopting military strategies.

It was notable that adolescent and adult participants from across the groups avoided direct discussion of the warring actors and dire violations, or expressing direct opinions or views on the conflict dynamics and actors, even those who had lost a family member or were injured due to the conflict. Fear is omnipresent, mainly

Boys (age 16-18) My Identity exercise, Idleb.

because the conflict is ongoing, and different warring parties are in control of each territory and its resources, holding power over the population and external support.[1]

"أنا لاجئ من دير الزور.. تهجرت من بلدي. أتذكر مرة كنت ألعب الكرة مع رفاقي وقصفتنا الطائرة وأصيب رفاقي وكانت دماءهم تملأ الأرض"

"I remember once I was playing football with my friends and the plane bombed us and my friends were injured and their blood filled the ground" (Al-Bab boy 13-15)

However, directly or indirectly, the adolescents talked about the conflict and its devastating impact on their studies, life and relationships. Comparing across the areas, this highlighted their different experiences of war depending on the subnational context. For example:

- Adolescents in Idleb and East Ghouta lived the experience of brutal war, bombardment, targeting of civilians, heavy and internationally-banned weapons, destruction of infrastructure, and the forced displacement of the majority of their communities. The percentage of disabled and orphaned adolescents reflected the

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[1] It is worth mentioning that, in a similar study conducted by the research team in Sudan following the political transformation in 2018-

2019, adolescents discussed openly the impact of oppression and conflict in hindering their hopes and expectations (UNICEF, 2020).

- severe suffering of those young women and men.
- Those from Raqqa experienced ISIS blocking the education process for years and imposing measures that marginalized adolescents, especially girls.
- In Homs, widespread destruction and fighting were associated with social degradation and identity-based discrimination.
- In al-Hasakeh, adolescents struggle with different education systems, the AA unrecognised and unaccredited curriculum and the GoS curriculum.

Therefore, the war created severe inequalities between adolescents across regions and communities, which urges all actors to create community-relevant policies and interventions in a participatory approach to address the needs and grievances of each region.

"القصف سبب تدمير منازلنا وتهجيرنا من بيوتنا وأرضنا واستشهاد أقاربنا"

"**The bombing destroyed our homes, the displacement from our homes and land, and the martyrdom of our relatives**" (**Al-Bab boy 16-18**)

Most groups mentioned that war and instability created a climate of fear and uncertainty, destroyed or repurposed infrastructure (including schools) and disrupted services, and hindered their study and life. For example, younger boys in Tartous were pessimistic about the situation and their future because of the catastrophic security and economic situation, some were already out of school and working, and most wanted to travel abroad. Interestingly, some groups (e.g. Aleppo younger boys) did not mention the war or displacement at all, focusing instead on the economic situation that negatively affected enrolment and the quality of education.

Displacement

The conflict led to the fragmentation of families and poor living conditions which forced many adolescents to leave school to work. For example, boys in Al-Bab (especially displaced adolescents) shared painful experiences, as many of them witnessed bombardments and experienced forced displacement to Turkey and other parts of Syria. In Aleppo, many girls described having lost one or more of their family members to death or displacement. Caregivers in Aleppo highlighted the waves of displacement that created difficult conditions for displaced and host communities and affected adolescents.

Recruitment to armed groups

Several groups of boys were concerned about military conscription or recruitment into armed groups (e.g. Al-Tal, Raqqa, Sweida), affecting their education but also motivating them to leave the country. This was also mentioned by some adults, including key informants in al-Hasakeh who considered that the conflict had fuelled fanaticism among youth and children, as huge inequalities led adolescents to 'blindly' follow the armed groups that benefited from the war, and to some boys threatening their parents to escape and join armed groups. They considered that adolescents wanted to 'prove themselves', or were influenced by TV programmes, the Internet and friends.

1.3 Insecurity and vulnerability

Increased insecurity in schools and the wider community has deepened the vulnerabilities of adolescents, exacerbated by weakened family and social structures.

Key informants and caregivers mentioned contextual factors such as poor governance, lack of trust in public institutions, lack of rule of law, the aggravation of social tensions, and inefficient public services. These factors provide a background for the growth of negative and dangerous phenomena, such as kidnapping, pillage and the arbitrary use of weapons. Adolescents mentioned other consequences such as bullying and harassment, suicide, violence in schools, armed recruitment, drugs and smoking, early marriage and child labour.

Many participants highlighted the link between the insecure environment inside and outside schools and increased school dropout rates, especially for girls. Adolescents, key informants and caregivers all highlighted the vital importance of providing secure and protected environments for adolescents as a first step forward"

"People with skills and knowledge cannot reach a high level and leadership positions due to corruption" **(Al-Tal boy 16-18)**

Some adults considered that family disintegration and dispersion due to the war had made adolescents more vulnerable to mental and physical exploitation. Adolescents, key informants and caregivers in different areas referred to increased social challenges, such as the spread of violence and crime, drugs, begging and prostitution, as well as forced recruitment, kidnapping, harassment and moral degradation. The older boys in Homs recognised that most students need psychosocial support, and key informants pointed out a lack of programmes supporting adolescents, for example in sexual awareness. Caregivers in Raqqa and Idleb were concerned about the absence of an appropriate educational environment or civil society programmes for youth or of opportunities for effective social participation, free expression and the ability to plan their future. One key informant from Aleppo stated that physical and verbal violence against boys and girls, and forced marriage, were related to "the absence of an effective role of civil and humanitarian associations."
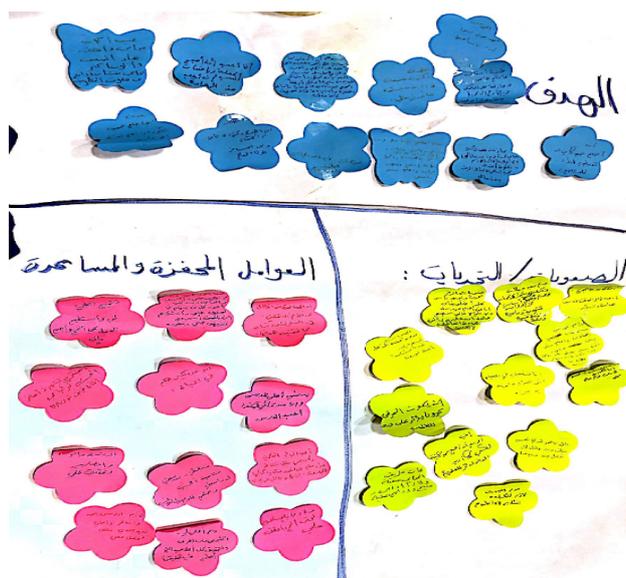
Girls (age 13-15) My Ambition exercise, Aleppo.

Some groups of adolescents (e.g. Homs, East Ghouta) mentioned growing inequality, the lack of rule of law and justice, and the impact on their hopes and motivation. Older boys in Raqqa highlighted suppression, corruption, lack of freedom of speech, inequality and displacement as key factors that negatively affect their study and lives. The older girls from Homs noted increased political and social polarization, and severe inequality and discrimination due to the war, and key informants also pointed to increasing discrimination and marginalization based on identity, religion, political affiliation, sex, class and displacement status. Caregivers in Tartous asserted that the war economy had caused wide economic disparities and divided society into a small very rich class and a large very poor class who lacked basic necessities, and associated these social challenges with poor public institutional performance and widespread corruption, nepotism, and the absence of accountability. Key informants in Sweida mentioned that government oppression had 'subordinated the will of younger generations'.

1.4 Severe poverty and inequality

Widespread poverty, unemployment and the increased cost of living have forced many adolescents to drop out of school, and many teachers to leave the profession or the country.

"الوضع الاقتصادي السيئ يلي سرق أحلام اليافعين"

"The poor economic situation stole the dreams of adolescents" **(Tartous boy 13-15)**

Poverty was a common obstacle for adolescents in all areas and from all groups. Economic deterioration has continued to deepen, despite the decline of intense armed conflict, and public services have decreased in quantity and quality. This has caused heightened suffering and deprivation in terms of access to food, clothing, housing, heating, electricity, transportation, health and education for the vast majority of Syrians. Hyperinflation caused a drop in the real value of salaries, which forced many in the education workforce to migrate or leave the sector.

Adolescents, key informants and caregivers from across the areas all highlighted the decline of job opportunities and surge in the cost of living, including the cost of education, which forced

many families to stop enrolling their children in schools. Many boys dropped out in order to work and support their families. For example, older boys in Sweida considered economic deterioration and poverty to be key obstacles for their study, as they have to work over summer to cover their education costs, as well as feeling insecure about military conscription. Many girls also dropped out to reduce costs and, in some cases, were married for economic reasons.

"الضائقة الاقتصادية المتواصلة التي تعاني منها الأسر المعيشية وخاصة اللاجئين والمجتمعات المستضيفة تجبر اليافعين واليافعات على تحمل المسؤولية المالية"

"**The continuing economic hardship experienced by households forces adolescents to take financial responsibility**" **(Idleb key informant)**

Adolescents also mentioned inequalities within broad deprivation. Girls tend to suffer more than boys due to biases within families and society which privilege boys in terms of study, income, mobility and decision-making. Rural areas are more deprived of employment opportunities and services than urban areas. Displaced people, in general, suffer from higher levels of poverty and deprivation compared to host communities. There is specific deprivation of disabled adolescents, most of whom do not have access to facilities to support their engagement in schools and communities. Some areas, like Homs, identified discrimination against specific communities based on their political affiliation or cultural background. On the other hand, adolescents referred to an elite that can afford to enrol their children in private schools and universities, and provide them with the necessary ICT equipment and services.

1.5 Social relations and norms

The family plays an indispensable role in supporting and protecting adolescents, although it can also replicate traditional values which sustain gender bias and undermine education or choice.

"أحد التحديات التي أواجهها هو أن أكون امرأة تعيش في مجتمع لا يدعم المرأة"

"**One of the challenges that I face is being a female living in a society that doesn't support women**" **(Al-Tal girl 13-15)**

Due to the increased scarcity of secure environments, the family has become fundamental and indispensable as a source of protection and support to adolescents.

The majority of adolescents considered their family, especially their parents, as the key support for them in their study and social life. Some mentioned brothers and sisters, or members of the extended family like grandparents or aunts.

"معظم الفتيات الذين تزوجوا بعمر مبكر تعرضوا للطلاق وبعدها عادوا للدراسة لأنهم عرفوا أن التعليم سبيل للحياة الكريمة وحفظ الكرامة "

"**most of those girls who married at an early age divorced later, then returned to education. They were aware after marriage experience that education is the way to a decent and dignified life**" **(East Ghouta key informant)**

Many adolescents also associated the family with enforcing old traditions which constrain their choices and access to education. For girls, these values can reduce their mobility and access to the internet, and underestimate the importance of their education, to the extent of forcing them into early marriage in some instances. In many cases, this has been exacerbated by warring actors exploiting a fanatic narrative opposed to girls' education and mobility. For boys, these traditions can force them to take responsibility to work and support their families at an early age, hindering their ability to complete their basic education and achieve their goals. Finally, many adolescents noted that families exert authority and influence over their study preferences and career choices. Adolescents in many areas described a generational struggle, especially to address equality between women and men, in particular for girls who voiced their aspirations to obtain an education to strengthen their autonomy and build their own careers.

"تتأثر الفتيات على وجه الخصوص بالأعراف الأسرية والاجتماعية والتي غالبا ما تحد من تمثيلهم في الأسرة والمجتمع وتحد كذلك من قدرتهم على الحصول على الخدمات المناسبة والفرص"

"**Girls, in particular, are affected by family and social norms, which often limit their representation in the family and society and limit their ability to access appropriate services and opportunities**" **(Idleb key informant)**

Parental support

"كل شي بعملو تحت المراقبة وكتير بتصير مشاكل مع اهلي"

"Everything is done under surveillance, and many problems arise with my family" (Tartous girl 16-18)

Many adolescents from all age groups stressed the importance of support from their family and friends. Most boys expressed satisfaction with the support of their parents for their education, with the exception of older boys in Raqqa and younger boys in Tartous who complained that family and tradition constrained their ability to express themselves and choose their future. The younger boys in al-Hasakeh noted that family support has become even more important in the time of instability, while some older boys (e.g. Al-Tal) pointed to complicated relationships, despite overall support.

However, most groups of girls described a lack of parental support. Several girls pointed out the special supportive role of their mothers, but some (e.g. Idleb) expressed some fear of their fathers. Some younger girls (Al-Bab, Al-Tal, Raqqa, Sweida, Tartous) criticized their parents' tendency to interfere, forcing them to choose specific fields like literature or pressuring them to leave education after the second cycle. Many groups of girls (Al-Tal, Al-Bab, Aleppo, East Ghouta, Idleb, Raqqa) mentioned traditions and family attitudes which limited girls' mobility, choices and opportunities for work and study and relationships. Some older girls (e.g. Idleb) said that their parents do not allow them to own a mobile or

to use the Internet and cameras. One younger girl in Homs suggested imposing penalties on parents who prevent their girls from continuing their education.

"عدم السماح لي باستكمال تعليمي لأنني فتاة وكذلك لا يفضلون العمل للفتاة"

"They do not let me complete my education because I am a girl and they don't like girls to work" (Aleppo girl 13-15)

Many groups pointed out that families prefer sending their boys to work to learn any vocation rather than completing study at school, while the traditional belief in the infeasibility of education for girls encouraged some families to marry off them at an early age. This is compounded by increasing poverty and instability. Adults in Damascus noted that the more educated the family, the more they tend to support their children to complete their studies, but that the war conditions had forced many families to take their daughters out of school and marry them to protect them, especially in rural areas. Boys and girls in Damascus emphasized their own perseverance, determination and personal incentives as their main drivers. "

"إن افتقاد الطفل للقدوة والاحتواء من قبل الأبوين يدفع به للتمرد واللجوء للشبكات التي تستهدف الأطفال: المخدرات - العمالة - الاستغلال الجنسي - التحرش"

"The child's lack of the ideal and parental inclusion pushes him to rebel and resort to networks of drugs, labour, sexual exploitation, harassment that target children" (Al-Tal KI)

Finally, some caregivers (Damascus, Homs, Tartous, al-Hasakeh) pointed to a lack of understanding and communication between parents and their children, and the generational difference between them in terms of technology and thinking. This translated into a lack of direction and guidance from families in the use of the internet, increasing the risk of misuse and exposing adolescents to different challenges and problems without substantial help or guidance. Caregivers in al-Hasakeh found that family problems and disputes, and miscommunication between parents and their children, increased pressure on adolescents, psychological problems, fear, despair and feelings of insecurity due to the radical changes in their lives. Younger boys and

girls from Tartous also highlighted widespread bullying and smoking among adolescents and its negative impact on them, and mentioned the absence of an integrating environment for girls with disabilities.

Restrictions on girls

"الصعوبات تكمن في مواجهة المجتمع الذكوري الذي لا يرضى أن تكون المرأة أفضل منهم"

"The difficulties in a patriarchal society that are not accepting women can be better than men" (Sweida girl 13-15)

"اعتبار بعض الفتيات أن جنسهم هو عائق في تحقيق طموحهم"

"Some girls consider their sex an obstacle to achieving their ambitions" (Aleppo girl 16-18)

Many groups of girls (e.g. al-Hasakeh, Aleppo, Homs) mentioned the impact of insecurity on their mobility, as their families impose more restrictions on them. They also highlighted the traditions that constrained girls from travel or accessing education Older girls in Aleppo highlighted that the war, violence and displacement had exacerbated inequalities between girls and boys, affecting their study and work opportunities and increasing pressure for early marriage. Some mentioned harassment as an increasing challenge for girls at this age.. Older girls in Al-Bab and Homs noted that old traditions biased against the mobility and education of girls have been revived during the war, especially in the rural areas, forcing girls to stay at home to work for the family, and increasing discrimination against the education of girls. Adults in Idleb asserted that, as well as being forced to marry early, many girls were exposed to domestic violence and subject to pressure from parents or brothers, as well as increased housework responsibilities.

1.6 The impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions exacerbated problems in access to education, and highlighted the need for quality and inclusive digital learning materials and channels.

Education was severely disrupted by COVID-19, which increased the health burden on the population and the entire fragile public health system. Mitigation measures forced physical distancing, quarantine and the closure of educational facilities for extended periods over 2020 and 2021. The majority of adolescents described substantial education losses resulting from the pandemic and highlighted the failure of the educational administrations to offer sound digital alternatives, while promoting students to the next grade without final exams or completing the school syllabus.

COVID-19 also caused further economic deterioration as employment opportunities declined even further and prices surged, creating a huge burden on families and increasing school dropout of adolescents. Additionally, lockdowns led to increased emotional and social pressures on families, girls in particular, including reported increases in domestic violence. Finally, when lockdowns ended, schools were not equipped with the necessary hygiene measures and equipment for confidence in a safe return.

"مع انتشار موجه فايروس كورونا.. الكثير انتقل للمدارس الخاصة ولم يكن وضع عائلتي يسمح في تلك الفترة التسجيل في مدرسة خاصة، لذلك تابعت التعليم والدروس عبر قناة يوتيوب لكي أستطيع مواكبة زميلاتي"

"With the spread of the Coronavirus, many moved to private schools, and my family's situation did not allow me to enrol in a private school, so I followed education and lessons through a YouTube channel so that I could keep up with my colleagues" (Al-Bab girl 13-15)

Many adolescents highlighted the impact of public-school closures, disrupting their education and creating 'chaos' in the education process. Some mentioned that school closures had been erratic, causing more infections and spreading fear among teachers and parents (Al-Bab). One key informant in Idleb mentioned that IDP adolescents and those living far from the city centres were more affected by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, while others (Al-Bab and Raqqa) considered that rural areas were less affected, as schools carried on as usual and quarantine was not observed. Some private schools were seen to have adhered to protection

and prevention measures and established effective distance learning groups compared to public schools (e.g. Al-Bab).

Many adults mentioned the absence of alternatives to compensate for education loss, or complained about low quality or unequal access to distance learning (Al-Bab, Aleppo, Damascus), and lack of strategies to adapt the curriculum. Adults in Tartous noted the failure of the Ministry of Education to educate students on how to use the application that was supposed to include a full explanation of the curriculum. Older girls in Raqqa considered that the pandemic contributed to hindering girls' education and created more pressures due to the economic impact and prolonged lockdown. In some areas (e.g. Al-Bab) adolescents mentioned that they had had to seek expensive private schools or irregular digital courses, while others noted the need for strong parental support for home learning (e.g. Al-Hasakeh).

Adults in Tartous linked the spread of anxiety and chaos in the local community to a lack of government response plans or consistent policies to substitute education losses. Many groups (Al-Tal, Aleppo, Damascus, East Ghouta, Homs, Sweida) complained about the strategy to promote all students without exams, leading to gaps in their education and a perceived degree of laziness and complacency among adolescents. Some adults in Raqqa mentioned that the lack of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 when schools reopened, which had made many parents nervous to send their children to school, especially with over 50 students per classroom.

"تعرض الأطفال في المنازل إلى العنف الأسري بسبب حالة الحجر التي كانوا يعيشونها " (أحد الأشخاص المفتاحيين)

"Children have been exposed to domestic violence because of the conditions they live in during the quarantine period" (al-Hasakeh key informant)

Some adults mentioned the impact of the pandemic on the social lives and mental health of adolescents, leaving them bored with nothing to do but go online, and aggravating their pessimism for the future (Al-Bab, Al-Tal, al-Hasakeh, Damascus, Tartous). The COVID-19 pandemic also

caused an increase in poverty and unemployment, increasing the constant pressure on families. As a result, and given the long periods at home, many adults (e.g. al-Hasakeh, Aleppo, Homs, Idleb, Tartous) linked the pandemic to increased family problems and psychological issues, including depression and despair, impacting girls with increased housework and movement restrictions, and in some cases domestic violence.
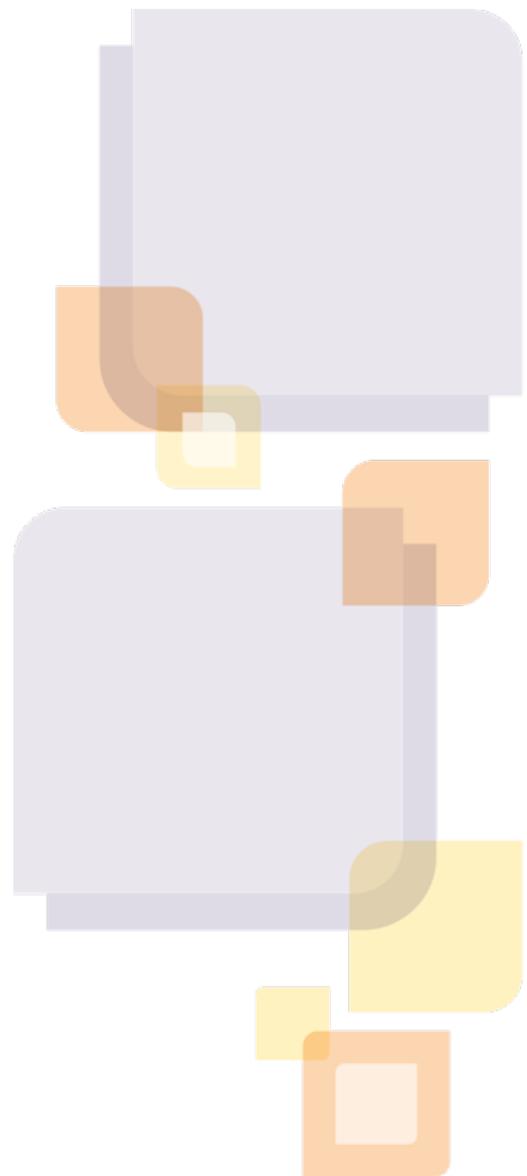
2-Education access and quality

The conflict has caused critical deterioration of the education system, exacerbated by fragmentation, leading to declining enrolment, outcomes and perceived value of education.

The authorities running each of the four main zones in Syria have designed and managed their education systems and content differently, but some common themes emerged. Adolescents across different areas described their education systems as weak, inefficient or mediocre, and all participants agreed that the education systems have deteriorated starkly during the conflict, reflected in poor governance, infrastructure and teaching. Some associated school management problems with corruption, nepotism and discrimination. Some areas, such as al-Hasakeh, have multiple, uncoordinated educational systems, and adolescents complained about the lack of recognition of certificates from areas not under government control.

In relation to the broader system and management, adolescents shared their struggles in public schools due to the condensed and difficult curriculum, while highlighting the poor quality of teaching and the absence of supporting materials and resources. They complained about traditional and outdated teaching methodologies, poor foreign language teaching, and the lack of qualified teachers. They also complained about the absence of extra-curricular activities and sport to fulfil their psychosocial needs. Some adolescents felt that their voices are not heard by school management.

They also noted broader challenges to school access related to financial hardship, poor infrastructure, insecurity and lack of transportation. In all areas, adolescents noted challenges of lack of school buildings, equipment and services, including heating, water and hygiene. In some cases, long distances between homes and schools and lack of transportation caused big challenges to get to school. Many girls and boys highlighted the absence of proper facilities for disabled adolescents. In some areas,

such as Aleppo, East Ghouta, Homs and Idleb, school infrastructure has been destroyed during the conflict, while in others, such as in al-Hasakeh, adolescents complained of a lack of school rehabilitation and maintenance.
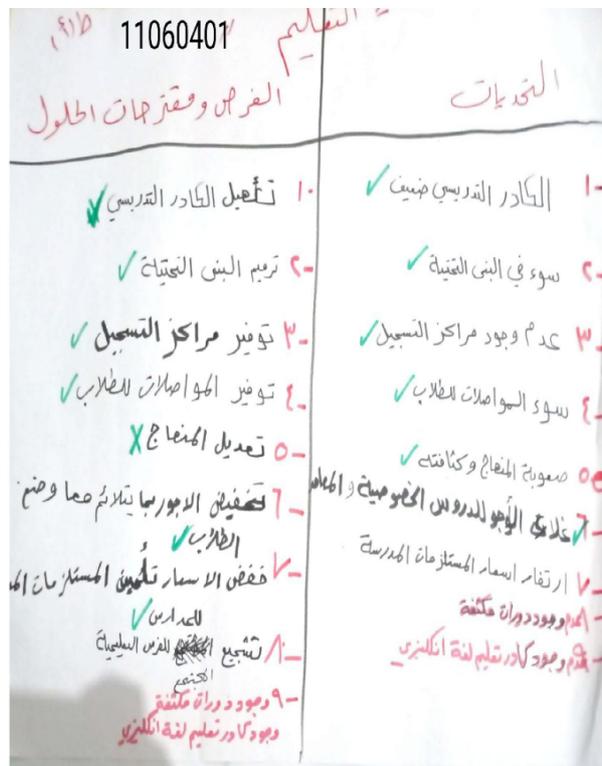
Girls (age 16-18) Café: Education exercise, Raqqa.

Adolescents also mentioned a surge in the cost of logistics and private lessons, which increases the burden on families and leads to more school dropouts. Some girls mentioned that their families refused to enrol them in school or university due to the long distance from their homes. Other negative phenomena spreading in school environments were mentioned, such as bullying, violence, harassment, smoking and drugs, discriminatory treatment by schools and teachers, and teacher apathy. This view, shared by many parents and adolescents, depicts a growing sense of scepticism about the value and utility of education in the context of conflict.

"التعليم التقليدي يدفع الى ترك المدرسة بسبب جموده والمعاملة السيئة وغياب جودة التعليم"

"Formal education forced adolescents to drop out of school because of its rigidity, bad treatment and lack of quality education" (Damascus girl 13-15)

The impact of the conflict on education were very striking and visible. For example, some younger girls in East Ghouta had difficulties writing, and older girls in Raqqa had lost several years of school, or dropped out completely, as a result of war and displacement. Boys in Idleb and Sweida emphasised the importance of ending the war, and the consequent political and economic problems, as key to providing decent conditions for them to enjoy study, work and relations.

2.1 Increased rates of school dropout

All of these problems with the education system reduced the motivation of students, support of families, and relevance and availability of education, and led to increased incidence of school dropout. The average age of dropout varied across regions, beginning at preparatory school at 12 or 13 years old in al-Hasakeh and Al-Bab, at 14-16 for boys in Aleppo, but starting from the 5th grade for girls in Al-Tal, preparatory stage for girls in Damascus and aged 10-12 for girls in Aleppo. In Raqqa, many adolescent boys preferred to work in agriculture, industry and carpentry while girls worked at their homes, dropping out of school in seventh or tenth grades. Adults in Tartous noted that, over the previous two years, the dropout rate had increased due to the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"ضغط الأهالي على اليافعين واليافعات للمساهمة في الإنتاج المادي خاصة عندما يرون أنهم قادرين جسدياً على العمل، بحجة أنهم بلغوا مرحلة عمرية يمكنهم الاعتماد على ذاتهم بها"

"Parents put pressure on boys and girls to work when they see their children physically able to work, using the argument that they have reached an age in which they can rely on themselves" (Homs key informant)

As well as the quality of education, push factors for school dropout include changing perceptions of the value of education, growing poverty and insecurity, and range according to sex, rural-urban origin and the economic status of families. For example, key informants and caregivers in Homs confirmed that adolescents in rural areas suffer most because of the risks and costs of transportation and widespread harassment of girls. More boys were forced to leave school to work and support their families

due to poverty or the absence of the breadwinner. Key informants in Aleppo asserted that many boys dropped out of school to work or were trapped with recruitment, child labour and drugs networks.

"سنوات الحرب الطويلة التي تمخضت عن عدد كبير من الشهداء الذين تركوا عائلات بأكملها دون معيل، وعدم قدرة الدولة على القيام برعاية هذه الأسر، اضطر الأطفال للعمل"

"The long years of war that resulted in a large number of martyrs who left entire families without a breadwinner, and the inability of the State to take care of these families, forced children to work" (Tartous caregiver)

For girls, early marriage increased due to poverty and biased social norms. Al-Tal caregivers reported that some girls pushed for early marriage or to stay at home to avoid the risk of insecurity, violence and harassment, and acknowledged that some families preferred to support male over female education due to customs and traditions. Younger girls in East Ghouta claimed that the low quality and difficulty of education had become a big burden in their lives, and led to increased scepticism of parents around the continuation of their daughters' education. Many of the older girls in East Ghouta had already left school, as their families did not support their education beyond elementary school. However, key informants in East Ghouta noted that many girls who married early later divorced, and some returned to education.
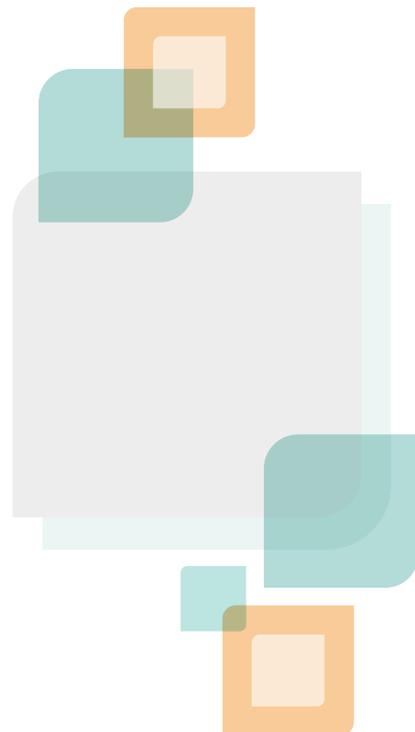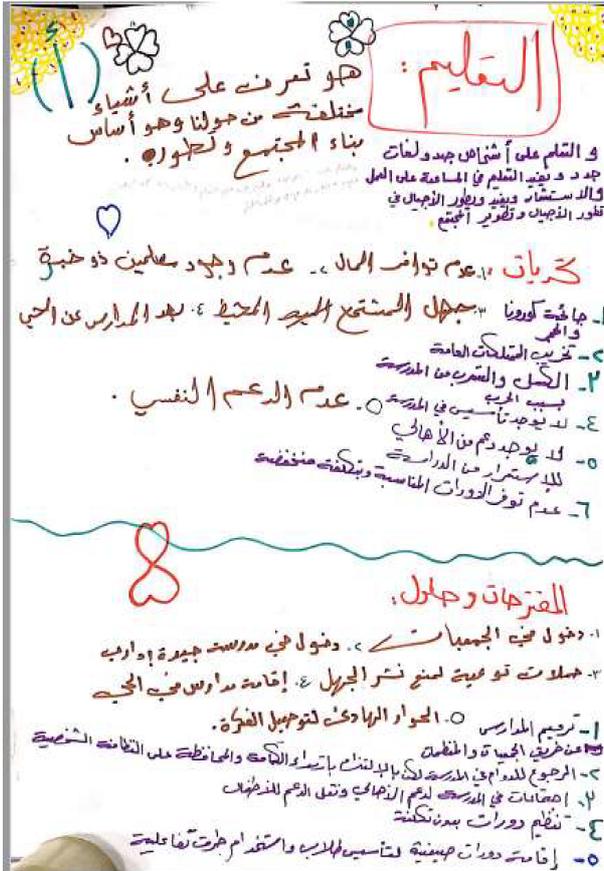
Girls (age 13-15) Café: Education exercise, Aleppo.

In al-Hasakeh some girls preferred to get married to avoid joining armed groups, a huge challenge for families in the northeast. Some girls in Al-Bab dropped out because of family fears of kidnapping or harassment. Many families in rural or conservative areas preferred not to send their daughters to mixed-sex schools. However, key informants noted that integration with different cultures and societies, increased awareness through social media, and the fact that women are forced to work due to poor living conditions and financial need, had led to an increase in awareness of the importance of education for girls. According to adults in Raqqa, most parents do not mind letting their daughters continue their education, though girls face more challenges in schools and on the streets, such as harassment, insecurity and the lack of local universities.

2.2 Multiple systems and certifications

Adolescents in al-Hasakeh talked about several issues relating to the dual system, where GoS schools are preferred because of the recognised certification, but are therefore overcrowded and often far away from their homes. They also mentioned problems with communication between adolescents in schools that used Kurdish or Arabic. Adults in al-Hasakeh considered that the dual system had affected the content and quality of the whole education process in the region. Adolescents in Al-Bab, Raqqa and Idleb also referred to the lack of recognised certification or international accreditation from their various education systems. Furthermore, adolescents in Raqqa mentioned that taking exams in GoS-controlled areas is difficult in terms of travel and registration, and some caregivers mentioned that in the presence of extremist actors such as ISIS, their children faced extreme danger in traveling to GoS schools outside of the area.

2.3 Teaching methods and curricula

"كل دولة بتدعمنا من نزل لغتها على المنهاج"

"For every country that supports us; we added its language to the curriculum" (Sweida girl 13-15)

Most adolescents considered that traditional teaching approaches and lack of interactive methods, the difficult, intense, irrelevant and frequently changing curriculum, and the lack of qualified teachers, were at the top of their education problems. Caregivers in Al-Tal echoed that the complicated and non-interactive curriculum increased pressure on adolescents and families and made schools an unattractive environment for adolescents. Girls in al-Hasakeh and Tartous noted a decline of the desire of adolescents to continue their education, and in East Ghouta many adolescents said that they and their parents had lost interest in education. Many adolescents highlighted the importance of training teachers and improving their approaches. Many (e.g. al-Hasakeh, Al-Bab, Al-Tal, East Ghouta and Idleb) complained of the low quality foreign language teaching in particular, including Turkish and English in Idleb. Some complained of a lack of vocational education, and the absence of recreational activities in schools.

2.4 Damaged and inadequate infrastructure

"بدي روح كل يوم امشي ساعة على المدرسة بوصل تعبان"

"I walk every day an hour to school, I arrive already tired" (East Ghouta boy 13-15)

"مدارسنا عبارة عن سجون للطلبة من حيث التصميم الذي يؤثر سلباً على الطلاب"""

"Our schools look like prisons for the students" (Tartous adult)

Adolescents in many areas complained of a shortage of schools, meaning overcrowded classes and long distances to travel. For most adolescents, especially girls, distance to school and insecure, infrequent or expensive transportation were among the biggest issues in their access to education. This was mentioned as a particular constraint for girls, and for adolescents in rural areas (e.g. in Al-Bab, Homs, Raqqa). Older girls in Idleb mentioned a lack of security on the road to schools, while the younger girls highlighted a lack of functional schools, sometimes a complete absence in camps, while many existing schools were not secure or properly equipped.

"المدارس ما فيها حمامات وخزانات مي وما في صوابي وتدفئة"

"Schools do not have toilets, water tanks, and there is no heating" (East Ghouta boy 13-15)

Adolescents in many areas (Al-Tal, East Ghouta, Homs, Idleb, Raqqa) noted that destruction and displacement had increased the pressure on schools and staff, creating an environment of instability and fear, and damaging the education process as well as the belief of families, students and the community in the value of education. Girls in Aleppo described how the conflict had destroyed schools and caused teachers and families to flee, forcing displaced children to join already crowded schools. Boys in Al-Tal noted that the instability and poor performance of public institutions affected the education process and their choices towards work and study. Adults in Al-Bab and Idleb told of frequent interruptions in education due to military operations, bombings and airstrikes on schools, lack of stability, repeated forced displacement and the COVID-19

pandemic. However, some key informants in Damascus emphasised that failures in the education process were caused by the ineffective governmental institutional system which existed before the war or COVID-19.

"School buildings are poor due to the war, not serviced, and not fully restored, and there are offensive political and religious expressions on walls, which makes them unqualified for teaching" (Homs key informant)

2.5 Discipline and discrimination

"استقبال بعض المدارس طبقة معينة من التلاميذ أو من توجهات وخلفيات بيئية ودينية معينة وعدم استقبال باقي الفئات المجتمعية"

"Some schools receive a certain class of students or from certain environmental and religious orientations and backgrounds and do not receive the rest of the community groups" (Homs girls 16-18)

Most groups of adolescents mentioned issues of discipline, violence and discrimination affecting their educational experience. Some girls (Damascus, Al-Bab, Raqqa) and many boys (Al-Tal, Al-Bab, Aleppo, East Ghouta, Idleb) noted a spread of bullying, bad treatment and sometimes violence by teachers. Boys in East Ghouta noted that the use of violence and a lack of counselling added to their resentment of school. Girls in Tartous mentioned the problem of schools and teachers favouring some students over others, and girls in Al-Tal described discrimination based on urban/rural and displaced/ resident status of students, noting a 'lack of accountability' in schools. Girls in Tartous noted a lack of communication between administration, teachers and students, and one older girl from Homs talked about the lack of freedom of opinion and widespread racism and discrimination in public education.

"عدم الجدوى من الذهاب للمدارس بسبب التسيّب وقلة الانضباط وهروب المدرسين من مدارس الذكور بسبب حالات الشغب والعنف والتنمر"

"**The futility of going to school due to chaos, lack of discipline and teachers escaping from boys' schools due to riots, violence and bullying**" (Al-Tal boy 13-15)

Some boys in Sweida and Idleb also mentioned the spread of violence or discrimination between students. Several groups mentioned the lack of integration for students with disabilities, and girls in Aleppo mentioned increased bullying of students with disabilities. Caregivers in some regions (e.g. Tartous, Homs, Damascus and Aleppo) also noted the lack of consideration for people with special needs, or bullying of displaced students and poor and vulnerable groups who have been negatively affected by the war, alongside the general rise in violence and lack of safe environment in schools. They noted that this was exacerbated by overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of educational staff who can deal properly with these negative phenomena.

This has led to changing the priorities of adolescents from education towards work or leaving the country. Girls in Tartous suggested that schools should listen more to students' voices, and build a disability-friendly environment.

Some older boys in Homs also referred to the importance of respecting adolescents' opinions in the education process and highlighted the lack of means to integrate students with disabilities into the education system. A girl from Homs suggested the need for an effective oversight system that allows schools to accept students without discrimination because of their social or religious backgrounds.

2.6 Teacher shortages and overcrowding

Many groups of adolescents complained about the lack of qualified teachers, due to migration and low salaries, resulting in overcrowded classes and poor-quality teaching. For example, girls in Homs reported how many teachers had fled the city, and boys in Idleb mentioned that many teachers worked without pay. Many groups mentioned that qualified teachers prefer to work in private schools, or leave the sector altogether, leaving the public system with insufficient qualified and specialised teachers. Key informants also referred to the mistrust between students and teachers, as many students do not trust the information given by their teachers on one side; and teachers complain about the disrespectful behaviour of some students on the other.

In Al-Tal, adults mentioned the substantial number of displaced people increasing pressure on education services and diminishing the quality of education. Caregivers mentioned that some displaced families did not register their children in school as they thought displacement would be a temporary status and because of the cost of transportation and services.

2.7 High costs and increasing inequalities

As a result of low quality or inaccessible public schools, dependency on private schools and educational institutes has increased. For example, girls in Homs reported that the low quality of education in public schools, especially for foreign languages, forced many students to register for costly private classes or resort to schools far away from their homes. In Raqqa, the poor-quality education in schools, and weaknesses in the AA curriculum, have led many adolescents to resort to expensive private institutes. The poorest are the most affected, as they are unable to pay for private lessons or register for courses in private institutes. Girls in Aleppo felt that education had become too expensive, and community appreciation for education had declined.

"بسبب ظروفنا السيئة نرى أن العلم وتحقيق طموحنا أصبح أمر صعب علينا، فكل طموح وكل مرحلة دراسية تحتاج إلى المال"

"Learning and achieving our ambition has become difficult for us. Every ambition and every stage of study needs money" (Aleppo boy 13-15)

The high costs of education services, transportation and supplies, and decrease in real wages, have meant that many families cannot afford education, especially for older students. In Tartous, the majority of families with limited income were unable to afford the large financial burden of books, school materials and additional private classes, besides the cost of transportation.

Caregivers also found that indirect privatisation policies that expand the space of private schools and educational centres had increased the cost of education and the disparity between private and public education. One key informant stated that 'education has become a business and the student is a commodity and a source of profit for teachers, institutions and commercial educational institutes'. Adults in Damascus highlighted the huge difference between public and private schools in terms of the quality education and teaching methods which created a big gap between the students of public and private schools. They noted that non-governmental and United Nations initiatives for adolescents were rare, and did not match the scale of the need.
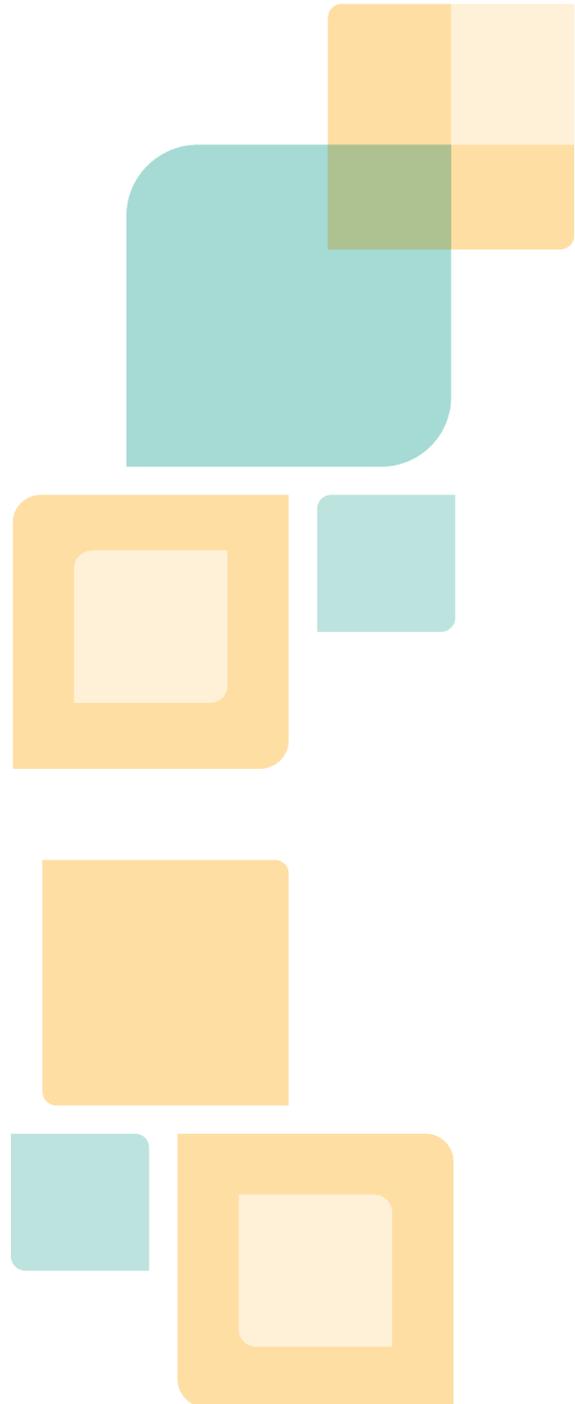
3- ICTs and digital platforms

ICTs are recognized as an important tool to overcome education gaps and for communication, but this is constrained by lack of access, skills, relevant materials and channels.

All groups of adolescents mentioned similar benefits and disadvantages of ICTs, noting that the Internet provided many opportunities but was a double-edged sword, with clear dangers. Different conclusions were reached about whether the negative aspects outweighed the positive. Most adolescents were aware of the importance of digital learning, especially in the conflict context, but access to ICTs is highly constrained and unequal, and digital learning is further restricted by the lack of Arabic content and platforms. Labs in schools are not equipped or used to develop digital learning skills.

"الانترنت فرصة كبيرة جدا لمتابعة التعليم وتطوير الذات وزيادة المعلومات"

"**The Internet is a very big opportunity to pursue education, self-development and increase information**" (Aleppo key informant)

3.1 Benefits of the Internet

The benefits mentioned by all groups included access to information and knowledge to support their study and develop skills (including foreign languages) and for translation, as well as entertainment through games, movies or sports. Adolescents repeatedly mentioned communication with migrated or displaced family members, access to news and information about other cultures and countries (e.g. Tartous), and the opportunity to make new friends (e.g. al-Hasakeh, Al-Bab). Several groups of boys and girls (Al-Bab, Al-Tal, Sweida, East Ghouta, Homs, Idleb, Raqqa, Tartous) noted its use for job opportunities, marketing and generating income.

"من الإيجابيات للإنترنت أنه أصبح بإمكان من لا يستطيع العمل بشكل فيزيائي، التعاقد مع عمل أون لاين وهي طريقة جداً رائعة"

"**One of the advantages of the Internet is that those who cannot work physically outside can contract with online work, which is a very wonderful way**" (Al-Bab girl 16-18)

Some younger girls (e.g. Sweida) said that they liked to use the Internet to develop life skills, such as cooking, sewing, makeup and playing musical instruments, though several out-of-school participants (e.g. Sweida, Raqqa) tended to use it only for communication and entertainment. Some older girls highlighted advantages for self-expression (e.g. al-Hasakeh) and openness to other cultures and intercultural exchange (Aleppo, Idleb), and older girls in Aleppo considered it an important tool to advocate for humanitarian and political issues. Adults in Damascus and Homs agreed that the Internet can stimulate adolescents' creativity and improve self-discovery and self-expression, improve their language skills and strengthen exchange and social cohesion.
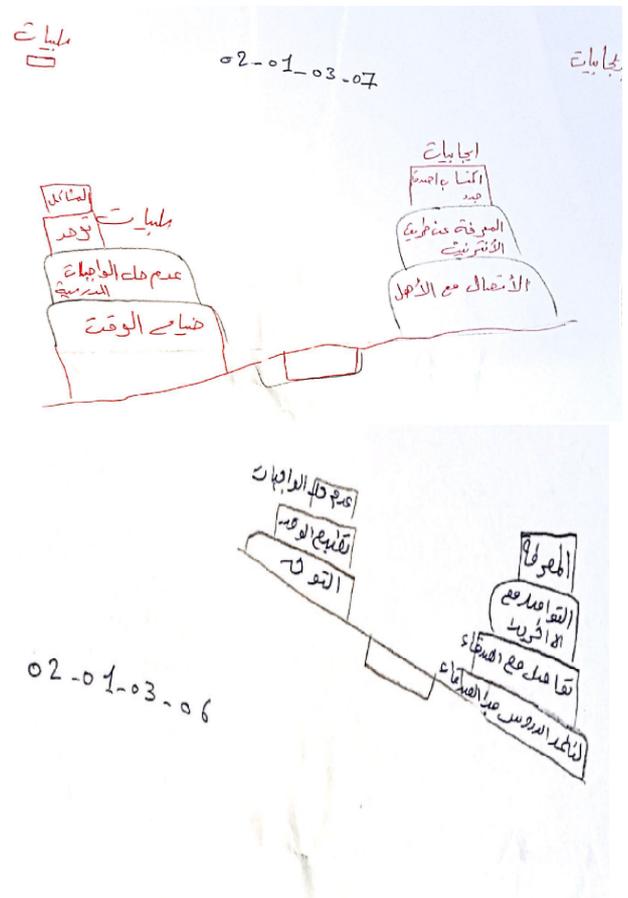
Girls (age 16-18) The Balance of Knowledge exercise, al-Hasakeh.

3.2 Threats of the Internet

"وتم الاختلاف أيضاً على أن الانترنت لا يفيدنا جداً في الاطلاع على الثقافات الأخرى لأن الانترنت قد يمدنا بمعلومات خاطئة عنها"

"The Internet is not very useful for learning about other cultures because it may give us false information about others" (Aleppo boy 16-18)

All groups pointed to some negative aspects of the Internet and ICTs, such as wasting time and getting distracted from studying, exposure to violent, sexual or harmful content and misleading information, and the threat of addiction to the Internet, social media and gaming. Some mentioned the threat of bullying, blackmail or hacking or loss of privacy. Some girls (e.g. Tartous) mentioned harassment, and some older boys in Raqqa mentioned that problems of ethnic hate speech could be exacerbated by the Internet. Several adolescents (e.g. Damascus) considered that the risks to safety and of exploitation outweighed the advantages of ICTs.

"إننا نعاني من عدم التركيز على التعليم عن بعد أو حتى استخدام النت للتحصيل العلمي" (أحد الأشخاص المفتاحيين)

"We suffer from a lack of focus on distance education or even the use of the Internet for educational attainment" (al-Hasakeh key informant)

Adults in several areas also noted risks to adolescents in terms of accessing pornographic and immoral sites or those that expose adolescents to blackmail, human trafficking and bullying, or content that promotes extremism or political polarisation. Some key informants (e.g. Al-Tal, Aleppo, Tartous) mentioned that some adolescents were exposed to fake accounts that can cause polarisation, suicide and violence, or are used to recruit them to sell drugs or join terrorist groups.

Some groups mentioned psychological and social issues. Several adolescents and adults saw the potential for family conflicts and fragmentation, violence, isolation or health problems and depression. Some adults were also concerned that the focus on online connections could lead adolescents to become disconnected from their real-life friends and family and feel isolated. For

example, adults in Tartous were concerned about the decline in communication between family members, and older boys in Tartous mentioned the danger of 'fake friendships'. Some young people in Aleppo debated over the role of the Internet in introducing new cultures, as some said that false information may harm relations with other cultures.

"ارجو اضافة النص العربي. "قبل 15 عاماً، كان الإنسان يتميز، إذا كان دارساً ونشيطاً في المدرسة وحصل على علامات عالية، أما الآن فيكفي ليتميز أن ينشر مجموعة صور على إنستغرام"

"15 years ago, how could someone be distinguished? If he studied well, was active in the school and got good grades, but now he could be distinguished if he shared a few photos on Instagram" (Damascus caregiver)

Many adults (e.g. Al-Tal, Raqqa, Idleb, Tartous) noted that most adolescents use the Internet only for entertainment, rather than education, and fail to restrict its use, leading to them wasting time and draining their mental, psychological and visual abilities, while affecting the level of their linguistic and verbal abilities. Some (e.g. Al-Bab, Damascus, Aleppo) were concerned that the Internet provided easy access to information which is mostly inaccurate, did not depend on a sequential scientific method and could slow down critical thinking or cause laziness. Older boys in Homs acknowledged that the availability of Google can lead them to 'avoid reading'.

There were differences of opinion around the solutions and responsibilities for effective and safe use of the Internet. Some girls (e.g. Al-Bab, Tartous) suggested that they needed support for time management and developing skills to use the Internet efficiently and safely. Some adults (e.g. Al-Bab, Homs, Raqqa) noted the need for parental supervision to avoid misuse of the Internet, while some adolescents (e.g. Damascus, Aleppo) considered that awareness and self-discipline were sufficient to control and mitigate the threats.
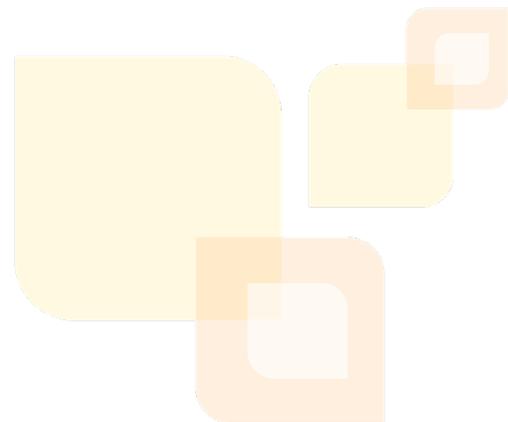
3.3 Distance learning

"التعلم الافتراضي، من أهم وسائل التعلم الحديث الذي يتجاوز مشاكل التعليم التقليدي وعدم المساواة في وصول الفتيات الى المدراس"

"**Virtual learning is one of the most important means of modern learning that transcends the problems of traditional education and the inequality of girls' access to school**" (Damascus girl 16-18)

Distance learning was mentioned by several groups of adolescents and adults as a key benefit or opportunity of the Internet, especially given the experience of school closures and education loss during the pandemic (and more broadly due to the war). Key informants in Al-Tal and Aleppo considered that the Internet offered the opportunity for more interactive learning, including practical applications for theoretical study and educational videos, making education exciting and easier for adolescents, and expanding adolescents´ horizons of thinking and sense of innovation. This created a gateway to free and lifelong learning, acquiring practical and life skills, and opening new international opportunities for them.

"للتكنولوجيا والعالم الرقمي دور كبير في التعلم بفاعلية وسرعة أكبر من التعليم التقليدي"

"**Technology and the digital world play a major role in learning more effectively and quickly than traditional education**" (East Ghouta caregiver)

Some, including older girls in Damascus and adults in Aleppo, considered digital learning very useful for students, especially girls, for overcoming challenges in conventional education related to distance, time and access, and outdated teaching methods. Key informants in Sweida insisted on the need for digital learning to be integrated with the mainstream education system, and the girls in Damascus echoed this, noting that conventional education had more credibility and a mandate to reach everyone.

"مع التعلم عن بعد أصبح بإمكان الأهالي مراقبة أبنائهم ومعرفة المحتوى العلمي المعطى لهم والحد من الاختلاط الغير مقبول عند معتقدات مجتمعات معينة" (أحد الأشخاص المفتاحيين في حلب)

"**With distance learning, parents can monitor their children and know the scientific content given to them and limit the mixing of others. It is acceptable in the beliefs of certain societies**" (Aleppo key informant)

Several groups criticised weaknesses in e-learning, including a lack of quality, accessible platforms, security and credible or trustworthy resources (especially in Arabic). For example, in Al-Bab, some girls explained that recognized digital learning programmes were expensive, while the free ones were not recognized or interactive. Younger girls in Tartous highlighted the limited free digital learning courses, lack of trusted sources, and distracting advertisements. Adults added that the many platforms for distance education were not coordinated by the Ministry of Education.

"يبقى تأمين الإنترنت أفضل من إرسال اليافعين إلى قرية أخرى للحصول على التعليم واستمراريته" (أحد مقدمي الرعاية من إدلب)

"**The availability of the Internet is better than sending adolescents to another village for education to ensure continuity of education**" (Idleb caregiver)

3.4 Skills for effective ICT use and digital learning

Most adolescents noted a widespread lack of skills and knowledge for effective digital learning: on the part of teachers to design and deliver interactive online learning; and on the part of students to use and access digital platforms effectively. Several groups (e.g. al-Hasakeh) highlighted the importance of developing adolescents' skills for effective and safe use of the Internet. Many older adolescents highlighted the lack of specialized teachers and platforms, the older girls in Al-Bab highlighted the poor use of WhatsApp by private schools. Older boys from Homs noted that problems with distance learning include weak teaching staff, curricula that do not contain interactive methods, information density in the curricula, and lack of skills to navigate the internet.

"موثوقية التعلم عن بعد أقل من موثوقية التعلم في المدارس مما يستدعي خبرة عالية لدى المعلمين" (فتاة من دمشق، 13 – 15)

"The reliability of distance learning is less than that of learning in schools, which calls for a high level of expertise for teachers" (Damascus girl 13-15)

Some boys (e.g. al-Hasakeh, East Ghouta) pointed to a lack of language skills (especially English) to access different sources of information or e-learning content. Key informants in Tartous mentioned that weaknesses in adolescents´ English skills led them to prefer Arabic sites, which had less credibility and limited cutting-edge information. Some adolescents (e.g. Al-Tal) mentioned that schools lacked the proper infrastructure to develop ICT skills and practice e-learning. Key informants (e.g. al-Hasakeh) also noted that neither teachers nor students had the necessary skills to use the ICT tools and platforms effectively.

"يصير الانترنت إيجابي لما بتصير المدرسة أون لاين، وفينا نتعلم من خلاله"

"The Internet becomes useful when the school becomes online, and we learn through it" (Tartous girl 13-15)

At the same time, older boys in Damascus noted how digital skills have become more necessary for remote working, highlighting the importance of digital learning to keep education relevant in light of the technological advances in the world. Older girls in Raqqa (and adults in Tartous) bemoaned the lack of quality and affordable training institutes or private centres to help them develop skills in effective ICT use, and girls in Damascus proposed ongoing awareness sessions on the use of digital learning, and improvements in the qualitative and quantitative capacity of schools to deliver. Finally, some mentioned that home learning can be very difficult due to the lack of space or a suitable atmosphere at home. Overall, it was felt that cost and access issues for quality digital education could widen inequalities between social classes in education, technology and skills.

3.5 Access to ICTs and digital platforms

"الحصول على الجوال بات حاجة اساسية حتى عند معدومي الدخل، ويؤدي عدم الوصول لخدمات الاتصالات إلى نشوء جيل جاهل فعلياً وضمنياً ومتعلم ظاهرياً، وغير قادر على مواجهة مصاعب الحياة ومتغيراتها"

"Having a mobile has become an essential need, even for income-limited people, therefore lack of access to ICT creates an ignorant generation. Even if they attend schools, this generation cannot face life's difficulties and changes" (Tartous adult)

One of the biggest barriers to effective distance learning is access to the Internet. Some challenges were universal, for example all groups in all areas complained about slow and poor-quality Internet services, and poor and unpredictable electricity supply. However, the level of access and affordability varied considerably across locations, potentially widening existing inequalities in access to education. For example, in Al-Bab adolescents considered they had better services than the rest of Syria, while many adults (Al-Bab, East Ghouta, Homs, Raqqa) pointed out that higher quality services are limited to bigger cities, with rural areas still facing more expensive and lower quality services. Some of the younger adolescents in Damascus and Homs said they had no access to the Internet and knew nothing about it. Key informants in Raqqa noted that IDPs, especially in informal camps, suffered from a lack of facilities to access the internet as the AA blocked Internet networks there. Furthermore, adults in Damascus, Raqqa and Idleb mentioned that many useful websites and applications were blocked.

"المدينة في الشتاء الماضي كانت تنقطع الكهرباء فيها أكثر من 20 ساعة متواصلة وكأنها مدينة من العصور الوسطى"

"Last winter, the city was without electricity for more than 20 hours straight, as if it were a medieval city" (Al-Tal boy 16-18)

The high cost of services and equipment to access the Internet, a significant problem for families in all areas, also threatened to increase disparities. Some adults (e.g. Damascus) considered that the spread of smartphone devices had increased adolescents' access to the Internet, but others (e.g. Idleb) noted that the high cost of these phones made them unaffordable for the majority of families, increasing disparities. Adults in Homs highlighted that inequality of access to the Internet between poor and rich, rural and urban, and boys and girls, could cause distance learning initiatives to widen existing disparities.

"**The number of females who can deal with smart devices in rural areas is relatively less than in the city, the same applies for surfing the Internet and using communication sites, due to the economic hardship**" **(Homs girl 16-18)**

Cultural issues also impacted equality of access for girls to ICTs and the benefits, including distance education. Some groups of girls (e.g. al-Hasakeh, East Ghouta, Idleb, Homs, Raqqa) told of increased restrictions on girls accessing phones and laptops.

"**Parents do not allow girls to use the phone or social media applications, unlike boys, who can use any programme they want**" **(Homs girl 16-18)**

Adolescents and adults highlighted efforts from different local actors to support education, e-learning and digital skills. However, these efforts have not matched the huge challenges facing this generation in the war-torn country. With a deterioration of the role of authorities, the role of civil society, international NGOs and the private sector has expanded, and participants called for more independent, community-based initiatives to provide fair and sound learning and communication channels for adolescents. That said, many adults and adolescents stressed the importance of developing the role of formal education authorities to develop the educational environment, infrastructure and quality, and provide accessible digital infrastructure.

Several groups of adolescents recommended that there should be free or subsidised internet services and equipment. For example, older girls in Idleb suggested a free public network for students and providing camps and schools with the Internet, and boys in Homs suggested that key actors including Government, civil society, and United Nations agencies should provide public spaces to access the Internet and equipment and

develop content for e-learning. Older adolescents in Tartous suggested free courses on accessing trusted information sources and digital security and eLearning for teachers, parents and students.

Discussions with experts and caregivers highlighted their willingness to engage with efforts to develop initiatives and programmes that help adolescents to develop their skills and knowledge and be more active in communicating, studying and working with others inside and outside of their regions. However, many initiatives lack experience in digital learning or technical and financial support to establish and sustain such programmes.
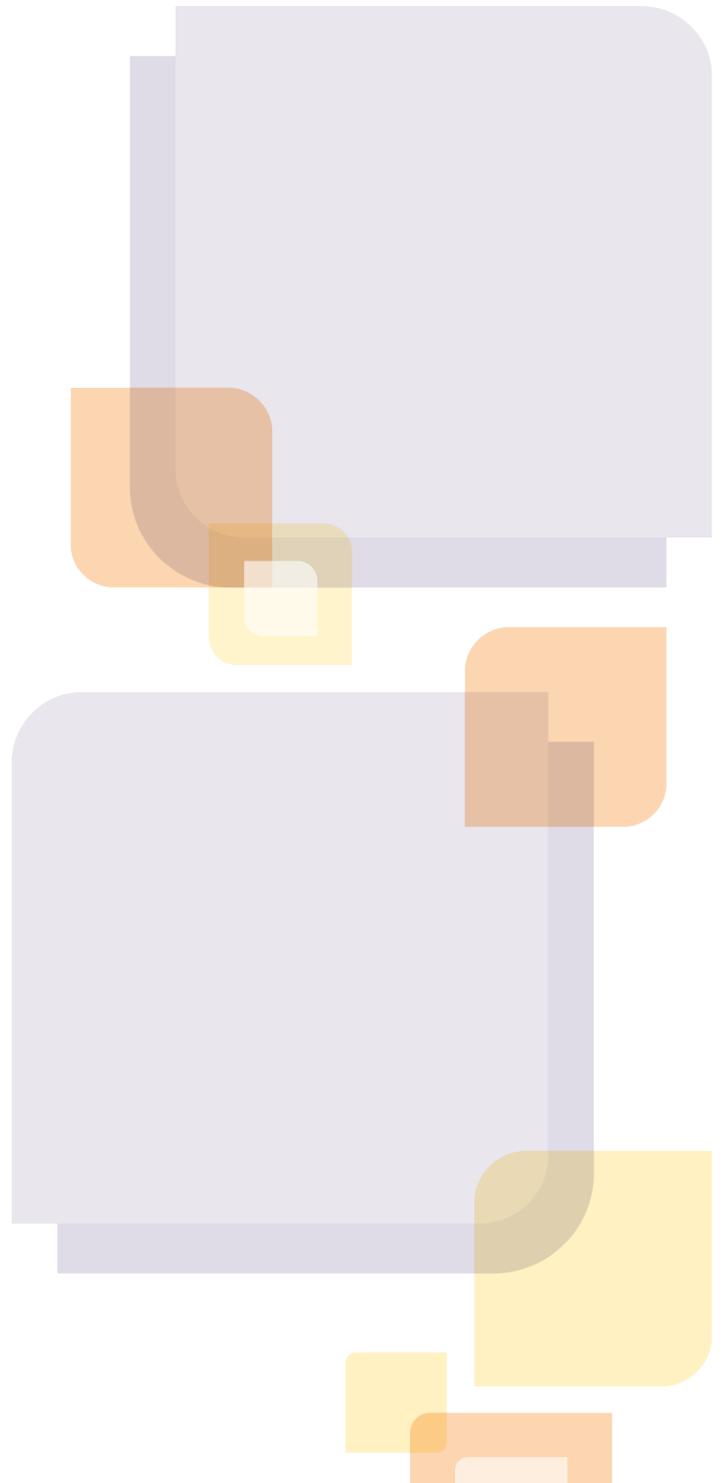
Conclusions

This research used an innovative, mixed, participatory approach to assess adolescents' challenges and expectations in education and ICT within the context of the ongoing conflict in Syria. The research approach attempted to be inclusive, engaging girls and boys, rural and urban, out of school and in school, displaced and host communities, disabled, orphaned, married and working adolescents. The approach included: i) in-depth consultations with adolescents, girls and boys, between 13-18 years old, in 11 areas in Syria; ii) semi-structured interviews with key informants in the study areas; and iii) focus group discussions with parents and caregivers. The process and results of the research were very dense, and revealed many valuable inputs and challenges that could be useful for further research and future interventions.

Participating adolescents drew a gloomy picture of the current situation in Syria. They highlighted how they suffer from the dynamics and effects of the armed conflict in a fearful, insecure, exclusionary and unstable environment. They have experienced or witnessed several grave violations including the targeting of civilians, kidnapping, injury, torture, the destruction of infrastructure, forced displacement, pillage, siege and the deprivation of food and basic services, among others. Although many of them have aspirations for a better future, they were frustrated by the ongoing conflict which they associated with poor institutional performance, indecent living conditions and social degradation. The COVID-19 pandemic further contributed to socioeconomic deterioration, including a surging population health burden, pressures on the health system, a decline in economic activities, increased cost of living, school closures and mobility restrictions. Caregivers and key informants highlighted similar challenges associated with the conflict and its impact on the youth.

Participants in this research explained the severe losses of the education system during the conflict. First, fragmented education systems emerged in the last decade which were categorised by distorted and politicised governance, lack of qualified teachers, divergent curricula and poor quality. Second, infrastructure and equipment have been subject to severe destruction or used for other purposes such as shelters for IDPs. Third, siege and discrimination policies further restricted accessibility of schools to children and adolescents. Fourth, COVID-19 increased the challenges for the education process including the closure of schools, health fears and lack of precautionary measures. Finally, insecurity and the increase in poverty contributed to an increase in school dropout rates. Furthermore, the deterioration of public education services has led to an expansion of the role of civil society and the private sector in education, although this has been a humble contribution compared to the substantial education losses.

The adolescents were aware of the importance of digital learning, especially in the conflict context. However, most of them expressed a lack of access to learning through the Internet due to a lack of Arabic learning content and platforms, poor access to the internet and electricity, and costly internet services and equipment. Labs in schools are not equipped or not used to develop their skills in digital learning. Adolescents debated the pros and cons of ICT, as they appreciated access to information, knowledge, learning sources, communicating with family friends and people from different cultures, developing their life and social skills, finding jobs and generating income. However, they highlighted problems such as wasting time (many participating adolescents spent more than four hours per day on social media), bullying, hacking, lack of privacy, exposure to bad content including violence and pornography, addiction, isolation and misleading information.

The findings of this research show that severe inequalities were created during the conflict. Although all areas studied have suffered from the consequences of war, they have experienced uneven impacts. Some areas were subject to intense military battles, siege and displacement, while others suffer from social and economic degradation. Moreover, inequality based on gender expanded during the conflict, as girls witnessed discrimination due to social norms, fanaticism, or the fear of abuse, kidnap and harassment. Boys were subject to conscription or

child labour to support their households. Other forms of inequality between IDPs and host communities, disabled and non-disabled, rural and urban communities and poor and rich families can also be tracked.

Given the severe burden of conflict on adolescent girls and boys, it is crucial that alternative policies and interventions are developed, based on a thorough analysis of the conflict context and consequences, and the priorities of adolescents. The next section draws on the findings, and the suggestions of adult and adolescent participants in the research, to recommend policies and interventions for adolescents to overcome the current situation and contribute to a post-conflict future.

1. Alternatives: Reclaiming the future

The terrifying grievances of the young generation in Syria are evident in the severe loss of human capital and deterioration of governance, accessibility and quality in education. However, this research highlights more dangerous aspects, such as adolescents' loss of hope in a better future, the widespread culture of fear and lack of trust, and discrimination. Furthermore, the foundations of conflict have been strengthened and institutionalised, such as political oppression, lack of rule of law, poor governance, social fragmentation, economic exploitation and inequalities.

The last two years have provided several indicators of a decline in intense military battles, but this has not translated into a secure environment for adolescents. The public institutions of GoS and other non-state actors are characterised by poor efficiency and a lack of preparedness, transparency or accountability. Moreover, warring actors have used education as a means for conflict by politicising education accessibility and curricula, targeting the education infrastructure and personnel, and reallocating educational resources towards conflict-related activities.

The substantial efforts of humanitarian organisations including United Nations organisations, international and national NGOs and community-based organisation were crucial to mitigate the impact of the conflict on younger generations and advocate for their protection. However, as this research shows, these efforts were humble compared to the severe conflict-related losses, and concentrate on urgent humanitarian interventions without creating alternative institutional systems to counter the structural causes of the problems that adolescents suffer.

These alternatives and solutions need to address the underlying and intermediate causes of conflict, deprivation and inequality, to avoid reproducing the same challenges and grievances. Additionally, they need to inherently counter the foundations of war, polarisation and the conflict economy within a long-term framework.

Adolescents will be active actors in the process of countering conflict, and advocating for a culture of peace, respect and justice. They need to be engaged in the peacebuilding process and policy development. This requires protection for their participation, ensuring their safety and security, and support for the most deprived adolescents to transcend the consequences of conflict.
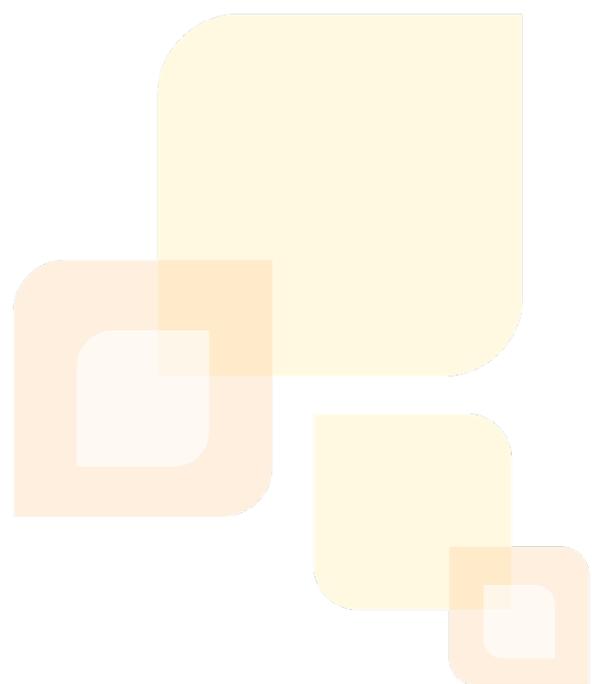
1.7 Intervention priorities

Although the conflict has had a devastating impact on the entire country, this is uneven across regions, communities, men and women, rural and urban areas, among others. The research team developed a framework to prioritise the regions most affected by conflict, based on four indicators (Table 1): the proportion of IDPs in the population; the poverty rate; the enrolment rate for basic education; and a protection indicator. The indicators were standardised to a value between (0 and 1), and the average calculated, and regions were ranked based on this average. The area ranked 1st (Idleb) is the top priority for intervention, and 11th (Tartous) is the lowest. However, it is clear that the indicators for all areas are alarming, and show a clear need for intervention.

Table 1: Prioritization of regions for intervention

Areas	Displacement		Poverty		Enrolment		Protection		Average of standardized indicators	Overall rank (1 is top priority)
	IDP/ Population	Std*	Poverty rate	Std*	Enrolment ratio	Std*	protection scale (1–5)	Std*		
Idleb	66	0.79	90	0.93	64	0.46	5	1.00	0.8	1
Raqqa	28	0.24	90	0.93	27	1.00	4	0.50	0.7	2
Al-Tal	80	1.00	88	0.79	80	0.22	4	0.50	0.6	3
Al-Bab	53	0.60	84	0.50	74	0.31	5	1.00	0.6	4
East Ghouta	42	0.45	91	1.00	65	0.44	4	0.50	0.6	5
al-Hasakeh	43	0.46	83	0.43	62	0.49	4	0.50	0.5	6
Homs	31	0.29	86	0.64	81	0.21	4	0.50	0.4	7
Aleppo City	12	0.00	88	0.79	75	0.29	4	0.50	0.4	8
Damascus	33	0.31	81	0.29	71	0.35	4	0.50	0.4	9
Sweida	25	0.20	77	0.00	95	0.00	4	0.50	0.2	10
Tatous	24	0.18	80	0.21	91	0.06	3	0.00	0.1	11

*Standardized indicator
Sources: 1. Humanitarian Needs Overview (2021): People in Need Dataset, UNOCHA; 2. SCPR (2020): Assessment of Socioeconomic Situation in Syria.

Within this overall context, the adolescent consultations, expert interviews and caregiver focus groups identified several deprived groups of girls and boys within each area. Firstly, they identified adolescents from the most vulnerable groups who suffer directly from the conflict, including:

1) Injured and disabled adolescents. Many adolescents highlighted the lack of facilities or means for integration of students with disabilities in the education process, and some referred to adolescents with disabilities suffering bullying in their schools and communities.

2) Orphaned girls and boys, who have lost the main social and economic care of their families, require special attention.

3) Girls and boys living in areas subject to destruction or siege, who have lost their opportunities to access safety, health, education and food security among other basic needs.

4) Displaced adolescents have lost family, resources including property, safety nets and sources of income. Many displaced girls and boys suffer poor living conditions and have lower access to education and digital platforms.

Second, they identified girls and boys who suffer indirectly from the conflict, that include:

1) Out-of-school adolescents. Almost half of this generation has dropped out of school as a consequence of the conflict, and in last two years COVID-19 has caused further substantial interruptions to the education process.

2) Working girls and boys. Many of the adolescents have worked to support their families, depriving them of access to education.

3) Girls and boys living in poverty, preventing them from accessing educational or digital opportunities.

Third, those groups suffering pre-conflict vulnerabilities, which include:

1) Girls and boys in rural areas, who lack access to quality education and ICT equipment and infrastructure.

2) Girls and boys who suffer from social norms and traditions. Girls often face social norms

that constrain their agency and mobility, and can deprive them of access to learning processes. Early marriage is a social phenomenon that undermines girls' opportunities to achieve their personal, work and education ambitions. Boys suffer more from child labour.

1.8 Policy options

Adolescents' active engagement

Children and adolescents are a substantial segment of Syrian society. In 2021, children below the age of eighteen accounted for 45 per cent of the population inside Syria, and adolescents (13-18 years old) accounted for 13 per cent of the total population. They are one of the most vulnerable groups in society, as they are deprived of participation, protection, health, education and decent living conditions to different extents. This generation, which has not been part of the conflict decision-making process, has a genuine interest in transcending the conflict dynamics and impacts. Therefore, adolescents could be a key actor in the peacebuilding process if they were allowed the space to participate.

There are several actors who can support the active engagement of adolescents, such as civil society initiatives and organisations, parents and caregivers, local and international humanitarian organisations including United Nations agencies, and human rights organizations and advocates. These actors need to represent adolescents in the design, research and implementation of projects and initiatives.

Adolescents' voices need to be heard to recover education and digital learning systems, in addition to their active engagement in public dialogue to build trust, solidarity and cooperation within and between Syrian communities. They are an asset for volunteerism, to recover the losses of conflict and mitigate inequalities. For example, adolescent girls' engagement could contribute to counter gender-based violence and discrimination against women.

Learning to counter polarization

The learning of young generations is a common interest among families, local communities and civil society. Therefore, learning processes can be designed to reinvest in shared values, rights, networks and justice. A targeted learning process needs several steps, including space for formal and informal learning specialists to develop an inclusive, participatory and efficient form of education governance beyond political, social and regional borders. Part of this governance involves adopting code of ethics for the learning workforce to adhere to the values of solidarity, justice and respect and professional standards of teaching.

The learning process should counter abuse of formal or informal education as a means of conflict, refuse discrimination among the new generation, and advocate against targeting education infrastructure, staff and students. In this regard, it will be important to unify the curriculum based on a long view of a peaceful and stable Syria, building constructive dialogue with experts, caregivers, adolescents and children to produce a curriculum that supports the sustainable transcendence of conflict, using modern scientific approaches. Curricula and learning content should provide relevant knowledge and skills for children and adolescents and build networks of Syrians inside and outside the country to resist oppression and fanaticism.

The learning process, including digital, is an important means to recover the loss of education and knowledge during the conflict, especially given current weaknesses in the formal education system. Moreover, the learning process should prioritise the most vulnerable education workforce and adolescents negatively affected by the conflict.

Communication and coordination between domestic and external actors who can support learning initiatives will be crucial to support the rebuilding of education and learning systems and enhance the quality of education for all.

Education for development

Education is the most important means to invest in human capital, which is a core foundation for transforming towards sustainable development. The enhancement of interrelations between education and development contributes to dismantling the foundations of conflict and provides incentives to the majority of Syrians, including adolescents, to reinvest in people's capabilities.

In the current situation of ongoing conflict, local and civic actors can create an independent space for all children, adolescents and community members to access informal education, develop skills, and build social relations. This space needs the engagement of parents and community members and leaders in dialogue with adolescents to identify common goals and priorities.

The space can be used to develop programmes and initiatives that link education with humanitarian and development interventions, such as health, education and living conditions; subsidies, education and green energy; ICT, education and social work; or education, food security and sustainability. Furthermore, the design of these initiatives will involve advocacy to counter conflict economies and transform conflict-related resources towards rebuilding education institutions and the recovery of human capital.

The space needs to trigger participatory development projects by civil society and encourage other actors to participate within a transparent and accountable governance model. This includes adopting equal accessibility to education services and local facilities, prioritising the most vulnerable adolescents. Moreover, it can establish projects and teaching courses in cooperation with other communities and institutions across Syria.

Education-centred projects develop the skills for establishing or engaging in productive and decent

work at the expense of conflict-related activities. It also provides the basic means for families to support their adolescents' leaning and communication.

2. The EDGE programme in Syria

2.1 Relevance to the context and adolescent priorities

This research shows that the EDGE programme is highly relevant in the Syrian context as it can contribute to bridging the learning gap in English language and digital skills. EDGE would be crucial in Syria to help girls with English and digital skills, but in the conflict context, EDGE can also be tailored to provide access to trustworthy digital learning sources and support girls to engage with other programmes to bridge their catastrophic education loss. These programmes may cover mathematics, physics and the Arabic language, as well as computer science, robotics and industrial production.

While developing language and digital skills, EDGE would need to focus on important learning content such as social cohesion, peace, rights and liberties, and justice to help adolescents to transcend the conflict and counter the culture of fear and hate. Moreover, EDGE could play an important role linking girls across different regions and areas, to improve trust and social linkages between adolescents who have become victims of political polarisation and social degradation. Some caregivers suggested themes related to citizenship and national identity, or conflict resolution, including ethics like respect, the right to express opinions, countering bullying and violence, and supporting equality. Additionally, many caregivers suggested awareness-raising sessions for adolescents about drug issues, sexual education and the prevention of harassment, and mental health such as dealing with stress and suicide.

2.2 Partners

It is important to stress the interests and aspirations of participating actors in this kind of intervention and programme. During the course of the field work in the 11 areas, most of them showed great interest and readiness to support the development of the EDGE programme and engage in future stages of the programme design.

The adolescents and adults highlighted efforts from different actors in their regions to support education, e-Learning and digital skills. However, the efforts have been very weak compared to the huge challenges that are facing this generation inside the war-torn country. With the deterioration of authority, the role of civil society, international organisations and the private sector has expanded, and the participants called for more efforts from independent civil society in the form of community-based initiatives to provide fair and sound learning and communication channels for adolescents. Nevertheless, many adults and adolescents assured the importance of the role of formal education authorities to develop the environment, infrastructure and quality of education, and provide accessible digital infrastructure.

The discussions with experts and activists showed their willingness to engage with efforts to develop initiatives and programmes that help adolescents to develop their skills and knowledge and be more active in communicating, studying and working with colleagues inside and outside of their regions. Many initiatives lack experience in digital learning, or technical and financial support to establish and sustain their programmes.

The key partners for EDGE are community-based initiatives and NGOs, in addition to international NGOs and United Nations agencies who can cooperate in learning and digital skills. However, each area has different authorities and actors, and EDGE needs to build its main partnerships with local communities and civil society and humanitarian institutions to avoid engagement with armed actors.
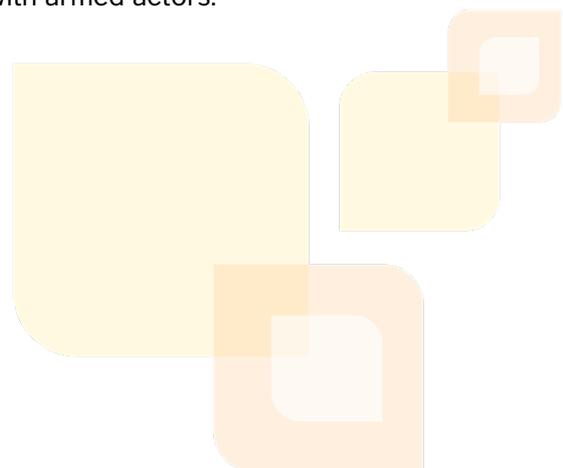
2.3 Implementation

The EDGE programme needs to be tailored to the specific social and educational context in each region, considering the capacity of local actors, the civil society landscape, the availability of appropriate training materials and curricula, and active non-governmental organisations. A participatory approach is key to engage local communities and a crucial starting point to ensure that parents approve and allow their daughters to engage in the EDGE programme.

Considering the promising opportunity for EDGE, it is recommended to consider working with Education Clusters and sectors, and international NGOs working in the education and protection fields. Initial entry points could be through involving or partnering with other actors in implementing remedial and quality education programmes, women's empowerment, and projects in different regions of Syria, as well as piloting the 1st phase of EDGE in coordination with NGOs and NGO forums or hubs. Additionally, this could be conducted through the most active NGOs, community-based and civil society organisations working in the areas of youth, women's empowerment and education, tailoring EDGE programmes to their needs, capacity and ability to reach to the adolescent target groups.

Considering the access challenges, this research recommends building on the Britch Council's previous experience, initiatives and networks in Syria and, most importantly, developing its local network for EDGE that could consist of several institutions and initiatives. This network should agree a code of ethics and toolkit which offers a suite of educational activities, digital learning pathways and resources, and teacher support. Engagement with communities in the local network could overcome the huge challenge of accessibility in the time of war and expand the scale-up of EDGE as a model for digital learning.

Implementation could take several forms such as:

1. Physical implementation with direct supervision of British Council on the ground, assuming that the local authority accepts the existence of British Council in their areas and this can be the situation in the North East;

2. Physical implementation through local actors and the British Council can build local capacity and supervise remotely;

3. Distance learning through the Internet and with the support of local organisations.

Target groups:

EDGE should target the most vulnerable and marginalized girls including those who suffer most directly or indirectly from the conflict (injured, disabled, orphaned, displaced, poor, out of school, working, early married.

EDGE should be piloted in one of the most vulnerable areas, to identify the most constructive and feasible modality while taking into account that each area is very distinct and may require different approaches and implementation modalities.

Content:

The content should not be restricted to English, especially in areas that perceive other languages as important and relevant. It should not limit digital skills to computer skills either. What is most needed is relevant content to support girls' continued education and self-development for their future. This content could cover:

- Life skills including digital skills;

- Social cohesion, rights and liberties, and citizenship;

- Culture of respect, diversity, and peace;

- Vocational education content;

- Access to Open Education Resources (OER) for school education support;

- Extra-curricular and creative content such as art, creative writing, video making among others;

    It should also include modules for teachers training on:

- effective pedagogies and holistic and differentiated teaching;

- development and facilitation of relevant education aligned with the school curriculum;

- psychosocial support and social emotional learning for adolescents;

- career and counselling skills;
- interactive content development and formative assessment.

This can leverage the British Council's teacher training programme, co-developed with local teachers for adapted and relevant content.

Delivery:

The programme could be virtual or physical at schools, NGO or cultural centres depending on the local conditions. The place should be safe with a suitable environment and conditions (sanitation, electricity and internet). EDGE should consider offline technology as a solution in remote and rural areas that lack internet infrastructure. This offline technology can provide selected and identified content through community connected labs equipped with devices and equipment such as laptops or tablets and a server. Programmes with distance learning should provide students and educational staff with ICT infrastructure and skills.

EDGE should be free-of-charge, based on participants' suggestions, and run by independent initiatives which depend on volunteers from civil society. Some suggested the importance of financial and technical support from the Unite Nations or humanitarian agencies, private sector, communities and families. The appropriate timing for the programme would be in the summer and spring holidays on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings, with sessions of between 2-4 hours per day.

It should be managed by highly qualified teachers, key people in the education field, or leaders of developmental and educational centres, who are change-makers and have a passion for development and community work and awareness of the needs of adolescents. The management should be inclusive, transparent and accountable to adolescents and the community, to gain the trust and maintain the code of ethics in these programmes. The programme should take a community-based approach by offering special sessions for parents on digital awareness and cyber security, and enabling trainers and supervisors from the local community to engage with EDGE. In addition to experts in the

psychological and social fields, adolescents themselves can provide good recommendations on their needs and concerns. Coordination between different initiatives will be crucial for sustainability and efficiency especially on challenging issues such as content production, alternative curricula and skills development.
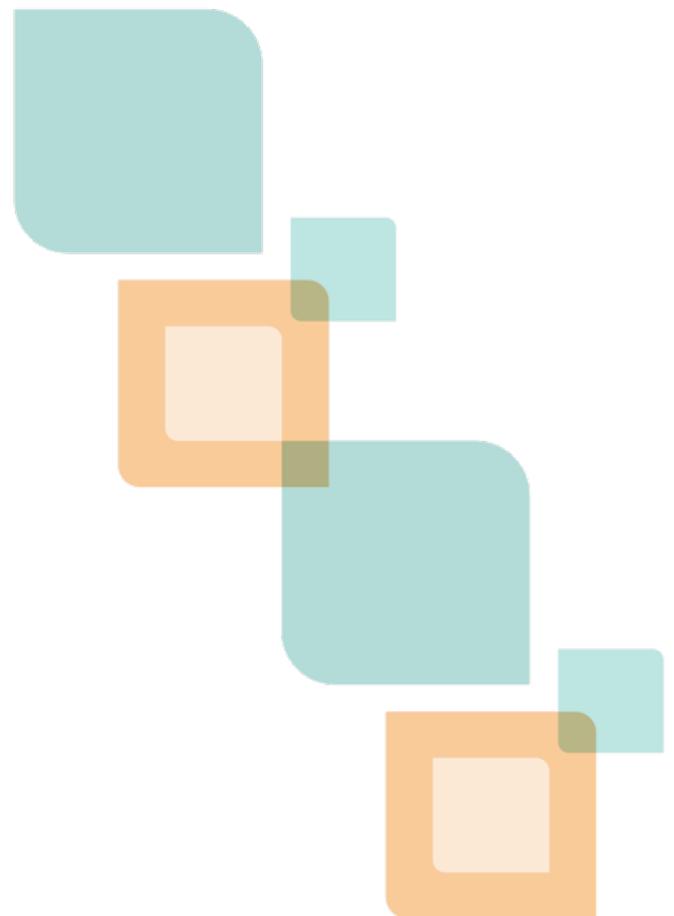
Annex 1: Detailed results by area

This annex provides detailed results for each of the local research processes, disaggregated by age and sex. Each subsection provides a general context to the area, as well as information on the aspirations and interests, support mechanisms, contextual challenges, education system and challenges and uses of and attitudes to the Internet and ICTs.

Al-Bab

Al-Bab is part of rural Aleppo, affected by conflict and displacement. Currently, it is under the control of the Turkish-backed opposition and has 178,000 inhabitants, of which around 90,000 were IDPs in 2020. The estimated poverty rate is 84 percent, and enrolment in basic education is 74 percent (SCPR, 2020).

Aspirations and interests:
- **Girls 13-15:** The girls of this group aim for high-level occupations such as doctors and dentists, even though some of them have difficulties in their education and one of them is already out of school. Two want to study and work abroad and many want to learn Turkish and English. They referred to different hobbies like swimming, singing and crafts.
- **Boys 13-15:** The participants were widely diverse: out of school and in school, displaced and resident, working and not working, and some of them enrolled in religious institutes. The majority aim to be doctors or engineers, while one wants to be a banker and another wants to be a football player. One of the participants said "I have no ambition and I like fighting and violent video games". Some of them expressed their conservative background and their interest in learning religion.
- **Girls 16-18:** Most of the group aims to be doctors or engineers, and many of them want to travel abroad. They like drawing, music,

cooking and dancing.
- **Boys 16-18:** This group has different vocational goals, such as doctor, engineer, journalist, accountant and painter. They mainly enjoy sport as their main hobby, some like to read the Qur'an and one of them likes chess. Many have conservative backgrounds.

Support mechanisms
- **Girls 13-15:** Most mentioned the importance of family support, though they criticized the community norms that do not appreciate girl's education and force them to choose specific fields like literature. Some of them reflected the conservative environment, as they considered that listening to music is forbidden.
- **Boys 16-18:** Many of them relied on the support of their families for study and relationships.
- **Adults:** According to key informants, some families prefer sending their boys to work or to learn a vocation or handicraft profession rather than completing their studies at school. On the other hand, conservative traditions and social norms and the belief in the infeasibility of education for girls encouraged families to marry them off at an early age.
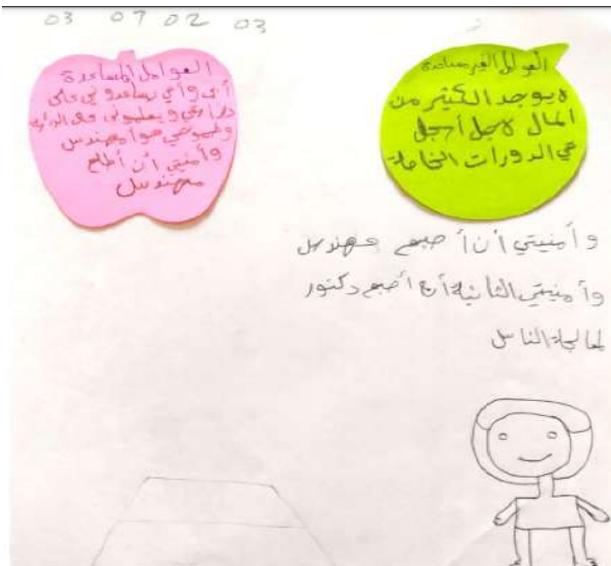
Contextual challenges:

"أنا لاجئ من دير الزور.. تهجرت من بلدي عام 2017.. أتذكر مرة كنت ألعب الكرة مع رفاقي وقصفتنا الطائرة وأصيب رفاقي وكانت دماءهم تملأ الأرض"

"I am a refugee from Deir-Ez-Zor. I was displaced from my country in 2017. I remember once I was playing football with my friends and the plane bombed us and my friends were injured and their blood filled the ground" (Al-Bab boy 13-15)

نزحت وهاجرت مع عائلتي إلى تركيا.. كان أول نزوح صعب لأنها أول مرة نغادر البلد - ثم عدنا لبلدنا وعدنا ونزحنا لعدة بلدات وقرى حتى استقرينا في الباب "

"I was displaced and immigrated with my family to Turkey. The first displacement was difficult because it was the first time we left the country - then we returned to our city and then displaced to several towns and villages until we settled in Al-Bab". (Al-Bab boy 13-15)

"أنا من حلب من حي الكلاسة نزحت إلى إدلب لمنطقة أريحا - ضاقت بنا الحال وصار القصف علينا فنزحنا إلى سرمدا واستأجرنا منزل لا يحوي أبواب ولا نوافذ - ثم نزحنا إلى الباب"

"I am from Aleppo, from Al-Kallaseh neighbourhood. I moved to Areha city- the situation deteriorated and the bombing started on us, so we moved to Sarmada and rented a house that had no doors or windows - then we moved to Al-Bab" (Al-Bab boy 16-18)

"القصف سبب تدمير منازلنا وتهجيرنا من بيوتنا وأرضنا واستشهاد أقاربنا"

"**The bombing destroyed our homes, the displacement from our homes and land, and the martyrdom of our relatives**" (Al-Bab boy 16-18)

- **Girls 13-15:** This group mentioned economic hardship and the increase in education costs as an important challenge for them.
- **Boys 13-15:** Most of this group were deeply affected by the war and some of them shared painful experiences, especially the displaced boys, as many had witnessed the bombardment of schools and houses, and one explained how his friends were injured. Several also elaborated on their consecutive forced displacements from their cities to Turkey and then to different places inside Syria. The conflict led to fragmentation of families and poor living conditions which forced adolescents to leave school and work.
- **Girls 16-18:** They mentioned social constraints in the conservative environment that, for instance, forbid music or girls' travel, and forced them into specific careers and/or study. Some of them referred to the impact of war that harmed them and their families and led to poor infrastructure, poverty and displacement.
- **Boys 16-18:** Some boys mentioned their experience with war and displacement that included the killing of their relatives, destruction of their homes, and living in camps and poor living conditions. The economic deterioration has forced many adolescents to leave school for work.
- **Adults:** The main challenges in Al-Bab are war, instability, insecurity, lack of rule of law, unemployment, widespread poverty and economic hardship, as well as the spread of negative phenomena such as violence, crime, discrimination, recruitment into armed groups and drugs. Forced displacement is frequently an issue, causing different psychological problems and leading many adolescents to be victims of kidnapping, get into begging or drugs, carry weapons or join armed groups. The poor financial situation of most families, arbitrary arrest and the loss of the breadwinner in light of the war has caused the spread of child and adolescent labour, school dropout and early marriage. The security situation, poverty and the spread of violence forced many parents to keep their children at home for their safety rather than send them to school.

COVID-19.

"مع انتشار موجه فايروس كورونا.. الكثير انتقل للمدارس الخاصة ولم يكن وضع عائلتي يسمح في تلك الفترة التسجيل في مدرسة خاصة، لذلك تابعت التعليم والدروس عبر قناة يوتيوب لكي أستطيع مواكبة زميلاتي"

"**With the spread of the Coronavirus, many moved to private schools, and my family's situation did not allow me to enrol in a private school, so I followed education and lessons through the YouTube channel so that I could keep up with my colleagues**" (Al-Bab girl 13-15)

- **Girls 13-15:** Some highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on the closing of public schools which forced them to seek private schools with high costs or unregulated digital courses.
- **Boys 13-15**: They referred to the role of COVID-19 in education interruption and the spread of chaos in the education process.
- **Boys 16-18:** COVID-19 caused substantial interruption of the education process and the alternative to compensate for education loss was poor.
- **Adults**: Key informants and caregivers agreed that COVID-19 was the cause of paralyzing social life and affected the displaced and residents alike. School closures and quarantine caused a disruption of education with an absence of effective educational alternatives, inability to adhere to virtual education due to a lack of digital and technological skills and platforms, and the failure to compensate for education loss. According to caregivers, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the Directorate of Education opened public schools at the peak of the disease, which led to the absence of many teachers due to the increase in infection and the spread of fear among teachers. On the other hand, the education sector in rural areas was not considerably affected by the pandemic and the educational process continued as before. Even when schools were closed, there were Qur'an education and literacy sessions in mosques. Private schools adhered to prevention and protection instructions and set up distance learning groups for their students.

1.9 Education system:

- **Girls 13-15:** This group agreed on the lack of qualified teachers, and the bad treatment of students by administration and teachers, the lack of public schools and universities, poor foreign language teaching, in addition to the lack of accreditation.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys identified many challenges for the education process, such as lack of recognized certificates and universities, the poor quality of education in public and private schools, lack of qualified teachers, lack of discipline and crowded classes, lack of schools in rural areas, expensive private schools and lessons and increased cost of education materials.

- **Girls 16-18:** This group highlighted many challenges of the education process, such as the poor quality of education, traditional teaching methods, different curricula, lack of universities, high cost of education and necessary materials, distance and costly transportation, and discrimination based on urban/rural and displaced/resident students.
- **Boys 16-18:** This group highlighted some challenges of the education system including poor quality, crowded and costly private schools, a lack of qualified teachers, poor foreign language teaching, the high cost of education materials, and the long distance to school. They also mentioned the lack of accreditation certificates and universities in the region.
- **Adults:** Frequent interruptions in education due to military operations, bombing, lack of stability, repeated forced displacement and the COVID-19 pandemic hindered the educational process. Schools in Al-Bab are shaped by the poor quality of education, particularly public education, as well as a lack of unified and approved curricula for public and private schools, a lack of qualified educational staff in public schools due to low wages and salaries that led many qualified teachers to work in private centres and, finally, the lack of a clear structure for education and clear planning for progress in the educational process. The caregivers mentioned that some educational staff work with fake certificates which undermines the quality of education. The lack of accreditation of secondary certificates issued by schools in Al-Bab, and the absence of good-quality universities in the region, resulted in the students losing confidence in their education.

Drivers of dropout

Adults: Economic hardships and the high costs of education and transportation problems forced many students to leave school and look for work to support their families, especially those living in rural areas. Key informants also mentioned that some children never go to school or only complete the first cycle because of financial problems, family instability and the high cost of education. Child recruitment with high wages was one reason for drop out of school. Likewise, girls drop out because of the family's fear of kidnapping or harassment. Dropout from school starts from preparatory stage at age 13, and increases in secondary school to age 16 years.

English language and digital skills

"توجد أهمية كبيرة لإعادة تفعيل دور البرامج التعليمية للغة الإنكليزية بسبب فقدان التواصل معها منذ خمس سنوات واقبال الطلاب على دراسة اللغة التركية أما بالنسبة لتقنيات المعلومات فهي حاجة أساسية وملحة بسبب ضروراتها الحياتية "

"**There is great importance to reactivate the educational programmes of the English language as they have stopped for five years due to the students' interest in learning the Turkish language. As for information technologies, they are a basic and urgent need to acquire these skills because of their necessities in different aspects of life**" (Al-Bab caregiver)

Key informants and caregivers agreed on the importance of informal programmes for languages and digital skills for adolescents, as the English language is a privilege to benefit from international opportunities. However, Turkish presence in Al-Bab has caused a general trend to focus on learning the Turkish language. Most government bodies, institutions and organizations are now dealing with the Turks and the Turkish curriculum is imposed at all academic levels. Thus, there is no strong demand for learning English, but there is a tendency to learn computer skills because of their demand as a major requirement for employment. The caregivers emphasised that there are no initiatives to teach English in the region and it is limited to private courses, which are expensive or target older people, while adolescents are marginalized. Some organizations offered English language training courses, but

most were directed to the Turkish language due to the nature of the current government.

Internet use and digital learning:

"اتبعت خلال انتشار فايروس كورونا برنامجاً محدداً في الدراسة (عن بعد) .... كانت هناك طرق تعليم جيدة سهلت علي الحفظ وتعلم مهارات وأساليب جديدة"

"**During the spread of the Coronavirus, I followed a specific programme in the study (from a distance) .... there were good teaching methods that made it easier for me to memorize and learn new skills and methods**" (Al-Bab girl 13-15)

"من الإيجابيات للإنترنت أنه أصبح بإمكان من لا يستطيع العمل بشكل فيزيائي، التعاقد مع عمل أون لاين وهي طريقة جداً رائعة"

"**One of the advantages of the Internet is that those who cannot work physically outside can contract with online work, which is a very wonderful way**" (Al-Bab girl 16-18)

- **Girls 13-15:** This group highlighted many advantages of ICT including access to information, communication, building skills, learning languages and entertainment. Also, they emphasized the importance of digital learning.
- **Boys 13-15:** The advantages of ICT as mentioned by participants were access to information, communication and distance learning especially in the time of COVID-19, and learning foreign languages especially Turkish and English.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls mentioned several advantages of ICT, such as distance working, marketing, learning, access to information, developing skills, communication, and learning languages. They insisted on the importance of digital learning especially in a time of COVID-19.
- **Boys 16-18:** These boys mentioned advantages of ICT such as access to information, digital learning, developing skills and learning languages, and entertainment. They appreciated digital learning in the time of COVID-19.
- **Adults:** The Internet is essential for obtaining required knowledge and information during the COVID-19 pandemic and finishing education. Also, it contributed to the development of digital skills and learning new skills.

Negative aspects:

- **Girls 13-15:** Some girls specified disadvantages of ICT, such as wasting time, access to bad content, and the negative effect on health.
- **Boys 13-15:** This group mentioned negative aspects of ICT such as wasting time, accessing violent games and bad content.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls mentioned disadvantages like wasting time, accessing bad content, and damage to family relations. Overall, they agreed that using ICT needs more attention to time management and developing skills in using the Internet efficiently and safely.
- **Boys 16-18:** These boys mentioned negative issues such as wasting time, isolation, and addiction.
- **Adults:** Key informants agreed that the Internet provides easy access to information, but that this is mostly inaccurate, does not depend on a sequential scientific method and often causes mental lethargy. They also mentioned that, with lack of parental supervision, the risks of misuse of the Internet increase by access to abusive, immoral sites or violent games or using it only for entertainment which causes addiction, psychological problems and wasting time. Caregivers emphasized problems in the unreliability of much of the information published on the Internet.

Access to the Internet and digital learning opportunities:

- **Girls 13-15:** This group identified many challenges, such as the high cost of recognized digital learning programmes, while the free ones are not recognized or interactive with professional platforms. They mentioned that the quality of the Internet is good in their region compared to other regions in Syria, although the equipment and services are expensive. Overall, they highlighted the scarcity of initiatives that aim to improve conventional and digital learning in the region. Some of them insisted on the training of teachers, curriculum, health conditions in schools, and reducing the cost of education for families. They recommended more initiatives towards recognized, interactive digital learning platforms.
- **Boys 13-15:** This group highlighted the challenges of digital learning, such as the lack

of specialized teachers and platforms, the low quality of the Internet, and the high cost of services and equipment.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls referred to many challenges like poor access to electricity and Internet, the lack of qualified specialists and platforms, the poor approach via WhatsApp implemented by private schools, and the high cost of services and equipment.
- **Boys 16-18:** The group referred to poor infrastructure for Internet and electricity, high cost, lack of equipment, and lack of specialists and platforms.
- **Adults:** Currently, there are many educational platforms for distance education, but the key informants considered that should be under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, broadcasting its educational sites. Caregivers highlighted Internet availability is better in the city of Al-Bab, while in the countryside it is expensive and of lower quality.

Recommendations by key informants and caregivers

- Provide schools with specialised and qualified teachers, educational means and modern equipment and stationery.
- Unify and improve the curricula used in public and private schools.
- Increase the wages and salaries of the educational staff, particularly the teachers' wages.
- Open new schools in rural areas or provide consistent transportation services.
- Compensate the educational loss due to the frequent closure of education.
- Increase the interest of international organizations in adolescents' issues, similar to women and children, to provide projects and programmes concerned with the empowerment and development of adolescents.
- Activate the role of educational supervision and control commissions.
- Open recognised universities in northern Syria and increase the number of scientific branches in the region, that may encourage students to continue their education given more clarity in their future.
- Establish effective digital educational content, means and platforms.
- Find urgent solutions for families in need by supporting and funding small projects to control child labour cases.
- Advocate for awareness of the dangers of ignorance, early marriage and child labour.
- Establish local community committees within camps to prevent domestic violence and harassment.
- Create informal learning programmes that:
  - Allocate a centre to teach computer and ICT skills.
  - Include themes in addition to ICT and languages like research skills, psychological counselling, digital or Internet marketing, vocational and handicraft training and life skills.
  - Hold programmes during holidays or the summer break, three days per week, two to three hours per session.
  - Form separate boys' and girls' groups because of the traditions and social customs of the area.
  - Recruit experienced and competent teachers and administrative staff, with

specialized psychological counselling cadres and supported by institutions working in the fields of protection and education.
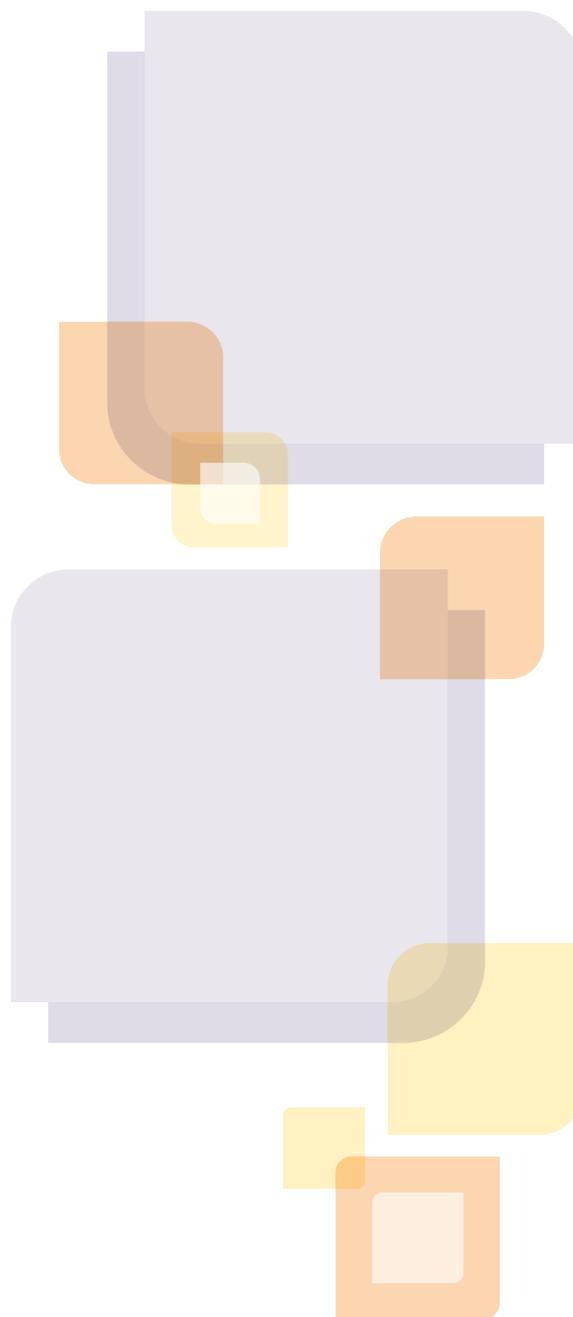
Al-Hasakeh

This Governorate has been out of Government of Syria (GoS) control since 2013, and under the control of the Autonomous Administration (AA), with support of the United States. The AA adopted different political and socioeconomic governance systems, including for education. Children in this area are exposed to different educational systems (AA system and GoS system), taught in different languages and with different curricula. The number of inhabitants in the city of al-Hasakeh is 414,000, of which 156,000 are IDPs. The overall poverty rate reached 83 percent in 2019, and the enrolment rate for basic education was 62 percent in 2020 (SCPR, 2020).

Support mechanisms

- **Girls 13-15:** These girls highlighted the importance of support from their family (especially parents) for their study and social relationships, and many also mentioned support from their friends.
- **Boys 13-15:** Many boys mentioned the support of their family, which become more important in the time of instability.
- Girls 16-18: Most of these girls had support from their families, especially mothers.
- **Boys 16-18:** These boys felt secure and supported by families and friends.

Aspirations and interests:

"طموحي أن أترك بصمة في التاريخ. أريد أن أبني مركز لحماية حقوق الانسان السبب لم أرى من يدافع عن أحلامي وحقوقي لذا قررت أن أكون من يدافع عن الناس الذي ظلمتهم الحياة والمجتمع والحرب"

"**My ambition is to leave a mark in history. I want to establish a centre for human rights because I did not find anyone fighting for my dreams and rights, thus, I decided to defend people who have been exposed to injustice from life, society and war**" (Girl 16-18, al-Hasakeh)

- **Girls 13-15:** These girls hope to achieve a high level of education and occupy prestigious conventional professions, such as doctors, pharmacists, engineers and lawyers. Some of them aim to support poor and deprived people in their future work, others aim to gain wealth and social status. However, a few aim to be football players (despite stigma from the family and society), singers, fashion designers or musicians.
- **Boys 13-15:** Some boys shared the same ambitions as the girls to be doctors and engineers, but several wanted to be professional football players.
- **Girls 16-18:** Girls of this age have ambitions of being doctors, pharmacists, engineers, teachers and lawyers, but they also mentioned other careers like financial manager, rights advocate and broadcaster. Some of them want to help the injured and marginalized people. Many of them mentioned their goal to travel outside the country to study, work and live, and some reported difficulties of travelling for Syrians due to the war. Most of them like school and some of them have several hobbies like drawing, playing music, travelling, sports, handcrafts and reading.
- **Boys 16-18:** Boys' ambitions are for high-level careers like doctors, engineers and language teachers, and one said he would like to be a football player. They like travelling, exploration, **reading and the Internet.**
- **Adults:** Most key informants and parents highlighted the lack of hope for adolescents and the tendency to migrate outside the country. Insecurity and uncertainty affected the whole generation, associated with family dispersion due to death or displacement of one or both parents. Key informants also mentioned different social challenges affecting adolescents' lives, such as drugs, domestic violence and harassment, especially for girls. In some cases, traditions and cultural norms increased the pressure and abuse. Not being in school increased the potential social and psychological pressure on adolescents due to uncertainty about the future, which made the majority of adolescents willing to migrate to Europe.

Contextual challenges:

"الزواج المبكر للفتيات أو الزواج القسري، التعرض للتحرش وخاصة بالنسبة للفتيات بسبب غياب الرقابة"

"**Early marriage of girls or forced marriage, harassment, especially for girls, due to the lack of supervision**" (key informant, al-Hasakeh)

- **Girls 13-15:** Some mentioned that war and instability in the area created a climate of fear and uncertainty, while many of them reported economic hardship, poverty and lack of employment opportunities as the main obstacles for them to fulfil their ambitions and expectations.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys shared many family problems and challenges due to poverty and financial constraints, or displacement and migration of family members. These constraints forced many boys to drop out of school and start working to financially support the family.
- **Girls 16-18:** A few girls mentioned war and instability as major hindrances in their study and life, as families impose more restrictions on girls' mobility. The war also caused a surge in prices and the spread of poverty and deprivation that led to child labour and an increase in early marriage cases.
- **Boys 16-18:** War and lack of security were mentioned as the main obstacles for their study and life. Additionally, all of them mentioned the suffering of poverty and poor living conditions that forced many boys to work and prevented them from continuing their studies.
- **Adults:** The key informants reported the most important challenges faced adolescents in al-Hasakeh to be instability, insecurity and uncertainty. The conflict has fuelled fanaticism among youth and children, destroyed infrastructure (including schools) and disrupted services. The destruction of institutions, or changing their purpose toward conflict, affected the educational process and economic activities in al-Hasakeh. The war caused many grave violations for adolescents, including the recruitment of boys and girls to join armed groups. Huge inequalities between segments of society led adolescents to "blindly" follow armed groups that benefited from the war. In this regard, some boys threatened their parents to escape from home and join armed groups. Similarly, experts found that adolescents are ready to join armed groups to prove themselves, and they were influenced by TV programmes, the Internet, and friends. Parents found that family problems and disputes, miscommunication between parents and their children, combined with the aforementioned circumstances, increased pressure on adolescents, psychological problems, fear, despair, and feelings of insecurity due to the radical changes in their lives.

COVID-19.

"تعرض الأطفال في المنازل إلى العنف الأسري بسبب حالة الحجر التي كانوا يعيشونها "

"Children have been exposed to domestic violence because of the conditions they live in during the quarantine period" (Key informant, al-Hasakeh)

- **Girls 13-15:** the disruption caused by COVID-19 on their education.
- **Boys 13-15:** COVID-19 heavily impacted their education, with the closure of schools for a long time without alternatives.
- **Girls 16-18:** COVID-19 was a major obstacle as public and private schools closed for a long time without any alternatives to compensate for the education loss.
- **Boys 16-18:** COVID-19 stopped the education process for several months causing a huge education loss.
- **Adults:** The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the general situation and led to the closure of schools and losing years of education for the students. Insecurity and COVID-19 forced adolescents to stay at home with the Internet, the only alternative to occupy their time. As children became addicted to the Internet, parents were afraid of the serious risks that might affect their behaviour, including violence. They noted that the pandemic had many negative effects on the education process,, as it worsened the socioeconomic situation as well as the educational performance of adolescents. Quarantine kept adolescents out of school without an effective alternative plan. The closure of schools caused interruption to their education, as distance learning was neither efficient nor inclusive. Neither the teachers nor the infrastructure were prepared for distance learning, due to lack of teacher training, weak and costly Internet and lack of proper equipment, especially in rural areas and for poor families. The distance learning which was applied was not interactive and needed additional efforts from parents, who did not have adequate qualifications to help their children. Staying at home for many hours and days caused many problems at home in the family, the constant pressure due to hygiene and quarantine caused some psychological issues, especially for girls who had to bear the housework chores and faced more movement restrictions than

boys during quarantine. The psychological pressure pushed adolescents to act violently, and some faced increases in domestic violence, especially gender-based violence.

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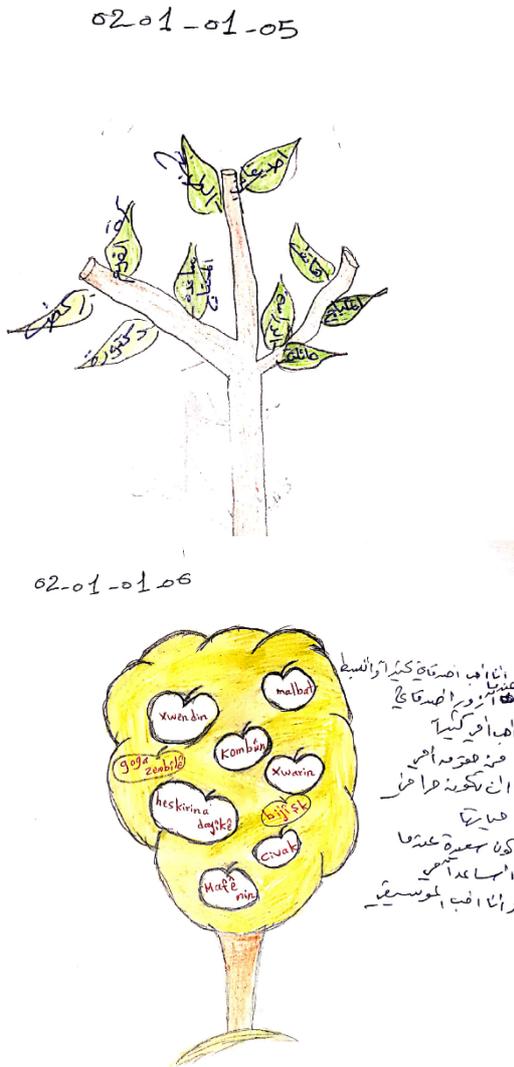
Education system:

"افتقار المدارس للبنى التحتية في المنطقة من كافة النواحي، حيث المدارس الموجودة حاليا تحتاج إلى ترميم جذري لكافة الخدمات الموجودة فيها) "

"The schools lack infrastructure in the region in all respects, as the existing schools need a radical restoration of all the services" (key informant, al-Hasakeh)

"هذه الدراسات التي تقومون بها غالباً تساهم في تطوير التعليم وتوفير دعم من مانحين للمختصين في المجال التعليمي من مؤسسات حكومة أو غير حكومة، أتمنى أن تتم باستمرار

لتساهم في تطوير التعليم وتوفير مستقبل أفضل للطلاب واليافعين/ات"

"These kinds of studies often contribute to the development of education and provide support from donors to specialists in the educational field from governmental or non-governmental institutions. I hope that these studies conduct continuously to improve education and provide a better future for students and adolescents (boys and girls)." (al-Hasakeh key informant)

- **Girls 13-15:** Many reported key challenges of the education system such as the lack of recognition of certificates of the AA system, which forced many to join GoS schools which are few, overcrowded and far from their homes. Another challenge mentioned was the adoption of dual-language systems that create difficulties in communication between Kurdish and Arabic adolescents. Moreover, they criticized traditional teaching approaches and the lack of qualified teachers. Some girls also mentioned a low desire to join school from some adolescents.
- **Boys 13-15:** War and instability affected the education process through the destruction of schools, migration of teachers and creation of different education systems. Boys consider that the education systems do not have enough schools, and the distance and lack of transportation were key issues, while teachers have weak knowledge of foreign languages.
- **Girls 16-18:** Many girls said that there is a lack of schools and universities, schools are very far away and the lack of transportation are all major constraints to education, especially for girls. Many of them highlighted the importance of training teachers and improving their teaching approaches.
- **Boys 16-18:** Many students left classes due to the poor management of schools, and several of them reported challenges in the education process such as transportation, poverty and economic hardship, lack of teachers, and low wages for teachers. They proposed coordination between NGOs and the United Nations to support schools, counter the impact of COVID-19, alleviate poverty, and develop online teaching.
- **Adults:** the key informants and caregivers

explained that education in the Northeast was complicated by the two education systems with different governance, values and authorities, one for the AA (in Kurdish) and the other for the GoS (in Arabic), which reflected the political conflict, affecting the content and quality of the whole education process. Generally, children and families tend to choose GoS institutions as the certificates are internationally and nationally accredited, unlike those granted by AA institutions. GoS schools suffer from many problems affecting the quality and accessibility of education, among them, limited classroom space per student (around 60 students per class), morning and evening shifts, and long distances to schools from students' houses, as well as the expensive and insecure transportation which raises security concerns. Schools lack sufficient educational staff to cover the number of students, due to the migration of many qualified teachers or forced displacement. As a result, dependency on supporting educational institutes, mainly private, has increased.

Drivers of dropout

Adults: Increased poverty due to currency devaluation, high inflation and unemployment, pushed adolescents to search for jobs and drop out of education. Boys were forced to leave school to work and support their families under the worst economic situation and the absence of the breadwinner. Early marriage also increased for girls to avoid poverty. Some girls preferred to get married to avoid joining military groups, which is a huge challenge for families in the northeast. Many families stopped sending their children to school because of a lack of sufficient and suitable education institutes, overcrowded schools, unqualified teaching staff, poor curriculum and teaching methods, their inability to provide their children with school materials such as uniforms and stationery, and the high cost of education, especially in private schools. Key informants mentioned the impact of economic hardship, lack of awareness of education, bullying of adolescents by teachers, and the lack of security and instability in the country on the education process. Some parents refrained from educating their daughters and encouraged early marriage due to biased social norms. Moreover, the poor living situation forced many adolescents to go to work to secure

a decent living for themselves and families. Consequently, school dropout rates increased, beginning at preparatory school at 12 or 13 years old.

As education is considered a complementary chain, especially for specific subjects such as maths, physics and chemistry, interruptions and disruptions rewarded a narrow set of skills. High school and intermediate degree students had to compress lessons or skip some parts of the curriculum during quarantine, which led to a lack of understanding of the content. Missed subjects and educational losses were not compensated. Many adolescents were cut off from an important educational stage and moved immediately from year to year without taking exams or the required evaluation of criteria to move to the next grade, which caused a kind of neglect and laziness among students assured transition to the next stage without exams.

Internet use and digital learning:

"الايجابيات تطوير النفس والترفيه عن النفس وتقديم المعلومات والتعرف على ثقافات جديدة، أما السلبيات المضي لساعات طويلة على الانترنت والتأثير على بعض الهوايات الأخرى كالرسم والموسيقى وغيرها وإضاعة الوقت والانطواء والانعزال"

"The advantages are self-development, entertainment, source of information, getting to know new cultures, as for the disadvantages, spending long hours on the Internet, affecting some other hobbies, such as, drawing, music, and others, wasting time, introversion and isolation" (girl 16-18, al-Hasakeh)

- **Girls 13-15:** The girls agreed on various pros and cons of the Internet for their generation, but disagreed on whether the negative aspects were greater than the positive ones. Overall, many girls think ICTs provide access to information and knowledge, help to develop skills such as foreign languages, facilitate communication with family members abroad, and provide entertainment through games, or watching movies or sports.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys had similar opinions about ICT, repeating the importance in terms of communication and access to languages, knowledge, useful games, and different cultures.
- **Girls 16-18:** The girls highlighted positive

aspects of ICT, such as self-expression, developing skills such as languages, access to knowledge, communication with new friends and societies, distance learning and communicating with their teachers. Most adolescents repeatedly mentioned communication with migrated/ displaced family members.

- **Boys 16-18:** This group mentioned many advantages in ICT, such as access to knowledge, distance learning, communication with families and friends.
- **Adults.** Both key informants and caregivers asserted the benefits of the Internet, such as access to information, the ability to provide an acceptable level of education for students and communication with family members and others inside and outside the country. Yet, using the Internet as a means of communication, learning, and access to information was hindered by many challenges, mainly the lack of proper infrastructure and the constant power cuts.

Negative aspects of the Internet

- **Girls 13-15:** Many girls referred to ICTs as a waste of time, exposing them to violent content, misleading information, family conflicts, and the threat of addiction to the Internet and online games.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys mentioned similar challenges, such as wasting time, and the possibility to access violent and bad content.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls mentioned many negative aspects, such as health problems (back pain, eye issues), isolation, waste of time, exposure to bad content, lack of physical communication, and distraction from study.
- **Boys 16-18:** This group also highlighted the dangers of isolation, waste of time, addiction, and potential depression

Access to the Internet and digital learning opportunities:

"إننا نعاني من عدم التركيز على التعليم عن بعد أو حتى استخدام النت للتحصيل العلمي"

"We suffer from a lack of focus on distance education or even the use of the Internet for educational attainment" (key informant)

- **Girls 13-15:** All girls complained about the bad quality of Internet and the high cost of services, in addition to lack of access to suitable

equipment and poor electricity supply. Also, they insisted on the existence of more restrictions on girls in accessing phones and laptops compared to their male peers. Several girls suggested the importance of developing adolescents' skills for aware and efficient use of the Internet.

- **Boys 13-15:** This group also reported issues with the poor Internet connection and the subsequent difficulties in implementing distance learning.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls reported poor infrastructure for ICT, such as the weak and costly Internet services, lack of electricity, and equipment that are not affordable for many families.
- **Boys 16-18:** Many boys lacked the language skills to access different sources of information. The ICT infrastructure was described as weak, with poor and costly services. In this regard, they suggested providing students with equipment, better Internet coverage and quality at a lower cost, and online learning opportunities.
- **Adults:** The key informants reported two main challenges to distance learning: lack of accessibility for many children, and the fear of parents that children were spending too much time on the Internet with the risk of wasting their time and being exposed to unsafe content.
- Lack of digital learning skills and platforms. According to key informants, teachers and students did not have the necessary skills to use the ICT tools and platforms effectively. In addition, adolescents mostly use the Internet for communication and entertainment on chat and social media platforms more than to learn and gain new skills, with the risk of exposure to unsafe content like pornography or violent scenes. The majority of caregivers stated the lack of reliability and credibility of some websites providing information.
- Foreign language learning and ICTs. Key informants recognised a quantum leap in foreign language learning (mainly English) and ICT, but only for a segment of the society due to the high cost of private institutes and the fact that they are mainly located in the big cities. The demand for English language has increased, especially for migration or working with INGOs that provide relatively high salaries.

## Recommendations by key informants and caregivers

<div dir="rtl">

"المراكز الثقافية كانت تخدم شريحة معينة من الناس فقط، لذلك نحن بحاجة إلى الكثير لتعلمها ولن نتمكن من ذلك إلا إذا كان هناك مبادرات ذات حجم كبير من قبل منظمات دولية تغطي المنطقة ككل وتستقبل جميع الناس وكافة الأعمار" (أحد مقدمي الرعاية)

</div>

"**The old cultural centres only served a certain segment of people, so we need a lot to learn how we manage it. We will only be able to do that if there are initiatives of a large size by international organizations that cover the region as a whole and receive all people of all ages**" **(al-Hasakeh caregiver)**

The participants suggested several options that could contribute to narrowing the educational and digital gaps for adolescents in the area. These were centred on specific informal learning programmes and initiatives such as:

- Unifying the educational curricula in cooperation between local and international actors, with special focus on developing capabilities and skills.
- Creating a unified programme (GoS and AA curricula) for distance learning and start it from an early age.
- Adding interactive materials to the current curriculum to develop social communication skills and establishing special halls for reading.
- Recruiting qualified teachers and educational staff, providing a substantial increase in their wages and salaries with an incentive system to attract them back to public schools.
- Creating informal learning programmes that:
  - Include themes such as entertainment activities, life skills, the English language, gender awareness, ICT skills, social communication skills, capacity building and talent development, self-development and individual skills.
- Provide entertainment centres and programmes that encourage students to learn.
- Use distance learning, as long as students and educational cadres are qualified to use ICT.
- Include mixed-sex groups, so that adolescents get rid of inhibition and are encouraged to express their ideas freely, benefit from each other and increase their self-confidence. Only one key informant advised that the programme should not be mixed-sex.

- The activities are held three to five days per week, for two to five hours per day.
- The activities are led by experienced educational cadres who have management and ICT skills, and good experience in dealing with adolescents.
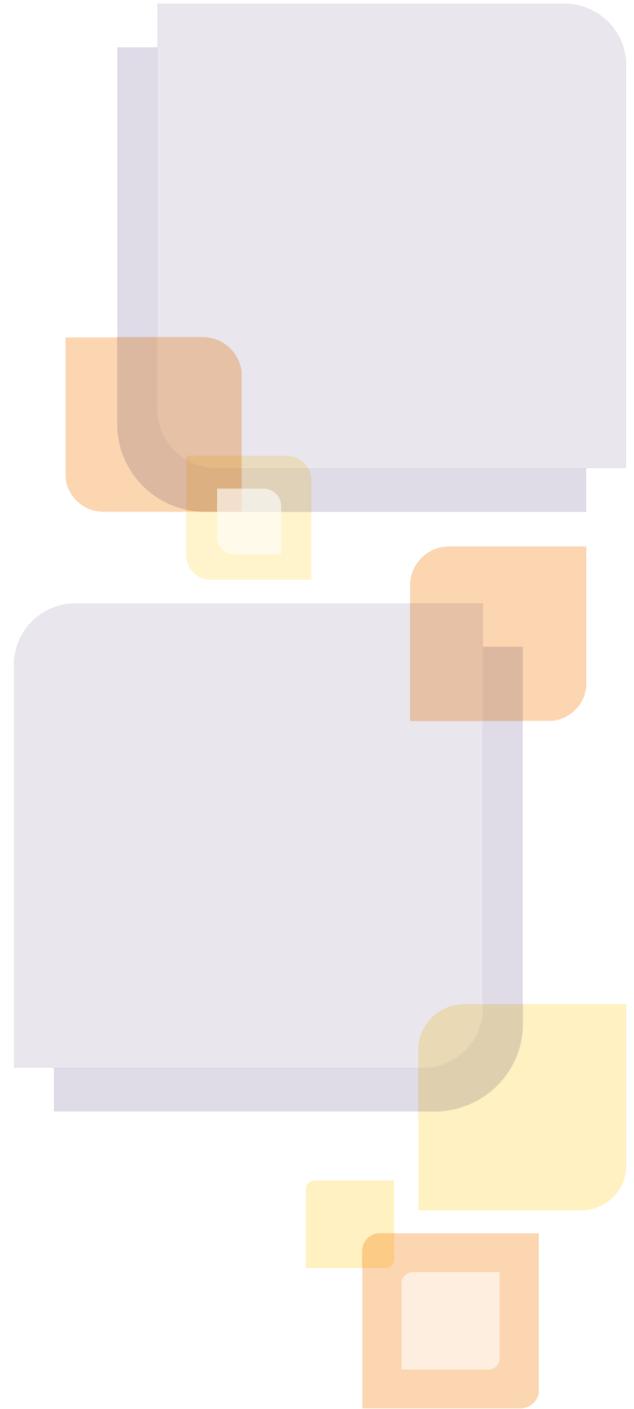
Al-Tal

Al-Tal is part of the Rural Damascus Governorate, and subject to a long siege during the war. Currently, it is under the control of GoS and it includes 731,000 inhabitants of which 207,000 were IDPs in 2020. The estimated poverty rate is 88 percent, and basic education enrolment is 80 percent (SCPR, 2020).

Aspirations and interests:

- **Girls 13-15:** Girls in this group were outspoken and demonstrated a sense of independent thinking and self-confidence. They had diversified interests and goals, some of which seemed far-fetched given the difficult living conditions and educational challenges that girls are enduring. They aim to be doctors, engineers, sociologists, pharmacists, teachers or lawyers. Some of them expressed their aim to support deprived and marginalised people, and an increased awareness of women's rights and care for human values and the common good. They have diversified hobbies like sport, playing music and drawing.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys in this age group aim to be engineers, doctors, IT engineers, but they also added second occupations like graphic designer, football player, marketing and smith. They have a variety of hobbies including football, swimming and self-defence sports and watching movies.
- **Girls 16-18:** Girls in this group exhibited a great sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence. Some of the girls are religious conservatives and they like to read the Quran. Most of the girls aim towards conventional high-status careers such as doctors, and to a lesser extent engineers, teachers or lawyers, but one wants to be a YouTuber. They have many hobbies like sports, reading, drawing, enjoying nature, and watching movies and TV series.
- **Boys 16-18:** Boys in this group aim to be doctors, engineers, dentists, lawyers, or economists, yet some want to be football players or self-defence coaches. They have many hobbies including sports, cooking and music. In general, many of them mentioned the lack of motivation to continue their education and reach their dream jobs.

Support mechanisms

- **Girls 13-15:** Although many girls appreciated the support of families and friends, some of them highlighted parents' tendency to interfere in girls' choice of education, or the growing pressure to stop girls' education after the second cycle. Tradition constrained girls' choices and mobility compared to boys.
- **Boys 13-15:** Most of them received substantial support from their families and friends in study and work.
- **Girls 16-18:** They received important support from families and friends.
- **Boys 16-18:** They have complicated relations with families and friends but they have their support in general.

Contextual challenges:

"أحد التحديات التي أواجهها هو أن أكون امرأة تعيش في مجتمع لا يدعم المرأة "

"One of the challenges that I face is being a female living in a society that doesn't support women" (Al-Tal girl 13-15)

"أصحاب المهارات والمعرفة لا يستطيعون الوصول إلى مناصب عليا ومناصب قيادية بسبب الفساد."

"People with skills and knowledge cannot reach a high level and leadership positions due to corruption" (Al-Tal Boy 16-18)

"التحدي الأساسي الذي يعاني منه اليافعين في المرحلة الحالية هي عدم الشعور بالأمان فالنشوء في بيئة غير مستقرة بشكل عام أدى إلى انعكاسات سلبية عليهم وعلى طريقة تفكيرهم حيث يسيطر عليهم حالة البأس والإحباط وانعدام التفكير بالمستقبل وفقدان الأمل"

"The main challenge that adolescents face in this stage is the lack of security, as growing up in an unstable environment, in general, led to negative repercussions on them and their way of thinking, as they suffer from despair, frustration, loss of hope and lack of thinking about the future" (Al-Tal KI)

"إن افتقاد الطفل للقدوة والاحتواء من قبل الأبوين يدفع به للتمرد واللجوء للشبكات التي تستهدف الأطفال: المخدرات - العمالة - الاستغلال الجنسي - التحرش"

"The child's lack of the Ideal and the parental inclusion pushes him to rebel and resort to networks of drugs, labour, sexual exploitation, harassment that target children" (Al-Tal KI)

- **Girls 13-15:** These girls reported that the conflict had damaged the education process through destruction and displacement which increased pressure on schools and staff. In addition, the surge in cost of living and the spread of poverty affected the family's ability to support the education of their children which forced the children to work or get married at an early age.
- **Boys 13-15:** This group expressed an in-depth understanding of the challenges that are facing them currently, including the lack of security and displacement. Some of them referred to the deterioration of social and economic situations and widespread poverty. These circumstances led many adolescents to leave school and work and aim for travel outside the country. They are also concerned about compulsory military service.
- **Girls 16-18:** The girls defined the deterioration of institutional performance, poor economic situation, massive displacement, and widespread of COVID-19 as key factors that negatively affected the education process and the interest of the family, student and community in the value of education in the current exceptional circumstances.
- **Boys 16-18:** They described the main factors that hinder their pathways for the future, such as the continuous conflict and lack of security, instability and poor performance of public institutions, displacement as a result of the conflict, the deterioration of the economic and service situation and the increase in poverty, and COVID-19 and its disruption of the education process. These factors affected education and their choices for work and study, and alongside the compulsory military service, they are forced to find solutions outside of the country.
- **Adults:** War conditions including killing, destruction, insecurity, uncertainty, displacement, losing the caregiver, and recruitment of children into militias are at the top of risks faced by adolescents. Furthermore, key informants explained how the war distorted the values and ethical norms of the society and substantially increased the pressure on adolescents which caused a sense of depression, insignificance, loss of hope, a lack of purpose and aiming to migrate. Key informants and caregivers referred to different challenges, such as the dramatic change in the society and relations during the conflict, the spread of violence and crime and theft, drugs, begging networks and prostitution. Additionally, they found that family disintegration and dispersion made adolescents easy victims of mental and physical exploitation.

COVID-19.
- **Girls 13-15:** Some girls defined the negative impact of COVID-19 on the education process.
- **Adults:** The quarantine during COVID-19 also caused different psychological problems for adolescents and aggravated their pessimistic perspective for the future. Quarantine left adolescents with a lot of free time, without productive alternatives except the Internet. Modern technology and devices made it easier for adolescents to access porn sites, electronic violence games, and sites that promote political and religious polarization. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a long closure of schools, and students moved to the next grade without exams or compensation for the education loss. Distance learning was difficult to apply due to the absence of appropriate infrastructure, smart devices, electricity, networks and high-speed Internet services.

Education system:
"عدم الجدوى من الذهاب للمدارس بسبب التسيّب وقلة الانضباط وهروب المدرسين من مدارس الذكور بسبب حالات الشغب والعنف والتنمر"

"The futility of going to schools due to chaos, lack of discipline, and teachers escaping from boys' schools due to riots, violence and bullying" (Al-Tal Boy 13-15)

- **Girls 13-15:** Many girls highlighted the poor education process due to weak management, the lack of qualified teachers, an intense and frequently changing curriculum, poor infrastructure, the lack of basic services like heat and drinking water, increased education costs, crowded classes, poor foreign language teaching, and lack of transportation. Some girls also expressed their fear of the Baccalaureate official exam and acquiring the required grades for entering the desired degree course.
- **Boys 13-15:** These boys described shortages of the education system, mainly the poor

management of the education process as many schools suffer from lack of discipline and the spread of bullying and sometimes violence, lack of qualified teachers, traditional teaching approaches, intense curriculum, poor foreign language teaching, lack of school, poor heating and hygiene services, lack of proper transportation, costly logistics and private lessons and institutes.

- **Girls 16-18:** These girls agreed on the shortcomings of the education process including poor management and lack of accountability, poor quality associated with a difficult curriculum, lack of qualified teachers, poor foreign language teaching, and poor supervision. They added crowded classes, lack of equipment and labs, and lack of heating as administrative challenges.

- **Boys 16-18:** The boys reported that the education system is poor and inefficient in terms of weak management and lack of commitment and resources, lack of discipline, lack of qualified teachers, absence of teachers, difficult curriculum, poor infrastructure, crowded and poorly serviced schools, lack of equipment, high cost of private institutes and lessons.

- **Adults:** The main challenges that directly affected education were the distorted governance of the education system, in terms of supervision, curriculum, coordination, efficiency, human capital and infrastructure, and finance depriving girls of education and forcing boys to work due to the economic hardship. The infrastructure was damaged and suffered from lack of equipment and logistics including desks, books and heating. Another major challenge for the education process was the lack of qualified teachers as the war forced many of them to leave the region or join private schools or another career due to low wages in public schools. Additionally, the complicated and not interactive curriculum increased the pressure on adolescents and families. Therefore, caregivers found that schools became a repellent environment for adolescents.

Both caregivers and key informants found that the financial burden of education, including private lessons to compensate for the lack of quality education, increased. The poorest students were the most affected, as they were unable to provide premiums for private lessons or intensive courses in private institutes. The substantial number of displaced people increased pressure on the education services and diminished the quality of education. Caregivers mentioned that some displaced families did not register their children in schools as they thought displacement would be a temporary status, and also due to the transportation and service costs. Moreover, some births were not registered due to informal marriages or the security status of the parents. Consequently, those children were out of school because of a lack of official documents.

Drivers of dropout

Adults: The destruction of school and disruption of the education process for years has led many adolescents to drop out of school to work due to poverty and costly services and the change in perception towards education. These challenges and risks increased the dropout from schools, starting from the 5th grade for girls, due to early marriage or traditions and social norms to stay at home to avoid the risk of insecurity status, violence and harassment. Key informants asserted that many boys dropped out of school to work or were trapped with recruitment, child labour and drugs networks. Caregivers mentioned that some families preferred to support male education over female education due to customs and traditions.

English language and digital skills

- **Boys 16-18:** This group mentioned some civil society initiatives to support students but these are limited and do not match the huge need. If boys need to learn English, they need to enrol in civil society or private organisations to get decent learning.

- **Adults:** Key informants agreed that informal education and language programmes contribute to developing the skills of adolescents in all fields, and are a good investment for the future, whether scientific, linguistic, technological or sports programmes. Through these programmes, adolescents can be directed to potential goals, and their free time is invested successfully and fruitfully. There are only some initiatives for informal programmes in the region for teaching language and basic computer skills, yet the quality of programmes varies from one institute to another. These institutes offer

courses for strengthening in school subjects, conversation skills and terminologies (medicine - informatics - engineering), but the costs are unaffordable for most families in Al-Tal. Caregivers mentioned that some adolescents learn languages through online courses, but these projects are not sustainable and sometimes stop at certain levels due to the lack of students at higher levels or the lack of qualified staff to reach higher language levels or conversation courses.

Internet use and digital learning:

- **Girls 13-15:** Many girls identified advantages of ICT, such as learning, access to knowledge and establishing new relationships and entertainment.
- **Boys 13-15:** These boys identified several advantages including e-learning, access to information and facilitating communication with families, friends and other societies.
- **Girls 16-18:** This group shared an interest in digital learning and identified many positive aspects of ICT including access to knowledge and exploring the world and communicating with other cultures, developing skills including languages, facilitating work and generating income.
- **Boys 16-18:** These boys stated many pros of ICT, such as access to information, knowledge and skills, and generating income through online job opportunities, communicating with friends and family, and entertainment.
- **Adults:** This group agreed that the Internet offers interactive learning compared to the classic school indoctrination, and an excellent way to access information, obtain new knowledge and practical applications for theoretical study. Key informants mentioned that ICT expands adolescents´ horizons, the sense of innovation, and is a gateway for free learning, acquiring life and practical skills, and opening new international opportunities for them.

Negative aspects:

- **Girls 13-15:** This group identified many disadvantages of ICT, such as bullying, wasting time, blackmail, hacking, bad content, and misleading information.
- **Boys 13-15:** Boys were sceptical about ICT and

mentioned many disadvantages like the addiction to games and social media, waste of time, hacking, lack of privacy, bullying, misleading information and bad content.
- **Girls 16-18:** They also identified many disadvantages including hacking, misleading information, waste of time, bullying, blackmailing, and isolation.
- **Boys 16-18:** This group mentioned many cons, such as addiction, stealing ideas, bullying, bad content, waste of time, and promoting violence.
- **Adults:** They agreed that the Internet is a double-edged sword. Most adolescents resort to the Internet only for entertainment, not education, with failure to restrict it to a limited time, which leads to wasting time and draining their mental, psychological and visual abilities, as well as affecting the level of their linguistic and verbal abilities. There are also risks to using the Internet in terms of accessing pornographic and immoral sites or those that expose adolescents to blackmail, human trafficking and bullying and promote extremism or political polarization. Key informants mentioned that some adolescents are exposed to recruitment into illegal groups to sell drugs or join terrorist groups.

Access to the Internet and digital learning opportunities:

"المدينة في الشتاء الماضي كانت تنقطع الكهرباء فيها أكثر من 20 ساعة متواصلة وكأنها مدينة من العصور الوسطى"

"Last winter, the city was without electricity for more than 20 hours straight, as if it were a medieval city" (Al-Tal boy 16-18)

- **Girls 13-15:** Many referred to poor ICT infrastructure in terms of Internet services, access to electricity and equipment which became extremely expensive. Schools lack the proper infrastructure to develop ICT skills and practice e-learning.
- **Boys 13-15:** Most agreed about the poor infrastructure and high cost of access to Internet service and equipment, in addition to the lack of electricity. Some of them questioned their ability for self e-learning when most of the educational e-content and relevant sites are in English and most boys of their age struggled with poor English language skills.
- **Girls 16-18:** This group highlighted the poor

services and high cost of the Internet, and financial constraints to have the proper equipment.

- **Boys 16-18:** This group also referred to the poor infrastructure of ICT and the lack of electricity and the increasing cost of services.
- **Adults:** Key informants and caregivers agreed that the use of the Internet faces challenges, such as poor infrastructure, unavailability of service on the landline, blocking many websites and applications that facilitate access to information, slow surfing on the Internet, power cuts for long hours, and the high cost of 3G/4G technologies. Online learning is usually done by individual initiatives but hindered by the shortage of infrastructure, suitable equipment, and high-speed Internet.

Recommendations by key informants and caregivers

- Recruit sufficient educational staff and qualified teachers including training the teachers.
- Invest in improving the infrastructure and maintenance of schools, and equip them with proper classes, equipment and logistics, utility and heating.
- Provide efficient vocational and industrial training.
- Support poor students with school supplies and free support courses.
- Provide digital education platforms in schools.
- Create informal learning programmes that:
  - Incubate physical and e-learning centres.
  - Include themes that include entertainment and educational activities like identity and citizenship, psychological healing, social reconstruction and moral restoration for adolescents, robotics, mental arithmetic, industrial production and operation courses, language and computer courses. In addition to programmes for sports, music, drawing, poetry, cooking and agriculture.
  - Engage parents and their children to discuss common societal and legal foundations, such as rights and duties.
  - Empower girls in obtaining productive projects that suit their orientations, such as sewing, hairdressing, cooking, beauty, fashion design.
  - Provide cheap and high-speed Internet and

proper equipment.
- Recruit experts in the psychological and social fields and qualified cadres with organic participation with adolescents.
- Conduct sessions three days per week, 1-3 hours per day.
- Design programmes as mixed-sex groups, however a few caregivers preferred single-sex groups.
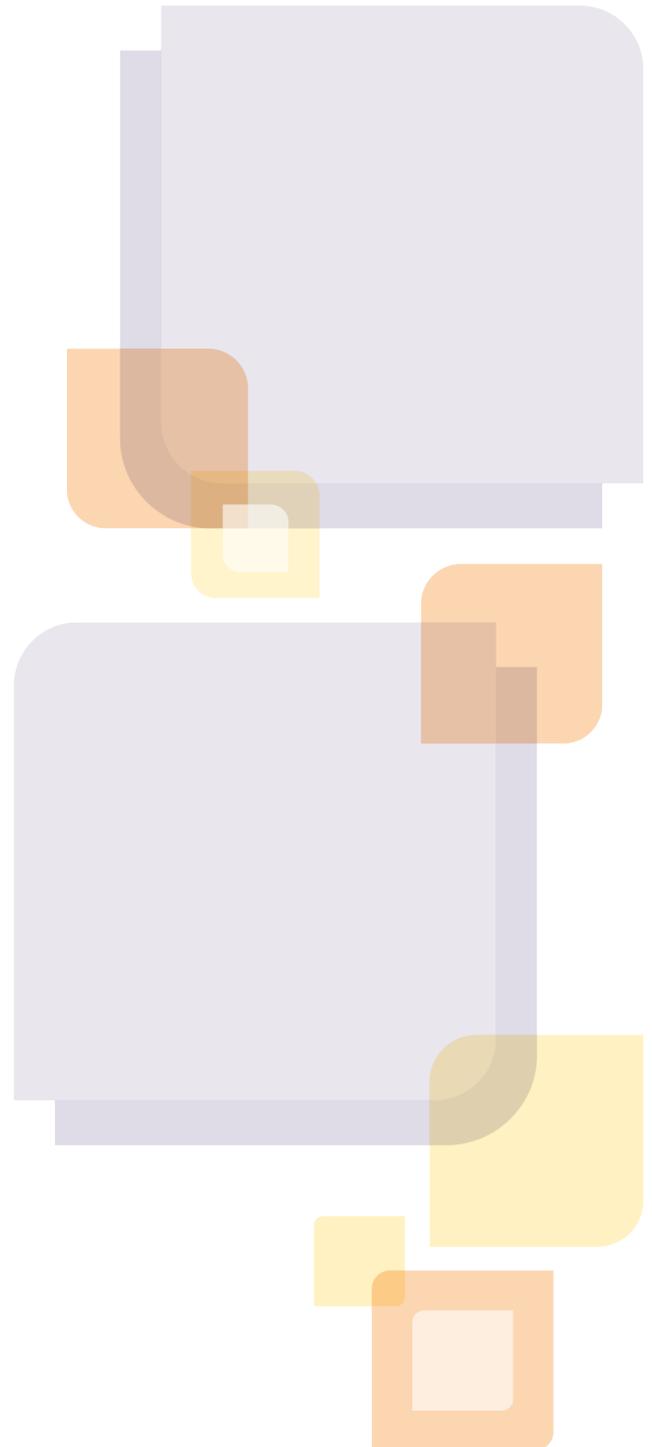
Aleppo City

Aleppo is the industrial capital of Syria and the first Governorate in terms of number of population. It was subject to severe damage and brutal battles, siege, pillage, and grave violations for civilians including children and adolescents. The city has been under the control of GoS since 2017, however, the northern rural areas are under control of the Turkish--backed opposition. The estimated population of the city of Aleppo in 2020 was 1,630,000, of which 249,000 are IDPs. The poverty rate reached 88 percent in 2019 and basic education enrolment was 75 percent.

Aspirations and interests:

"هدفي الزواج وتكوين العائلة ليس لدي طموح بالدراسة أو العمل وأريد أن أصبح ربة منزل لأن الدراسة لا تنفع الفتاة "

"My goal is to get married and create a family, I do not have ambitions to study or work, and I want to become a housewife I believe that the study does not benefit girl" (Aleppo girl 16-18)

- **Girls 13-15:** These girls aim to be doctors, dentists, engineers, lawyers, pharmacists or teachers in the future. Many girls are interested in playing music, practising sport, karate, yoga or singing. Some girls hope to support people in need and challenge injustice. Many expressed their wish to travel outside Syria to study, work and live.
- **Boys 13-15:** These boys aim to be military officers, lawyers and football players. Most of them have sport as a hobby. They have poor skills in drawing and handwriting which reflect the poor quality of education. Most of them assured the importance of education and the need for more awareness to encourage adolescents and families to be more engaged in the education process.
- **Girls 16-18:** Many girls in this age group are looking to work in a practical and income-generating sector like trade, broadcasting, directing, writing, fashion and design, or as a dental prosthetist. Some girls mentioned the importance of generating income from online jobs. Few of them aim to work in civil society to help children and people in need.
- **Boys 16-18:** These boys aim to have careers that guarantee income and social stability like establishing a company for elevators or a café.

A few boys want to be professional football players, while one of them wants to be an influential decision-maker. The struggle between work and study appeared in this group. Some of them expressed their desire to support people in need. Many of them want to travel to work outside the country or to learn about other cultures. The participants have different hobbies including sports and enjoying nature.
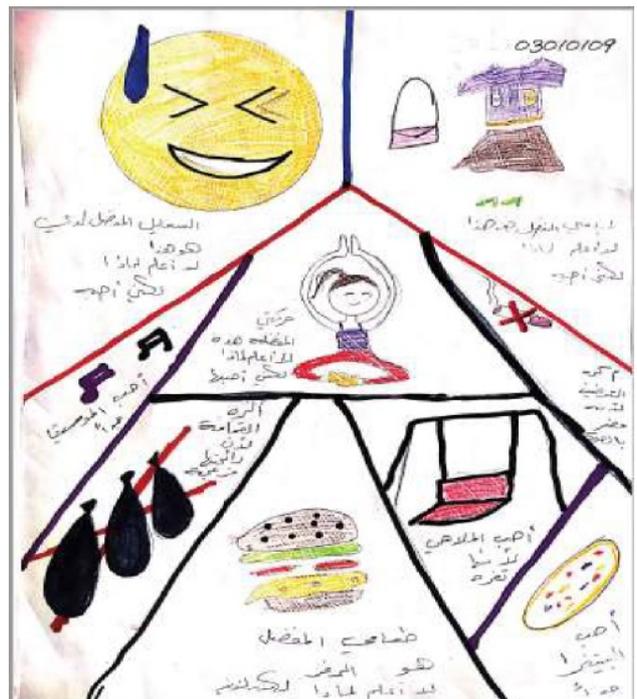
Support mechanisms:

"عدم السماح لي باستكمال تعليمي لأنني فتاة وكذلك لا يفضلون العمل للفتاة"

"They do not let me complete my education because I am a girl and they don't prefer her to work " (Aleppo girl 13-15)

- **Girls 13-15:** Many girls feel safe and supported by their families, however, the girls suffer more compared to boys due to the traditions that favour the male members of the family.

Contextual challenges:

"بسبب ظروفنا السيئة نرى أن العلم وتحقيق طموحنا أصبح أمر صعب علينا، فكل طموح وكل مرحلة دراسية تحتاج إلى المال"

"**Because of our bad circumstances, we see that learning and achieving our ambition has become difficult for us. Every ambition and every stage of study needs money**" (Aleppo boy 13-15)

"اعتبار بعض الفتيات أن جنسهم هو عائق في تحقيق طموحهم"

"**Some girls consider their sex an obstacle to achieving their ambitions**" (Aleppo girl 16-18)

"اليأس نتيجة الظروف التي يمرون ويشعرون بها والأوضاع التي عاشوها، فمثلا كلمة الموت رافقتهم في كثير من أيامهم عكس الجيل السابق الذي لم يكن يعرف الموت في عمر المراهقة"

"**The despair because of conditions and circumstances they suffered from, for example, "Death" a word that accompanied them in many of their days, unlike the previous generation who did not know death in adolescence**" (Aleppo KI)

"العنف الموجه ضد الفتيات اليافعات وإرغامهن على الزواج، فضلا على العنف الجسدي واللفظي الذي يتعرض له الذكور من قبل أرباب العمل و الذي ترافق مع غياب الدور الفعال للجمعيات والمنظمات المدنية والإنسانية"

"**Violence directed against adolescent girls and they forced to get married, as well as physical and verbal violence against boys by employers, these were associated with the absence of effective role for civil and humanitarian associations.** " (Aleppo KI)

- **Girls 13-15:** Many girls are living in families that lost one or more of their members due to death or displacement. A few girls highlighted their fear of war and the absence of justice. Poverty and poor living conditions were common challenges for most adolescents, associated with the increased cost of education. This hardship forced many children and adolescents to leave school to work or get married at an early age.

- **Boys 13-15:** These boys did not mention war or displacement, but discussed the poverty and hard economic situation that negatively affected enrolment and the quality of education.

- **Girls 16-18:** These girls highlighted the inequality between girls and boys which affects the study and work opportunities for girls. The war, violence and displacement expanded this gap and forced many girls into early marriage and to drop out of school. Some of them mentioned harassment as an increasing challenge that girls face at this age. They also highlighted the traditions that constrained girls from traveling or accessing education. Many girls pointed out that the cost of education and poverty is the main challenge to complete their education.

- **Boys 16-18:** Among the main challenges they are facing, they identified military conscription, the consequences of war including the increased cost of living and widespread poverty.

- **Adults:** One of the most important factors is the violent conflict, which affected feeling secure and the psychological health of adolescents and their vision for the future, and also increased poverty and destroyed many educational institutions. Caregivers asserted that the war, violence and the absence of stability and security are the most serious challenges that hindered the education process. They confirmed that the areas that were directly affected by the war are still destroyed, however, the situation in East Aleppo is much worse compared to the West. They highlighted the waves of displacement that created difficult conditions on the displaced and host communities and affected the adolescents. Moreover, the economic hardship and huge disparities between the social classes of society increased the educational gap and forced some parents to marry off their daughters or send boys to work.
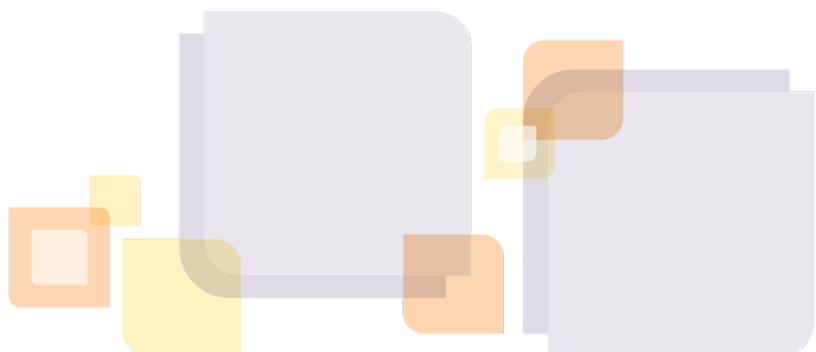
COVID-19.

"توقف اليافع عن الدراسة، والقرارات التي تم ترفيع كل الطلاب الى السنة التالية بدون إجراء أي فحص، وهنا تكمن المشكلة حيث خلقت هذه القرارات فجوة كبيرة بنقص المعلومات عند تغيبهم للمدرسة وعدم تعويضها أو ترميمها"

"The cessation of studies, and the decisions to promote all students to the next year without taking any exams, these decisions led to a great lack of information when they were absent from school and did not compensate or restore it" (Aleppo KI)

- **Girls 13-15:** COVID-19 has disrupted the education process even more and caused substantial loss for adolescents.
- **Girls 16-18:** COVID-19 as another factor that negatively affected the education process
- **Adults:** The COVID-19 pandemic affected the education process through a long closure of schools, while distance learning was inequitable and poor in Syria, especially for the poor who were unable to acquire the necessary equipment and afford the cost, in addition to the problems of the quality of Internet and power outage which affected everyone. Moreover, students moved to the next grades without completing the entire curriculum exams, which decreased the level of education. Key informants reported disparities in the educational levels between public and private schools, as the public ones did not take any serious steps to substitute educational losses. Furthermore, the pandemic increased domestic violence and caused psychological problems, such as despair and depression, which affected the educational performance of the adolescents.

Education system:

"من المقترحات هو تطوير المناهج، تدريب المعلمات على التعامل مع ذوي الإعاقة وزيادة المدارس الدامجة"

"Among the suggestions are developing curricula, training teachers to deal with people with disabilities, and increasing inclusive schools" (Aleppo girls 16-18)

- **Girls 13-15:** These girls mention war as the main cause of deterioration of education, as

the conflict destroyed schools and teachers fled and the population were displaced. Most of the girls described the quality of education as low, with a lack of qualified teachers, lack of interactive approaches, weak teaching of foreign languages, in addition to the long distance between girls' homes and schools. Education became so expensive and communities' appreciation for education has declined, and schools witnessed increased bullying of students with disabilities. The girls suggested the importance of increasing the number of schools, supporting education via NGOs and United Nations agencies, training teachers, respecting the right to education for people with disabilities, providing the needed equipment and facilities, and finally developing the more interactive education approaches
- **Boys 13-15:** Many identified education challenges like the lack of qualified teachers, violence by teachers, and lack of transportation. A few mentioned the importance of addressing the issue of disability and developing new approaches to engage people with disabilities in the education process.
- **Girls 16-18:** Many criticized the current education process due to the traditional and non-interactive teaching approaches, lack of qualified teachers, and lack of engagement with students with disabilities.
- **Boys 16-18:** This group criticized the poor education process and traditional teaching approaches, in addition to the financial constraints to education enrolment.
- **Adults:** They recognised that the key challenges to adolescent education are: economic - poverty, high cost of living, and unemployment; social and institutional - including the lack of a safe environment, the spread of violence, the lack of sufficient educational staff, harassment, discrimination, verbal and physical violence and tradition. They reported the absence of a real role for associations and organizations to solve this problem.

Access to education was affected by the violent conflict especially in areas impacted by massive bombing and military operations. Many schools were out of service or destroyed and displaced children had to join crowded schools, which decreased the class space and severely affected education quality. Moreover,

the repercussions of the war affected the economy and created many crises that affected education, such as the transportation crisis, the high cost of education and a decrease in real wages. Many families could not afford the costs of education especially for students in the last high school grade. With low salaries and wages, teachers sought different opportunities in the private sector. Education has become a business and the student is a commodity and a source of profit for teachers, institutions and commercial educational institutes.

Adults mentioned additional challenges including the lack of qualified and sufficient educational staff to manage new curricula, poor infrastructure, a lack of modern educational equipment, the migration of good teachers, overcrowded classes, low quality education in content and method (mainly in public schools) which forced students to rely on high-cost private classes or institutes, increased dropout rates due to the distance of schools from homes and the high cost of transportation, as well as families' inability to provide their children with educational materials, such as stationery, uniforms, books and others.

Drivers of dropout

Adults: The decreasing standard of living forces many students to leave school, besides preventing girls from going to school for cultural norms or safety concerns. The average age of dropout for boys ranges between 14 to 16, while girls drop out earlier (10-12 years old). Reasons for dropout change according to sex, rural-urban origin and the economic status of the families. For boys, dropout is mainly due to joining the labour market to support their families, or the belief in the unimportance of education especially in 10th and 11th grades. The high share of students who were forced to drop out because of the war conditions prefer to work rather than study. Lack of awareness and care from the family, and the low quality of education, affect the education retention rate. Key informants mentioned that the main reasons for girls' drop out are the family's concerns about security issues, not joining mixed-sex schools or early marriage in conservative and

rural areas. However, the familiarisation and integration with different cultures and societies, increased awareness through social media platforms, and the fact that women are forced to work due to poor living conditions and financial needs, led to an increase in their awareness of the importance of education.

English language and digital skills

"أول برنامج يجب تطبيقه على اليافعات للتعرف على حقوقهن والنضال للحفاظ عليها وشرح واضح لأهمية المرأة ودورها في المجتمع وممارستها لحقوقها في حرية التعبير والاختيار، بالإضافة إلى برامج ترفيهية ثقافية للتعويض الفتيات عما يتعرضن له من حرمان وتهميش وعنف سواء ضمن العائلة أو في المجتمع"

"The first programme that must be applied to girls is to identify their rights and struggle to preserve them, and a clear explanation of the importance of women and their role in society and the exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and choice, in addition to cultural and entertainment programmes to compensate girls for the deprivation, marginalization and violence they are subjected to, whether within the family or in society" (Aleppo KI)

Adults: Informal education and language programmes were appreciated, especially by people who cannot afford to pay for education in private institutes and academies, through internationally recognized apps, such as Babel, Duolingo, and Udemy. These programmes could be complementary to the school curricula. In Aleppo, some Informal education and language initiatives appeared in universities or schools, such as the "Shash" initiative which aimed to support students in the first year of scientific research. However, only a limited number of NGOs provided language courses.
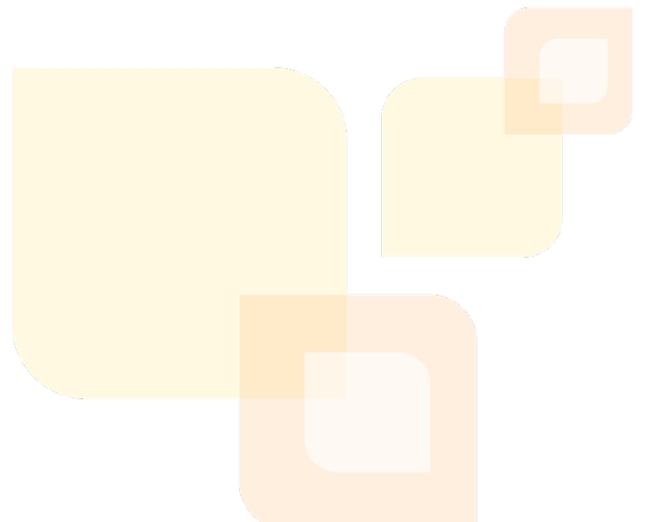
Internet use and digital learning:

"الانترنت فرصة كبيرة جدا لمتابعة التعليم وتطوير الذات وزيادة المعلومات"

"The Internet is a very big opportunity to pursue education, self-development and increase information" (Aleppo KI)

"أصبح بالإمكان لبعض الفئات من المجتمع أن تصل إلى التعليم والدروس عن طريق الانترنت، كالنساء والفتيات بسبب منعهم من الذهاب إلى المدرسة أو المعهد من قبل رجالهن بحجة الاختلاط، فمع التعلم عن بعد أصبح بإمكان الأهالي مراقبة أبنائهم ومعرفة المحتوى العلمي المعطى لهم والحد من الاختلاط الغير مقبول عند معتقدات مجتمعات معينة"

"It has become possible for some groups of society to access education and lessons via the Internet, such as women and girls, because they were prevented from going to school or institute by their men under the pretext of mixing. With distance learning, parents can monitor their children and know the scientific content given to them and limit the mixing of others. It is acceptable in the beliefs of certain societies" (Alepppo KI)

- **Girls 13-15:** Many girls identified advantages of ICT in terms of accessing knowledge, learning, and information, communication with friends and family members abroad, entertainment, and openness to other cultures.
- **Boys 13-15:** These boys mentioned positive sides like access to information, communication and reading.
- **Girls 16-18:** This group consider ICT an opportunity to access knowledge, information, entertainment, income and job opportunities, and communication with new friends. The majority focused on the importance of the Internet in advocating for humanitarian and political issues.
- **Boys 16-18:** These boys identified advantages of ICT such as learning, professional training, and generating income.
- **Adults:** ICTs can be a means to access knowledge, skills, entertainment and communication. It opens different sources of information and knowledge and facilitates access to foreign sites that facilitate learning foreign languages to open up more opportunities for them in the future. Key informants mentioned that using ICT in educational processes, such as distance learning, documentaries, educational videos and records, make education more exciting and easier for adolescents.

Negative aspects:

"وتم الاختلاف أيضاً على أن الانترنت لا يفيدنا جداً في الاطلاع على الثقافات الأخرى لأن الانترنت قد يمدنا بمعلومات خاطئة عنها"

"The Internet is not very useful for learning about other cultures because the Internet may give us false information about others" (boy 16-18 Aleppo)

- **Girls 13-15:** This group mentioned several disadvantages of ICT, including wasting time, bad and violent content, isolation, distraction from study, addiction, insecurity and lack of privacy. The girls debated whether the reason for distraction from study is Internet or lack of skill in time management.
- **Boys 13-15:** This group listed disadvantages including lack of security, bad content, family fragmentation and dangerous games.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls identified some negative aspects of ICT like bullying, addiction, harassment and hacking. The girls were divided into those who considered the Internet as a threat to adolescents or not, as well as those who considered entertainment a positive or negative aspect.
- **Boys 16-18:** This group identified negative aspects of ICTs like lack of privacy, isolation and bad content. They debated over the role of the Internet in introducing new cultures, as some of them said that false information may harm relations with other cultures. In another debate on the risk of addiction, some claimed that it should be the responsibility of

adolescents to use the Internet wisely.

- **Adults:** Key informants and caregivers agreed that ICT was a double-edged sword, and can be a way of distracting, isolating and wasting time with very dangerous and serious results. One negative side of ICT is the fake accounts and websites that bring negative phenomena, such as polarisation, suicide and violence. Besides, the Internet is used for communication rather than learning, and entertainment rather than obtaining skills and knowledge, as well as providing easy access for adolescents to improper sites. Caregivers referred that the use of the Internet can limit the ability of children to think and increase laziness and social isolation.

## Access to the Internet and digital learning opportunities:

- **Boys 13-15:** this group referred to the weak and costly Internet services.
- **Adults:** Although online learning is a good advantage of ICT for many, especially under the conditions of war or pandemic, this opportunity is inaccessible for the poor due to the high costs of access to the Internet and good equipment. This widens the inequality between social classes not only in education but in development, technology and competence. Nevertheless, the main difficulties to benefit from ICT in Syria are weak communication services, lack of proper and effective infrastructure, frequent power outages and high costs of Internet service. Moreover, obtaining the required equipment, such as laptops, tablets and mobile phones, is unaffordable for many Syrian families. In some cases, home learning could be very difficult due to the lack of a comfortable and suitable atmosphere at home,, and some students or teachers do not have adequate skills to use ICT.

Recommendations by key informants and caregivers

- Provide sufficient qualified schools and educational staff to eliminate the need for private classes.
- Conduct awareness campaigns on the importance of completing education and providing school supplies and auxiliary

educational materials.
- Increase educational centres and schools, especially in the affected areas;
- Conduct training courses for teaching staff, with new interactive educational methods and curricula based on updated theoretical and applied research to encourage creativity and initiation.
- Develop networking between NGOs and the Ministry of Education to attract and reach out to a large number of students.
- Design a monitoring and evaluation system to measure the impact of the educational process as a whole.
- Create informal learning programmes that:
  - Include themes such as mathematics, management and business, administration skills, communication skills, social consolidation skills, citizenship, research skills, IT skills, sexual education, e-marketing, content writing, translation, design and languages. One of the key informants suggested a programme for girls focusing on their rights to freedom of expression and choice.
  - Cover the mental, physical, intellectual and spiritual development of adolescents.
  - Recruit educational staff or trainers who should be well-educated, have relevant skills and academic education and sufficient vocational and academic experience.
  - Guarantee the sustainability and inclusivity of the programme.
  - Collaborate between schools and NGOs in terms of equipment and place.
  - The caregivers and parents did not agree about single- or mixed-sex groups.
  - Conduct the programme during the weekend and holidays, two to three hours per day.
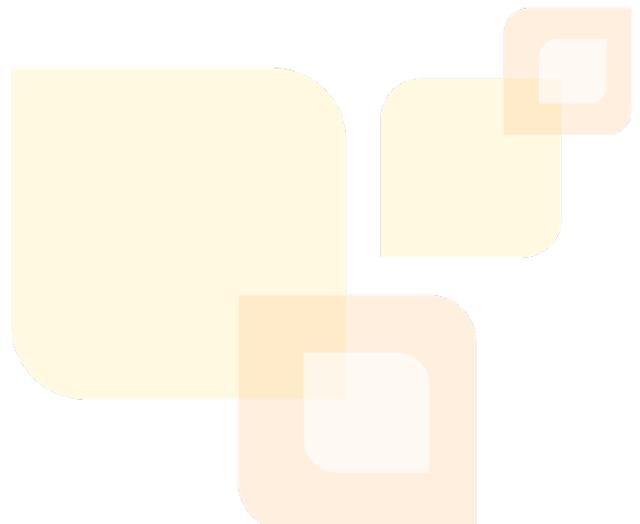
Damascus

The Syrian capital witnessed military operations and insecurity, but this was less intense than for Rural Damascus and Aleppo, for example. It suffered destruction in some neighbourhoods and received many displaced persons. It is under GoS control, and the estimated number of people in the Governorate is 1,787,000 of whom 625,000 were IDPs in 2020. The estimated poverty rate was 81 percent and basic education enrolment was 71 percent in 2019 (SCPR, 2020).

16-18 year-old boys workshop groups

Aspirations and interests:
- **Girls 13-15:** Most girls chose conventional future careers that are most approved by parents and respected by society, such as a doctor, dentist, pharmacist, engineer or teacher. Two girls aim to become writers, another two want to be nurses or social workers. They had diversified hobbies like sports, reading, drawing, outdoor activities, listening to music, and playing video games. Some girls expressed their optimism and positive outlook for the future.
- **Boys 13-15:** Half of the boys in this group aim to travel, while the difficulty of learning

languages was mentioned as one of the challenges for travelling. Four out of nine boys wanted to become football players. Their main challenges were related to the difficulty of getting enrolled in national teams or receiving coaching. One boy had a clear goal of becoming a professional carpenter as he is already working in carpentry and has good support from his employer. One boy wants to become an engineer and finds studying at school to be his biggest challenge. In terms of hobbies, most expressed their love for sports activities, namely football and swimming, and playing games, and a few like music and singing.
- **Girls 16-18:** Girls in this group reflected a positive overall attitude and were outspoken. Interestingly, the idea of travelling was mentioned by four girls who expressed their interest in discovering the world. Girls' ambitions for varied between becoming a doctor, businesswoman, nurse, civil engineer, computer engineer or social worker/counsellor. They had a wide range of interests and hobbies from swimming to playing music, reading and writing poetry and drawing, among others.
- **Boys 16-18:** Most of the boys were into football playing or swimming, while one of them favoured music. Their interests and aspirations for their future professions varied between electronic engineer, football player, lawyer and famous actor.
- **Adults:** The deteriorating financial and economic status of adolescents' families, the huge disparity in access to educational opportunities, as well as pessimism due to military conscription, seriously affected the psychological state of adolescents. They felt lost, anxious, stressed, pressured and preferred to travel abroad regardless of their qualifications, competencies, abilities and ambitions.

Support mechanisms:
- **Girls 13-15:** When addressing the challenges that could hinder them from achieving their goals, most of these girls mentioned the difficulty and highly demanding nature of their school studies, while all agreed that the support of parents and teachers and their overall environments helped them to face these challenges.
- **Boys 13-15:** Some boys mentioned the

support of their parents, or of their friends, others emphasized their own perseverance and personal motivation as their main drivers.

- **Girls 16-18:** The support for these girls seemed to come from parents and the surrounding community, but mostly from their own strong sense of perseverance and determination.
- **Boys 16-18:** These boys all seemed to get their drive from the support of their parents and friends, their own sense of determination or the inspiring success stories of others.
- **Adults:** Caregivers mentioned the lack of understanding and communication between parents and their children, as well as generational differences in terms of technology and thinking. Generally, an educated family that believes in the importance of education helps the student to complete their studies. Some key informants stated that girls are taking their rights exactly like boys in urban areas. Despite societal awareness of the importance of education for girls, the war conditions forced many families to remove girls from school and marry them to protect them. Also, girls in rural areas are more often forced into early marriage or to stay at home. The role of the family to direct adolescents towards effective use of the Internet is completely absent, which increases the risks of misuse.

Contextual challenges:

Adults: In Damascus, key informants and caregivers agreed that the main challenges faced by adolescents are war, insecurity, the deteriorating economic situation and the lack of prospects. Moreover, sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic have led to the spread of poverty, unemployment and increased cost of living. Adolescents were exposed to violence, drugs, recruitment to armed groups, the impact of social norms and traditions due to wrong religious concepts and low family education, as well as displacement conditions. Displaced adolescents, particularly, faced harassment, violence, bullying and discrimination in schools with a lack of educational staff who can deal properly with these negative phenomena. Finally, holding the burden of their family and feeling the responsibility to support them due to the loss of a breadwinner increased the cases of child labour and early marriage.

COVID-19:

Adults: Caregivers highlighted the degradation in the quality of education during COVID-19, as some schools adopted distance learning, but only some groups benefited from it due to poverty, poor infrastructure and displacement conditions. Additionally, schools were not qualified to apply online learning in terms of staff, quality and logistics. Key informants explained that adolescents had problems with time management, lack of Internet or electricity, domestic violence and family disputes. The pandemic caused serious effects on psychological health because of lockdown, lack of communication with friends, the spread of death and disease, and misuse of social media. There were no summer clubs or activities, and most adolescent activities were confined to the home and technology. In schools, there was an abbreviation in curriculum and students succeeded to the next stage without exams.

Education system:

"التعليم التقليدي يدفع الى ترك المدرسة بسبب جموده والمعاملة السيئة وغياب جودة التعليم"

"Formal education forced adolescents to drop out of school because of its rigidity, bad treatment and lack of quality education" (Damascus Girl 13-15)

- **Girls 13-15:** Girls mentioned the poor quality of education, lack of qualified teachers, lack of schools and transportation difficulties and expense, in addition to the increased cost of education. Some girls mentioned the spread of violence and bullying in schools. The recommendations of this group were to provide training for teachers and to engage and support local organizations to fill the gap in alternative education.
- **Boys 13-15:** This group considered that the major problems of conventional education lie in the poor quality of teaching, lack of sufficient schools and transportation. They highlighted the need for training of teachers to improve the quality of teaching and called for the support of local NGOs in providing free school materials, awareness sessions on the best use of digital learning, and a subsidized plan for IT equipment and devices.
- **Girls 16-18:** One of the biggest challenges

shared by this group was the difficulty of school studies and fear of the national Baccalaureate exam. Conventional education still suffers from critical shortcomings, such as poor infrastructure and lack of transportation, especially in rural areas, and poor quality due to the incompetence of teachers, lack of integration of people with disabilities and the constant change to the curriculum, which is poorly taught.

- **Boys 16-18:** The group highlighted several challenges in the situation of conventional education. Schools are overcrowded and poorly equipped and the quality of education is poor due to the incompetence of teachers. The boys recommended the provision of intensified courses to bridge the learning gap of dropout students, as well as increase in teacher salaries to match the expected work and efforts, and efforts of institutes and learning centres in providing parallel school support.

- **Adults:** Schools suffer from a shortage of qualified educational cadres due to migration and travel abroad, overcrowded classes, problems in the quality of education and curricula, and lack of educational materials and equipment. In some areas, there is a lack of basic infrastructure and semi-destroyed schools, in other areas, services and infrastructure are very poor, with regards to toilets, drinking places, laboratories or public utilities, and even heating. Some key informants emphasised that the failure of the education process was caused by the ineffective governmental institutional system, which existed before the war or COVID-19.

Some key informants and many caregivers highlighted the huge difference between public and private schools in terms of quality and teaching methods, which created a huge gap between the students of public and private schools. Caregivers also mentioned that economic hardship affected the adolescents' education, as many families could not afford the required school supplies, such as stationery and books, or to register them in private lessons.

Some key informants mentioned that civil society organizations can play a positive role, but are bound by funders' goals and conditions. There are no organizations that work directly on adolescent issues, because they are focusing on humanitarian needs such as distributing in-kind aid, or protection programmes such as women empowerment, harassment and domestic violence. United Nations organisations such as UNICEF work to provide students with stationery and books, and UNDP conducted a virtual exhibition targeted at a small category of adolescents who have modern and high-quality mobiles, tablets or laptops with the high capacity needed to download and function the programmes or apps. These efforts are very humble compared to the urgent needs of adolescents.

Drivers of dropout

Adults: The school dropout rate increases after the ninth grade due to violence, bullying and the economic hardship that forces boys to work and help their families, or as for girls, when they reach the preparatory stage.

English language and digital skills

Adults: Some civil and private organizations worked on informal education and language programmes inside Syria or from abroad through initiatives in partnership with local actors, such as the Syrian Youth Association, but these are very limited. For example, there was a robotics competition conducted by the Syrian Society for Informatics, and Plato Clubs and institutes offer English courses to adolescents. Key informants emphasised that informal learning programmes are necessary and important for accessing knowledge like at school. Furthermore, the importance of these programmes is greater in the countryside than in Damascus, because of disparities and the gap in educational levels. Today, the Internet and e-learning are an essential alternative to cover existing educational gaps.

Internet use and digital learning:

"موثوقية التعلم عن بعد أقل من موثوقية التعلم في المدارس مما يستدعي خبرة عالية لدى المعلمين"

"**The reliability of distance learning is less than that of learning in schools, which calls for a high level of expertise for teachers**" (Damascus girl 13-15)

"التعلم الافتراضي، من أهم وسائل التعلم الحديث الذي يتجاوز مشاكل التعليم التقليدي وعدم المساواة في وصول الفتيات الى المدراس"

"Virtual learning is one of the most important means of modern learning that transcends the problems of traditional education and the inequality of girls' access to school" (Damascus girl 16-18)

- **Girls 13-15:** These girls had different points of view about ICT, with social networking, entertainment and accessing information amongst the most important positives.
- **Boys 13-15:** Two out of nine boys said they knew nothing about the Internet, while most of the others found that the opportunity to connect with friends from a distance was one of its key advantages, as well as accessing information and learning languages. The prominent view in this group was that the advantages of digital learning surpassed its disadvantages.
- **Girls 16-18:** All of these girls found ICT very useful to access information, enrich knowledge, learn and stay connected with friends and family. Some added its usefulness for entertainment.
- **Boys 16-18:** Most of these boys found that the opportunity to stay in touch with people was one of the key positives of the digital space, while one mentioned the importance of accessing information.
- **Adults:** This group stated that one of the most important features of ICT is the ability to access new information, benefit from distance learning programmes, as well as communicate with people with different cultures to break barriers of spaces and enrich adolescents culturally and socially. It also stimulates adolescent creativity and improves discovery of self-skills. It has become necessary to have the skills of using digital platforms and to work remotely.

Negative aspects:

"قبل 15 عاماً، كيف كان الإنسان يتميز؟ إذا كان دارساً ونشيطاً في المدرسة وحصل على علامات عالية، أما الآن فيكفي ليتميز أن ينشر مجموعة صور على إنستغرام"

"15 years ago, how could someone be distinguished? If he studied well, be active in the school and got grades, but now, he could be distinguished, if he shared three of four photos on Instagram" (Caregiver, Damascus)

- **Girls 13-15:** This group highlighted the

absence of safety, threats of exploitation, misleading information and the waste of time as serious pitfalls. Some believed that the risks and threats of the digital field surpassed its advantages; while others elucidated that it was a matter of awareness and self-discipline to control and mitigate these threats.

- **Boys 13-15:** The boys considered the main disadvantages to be the threat of lack of security, waste of time and false information, which were considered avoidable when users are well-informed and have control over the time spent on the Internet.
- **Girls 16-18:** This group agreed on the threats as a result of lack of security, isolation, waste of time and addiction. However, they had conflicting opinions on whether the advantages outweighed the disadvantages, as some believed that the threats could be managed through awareness and self-discipline,, while others disagreed.
- **Boys 16-18:** All of these boys agreed on the critical threats of the Internet, such as the exposure to dangerous content that could promote a culture of violence, lack of safety, waste of time, false information and exploitation. In the end, there was no consensus on whether the advantages of the digital space surpassed its disadvantages.
- **Adults:** Although social networking gives adolescents the benefits to find new connections, they may find themselves disconnected from their real-life friends and family. The Internet turns out to be a means for entertainment rather than education, and is associated with addiction, time-wasting and distractions. Some adolescents depend on the Internet to find a ready solution for their homework, which slows down their critical thinking.

Access to the Internet and digital learning opportunities:

- **Girls 13-15:** Two girls abstained from responding to these questions as they had no access to the Internet. This group compared conventional learning with digital learning and, for many, digital learning lacked some of the key prerequisites, such as safety and equal access to good connectivity, equipment and financial means. But it also provided an alternative learning opportunity that

overcomes the challenges of conventional education, such as outdated teaching methods and the lack of transportation. For girls, two key characteristics were added to conventional education: its mandate to reach all children, unlike digital learning; and its low quality due to the incompetence of teachers.

- **Boys 13-15:** Some found digital learning an opportunity to overcome the disadvantages of conventional education, while others believed that conventional education has more credibility and needs to be more supported and improved. Most of this group identified that the key ills of digital learning lie in the lack of access to the Internet and its high cost.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls found that digital learning is very useful in overcoming distance, time and access challenges that students usually struggle with in conventional education, especially girls. But they also highlighted the lack of readiness for using digital learning due to poor connectivity, lack of trained teachers, lack of credibility and the blocking of many sites. Finally, girls in this group called for providing ongoing awareness sessions on the use of digital learning and for improving the "qualitative" and "quantitative" capacities of the schools.
- **Boys 16-18:** When discussing digital learning, most of these boys highlighted its importance in light of the technological advancement in the world today. Yet, in their own contexts, digital learning was not possible due to the absence of prerequisites such as infrastructure (electricity and connectivity), equipment and devices, and awareness of effective and safe use.
- **Adults:** This group considered that the spread of smart mobile devices among adolescents has increased their access to information on the Internet.

Recommendations by key informants and caregivers

- Develop the current curriculum towards modern methods based on critical thinking and research skills; in addition to using interactive approaches, such as theatre or arts, to ease psychological pressure and provide a secure space for adolescents to express their ideas through educational, entertainment or technological activities.

- Monitor the performance of teachers and school management.
- Rehabilitate school infrastructure, provide qualified and motivated teachers and create friendly spaces for adolescents.
- Provide free services for adolescents, such as transportation or Internet packages.
- Promote learning foreign languages and sports, painting and similar classes in public schools.
- Facilitate alternative or intensive education and coordination with public authorities.
- Develop the role of NGOs and local initiatives to reach out to adolescents. Attract adolescents to develop their technical, linguistic and social skills through collaborative efforts with NGOs.
- Provide awareness sessions for girls who are married at an early age to encourage them to continue their education.
- Create informal learning programmes that:
  - Use participatory approaches with adolescents to recognize their needs and design programmes.
  - Include themes like life skills, psychological therapy, self-defence skills, technical skills, communications skills, English and other language skills, active citizenship, sexual awareness, art, music, sports, self-protection and mathematics.
  - Choose qualified, educated, experienced staff to manage the programmes.
  - Define the type of programmes as mixed- or single-sex groups based on the different cultures and social norms in Damascus society.
  - Conduct the programmes on holidays, morning and evening sessions.

East Ghouta

East Ghouta is part of the Rural Damascus Governorate, which witnessed several massive military operations and a long brutal siege that resulted in massive loss of human life, human and physical capital, and saw most of its population forcibly displaced. It is under GoS control and the estimated number of people in the region was 168,000 in 2020. The estimated poverty rate was 91 percent and enrolment in basic education was 65 percent in 2019 (SCPR, 2020).

Aspirations and interests:

"الطموح السفر لأي بلد لأن الوضع العام في البلد يفتقر لأبسط مقومات الحياة"

"**The ambition is to travel to any country because the general situation in the country lacks the most necessities of life**" (Boy 16-18 East Ghouta)

"هناك جزء من الأهل يفضلون تزويج بناتهم ومعظم الفتيات الذين تزوجوا بعمر مبكر تعرضوا للطلاق وبعدها عادوا للدراسة لأنهم عرفوا أن التعليم سبيل للحياة الكريمة وحفظ الكرامة "

"**Some of the parents prefer to marry off their daughters. However, most of those girls who married at an early age divorced later, then returned to education. They were aware after marriage experience that education is the way to a decent and dignified life**" (East Ghouta KI)

- **Girls 13-15:** Some girls aim to achieve high-level careers, such as a lawyer, engineer, doctor, police officer or criminal investigator, while many want to contribute to the betterment of their societies and help others, defend women rights and enhance justice. Other girls aim for practical careers, such as cook, hairdresser or teacher. They have hobbies like reading, sport, hanging out with friends, watching TV, drawing and cooking.
- **Boys 13-15:** The group included boys who dropped out of school to engage in a vocational job and those who are keen to pursue university studies and achieve their dream job. As to the desired occupations, engineering was the most common among this group. Some of them would like to be a tiler, carpenter or manager. Sports represented a key element in boys' lives. Music, movies and love for nature were some of their common interests. Some of them concentrated on travel abroad as an exit from the current situation.
- **Girls 16-18:** The girls were very diverse, as around one third were out of school and married, some were mothers of two children, two were pregnant, and another was divorced. One girl, who is a mother of two and whose husband does not allow her to leave the house, was a high performing student until she left school in grade 9. The girls indicated their ambitions of being doctors, pharmacists, teachers and lawyers, although many of them were already out of school. They have different hobbies, such as sport, wool handicraft, reading, drawing, photography and singing.
- **Boys 16-18:** Boys in this group loved sports, mathematics and volunteer work. Many expressed their wish to travel, avoid military service and leave the country for better opportunities. Seventy percent of the boys worked in a job, though none of them was out of school. Most of them had to work because of financial difficulties and to help their families. Many of them wanted to become engineers, while few others opted for opening a hair salon or mechanic.

Support mechanisms:

- **Girls 13-15:** The support and encouragement of families and friends was a common thread among most of the girls, except for a few cases where the girls either had to struggle with a family divorce or face the interference of extended family in the absence of the father. The conservative environment substantially constrained their relationships, work and study.
- **Boys 13-15:** Most of them had support from family, friends and society.
- **Girls 16-18:** Some families did not support the education of girls beyond elementary school due to social and economic factors.
- **Boys 16-18:** Boys in this group were aware of the critical limitations that hinder their pathways. Nevertheless, they were building on their strong family and friend networks, working hard while studying in the most challenging conditions.

Contextual challenges:

- **Girls 13-15:** This group participated actively in the exercises, yet they represented the deep impact of conflict on this region as some of them have difficulties in writing their ideas correctly due to several interruptions of education during the war, and one girl who lost her father is illiterate. The war and lack of security resulted in destroyed infrastructure, loss of human capital, widespread fear and lack of trust, in addition to massive repeated displacement. One girl added the lack of rule of law and justice. The girls also highlighted poverty and lack of jobs due to the war, which negatively affected their living conditions and forced many of them to work, early marriage, and drop out of school due to the financial cost.
- **Boys 13-15:** This group highlighted the role of conflict indirectly, as they mentioned the challenges of destroyed schools and roads, in addition to displacement of the population. They also mentioned widespread poverty in the region, which forced many adolescents to work and drop out of school.
- **Girls 16-18:** This group recognised that the conflict and deprivation have increased child labour among boys and an increase of early marriage among the girls. It also led to the destruction of infrastructure including schools, displacement, deterioration of services, a surge in the cost of living and poverty.
- **Boys 16-18:** The boys highlighted conflict and insecurity indirectly by mentioning the destroyed schools and lack of public services and the enormous increase in the cost of living and poverty.
- **Adults:** The majority of key informants agreed that the main challenges currently facing adolescents are related to the consequences of the war and the long siege on East Ghouta. The region was subject to severe destruction resulting in extreme poverty of most families, a surge in the cost of living, lack of basic services and job opportunities. The war caused a spread of violent culture and behaviour within the family and society, discrimination, drug addiction, and serious psychological problems for adolescents. Caregivers and some key informants highlighted that the loss of one parent pushes adolescents to work at a very early age to take financial responsibility for the family. At work, those adolescents were the most exposed to violence, harassment and exploitation. The majority of caregivers and key informants agreed that early marriage linked to social norms and traditions is one of the risks that girls face in East Ghouta. Widespread poverty hindered the ability of many adolescents to continue their education. In addition, depression, anxiety, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorders among adolescents due to the war and violent conflict disturbed their ability and willingness to complete their education journey.

COVID-19:

- **Girls 13-15:** A few girls mentioned the impact of COVID-19 on the interruption of the education process.
- **Girls 16-18:** COVID-19 added a new burden to the education process and living conditions in the war-torn region.
- **Boys 16-**18: Some of them highlighted the role of COVID-19 on the interruption of study and work in their region.
- **Adults:** The group agreed that the COVID-19 negatively affected the education of adolescents and caused a general increase in the dropout rate. Essentially, the pandemic has not only affected education, but all sectors. Many economic activities were closed and that was associated with an increase in the cost of living and decline in sources of income. Additionally, there were severe problems in the energy, communication and transport sectors which directly affected the educational process. Key informants mentioned that COVID-19 consequences and school closures forced students to stay at home for a long time, creating a wide educational gap. Furthermore, caregivers mentioned that the shrinking of the full curriculum and promotion without exams have negatively affected the education process.

Education system:

" بدي روح كل يوم امشي ساعة على المدرسة بوصل تعبان"

"I walk every day an hour to school, I have arrived already tired" **(East Ghouta boy 13-15)**

"المدارس ما فيها حمامات وخزانات مي وما في صوابي وتدفئة"

"Schools do not have toilets, water tanks, and there is no heating" **(East Ghouta boy 13-15)**

"The main reason for dropping out is the difficulty of the curricula and the war played a major role in the students' dropping out of school for years or not entering schools at all" (East Ghouta KI)

- **Girls 13-15:** Educational challenges have become a big burden in the girls' lives. The density and difficulty of the curriculum, the deterioration of education quality, and the degradation of school infrastructure and management, coupled with the lack of transportation, have turned girls' education into an arduous effort, leading to increased scepticism of parents and withholding the continuation of their daughters' education. Some girls highlighted specific challenges, such as the lack of qualified teachers, the distance and cost of transportation, lack of equipment at schools, weak discipline in classes, bad treatment by teachers and management, costly private lessons, and weak teaching of foreign languages.
- **Boys 13-15:** In terms of educational challenges, they expressed their struggles with the difficult curriculum and the poor quality of teaching. Boys complained about the long distance to schools and the lack of transportation. Lack of heating, electricity and water tanks in schools in addition to the use of violence and the lack of counselling added to the boys' resentment of school education in the absence of alternative private or informal learning initiatives.
- **Girls 16-18:** The absence of quality and teacher commitment was raised as the top issue, although the description of the degraded school infrastructure was deplorable too. The group highlighted the poor management of education, in addition to the complex curriculum, lack of teaching tools, weak foreign language teaching, and expensive materials and private lessons.
- **Boys 16-18:** This group struggled as well from many educational deficiencies: poor infrastructure and services, poor teaching and management and a complex curriculum, in addition to the high cost of private lessons and institutes.
- **Adults:** This group asserted that institutional

weaknesses of the education system are related to poor infrastructure and management, a difficult curriculum which depends on classical methods (memorization and indoctrination), high cost of education, and lack of qualified teachers. One of the key informants highlighted that the lack of specialized teachers in Al-Ghouta of some basic subjects like Arabic, chemistry or physics force teachers to come from more distant regions. Caregivers highlighted the lack of equipment and educational materials in schools (computer equipment and laboratories), and overcrowded classes. Overall, many adolescents and parents have lost interest in education.

Drivers of dropout

According to key informants, the social challenges for education are the neglect of girls' education by parents who prefer early marriage for their daughter. However, many of the girls who married at an early age divorced later, and some then returned to education. The dropout age from school ranges between 13 and 16 years old. Only two key informants reported a starting age for dropout at primary school.

English language and digital skills

- **Girls 16-18:** Some girls called NGOs and civil society groups to invest in English language and digital literacy learning in order to bridge the learning gaps resulting from poor-performing school education and the recent COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Boys 16-18:** These boys suggested opening free courses to teach digital skills and foreign languages to facilitate access to eLearning.
- **Adults:** One key informant considered that informal learning and language programmes are as important as formal education. Informal programmes for foreign languages and digital skills are very important to compensate for the lack of relevant teaching staff in formal schools. Caregivers also emphasised the importance of informal learning, however, it is not available or accessible because of the high fees for these kinds of services. Few projects in East Ghouta provide free English, computer and vocational courses for adolescents. There is high demand for language and computer informal programmes especially from girls

Internet use and digital learning:

"أحياناً بعض المعلمين يشكلون مجموعات دراسية على برنامج الواتس ويوجد فائدة من خلال متابعتهم للطلاب ومشاركة المعلومات وحل المسائل وتصحيحها"

"**Some teachers form study groups on WhatsApp. It was useful, as teachers follow up on students, share information, solve problems, and correct homework**" (East Ghouta KI)

"للتكنولوجيا والعالم الرقمي دور كبير في التعلم بفاعلية وسرعة أكبر من التعليم التقليدي"

"**Technology and the digital world play a major role in learning more effectively and quickly than traditional education**" (East Ghouta caregiver)

- **Girls 13-15:** Many girls considered the pros of using the Internet to exceed the cons. They mentioned learning, access to information, entertainment, work and marketing.
- **Boys 13-15:** Some use ICT for entertainment, and mentioned the pros of ICT as access to information, learning at the time of COVID-19, communication and marketing.
- **Girls 16-18:** This group mentioned the advantages of using the internet, such as access to information and learning, work, developing skills, learning languages and entertainment.
- **Boys 16-18:** These boys highlighted the pros of ICT such as access to knowledge, information, learning, work and developing skills.
- **Adults:** This group agreed on the importance of ICT for adolescent education and life as a means of communication, learning and access to information.

Negative aspects:
- **Girls 13-15:** This group highlighted some disadvantages such as waste of time, abuse, harassment, addiction, bad content and hacking.
- **Boys 13-15:** These boys elaborated on cons such as waste of time, hacking and false information.
- **Girls 16-18:** The disadvantages according to the majority were waste of time, bad content, harassment, addiction and false information.
- **Boys 16-18:** The cons according to this group

were waste of time, false information, addiction, and lack of security, harassment and provoking violence.
- **Adults:** This group were concerned about adolescents accessing violent content and wasting time.

Access to the Internet and digital learning opportunities:

"ما في لا نت ولا كهرباء...هنن قبل ما يوصلوا خطوط التلفونات، خليهم يجيبوا الكهرباء!"

"**There is no Internet or electricity...Before they connect the phone lines, let them provide the electricity!** " (East Ghouta boy 13-15)

- **Girls 13-15:** The girls identified many challenges related to ICT, such as the lack of electricity, weak Internet, high cost of services and equipment, and the lack of skills for efficient use. They suggested improving access to quality Internet, reducing the cost for students, providing schools with equipment, and training adolescents on digital skills. Some girls do not have mobile phones or access to the Internet due to social and financial constraints.
- **Boys 13-15:** Some of these boys did not have a mobile. They mentioned the poor infrastructure and lack of quality Internet and electricity, the costly service and equipment.
- **Girls 16-18:** Many of these girls did not have a mobile phone or access to the Internet, others faced social constraints, lack of experience, weak internet, lack of electricity, and expensive services and equipment.
- **Adults:** Many challenges prevented adolescents to benefit from the Internet, such as weak connectivity and infrastructure and continued power outage, especially in the countryside.
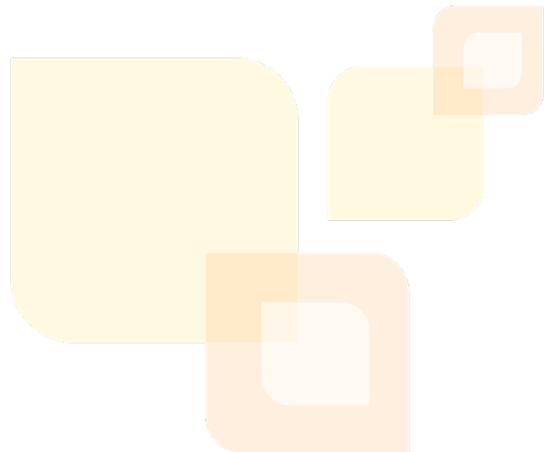
Recommendations by key informants and caregivers:

- Provide sufficient schools and rehabilitate school infrastructure (electricity and the Internet) and utilities.
- Qualify the teaching staff with knowledge and educational skills.
- Support the development of interactive education.
- Provide financial and psychological support for teachers and students.
- Provide supportive courses in different school subjects, mainly for high school students.
- Design effective courses and programmes to compensate for educational loss.
- Enhance awareness of adolescents on how to use the Internet properly and protect themselves from exploitation.
- Follow-up by teachers and parents and enhance communication between them to discuss and solve students' problems.
- Hold joint dialogue sessions between parents and adolescents to enhance communication and harmony between them.
- Provide classrooms and educational centres with appropriate educational equipment, laboratory, display screens and other educational requirements.
- Create informal learning programmes that:
  - Include themes like supportive courses to recover the loss in the formal education process, awareness sessions for adolescents about drug issues, sexual education and the prevention of harassment, mental health issues, life skills, communication skills, teamwork, creativity, time management, and collective action, and language and computer skills.
  - Recruit qualified and experienced management and teaching staff in different specializations, such as informatics and language, with advanced communication and dialogue skills.
  - Conduct the programme for three days a week and two hours per day. The programme should not be intense to ensure sustainability and continuity.
  - Design single-sex groups, and conduct awareness sessions for adolescents and parents about the importance of mixed-sex groups because it adds different experiences for adolescents, boys and girls.
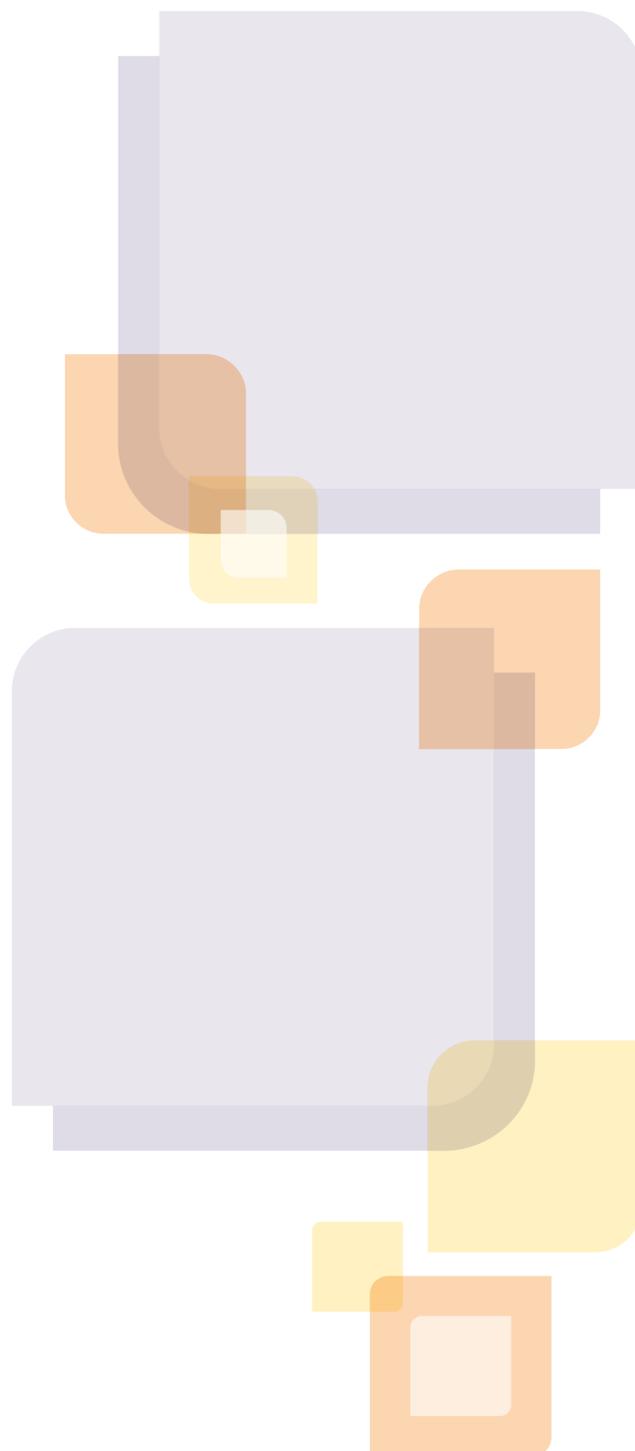
Homs

Homs is a war-torn city and witnessed brutal battles and destruction including of schools, hospitals, public and residential buildings. It also suffered from massive rights violations, including a siege, kidnapping, torture, arbitrary arrests, forced displacement, gender-based violence, military recruitment among others. The city was a place for weaponizing sectarian and ethnic identities by the warring parties that created severe degradation for social relations in Homs. The city has been under the control of GoS since 2017, and rural areas since 2018. In 2020, the number of inhabitants in the Governorate of Homs is estimated at 1,432,000 of which 328,000 are IDPs. The poverty rate reached 86 percent, and the basic education enrolment rate was 81 percent, in 2019 (SCPR, 2020).
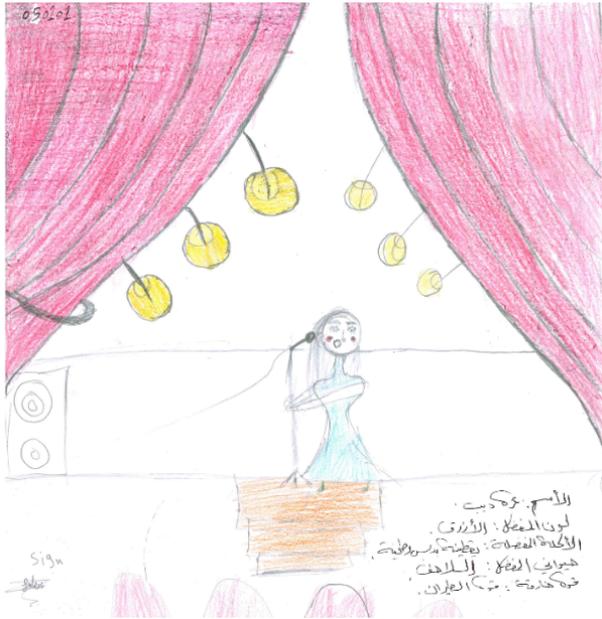
Aspirations and interests:

"ركزت اليافعة على أنها تحب دراسة الإعلام، التحديات لا يوجد فرع إعلام في حمص والمواصلات صعبة بالإضافة تخشى لأنها محجبة ألا تحصل على فرص إعلامية كما تريد"

"I like to study media, but there is no university branch for media in Homs and transportation is difficult, and I am afraid that I will not get media opportunities because I wear the hijab" (Girl 16-18 Homs)

"رسمت اليافعة قفص وداخله عصفور وحول القفص أغصان خضراء، عبرت أنها تشبه العصفور، سجينة، أعاقتها بتر الطرف، لا تستطيع الذهاب بعيداً بمفردها، وترى جمال العالم كله من حول القفص الذي يمنعها من التمتع بجمال الطبيعة"

"One girl (13-15) drew a bird inside a cage and green branches around the cage. She expressed that she resembles a bird, a prisoner, hampered by the amputation of her limb, cannot go far alone and sees the beauty of the whole world around the cage, which prevents her from enjoying the beauty of nature" (Homs workshop)

"تحدثت اليافعة في رسمتها عن يد تحمل ميزان العدالة بأنها جسدت نفسها من خلال اليد ترى أن كل أنثى عليها التحرر من العادات والتقاليد المسيئة لها ومطالبتها بحقوقها"

"The girl (13-15) stated in her drawing, a hand that carries the scale of justice, that she embodied herself through this hand, and she believes that every female must be freed from the customs and traditions that offend her and her claim for her rights" (Homs workshop)

"هدف اليافعة أن تتحسن حالتها الصحية بعد عدة سنوات وأن تكون قادرة على إتمام عمليتها التعليمية، فهي غير قادرة على الكتابة بدون رجف، أو الذهاب بمفردها للمدرسة لأنها لا تستطيع الوقوف طويلاً"

"The (13-15) girl's goal is to improve her health after several years, and to be able to complete her educational process, as she is unable to write without trembling, or to go to school alone because she cannot stand for long" (Homs workshop)

"هدف اليافعة أن تصبح باحثة آثار ... وذكرت في التحديات أن الأهل غير مشجعون لها لأنهم يرون أنها مهنة لا تناسب الفتيات وليس لها مستقبل مهني جيد"

"The girl (16-18) said she wanted to become an archaeologist, and mentioned that her parents are not encouraging her because they see that it is not a profession that suits girls and it has no perspective" (Homs workshop)

- **Girls 13-15:** These girls were actively engaged in the sessions, including the girls with disabilities (sight impairment, amputated limb, and hemiplegia). The ambitions they shared were to become IT engineers and architects, anatomists, ophthalmologists, psychiatrists,

lawyers, teachers and pharmacists. Some girls said that they would like to combine their future careers with supporting poor, sick and displaced people. Several girls are looking to travel outside Syria to secure a better future, education and work conditions.

- **Boys 13-15:** When asked about their ambitions, the boys did not answer with conventional careers like doctors and engineers, instead they want to be business people, managers, traders, software developers, YouTubers or basketball players. Poverty and economic hardship drove them to look for careers with high income, and some of them consider that education is not enough for the future.
- **Girls 16-18:** Some of the girls said they aim to be engineers, doctors, lawyers, teachers or pharmacists; others would like to hold a PhD in mathematics or English literature or to be an archaeologist, a member of Junior Chamber International (a private business), or a YouTuber. Many girls appreciate the importance of education for women. In addition, they are looking to travel outside the country.
- **Boys 16-18:** A few boys said that they would like to be doctors and engineers, and the majority chose different careers like football players or influencers, and income-generating professions like traders or programmers. In general, they fear failure in education at this critical stage of their lives.

Support mechanisms:

"تحدثت اليافعة عن عدم السماح لليافعات في بيئتها للتعلم وتقترح تشديد العقوبات وملاحقة الأهل الذين يمنعون فتياتهم من متابعة تعليمهم"

"The girl (13-15) talked about not allowing girls in her environment to learn and suggests imposing penalties on parents and prosecuting who prevent their girls from continuing their education" (Homs workshop)

- **Girls 13-15:** In general, the majority consider their families as supportive actors in their study and social life.
- **Adults:** Many mentioned poor communication between parents and adolescents which exposed adolescents to different challenges and problems without substantial help.

Contextual challenges:

"اليافعون هم أكثر الأشخاص تأثراً بظروف الحرب"

"Adolescents are the most affected by the war conditions" (Homs KI)

- **Girls 13-15:** Some adolescent girls reported how the war had impacted their education, saying that many schools in the region were destroyed and a lot of teachers fled the city, thus creating an environment of instability and fear for students. Displaced communities suffered more in access to education and other public services. All girls referred to the deterioration of the economic situation and the surge in the cost of living and increase in poverty rates that affected the ability of families to afford education for their children and adolescents. Some also mentioned the role of tradition in restricting girls' access to education and movement.
- **Boys 13-15:** Some boys mentioned the role of war in severely affecting the education process through weakening the rule of law, destroying infrastructure and displacing people including teachers.
- **Girls 16-18:** Many girls mentioned the war and insecurity as major obstacles for their study and life since the war destroyed infrastructure and caused enormous loss of human capital, political and social polarization, and severe inequality and discrimination. This environment affected girls the most, as families restricted girls' mobility due to the lack of safety and security. The increase in the cost of living and lack of job opportunities that were associated with the war caused many difficulties for families to support the enrolment of their children, which was reflected in the increase of child labour and early marriage. Also, old traditions that are biased against the education of girls, especially in rural areas, have been revived during the war. In rural areas, participants highlighted more engagement for girls working with family at home and in agriculture, and mentioned increasing discrimination against girls' education.
- **Boys 16-18:** Some boys described the main impact of war on infrastructure and the economic situation. They highlighted the importance of supporting the victims of war in terms of education and living conditions. Furthermore, many of them said that most students need psychosocial support due to the

complicated and uncertain environment.

- **Adults:** Key informants explained that the war caused massive political and social divisions, lack of safety and security, and the loss of lives and property. Homs suffered from discrimination and marginalization based on identity, religion, political affiliation, sex, class, and displacement status. Key informants also highlighted the spread of negative social manifestations that affected adolescents, such as violence, bullying, harassment, threatening, blackmailing, domestic violence especially towards girls, drugs and smoking and pornography, with the lack of supportive programmes for sexual awareness in the surrounding environment.

COVID-19:

- **Girls 13-15:** Many girls discussed the role of COVID-19 in disrupting the education process without any effective alternative to compensate for the loss of education.
- **Boys 13-15:** The loss of education due to COVID-19 negatively affected their ability to continue their education journey.
- **Adults:** The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the education status of adolescents, as the key informants and caregivers reported. Caregivers highlighted the frequent closure of schools, in addition to the abbreviation of the curriculum and moving students to the next grade without exams, which further deteriorated the quality of education. At the same time most families were not able to compensate for the educational loss of their children due to economic hardship and the high cost of private education. Adolescents got unequal access to the Internet and eLearning opportunities and economic deterioration increased child labour cases, family pressure and domestic violence. Weak infrastructure did not support the system of distance learning because of lack of electricity, slow Internet, and a lack of proper equipment and logistics and supporting educational programmes. However, one of the caregivers found that lockdown revived family relationships and led to the family meeting again. He stated that adolescents learned new skills, such as computers and IT, and some of them filled the time with useful hobbies, such as drawing.

1.10 Education system:

"استقبال بعض المدارس طبقة معينة من التلاميذ أو من توجهات وخلفيات بيئية ودينية معينة وعدم استقبال باقي الفئات المجتمعية"

"Some schools receive a certain class of students or from certain environmental and religious orientations and backgrounds and do not receive the rest of the community groups" **(Girls 16-18 Homs)**

"المباني المدرسية رديئة بسبب الحرب وغير مخدمه ولم تخضع بكاملها للترميم ويوجد فيها عبارات سياسية ودينية مسيئة مما يجعلها غير مؤهلة للتدريس"

"School buildings are poor due to the war, not serviced, and not fully restored, and there are offensive political and religious expressions on walls, which makes them unqualified for teaching" **(Homs KI)**

- **Girls 13-15:** Many girls evaluated the education process as poor due to the traditional teaching approaches, difficult curriculum, not covering the whole content, and lack of qualified teachers. They reported the low quality of education in public schools, especially for foreign languages, which forced many students to register in costly private classes. Furthermore, the cost of educational materials, such as uniforms, books and stationery, becomes a burden on families. Some girls mentioned the difficulties of accessing school, especially good schools, due to the long distance from their homes, in particular in rural Homs.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys criticized the poor education environment, including the intense curriculum and static teaching approaches. They also highlighted the lack of qualified teachers and the need for private classes which are very costly. Some of the boys worked during summer and vacations to cover part of their education costs.
- **Girls 16-18:** Many girls described the educational challenges, mentioning the poor education environment, intense curricula, lack of qualified teachers, large number of students in the class, old teaching approaches, discrimination between students, education loss due to the war or COVID-19, absence of freedom of expression for students, bias against girls' education, and transportation difficulties. One girl talked about the lack of

freedom of opinion and widespread racism and discrimination in public education. She put forward a solution of an effective oversight system that allows schools to accept students without discrimination based on their social or religious backgrounds.

- **Boys 16-18:** The boys all agreed on the poor performance of the education system, including the lack of schools, qualified teachers, affordable means of transportation, in addition to the absence of interactive teaching approaches and e-learning. They believe that the quality of education in rural areas is poorer than in the city. Also, some boys referred to the importance of respecting adolescent opinions in the education process. Some boys highlighted the lack of means to integrate students with disabilities into the education system.

- **Adults:** Key informants noted that the war led to substantial destruction of schools and infrastructure, and large losses in educational staff, especially teachers, as many of them fled the country. Poor governance of the educational system, lack of schools and related services, poor coordination among actors in the sector and inequality in educational services were the main characteristics of the education system. Many schools have been damaged by the war partially or fully and required substantial rehabilitation and maintenance. Some schools are still used as weapons storage and other schools still function as shelters for displaced people.

The insufficient number of schools with a high number of students led to overcrowded classes and a difficulty in imposing discipline in class, especially in male schools. One of the key informants mentioned that students frequently assault the teachers. Furthermore, schools lacked qualified teachers, proper teaching equipment and logistics, or an integrated environment for students with disabilities. The cost of education is very high, as students need support through private lessons or private educational institutions to digest information. This has been associated with widespread of poverty and drop in most family's sources of income.

Caregivers added some difficulties, such as poor governance of the education system and lack of coordination between public and private schools, poor infrastructure, poverty and the high cost of living, and bullying against poor and vulnerable groups who have been negatively affected by the war. All that led to changing the priority of adolescents from education towards work or leaving the country, due to the social and economic reality and their inability to meet their basic needs.

Drivers of dropout:

"ضغط الأهالي على اليافعين واليافعات للمساهمة في الإنتاج المادي خاصة عندما يرون أنهم قادرين جسدياً على العمل، بحجة أنهم بلغوا مرحلة عمرية يمكنهم الاعتماد على ذاتهم بها"

"Parents put pressure on boys and girls to work when they see their children physically able to work, using the argument that they have reached an age in which they can rely on themselves" (Homs KI)

Adults: The group confirmed that rural areas suffered the most. Caregivers highlighted the transportation crisis between rural areas and the city, and the low-qualified teaching staff, which resulted in higher dropout rates of schools in the rural areas. Additionally, the widespread harassment of girls, especially in rural areas, led many families to prevent their daughters from enrolling in schools.

English language and digital skills:

"أعتبر البرامج الداعمة وغير التقليدية كأهمية البرامج الدراسية"

"I consider supportive and non-traditional programmes as important as formal study programmes" (Homs KI)

- **Adults:** Many key informants found that informal education and distance learning is as important as school education. Some initiatives are established in Homs, such as "Light"; "Syrian Computer Society"; "Sayyar"; and other individual initiatives which support adolescents at low cost or for free. Many are formed by individuals or groups through WhatsApp or Facebook.

1.11 Internet use and digital learning:

- **Girls 13-15:** The girls mentioned the advantages of ICT, such as access to distance learning and information, in addition to communication with relatives, teachers and friends. They also mentioned entertainment, learning social and life skills, and finding job opportunities to generate income.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys mentioned advantages of ICT like providing access to knowledge and information, developing skills and communicating with family members abroad and friends, and they assured the importance of ICT as a source of income.
- **Girls 16-18:** The girls appreciated many pros of ICT, such as accessing knowledge and learning, developing skills, facilitating communication and entertainment.
- **Boys 16-18:** The boys considered advantages of ICT as the access to knowledge, e-learning and information, the possibility of developing new skills and languages and enjoying entertainment.
- **Adults:** Key informants referred to adolescents' access to the Internet increasing their access to information and knowledge, their ability to express themselves, their language skills, and communication. Moreover, caregivers added that the Internet is useful to strengthen intercultural exchange inside the community and increase social cohesion.

Negative aspects:

- **Girls 13-15:** The girls highlighted disadvantages such as the waste of time, the exposure to unsafe and violent content and fake news, the lack of privacy, bullying, hacking and addiction.
- **Boys 13-15:** They noted negative aspects of ICT such as bullying, fake news and unsafe content, waste of time, addiction and health problems.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls also mentioned cons such as bullying, weak social relations, fake information, isolation, violent content and wasting time.
- **Boys 16-18:** For the disadvantages, these boys considered the waste of time, watching long series, addiction, avoiding reading as everything is available on Google, hacking, bullying and lack of privacy.
- **Adults:** Key informants found that the Internet

has negative sides including bullying, hacking, violating privacy, wasting time, addiction to violent games, gambling or pornography, and the risk of isolation. Caregivers found that the majority of adolescents are more interested in gaming and hobbies than educational programmes.

Access to the Internet and digital learning opportunities:

"عدد الإناث القادرات على التعامل مع الأجهزة الذكية أقل نسبياً عن المدينة، وكذلك الأمر بما يخص تصفح الإنترنت واستخدام مواقع التواصل وذلك بسبب ضعف الإمكانيات المادية"

"The number of females who can deal with smart devices in rural areas is relatively less than in the city, the same applies for surfing the Internet and using communication sites, due to the economic hardship." (Girls 16-18 Homs)

"الأهل لا يسمحون للأنثى في استخدام الهاتف أو تطبيقات التواصل الاجتماعي على عكس الذكر الذي يستطيع استخدام أي برنامج يرغب به"

"Parents do not allow girls to use the phone or social media applications, unlike boys, who can use any programme they want" (Girls 16-18 Homs)

- **Girls 13-15:** Many girls criticized weak e-learning in terms of poor infrastructure, and the lack of security and trustworthy resources. In this regard, they referred to poor and costly Internet services, and poor access to electricity and equipment, such as mobile phones and laptops. A discussion circulated about the fact that most girls cannot continue their virtual education because of their lack of prior knowledge of how to learn through the Internet and the deteriorating quality of the Internet, which makes them refrain from e-learning.
- **Boys 13-15:** Some boys pointed out the poor quality of Internet services. They suggested that key actors including Government, civil society, and United Nations agencies should design plans to recover educational loss, provide public spaces to access Internet and equipment and develop the content of e-learning.
- **Girls 16-18:** Some girls described the gender bias against girls in using mobiles and applications compared to boys. They all agreed

on the weak ICT infrastructure and the high cost of services and equipment. Rural areas have less access to ICT due to the poor Internet and electricity, and lack of financial resources to buy equipment and pay the bills.

- **Boys 16-18:** Most mentioned they do not have their own phones, poor Internet, weak teaching staff, curricula that do not contain interactive methods, difficulty in transportation, information density in the curricula, and ignorance of some in surfing websites. They suggested developing the weak infrastructure of ICT and providing the service and equipment at lower prices for students.
- **Adults:** This group considered that adolescents cannot use the Internet effectively due to lack of support from their parents. Online education has different obstacles with a lack of qualified experts and accessibility restrictions. Key informants also highlighted inequality of access to the Internet between poor and rich, rural and urban, and boys and girls, which widened the disparities between these categories. The base ground for effective use of ICT is already missing, namely the availability of electronic learning platforms, mastering scientific research skills, and accessing quality Internet for all.

Recommendations by key informants and caregivers:

- Conduct a comprehensive informal learning programme to teach languages, digital, programming and IT skills, social and financial skills, in addition to mathematics and physics.
- Develop income-generating e-projects with the cooperation of NGOs, youth, qualified teachers, and activists.
- Design vocational or educational programmes based on the assessment of societal needs.
- Integrate conflict resolution in programmes with special focus on ethics like respect for each other, the right to express an opinion, countering bullying and violence, and equality.
- Develop the skills of workers in the educational sector and support them financially, in addition to providing them with the tools needed to be able to create online content in response to adolescents' needs.
- Target the areas in need in the city through increasing awareness of the importance of self-learning/ e-learning and its advantages.

- Conduct programmes in the summer and spring holidays and school holidays on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays in the evening; with sessions between 3-4 hours per day.
- Locate the programmes in school outside working hours, or NGOs that provide a security cover, or in " cultural centres", or through mobile teams in rural schools.
- Manage the programmes with highly qualified young teachers, key people in the education field, or owners of developmental and educational centres, who are change-makers and have a passion for development and community work and an awareness of the needs of adolescents.
- The key informants did not agree whether the programmes should be mixed- or single-sex groups.
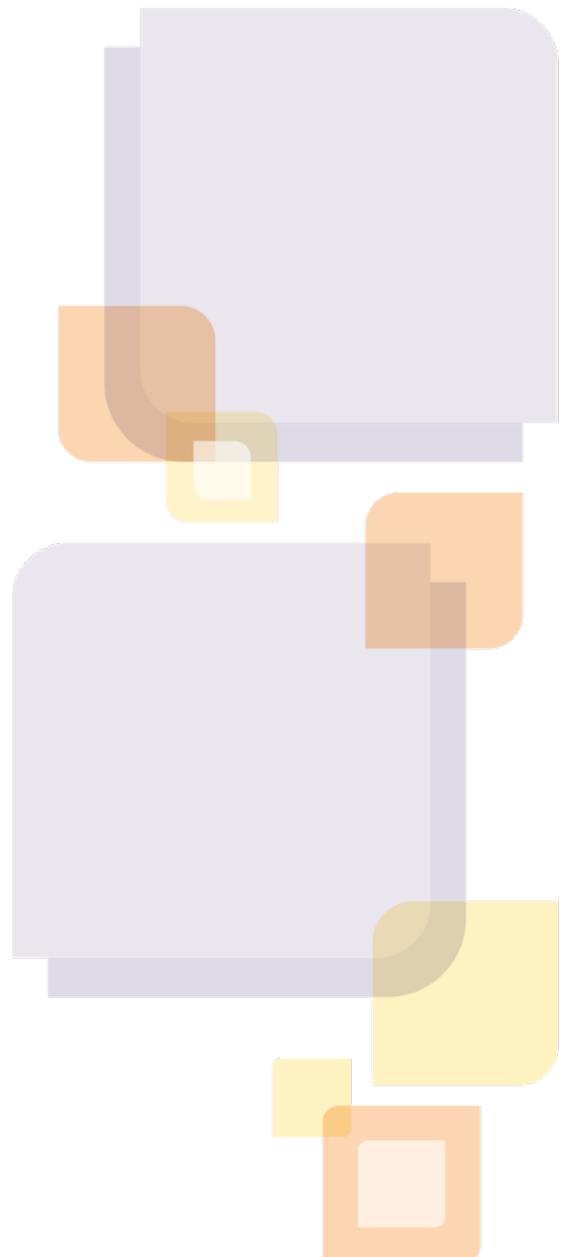
Idleb

The Governorate witnessed several massive military operations that resulted in catastrophic human and material losses and it still suffers from a lack of security and stability. It received IDPs from all over Syria in addition to displaced people within the Governorate. It is under HTS control and the estimated number of people in the Governorate was 2,353,000 of which 1,125,000 were IDPs in 2020. The estimated poverty rate was 90 percent and the basic education enrolment was 64 percent in 2019 (SCPR, 2020).

Aspirations and interests:

"بحب كون صيدلانية لأنني أحب مساعدة جميع الناس المحتاجين وخصوصا الأيتام المحرومين من أهلهن بسبب الحرب "

"I like to be a pharmacist because I love helping all the needy people, especially the orphans who have been deprived of their families because of the war" (Idleb girl 13-15)

- **Girls 13-15:** The traits that were noticeable among this age group of girls were sadness, timidity and insecurity. They aim towards conventional careers, such as teacher, doctor and pharmacist; though some of them aim to be a painter, journalist or hairdresser. They expressed some hobbies like music, drawing, sport and singing; and many of them shared an important role of religion in their lives, for instance, many girls mentioned reading and listening to the Qur'an.
- **Boys 13-15:** Many boys identified with being engineers to contribute to rebuilding their country, while some others aimed to be carpenters, physical therapists or doctors. The common traits in this age group were their interest in sport, they also like nature and outdoor activities.
- **Girls 16-18:** The distinctive traits in this group of girls were their acquired sense of confidence, maturity and openness. Some girls have already started their work to support their families, while others started to contemplate the idea of travelling outside the country. They aimed for a varied spectrum of careers as many of them want to be doctors, dentists, engineers, teachers, while a few of them aim to

be a hairdresser, dressmaker or nurse. Some of them concentrated on their desire to support poor and vulnerable people and appreciated peace and justice values. Many of them have hobbies like reading, writing and drawing, travel, listening to music, outdoors activities, cooking, swimming and sports.
- **Boys 16-18:** The group consisted of boys who are working and out of school and others who enrolled in schools. They have different goals like being a writer, a football player, owning and driving a truck, managing a car maintenance shop, and one of them wish to be an astronaut even though he is out of school. They have different hobbies, mainly sports and enjoying nature. The majority of them hope to travel outside the country to start their work or study.

Support mechanisms:

- **Girls 13-15:** Most of the girls highlighted the support of their families, especially mothers and friends, but some of the them mentioned family and society constraints that prevent girls from continuing their education or restrict their study and work options. One of the girls showed the fear of her father as she refused to put in writing what she verbally expressed about the lack of her father's support for her education.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys appreciate family and friends' support to continue their study or work.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls attributed special importance to the mother's supporting role while avoiding in some cases to address the father's lack of support for girls' continued education. Some of them face their parents' refusal to let them own a mobile or use the Internet and cameras due to societal and cultural norms and customs.
- **Boys 16-18:** All boys mentioned positively the support from their families and friends.

Contextual challenges:

"الضائقة الاقتصادية المتواصلة التي تعاني منها الأسر المعيشية وخاصة اللاجئين والمجتمعات المستضيفة وتجبر اليافعين واليافعات على تحمل المسؤولية المالية"

"The continuing economic hardship experienced by households, especially refugees and host communities, forces adolescents to take financial responsibility" (Idleb KI)

"تتأثر الفتيات على وجه الخصوص بالأعراف الأسرية والاجتماعية والتي غالبا ما تحد من تمثيلهم في الأسرة والمجتمع وتحد كذلك من قدرتهم على الحصول على الخدمات المناسبة والفرص "

"Girls, in particular, are affected by family and social norms, which often limit their representation in the family and society and limit their ability to access appropriate services and opportunities" (Idleb KI)

- **Girls 13-15:** The war severely impacted the lives of adolescents in Idleb, as it caused massive loss of lives and hundreds of thousands of casualties, kidnapping, torture, arbitrary arrests, targeting people and infrastructure including schools and hospitals, in addition to the forced displacement of millions of people. Most girls highlighted the impact of war on their study and relationships and insisted on the negative impact of instability, insecurity and displacement. All girls mentioned another impact of the war which is poverty and an increase in the cost of living, which they considered a major challenge for them.

- **Boys 13-15:** Boys highlighted war as the key challenge that they face, and its impact in terms of lack of stability and security, destruction, poverty and increase of prices, and enormous and repeated waves of displacement with very poor living conditions. They emphasised the importance of ending the war as a key to providing decent conditions for them to enjoy study, work and relationships.

- **Girls 16-18:** These girls suffer from the war and insecurity conditions and highlighted the challenges of poverty and economic hardship and the circumstances that were associated with displacement. The lack of jobs and increase in the cost of education forced some girls to work, leave school, and in some cases to early marriage. The war destroyed infrastructure and schools and forced many qualified teachers to leave the country.

- **Boys 16-18:** The boys agreed on the massive negative impact of war on adolescents and their community. As a consequence of war, they suffer from a lack of stability and security, deterioration of economic and living conditions, in addition to the massive number of displaced people.

- **Adults:** The ongoing war caused various risks and challenges that affected adolescents' lives

and futures in Idleb. The key informants and caregivers divided the economic, societal and institutional challenges into

1. The consequences of the war (lack of safety, discrimination, violence, political exclusion, grave violations of human rights including child labour and military recruitment, movement restriction, abduction, and loss of personal documents). Key informants mentioned that the long-lasting military escalation and lack of security in Idleb affected the physical and psychological situation of adolescents because of the disintegration of the social fabric, the fragmentation of families, the disconnection of networks and the disruption of family ties, especially for those subject to forced displacement. Displaced adolescents constantly express their feelings of isolation, despair and, hopelessness. Many caregivers mentioned that adolescents lack the opportunities for effective social participation, free expression and the ability to plan their future. The difficult conditions led to widespread negative phenomena, such as begging, bullying, neglect, homelessness, harassment and drugs.

2. The degradation of the economic situation (high cost of education and living, poverty, food insecurity). Many caregivers mentioned that economic hardship and poverty forced many adolescents to drop out of school and go to work, which exposed them to exploitation and human rights violations.

3. Social norms and traditions (early marriage). The group asserted that many girls are forced to marry at an early age due to traditions and social norms and they are exposed to domestic violence and subject to pressure from parents or brothers, besides the pressure of unusual housework.

COVID-19:

Adults: COVID-19 affected the life and education of adolescents with a remarkable increase in the dropout rate due to the difficulty of distance learning, as most families complain about the high cost of the Internet and lack of devices, and prioritize food security over education. One key informant mentioned that IDP adolescents and those who are living far from the city centres are

most affected by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The school closures affected students' psychological state and increased abuse and violence against girls.

Education system:

"الضرب من قبل المعلمين والتمييز بين الطلاب"

"**Beating by teachers and discriminating between students**" (Idleb boy 13-15)

- **Girls 13-15:** Most of the girls highlighted the challenges of the education process, such as the lack of functional schools, some of them completely lack schools in camps, and many existing schools are not secured or properly equipped. Many schools are far from homes and the cost of transportation is high. They also referred to lack of accreditation of certificates, and the high cost of university fees, lack of qualified teachers, the difficult curriculum, poor foreign language teaching including Turkish and English, lack of vocational education, and the absence of recreational activities in schools.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys mentioned key challenges for the education process such as the destruction of schools, lack of functional and equipped schools, high cost of education materials, lack of qualified teachers, distance from schools, discrimination between students, and beating of students by teachers and supervisors. They recommended providing intensified summer schools or clubs to make up for the learning gaps caused by COVID-19 and to equip schools with play fields. On a more progressive level, they recommend investing in converting regular schools into e-learning schools.
- **Girls 16-18:** They mentioned many challenges of the education process, such as the destroyed schools, lack of qualified teachers, poor foreign language teaching, lack of equipment and logistics, high cost of education, costly private lessons, difficult curriculum, lack of library and labs and Internet at schools, the distance between schools and homes and the cost of transportation, lack of recreational activities, discrimination between students by teachers, and lack of security on the road to schools. They suggested that local and international civil society can contribute to developing the infrastructure, labs, training

teachers and developing online learning, and providing educational materials at reasonable prices.
- **Boys 16-18:** Boys considered that the education process suffered from lack of equipped schools and high cost of education materials and logistics, lack of qualified teachers (many teachers work without salaries as volunteers), lack of language institutes, and some mentioned teachers beating students at school.
- **Adults:** The main challenges hindering the education process in Idleb are the mass destruction of schools and insecurity due to the intensity of military operations and the ongoing airstrikes on schools and education facilities by the Russians and GoS. This led to consequences such as a limited number of schools in service, overcrowding (60 to 70 children in one class), insufficient quantity and quality of educational staff, lack of school supplies and books, long and costly transportation, high cost of education, damaged infrastructure (water, sanitation and heating systems), low wages and salaries of teachers in public school, and unaccredited certificates issued from The Syrian Interim Government.

Drivers of dropout:

Adults: Adolescent education is further threatened by poverty, lack of livelihoods and work opportunities for the families, and the loss of breadwinners due to death, abduction or disability. Traditions and social norms that make families marry off their girls at an early age and force boys to leave school for work to support them are also a problem.

English language and digital skills

Adults: Informal education and language programmes, according to some key informants, can be an added value and positively influence adolescents' way of thinking, academic achievement, and social interaction. In addition, the can help adolescents who have dropped out of education by online and distance learning. English language and computer skills are essential tools to access knowledge and for adolescents to communicate with their peers around the world, in addition, English can open more opportunities in the job market.

Internet use and digital learning:

"يبقى تأمين الإنترنت أفضل من إرسال اليافعين إلى قرية أخرى للحصول على التعليم واستمراريته"

"**The availability of the Internet is better than sending adolescents to another village for education and ensure continuity of education**" (Idleb caregiver)

- **Girls 13-15:** The girls identified many pros of ICT like learning, improving skills, communication, marketing and entertainment.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys identified advantages of ICT such as access to information, communication, improving skills like languages, entertainment and playing games.
- **Girls 16-18:** The majority of girls considered the advantages of ICT, such as access to information, communication, developing skills, learning languages and entertainment, exceed the disadvantages.
- **Boys 16-18:** The boys mentioned some advantages of ICT such as learning languages, access to information and news, and communication.
- **Adults:** Caregivers reported advantages of ICT such as entertainment, developing talent and skills and learning about other cultures. In addition, ICT develops adolescents' scientific skills, eases access to information sites, bridges distance and facilitates communication with friends, and enables distance learning.

Negative aspects:

- **Girls 13-15:** Many girls highlighted the cons of ICT including wasting time, the decline of physical social relations, addiction, bad content, false information and lack of security.
- **Boys 13-15:** Boys highlighted many disadvantages like a wasting time, bullying, addiction, false information and negative impacts on health.
- **Girls 16-18:** Older girls noted disadvantages such as addiction, waste of time, harassment, lack of security and privacy.
- **Boys 16-18:** These boys mentioned disadvantages like addiction, bad content, false information and wasting time.
- **Adults:** The caregivers also emphasized different challenges and risks for using the Internet, for example, the risk of addiction to games, like the multiplayer battlegrounds and online game "PUBG", which may negatively

affect behaviour, wasting their time and leading to psychological problems such as depression and suicide. Furthermore, using the Internet for a long time may cause physical problems, such as back, neck, and finger pain and poor vision. They also highlighted some risks including misleading information, being exposed to exploitation, cyber harassment, sexual abuse, blackmail and misuse of their personal information.

Access to the Internet and digital learning opportunities:

- **Girls 13-15:** This group referred to lack of access to electricity and the poor quality of the Internet and the high cost of the required services and equipment.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys referred to poor infrastructure of ICT in terms of poor quality of Internet, lack of access to electricity and quality equipment, and the blocking of many websites and applications.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls highlighted key factors that hindered the best use of ICT like the poor quality of the Internet, the high cost of Internet and needed equipment, lack of knowledge in using the Internet and digital platforms efficiently, lack of electricity, and the constraints on girls using ICT by society and families. They suggested the development of a public network that is free of charge for students and providing camps and schools with the Internet, in addition to providing equipment at reasonable prices to students.
- **Boys 16-18:** Many boys highlighted the shortcomings of ICT services, such as weak Internet quality, high prices, and lack of equipment and electricity.
- **Adults:** Key informants reported access problems such as the high cost of the Internet, lack of devices and equipment, online abuse (like data protection, bullying, sexual harassment), and difficulties in accessing reliable information (most of the adolescents are not equipped with the necessary skills and awareness to surf the Internet safely). Caregivers noted the high cost of the Internet and smartphones made it unaffordable for the majority of adolescents, which increased disparities between them. Usually, there is discrimination against girls in using the Internet and modern technology, as some parents prevent them from using social media.

Recommendations by key informants and caregivers:

- Increase efforts to stop the war as an essential condition to recover educational losses and return safety and stability to the city.
- Rehabilitate destroyed schools and build new ones to accommodate all students properly and provide them with all necessary facilities, equipment, supplies and infrastructure (electricity and transportation).
- Reduce violence and increase the safe environment in Idleb in general and for adolescents' spaces in particular.
- Raise the qualification and competence of educational staff and raise the salaries and wages of teachers.
- Provide special classes or programmes for adolescents who have dropped out of school.
- Conduct free summer courses in available schools to compensate for lost education.
- Provide schools with an appropriate teaching and learning environment that contributes to developing student talents and capabilities.
- Introduce awareness sessions for parents to raise the importance of education and interaction with adolescents.
- Create informal learning programmes that:
  - Include themes for informal learning, such as life skills, computer and digital skills, English and other language skills, communication and digital security, programmes to develop, personal skills and courses in the field of arts (drawing and writing, Arabic calligraphy, decoration), awareness courses against violence and support of human rights, and entertainment activities (swimming, chess and football).
  - Design virtual or personal programmes with single-sex groups to respect social traditions and norms in this region.
  - Conduct programmes three to five days per week, with sessions of two to three hours in the afternoon or night, at the centre of the city to be reachable for all.
  - Provide a safe place with suitable environment and decent conditions (sanitation, electricity, and internet).
  - Provide laptops and smartphones for adolescents to be able to access the Internet with the possibility of restricting downloading harmful software to increase the focus of adolescents on necessary educational programmes.
- Recruit the most qualified and experienced staff to deal with adolescents in the programme.
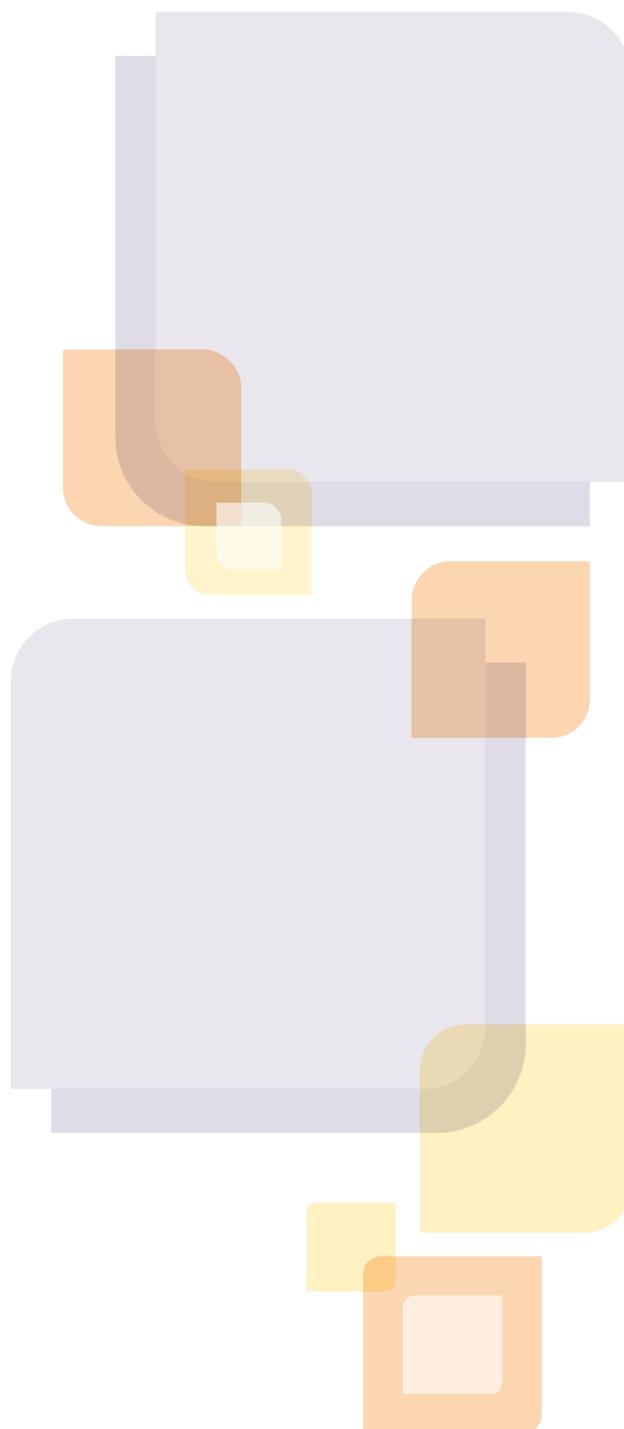
Raqqa

The Governorate of Raqqa was severely damaged during the war, especially after ISIS took control and announced it as its Capital. The War on Terror coalition with AA forces controlled the Governorate after massive destruction in the city of Raqqa. The city is under AA control, while some rural areas in the south are under GoS control and part of the northern rural areas under the control of the Turkish-backed opposition. In 2020, the estimated population of the city of Raqqa was 430,000 of which 121,000 were IDPs. The poverty rate was estimated at 90 percent in 2019, and basic education enrolment was only 27 percent (SCPR, 2020).

Aspirations and interests:
- **Girls 13-15:** The girls aim to be doctors, engineers, or teachers; a few want to be painters or work as volunteers to help people in need; and some aim to travel. They have many hobbies like drawing, sports, playing musical instruments and cooking. They agreed on the importance of equality between girls and boys in accessing education.
- **Boys 13-15:** Most of the boys consulted want to be doctors, engineers and lawyers, though one wants to be a barber and another a comedian. They share sports as a hobby and many of them aim to travel abroad.
- **Girls 16-18:** The majority of the girls in this age group reported ambitions to achieve high and conventional careers like doctors, engineers, pharmacists, lawyers and journalists. Some of them were forced to take up professions like hairdressers or dressmakers because they could not continue their education due to the lack of family support for girls' education, or insecurity and increased harassment which constrained their mobility.
- **Boys 16-18:** At this age, boys are looking for income-generating professions that are required in the job market like maintenance of mobile phones, smiths, IT engineers, equestrian coaches and politicians.
- **Adults:** Key informants mentioned many problems the adolescents suffer, such as marginalization, the lack of spaces to express themselves and for youth to meet, exploding their energies and their conviction that they have no clear future opportunities as a result of the poor economic and institutional situation, which forced most of them to consider travel and emigration.

Support mechanisms:
- **Girls 13-15:** A few girls stated that some families do not support girls' education.
- **Boys 13-15:** The majority of them assured the supportive roles of their families and friends.
- **Girls 16-18:** Some mentioned the lack of family support for girls' education mainly because of poverty and tradition.
- **Boys 16-18:** They noted a lack of family and educational staff support for adolescents to complete their studies.

Contextual challenges:
- **Girls 13-15:** Some girls mentioned that war and insecurity resulted in deaths, injuries and displacement, in addition to the destruction of schools and infrastructure. They also highlighted the surge in prices and increased poverty as the main obstacles for them to continue their studies.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys highlighted poverty and increased cost of living that forced many of them to work to support their families, or to avoid spending on education. A few of them mentioned the role of war in destroying schools and the negative impact of lack of security in some places.

- **Girls 16-18:** War and displacement have negatively affected these girls' education as many of them lost several years of school or dropped out. The war caused insecurity, destruction of infrastructure and increased poverty, which damaged the ability of girls to build their skills and complete their education.
- **Boys 16-18:** The boys highlighted war, suppression, corruption, lack of freedom of speech, inequalities and displacement as key factors that negatively affected their study and lives. The war and insecurity led to an increase in the cost of livings and poverty which forced many adolescents to leave school to work.
- **Adults:** The armed conflict in Syria has had a serious impact on public life and the education process in Raqqa. It led to economic, societal and institutional challenges in terms of poverty, high cost of living and services, loss of security, unemployment, destruction of infrastructure, and the spread of dangerous negative manifestations such as violence, harassment and discrimination.

Caregivers added that the main risks that adolescent girls and boys may face in Raqqa are forced recruitment, child labour, social violence, kidnapping, bad companions, the existence of strangers, and harassment and moral degradation. They confirmed that the most common risks that adolescents are exposed to under the lack of parental attention are misuse of the Internet, as well as smoking and drugs, and violent video games. The absence of the appropriate educational environment for adolescents and the absence of active civil society organizations promoting and activating special programmes for youth were additional factors that worried caregivers. Some mentioned special concern about the prison in Raqqa, considering it a training centre for crime, especially since the arrested adolescents are from different age categories.

COVID-19:
- **Girls 13-15:** The group agreed on the negative impact of COVID-19 on the education process.
- **Girls 16-18:** The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to hindering girls' education and created more pressures due to its impact on the economic situation and prolonged lockdown.
- **Adults:** There were no serious procedures to deal with COVID-19 other than the quarantine which had negative impacts on adolescents. They lost the opportunity to go to school, which helps them gain respect, social and life skills, and friends. Teachers started distance education; adolescents could not complete the educational curricula in schools due to fear and anxiety over the COVID-19 pandemic. The quarantine, disturbances and family problems resulting from it, and the long isolation, affected their psychological state, especially in the city as adolescents in rural areas did not adhere to the quarantine. When the schools reopened, there were no measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in schools, which made many parents refrain from sending their children to school, especially since there were more than 50 students to a classroom.

Education system:
- **Girls 13-15:** The educational challenges according to the girls were the lack of schools, qualified teachers, equipment and health measures. They also mentioned the high cost of stationery, transportation, and the high fees of private institutions. Some of them highlighted mistreatment by teachers and frequent teacher absences. They suggested supporting the education process, establishing educational institutes, and developing supportive teaching programmes.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys agreed on the weak education process, they mentioned the lack of schools and qualified teachers, crowded classes, high cost of the private institutes, and lack of language centres. Additionally, enrolled students faced difficulties because of the high transportation and stationery costs.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls highlighted several challenges of the educational process, such as lack of schools and qualified teachers, discrimination between students, and the high cost of private institutes. However, they mentioned the availability of some informal civil initiatives to support education.
- **Boys 16-18:** This group considered that the education system suffers from a lack of schools and weak education process, lack of qualified teachers, and weaknesses in foreign languages.
- **Adults:** The group agreed that the education

system in Al-Raqqa suffers from different problems and adolescents face great challenges, such as the lack of sufficient schools, especially for students of the preparatory and secondary education stages, with up to 50 students per class. In addition, they mentioned poor logistics and technical equipment in schools, and the poor quality of education, as most teachers have only baccalaureate certificates, and qualified teachers are reluctant to teach because of low wages in AA schools, and prefer to work for private institutes where the average wage is higher. Moreover, in AA schools, key informants reported mistreatments by educational staff, such as penalties, strict inspection and unprofessional behaviour from the administration. Adolescents in rural areas are affected more than those in urban areas in terms of accessibility and the quality of education. Due to the poor-quality education in schools and the weakness of AA educational curricula, adolescents resorted to very expensive private institutes exacerbating their difficult economic situation.

Similar to al-Hasakeh, certificates are also a big challenge, as there is no international accreditation of AA school certificates, and the only accredited certificates are issued by GoS. Adolescents who intend to take exams in GoS-controlled areas face difficulties in terms of travel, registering for the exam, and bringing the exam card. During the presence of extremist actors, such as ISIS, many parents were exposed to severe dangers sending their daughters and sons to GoS schools outside of Al-Raqqa.

Drivers of dropout

Adults: The low standard of living and spread of poverty pushed adolescents to drop out of school and work to help their families. Many boys preferred to work in agriculture, industry and carpentry, while girls worked at their homes. Key informants reported that students often drop out of schools at preparatory and secondary levels, and most adolescents prefer to apply for free middle and secondary certificate exams, so they drop out of school in seventh or tenth grades. According to the group, most parents in Al-Raqqa do not mind letting their daughters continue their education, but girls face more challenges in

schools and on the streets, such as harassment, insecurity and the lack of universities in Raqqa.

English language and digital skills

Adults: The group assured the importance of informal education and language programmes for adolescents, as these develop their English language skills for communication and access to sources of information. Informal programmes assist with the capacity-building and integration of adolescents, as many international initiatives require English and digital skills. These programmes recover the poor quality of foreign language teaching and digital skills in formal schools.

Internet use and digital learning:

- **Girls 13-15::** All of the girls used ICT as a source and means to support their study, access to information and developing language skills and increasing job opportunities. They said that ICT helped them in communication and entertainment through social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, and Snapchat.
- **Boys 13-15:** The out-of-school boys use ICT only for communication or watching movies. Other boys referred to the advantages of ICT in terms of accessing information and knowledge.
- **Girls 16-18:** The girls mentioned advantages of ICT including learning, access to knowledge, exploration, communication and entertainment.
- **Boys 16-18**: The boys highlighted the importance of ICT in access to knowledge and information and job opportunities, to communicate with family and friends and other societies.
- **Adults:** Key informants agreed that adolescents have become more dependent on the Internet for education. However, they lack sufficient technical and computer skills, digital educational platforms, fundamental infrastructure, good quality of Internet, and suitable electronic devices due to economic hardship and poverty. They emphasized the advantages of ICT as a source of information in different fields, which provides adolescents with the opportunity for distance learning, and promotes virtual social activities. However, there was no agreement on the importance of the Internet between caregivers.

Negative aspects of the internet:

- **Girls 13-15:** The girls mentioned some negative aspects of ICT, such as addiction, unsafe content, isolation, wasting time, and the negative impact on health.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys highlighted many disadvantages, such as wasting time, bad content and addiction.
- **Girls 16-18:** The girls identified some disadvantages such as addiction, isolation, wasting time, and health problems.
- **Boys 16-18:** The boys mentioned negative aspects including ethnic and hate speech, bullying, addiction, hacking, and bad content (violence, drugs, pornography).
- **Adults:** Many caregivers said that the Internet teaches kids laziness and idleness. There is also fear of using the Internet for violent gaming, and accessing porn or bad content.

Access to the Internet and digital learning opportunities:

- **Girls 13-15:** This group mentioned poor Internet services, lack of access to electricity and difficulties in having the proper equipment.
- **Boys 13-15:** Some of the boys do not have phones or access to the Internet. They also mentioned the high cost of the Internet and poor access to electricity.
- **Girls 16-18:** The girls mentioned weak and high cost Internet services, in addition to the lack of training institutes to help them develop their skills to use ICT efficiently.
- **Adults:** Distance learning in Raqqa is expensive and not available to all people. During COVID-19, the educational level of the rural adolescents worsened more and more, where the quality of the Internet is worse than in the city. For adolescent girls, in particular, most do not have a phone or are banned from using it, and cannot leave their homes to complete their education in special groups. IDPs suffer from the same difficulties, but those in informal camps suffer more as the AA prevents Internet networks there. Adolescents need to develop computer skills to use the Internet, be aware of suspicious websites, and require the supervision of their parents.

Recommendations by key informants and caregivers

The participants made suggestions for programmes that can support adolescent learning skills such as:

− Provide a secure environment, qualified educational staff and updated curricula.
− Improve the quality of schools by including modern equipment, places to play, laboratories, sports and social youth clubs.
− Provide poor families with school supplies, such as stationery and books.
− Rehabilitate educational infrastructure, such as schools, training institutes, technical infrastructure, Internet networks, and digital education platforms.
− Create informal learning programmes that:
- Include themes like languages and life skills, ICT skills, vocational training, awareness sessions to discuss social issues such as child marriage, violence, personal hygiene, health and education.
- Target and form mixed-sex groups.
- Design a special formal education programme for girls, that includes the formal education curriculum, English and computer skills. It could be virtual or in-person to give wide options for girls who have restrictions to move.
- Courses should last for three months, three days per week and four hours per day, and be managed by experienced and qualified staff.
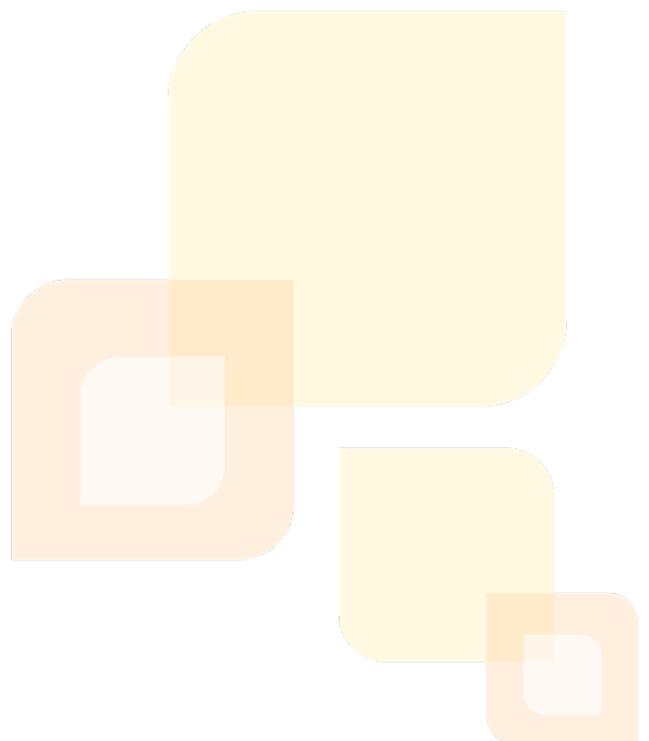
Sweida

The Governorate of Sweida did not witness major military battles compared to other regions, yet it suffered from instability and insecurity. It is under GoS control and the estimated number of people in the city was 178,000 of which 49,000 were IDPs in 2020. The estimated poverty rate was 77 percent and the basic education enrolment was 95 percent in 2019 (SCPR, 2020).

Aspirations and interests:

- **Girls 13-15:** Some girls expressed their passion to achieve conventional careers, such as pharmacist, engineer, doctor, while others aimed to be an actress, fashion designer or hairdresser. They are interested in learning foreign languages such as English, French, Russian and Korean, as they want to travel. They mentioned many hobbies like playing music, drawing and sport.
- **Boys 13-15:** Boys have different aims for their careers and hobbies, they aim to be IT engineers, judges, dentists, pharmacists, cooks or football players. Many of them want to reach a high level of welfare and want to travel. Three of them use the Internet to learn programming, games design and computer maintenance.
- **Girls 16-18:** They aim for a variety of careers like doctor, engineer, programmer, nurse, teacher, psychologist, IT engineer, broadcaster or YouTuber. They also have many hobbies including playing music, cooking, drawing, dancing, singing and reading. Some of them stated their willingness to help people in need. Many of them want to travel to study and work.
- **Boys 16-18:** These boys were active and ambitious. They aimed to be photographers, engineers, politicians, estate agents and traders, and some of them expressed their will to travel outside the country. They have many hobbies like playing music, singing, body-building, drawing, and communicating through social media.

Support mechanisms:

- **Girls 13-15:** The girls have strong support from their families, yet sometimes parents and the community control their choices in education, careers and social life. Some of them criticized inequality between boys and girls in society.
- **Girls 16-18:** Although these girls appreciated family support, all of them want to be economically independent.

Contextual challenges:

"الصعوبات تكمن في مواجهة المجتمع الذكوري الذي لا يرضى أن تكون المرأة أفضل منهم"

"**The difficulties in a patriarchal society that are not accepting women to be better than men**" **(Girl 13-15, Sweida)**

- **Girls 13-15:** Some girls mentioned the negative impact of war on their lives as it led to insecurity and instability in their society. The conflict also led to poverty and increased the cost of living which affected their lives in and out of schools. Some of them left school and worked to support their families.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys stated that war and insecurity are the main challenges for their expectations. As a result, the cost of living increased while sources of income dropped, which led to massive increases in poverty. They also fear compulsory military services, especially in the current situation.
- **Girls 16-18:** The girls highlighted insecurity and poverty as key factors that negatively affected their study.
- **Boys 16-18:** They expressed their fear of instability and insecurity and some of them considered that their challenges will be solved

if the current political and economic problems are addressed. The economic deterioration and increased poverty are key obstacles for their study, and most of them work in summer to cover their education costs, in supermarkets and restaurants. They also feel insecure about military conscription.

- **Adults:** They explained that adolescents in Sweida faced different social, economic and institutional risks and challenges due to the ramifications of the prolonged conflict. The key informants noted that the Governorate lacked stability and security and suffered from the spread of violence, kidnapping, drugs, sexual abuse, the loss of hope in the future, and the government oppression subordinated the will of young generations. Key informants also mentioned that economic hardship and social pressure caused different psychological and social problems and diminished the education opportunities of many adolescents. Caregivers stated that the main challenges faced by adolescents are the absence of rule of law, the danger of electronic blackmail on adolescents, dangerous social manifestations such as malnutrition, begging, the spread of weapons, violence, harassment, kidnapping and drugs, which destroy adolescents psychologically and financially, the foggy future that made them lose their ambition, the disintegration of society and the increase in divorce, poverty, economic hardship and unemployment, and finally, loss of belonging and the ambition to travel abroad.

COVID-19:

- **Girls 13-15:** These girls highlighted the role of COVID-19 in hindering the education process and affecting their mobility.
- **Girls 16-18:** COVID-19 created many challenges for these girls, especially that they could not recover the education loss.
- **Adults:** Key informants highlighted the negative effects of COVID-19 on adolescent education due to poor educational alternatives, increasing the educational loss without compensating for it, and allowing promotion to the next grade without exams.

Education system:

"كل دولة بتدعمنا من نزل لغتها على المنهاج"

"**For every country that supports us; we added its language to the curriculum**" **(Girl 13-15 Sweida)**

- **Girls 13-15:** Girls identified many problems with the education system, such as the lack of qualified teachers, traditional teaching approaches, the curriculum frequently changing and increasing in intensity, poor teaching of foreign languages, violence and bullying between students, mistreatment of students by teachers and administration, costly private classes, lack of equipment, high prices for books and stationery, and the spread of smoking and drugs.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys assessed the education process as weak and inefficient in terms of curriculum and teaching approaches and the lack of qualified teachers. They also mentioned the increased cost of the education process and the difference between private and public schools. Some of them mentioned the poor services in schools and the spread of violence between students.
- **Girls 16-18:** The girls mentioned the challenges of the education process, such as the weak infrastructure of schools, lack of qualified teachers, the low wages for the teachers, crowded classes, private classes, corruption and nepotism, and lack of e-learning.
- **Boys 16-18:** These boys highlighted the key problems in the education process as the poor school administration, intense curriculum, lack of qualified teachers, poor working conditions and low wages for teachers, lack of electricity and transportation, poor services in schools, costly private lessons, and lack of skills development including digital.
- **Adults:** This group agreed that the education system has structural problems which hindered the education process and adolescent education. They emphasized that these problems included poor infrastructure and equipment, poor curriculum and learning methods, overcrowded classes that hinder interactive lessons, lack of sufficient qualified and trained teachers as a result of the migration of qualified teachers outside the country, the high costs of education due to the pressing need for private sources to

compensate for the educational loss, the low quality of public educational services, and transportation difficulties, especially in rural areas. The caregivers added the failure to provide schools with the necessary materials, modern technologies and services, such as electricity, modern appliances and clean water. In addition to the lack of confidence of adolescents in technical and vocational schools, problems include corruption within these schools, poor examination processes and the spread of cheating. The poor quality of education and learning methods, the lack of adolescents´ IT skills and their misuse of the Internet and digital platforms increased the educational gap.

Drivers of dropout

Adults: School dropout increased due to family problems, the generation gap between adolescents and parents and a lack of parental supervision, poor governance of the education system, and poverty which pushed some adolescents towards the labour market and, in some cases, to recruitment into armed groups. The majority of key informants believed that girls have good opportunities in education in Al-Sweida, yet two mentioned that traditions and social norms force some girls to early marriage and the society restricts girls' education by preventing them from studying outside of the Governorate.

English language and digital skills:

Adults: The group agreed on the importance and feasibility of informal education, digital and language learning programmes for adolescents because they are attractive and motivate adolescents through their tools and style. Currently there are some civil and private initiatives for informal learning but these do not fulfil the enormous needs.

Internet use and digital learning:

- **Girls 13-15:** Some of the girls use the Internet to develop their life skills, such as cooking, sewing, makeup, and playing musical instruments. The majority considered the pros of ICT greater than the cons. Overall, they mentioned the advantages of ICT, such as

communication, exchange of ideas, access to information, entertainment, marketing and job opportunities. It is worth noting that the out-of-school girls use the Internet only for communication and entertainment like watching movies.

- **Boys 13-15:** The boys consider ICT as an important means to access information, learn and communicate with new friends and cultures. It also generates job opportunities and helps in marketing.
- **Girls 16-18:** The girls stated pros of ICT such as learning and access to information, facilitating study and work, communicating with new friends and other cultures, and creating job opportunities and developing life and work skills.
- **Boys 16-18:** The boys defined the key advantages of ICT for learning and access to knowledge and different sources of information and developing various skills.
- **Adults:** The group agreed that ICT could be a very important chance for adolescents to acquire new knowledge and communication skills, but key informants insisted on the necessity for this to be integrated with the education system. Key informants stated that the Internet was a means to know new cultures and languages and a facility for entertainment during quarantine. Caregivers found that access to the Internet and distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine allowed adolescents to compensate for part of the education loss.

Negative aspects:

- **Girls 13-15:** The group defined several disadvantages like addiction, isolation, fraud, lack of privacy and hacking, and dangerous games.
- **Boys 13-15:** Some of the boys highlighted disadvantages such as wasting time (some spent 3-5 hours per day on the Internet to watch YouTube or sports games or communicate with friends), addiction, and bad content.
- **Girls 16-18:** The group noted cons including the fragmentation of families, bad content, addiction, dangerous games, and wasting time.
- **Boys 16-18:** This group highlighted the main disadvantage of ICT as wasting too much time in gaming and watching movies and chatting, the group spend daily between 4 and 12 hours on the Internet. They also mentioned addiction, isolation and bad content.
- **Adults:** The group mentioned disadvantages of ICT such as the misuse of the Internet which increases the risk of cyber addiction, isolation, depression and suicide, spreading the culture of violence, insecure contact and privacy violation, and wasting time in gaming and entertainment rather than education.

Access to the Internet and digital learning opportunities:

- **Girls 13-15:** The girls highlighted poor and costly Internet services and the high prices of the required equipment.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys noted that the Internet service is weak and costly and there was a lack of access to electricity. One of the participants suggested introducing solar energy to provide Internet and electricity services in institutions.
- **Girls 16-18:** The girls insisted on the high cost of the Internet and lack of electricity and the poor infrastructure and investment in ICT. It is worth mentioning that they use the Internet on average five hours per day.
- **Adults:** This group considered that distance learning could be an opportunity, but Internet services are weak and costly and there is a lack of needed equipment and proper electronic devices due to family finances. They also mentioned many challenges which hindered the use of ICT including poor infrastructure, power outages and high costs of using the Internet and electronic devices.

Recommendations by key informants and caregivers

- Reform the formal education system in terms of governance and quality of education.
- Develop a modern and new curriculum to be more interactive with adolescents.
- Improve and rehabilitate infrastructure, platforms and the Internet for e-learning.
- Provide psychological support to adolescents.
- Improve the income of teachers.
- Develop programmes to improve the individual and social skills of adolescents.
- Develop e-learning which can be an opportunity to develop the capabilities of students, but this needs infrastructure and support.
- Develop programmes to support the skills of adolescents and improve the educational environment.
- Integrate technology with education and provide the Internet in schools and universities for digital interactive education and the provision of virtual classes.
- Support industrial and vocational schools and engage them in the labour market at an early stage, and support student projects, arts and creative talents.
- Create informal learning programmes that:
- Concentrate on foreign languages and critical thinking and scientific methods, critical thinking, logic, mathematics, physics, natural sciences, life and digital and communication skills, public work, team building, emotional and social intelligence, and social cohesion.
- Conduct sessions at least three days a week and on holidays and for three hours per day.
- Provide necessary equipment, such as a projector, the Internet and a laboratory.
- Design mixed-sex groups.
- Manage the programme with qualified persons who are able to deal with young people.
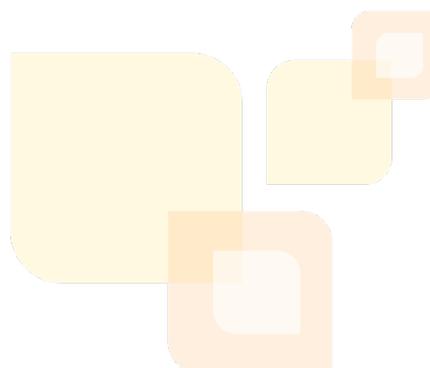
Tartous

The Governorate did not witness military operations, yet it suffered from substantial loss of life of youth who joined the GoS army, displacement and instability. It is under GoS control and the estimated number of people in the Governorate was 801,000 of which 138,000 were IDPs, in 2020. The estimated poverty rate was 80 percent and basic education enrolment was 91 percent in 2019 (SCPR, 2020).

Aspirations and interests:

"صعب كتير نفكر بطموح وهدف لأننا ما نعرف بكرا شو بيصير"

"It is so difficult to think of our ambition and goals because we are not certain what will happen tomorrow" (Tartous girl 13-15)

"طموحي كون محامية اذا خلوني كمل دراستي. لانو حلم أمي ولأقدر دافع عن حقوقي"

"My ambition is to be a lawyer if they let me complete my studies. Because it is my mother's dream, and to defend my rights" **(Tartous girl 16-18)**

- **Girls 13-15:** Most of the girls aimed for conventional high careers, such as doctor, pharmacist, or architect, while some girls aim to be a psychiatrist, accountant, makeup artist, hostess, actress, fashion designer or Youtuber. All of them liked school and study, and most were interested in learning foreign languages, mainly English and some mentioned French, Russian, and Korean. They mentioned many hobbies like drawing, handcrafts, playing music, watching TV series, and practicing sport. Some girls mentioned marriage as a way to escape from the difficult economic situation, others mentioned travel abroad, and some of them referred to working alongside study to earn income. Most of them appreciated women's economic independence.
- **Boys 13-15:** The participants had different goals for their careers. Some of them wanted to be engineers, however, the majority aimed for unconventional careers such as sports, pilot, hairdresser or painter. Also, two of them aimed to be high-level politicians. Their main hobbies were sport, swimming, paint, music, and nature.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls were from different conservative and non-conservative backgrounds, and spent some time engaging with each other. One of them had a disability, some of them were orphans, and one girl studied and worked. In general, they had ambition and passion for the future and they appreciated women's social and economic independence. They had a variety of aims including being a lawyer, doctor, economist, pharmacist, human rights advocate, teacher, translator, painter, sports coach or hairdresser. Most of them like sports and nature, music, travel, reading, writing, learning languages and cooking. Many of them want to travel abroad to find better conditions, however, in general their families reject that.
- **Boys 16-18:** The adolescents in this group were mixed between those enrolled and not enrolled in school, some of them aimed to be a doctor, engineer or lawyer, while others aimed to be a pilot, programmer, painter, self-employed or working abroad. They had many hobbies, such as listening to music, playing online games, and watching movies. Some of them worked in trade and construction, and all wanted to earn high income in the future. Most of them dreamt of travelling abroad, due to the war conditions and the deterioration of the economic conditions in addition to the fear of compulsory recruitment military services.

Support mechanisms:

"كل شي بعملو تحت المراقبة وكتير بتصير مشاكل مع اهلي"

"Everything is done under surveillance, and many problems arise with my family" **(Tartous girl 16-18)**

- **Girls 13-15:** They have the support of their family and friends, however, some girls criticized the parents and society for interfering in their choices of field of study and career in addition to the constraints on their choice to travel abroad. They also highlighted widespread bullying and smoking among adolescents and its negative impact on them. Additionally, some girls mentioned the absence of an integrating environment for girls with disabilities.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys like to hang out with friends, and most of them complained about family and society interventions that constrained their ability to express themselves

and choose their future. Most of the boys identified bullying and smoking as challenges for them.

- **Girls 16-18:** Many girls appreciated support from families and friends, but many of them expressed the several constraints imposed on them by parents and societies.
- **Boys 16-18:** Most of them relied on support from their families and many mentioned their desire to get married.
- **Adults:** Caregivers specifically stated that the bad psychological state of people increased the disintegration of the family and divorce cases and affected the life of adolescents. Furthermore, the lack of communication between adolescents and parents increased the generation gap.

Contextual challenges:

"الوضع الاقتصادي السيئ يلي سرق أحلام اليافعين"

"**The poor economic situation stole the dreams of adolescents**" **(Tartous boy 13-15)**

- **Girls 13-15:** The girls expressed their concern regarding the status of instability and deterioration of living conditions, which created many obstacles for them to achieve their goals.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys were pessimistic about the current situation and their future and wanted to travel abroad. They highlighted the catastrophic economic situation and the instability as major factors that have hindered their ability and opportunities; some of them were already out of school and working.
- **Girls 16-18:** Although most of the girls had ambitious goals, they expressed their frustration with the war and socioeconomic challenges which hindered their living conditions, study and relations.
- **Boys 16-18:** The increase in poverty and cost of education forced some of these boys to work to help their families.
- **Adults:** key informants found that the violent conflict severely affected the psychological health of adolescents, increased depression, caused the degradation of social values and morals, spread poverty and deterioration of living conditions, and created widespread negative phenomena such as violence, early

marriage, child labour, drugs, smoking, sexual harassment, bullying and addiction to electronic devices and violent games. Moreover, the violent conflict increased the number of male deaths, which left many families without a breadwinner and left adolescents out of control.

Caregivers agreed that the economic situation is considered the main challenge for adolescents in Tartous, followed by the social and psychological problems and disparities. They asserted that the war economy caused wide economic disparities and divided society into small very rich class and large very poor class who lacks the necessities. The younger generation also suffer from feelings of insecurity, loss of belonging and anxiety for the future. These social challenges were associated with poor institutional performance and widespread corruption, nepotism, and lack of accountability.

COVID-19:
- **Boys 13-15:** Many boys identified COVID-19 as a new challenge for them and their families, because of the closure of schools, the health risks, and the deterioration of economic activities.
- **Girls 16-18:** Some girls mentioned the challenges associated with COVID-19 that forced them to be at home.
- **Adults:** This group agreed that COVID-19 affected the education of adolescents and spread a state of anxiety and chaos in the local community with a lack of government response plans or consistent policies to substitute the educational loss. The COVID-19 pandemic also caused an increase in poverty and unemployment, resulting in constant pressure on families. School closures harmed adolescent educational attainment, especially in sequential subjects such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, French and English. Distance learning was not accessible to all students because of a lack of proper devices and good speedy Internet services, as well as the failure of the Ministry of Education to educate students on how to use the application that is supposed to include a full explanation of the curriculum.

Education system:

"مدارسنا عبارة عن سجون للطلبة من حيث التصميم الذي يؤثر سلباً على الطلاب"

"Our schools look like prisons for the students which affect them negatively" (Tartous adult)

- **Girls 13-15:** The girls assured the right of education for every child, and many of them identified education challenges as follows: The decline of the desire of adolescents to continue their education, intensive and changing curriculum, lack of qualified teachers, high cost of private lessons, poor infrastructure including lack of heating and poor hygiene, crowded classes, bullying and violence, favouritism towards some students, lack of communication between administration, teachers and adolescents. They suggested changing the curriculum to be more interactive and less intensive, investing in new schools and rehabilitating existing ones, supporting free courses for students, activating the school health and social supervision, and enhancing the participatory education environment.

- **Boys 13-15:** The boys identified the challenges of education process including poor infrastructure, lack of proper health and educational minimum requirements, lack of ICT infrastructure, crowded classes, lack of qualified teachers, difficult curriculum, costly private lessons, discrimination between students, bullying in schools, and lack of communication between school and parents. They suggested the importance of rehabilitation of schools, changing the curriculum and teaching methods to be more interactive and less intense, and expanding the space for adolescents to choose their careers and study.

- **Girls 16-18:** The older girls agreed on the challenges of the education system including poor education methods and quality, lack of qualified teachers, forcing students towards costly private lessons, lack of discipline in schools, crowded classes, bullying, difficult curriculum, and poor teaching of foreign languages. They suggested interventions such as expanding the schools, changing the curriculum and teaching methods, improving language teaching, training teachers, listening to students' voices, and building a disability-friendly environment.

- **Boys 16-18:** The boys assessed the education

system and mentioned the following challenges: corrupt education management, poor education tools, lack of qualified teachers, irrelevant and complicated curriculum, increased cost of education, lack of proper environment for disabled students.

- **Adults:** Key informants named the main challenges of education in Tartous as: poverty and the high cost of living and of education, feeling insecure, customs and traditions, discrimination, violence, and lack of educational staff. Caregivers found that the education system suffers from low quality of education in public schools, very low wages and salaries in education sectors, and lack of consideration for people with special needs. Key informants highlighted the lack of qualified educational staff due to the low quality of the education system in Syrian universities from where low-qualified teachers graduate. Moreover, the lack of suitable and qualified educational staff to deliver the new school curriculum, especially in rural areas, forced adolescents to receive their education from unspecialized teachers. Key informants also referred to the mistrust between students and teachers, as many students do not trust the information given by their teachers on one side; and teachers complain about the disrespectful behaviour of some students on the other.

The majority of families with limited income were unable to afford the large financial burden of books, school materials and additional expenses for private classes, besides the costs of transportation. Caregivers also found that indirect privatisation policies that expand the space of private schools and private educational centres increased the cost of education and the disparity between private and public education.

Drivers of dropout

"سنوات الحرب الطويلة التي تمخضت عن عدد كبير من الشهداء الذين تركوا عائلات بأكملها دون معيل، وعدم قدرة الدولة على القيام برعاية هذه الأسر، اضطر الأطفال للعمل"

"The long years of war that resulted in a large number of martyrs who left entire families without a breadwinner, and the inability of the state to take care of these families, forced children to work" (Adult Tartous)

Adults: According to key informants, school drop-out rates increased relatively in Tartous during the war because of the financial problems and deterioration of the economic status of households. In the last two years, the dropout rate also increased due to the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

English language and digital skills

Adults: Key informants referred to the importance of informal education and language programmes for their role in building adolescents' skills, but that current initiatives are profit-oriented and lack of good management, particularly individual initiatives.

Internet use and digital learning:

"بيصير الانترنت إيجابي لما بتصير المدرسة أون لاين، وفينا نتعلم من خلاله"

"**The Internet becomes useful when the school becomes online, and we learn through it**" **(Tartous girl 13-15)**

"الحصول على الجوال بات حاجة اساسية حتى عند معدومي الدخل، ويؤدي عدم الوصول لخدمات الاتصالات إلى نشوء جيل جاهل فعلياً وضمنياً ومتعلم ظاهرياً، وغير قادر على مواجهة مصاعب الحياة ومتغيراتها "

"**Having a mobile has become an essential need even for limited-income people, therefore the lack of access to ICT creates ignorant generation even if they attend schools, this generation cannot face life difficulties and its changes**" **(Tartous adult)**

"تكنولوجيا المعلومات مهمة بنسبة كبيرة لأنها ذات دوافع وأهداف تنموية، تمكن من بناء قدرات اليافعين بكل الاتجاهات وخاصة المبادرات التي تأتي عن طريق المنظمات لأنها تستهدف غالباً الشريحة المهمشة"

"**ICT is very important, as it has developmental motives and goals aimed at building the capabilities of adolescents, especially the initiatives that are introduced by NGOs because they mostly target the marginalized group**" **(Tartous adult)**

- **Girls 13-15:** The girls ranked the advantages of using the Internet as follows: communication with friends, entertainment, access to news and information about other cultures and countries, developing skills, and searching for information and translation. Overall, two-thirds of them considered the advantages are greater than the disadvantages.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys mentioned the advantages of ICT as communication with friends, entertainment, access to information, and a source for learning especially through YouTube. Overall, half of them said the positive aspects of ICT are greater than the negative ones.
- **Girls 16-18:** The older girls identified access to information and knowledge, communication with new friends and cultures, marketing and work as advantages of ICT. Most of them used Facebook and YouTube on the Internet and mainly for entertainment.
- **Boys 16-18:** The boys mainly use Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, and two of them mentioned that they follow sources for scientific content. They mentioned the pros of ICT, such as access to information, learning, communication, marketing and working, and online workshops.
- **Adults:** This group agreed that ICT has various advantages as a source of information, and an opportunity for distance learning and compensating for educational losses.

Negative aspects:
- **Girls 13-15:** The girls ranked the disadvantages as harassment and bullying, negative content, such as violence, horror and suicide, waste of time, addiction, isolation and lack of privacy.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys identified disadvantages including untrusted information, hacking and lack of privacy, bad content including pornography, abuse, and fake friendships.
- **Girls 16-18:** These girls mentioned many disadvantages such as untrusted information, hacking, bullying, waste of time, addiction, isolation, fanaticism, lack of security and privacy, lack of online learning culture. The majority considered the negative aspects are more significant than the positive ones.
- **Boys 16-18:** The boys highlighted the cons of ICT such as waste of time, bad content, gaming, violent content and false information.

- **Adults:** The group noted negative impacts of ICT as the lack of communication between family members as they spend most of the time on social media, the unreliable sources of information, overuse of technology for entertainment rather than educational purposes, time-wasting, and ease of access to inappropriate sites such as violent games and porn pages

Access to the Internet and digital learning opportunities:

- **Girls 13-15:** The girls identified many challenges related to the ICT infrastructure such as the weak Internet, and hacking of networks, the high cost of Internet and equipment. They also highlighted the limited free digital learning courses, lack of trusted sources, and distracting advertisements. They suggested providing quality and free Internet for all, providing equipment with reasonable prices, and supporting adolescents to develop skills for time management.
- **Boys 13-15:** The boys highlighted ICT challenges such as lack of electricity, low-quality Internet, lacking and costly modern equipment, parental constraints, and the lack of free courses on using ICT efficiently and securely. They suggested providing free Internet for students in addition to proper equipment at schools, reducing the cost of equipment for students, and developing an online curriculum.
- **Girls 16-18:** The girls mentioned the poor infrastructure for ICT in terms of access to electricity or quality Internet and the high cost of equipment. They suggested free Internet for students and courses on accessing trusted information sources and digital security and eLearning for teachers, parents and students.
- **Boys 16-18:** The older boys mentioned the poor quality of the Internet and lack of security, hacking, and costly equipment. Overall, the majority of them considered the pros and cons of using ICT; and they suggested providing equipment for students with reasonable prices and loans, and free Internet for students, free courses on using the Internet and digital security.
- **Adults:** They referred to different challenges to benefit from ICT due to the lack of adequate and modern infrastructure to get good and

effective Internet for communication, sustained electricity, and quality Internet. Moreover, most adolescents do not have enough qualifications and digital skills, with a small number of private centres that provide ICT courses at acceptable costs. Key informants also mentioned that the weakness of adolescents´ English skills led them to prefer Arabic sites, which have less credibility and limited cutting-edge information.
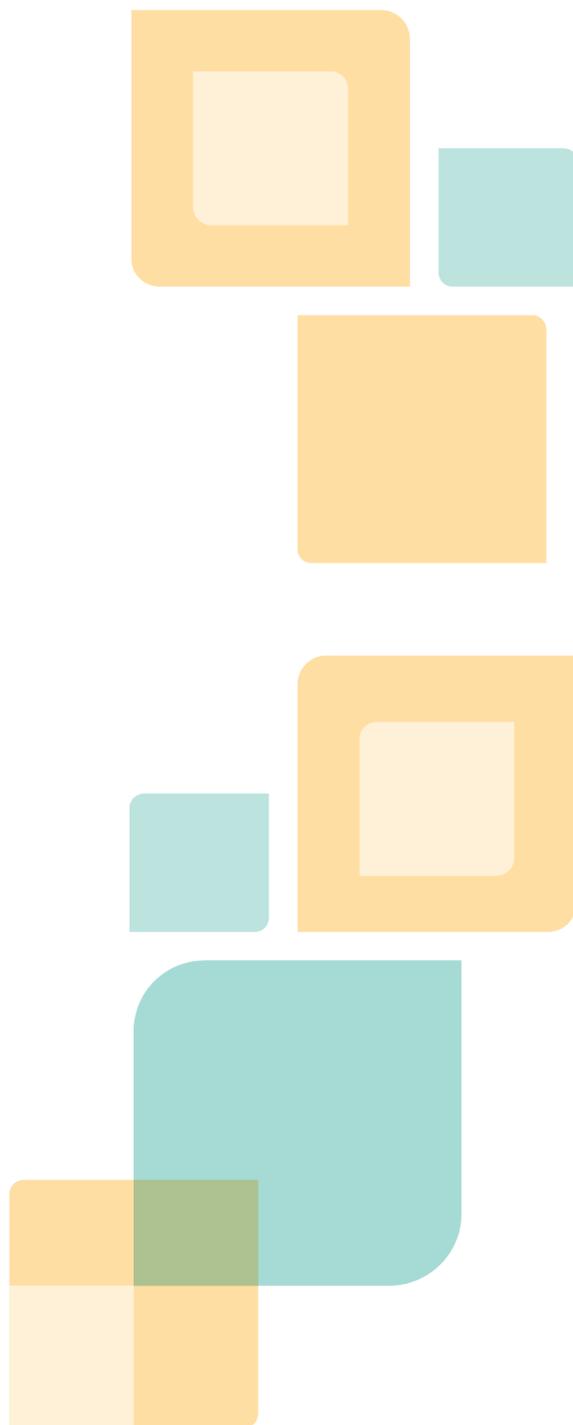
Recommendations by key informants and caregivers

- Provide modern educational methods that avoid indoctrination and memorization.
- Provide schools with modern technological means and scientific laboratories.
- Increase the performance and the quality of the educational staff that understand the needs and capabilities of adolescents.
- Provide consistent services, such as electricity and the Internet, and improve the performance of public schools to diminish the need for private education.
- Expand the use of technical and technological means and increase the number of platforms that provide Internet services in the region.
- Increase the number of schools to reduce overcrowding in the classroom.
- Rehabilitate schools to provide a safe and healthy environment for adolescents.
- Introduce monitoring and evaluation of the educational staff to control their performance.
- Promote cooperation and coordination between NGOs, the Government, and the private sector to fill educational gaps.
- Increase the number of digital sources that provide accurate and scientific content for adolescents.
- Create informal learning programmes that:
  - Provide psychological rehabilitation programmes and skills for adolescents, which help in overcoming the challenges of education.
  - Provide offers for low-cost electronic devices required to work on irregular programmes and digital language teaching platforms or present instalment offers to purchase these devices.
  - Encourage teacher incentives to provide free courses to improve adolescents' digital and language skills.
  - Reactivate the role of national youth organizations.
  - Reconsider the role of international organizations and local associations for adopting educational and recreational activities for young people with the need to change the community's mentality and opinion of what these organizations offer.
  - Train staff to deal with adolescents, exchanging experiences among them, and presenting their initiatives.
  - Activate the voluntary role of parents and young people and spread awareness of voluntary activities for the development of society.
- Monitoring and accountability of associations' work and programmes.
- Activate the role of local community committees and individual initiatives, spreading the culture of solidarity initiatives.
- Include themes in informal programmes such as languages and ICT skills, life skills, communication skills, time management, values, empowerment, preparation to enter the labour market, choosing a suitable career based on their abilities and interests, mental health.
- Locate the programme in safe and reachable areas.
- Conduct sessions on holidays, Fridays and Saturdays, three times per week lasting two or three hours.
- Design for mixed-sex groups.
- Programme to be managed by qualified psychological, social and technical staff.
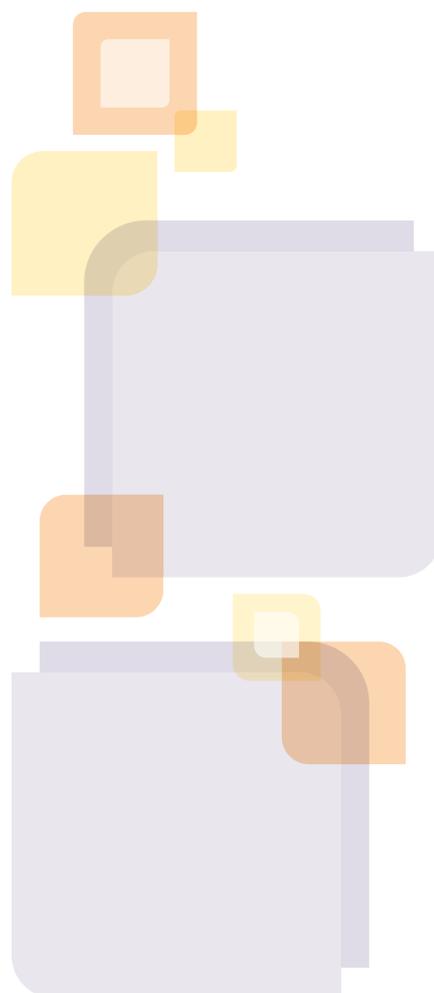
Annex 2: Research ethics

All facilitators and field researchers are requested to comply with the following ethical instructions to protect the safety and wellness of adolescent girls and boys and ensure the confidentiality of the data and information and the quality and integrity of this research.

General rules

- The adolescent is someone who holds capabilities and rights. Therefore, the interaction with her/him must be based on that recognition which implies that the researcher must be more sensitised to the threats that adolescents are exposed to.
- To comply with the criteria of the safety and security of researched and researcher individuals at first, and not take any personal risks to achieve the research. Any arising risks must be assessed internally with the team to agree on the required measurements to address them.
- Provide the parents and caregivers of the adolescents with a full description and explanation of the goals and ethics of the research and how the extracted data will be used, and highlight that the participants have the right to withdraw from the research or abstain from sharing their names, numbers and addresses.
- The written approval of the parents for the participation of their adolescent children is mandatory in the research.
- Assure that the adolescent participants understand the purpose of the research and the importance of their participation while making sure that all the information related to the research is communicated smoothly and clearly.
- The field researcher must report to the research team of any arising conflict of interests between him/her and any other participants in the research. Accordingly, the research team assesses such cases to ensure that they do not happen and affect the integrity of the research. As an example, in case a field researcher is responsible for providing humanitarian aid in one of the studied areas, or a case whereby the field researcher is in any kind of a power position vis-a-vis the researched participant.
- The field researcher must clarify to all the adolescent participants that they have the right to abstain from responding to any of the questions and to withdraw from the research if they wish to. In the case that any of this happens, the field research must inform the research team.
- Gender-based sensitization is ensured throughout all the phases of the research.
- Protect the adolescents from any kind of possible abuse or manipulation during the interaction with the rest of the participants in the research.
- Be aware not to abuse the power relations existing between the adult researcher and the adolescent participant.
- Ensure that parents or caregivers are not using their power and forcing the adolescents to participate in the research.
- Clarify to the adolescent and to their parents the expectations of the research.
- Respect the norms of the communities when working in the studied areas.
- Be considerate to the pace and to the need for a break time during the long sessions that require lots of concentration efforts from the adolescents as well as from the field researchers.
- Field researchers must abide by the ethics and the methods of participatory research to ensure the quality and the accuracy of the information and results obtained. In case of any confusion, the field research must refer to the research guidelines and to the research team.
- Coordinate with the field coordinator of the studied area all the logistics and preparatory work ahead of time and make sure that the consultation workshops are well prepared.
- Be respectful of the social customs and norms of the communities in the studied area in terms of dress code and general behaviour.
- Be objective and impartial towards all the inputs of the adolescent participants without making attempts to influence them towards prior assumptions that the researcher may have.
- Accuracy and integrity in documenting and reporting all the information and inputs that are generated from the consultations with adolescents and caregivers.
- Be respectful of the time of the parents and the adolescent as well as their living circumstances.
- Treat all the information related to the research with full confidentiality and not use it outside the research for any reason.

Rules and ethics related to working with adolescents with special needs

- Abide by the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) which confirms the right of people with disabilities to full and effective participation in their society same as all other people.
- Adapt the research tools and provide alternative ways to present the questions and the activities in order to accommodate the participants with disabilities and help them contribute in the best way possible.
- Core principles: respect, trust, belief in the capabilities of the persons with disabilities, inclusivity, active listening, and participation.

Rules and ethics to protect the adolescent girls and boys against any sexual abuse or violation

Harm is the behaviour or the actions that individuals or institutions do, and which can harm the safety, comfort, growth or dignity of the adolescent participant. A harmful treatment can be any of the following:

- Emotional or psychological harm includes any disrespectful treatment that insults dignity, such as bullying, verbal violence, repetitive criticism, belittling, shaming, alienation and solitary confinement.
- Physical harm is defined as any kind of intentional physical injury which includes hitting, pushing, biting, burning, or any kind of action that causes physical harm.
- Sexual harm is the exercise of any sexual activity with a minor who cannot express his/her approval to that action (which he/she may not understand) and includes the use of sexual vocabulary with an adolescent, sharing with adolescent girls and boys sexual content or touching them inappropriately or harassing them, incest, early marriage, forced marriage, rape and sexual slavery.

Reporting policies

The reporting on any potential, suspicious or confirmed mistreatments and challenges is mandatory within a maximum of twenty-four hours.
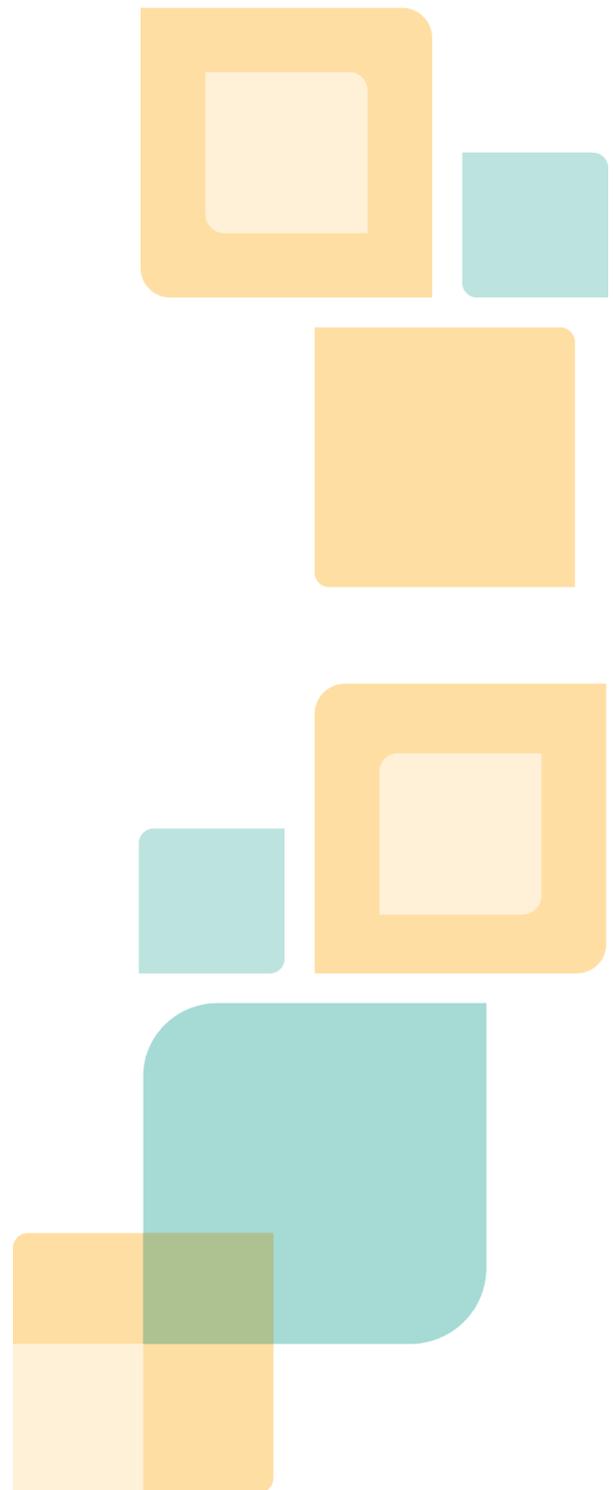
Annex 3: Implementation Planning and Research Task Force:

On the field level, the SCPR implementation plan of the EDGE project was conducted in 11 different areas. In each area, a field team of three members, a coordinator, a facilitator and a note taker worked on the organization, operation and implementation of the research tools and activities and the data collection. Field coordinators were in charge of working on all the logistical required preparations and arrangements as well as the coordination with local actors and networks. Both facilitators and note takers worked jointly and in sync on preparing and conducting the adolescents' consultations, focus groups and KI interviews. While facilitators presented and engaged youth in the consultations, note takers attentively registered and documented all the inputs of the adolescents. The same process was applied during the focus groups and the interviews.

Prior to the selection process and interviewing phase, the SCPR team worked together on setting up key standards and criteria for the field team. These standards and criteria include the following principles: Experience, reputation, transparency, objectivity, reliability, ethicality, confidentiality and knowledge of protection and human rights policies while taking into account that the selection will opt for those who demonstrate higher capabilities of performing the required work under pressure and within a limited time frame. Then, the selection process of the coordinators, facilitators, and note takers, went through these steps:

1. The call for applications for people with relevant facilitation experiences in education-focused, child, youth, and protection programmes was announced among SCPR partners, members, and networks in the studied areas.
2. Interested applicants and referred personal were asked to provide a CV and motivation letter, including personal biography, and details on their work and research experience in humanitarian and development domains, including consultations and engagement activities with IDPs, refugees, host communities, children, adolescents, youth girls and boys, as well as programmes and projects relevant to EDGE scope.
3. A selection committee formed of SCPR core team, worked together on the making interview process with the selected applicants to assess their competencies, communications skills, and capabilities to perform the required work while paying close attention to validate their professionalism and ethical suitability to conduct the EDGE research project.
4. The selection committee made their assessment based on additional and relevant professional criteria for each of the three-team members. Those criteria included the following:
   - Social science degree or any other relevant educational background;
   - Training experience in relevant fields, or equivalent work experience in the humanitarian and development programmes particularly with children and/or youth groups;
     - Ethnic and geographical balance (Kurdish, Arab, urban, rural…etc.);
     - Sex ratio;
     - Location of residence and outreach mobility in the selected areas in Syria;
     - Motivation to take part in planning and facilitating the required consultations and arrangements on the ground;
     - Commitment to attend all the project's training sessions and to comply with the project deliverables and schedule. The availability to join SCPR-EDGE project in April 2021.
5. The selection committee held several meetings to shortlist and do the final selection of the participants.
6. 47 candidates were interviewed: Taking into consideration the selection criteria outlined above, SCPR selected 33 candidates as coordinators, facilitators, and note takers and invited them to attend the training.
7. Following that, an acceptance letter was sent asking for confirmation.

Annex 4: Team Building and Training

Following the selection process, the SCPR worked on preparing for the training of the 11 field teams. The training was conducted by the SCPR core team through the Zoom platform and was held over three days for 6 hours each on March 23rd, 24th and 27th. The 3-day training covered the entire project's objectives, guidelines, methodology, ethics and tools. The training was also interactive and used participatory training techniques to engage the entire team in testing and practising the tools by dividing them into random smaller groups through breakouts rooms while giving extensive time for reflection and for questions and answers to ensure that all members were fully prepared and understanding the subject matter, the technical and operational components as well as the sensitive and critical aspects such all the variances in youth selection that need to be taken into account as per the following training agenda:

- Research objective and methodology
- Roles and responsibilities of each team member
- Research ethics including communication and coordination with stakeholders and participants as well as facilitation and detailed documentation.
- Logistical planning and approval process
- Consultation sessions with the adolescents
- Focus groups discussions with caregivers
- Interviews with key informants
- Project implementation plan, timetable and coordination mechanism (including the completion of all the forms)
- Pilot phase

Following the training, all the teams received by email the entire training package which includes the project's detailed description, guidelines and forms to read again and reflect upon for any further questions or inquiries. Follow-up with all the teams was conducted after five days to ensure they all have a full grasp and deep understanding of the project' implementation, and to start planning for pilot consultation with a selected youth group. Accordingly, the pilot was agreed to be conducted by the Raqqa team.

Annex 5: Pilot Phase | Al-Raqqa

Once the pilot was decided to be conducted in Raqqa, the SCPR core team started to work on the daily follow-up with the Raqqa team to ensure their full preparation and readiness to conduct the pilot. Due to the time limitation, parents' approvals were processed through WhatsApp. The pilot was held on April 1st, with eight youth of 16-19 age group (group #5). In collaboration with the local Youth College Initiative in Raqqa. The Latter helped in providing the location and the logistical support. The Raqqa team piloted the first and the second exercises of the adolescents' consultation tool and documented the adolescent's inputs and sent them to the SCPR team for assessment.

Accordingly, the SCPR core team reviewed the documentation of the Raqqa adolescents' consultation pilot, prepared all their feedback comments and arranged for another entire zoom meeting with all the 11 team members to share the findings and inputs of the Raqqa pilot. That meeting was held on April 5th for 2 hours and allowed the Raqqa team to share their experience in applying the two first exercises with group#5, their challenges and learning lessons. The team meeting also gave the space and time for all other 10 teams to comment and ask clarifying questions on the pilot. Some of the key findings of the pilot were the following:

- Need to give more time for preparation in order to be more in control of the content presentation and to avoid delays.
- Need to be firmer with timing and to stick to the time given for each exercise.
- Need to make sure that coding appears on all documentations.
- Need to give special attention and support for the participants who struggle with writing or with being expressive.
- Need to better prepare for the group activity in order to make sure that all youth participants are equally engaged in the group exercise.
- Need to give more attention to group interaction rather than one-to-one interaction.
- Need to coordinate with parents in advance in order to get their approvals in the best suitable way.

Annex 6: The sample characteristics by sex

		Sex				Total	
		Female		Male			
		Count	Col %	Count	Col %	Count	Col %
Group	Group 1	107	25%	0	0.0%	107	17%
	Group 2	105	24%	0	0.0%	105	16%
	Group 3	0	0%	106	49.8%	106	17%
	Group 4	114	27%	0	0.0%	114	18%
	Group 5	0	0%	107	50.2%	107	17%
	Group 6	86	20%	0	0.0%	86	13%
	Group 7	17	4%	0	0.0%	17	3%
Age							
	12	2	0%	0	0.0%	2	0%
	13	80	19%	36	16.9%	116	18%
	14	70	16%	32	15.0%	102	16%
	15	73	17%	39	18.3%	112	17%
	16	69	16%	34	16.0%	103	16%
	17	67	16%	40	18.8%	107	17%
	18	57	13%	29	13.6%	86	13%
	19	11	3%	3	1.4%	14	2%
Rural/Urban							
	Rural	162	38%	77	36.2%	239	37%
	Urban	267	62%	136	63.8%	403	63%
Enrolment							
	Enrolled	376	88%	180	84.5%	556	87%
	Not enrolled	53	12%	33	15.5%	86	13%
Working							
	Not Working	398	93%	151	70.9%	549	86%
	Working	31	7%	62	29.1%	93	14%

Orphan						
	Orphan 1	64	15%	28	13.1%	92	14%
	Orphan 2	10	2%	4	1.9%	14	2%
	Not Orphan	355	83%	181	85.0%	536	83%
IDPs						
	IDPs	115	27%	53	24.9%	168	26%
	Res	314	73%	160	75.1%	474	74%
Area						
	Idleb	45	10%	18	8.5%	63	10%
	Al-Bab	24	6%	26	12.2%	50	8%
	al-Hasakeh	41	10%	20	9.4%	61	10%
	Raqqa	43	10%	18	8.5%	61	10%
	Sweida	39	9%	19	8.9%	58	9%
	Al-Tal	40	9%	18	8.5%	58	9%
	Harasta	34	8%	17	8.0%	51	8%
	Aleppo city	48	11%	24	11.3%	72	11%
	Homs	49	11%	19	8.9%	68	11%
	Damascus	26	6%	14	6.6%	40	6%
	Tatous	40	9%	20	9.4%	60	9%

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