

A young girl with dark hair, wearing a purple sweater with white floral embroidery, holds a wooden handle. In the background, a young boy is visible, looking towards the camera.

SYRIAN ADOLESCENTS: THEIR TOMORROW BEGINS TODAY

September 2014

Introduction

The conflict in Syria and exodus of Syrians to neighboring countries is now in its fourth year, with hundreds of thousands of lives lost during the conflict and close to three million people seeking refuge outside of their home country. A recent study by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) showed that Syrian refugee children and adolescents are experiencing a variety of hardships including isolation and insecurity, psychological distress, extended disruptions of education and exploitative working conditions.¹ The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) recently called the global community to action, stating that in order to avoid losing an entire generation of educated, engaged and productive Syrian and host community children and adolescents, existing humanitarian efforts must be coupled with increased effort to develop future-focused strategies that prepare children and adolescents with the education and skills they will need to help rebuild their lives and their societies.² UNICEF reports that despite the amazing resilience demonstrated by Syrian children, another year of conflict and suffering is likely to severely limit their ability to realize their potential and rebuild their futures.³

Of 1.5 million Syrian refugee children under the age of 18 living outside of Syria, one in every four is an adolescent age 12-17.⁴ Mercy Corps believes that these adolescents represent a critical cohort that warrants particular attention and investment. Adolescents lack psychosocial support, education and skills-building programs as they are often pressured to stay indoors for their safety — the case for many adolescent girls — or to labor inside or outside the home to support their family — the case for both adolescent girls and boys. These adolescents will be first among the generation of Syrian children affected by the conflict to be called upon to help mend torn social fabric and build back broken economies.

In an effort to fill gaps in research on Syrian adolescents and their host community peers, and specifically a gap in examining adolescence from a regionwide viewpoint, Mercy Corps assessed the situation in which Syrian refugee and host community adolescents live in Jordan, Lebanon, the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI), and Turkey between January and June 2014. Based on focused discussions with those adolescents and key informants, this report details findings and presents recommendations to guide donors, host countries and NGOs in supporting and implementing future-focused strategies to improve adolescent well-being and facilitate the development of critical skills for Syrian refugee and host community adolescents.

RECOMMENDATIONS AT-A-GLANCE

- » **Provide 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.
- » **Establish 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 to critical social and health services, while delaying marriage and pregnancy.
- » **Reduce Barriers to Education and Provide Alternative Learning Options:** Formal and informal education programs are needed to address educational setbacks that adolescents have experienced during the last four years of conflict. Informal, flexible learning arrangements are needed urgently to fill the growing gap in adolescents attending formal lower and upper secondary school.

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

² Lost Generation — A Strategy for Children Affected by the Syria Crisis. UNICEF, October 2013.

³ Under Siege: The Devastating Impact on Children of Three Years of Conflict in Syria. UNICEF, March 2014. http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Under_Siege_March_2014.pdf

⁴ The Future of Syria: Refugee Children in Crisis. UNHCR, November 2013.

- » **Support Goal Setting & Planning:** For adolescents to effectively navigate their path to adulthood, despite the significant barriers they will face, they need to be able to set goals and develop plans to achieve them. For adolescent refugees in particular, goal setting and planning can create a sense of purpose and stability.
- » **Support Involvement in Community Initiatives:** Supporting adolescent involvement in 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.
- » **Build Employability and Vocational Skills:**⁵ 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 time, and take concrete steps toward a brighter future. Market assessments should be used to ensure these skills are in demand in the local host community and, to the degree feasible, transferable to Syria if and when adolescents return.

Reclaiming Adolescence

More than one million Syrian children who are under the age of 18 and are living outside Syria continue to miss educational and life milestones. Among these children, 68 percent are not attending school.⁶ Inside Syria, more than half of school-age children (2.8 million) are out of school.⁷ Missing these milestones will continue to deny Syria and the region of the productive, wage-earning youth and adults it needs to stabilize tensions and drive future social and economic development for decades to come. Adolescents are not being reached in significant numbers by current programming — which is often conducted through schools and refugee camps — because they are often working or kept at home and the majority do not live in camps. While there are encouraging signs that the international community is beginning to look with more depth into the unique needs of adolescents,⁸ more needs to be done in the immediate future.



Drawing by Female Adolescent, Lebanon



Tough Places: The war in Syria and the uncertainty of being a refugee is making life extraordinarily difficult for adolescents.

Nearly 300,000 Syrian refugee adolescents find themselves living in neighboring countries where their futures are held hostage by the conflict in Syria and an insufficient response from international and host countries. These adolescents often face daily verbal and physical abuse in their communities and where they work. With little access to an education or opportunities to learn new skills, many adolescents are kept indoors by parents to keep them safe, and many are required to find low-skill and often illegal jobs that help themselves and their families meet basic needs but do little to advance their future employability prospects.

⁵ In countries where it is illegal for Syrian refugees to work, see skills transfer recommendations later in this report.

⁶ Lost Generation — A Strategy for Children Affected by the Syria Crisis. UNICEF, October 2013.

⁷ Syria Crisis: Education Interrupted. UNICEF, World Vision, UNHCR, Save the Children, December 2013.

⁸ UNFPA, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR and Save the Children International (SCI) recently published Situation Analysis of Youth in Lebanon Affected by the Syrian Crisis 2014 (April 2014), which takes a comprehensive look at the situation of adolescents in Lebanon.



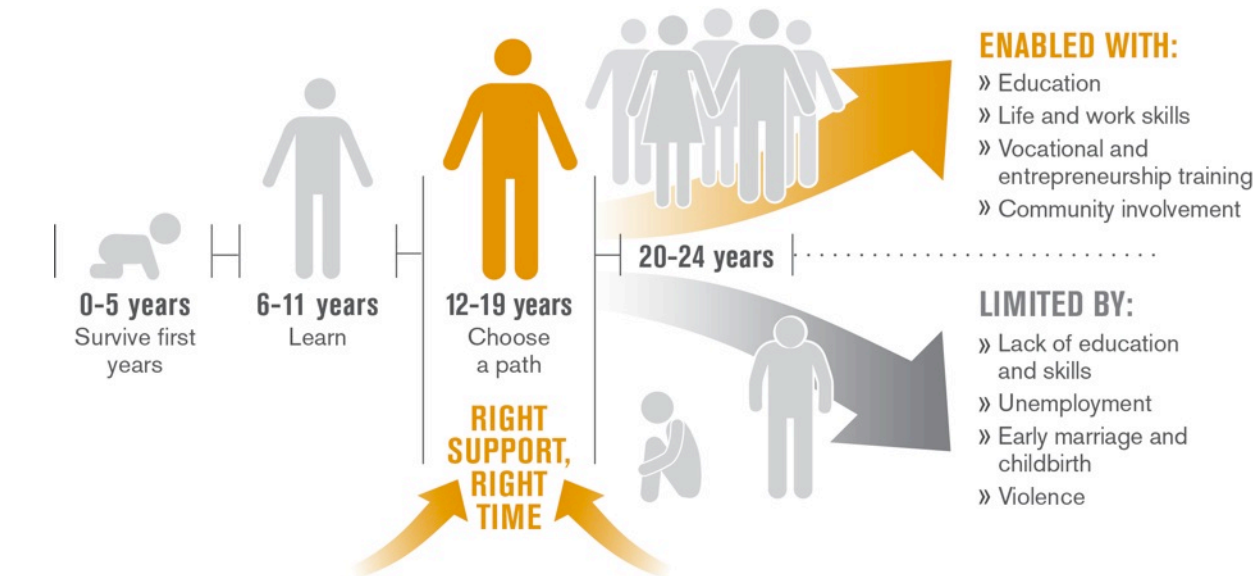
Most Critical Times: This is the time to act. Once young people choose their direction, it is not easy to change course. It is estimated that the first three years of the Syrian conflict have eroded 35 years of development.⁹ If adolescents don't reach these critical developmental milestones soon, it's hard to imagine a future in which Syria and neighboring countries will be able to build peaceful and sustainable lives. Adolescence represents a small, urgent window of opportunity to connect with young people and help them make positive, life-changing decisions.

"Society will look at you in a different way, a more positive one if you finish your education. If I can't return to school soon, I will lose my chances in life."

- Syrian female in the KRI



Greatest Impact: If young people channel their energies in a positive direction, they can become part of the solution. If targeted properly, adolescents at the brink of adulthood are poised to serve new roles as productive members of their communities. We must see adolescents for what they are, an important investment that can lead to dividends in future recovery and development. If they are not set up for success, however, this group of young people could drive further destabilization in the region.



Assessment Methodology

Between January and June 2014, Mercy Corps conducted 34 focused discussions with 365 adolescents ages 12-19 segmented by sex and nationality.¹⁰ These discussions included both Syrian and host community adolescents, and were conducted in both urban and rural locations in Jordan, Lebanon and the KRI, and an urban location in Gaziantep, Turkey. Approximately half of the participants were female and half were male (see table).

⁹ The Syrian Catastrophe: Socioeconomic Monitoring Report First Quarterly Report. UNRWA, 2013. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/520dfa414.html>

¹⁰ This qualitative research provided a tremendous depth of insight into the challenges that Syrian refugee and host-community adolescents face. However, findings are only representative of the adolescents who participated, and, while useful for identifying trends among groups, findings are not representative of all adolescents in these countries.

FOCUSED DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS

Country	Syrian Adolescents		Host-Community Adolescents		Total
	Female	Male	Female ¹¹	Male	
Jordan	20	20	20	20	80
Lebanon	20	20	20	20	80
Turkey	35	40	7	37	119
KRI	23	22	22	19	86
Total	98	102	69	96	365

Participants were included on the basis of never having directly engaged in previous child protection, psychosocial support or youth development programming in the hopes of informing strategies to better engage hard-to-reach adolescents. All participants were living in host communities as opposed to refugee camps. Approximately half were in school, with variation across locations, sex and nationality segments. Overall, Syrian participants were less likely to be in school than their host-community counterparts, and Syrian boys in most countries were less likely to be in school than Syrian girls.¹² Among Syrian participants, those living in the KRI had higher enrollment rates than those in Jordan or Lebanon, with participants in Turkey having the lowest enrollment rates.

Instead of adhering to traditional quantitative and qualitative methods, a more creative and interactive approach was taken to increase engagement and improve the quality of participation.¹³ Adolescents were provided with digital cameras and art supplies and asked to take photographs and draw in response to a series of guiding questions¹⁴ related to their current situation and future goals. Adolescents then shared photographs and artwork with the group to generate discussion. Focused discussions were facilitated by young adults the same sex as the adolescents. Facilitators asked adolescents a series of questions to describe, reflect on and interpret their photographs and drawings.¹⁵ In addition to the photography, art and discussions, Mercy Corps organized recreational activities for participants, including physically active games such as soccer, volleyball, and basketball, as well as folk dances for some of the groups of girls. In-depth interviews were

“An organization invited me and my friends, and we came together with our Turkish and Syrian brothers. It was quite boring at first, but after a time we interacted and started to become friends. Actually there’s no reason to discriminate between Turks and Syrians because they are also people like us and Muslims like us. Together we took photos, we drew pictures, and explained our dreams. We were really happy together and had a really fun time.”

- Turkish Boy, 16

¹¹ The low attendance of Turkish girls was likely due to a combination of factors that include greater focus on recruitment of Syrian girls, host-community fears around sending girls to a mixed event with Syrians, family pressure to stay home, and a low number of young Turkish women volunteer recruiters.

¹² In Turkey this was not the case. 14 out of 40 boys engaged in the focused discussions were in school, while only 1 out of 35 girls were in school.

¹³ Mercy Corps’ research methodology was adapted from multiple methods, specifically Photovoice (Wang, C. and M. Burris. Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment. Health Education and Behavior. 24 (3): 369-387, 1997), IDEO’s Human-Center Design Field Guide Aspirations Exercise (IDEO, Human-Centered Design (HCD) Field Guide, Second Edition), and Technology of Participation (TOPs) Focused Conversation using ORID questioning (Objective, Reflective, Interpretive and Decisional). More information at: http://ispimi.org/images/meeting/082212/focused_conversation_univ_minnesota.pdf.

¹⁴ Guiding Questions included: What do you like about your current situation? What don’t you like about your current situation? What would you like to be doing in three to six months?

¹⁵ Probing questions included: Please describe your photograph/drawing. Why did you take/make this photograph/drawing? How does it make you feel? In three to six months’ time, what would you like to see changed about this photograph/drawing? How would you go about making that change and who/what might help you make that change?

also conducted with key informants, such as a director of a school in the KRI established for IDPs and teaching Syrian refugees, Government of Lebanon Social Development Committee staff, and youth outreach workers in Jordan.

A limitation to this methodology is that the issues detailed in this report only reflect those discussed during the focused discussions. Therefore, rather than covering the entire spectrum of issues affecting Syrian refugee and host-community adolescents, findings reflect key thematic trends that arose during the discussions. Discussion facilitators did not actively cue issues into discussions in order to avoid influencing the topics discussed. As a result, this report is

not a comprehensive account of all of the issues affecting this population. Other important issues, some of which are well documented, include but are not limited to Gender-Based Violence (GBV), adolescents in conflict with the law, juvenile justice, and rights violations experienced by adolescents inside or while leaving Syria or in their host communities. Mercy Corps recommends that existing literature on these and other issues be used, and if not available, that more in-depth and targeted analysis be carried out in order for programs to address these issues adequately when designing and implementing programs with this population.



An adolescent in Lebanon.

Findings



All of the adolescents interviewed face serious challenges to their future development that cause them stress and concern. Syrian refugees spoke about the difficulties they face on a daily basis and their feelings of powerlessness to change their circumstances. They discussed the practical challenges they face with a strong sense of urgency focused on filling immediate needs, coping with new living conditions, and solving problems that will get them through the days and weeks ahead. The challenges faced by host-community adolescents tended to be less urgent, longer-term issues that were more deeply embedded in cultural, economic and political norms and realities, but which are nevertheless stressful to manage and affect their lives in very real and immediate ways.

Youssef's Tree

During discussions with host-community and Syrian adolescents Youssef, a 15-year-old male living in Lebanon, drew a tree and described it as follows:

"It's a very small drawing but it has big meaning. This tree represents me. The wind, the lines to the right of the tree, represents the things that keep me from who I want to become in life. While this wind can blow the leaves from my branches it cannot knock me over. The soil and the roots of the tree keep me grounded."

Youssef's tree serves as a powerful analogy that guides how Mercy Corps approaches programming for adolescents. After talking with over 350 adolescents we are informing program design by detailing what adolescents describe as the "wind," the barriers that impede them from developing into peaceful and productive young adults, and the "soil and roots," the enablers that promote adolescent development.

Many participants, both Syrian and host-community adolescents, noted that they had never been asked about their needs before. Many adolescents spoke with determined resilience and described strategies that will help them overcome the stress of the past, jump-start their learning and community involvement in the present, and reclaim their role as co-creators of a more hopeful future.

This table provides an overview of the themes that emerged from the focused discussions.

Group		Barriers ¹⁶									
		Social Isolation & Hopelessness	Humiliation, Social Tension & Discrimination	Barriers to Education	Challenges at School	Barriers to Work	Harmful Working Conditions	Lack of Skills & Job Training	Gender Issues	Language Barriers	
Adolescents from Syria											
Jordan	Females	●	●	●	●				●	●	
	Males	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	
Lebanon	Females	●	●	●	●				●	●	
	Males	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	
Turkey	Females	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	
	Males	●	●	●		●	●	●		●	
KRI	Females	●	●	●				●		●	
	Males	●	●	●		●	●	●		●	
Host-Community Adolescents											
Jordan	Females	●			●				●	●	
	Males				●			●		●	
Lebanon	Females	●			●				●	●	
	Males				●			●		●	
Turkey	Females	●		●					●		
	Males	●						●	●		
KRI	Females	●			●				●		
	Males				●						

● Serious Barrier ● Moderate Barrier

Serious issues are issues that groups indicated are of great importance to them or that they talked about at length. Moderate issues also arose as concerns by these groups, but not to the same degree. Other issues not marked or listed here may also be important, but did not arise during the discussions.

¹⁶ This table is not meant to be prescriptive or comprehensive, but to highlight areas of concern and provide direction for further exploration. Issues may vary for other adolescents not included in the discussions.



Barriers to Development

The adolescents we spoke with described the challenges they currently face or anticipate confronting in the future. As in Youssef's drawing of the tree, these are the forces that can keep adolescents from achieving their goals in life.

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND HOPELESSNESS

Throughout the assessment, Syrian adolescents — boys and girls — consistently expressed a lack of hope, anxiety over their futures, and social isolation. Some host-community adolescents, and particularly girls, also expressed painful levels of isolation.

Syrian Boys' Hopelessness and Isolation

Syrian boys' photographs and discussions detailed how many of them are consumed by a sense of hopelessness. One 17-year-old Syrian boy living in Lebanon took a photo of himself holding chains. When describing the photo he said, "This is a picture of a chain; it symbolizes the blockades that forbid me from crossing the borders. I want to break free and go back." Boys repeatedly referenced broken social networks, missing friends from Syria and a growing sense of hopelessness. One youth outreach worker described that adolescent boys "feel like they are starting over. They have no friends and don't know where to go."



This is a picture of a chain; it symbolizes the blockades that forbid me from crossing the borders. I want to break free and go back.

- Male Adolescent, Lebanon

Girls' Physical and Social Isolation

Discussions revealed staggering physical and social isolation experienced by most adolescent girls and Syrian girls in particular, and girls were acutely aware of how their isolation limited their social and intellectual growth. One Syrian girl eloquently described her situation through her photograph of a painted flower, saying, "A flower is like a person, affected by their environment, so you have to strengthen yourself, even if you as a person feel abandoned." Accounts of isolation were stark, with one Syrian girl in Lebanon describing her housing situation as "a prison" where she lives under "the stifling control of her parents."¹⁷ This isolation also affects host-community girls who are often pressured to remain in the home or into early marriage, sometimes at the cost of an education. Unable to access the space to express themselves among peers, girls feel hampered by parents' restrictions and being excluded from decision-making.

Compounding Factors

Harassment on the streets, long work hours, and domestic duties further inhibit socializing and increase isolation for many adolescents, and language barriers worsen isolation for Syrian adolescents.

¹⁷ This finding is consistent with other findings that have shown that security, home chores and lack of knowledge of available activities result in up to 29 percent of children and adolescents leaving their homes once or less a week (The Future of Syria: Refugee Children in Crisis. Stuck Indoors. UNHCR, November 2013.)

Mourning Syria

Understandably, Syrian youth are focused on mourning the displacement of their lives, the ongoing conflict, and on remembering the past. Many are focused on going back to Syria, and many Syrian boys have a desire to join the armed struggle. Their photographs and drawings reflected this preoccupation: they show dilapidated buildings and piles of construction debris that reminded them of the destruction back home, Syrian flags (both rebel and regime flags), and bombings and violence. One Syrian boy from Turkey commented,

“When I was in Syria I used to go to school, but now I work in a café. Before we use to think and dream of the future. Now we are only living in our past.”

This intense focus on their homeland is not a bad thing and is what currently matters most to these youth. When it interferes with identifying productive ways to spend time in their host communities, however, it can impede the growth and development that will help them in their host communities or if/when they return to Syria.



Collage by Syrian Adolescent, Jordan

Trauma and Violence

A number of Syrian adolescents have witnessed violence, as evidenced by traumatic events they described and illustrated. Further assessment is necessary to help determine the range of adolescents' needs and the prevalence of trauma-related mental health issues, and also to identify activities that can help increase their sense of stability and social support in host communities.



“A flower is like a person, affected by their environment, so you have to strengthen yourself, even if you as a person feel abandoned.”

- Female Adolescent, Jordan

Host-Community Boys

Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish boys expressed frustration with available social outlets and a desire for more opportunities to get together and engage in the types of creative activities used during the assessment. The facilitators of the Turkish male groups noted behavioral problems — including hassling Syrian boys — and perceived that some boys are very vulnerable, even relative to the Syrian boys, because family structures have been disrupted. “The boys resort to cultures of violence for self-protection and self-esteem as a result.”

HUMILIATION, SOCIAL TENSION AND DISCRIMINATION

“It would be better to return to Syria to fight and die with dignity than live in humiliation.” This statement, from a Syrian boy from Jordan, reveals a frequently repeated choice that Syrian refugees, particularly boys, struggle with on an ongoing basis. This sense of humiliation was often referenced in relation to sources of social tension between Syrian refugees and host communities.

Social Tension

Sources of tension include beliefs that Syrian refugees are straining public services, spreading disease and driving up the cost of housing while driving down wages, thereby increasing competition for jobs. This tension is often expressed through verbal and physical harassment. Syrian boys in Turkey reported that they cannot go out after 18:00 because they feel unsafe and face harassment by the Turkish public. In Jordan, boys reported that verbal assaults can often escalate to physical violence while adolescents play in the neighborhood or come into contact with one another while walking to or from school. Adolescents also reported receiving unequal treatment in their host communities, with some shops refusing to sell goods to Syrians.

Stereotypes

Several Turkish boys were openly antagonistic toward the Syrian boys during the assessment activities, echoing sentiments and ideas they have heard in their homes. These negative sentiments were also prevalent in Jordan and Lebanon. Some Turkish boys and girls did, however, express being pleasantly surprised to learn that Syrians were not as “bad” as their parents had told them, revealing this was in fact the first time they had actually spent any time with Syrian peers.

Humiliation

Adding to this discrimination, the difficult conditions under which Syrian boys and girls are obliged to work in unskilled jobs¹⁸ and to live in substandard housing, coupled with the trauma of war and displacement, are at the heart of feelings of anger and humiliation.

Overall, Syrian adolescents reflected a high level of awareness and strong sensitivity with regard to the negative perceptions of Syrians amongst host-community members. A growing sense of hopelessness combined with nearly daily experiences of humiliation and discrimination deepen the isolation of Syrian adolescents, and requires urgent action to change the course of these adolescents before it is too late.



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

- Male Adolescent, Jordan

¹⁸ Work-based humiliation is a growing concern since it is estimated that one out of every ten refugee children is thought to be working (Under Siege: The Devastating Impact on Children of Three Years of Conflict in Syria. UNICEF, March 2014. Based on UNICEF field team estimates.) The percent of adolescents working was much higher for participants in the focused discussions, likely because current estimates include younger children, and the number of working adolescents is likely to be much higher.

EDUCATION CHALLENGES

Learning through formal or informal education and acquiring new skills emerged as a priority for all adolescents, but significant barriers interfere with fulfilling this priority.

Syrian Adolescents

For a majority of Syrian adolescents, education represents the most powerful means to building a future. Access to schooling is a fundamental challenge, however, with around half of participating Syrian adolescents out of school for a variety of reasons. For many (particularly boys but also many girls), the urgent need to bring in income requires that they drop out of school. When they drop out of school, they recognize that they are falling behind and that this will likely impact their future whether in their host communities or back in Syria. A Syrian boy in the KRI said,

“I wish I could have money to go to school and learn without being worried about paying rent, but I have to work in order to help my family with everyday life expenses.”

Even when Syrians can go to school, hostile learning environments often resulting from overcrowding in classrooms, problems with language of instruction, bullying, overworked teachers and limited remedial education and psychosocial support, are driving adolescents away from school, and they’re not likely to return. One Syrian boy in Jordan summed up the feeling shared by many when he said, “I don’t feel happy here at all. I am being bullied and attacked on the way to and during school.” Often this negative and violent behavior is not just perpetuated by students, but also teachers who treat refugee students poorly. For many adolescents, the violence and mistreatment by peers and teachers was identified as a key factor in their decision to leave school.¹⁹

Host-Community Adolescents

Educational concerns expressed by host-community adolescents are largely related to the quality of education. Many resent the poor quality of education in terms of teacher capacity and curricular content. They also cited other problems, such as discipline problems that disrupt classes, and teachers’ use of corporal punishment.

Problems Faced by Girls

Both Syrian and host-community girls expressed deep concerns about gender issues related to school. Some girls do not attend school because their parents are uncomfortable allowing them to leave the house. A Turkish girl described how “My father is the one who prevents me from attending school. He is like a leader; what he says is always ‘right.’ If I were born again, I would not get married and instead return to school.” Iraqi Kurdish girls discussed how parents and teachers disapprove of friendships between boys and girls, and remove girls from school if they are seen to be interacting too much with boys.



“I love my school, my classmates. I love to learn, although we hate the principal. He shouts at us a lot.”

- Female Adolescent, Jordan

¹⁹ Mercy Corps conducted an assessment of violence in schools in Lebanon in June 2014 that found that bullying is prevalent, with Syrian adolescents being the main targets. Bullying occurs between Lebanese and Syrian peers and among Syrian peers. Adults, including teachers and principals, also commit abuse and corporal punishment. Bullying and violence are most commonly witnessed at school, and are major factors deterring refugee children from attending school.

WORK CHALLENGES

Syrian Adolescents

As mentioned above, work is a necessity for many Syrian adolescents. In some cases, they have become the main breadwinners in the family, either because one or both parents are back in Syria, have died, or cannot find work themselves. In general, more boys than girls work due to concerns for girls' safety, but in Turkey, for example, the numbers are nearly equal. While Syrians can work legally in the KRI, work permits are difficult or impossible to obtain in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. As a result, adolescents often labor illegally in low-skilled informal jobs without work permits, and are vulnerable to unsafe conditions, long hours, physical abuse and sexual harassment, and low wages — precisely the conditions that lead to feelings of anger and humiliation. Syrian adolescents labor in factories, at restaurants, in construction, as tailors, and in salons. In Turkey, boys as young as 10 years old are laboring in packing and shoe factories, gluing soles into place. Syrian girls spoke of verbal abuse and harassment during work, and said they feared beatings if they complained about their conditions. Many Syrian girls are working double shifts — first outside the home, and then domestically. This further reduces opportunities for meeting with friends or attending school, and increases isolation.

Host-Community Adolescents

Some host-community adolescents work as well, either while in school or instead of school. In most countries, working adolescents are primarily boys. But many Turkish girls also work. Mercy Corps intends to investigate the issues affecting working adolescent girls further through targeted outreach and participation in activity development.

GENDER ISSUES

Some adolescents discussed the challenges they face due to strict gender roles that limit the free expression of girls and boys. Girls expressed they felt it was unfair that boys and men have rights that women and girls do not. Girls are very aware that they are treated differently than boys, and receive unwanted attention that makes them uncomfortable. They sometimes feel they are to blame and wonder what it is that they are doing wrong. The way girls are perceived and express themselves can have significant consequences on girls' lives, and therefore produce stress and concern, particularly in rural and socially conservative areas.

Turkish boys described feeling isolated due to a lack of opportunity for self-expression beyond the gendered norms of playing soccer, as there is a generalized lack of acceptance of boys who want to participate in art and other expressive activities.

“Sometimes I get to write and read books, but most of the time, I need to do housework. I really want to study, but I can't because my father prefers that I get married. It has been four years since I was in school, and if I had continued studying I would be completing high school now. If I had an occupation, I wouldn't feel so crushed to be getting married. I am closest to my mother, my aunt, and my cousins. Only when I am with them do I feel that I won't fall to pieces.

- Turkish Girl, 17



Enablers to Development

While the above barriers are preventing adolescents from pursuing their future goals, adolescents also described factors that will enable them to overcome these barriers or help them withstand the negative forces working against them.

SETTING GOALS AND MAKING PLANS

Planning and setting goals can help adolescents navigate their paths to adulthood. A majority of adolescents we spoke with, however, struggled to articulate future goals (even when the timeframe for those goals was a relatively short 6 to 12 months) and identify tangible steps to pursue them.

Syrian Adolescents

Most Syrian adolescents are caught in limbo somewhere between the pasts they left behind in Syria, the futures they were planning, and their current reality. At this critical point in their lives, when they would normally be finishing school, preparing for university or starting work, and dreaming of their lives as adults, they are emotionally and developmentally paralyzed. Even as they expressed hope for the future of Syria, they avoided any discussion of plans for their time as refugees, whether in the short- or long-term. A Syrian girl in Turkey described feeling that “we are simply living moment to moment,” while another expressed that Syrians have lost the ability to think or dream.

For adolescent refugees in particular, goal setting and planning can help to develop short-term plans so they have more skills if and when they return to Syria, and also to make constructive use of their time in host communities. Their future is unclear and unstable, which is why goal setting is challenging, but also why it can help create a sense of purpose and stability.

Host-Community Adolescents

Host-community adolescents also had difficulties describing long-term goals and short-term, concrete steps toward achieving them. Relative to Syrians, they were better able to express and detail future goals, but concrete steps on how to achieve these goals were scarce. Some girls were able to articulate professional aspirations, but were unsure of the level of support they would receive from their families to achieve them.

EDUCATION, SKILLS AND TRAINING

All adolescent groups expressed a desire to complement past or present schoolwork with additional learning in areas such as language, computer literacy, writing, business skills, and vocational and professional training. But such opportunities are rare for these adolescents. One boy in the KRI said,

“Most NGO’s have [vocational] training but they aren’t accepting ages under 18 so we are not included in most of those trainings.”

Providing such opportunities — particularly for out-of-school adolescents — can help them take steps toward long-term goals, build confidence, and make productive use of time, particularly for refugees whose access to school and work are limited.



Photo by Male Adolescent, KRI

One approach to filling this need is to develop a skill-sharing program that matches existing skills that adolescents, youth and adults in the community already have with skills that adolescents desire. As one Jordanian key informant suggested, “We need to create opportunities for Syrians to show what skills and talents they have, and Jordanians to show what skills and talents they have. They could then come together to work on community projects that exchange and apply those skills.” This type of locally resourced peer-to-peer and mentor-to-adolescent engagement should be encouraged. For locations such as the KRI where work is legal, market assessments with corresponding vocational and employment skills training can help adolescents find safer and more and equitable work with greater income and career potential.

Language

Learning the local language can provide the opportunity for Syrian adolescents to overcome social isolation and challenges in school and at work. English and French are used for many school subjects in Lebanon and Jordan; the dialect of Kurdish spoken in the KRI is different than that of the Syrian refugees; and most refugees in Turkey do not speak Turkish. Many adolescents expressed interested in learning the language of their host communities, and some are already taking languages courses. By providing Syrian adolescents with the opportunity to learn local languages, they will struggle less with school, and more easily integrate into their new communities.

Community Involvement

Despite significant differences in past experience, current realities and future prospects, Syrian and host-community adolescents shared a desire to work with peers to improve their communities. One Syrian girl reflected on the challenges ahead in Jordan and back in Syria saying, “We will have to act together, as one hand.”

Community involvement serves multiple purposes. First, it helps adolescents hone their life, project-management and transferable skills through real-life application of those skills. Second, by enhancing community spaces, adolescents are increasing their ownership of these spaces and the likelihood that they will use them for constructive activities. Third, by getting involved in their communities, adolescents will increasingly be recognized and respected by adults for their contributions, and seen as assets for future community development. Fourth, community projects bring together Syrian refugees and host-community adolescents to work side-by-side to improve shared community concerns. This shared sense of responsibility and accomplishment builds constructive relationships that are based on a mutual recognition of skills and assets. As more of these relationships are created the differences that fuel social tension erode and the likelihood of conflict can be diminished.



Jordan — Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

Recommendations

The issues described above suggest a number of important interventions that can positively impact adolescent Syrian refugees, as well as their host-community counterparts, by addressing some of their deepest needs. Specific programming should be based on further assessments of the target group and tailored to their particular needs and the local context, and should give particular attention to recruiting and including the most vulnerable and isolated adolescents.

The table below suggests intervention types according to participant group, as determined from focused discussions, followed by a brief explanation.

Group		Program Activities							
		Psychosocial Support	Safe Spaces for Girls	Educational Support	Language Lessons	Goal Setting & Planning	Community Service Projects	Market Assessments	Employment / Life Skills
Adolescents from Syria									
Jordan	Females	●	●	●	●	●	●		●
	Males	●		●	●	●	●		●
Lebanon	Females	●	●	●	●	●	●		●
	Males	●		●	●	●	●		●
Turkey	Females	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	Males	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
KRI	Females	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	Males	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
Host-Community Adolescents									
Jordan	Females	●	●	●		●	●		
	Males			●		●	●	●	
Lebanon	Females	●	●	●		●	●		
	Males			●		●	●	●	●
Turkey	Females	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	Males	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
KRI	Females	●	●	●		●	●		
	Males	●		●		●	●	●	●

● Most Relevant ● Somewhat Relevant

PROGRAMMING RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section identifies key recommendations for addressing the barriers adolescents face. For all of these adolescent-focused interventions, programs should consider not only adolescents, but also the role of the wider community of parents, teachers, employers, and community members. Identifying and addressing their roles in perpetuating barriers, as well as in contributing to solutions, will create more durable results.

Psychosocial Support to Reduce Isolation and Hopelessness

All adolescent groups were keenly interested in broadening their social support networks. Psychosocial support programming that provides opportunities for individual and collective expression through sport and creative activities can reduce isolation and marginalization and build bonds among peers. These expressive activities also provide an essential building block for establishing trust, building self-esteem and confidence, and encouraging teamwork. These programs should be group-based, mix Syrian and host-community adolescents when feasible, and be facilitated by trained and trusted Syrian and host-community mentors of the same sex and ethnic background and who speak the same language as the adolescents they work with. Facilitators should also be trained and prepared to manage tensions between Syrians and host-community adolescents, as well as Syrian adolescents with differing political viewpoints.



Painting by Male Adolescent, KRI

In recognition of the unique stressors that many Syrian adolescents experienced as a result of the conflict in Syria, programs should allow for Syrian-only group sessions and establish a referral mechanism for adolescents requiring more specialized mental health services, such as those who have experienced and continue to be affected by psychological stress.

Sports for Change

Mercy Corps has found sport and play — through our Moving Forward methodology — to be an effective way to build self-esteem, trust, teamwork and constructive communication among adolescents affected by natural disaster, conflict or chronic instability. An additional methodology called 321Go! uses school and community-based sport programming to increase leadership skills and community involvement. Both Sports for Change interventions are being adapted for use with Syrian refugee and host-community adolescents.

Lebanon — Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

Safe Spaces for Girls

Almost all groups of girls expressed an intense desire to have a shared girl-only space where they can meet and exchange experiences with other girls. Girl-only spaces, also known as safe spaces, allow girls to build social capital and to discuss intimate issues such as life changes, emotions and puberty, and even more sensitive concerns like domestic abuse or gender-based violence (GBV).

Safe spaces build individual resilience by providing important support to a girl, including creating a network of other people who understand her and with whom she can discuss strategies to overcome current challenges and pursue future goals. In a refugee situation, it is more important than ever to create supportive peer networks through which to build constructive identities while countering physical and social isolation. A girl in Jordan expressed through her photograph how she felt about the other girls in her group: “My picture is of five of us with our fingers put together in a star. 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.”

“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



Reduce Barriers to Education and Provide Alternative Learning Options

Most adolescents expressed eagerness to continue their education — either formal or informal — despite the barriers they face. These barriers grow larger as adolescents are out of school for too long, feel too old to re-enter school, or lose their desire to return after starting to work. As a result, adolescence is too often a time when dropout rates spike for both host-community and Syrian adolescents.

To turn this trend around, programs working with adolescents need to provide targeted support to adolescents at most risk of dropping out, and those who have recently dropped out. Such support can include remedial classes or after-school supplemental tutoring in areas such as literacy, numeracy and languages, or offering exam preparation courses to increase passage rates. Other strategies to improve access include alternative scheduling by expanding the use of double shifts (morning and afternoon), which is being used with some success in Jordan, and flexible shifts for girls and boys required to work inside or outside the home. Alternative transport can also improve access by helping get students, and girls in particular, to and from school safely.

Learning Languages: Language lessons should be a key component of informal educational opportunities offered to Syrian refugees to enable them to improve school performance and integrate more effectively into their new environments. Host-community languages should be offered to Syrian refugees, while other languages, such as English, can be offered to mixed groups.

Support Goal Setting & Planning

Setting goals, developing plans and building the motivation to implement them are a critical part of personal, academic and professional development²⁰ and should be fostered in adolescent-focused programming at multiple levels including educational and

Education on Demand

The challenges keeping Syrian refugees from 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. A flexible and demand-driven alternative is needed. 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. Programs targeting adolescents should begin to raise awareness, interest and acceptance of this flexible schooling approach within host communities, and identify new, or work with existing, partners to host and manage these emerging virtual schools.



Photo by Male Adolescent, KRI

²⁰ Duckworth, A.L and M. Seligman, Self-Discipline Outdoes IQ in Predicting Academic Performance of Adolescents, Psychological Science 16, no. 12 (2005). Cited in Tough, P. How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character. 2012.

vocational attainment and community service projects. Programs that help adolescents move from a commonly heard response of, “I want to return to Syria to help rebuild,” to a more realistic short-term goal and plan of, “I want to learn construction skills and I have a Lebanese neighbor who is willing to teach me,” allows adolescents to take that critical first step. While a powerful activity, goal setting and planning must be done in a careful manner to manage expectations.

These activities should include exploration of the range of future career options available to adolescents, and the paths required for those options. For locations where work is not legally accessible for refugees, such as Turkey and Jordan, the locally resourced peer-to-peer and mentor-to-adolescent skills exchange discussed above should be explored for Syrian adolescents.

Support Involvement in Community Initiatives

Adolescents share similar ideas for making improvements to their communities and a willingness to work together in mixed groups to implement small-scale community service projects. Community service projects can be supported through small grants to local organizations or more established groups able to raise funds locally. Strong mentoring is required to ensure activities are well designed and managed, as adolescents do not necessarily have the skills to singlehandedly act without some degree of adult support. Potential projects include:

Cleaning Up: Many refugee and host-community participants expressed interest in working together to improve public spaces through trash removal and other enhancements. One group of Syrian girls discussed forming uniformed work teams to pick up trash and compete with other teams to see who could pick up the most trash.

Sports & Recreation: Another shared area of interest is access to recreational and community facilities to participate in sports and hold crafts and cooking fairs. Organizing mixed Syrian and host-community teams, or crafts and cooking exchanges, were shared as strategies to help adolescents recognize each other for their skills and assets rather than stigmatize each other based on misinformation often passed down from parents.



Photo by Male Adolescent, KRI

Market Assessments, Employment Skills & Life Skills

Despite the desire for all adolescents to complete school, some will not have that option, either out of economic necessity to work or the inaccessibility of school, while others will have to work and go to school. Particularly in locations where work is legal for adolescent refugees, such as the KRI, specific vocational skills, geared toward sectors with high demand, can provide adolescents with better access to safe, equitable employment and provide a stepping-stone to future career growth. Conducting market analysis and engaging adolescents in that analysis should be used to ground employability and vocational training in market realities. Existing vocational programs and services should be explored, and access to Syrian adolescents expanded.

For those countries where legal employment is not possible, programs should identify and develop a skill set that builds on basic life skills, supports the pursuit of short-term goals and promotes learning that can be transferred for use in community involvement and future employability. A basic set of project management skills including working in teams, communication, responsibility and time management, negotiating, budgeting and measuring impact should be included in a core curriculum.

For host-community adolescents, market-oriented technical and vocational skills are recommended for out-of-school adolescents. For those already working, business development or entrepreneurship training may be appropriate, coupled with finance management and basic accounting, to allow for small-business creation.

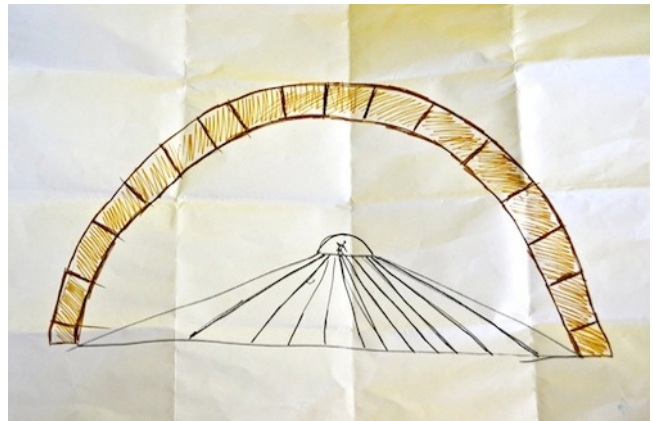
Conclusion

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 will not be well placed to stabilize tensions and to drive future social and economic development.

Despite the fact that one-third of the 4.65 million displaced children are between ages 12 and 18, and at a critical moment in their lives that will heavily influence how their futures unfold, there is a major gap in the focus on these adolescents. Protection mechanisms for children and adolescents in communities and schools are undeveloped, and this ultimately affects both access to and quality of education, safe livelihoods and potentially peace and stability. Syrian adolescents are particularly vulnerable to stigmatization, discrimination and bullying by peers, and a sense of humiliation is pervasive and often involves physical violence. These and other factors are setting young people up to be both victims and perpetrators in a continuing cycle of violence.

If we can equip young people to channel their energies in a positive direction, however, they can — and very much want to — become part of the solution. Mercy Corps believes that if Syrian and host-community adolescents are safe and possess positive coping mechanisms to overcome isolation, hopelessness and humiliation and build trust and social networks, they will be equipped to learn, develop skills and make decisions that help them overcome future challenges. With these capacities, adolescents will become more resilient to the shocks and stresses around them and be better able to navigate their transition to adulthood with optimism and hope. More broadly, they can better contribute to peace building, and create a more stable and peaceful society.

In order to make this happen, adolescents need to be brought to the forefront of a comprehensive development strategy for the region, and programming that targets adolescents will need immediate attention and investment. Designing programs to help adolescents navigate through this critical transition — from adolescent to adult, school to work or destruction to development — and emerge on the other side with an education, skills and hope for the future is not only an investment in the lives of adolescents but an investment in the future of the region for the next half-century.



“The closer side of this tunnel represents the present, and the far side represents my goal which I want to reach...I just want to become a good citizen.”

- Male Adolescent, Jordan

This report has been compiled from more detailed country-level reports. For more information on country-level findings and recommendations, go to <http://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/advancing-adolescence>.

ABOUT MERCY CORPS

Mercy Corps is a leading global humanitarian agency saving and improving lives in the world's toughest places. With a network of experienced professionals in more than 40 countries, we partner with local communities to put bold ideas into action to help people recover, overcome hardship and build better lives. Now, and for the future.



45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204

888.842.0842
[mercycorps.org](https://www.mercycorps.org)

CONTACT

MATT STRENG, MPH

Senior Advisor, Youth Development | Technical Support Unit
mstreng@mercycorps.org

HEIDI WAGNER

Senior Program Officer, Syria Response | Regional Program Team
hwagner@mercycorps.org

Cover photo: Iraq — Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps