



NO ONE HEARS US

Syria — Mercy Corps

“This is the first time someone asked us how we are doing.”

-Adolescent focus group participant

Introduction

After four years of an unrelenting conflict, Syria is witnessing a constant deterioration of the humanitarian situation with 12.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, including 7.6 million internally displaced people and more than 5.6 million children in need of assistance. An estimated 4.8 million are living in hard-to reach areas¹, and over 4 million refugees in neighboring countries². The destruction of infrastructure by bombings and fighting; besieged areas; human rights violations; and lack of basic necessities, including food and medicine, are widespread throughout the country. Children and adolescents are paying the highest price, as they are denied access to educational and life opportunities, and even to basic needs and the right to life itself. The utmost importance of concentrating humanitarian efforts toward this fragile category is clear, as they represent the future of Syria and the only chance the country has to rebuild its society, through an educated and productive population.

¹United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA, 2014, *2015 Syria Response Plan*.

² UNHCR, *Syria Regional Refugee Response*, Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal, last Updated July 15th, 2015.

This assessment is part of the No Lost Generation Initiative,³ launched in January 2014 by governments, the United Nations, and international and non-governmental organizations to address the immediate and long-term impacts of the Syria crisis on a generation of children and adolescents in Syria and the region. This initiative aims to expand access to education and provide psychosocial support to children, strengthen child protection, boost social cohesion and promote peace building to restore hope to millions of Syrian children.

In the framework of this global call to action, an Adolescent Assessment in Syria was conducted under the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Development (DFATD) funded “No Lost Generation Advancing Adolescents and Improving School Water and Sanitation” program, implemented in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The overall objective of the program is to reduce vulnerability of crisis-affected people, particularly women and children. This assessment is intended to support the development of an appropriately tailored program and well-informed strategies to support adolescents. The main areas of focus were priorities and needs, gaps and coping mechanisms, adolescents’ outlook and aspirations for the future, their role in the family and in the community, their engagement with the community and with which actors, and whom they turn to for support and to draw hope.

Methodology

Following is a summary of the methodologies used:⁴

	Total Participants	Male	Female
Focus Group Discussions	120	60	60
Adolescent Interviews	120	51	67
Parent Interviews	35	13	19
Key Informant Interviews	167	94	68
Community Based Organization Interviews	10	8	2

Considering the extreme complexity of the Syrian conflict and the particulars of each area, the assessment team decided to focus the research on eight communities. Some characteristics are common to more than one community, while others are area-specific:

- » In **opposition-controlled areas**, services to the population are scarce and infrastructure is heavily damaged. Armed groups are more numerous and active.
- » **Besieged areas** share many common traits, such as lack of basic necessities, higher levels of poverty and very limited accessibility.
- » **Safer areas** have better services, and more schools, public spaces and cafes are still functioning.

³UNICEF, 2013, *A Lost Generation? A Strategy for Children Affected by the Syria crisis*.

⁴Discrepancy of total participants with total male and female numbers is due to the fact that not all respondents answered the question about their gender.

Key Findings

During the focus group discussions and in their answers to the survey, adolescents described how their existence has been heavily changed by the conflict, shaping their self-perception as well as their hopes and dreams for the future. Despite a strong feeling of fear for their lives as well as the lives of loved ones, adolescents showed extraordinary resilience and suggested many strategies that would help them cope with the enormously difficult situations presented in their daily lives amidst a civil war.

SAFETY AND SECURITY NEEDS

The need for the return of security and peace in the country is without a doubt the strongest and the most heartfelt by adolescents, their parents and the overall community. Paralyzing fear and extreme sadness resulting from the war permeates every discussion. *“War is what is hindering all aspects of our life and our progress in life,”* affirms a male adolescent. They see the end of the conflict as the only real solution to their misery and their only hope for a better future.

The desire to escape and travel abroad is shared by many adolescents but is extremely strong in besieged areas. At the same time, the Palestinian population is subject to higher levels of vulnerability due to its refugee status, which makes it more difficult to travel.

In addition, adults are extremely concerned about the numerous threats their children face every day and the uncertainty of the future that awaits them. As a result, they often become overprotective and give no space or freedom to adolescents in a desperate effort to keep them safe. Parents themselves are under profound stress and end up isolating their children in order to protect them without considering the psychological impact, particularly on adolescents. Coupled with limitations of movement for all civilians posed by shelling and fighting, armed factions and sieges, parents’ restrictions create a deep feeling of frustration in adolescents, especially girls, who feel locked inside the house, confined to their bedrooms and constantly longing to get out and be with their friends.

“I swear to God, if you bring a ship over here and take us all together to Sweden, it would be good. At least we could stop thinking about food and drink and if we are going to eat or not today. We could live normally like any other human being.”

-Male adolescent

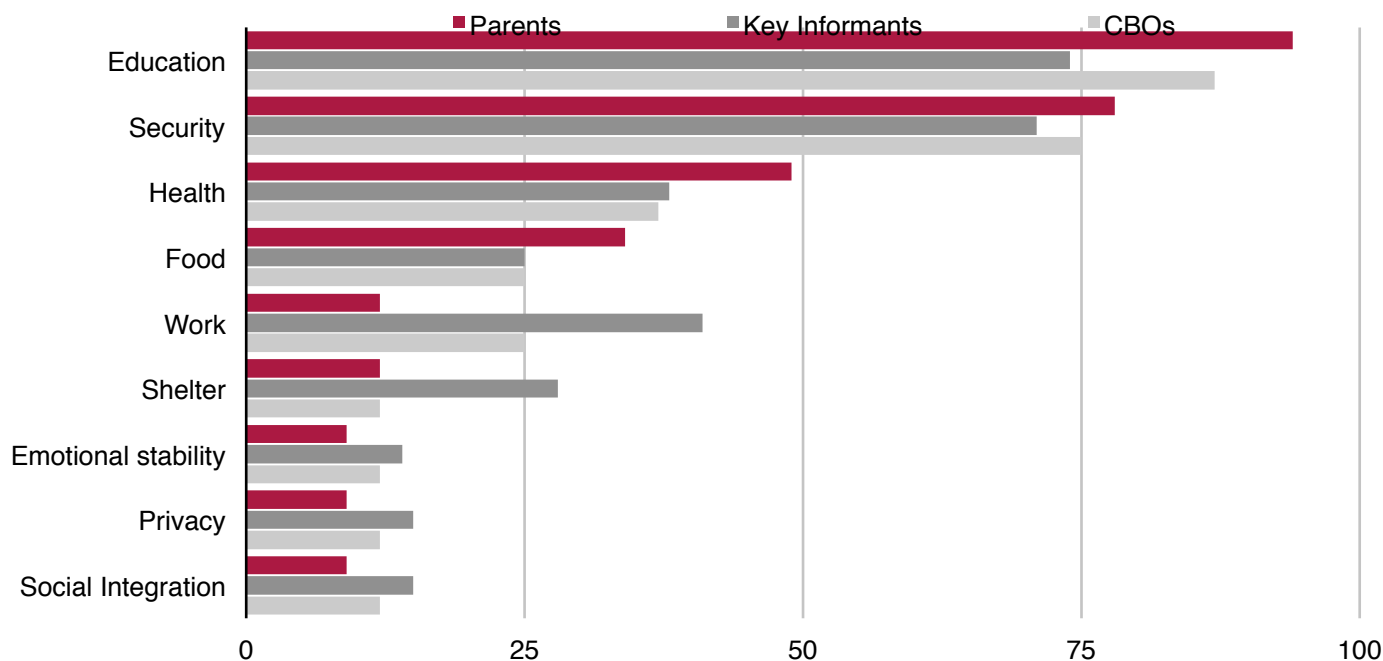
Only male respondents feel safe enough to walk alone in their neighborhood, though 80 percent of the adolescents do not go out at night because of the lack of security. More than half of the adolescents who participated in the assessment spend the majority of their time at home, where they feel safe. Despite the fact that family remains the first source of support for adolescents, an increasing sense of isolation and depression is widespread.

There is also the crippling sense of a new threat to adolescents’ freedom and security. Adolescents fear the spread of radicalism and extremism, which poses another obstacle to their fulfillment. Parents and key informants report that in certain areas, many male adolescents end up joining armed groups for lack of a better option as well as financial gains. Many male adolescents and their fathers defected from the army or were detained and are now hiding from the regime. Some were left behind by their fleeing families for the same reasons and have no support network.

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Finishing education is clearly a priority, according to adults and parents (94 percent of parents).

Priorities for adolescents, according to parents, key informants and Community Based Organization staff (percent)



A high percentage (81 percent) of adolescents who were interviewed are currently studying, with the largest majority getting formal education in public and private schools. Nevertheless, 76 percent are facing serious difficulties in continuing their education. As a male adolescent confirms, “We go to school every day. Sometimes there is no teacher, but we still go. It is better than sitting (doing nothing).” The main obstacle remains the security

situation, which results in challenges reaching the school premises; the closure of schools; lack of teachers, books and supplies; and parents forcing their children to drop out because of fear as well as the financial need to work. Further, among displaced adolescents, a strong feeling of marginalization within the school environment often results in adolescents dropping out of school.

Adolescents are motivated to continue studying by the wish for a better future and a good job. A female adolescent stated, “I want to become a teacher and go to university,” which is one of the many quotes collected that highlight the fact that adolescents’ ambitions and dreams rely on the hope of finishing their studies and often accessing university. Parents and family play a fundamental role in encouraging young students, as they emphasize the importance of education as the main path to success, better job opportunities and often the only chance to travel abroad.

When asked what would help them continue their education, the improvement of the security environment is again perceived as fundamental, followed by the improvement of the family financial situation, encouragement from parents and other family members, and the availability of fully functioning schools.

“My dream was to become a pediatrician in the future, but now I cannot make this dream come true because I have lost three years of education.”

-Female adolescent

A number of regional trends can also be identified when it comes to educational needs. Some communities are reported to have more schooling opportunities, whereas in besieged areas, education naturally falls behind access to basic needs such as food, water and fuel.

EMPLOYMENT AND LIVELIHOODS NEEDS

Some adolescents are also working while studying (12 male and 3 female respondents). Of the remaining adolescents interviewed who halted their education, the majority did so because of the need to work due to lack of family financial resources as well as the security situation.

Those who are able to find a job (22 percent of respondents dropped out of school and are currently working) are often poorly paid and physically unsuited for the job. Driven by the need to help their families and sometimes being the only breadwinner in the household, adolescents work as shop assistants, street vendors, in construction and farming, or helping the parents in their work. The majority receive, on average, less than \$100 per month. Mistreatment by employers and abuse are also reported. More than half are unhappy with their jobs and working conditions. Working adolescents wish for better working conditions (38 percent) and to go back to school (21 percent). A total of 18 percent of respondents are looking for a job unsuccessfully, and the majority feels that finishing education and access to vocational training would help them in their search.

Families rely primarily on parents' salaries but also on those of adolescents and their siblings, as well as relief assistance. The latter, particularly important in besieged areas, also generates a sense of hopelessness and degradation. *"I wish I could meet the needs of the household and stop taking aid from donors because this makes me feel incompetent,"* affirms a male adolescent.

According to the adolescents' interviews, in 41 percent of cases the available income hardly covers family expenses, and family members are forced to borrow from relatives, neighbors and friends; cut expenses; look for more work; and look for support from relief organizations. In the effort of helping their family, adolescents often feel helpless and depressed. At the same time, adolescents are well aware of the stress experienced by adult family members and try not to put more pressure on parents by asking for help outside of the family (42 percent turn to friends) and looking for other sources of income.

In some extreme cases, families resort to early marriage of their daughters, as reported in one of the facilitators' notes from a female focus group discussion: *"The financial resources have become so limited to the point that fathers cannot provide for their families and marry the girls off prematurely."*

Where male mobility is hindered by security concerns, females may be the sole family support. Looking for basic necessities such as food, fuel and water, they often end up waiting in line for hours to receive relief assistance. At times, this creates a contrast with the many restrictions posed by parents and increases frustration in young girls: *"If I want to visit our neighbor, I need to get permission, but if I want to go to Al Rejaa (an aid distribution point), it is OK, even if I stay the whole day there,"* reports a female adolescent.

HEALTH NEEDS

Adolescents are also concerned about the difficulties in accessing health services since the start of the conflict. Almost half of the interviewed adolescents were in need of medical services in the last year, with 41 percent of the total treated in a hospital and 20 percent currently suffering from health problems and chronic illness. Only 19 percent of the respondents have access to a nearby hospital and 50 percent to a dispensary/pharmacy. Medical services are reported to be scarce, of poor quality and expensive.

In addition to injuries caused by the fighting and shelling, many adolescents have experienced terrible psychological traumas, like losing family members and other conflict-related shocks. The reported increase in the use of drugs and alcohol among adolescents, as a coping measure in the face of hardship, is a point of concern when it comes to adolescents' health.

“The most beautiful thing I have done in these hard times is training a football team of kids. Their happiness makes me happy.”

-Male adolescent

PARTICIPATION AND ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY

On one hand, adolescents are perceived in a positive light. Parents and key informants widely recognize their important role supporting the family by taking care of younger siblings and vulnerable members of the family and the community, helping with household chores and contributing to the family income. On the other hand, they are referred to as a great source of worry. They are characterized as reckless and careless, a drain on the few available resources, continuously complaining and bringing more troubles by increasing tension in the household, and rebelling against the status quo. While key informants recognize the fact that the negative side is brought about by the difficult situation adolescents live in, parents tend to be less aware of the complexity of the issues faced by adolescents and judge them harshly, with 36 percent thinking that adolescents only take care of themselves and are a burden to the family.

Adolescents, on the other hand, feel marginalized, deprived of any role within the community, because the circumstances force them to be inactive. At the same time, their need to help and support the household and whole community is very strong: *“I am willing to starve myself to feed my family and every displaced person,”* says a male adolescent.

A total of 74 percent of adolescent respondents do not participate in any type of activity outside their home apart from going to school, often because of restrictions from parents, lack of availability in their community, financial constraints and the security threats of leaving their homes. Activities for adolescents are scarce and confined to a few options, such as educational activities provided by schools as well as relief work and volunteering with charities and relief organizations. Helping others gives adolescents a sense of purpose and is perceived as a rewarding activity even when dangerous. Often, even this opportunity is not available to adolescents, as many organizations consider them too young or refuse their help on the basis of their gender.

Only a small number of adolescent respondents, male and female, are actively involved in the political discourse and engage with civic activists through media, communication groups and social networks. In less secure areas, it is especially boys who engage in such activities. Whenever the Internet is available, social networks provide a valuable outlet for adolescents' need for communication and expression, allowing them to actively share their experiences and freely express their ideas.

Though rare, some recreational activities, such as sports (especially football) are reported to be available at times. They often are organized by local groups and schools. Additionally, in some communities, religious groups are reported to engage with adolescents quite actively.

Whatever the type of activity that adolescents take part in, there is always positive feedback that it brings purpose to their lives and encourages them, especially if it involves helping others. In fact, 61 percent of the interviewed adolescents would like to engage in available activities, especially in relief work and related trainings (e.g., first aid), and recreational and cultural activities, but they believe that a certain level of safety and security needs to return. Activities and adolescents' centers need to be available at a reasonable distance, and, above all, parents' approval and trust must be gained.

STATUS AND PERCEPTION

Syrian adolescents expressed the loss of hope and fear that *“there is no future awaiting us.”* Adolescents are aware of the fact that they lost their childhoods and are forced to be adults too early, as expressed by a male adolescent and echoed by many others: *“I feel a thousand years old.”*

At an age when the need for independence increases, girls experience an even stronger feeling of oppression and complete lack of freedom, as parents tighten control over their lives and movements and a return to conservative values spreads throughout the country.

As already mentioned, adolescents also feel judged and negatively viewed by parents and the community, which further diminishes their self-esteem and confidence. They feel that no one values them or is interested in what they want and think.

Nevertheless, parents and key informants, while expressing a certain level of disapproval for some adolescents’ behaviors, generally consider them the country’s future and the only hope for a better Syria. Both recognize the hardship that their children’s generation is experiencing and the high potential that remains unfulfilled.

Social tensions due to the conflict are recognized to negatively influence and change adolescents’ behavior.⁵ Fragmentation of family structure, tensions due to the economic situation, contrasting political views, exposure to sectarianism, and tribal conflict often result in a rise of adolescents’ insecurity and fear, a wish for rebellion, feelings of hatred, and radical thinking that can have long-lasting results on their future and the future of their country. This trend is particularly evident in areas where sectarian and tribal conflicts are widespread.

At the same time, adolescents reveal enormous resilience and optimism. One of the girls participating in a focus group discussion goes to the extent of saying that the conflict is a convenient opportunity for females to try to change society once and for all, finally proving the importance of their role. Adolescents would like to be seen by the community with respect, their capabilities and potentials recognized, to be supported, understood and encouraged.

Amidst sentiments of uncertainty on how the situation will develop, adolescents suggested several ways to bring change and improve their situation as well as their communities. Access to education remains on the top of their list as the antidote to misery. Focus is not only on formal education but includes life skills-enhancing courses and technical courses. Adolescents are also willing to share what they know with younger generations.

The need for financial support for small, tailored projects for adolescents is also often recommended in order to improve the livelihoods of their family and benefit the community at large. One example includes access to land and agricultural tools for boys to fight the siege by producing food, as well as simple cultural activities.

A demand for psychosocial support and awareness-raising activities is also considered essential by many. The latter ranges from fighting extremism to increasing awareness within families about adolescents’ potentials and needs, as well as awareness about women’s rights.

⁵Untapped Potentials: Adolescents affected by armed conflict, Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, January 2000

Adolescents also call for more opportunities to actively help their community and the people most severely affected by the situation, through volunteering and joining charities and relief organizations.

Their strength and resilience comes from the love and support of parents and friends; from the community that shares their fate and the inspiring example of relief workers who devote their time to help others; from God and religion, as well as from within themselves; from their desire for a better future; from their dreams and the feeling of irreplaceable purpose that achievements bring.

GENDER-BASED PROTECTION CONCERNS

Despite the fact that both male and female adolescents equally experience psychological deterioration and suffer tremendously because of the war, some specific concerns for females can be drawn from this assessment. Girls tend to experience a stronger sense of isolation, as they are often confined within the family walls and have fewer opportunities to be with friends and express their sufferings. Parents' fear for their daughters results in forced school dropout, no chance to join any type of activity and a decrease in self-confidence and self-respect. The return to conservative traditional behaviors reinforces female oppression, especially when coupled with the threat of radicalism and extremism.

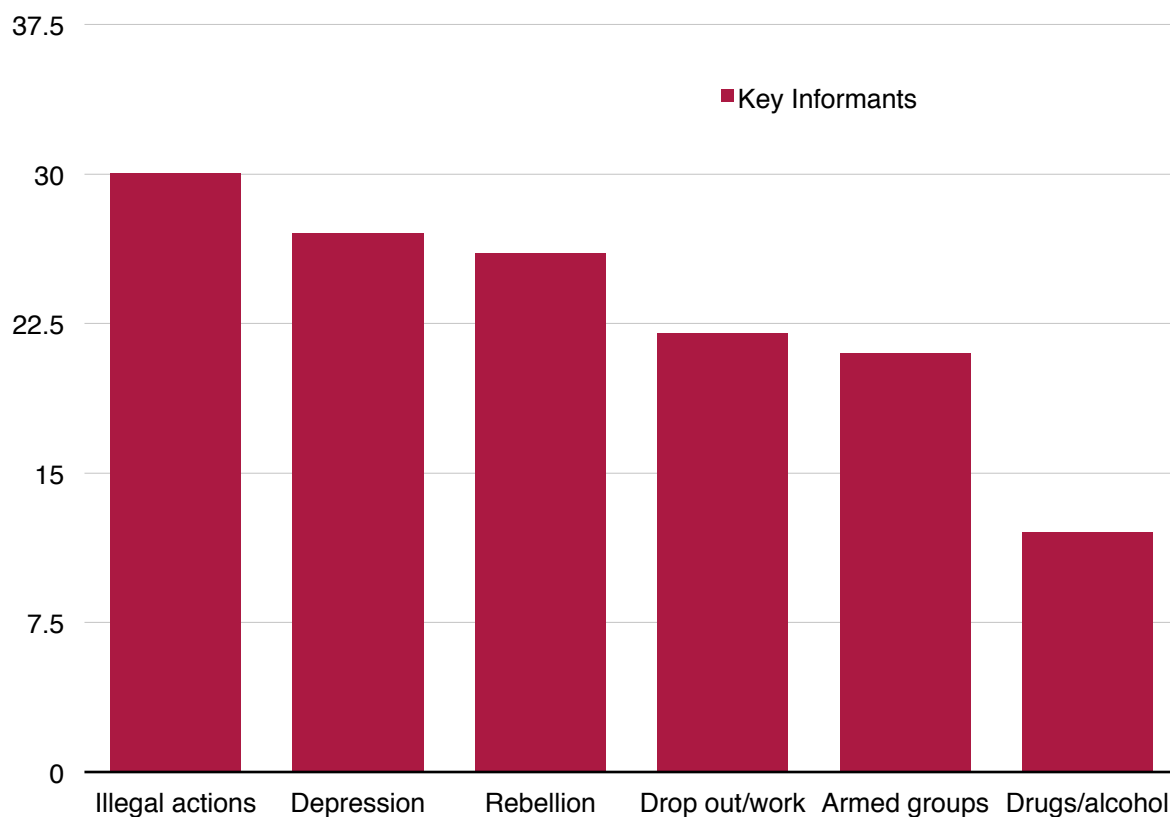
“Love, parents and friends are the main incentive to keep moving towards a better future. It is our duty to secure a better future for them.”

-Female adolescent

Early marriage, despite not being prevalent, does appear more than once in the data collected. In one focus group discussion, a girl advised the group against early marriage, saying she had lost the opportunity to finish her studies and be independent. Additionally, the possibility of sexual assault in the workplace was raised by female respondents, thus highlighting their vulnerability compared with male peers, which increases when they need to work outside of the house or replace male roles in looking for relief assistance and responding to the needs of the household. When asked whether they felt safe to move around or in particular circumstances, like going to the bathroom alone, the majority of female respondents decided to choose the option “no answer,” possibly communicating a specific message about the threat that they face in their daily life.

On the other hand, as mentioned in previous sections, male adolescents are more at risk of being recruited by the Government of Syria Army or opposition groups – reported by key informants to be the fifth most frequent behavior that male adolescents resort to when they cannot meet their needs. Resorting to illegal actions such as theft and smuggling is also a male trend that key informants recognise as the first coping measure adolescents use to meet their basic needs.

Primary behaviors adolescents resort to when they cannot meet their needs, according to key informants:



Conclusion and Recommendations

It is clear that providing an outlet for adolescents' emotions and allowing them to express their potential and reassert their role in society is paramount to restore self-confidence, hope, psychosocial stability and strength. Therefore, these recommendations are meant to offer realistic options for programming, taking into consideration the current context in Syria as well as the wishes and suggestions of the adolescents who were interviewed.

It should be noted that community assessments would need to be conducted prior to any project implementation. Thus, the following recommendations should be considered as possible options for further exploration. It is also evident that in the current context, tailoring adolescent programming to the traditions and cultural environment is essential, such as planning separate activities for males and females, in order to gain parental consent and reduce risks.

- 1. Support female adolescents in getting involved with their communities outside the family circle and reconnecting with their friends through small-scale community projects to reduce isolation and hopelessness.***

As highlighted during the analysis of results, females are in desperate need of engaging in activities that go beyond household chores and taking care of younger siblings. Confinement within the family walls, as well as lack of contact with girlfriends, leads to depression and isolation, resulting in a loss

of self-respect and value for life. Small-scale community projects that involve adolescent girls should be identified and organized. A possible suggestion is organizing recreational and educational activities with younger children. Females show a natural and deep sense of responsibility toward children (“*I draw my strength from children and their laughter; it is our duty to secure a better future for them,*” says a female adolescent). Basic kindergarten training could also be provided to participating girls, which would benefit the children as well as enhance the skills of the girls and open possible future job opportunities. At the same time, engaging in such activities within a group of adolescent females will provide an important outlet for their self-expression, allow them to share experiences and ideas with their female peers, and encourage one another, thereby improving their psychological well-being. In addition, parents will be more easily persuaded to give permission to their daughters if suggested activities are meant to benefit children and have an educational purpose. However, finding a safe space for such activities as well as a safe means of access to these spaces is essential to gain parental consent.

Basic psychosocial support should also be provided as part of the training, and strong elements within the group could be identified for further training in order to support children showing signs of mental health issues. Other trainings, such as sewing, were suggested by female adolescents, but with the humanitarian purpose of sewing clothes for children from old adult clothes and other textiles, again in the effort to go beyond acquiring a specific skill and benefiting the community at large. Additional options can be explored but require further analysis at the community level.

2. Identify possibilities and support the inclusion of male adolescents in relief and community support projects to foster a sense of agency and purpose while also enhancing their life skills and social cohesion.

Young males experience a strong sense of powerlessness and humiliation, but unlike their female counterparts, they tend to leave the house and spend long hours with friends, at times in the streets, thus subject to the influence of armed groups and radical political groups. To cope with the feeling of frustration, they resort to substance abuse and illegal behaviors, like stealing and smuggling, getting involved in dangerous situations and losing focus on investing appropriately in their future. Both in focused discussions and in responding to the survey, adolescents engaged in relief activities showed much higher levels of resilience, optimism and hope for a better future that was contagious for their peers who were listening to their experiences of helping others. Possibilities to join relief activities should be identified and male adolescents’ involvement organized, thus helping them regain a role within the community and increase their self-esteem. Specific trainings could be provided, such as first aid techniques and basic medical assistance, but also sports coaching and other educational activities that could benefit younger children or even peers. Parental consent is likely to be more easily obtained.

Other small-scale projects could be supported, such as community gardens to grow vegetables and fruits, providing basic agricultural tools and seeds, thus increasing adolescents’ sense of belonging to the community and the land, as well as of agency even in the face of continuing siege. The benefit of such projects are innumerable, ranging from acquiring important life skills to practically helping the community producing food, but at the same time require access to the area (for materials) and availability of land.

3. Raise awareness among parents and the community at large of adolescents’ needs, problems and potentials in an effort to bridge the generational gap between them and increase community support and encouragement for adolescents, while also fostering mutual respect.

A strong feeling of disconnect between adolescents and adults is often reported in collected data. The need to raise awareness about adolescents’ needs and their potential among parents and other

adults in the community is evident, both to guarantee parental consent when it comes to the previous recommendations, as well as to increase understanding and respect between the two generations.

Community sessions, as well as single outreach visits, could be organized to introduce the dangers of inactivity, depression and isolation in adolescents, as well as the many threat of deviations, in a conflict situation. Adolescents' unrealized potential and important role in society now and in the future should be highlighted. Finally, the programs developed for adolescents should be presented and parents introduced to their aim of preventing adolescents' degradation and bringing out the best in adolescents while also benefiting their communities.

These awareness-raising sessions should include specific gender-based elements that could help improve the perception of female members of the family, not only as vulnerable elements to protect but also as important contributors to society development.

Thank You

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