



**Understanding resilience:  
Perspectives from Syrians**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**





---

*“No matter how long the darkness is, the light must come, and no matter how long the clouds are, spring and flowers must come.”*

*“Resilience means that you hold on to the thing you love most and keep a beautiful image of it despite the distortions of war. I see my country as the most beautiful thing in my life regardless of the destruction, killing, and displacement that was forced upon its people. I strive to become a distinguished person in order to serve my country and make it special again. One day Syria will become better than even before the war. I see it on the horizon and even if I do not live it myself, the next generation will.”*

---

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This research report was prepared by GK Consulting for CARE International UK with funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID).

The GK Consulting international team was led by Gwendolyn Heaner, with Shereen Shaheen as regional field team manager, Jennifer Flemming as regional specialist, Sufian al Said as regional field team associate, James Rogan as technical advisor, and Linda al Khatatbeh and Rania Matalka as translators. Staff at CARE provided technical and logistical support and guidance throughout the entire process, most especially Wafa al Amaireh and Sheri Lim; others at CARE provided helpful feedback on drafts of the data collection tools, initial findings and reports, most especially Laura Hughston, Fairouz Hassan, Erin Weir, Ellie Matthews and Zena Ni Dhuinn-Bhig.

The members of the four research teams inside Syria, who will not be named to protect their confidentiality, deserve the utmost credit for their unwavering dedication, indispensable insights, and ongoing guidance to the international team over the months of the research that resulted in extremely rich and focused data.

Most importantly, the hundreds of participants who volunteered so much of their time and trusted our teams with their emotional and inspiring stories deserve our deepest gratitude.

CARE International UK would like to dedicate this research to all who have faced similar tragedies and trauma throughout the Syrian war.

*Note: Photos are for illustrative purposes and do not feature participants in this research. Captions and credits for all photos are listed on the back page of this report.*





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Overview

*Understanding resilience: Perspectives from Syrians* sought to examine resilience in Syria, from the experiences and reflections shared by Syrians inside the country. CARE and many other humanitarian agencies generally articulate resilience as “the ability of people, households, communities, countries and systems to absorb, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses.” The research focused on the following questions:

1. What does resilience mean from the perspective of people living in Syria?
  - What capacities do households and communities use and what strategies do households and communities adopt to become resilient in such a changing context?
  - What are the main factors that affect household and community resilience in an active conflict area?
2. How has the conflict affected the role of women within their families and communities (positively and negatively)?
3. How does it relate to the humanitarian community’s and CARE’s definitions of resilience?
  - Is CARE’s understanding of supporting resilience suitable for the context within Syria?
  - How can the humanitarian sector build/improve on the capacities and actions that households and communities take to build their own resilience in Syria?
4. What systems need to be strengthened to better support the resilience of households and communities in protracted crisis?

The results of this research are meant to contribute nuanced insight and in-depth understanding of resilience in Syria, in order to both inform humanitarian efforts, as well as to reflect on CARE’s Resilience Framework<sup>1</sup> which provided the framework for analysis.

---

<sup>1</sup> CARE (2016a). Increasing resilience: Theoretical guidance document for CARE International.

## Methods

This research prioritised in-depth and community-based qualitative methods, using a Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation and Research (PEER) methodology in which researchers already living in the research communities had access to locations and rapport with participants, that would otherwise have been very difficult and time consuming to achieve by an external field team. In conducting six months of longitudinal, qualitative research, the study included a total of 328 unique participants from 11 governorates (the majority from Aleppo and Homs), residing at the time of research in Idleb, Al Hassakeh, Raqqa, Aleppo and one host community in Jordan.

Participants were visited and re-visited over seven waves of research at two-weekly intervals, and they engaged in a range of guided and non-guided tools, including Key Informant Interviews, Life Stories, and Journaling. Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling, with the aim of capturing a broad variety of demographic features and variety of experiences Syrians faced during the conflict. As qualitative research, the sample is not meant to be representative of Syrians as a whole or any specific subgroup, but to share experiences and voices drawn from a broad range of individuals who may not be linked to any specific humanitarian assistance or programme.

## Findings

### OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS' CIRCUMSTANCES

- The Syrian conflict context continues to be highly dynamic, and participants are facing multiple risks and hazards that are constantly changing in terms of source, type, intensity, and scale. These risks are complex, with harsh economic circumstances interconnected with continued conflict events and displacements.
- Most participants have been displaced one or more times, and acknowledge the possibility of future displacement for themselves and their families.
- Most participants have faced a massive loss in cash and material assets, livelihoods, and educational opportunities.

The findings are presented according to the four capacities for resilience within CARE's Resilience Framework:

**Anticipatory capacity:** The ability of individuals, households, and communities to foresee and therefore reduce the impact of hazards that are likely to occur and be ready for unexpected events through prevention, preparedness and planning.

**Absorptive capacity:** The ability of individuals, households, and communities to accommodate the immediate impact of the shock/stress on their lives, wellbeing, and livelihoods, by making changes in their usual practices and behaviours using available skills and resources, and by managing adverse conditions.

**Adaptive capacity:** The ability of individuals, households, and communities to adjust their behaviours, practices, lifestyles, and livelihood strategies in response to changed circumstances and conditions under multiple, complex and at times changing risks.

**Transformative capacity:** The ability of individuals, households, and communities to influence the enabling environment and drivers of risks to create individual and systemic changes on behaviours, local governance and decision-making structures, market economics, and policies and legislation.

## ANTICIPATORY CAPACITY

*Most participants had received some sort of warning of impending risk (either official or unofficial channels) though it was not always clear whether the warning was reliable.*

- Participants trusted and relied upon on horizontal warnings (e.g. those coming from their social networks) the most and generally everyone has access to this information as they share it widely and indiscriminately.
- In many cases the information provided was inadequate to make an informed decision about how to respond.
  - Rural areas and camps received reliable official warnings more often than urban areas, though horizontal mechanisms were still relied upon.
  - People learned over time to observe subtle changes around them to anticipate impending hazards.

*Even when participants had adequate warning, they generally lack the ability to prepare due to dwindling savings and assets.*

- Over time they have learned to be as well-prepared for unexpected events as possible and understand the importance of preparing for shock events. Because of the multi-risk and multi-hazard environment – wherein the nature and intensity of a shock or stress varied widely – participants have learned to prepare for anything as best as they can, since they will likely need to decide how to act in the instant the hazard is materialising. The degree to which each person can prepare differs, but most are implementing similar preparation strategies, including:
  - Planning the best location to flee to
  - Noting the safest and fastest routes out of town
  - Establishing communication channels
  - Stocking food and/or securing residence
  - Keeping cash on hand or objects that can be carried away and/or sold
- As savings dwindled and with new income insufficient to meet basic needs, people are acutely aware that they should be saving and preparing for another shock event, but they lack the means to do so, causing psychological distress among many.

## ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY

*Decisions about how to absorb the shock (e.g. to leave or stay) are based on the degree of preparation and nature of the shock. Communities generally stick together in this decision, as it makes the absorption easier.*

- For many participants, a higher degree of preparation (e.g. sufficient food stocked, plenty of cash on hand) was an important factor in deciding to stay in their homes in the face of a shock.
- The decision to stay or flee was also dependent on the type and intensity of the conflict event (e.g., burned bridges or road blocks might make escape impossible; ongoing shelling of nearby buildings means that staying is too dangerous). Communities often stayed together in such circumstances, as they cooperatively dealt with the risks at hand.

*Savings, cash, and assets make it easier to absorb shocks and stressors, but psychological strength and social networks are just as critical; aid is not relied upon but is welcomed.*

- Although people with savings, cash, or specific assets (e.g. a car) absorb more easily because of their ability to access food, transportation to a safer location, safe housing, and healthcare, sometimes no amount of cash or assets would be helpful to absorb a shock.
  - Those without savings or cash turned to family and friends for support, so being in a location where family and friends were nearby (either because they were displaced together, or because they were displaced to a location where they already knew people) was critical.
  - Support from family, community and neighbours was indispensable during all shocks: while fleeing, relocating to new areas and when staying at home during attacks. Participants also depended on social networks during individual shocks (e.g. assistance for disabled relatives, food and supplies for new babies).

- Aid is welcomed but not relied upon, given it has been typically inconsistently available or inadequate.
- Psychological strength is critical, and not necessarily linked to having cash or strong social networks.
  - Certain personal qualities, such as patience, mental strength, self-reliance, and religious beliefs contribute to effectively absorbing in the midst of the worst types of violence and shocks.
  - Substantial change in living conditions (e.g. from urban living to extremely rural or camp life; from being affluent to having nothing) had a negative psychological impact on individuals and families, making them less resilient in this domain despite having cash, family, etc.

## **ADAPTIVE CAPACITY**

*People are facing a 'new normal' with livelihoods, education, and gender norms, and are generally willing to adapt to the new normal provided it means stability and consistency.*

- Across gender and age, participants are generally willing to adapt to their new normal as it relates to new livelihood strategies, new ways of accessing education, and residing in new locations, even if it is a significant departure from their previous life. Their main hope is for stability in this new normal, and to become less reliant on absorptive and anticipatory strategies to survive.
- Participants however are hopeful but cautious, focusing both on adapting to their new circumstances and remaining aware that they may have to react to new conflict events.
- Women in particular are adapting to very new roles as compared to before the conflict, particularly in terms of pursuing work outside of the home and as heads of households.
  - Many women discovered their potential as they adapt in order to ensure their own and their family's survival, and feel empowered by changes in traditional gender norms.
  - In taking on these new roles, women heads of households often feel incredibly stretched as both breadwinner and primary caregiver of children.
  - There are mixed ideas on the sustainability of new gender norms, and traditional views of gender are still held by some (from both male and female participants).

*Education, transferrable skills, and access to finance make adapting easier; social networks are an indispensable safety net for those without such assets.*

- Although people who have education, transferable skills, and access to finance (via their own savings or social networks) are better able to adapt to new and longer-term livelihoods, even they are not fully secure in the face of new shocks or stressors. Participants who did find new livelihoods experienced a significant decrease in their income compared to before the conflict.
- People who have strong social networks in a location that they have been displaced to (whether already there, or networks that displaced together) are more likely to effectively adapt to that new location.
- Access to finance (however obtained, e.g. loans, credit, cash aid) and skills training can help those who do not have social networks or higher education in pursuing adaptive strategies.
- The desire to continue education was one of the strongest sentiments from participants when describing their futures or the futures of their children

## **TRANSFORMATIVE CAPACITY**

*Social capital is and has been strong, but may be deteriorating.*

- Social cohesion is a necessary component of transformative capacity, but the research indicates that while intra-group<sup>2</sup> cohesion and capital is strong in Syria (as it was before the conflict) inter-group cohesion may be degrading as a result of the conflict.
  - The data shows strong enduring social cohesion within groups that existed prior to the conflict (families, neighbourhoods, communities, rural towns) in response to conflict events. However, some participants

---

<sup>2</sup> 'Group' refers to those belonging to a social network prior to the conflict, often made up of those living in the same geographical regions/ neighbourhoods or rural towns, and/or members of an immediate and extended family.

note that with communities and families disbanded across the country due to conflict, such social ties may be weakening.

- While there are instances of social cohesion between groups (especially between IDPs and host communities), this cooperation is largely acute and in response to basic survival needs. In terms of recovery and rebuilding, inter-group cohesion, collective action, and social capital across differing ethnic and religious groups, as well as sides of the conflict, is lacking and likely even deteriorating.

*Conditions are not yet conducive to policy and systems-level changes.*

- While people commented on certain policy and systems-level changes that they feel are needed in both their own communities and beyond as the conflict winds down, there are few concrete ideas about how to accomplish these. Participants noted that this is a result of their present need to focus on surviving and being still in the very active phases of anticipating, absorbing, and adapting.
- The degree to which local governing and decision-making structures were recovering varied by location and was indicated by increased access to and improvements in basic services (e.g. hospitals, schools, water, and sewage systems), as well as reviving markets and public transportation options.
- Even where these structures exist, trust in and ability to actively participate in local governance and leadership is poor, limiting the degree to which individuals and families can (or feel as though they can) make changes to it.
- Trust in NGOs is also limited, particularly in urban locations. Participants describe lack of access and information related to NGOs, as well as poor cooperation and communication. Where they have been provided aid, it is often described as inadequate or redundant.

## Conclusions

Based upon the perspectives of Syrians who partook in this study, defining resilience in Syria requires consideration of (a) straightforward economic and logistical resilience, such as livelihoods activities and access to financial capital at both the household and community levels; (b) characteristics of individuals, households, and communities such as self-reliance, flexibility, and adaptive learning; and (c) the central role of family ties, social cohesion, and community cooperation. Also, self-reliance, diversity and redundancy of skills and resources, flexibility, and adaptive learning feature prominently in descriptions of resilience in Syria among the participants.

It is clear from Syrian participants that resilience is a process, not a set of fixed personal, household, or community traits or assets. The lines between anticipating, absorbing and adapting are particularly difficult to identify in the Syrian context as a result of the protracted nature of the conflict, with new shocks and stressors occurring even after a period of relative stability and of rebuilding one's life. This means that one can effectively shift between these various stages in non-linear ways as needed. Even in a period of relative stability and adaptation, one is always anticipating another potential shock. If and when this does occur, one must be able to immediately use absorptive strategies again, and after absorbing to adapt in an entirely new way yet again.

The most consistent factor that contributes to resilience is social capital. In general, individuals without family resources or support are more vulnerable and exposed to shocks. Simultaneously, there are indications that social capital may be degrading as families and communities are separated and isolated as a result of the conflict. In these cases, cash and financial support may be even more critical for individual and household resilience.

A transformation of gender norms has occurred throughout the country, with women consistently taking on new roles that were previously in the domain of men, and often having to take on multiple roles. However, the nature and strength of such transformation differs both across and within locations, and there were differing opinions from women and men participants on the sustainability and desirability of such change for post-conflict Syria. Among those agreeing that women's increased agency was a positive shift, there was clear agreement that women should be at the centre of their own decisions regarding their lives now and in the future.



## Recommendations

The recommendations have been drawn from the findings of this research, reflecting the needs of Syrians in becoming more resilient and how further humanitarian and recovery programming can best support them in Syria. More detailed background to these recommendations is in the findings of the full report.

### Helping adapt to the new normal:

- Interventions around providing support for people's livelihoods, education, and settling into a permanent location should acknowledge that people are happy to adapt to a 'new normal', so long as it is a long-term and stable solution.
- Support livelihood interventions that will enable people to find or create long-term opportunities.
  - Support household enterprises and livelihoods that have room and opportunity to grow through a combination of interlinked support: new skills training and apprenticeships alongside providing access to finance and links to employers, entrepreneurial skills training, and market linkages.
  - Stimulate livelihood opportunities in rural areas, in particular where there are limited options beyond subsistence agriculture which pushes people to (less safe and secure) cities.
- Recognise that even within recovery support, programming should allow for quick absorptive/humanitarian interventions, as shocks are regular and often devastating. Flexibility in supporting adaptive capacity should also be part of the programming approach, since what may have been successful previously (what kind of support is needed) may not be successful after a new shock/stressor.
- Facilitate access to education for youth.
  - Explore educational offerings in programming areas, and link youth to education opportunities offered, including distance (virtual) education, accelerated learning, and alternative learning.
  - Provide scholarships for tuition and materials and examination fees.
  - Establish tutoring programmes in communities for college-educated Syrians to work with younger children unable to access school.
  - Identify examination periods and arrange for safe transportation of young people to take exams.

### Supporting the continued empowered roles of women in their communities:

- Women should be encouraged to be the centre of their own decisions regarding their lives, now and in the future. Programming should emphasise choice, continued support, and cooperation within communities for women who want to take on new roles and relations that they did not have before, but not forcing women to do so.
- Facilitate dialogues with women, men, couples and youth that include: (a) women role models (in livelihoods and leadership positions); (b) supporting women who choose not to work, maintaining emphasis on their right to power in the domestic sphere and public life, in addition to those who chose new roles; (c) working with men to be advocates supporting gender transformation; (d) ensuring balanced programming with men and women that meets their different needs; (e) monitor potential resentment toward women as a result of these changes.
- Provide tailored support for women's economic empowerment.
  - Support the development of women-led enterprise co-operatives and women who choose to access skills training, asset accumulation and finance.
  - Support single women in their family and economic responsibilities, including those who have effectively absorbed and adapted to life without a husband. This may help women avoid risky situations where they feel the need to rely on a husband at all costs and revert to traditional roles for the sake of keeping themselves and their children supported.
  - Fostering new social networks, community cohesion and providing psycho-emotional support should be key elements of programmes that facilitate women's economic activities, alongside economic empowerment.



## **Facilitating cooperation between Syrian households and communities and local governing structures and institutions to support recovery:**

- Build from existing social networks within cohesive communities to collectively identify local needs, concerns and opportunities. Support inclusion of women, youth and people with disabilities, and use conflict sensitivity, peace building and social cohesion approaches to build social capital.
- Support collaboration between host communities and displaced persons to jointly identify community-wide needs and proposed solutions, including preparedness and early warning, risk identification and risk reduction, asset mapping, market access and development opportunities, etc.
- Facilitate processes and platforms for dialogue between local governing and decision-making structures, institutions, NGOs and community members to encourage collective prioritisation of issues. These can also be used for communication of information by local leaders and institutions, and community members for raising concerns and feedback.
- Work collaboratively to identify ways to address these needs and opportunities and improve service provision at a local level and with local resources (from local leadership, institutions, private sector and community members themselves).

## **Improving humanitarian support:**

- An initial phase of regaining trust and confidence may be a necessary first step of any programming. Expect that people may have ambivalent – and sometimes negative – attitudes toward interventions delivered by NGOs that have been helpful and even indispensable at times, but also highly unreliable, inconsistent, and sometimes untrustworthy.
- Improve communications and consistent provision of assistance. Continue to provide cash, food, and shelter to those in immediate need, and provide clear explanations (as possible) to those receiving it about what they may be able to expect next, and when, to reduce even further uncertainty in their lives.
- Consider the psycho-social needs that all Syrians may have and recognise the impact of trauma on people's ability to recover, regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, age, education level, or displacement status; offer or link them to services accordingly.
- Consider how to support those hardest to reach, particularly:
  - Returnees and people integrated into host communities (not in camps)
  - People who remained in besieged areas
  - People with disabilities and special needs
- For sustainable recovery and more robust resilience, individual and household capacities and characteristics must connect outwards towards community, regional, and ultimately national systems. This is particularly relevant when planning humanitarian and longer term efforts, as it emphasises various points of entry situated within complex and dynamic social and political systems.
- Communities often stayed together in deciding to stay or flee in the face of an attack or other shock and to work cooperatively together. In arriving to a host community, some participants described the support provided to IDPs by community members to help them deal with being displaced. Those who stayed at home during heightened conflict relied even more heavily on family, friends and neighbours, establishing self-supporting networks of assistance (e.g. vehicles, provision of supplies, access to goods to purchase, etc.). In the recovery and rebuilding phases, possible degradation of social cohesion may have very real consequences for effectiveness. Provide humanitarian support in ways which support and strengthen social networks and social cohesion, and self-supporting networks of assistance to provide a strong foundation for future recovery.
- Engaging youth and women in the delivery and leadership of humanitarian programming can support empowerment, strengthen social networks and the benefits these bring (e.g. information dissemination, social cohesion), increase the skills from which they can build for future recovery, and ensure their particular needs are addressed.



**CARE International UK**  
**89 Albert Embankment**  
**London SE1 7TP**  
**020 7091 6000**  
**[www.careinternational.org.uk](http://www.careinternational.org.uk)**  
**[insights.careinternational.org.uk](http://insights.careinternational.org.uk)**  
**Registered charity number: 292506**

**PHOTOS:**

p1, Mariam (name changed) works on a farm where she earns the equivalent of 20 US cents per day – barely enough for her and her four children to survive. She received support through CARE's partner the Syria Resilience Consortium. Photo © Abdullah Hammam/Syria Resilience Consortium 2019

p3, A displaced family in northwestern Syria © Syria Relief 2019