Situation for Children in Syria and Neighbouring Countries

I. CONTEXT

The Syrian crisis continues to deteriorate leading to significant human tragedy within Syria itself and also in the context of its impact on neighbouring countries taking in displaced populations, including Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey.

Refugees from Syria and internally displaced people in Syria constitute a highly diverse population in terms of religious, ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds. A particular characteristic of the Syrian refugee population is its vulnerability due to most being women, children and elderly and having been forced to flee their homes and country with little more than the clothes they were wearing.

In Jordan for example, close to one third of the entire registered Syrian refugee households are female headed. Furthermore, over half of all Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries are below the age of 18. Most refugees live in urban settings, and only around 15 per cent reside in camps.

Many Syrians have suffered multiple rights violations and abuses from different actors, including massacres, murder, execution without due process, torture, hostage-taking, enforced disappearance, rape and sexual violence, as well as recruiting and using children in hostile situations.

Indiscriminate bombardment and shelling have created mass civilian casualties and spread terror among civilians. Furthermore, parties have enforced sieges on towns, villages and neighbourhoods, trapping civilians and depriving them of food, medical care and other necessities. Parties to the conflict also have disregarded the special protection accorded to hospitals, and medical and humanitarian personnel.

Additionally, these refugees face numerous other challenges. Increasingly they have exhausted their assets and resources and face difficulties accessing: employment, adequate housing, health services, documentation and education, putting them at risk of exploitation.

The effect on children of violence, loss, displacement and violation of so many of their rights is unimaginable. “After three years of conflict and turmoil, Syria is now one of the most dangerous places on earth to be a child” concludes a 2014 Unicef report which states that

- 5.5 million Syrian children are in need of humanitarian assistance – that is 56% of all Syrian children (inside Syria and amongst displaced and refugee population);
- One in 10 children – over 1.2 million – have fled the country to become refugees in neighbouring countries. Some of these countries already host large numbers of refugees or Internally Displaced Persons (IDP’s) and face immense social and economic pressure;
- By the end of January 2014, 37,498 Syrian children had been born as refugees;

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1 Culture, Context and the Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing of Syrians; A Review for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Staff Working with Syrians Affected by Armed Conflict, 2015
2 Mental Health and Psychosocial support for Children Affected by Syria Crisis: Regional Mapping June-December 2014: Save the Children
Nearly 3 million Syrian children are out of school – that is 40% of all children of school age;

The report also states that child casualty rates are the highest recorded in any recent conflict and notes that a UN estimate of at least 10,000 children having been killed is likely to be an underestimate since death and injury rates are so difficult to measure.

The statistics demonstrate the scale of the tragedy but cannot convey the magnitude of human suffering for each individual child. Participatory work with refugee children during this mapping provided a glimpse into the ways in which the experiences of refugee children have shaped their thoughts and feelings.

2. CHILD PROTECTION, MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL DISTRESS

Child Protection and Mental Health needs/situation of children inside Syria:

A livelihoods assessment conducted by Save the Children in north-eastern Syria found that after years of conflict, families are struggling to meet their basic needs and are increasingly reliant on negative coping practices, putting children out to work, marrying daughters early, and allowing children to become involved with armed groups.

Many women and girls, and to a lesser extent boys and men, are exposed to Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) resulting from conflict related violence, the breakdown of law and order inside Syria, increased poverty, lack of basic needs and safe services, family separation and disruption of traditional social networks and protection mechanisms.

The effects of conflict on Syrian mental health and psychosocial wellbeing are profound. Experiences of conflict-related violence and concerns about the situation in Syria are compounded by the daily stressors of displacement, including poverty, lack of basic needs and services, on-going risks of violence and exploitation, isolation and discrimination, loss of family and community supports, and uncertainty about the future.

Psychological and social distress among refugees from Syria and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Syria manifests in a wide range of emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioural and social problems. Emotional problems include: sadness, grief, fear, frustration, anxiety, anger, and despair. Cognitive problems, such as: loss of control, helplessness, worry, ruminations, boredom, and hopelessness are all widely reported, as are physical symptoms such as: fatigue, problems sleeping, loss of appetite and medically unexplained physical complaints. Social and behavioural problems, such as: withdrawal, aggression and interpersonal difficulties are also common.

Most of these phenomena among Syrian refugees, and for most people, are the result of ongoing violence, displacement and the difficult circumstances in which they currently live and do not necessarily indicate mental disorders. Difficult life circumstances often lead to demoralisation and hopelessness, and may be related to profound and persistent existential concerns of safety, trust, coherence of identity, social role and society. Symptoms related to past experiences have also been widely documented, such as nightmares, intrusive memories, flashbacks, avoidance behaviour and hyper arousal.

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3 Child Protection Assessment, north-eastern Syria, Save the Children-2015
Child Protection and Mental Health situation in neighbouring countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey):

“One particularly striking social phenomenon that has emerged not only in Jordan, but in all countries hosting Syrian refugees, is that of child labour”.

Although child labour was a fact of life in Syria prior to the war, the humanitarian crisis has greatly exacerbated the problem. As a result, many children are now involved in economic activities that are mentally, physically or socially dangerous and which limit – or deny – their basic right to education. Children living or working on the street face the biggest dangers of all. A recent study in Lebanon identified 1,510 street-based children, mainly in Beirut and Tripoli, 73% of whom were refugees from Syria. The most common type of work is begging (43%), followed by street vending (37%). Incomes averaged US$11 per day, but vary considerably, from US$9 for begging and windscreen washing to US$21–36 for illicit activities or prostitution. In its most extreme forms -- such as child recruitment by armed forces and groups, or sexual exploitation -- child labour is a grave violation of children’s rights. The worst forms of child labour can cause severe psychological damage to children and will have a profound effect on a child’s mental health.

An assessment conducted in Lebanon with the participation of Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian children highlights the key issues children face in Lebanon. Findings from consultations with Syrian children show that Syrian children are at high risk of becoming involved in some of the worst forms of child labour. In addition, children listed the high risk of violence and lack of security, in the family and in the community as one of the other main risks facing them. Girls in the age group 14 – 17 mentioned sexual harassment as a frequent concern, both at work and while outside their houses in general. Need for psychosocial activities is also one of the key concerns for children. Children explained that they did not have enough spaces or time to play in Lebanon. Recreational activities run by organisations are limited, and they are restricted from playing outside due to fear of harassment and physical violence from Lebanese children and adults. Girls in the 8 – 10 age group mentioned that they have less time to play than their brothers, because they have to help their mothers with housework. Moreover, children showed clear signs of anxiety and distress in relation to the unstable political situation in the region and the implications these hold in terms of security for Syrian refugees.

A Baseline Assessment of Child Labour among Syrian Refugees in Za’atari Refugee Camp, Jordan (Nov 2014) found that:

- Nearly all children stated their reasons for working were related to economic insecurity of the household and one in four households, just over 26%, stated that it was necessary to withdraw children from school to generate income.
- Three out of four working children reported health problems at work – nearly 80% suffered from extreme fatigue and a further almost 40% reported injury, illness or poor health.
- 20% reported physical abuse (beatings) and nearly 24% reported emotional abuse.

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4 Small Hands, Heavy Burden – How the Syria conflict is driving more children into the work force - July 2015
5 Small Hands, Heavy Burden – How the Syria conflict is driving more children into the work force - July 2015
6 Participatory assessment with children in South Lebanon -September 2014
Adolescents and youth have particular experiences within a humanitarian context[^7], for example feeling under extra pressure, especially female youth, to abide by traditional norms and roles, to marry early and be confined within the home. The humanitarian setting exacerbates also basic needs for social services, among others. Without access to such services, youth vulnerability to poverty and violence increases, including sexual violence and sexual abuse and exploitation. Youth are obliged to assume the role of adults at an early stage without being prepared for this, in the absence of positive adult role models or support networks. This can lead to risky behaviour, including criminal activities, survival sex, violence and drug abuse.

**Coping with psychosocial distress (Culture, Context and the Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing of Syrians- 2015)**

Many families are able to adapt and adjust to the changes required by a new situation when provided safety and some external support. For most Syrians, the first source of support is the circle of family and friends. Displacement and the dynamics of the conflict challenge and may disrupt these social support structures. Refugees and IDPs, dealing with the effects of difficult living conditions and/or exposure to violence and adversities, consistently report high levels of distress. The efforts people make to minimise or overcome distress and to solve (inter)personal problems are often called coping. Displaced Syrians use various ways to cope with psychosocial distress. This may include individual strategies to reduce tension and stress such as praying, withdrawal, listening to music, watching TV or drawing, as well as social activities such as seeking the companionship of family and friends, engaging in social activities, attending a community activity or school, talking with a trusted person. However, negative coping strategies are also extremely common, including withdrawal, aggression, risky behaviours, smoking, alcohol and drug use among others.

Nonetheless, age, gender, language, religious and ethno-cultural diversity have an impact on refugees’ experience of displacement. Specific groups may be particularly vulnerable and at risk to protection and mental health issues, such as female heads of households, adolescents, unaccompanied and separated children, children with disabilities, the elderly, and those lacking documentation.

### 3. EDUCATION

**Education Context inside Syria**

Before the war, almost all of Syria’s children were enrolled in primary school and literacy rates were at 95% for 15-24 year-olds. Four years into the conflict, almost three million children are no longer in school and Syria is now estimated to have one of the lowest enrolment rates in the world. Enrolment in Aleppo is as low as 6%. Inside Syria, schools are under attack and there has never been a more dangerous time for Syrian children to try to get an education. At least a quarter of schools have been damaged, destroyed, used for military purposes or occupied by displaced people[^8].

**Education in Refugee-Hosting Countries**

A demographic analysis of the Syrian population that is registered with UNHCR indicates that half of the Syrian refugee population consists of children, with approximately 35 per cent of school age (5–17 years). In December 2014, more than half of all school-aged children (or more than 642,000) were estimated to be out of school[^9]. Only 340,000 are

[^7]: Situation Analysis of Youth in Lebanon Affected by the Syrian Crisis -April 2014.
[^8]: The Cost of War: Calculating the impact of the collapse of Syria’s education system on Syria’s future
enrolled in formal education. In some areas that figure is even worse: in Lebanon, which has taken in the largest number of refugees, 78% of Syrian children are out of school.\textsuperscript{10}

For those who do get some access to education, it is often patchy and insufficient. Non-formal education programmes take different forms in each host country, with different actors involved and with varying space granted to non-state actors to provide education. Unfamiliar curricula, language barriers, overcrowding and discrimination against children from Syria are all barriers to learning. The majority of refugee children live outside formal camps and in host communities or informal settlements. Their access to education is thwarted by the already limited capacity of the public education systems in host countries and the acute financial pressures their families are facing.\textsuperscript{11}

In other cases, access to education is simply not an option. Refugee children have to deal with a host of issues including unfamiliar curricula, language barriers, discrimination, problems in obtaining certification, the limited legal status of their parents and the psychological impact of the crisis.

Dropping out of school puts these children at a life-long disadvantage, hindering their chances of getting decent work and escaping the cycle of poverty and exploitation.

4. Key Resettlement and Integration Support Needs for Syrian Children and Families

**Orientation and support**

- Orientation for arriving children and families on the culture, customs, lifestyle in the UK.
- Orientation on the UK asylum system, and the rights and limitations of children and families within it according to their status.
- Resettlement to areas with pre-existing Syrian communities so that children and families can create and maintain support networks. This should bear in mind tension that may exist between different groups.
- Establishment of mentoring opportunities for children who need additional support with integration and education, particularly separated children.
- Provision of grants to support the initial purchase of basic living equipment, clothes and education material.

**Care for unaccompanied and separated children**

- If receiving unaccompanied children, recruitment of culturally appropriate foster families and provision of training and support to provide foster care.
- Provision of training and support to extended families receiving children under the family reunification scheme.

**Mental Health Psycho-Social Support (MHPSS)**

- Identification of Arabic speaking/Syrian mental health professionals who can support with MHPSS interventions.

\textsuperscript{10}The Cost of War: Calculating the impact of the collapse of Syria’s education system on Syria’s future
\textsuperscript{11}The Cost of War: Calculating the impact of the collapse of Syria’s education system on Syria’s future
• Provision of specialist medical and MHPSS services for survivors of sexual violence and torture.

**Education**

• Orientation in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and Turkey on the education system and curricula for school-age children who have been identified and selected for resettlement.

• Continuous Professional Development days for teachers and local education authorities on understanding the context and curricula in Syria and countries of first asylum, and how to support students with integration, education and psychosocial challenges they may face.

• Identification of options for children to continue their formal education e.g. catch-up classes in school, transitional learning programmes, mother tongue education, and provision of technical support on wellbeing and psychosocial efforts.

• Identification of qualified Syrian teachers within the UK who can support in schools as teaching assistants or teachers.

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Please contact Neil Mathers, Head of Save the Children Scotland, for further information and updates.