



SYRIAN ADOLESCENTS: THEIR TOMORROW BEGINS TODAY

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Jordan - Sumaya Agha / Mercy Corps

Of 1.5 million Syrian refugee children under the age of 18 living outside of Syria, one in every four is an adolescent age 12-17.¹ These adolescents continue to miss critical educational and life milestones, denying Syria and the region of the productive, wage-earning youth and adults it will need to mend torn social fabric and build back broken economies.

Mercy Corps believes that Syrian refugee and host-community adolescents represent a critical cohort that warrants particular attention and investment. Adolescents currently lack sufficient psychosocial support, education and skills building programs. Girls are often pressured to stay indoors for their safety where they support their families performing household work. Boys, and a smaller number of girls, are increasingly sent out each day to support their families through hard and at times exploitative work. To lose this generation of productive young people would be a missed opportunity with significant repercussions. By investing in this generation now, we can support them in building their tomorrow today. Engagement with adolescents has the potential to reap dividends for decades to come for the peace and productivity so desperately needed in Syria and the region.

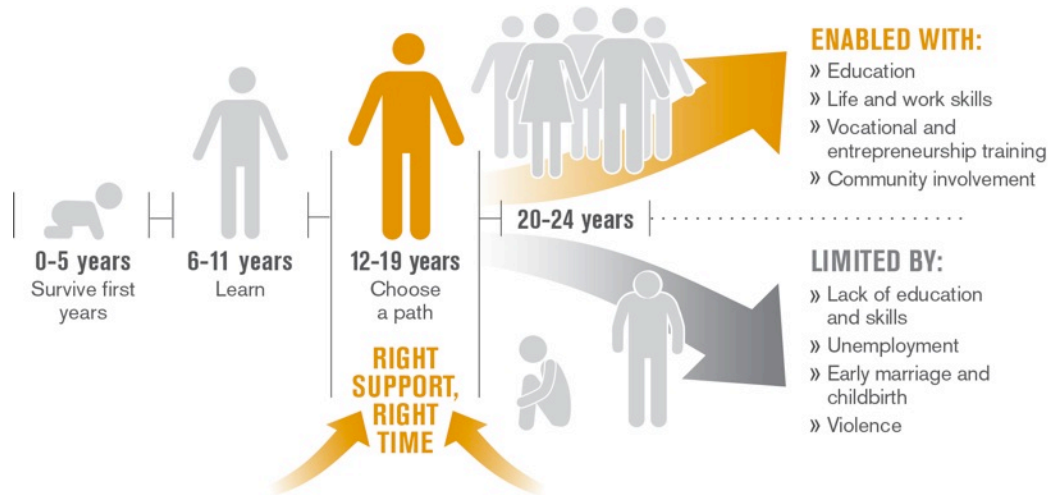


¹ The Future of Syria: Refugee Children in Crisis. UNHCR, November 2013.



A CRITICAL TIME

Adolescence is the time to act. The choices adolescents make regarding education, work, marriage, or violence send them down a path that is not easy to change later in life. It is estimated that the first three years of the Syrian conflict have eroded 35 years of development.² If adolescents don't reach critical educational, emotional and employable milestones soon, it's hard to imagine a future in which Syria and neighboring countries will be able to build a peaceful and sustainable existence. Adolescence represents a time-bound, brief window of opportunity to connect with young people and help them make positive, life-changing decisions.



TOUGH PLACES

Nearly 300,000 Syrian refugee adolescents are living in neighboring countries where their futures are being held hostage to the conflict in Syria as well as to overwhelmed host countries and donor nations.³ These adolescents often face daily verbal and physical abuse in their communities or at their workplaces. With little access to an education or opportunities to learn new skills, adolescents are often isolated by parents to keep them safe, or forced to work low-skill and illegal jobs that may help meet basic needs but do little to advance their future prospects for finding better employment.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXPANDED IMPACT

If young people channel their energies in a positive direction, they can become part of the solution. If targeted properly, adolescents on the brink of adulthood can be poised to serve in new roles as productive members of their communities. We must see these adolescents for who they are, a valuable investment that can pay dividends in Syria's future recovery and development. However, if they are not set up for success, this group of young people could drive further destabilization in the region. The recommendations provided below are drawn from conversations with over 350 male and female Syrian refugee and host-community adolescents in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey and outline key programmatic investments that are needed to support the emerging generation of young Syrians and their neighbors.

² The Syrian Catastrophe: Socioeconomic Monitoring Report First Quarterly Report. UNRWA, 2013. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/520dfa414.html>

³ The Future of Syria: Refugee Children in Crisis. UNHCR, November 2013.

To local and international program donors and implementers:

- » **Expand Psychosocial Support to Reduce Isolation and Hopelessness:** Adolescents need opportunities for individual and collective expression to reduce isolation and marginalization and build bonds among peers. This will allow adolescents to build the social capital they will need to navigate an uncertain future.
- » **Reduce Barriers to Education and Provide Alternative Learning Options:** Expanded formal and informal education programs can address educational setbacks that adolescents have experienced during the last four years of conflict. Informal, flexible learning will fill the growing gap currently preventing adolescents from being able to attend formal lower and upper secondary school.
- » **Support Goal Setting & Planning:** For adolescents to effectively navigate their path to adulthood, they need to be able to set goals and develop plans. For adolescent refugees, in particular, goal setting and planning can create a sense of purpose and stability.
- » **Prioritize Involvement in Community Initiatives:** Supporting adolescent involvement in mixed-group community initiatives will allow for the building of transferable skills, increase a sense of belonging and self-respect, and decrease growing tensions between refugees and host-community adolescents.
- » **Enhance Employability and Vocational Skills:** Many adolescents need employment and vocational skills training as well as access to safe and equitable employment in order to fulfill basic life needs, make productive use of their time, and take concrete steps toward a brighter future. Utilizing market assessments ensures these skills are already in demand in the local host community and, to the degree feasible, transferable to the Syrian context.
- » **Build Safe Spaces for Girls:** Adolescent girls need safe spaces where they can tap into supportive mentors and peers who can help them advance their education and access critical social and health services, while delaying marriage and early pregnancy.

“It would be better to return to Syria to fight and die with dignity than live in humiliation.”

— Male adolescent, Jordan



Sourced from adolescent assessment activity



Together, we are like a star, and this picture is for me to always remember them, and how my love has grown for them. These girls have become more valuable to me than sisters.

— Female adolescent, Jordan

Sourced from adolescent assessment activity

To the bilateral and multilateral donor community and host governments:

- » **Invest in programming specifically targeting adolescents:** While much programming to date has understandably focused on the needs of children, programming that targets adolescents ages 12-19 warrants greater attention and investment. If adolescents continue to miss important educational and social milestones, this generation — the one most likely to deal with the aftermath of the conflict — will not be well prepared to defuse tensions or to drive future social and economic development.
- » **Engage collectively with one another and regional bodies to formally recognize accredited and certified vocational training options and remedial programs for refugee youth.** Expand non-formal education spaces and services to cater to the hundreds of thousands of students who will not find places in public schools, while ensuring that pathways back to formal education are created. Providing nationally and regionally certified programs in non-formal school settings has the potential to expand access and allow for larger numbers of children to receive more specialized support. These activities can help prepare adolescents for safe and equitable work as they approach young adulthood.
- » **Engage Syrian Adults:** Development of education strategies, programs and plans in host communities, and at the national level, would benefit from ongoing dialogue and participation of Syrian teachers and facilitators in setting priorities.
- » **Work with communities and Syrian educators in the refugee population to develop formal protection policies for schools.** Protection mechanisms for adolescents in schools are undeveloped and this ultimately affects both access to and quality of education. Syrian adolescents are particularly vulnerable to being stigmatized, discriminated against and bullied by peers in their host communities. Hostile learning environments — often resulting from overcrowding in classrooms, problems with the language used in instruction, overworked teachers and limited remedial education and psychosocial support — are driving adolescents away from the education opportunities that do exist. As a result, out-of-school youth are a potential destabilizing element for local communities.

Education On Demand

The challenges facing Syrian refugees receiving a formal education are many and include overstretched school and teacher capacity, poor quality instruction, instruction in multiple languages, lack of clarity in the certification and accreditation processes, and challenges in school registration. **Students need a flexible and demand-driven alternative.** Efforts to make a standard, non-political Syrian curriculum available to refugees through a combined online and in-person approach are gaining traction and momentum and should be supported.

Programs targeting adolescents should begin to raise community awareness, interest and acceptance of this flexible schooling approach and identify new, or work with existing, partners to host and manage these emerging virtual schools.

Conclusion

Currently, the global community is standing aside as Syrian and host-community adolescents lose opportunities for education, growth, and a brighter future. If adolescents continue to miss important educational and social milestones, this generation — the one most likely to deal with the aftermath of the conflict — will not be well placed to stabilize tensions and to drive future social and economic development. If we support adolescents in building their tomorrow today by equipping them to channel their energies in a positive direction, they can — and very much want to — become part of the solution.



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