

Youth and young women as drivers of localised Early Recovery in Syria



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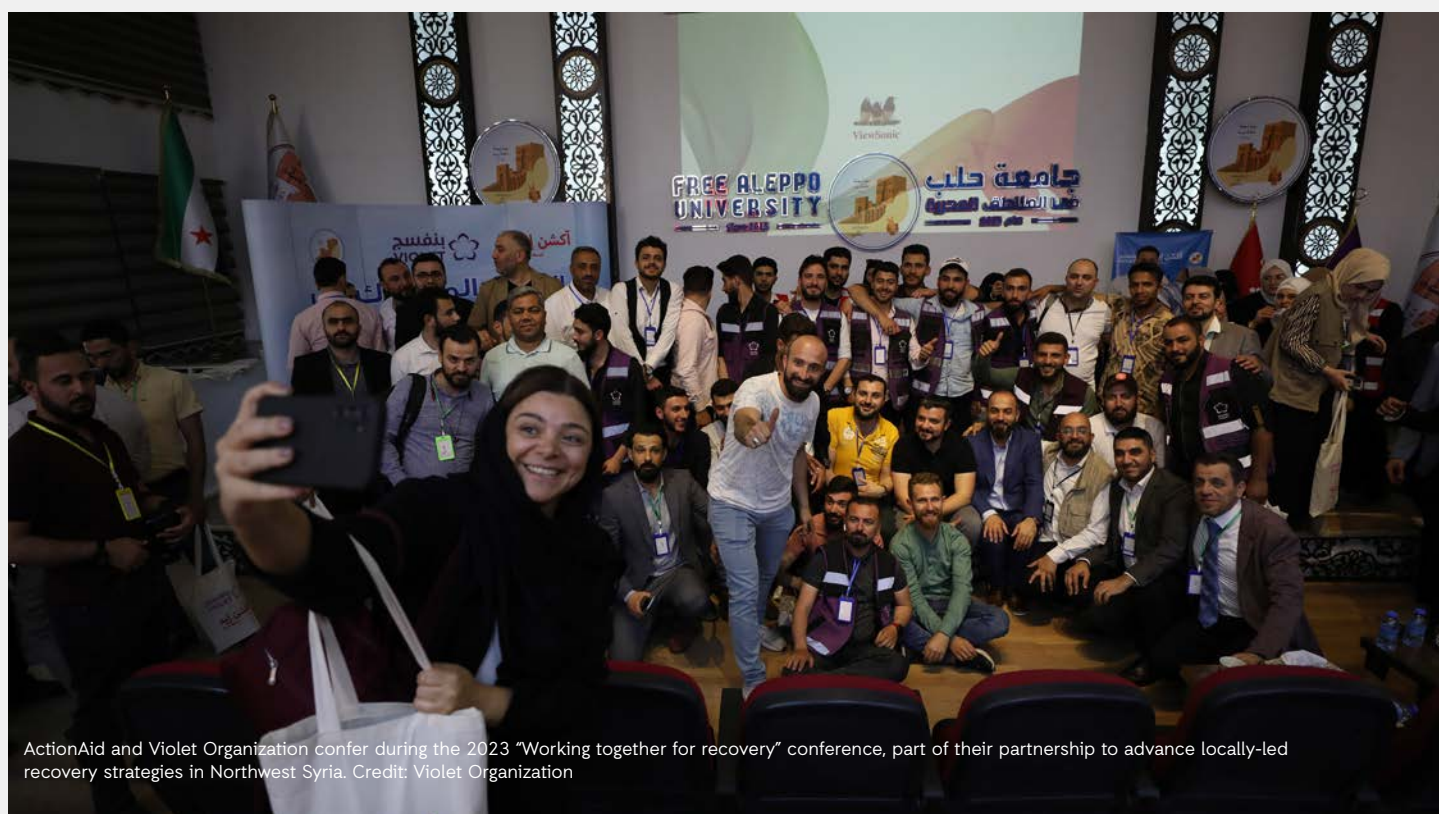
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ActionAid and Violet Organization confer during the 2023 "Working together for recovery" conference, part of their partnership to advance locally-led recovery strategies in Northwest Syria. Credit: Violet Organization



Visitors engage with artworks at a cultural exhibition in Aleppo, highlighting the city's artistic heritage. Credit: Mashroa By Default.

01. Executive Summary

01.1. Why youth and young women matter for early recovery now

Syria's early recovery has entered a decisive but fragile phase. More than a decade of conflict, compounded by economic collapse, mass displacement, and the long-term impacts of the February 2023 earthquakes, has left communities navigating recovery in a context of contested public authority and declining international assistance, without stable institutions, predictable funding, or clear governance pathways. This creates a policy environment in which recovery depends less on formal systems and more on local social capacity. In this context, youth and young women are not peripheral stakeholders or future beneficiaries. They are producing, practicing, and sustaining recovery in practice.

Across Northwest Syria (NW Syria), youth and young women have acted as first responders, service continuity providers, social brokers, and informal governance actors. In addition to their contribution to knowledge production and experience sharing, they mobilised before formal systems kicked in during the earthquake response and they continue to anchor recovery through psychosocial support, protection, livelihoods, education, and community coordination. These roles are not ad hoc or exceptional, but structurally embedded responses to prolonged displacement, institutional erosion, and constrained civic space.

Primary evidence shows that communities rely on youth and young women not only to deliver assistance, but also to interpret needs, mediate tensions, and rebuild trust where formal authority is lacking or contested. They produce informal recovery functions: holding together social relations, enabling access to the most marginalised, and sustaining collective action under extreme volatility.

Policy and funding frameworks have not kept pace with this reality and overrely on the informal labour of youth and young women. Youth and young women remain widely mobilised but structurally marginalised, treated as implementers rather than decision-makers, and volunteers rather than leaders. This gap between practice and policy now poses a strategic risk to early recovery outcomes:

01.2. What has changed since the 2023 earthquake

The February 6, 2023, earthquakes, two major tremors of 7.8 and 7.5 magnitude, were a defining moment for Syria's recovery landscape. These shocks compounded an already fragile humanitarian context in northwest Syria, where protracted conflict, displacement, and chronic underfunding had left formal governance structures weak and humanitarian systems overstretched. The quakes damaged critical infrastructure and exacerbated pre-existing humanitarian needs; preliminary recovery needs assessments estimated widespread destruction of health and water systems, with millions more in need of support than before the event.

In northwest Syria specifically, the quake laid bare structural fault lines in both humanitarian and recovery systems. Formal governance and external aid modalities were not positioned to scale quickly or equitably under the combined pressures of conflict and disaster, while local actors, including youth and young women's networks, emerged as primary responders and persistent recovery agents. This dynamic has exposed a two-speed recovery landscape: formal authorities and bureaucratic mechanisms struggle to adapt at scale, while local, informal capacities continue to respond through social capital (trust, proximity, social networks), often under strain from unpaid labour and exclusionary compliance regimes.

Three major shifts in the recovery environment are evident:

I. Local legitimacy became indispensable under crisis conditions.

The earthquake underscored the centrality of local legitimacy in delivering life-saving support. Official appeals were launched rapidly, but operationalising response and early recovery in non-government-controlled areas remained constrained by access and coordination frameworks tied to larger institutional actors. In practice, community-embedded actors — including youth networks, young women-led groups, and civil society organisations — were among the first to conduct search and rescue, organise emergency shelter, distribute food and essential supplies, and maintain psychosocial and protection support. These responses were built on relational authority — recognition grounded in trust and prior community presence — rather than formal institutional mandate, enabling access where procedural systems could not. (Alnap, 2025).

II. The limits of short-term humanitarianism were laid bare.

National and international appeals were activated rapidly — for example, the UN launched a flash appeal for Syria shortly after the earthquake — but actual funding flows lagged behind need, and funding mechanisms remained oriented to short grant cycles (OCHA, 2023).

As the emergency phase moved into early recovery, many locally led initiatives encountered compliance barriers and funding withdrawal before recovery programmes were stabilised. This situation deepened community perceptions of abandonment and eroded trust in formal systems — a critical challenge in an already fragile context where humanitarian needs continue to exceed available resources and long-term recovery financing remains inadequate (Impact Initiative, 2024).

III. Recovery governance has narrowed participation instead of broadening it

Since the 2023 earthquake, early recovery in Syria has increasingly been organised around governance, regulation, and legitimacy. This reflects a shift from emergency delivery toward longer-term recovery in a context of fragmented authority and low institutional trust. As recovery frameworks have taken shape, decisions about who can participate, access funding, and influence priorities have become more central to recovery outcomes (OCHA, 2023; ALNAP, 2024).

In northwest Syria, this governance shift has been implemented through regulatory and financing frameworks that prioritise scale, formal registration, and compliance capacity. In practice, these requirements have concentrated resources and decision-making among large international and national organisations, while youth- and young women-led initiatives and other locally embedded actors—many of which demonstrated speed, access, and effectiveness during the earthquake response—have struggled to enter recovery planning and financing spaces (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2023; ICVA, 2023).

Inter-agency reviews of the Syria–Türkiye earthquake response show that localisation commitments were weakly reflected in recovery governance arrangements. Risk-averse funding, rigid compliance standards, and centralised planning processes limited the role of smaller local actors, even where they had strong community trust and operational reach (ALNAP, 2024). As a result, responsibility and delivery increasingly sit at the local level, while authority and resources remain concentrated elsewhere.

This configuration has direct consequences for recovery. By excluding trusted local initiatives from decision-making and resourcing, recovery governance weakens social trust, reduces relevance, and limits the effectiveness of recovery efforts in a context where local legitimacy and sustained community engagement are essential (OCHA, 2024; Humanitarian Outcomes, 2023).

01.3. Structural Barriers Affecting Youth and Young Women's Leadership in Recovery

Despite their central contribution to early recovery delivery, youth and young women in Syria face persistent structural constraints that limit their ability to influence recovery priorities, access resources, and sustain leadership over time. The evidence indicates that these constraints are not primarily related to individual capacity, but emerge from the interaction of governance arrangements, funding architectures, compliance practices, and entrenched social norms.

First, recovery governance structures tend to limit youth and young women's participation in decision-making. During the emergency phase, youth and young women played critical roles in service delivery, protection, and coordination in the absence of functioning institutions. As recovery processes became more formalised, however, their engagement has largely been channelled into implementation, outreach, and voluntary roles, with limited representation in recovery planning, prioritisation, or oversight mechanisms. This reflects an institutional tendency to engage youth as implementers rather than as actors with a role in governance and strategic decision-making.

Second, funding and aid architectures constrain sustained leadership and influence. Recovery funding is commonly short-term and compliance-intensive, while youth- and young women-led initiatives often operate continuously across emergency, early recovery, and stabilisation phases. Delays in approvals and short funding horizons reduce continuity and relevance, particularly in protracted displacement contexts. At the same time, donor and INGO risk management practices, shaped by political fragmentation and declining global funding, continue to favour established partners. As a result, youth- and young women-led initiatives are frequently engaged as delivery partners without corresponding authority over priorities, budgets, or programme adaptation.

Third, registration and compliance requirements operate unevenly across the recovery landscape. Legal registration is often used as an indicator of legitimacy, despite limited evidence that it correlates with accountability, community trust, or recovery impact. Requirements vary by donor, grant size, and geography, creating an unpredictable environment for youth- and young women-led initiatives. In a context of shrinking funding, these dynamics also increase competition and create pressure for premature formalisation or geographic expansion, which can weaken locally embedded recovery practices.

Fourth, gendered norms and care-related roles shape young women's participation. Young women's recovery work is concentrated in care, protection, psychosocial support, mediation, and community cohesion—areas that expanded significantly after the earthquake but receive limited recognition within formal recovery coordination and funding frameworks. Much of this work is unpaid or under-resourced, reinforcing expectations that young women absorb increasing responsibilities without adequate safeguards, remuneration, or institutional support. Cultural norms, security concerns, and logistical barriers further limit access to coordination spaces, while risks such as harassment, burnout, and secondary trauma are not consistently reflected in duty-of-care arrangements.

Finally, participation mechanisms often prioritise visibility over influence. Respondents across interviews and group discussions described the use of "youth participation" and "women-led" classifications as eligibility criteria for funding, rather than as indicators of meaningful decision-making power. Young women in particular reported that participation is sometimes accepted only when it aligns with existing priorities, resulting in engagement that does not consistently translate into institutional or political influence.

Together, these structural barriers help explain the gap between the documented practice of youth- and young women-led recovery and their limited position within formal recovery systems. Addressing these constraints is essential to strengthening recovery effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability in Syria.

01.4. What this policy paper argues

This policy paper argues that a central challenge in Syria's early recovery lies in recognising, resourcing, and institutionalising youth and young women's leadership without eroding the community legitimacy on which it is built.

Evidence from Syria shows that when youth and young women are supported through flexible funding, access to safe civic spaces, and sustained accompaniment, recovery processes become more responsive to local needs, more trusted by communities, and more likely to endure over time. Approaches that combine financial support with mentoring, governance strengthening, and co-design—such as those implemented by ActionAid through local partners—demonstrate how participation can extend beyond service delivery to include influence over priorities and programme adaptation, while maintaining accountability.

Conversely, when policy and funding frameworks remain rigid or misaligned with local recovery dynamics, there is a risk of reinforcing exclusion, burnout, and disengagement at a point when early recovery depends heavily on locally driven action, social cohesion, and sustained community trust.

01.5. Headline policy asks

I. Recognise youth and young women as recovery and governance actors, not auxiliary implementers.

Evidence from Syria shows that youth and young women have acted as first responders, service coordinators, protection actors, and community mediators throughout the emergency and early recovery phases. However, their engagement is largely confined to voluntary delivery roles, with limited influence over recovery priorities, budgets, or oversight. Policy frameworks should explicitly position youth and young women as recovery and governance actors, with defined roles in planning, prioritisation, and decision-making—not only as implementers or sources of unpaid labour.

II. Align recovery funding models with community recovery timelines.

Primary data consistently indicates that short-term, inflexible funding cycles undermine continuity, trust, and leadership development. Youth- and young women-led initiatives operate across emergency and recovery phases, yet face delayed approvals, abrupt funding endings, and compliance requirements misaligned with their capacity. Donors should provide multi-year, flexible funding with graduated compliance arrangements that enable sustained leadership and accountability without forcing premature or damaging formalisation.

III. Institutionalise safe and meaningful participation, not symbolic inclusion.

Across interviews and group discussions, participation was often described as consultative rather than decision-shaping, with particular risks for young women, including exposure, burnout, and retaliation without protection. Recovery systems should embed youth and young women within coordination, planning, and oversight structures, with clear mandates, decision relevance, and safeguards to prevent tokenism, exploitation, or unpaid risk-bearing.

IV. Treat care, protection, and social cohesion as core recovery functions.

Evidence shows that young women-led recovery efforts are concentrated in care work, protection, psychosocial support, mediation, and community cohesion—areas that expanded significantly after the earthquake but remain marginal within formal recovery coordination and funding. Recovery frameworks should integrate these domains across all sectors, recognising them as essential infrastructure for stabilisation, trust, and long-term recovery, rather than as secondary or “soft” activities.

V. Invest in local civic infrastructure that sustains recovery over time.

Youth hubs, young women-led platforms, and community-based organisations played a critical role in preparedness, mobilisation, and early recovery, providing trusted spaces for coordination, learning, and collective action. Evidence from ActionAid-supported initiatives demonstrates that such civic infrastructure enables continuity between response, recovery, and longer-term stabilisation. Donors and coordination actors should treat these spaces as long-term recovery assets rather than short-term project components

01.6. Data sources and methods

This policy paper draws on a qualitative research design combining a desk review, key informant interviews (KIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). Data collection and analysis sought to capture a diversity of perspectives on youth and women's leadership, localisation, and early recovery across Northwest Syria, Northeast Syria, and Government-controlled areas.

The desk review comprised: (i) relevant institutional and inter-agency policies and guidance on youth leadership and civic participation, women's leadership and gender-transformative programming, localisation, and early recovery; (ii) available documentation on ActionAid's programming, including an evaluation of ActionAid's intervention during the earthquake response; and (iii) secondary literature and comparable studies examining similar themes in Syria and globally. The desk review informed the research framing, stakeholder selection, and interview guides.

Primary data were collected through KIs with representatives of local civil society organisations (CSOs), local governance and public institutions, local partner organisations, international NGOs, United Nations agencies, and youth representatives. In addition, interviews were held with ActionAid staff at programme and policy levels to provide contextual and strategic insights relevant to the commissioning and positioning of the paper; these inputs were analytically distinguished from primary stakeholder perspectives.

FGDs were conducted in Idlib and Aleppo to ground the analysis in community-level experiences and to explore shared perspectives on participation, barriers, enabling factors, and priorities for youth and young women's engagement in recovery processes.

All interviews and group discussions were coded using anonymised identifiers indicating respondent type, geographic scope, and institutional role. Personal identifiers were removed to ensure confidentiality and mitigate risk. Data were analysed using a thematic approach, triangulating findings across the desk review, KIs, and FGDs to identify converging and diverging patterns across contexts and to inform practical, actionable recommendations.

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02. How Early Recovery Is Understood in Practice

Across interviews, early recovery was consistently described as a transition process, rather than a discrete phase, linking emergency response to longer-term recovery, governance, and development. Respondents emphasised that early recovery begins while humanitarian needs persist and is shaped by efforts to restore trust, services, and community self-reliance.

From a civil society perspective, early recovery was framed as a shift away from crisis management toward rebuilding institutional relationships and public confidence:

“From a humanitarian perspective, early recovery is an indicator of moving from emergency response toward rebuilding trust in public institutions and restoring their role as service providers.” KII-CSO-02 | NW Syria | CSO
From a civil society perspective, early recovery was framed as a shift away from crisis management toward rebuilding institutional relationships and public confidence:

This understanding aligns with humanitarian guidance that conceptualises early recovery as a process embedded within ongoing response efforts, addressing immediate needs while laying foundations for sustainable recovery (UNDP, 2008; ALNAP, 2024).

Implementing partners described early recovery through practical, sequenced actions responding to displacement, return, and prolonged disruption. Psychosocial support and legal awareness were identified as initial entry points, particularly to address uncertainty around rights, documentation, and housing, land, and property issues following displacement:

“We always start early recovery with PSS and legal awareness, people need to understand their rights, property, and how their situation changed after displacement and return.” KII-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner CSO

Economic empowerment was consistently highlighted as the central pillar of early recovery, particularly for women and youth. Respondents described skills-based and home-based livelihood activities tailored to educational background and experience, with the explicit aim of reducing dependency on humanitarian assistance:

“The focus is economic empowerment, training that allows women to work from their homes, according to their background, so they can remain financially independent and not rely on aid.” KII-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner CSO

Other respondents emphasised duration and continuity, distinguishing early recovery from short-term projects:

“It is the transition from emergency response to sustainable services—moving away from short-term projects toward long-term support that communities benefit from for years.” KII-PAR-03 | NE Syria | Local partner organisation

From an organisational perspective, ActionAid defined early recovery as the phase following immediate emergency response in which activities shift from life-saving assistance toward sustainable solutions. In the context of the 2023 Syria earthquake, ActionAid viewed the first year as the response phase and the second year as the transition into recovery, characterised by longer-term, sustainability-oriented programming KII-AA-01 | Syria programme | ActionAid

Taken together, respondents' definitions converge on three core elements of early recovery:

- a temporal transition that overlaps with humanitarian response;
- social and institutional repair, including trust and service provision; and
- economic and psychosocial stabilisation to support dignity and independence.

These perspectives highlight that early recovery, as understood by local actors, is not a technical handover but a process that shapes whether communities move toward sustained recovery or remain dependent on emergency assistance.



A Violet volunteer provides critical assistance as part of the emergency response in Northwest Syria following the February 2023 earthquake. Credit: Violet Organization

03. Context and Policy Problem

03.1. Post-earthquake recovery and political transition

Syria's early recovery is unfolding under conditions of layered crisis rather than linear transition. The February 2023 earthquakes struck communities already shaped by prolonged conflict, mass displacement, economic collapse, and fragmented authority. In Northwest Syria (NW Syria), where formal state institutions remain absent or contested, recovery has been driven largely by civil society organisations, local councils, volunteer networks, and humanitarian actors operating under chronic uncertainty.

The earthquake simultaneously expanded needs and accelerated local mobilisation. Youth and young women mobilised immediately, often before formal systems resumed operations. They sheltered families using available local resources, guided them to locations where services were accessible, and supported their access to essential items within temporary accommodation arrangements. KII-CSO-Y2, NW Syria

This mobilisation was built on years of displacement governance, informal organising, and community trust, particularly in camps and peri-urban settings (Khoury, 2024; Ruiz de Elvira and Zintl, 2014; Ruiz de Elvira, 2019; Abdelwahid, 2013). The earthquake did not create youth leadership, but rather made it visible by disrupting existing systems and exposing capacities that had long existed. However, despite their demonstrated effectiveness during the response, these youth-led efforts largely remained outside formal coordination, funding, and decision-making structures.

At the same time, the outcomes of the earthquake emergency response coincided with a broader post-conflict political and institutional transition. Across Syria, including in previously opposition-held areas in north-west Syria, early recovery is increasingly used to describe a shift away from emergency, life-saving service delivery toward multi-sectoral interventions with longer-term objectives, implemented through local authorities and formal systems. This reframing has brought greater emphasis on governance, regulation, and institutional alignment, with government actors and coordination bodies prioritising approvals, planning frameworks, registration, and compliance mechanisms as prerequisites for recovery engagement. As one government representative articulated

"We moved from a 'stateless' phase to a 'state' phase, work must be coordinated, approved, and adapted to the community context." KII-GOV-01 | Idlib | Local government

This reframing has sharpened tensions on the ground. While donors and authorities push for a transition toward livelihoods, systems, and stability, communities continue to face unresolved survival needs, insecure shelter, and persistent protection risks. Partners repeatedly cautioned against treating recovery as a clean phase shift:

"We still have basic needs. It's not correct to link recovery to political change as if we move from relief to peacebuilding, people still have unmet essentials." KII-PAR-04 | Syria-wide | Local partner organisation

As a result, early recovery is experienced not as a settled stage, but as a contested space where emergency response imperatives, recovery ambitions, and governance agendas overlap and compete. This matters because access, legitimacy, and leadership are negotiated within this space, shaping which actors are recognised, which forms of action are funded or constrained, and whose contributions are translated into longer-term recovery influence.

03.2. Why this is a decisive policy moment

- The earthquake response phase has now concluded, and lessons-learned processes have been completed. This policy paper therefore comes as a culmination and comprehensive documentation of those lessons.
- The context is now being forced to transition from emergency response to early recovery, and strategic and policy directions are currently being shaped. This makes it an optimal moment for change, as resistance to reform is lower while resources and readiness for change are higher.
- There is still momentum from the response phase. Youth continue to feel a sense of pride in their emergency response, and this represents a critical opportunity to sustain their engagement and motivation if the policy problems described are addressed.



A meeting of a youth action committee formed by ActionAid's young advocates and activists in Syrian communities. Credit: ActionAid.

04. What the Evidence Shows: Youth and Young Women in Practice

This section demonstrates how youth and young women functioned as de facto early recovery actors during the February 2023 earthquake and continue to do so in the current recovery phase. Rather than treating youth and young women as a homogeneous group or a beneficiary category, the evidence shows how recovery roles were produced in practice through proximity, social trust, adaptive decision-making, and informal governance functions under conditions of institutional fragility.

Across interviews with civil society organisations, local authorities, humanitarian partners, and youth- and young women-led initiatives, a consistent pattern emerges: youth and young women filled critical service, coordination, protection, and mediation gaps that formal systems were unable to address at speed or scale. These roles were neither spontaneous nor accidental; they reflected accumulated local knowledge, social embeddedness, and organisational experience developed over years of displacement and crisis response.

04.1. Youth as first responders and early recovery actors

Primary data consistently shows that youth were among the first actors to mobilise following the earthquake, often before formal humanitarian systems resumed operations. Youth-led action began immediately along displacement routes, where young people received families fleeing from Idlib toward the northern Aleppo countryside, redirected them to safe locations, and converted schools into collective shelters (KII-CSO-01 | NW Syria | CSO). One respondent described this initial response as follows:

“People were displaced from Idlib to the northern Aleppo countryside, and youth responded immediately. They received people on the roads and prepared schools for shelter.”
(KII-CSO-01 | NW Syria | CSO)

This rapid mobilisation extended beyond shelter. Youth initiatives addressed critical service gaps that emerged during the crisis, including water provision, sanitation, waste collection, transport to shelters, and rehabilitation of damaged schools. A government respondent emphasised that youth and young women, alongside other community members, effectively substituted for absent municipal services (KII-GOV-01 | Idlib | Local government):

“The major role played by youth, young women, and men was filling gaps in basic services: providing water to extinguish fires in Latakia’s mountains, rehabilitating schools, cleaning, waste collection, sanitation facilities, and transporting people to shelters.”
(KII-GOV-01 | Idlib | Local government)

Evidence shows that youth-led responses involved structured planning, coordination meetings, needs assessments, task allocation, and evaluation. Another government respondent highlighted that even under crisis conditions, initiatives were organised rather than improvised:

“The initiatives were not random. There were meetings, coordination, planning, task distribution, and assessment of needs.”
(KII-GOV-01 | Idlib | Local government)

Youth engagement also extended into recovery-oriented activities following the immediate emergency phase. This included debris clearance, rehabilitation of public spaces, city-wide cleanliness campaigns, tree planting, and street painting, all of which were explicitly framed by respondents as part of early recovery rather than short-term relief (KII-INGO-01 | Syria-wide | International NGO).

Beyond physical recovery, youth played a central role in community awareness, protection, and service continuity. Respondents described reliance on youth and students to conduct awareness campaigns on public health, child protection, education, and gender-based violence, contributing to improved prevention and service uptake. Youth also provided psychosocial and educational support, including free remedial classes for examination students in camps and towns, often on a voluntary basis and sustained over many months (KII-CSO-02 | NW Syria | CSO).

"Youth used social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram to mobilise support and help people understand the scale of the disaster."
(KII-CSO-02 | NW Syria | CSO)

Finally, youth took on central social roles, mediating tensions between returnees and residents, managing sensitivities, and preventing escalation of conflicts across different groups in temporary shelters (KII-PAR-04 | Syria-wide | Local partner organisation).

04.2. Young women as recovery actors: Stabilizing through social reproduction

Respondents repeatedly highlighted that young women played indispensable roles in identifying needs, facilitating access, and mitigating protection risks, especially for young women and girls (KII-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner CSO). As one respondent explained, young women's presence was critical precisely because they understood gendered needs that were otherwise overlooked:

"Women understand women's needs more. There are many needs for women beyond basic needs, and their presence was necessary to address them."
(KII-CSO-01 | NW Syria | CSO)

Young women-led action focused heavily on protection, psychosocial support, care, and education—areas that proved decisive for stabilisation in camps, shelters, and damaged neighbourhoods (KII-CSO-02 | NW Syria | CSO). Youth- and young women-led groups organised psychosocial support where none existed, as noted by one civil society respondent:

"In the areas where I worked, there was no psychological support for displaced or affected people."
(KII-CSO-02 | NW Syria | CSO)

Young women also acted as access brokers and information intermediaries. Partner organisations described working with young women-led initiatives composed of survivors, relatives of detainees and missing persons, and long-standing community actors. These initiatives enabled access to beneficiaries through trusted social networks, maintained up-to-date contact information, and supported follow-up in displacement settings (KII-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner):

"They had direct contact with beneficiaries... when we couldn't reach a woman, another woman from the initiative could. Data and relationships were essential."
(KII-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner)

In parallel, young women-led organisations conducted awareness-raising on women's rights, available assistance, and protection risk mitigation. These efforts helped overcome cultural and access-related barriers, enabling women and girls to safely access services. As one partner summarised, these initiatives strengthened trust and accountability while supporting a gender-responsive, locally led response (KII-PAR-01 | NW & NE Syria).

Importantly, the evidence also highlights young women's engagement beyond service delivery, including advocacy and collective action. One respondent described a women-led petition signed by women in Idlib and submitted internationally to demand protection for communities under bombardment, illustrating how young women moved between care, mobilisation, and political engagement when space allowed (KII-GOV-01 | Idlib | Local government).

Despite their centrality, much of this contribution remained informal and unpaid, reinforcing the earlier analytical argument that young women's recovery work is systematically undervalued even as it sustains social cohesion and stabilisation.



A localized volunteer group meeting in Damascus, supported by ActionAid's project to involve youth in humanitarian advocacy and decision-making. Credit: ActionAid Arab Region.

05. What Gets in the Way: Structural Barriers Identified

Despite their central role in early recovery, youth and young women face persistent structural barriers that limit their ability to influence recovery priorities, access resources, and sustain leadership over time. These barriers mainly emerge from the interaction between governance arrangements, aid and funding architectures, and deeply embedded social norms that shape who is recognised as a legitimate recovery actor.

This section analyses four interlinked constraint systems identified consistently across KIs, FGDs, and partner interviews. These barriers do not operate in isolation; together, they shape a recovery environment in which youth and young women are relied upon for delivery but excluded from authority, resources, and long-term influence. Collectively, they explain the gap between the practice of recovery documented in the prior section and the marginal position of youth and young women within formal recovery systems.

05.1. Governance and civic space constraints

Although youth and young women are widely acknowledged for their contributions during crises, their engagement narrows significantly once recovery shifts into formal planning, coordination, and funding structures. During the emergency phase, in the absence of functioning institutions, youth groups and informal initiatives stepped in to organise community support, facilitate access to assistance, and sustain basic services.

However, as recovery processes became formalised, youth were not incorporated into decision-making structures. Instead, humanitarian agencies continued to engage them primarily in operational and largely voluntary roles—such as outreach, facilitation, and service delivery—without representation in recovery planning, prioritisation, or oversight mechanisms. This reflects a prevailing institutional logic in which youth are perceived as flexible implementers rather than legitimate governance actors (KI-CSO-01 | NW Syria | CSO; KI-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner; FGD-04 | Aleppo | Community participants).

From the perspective of donors, INGOs, and UN agencies, engaging youth as implementers is viewed as a lower-risk and more manageable approach in a highly fragmented political context. Decision-making authority is therefore retained within established governmental counterparts and recognised humanitarian organisations, while youth participation is channelled into delivery functions that support programme execution without challenging existing power structures (KI-CSO-02 | NW Syria | CSO; KI-INGO-02 | Syria-wide | International NGO).

These institutional choices are reinforced by internal dynamics within civil society. Several respondents pointed to resistance from established CSOs and senior actors who are unwilling to share authority or invest in generational transition. As one civil society representative stated:

“People always blame donors, but we ourselves do not trust young people. We prefer to hold on to our roles and our work, and we are afraid that others might take it from us. Therefore, we do not give young people real roles. At most, we may allow them to work with us, but without investing in their development. As a result, the role of these young people remains invisible and practically non-existent.”

(KI-CSO-01 | NW Syria | CSO)

A key justification used to sustain this exclusion is the perceived “lack of capacity” among youth, often linked to disrupted education trajectories caused by displacement, forced migration, and the prolonged collapse of education systems. This is particularly relevant for youth and young women in NES, where years of conflict resulted in widespread disruption to both school and university education, with higher education institutions only re-established from 2017 onwards. In contrast, education systems in other parts of Syria, including Government-held areas and parts of Northwest Syria, experienced comparatively less prolonged disruption or continued functioning in various forms.

One partner organisation explained that youth aged 17–27 today were 10 or 11 years old at the start of the conflict—when they should have been in primary school—yet most dropped out due to displacement or interrupted education (KII-PAR-03 | NE Syria | Local partner organisation):

“We now have a generation where 40% either has very weak education or no education at all. I cannot integrate these groups into society and rely on them after ten years... Because the youth we support today, after ten years, we want to see them as leaders. I cannot build on a fragile group.”

(KII-PAR-03 | NE Syria | Local partner organisation)

This logic produces a self-reinforcing cycle. Youth are relied upon extensively for operational tasks during emergencies and early recovery, yet are deemed insufficiently prepared for governance because of deficits created by the conflict itself. Educational disruption—produced by systemic failure—is reframed as an individual limitation, allowing institutions to defer inclusion indefinitely while continuing to draw on youth labour.

These structural exclusions are further reinforced by social and cultural norms that delegitimise youth participation in decision-making. Multiple respondents described prevailing age-based hierarchies that frame youth perspectives as immature or provisional, regardless of experience or demonstrated capacity:

“From my experience, the community’s stereotypical perception of youth is the biggest obstacle facing young people... ‘What do you know about these issues? You are still young. Your ideas will change when you grow up.’”

(KII-CSO-02 | NW Syria | CSO)

These norms intersect with practical barriers that further narrow civic space. A government respondent highlighted how dismissive institutional attitudes toward youth are compounded by material constraints that make sustained engagement difficult:

“The first issue is not listening to them properly, or looking at them with a somewhat condescending attitude. The other issue is material barriers. Sometimes a meeting is held in a remote area, and the person is unable to reach it. Or they may be busy with work and do not have the time to participate because of financial or social constraints.”

(KII-GOV-02 | Aleppo | Public youth institution)

05.2. Funding and aid architecture barriers

Funding structures are one of the most significant constraints on youth and young women’s leadership in recovery. Across all stakeholder groups, respondents highlighted a persistent misalignment between how recovery unfolds in practice and how funding is designed, accessed, and administered. While youth and young women’s initiatives often operate continuously across crisis phases, current funding models remain short-term, risk-averse, and compliance-heavy, limiting their ability to sustain, scale, or institutionalise their contributions.

Together, these dynamics produce a pattern of participation without power, in which engagement is maintained, but influence, resources, and authority are systematically withheld.

I. Short-termism and temporal misalignment

Recovery funding is widely perceived as too short-term and inflexible to support leadership development, institutional continuity, or sustained community engagement. Youth- and young women-led initiatives frequently operate across emergency, early recovery, and stabilisation phases, yet funding often arrives late, ends abruptly, or fails to adapt to shifting realities. Several respondents described how delays rendered planned interventions irrelevant, forcing initiatives to self-finance, downscale, or halt activities altogether. This temporal disconnect undermines trust and continuity, particularly in protracted displacement and recovery settings (FGD-02 | Idlib | Community participants; FGD-03 | Aleppo | Community participants; KII-YTH-01 | NW Syria | Youth representative).

Limited funding was repeatedly identified as a core constraint on sustainability and scalability, even where youth-led initiatives demonstrated clear community-level impact. As one partner noted, insufficient funding affects not only the continuation of activities, but also the ability to manage risks, estimate costs accurately, and plan for long-term sustainability (KII-PAR-01 | NW & NE Syria | Local partner organisation).

As recovery systems narrow access to longer-term or paid roles, youth engagement is increasingly channelled into short-term, unpaid, or voluntary functions, temporarily filling capacity gaps while externalising recovery costs onto youth and young women themselves (KII-CSO-02 | NW Syria | CSO, youth civic engagement & governance).

II. Risk aversion and preference for “trusted” partners

These challenges are compounded by donor and INGO risk aversion, which has intensified in the context of declining global humanitarian funding. Donors continue to prioritise established and “safe” partners, limiting opportunities for youth- and young women-led initiatives to access funding directly or transition into recovery leadership roles. As one UN respondent observed:

“Donors prefer old and guaranteed partners. There are no real governance or financial management training programmes, and global funding is decreasing.”
(KII-UN-01 | NW Syria)

This preference reinforces a closed funding ecosystem in which large organisations dominate access to resources and decision-making, while youth initiatives are positioned as implementers or sub-contractors. Several respondents noted that youth- and young women-led initiatives are relied upon to deliver activities and mobilise communities, yet are not given authority over priorities, budgets, or programme adaptation:

“Large organisations control the funding and decision-making. Youth- and young women-led organisations implement activities but are not given leadership or space to develop.”

(KII-YTH-01 | NW Syria | Youth representative)

In this context, localisation often translates into delegated delivery responsibilities without commensurate power, deepening the gap between participation and influence.

05.3. Registration, selective compliance, and competitive formalisation

Primary data shows that registration and compliance requirements function unevenly across Syria’s early recovery landscape, creating a selective system in which youth and young women-led initiatives face inconsistent expectations, heightened competition, and pressure to formalise or expand in ways that undermine their community-rooted role.

I. Uneven application of compliance and selective formalisation

Across interviews, respondents described a fragmented compliance environment in which requirements vary by donor, partner, grant size, geography, and organisational status. In practice, registration is often treated as a proxy for legitimacy, despite limited evidence that legal status correlates with accountability, community trust, or recovery impact (KII-CSO-02 | NW Syria | CSO; KII-INGO-01 | Syria-wide | International NGO).

Some civil society organisations reported imposing minimum registration thresholds on youth initiatives as a form of risk management:

“We asked that the youth teams we work with have some form of registration and that they be registered for at least one year as a guarantee of active community engagement.”
(KII-CSO-02 | NW Syria | CSO)

At the same time, partners acknowledged applying differentiated standards depending on funding size and purpose:

“For grants of USD 20,000–30,000, registration is required. For small initiatives, such as rehabilitating a park, registration is not needed; volunteer contracts witnessed by the local council are sufficient.”

(KII-PAR-03 | NE Syria | Local partner organisation)

While such flexibility exists in principle, youth- and young women-led initiatives described this landscape as unpredictable and difficult to navigate. Registration procedures were characterised by unclear legal frameworks, prolonged timelines, and shifting institutional requirements, particularly in the post-transition period. One youth initiative respondent noted that lengthy and routine registration processes alone constituted a significant barrier, even where security conditions were manageable (KII-YTH-01 | NW Syria | Youth representative).

This uneven application of compliance has two effects. First, it disadvantages youth and young women-led initiatives that lack legal expertise or institutional backing, even when their recovery work is locally trusted and effective. Second, it concentrates decision-making power among established organisations that can absorb compliance costs and delays, reinforcing existing hierarchies within the aid system.

Several respondents also challenged the assumption that unregistered initiatives lack internal governance. Youth initiatives and partners described relying on internal bylaws, structures, codes of conduct, and thematic policies as substantive accountability mechanisms. However, these forms of governance are rarely recognised within formal compliance frameworks, limiting their value in funding and partnership decisions (KII-CSO-02 | NW Syria | CSO; KII-PAR-05 | NW Syria | Local partner CSO).

II. Registration, competition, and geographic expansion pressures

Registration challenges are compounded by declining funding and intensified competition. Primary data indicates that youth and young women-led initiatives increasingly face pressure to expand geographically or open offices in newly prioritised areas to remain eligible for funding, regardless of local recovery needs.

One CSO respondent highlighted growing uncertainty around future funding channels, including concerns that support may increasingly flow through state-linked structures:

“There will be a huge number of organisations and competition for funding. We don’t know what the future support landscape will look like, or whether donors will support the government to manage aid.”

(KII-CSO-01 | NW Syria | CSO)

Youth initiatives described how this competitive environment incentivises rapid expansion into new areas, even where this risks social harm or weakens community trust. One youth-led organisation deliberately chose not to follow this trend:

“Many organisations expanded into new cities to secure funding. We chose not to do this because we saw how it affected people and fuelled new tensions.”

(KII-YTH-01 | NW Syria | Youth representative)

This pressure to expand disadvantages youth and young women-led initiatives that prioritise continuity, long-term presence, and deep community relationships over scale. It also creates a zero-sum dynamic in which recovery funding becomes tied to geographic positioning rather than demonstrated local need or impact.

Taken together, registration requirements, uneven compliance practices, and competitive expansion pressures shape a recovery environment in which youth and young women-led initiatives are either excluded for remaining informal or pushed toward premature formalisation and geographic spread. In both cases, the outcome is erosion of the locally embedded, trust-based practices that sustained early recovery during and after the earthquake (KII-UN-01 | NW Syria | UN agency).

05.4. Gender-specific barriers and the invisibility of care labour

For young women, structural barriers are compounded by gendered expectations, protection risks, and the systematic undervaluation of care labour. Primary data shows that young women's recovery work is concentrated in care, protection, psychosocial support, mediation, and community cohesion—domains that expanded significantly after the earthquake but remain marginal in formal recovery frameworks (KII-GOV-01 | Idlib | Local government; KII-CSO-01 | NW Syria | CSO; KII-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner CSO).

Many young women-led recovery initiatives operate with limited or no remuneration and minimal resources. While this enables rapid response, it normalises the expectation that young women will absorb expanding care responsibilities without compensation, safeguards, or institutional recognition.

Cultural norms, security concerns, and logistical barriers limit young women's access to coordination spaces and decision-making forums. Even where participation is formally permitted, engagement often depends on informal approvals, accompaniment, or negotiation, restricting sustained leadership (FGD-03 | Aleppo | Community participants).

Young women also reported heightened exposure to harassment, digital blackmail, bullying, burnout, and secondary trauma, particularly in protection and psychosocial roles. These risks are rarely reflected in risk assessments or duty-of-care provisions, rendering young women's emotional labour largely invisible (KII-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner CSO).

Beyond individual constraints, recovery coordination mainly focuses on infrastructure and physical assets. This structural bias marginalises young women-led organisations whose strengths lie in social stabilisation, protection, livelihoods, and care. They are often excluded from recovery planning and funding. These areas are treated as secondary within coordination processes, despite clear evidence that they are essential for effective recovery and social cohesion (ALNAP, 2024; OCHA, 2024).

Another key challenge raised primarily by young women-led initiatives in both key informant interviews and group discussions relates to the use of "women-led" as a classification for funding eligibility, rather than as an indicator of meaningful women's space and participation. Several respondents described how some CSOs and groups superficially appoint women to leadership or team roles in order to present themselves as women-led and access funding streams that prioritise women-focused initiatives (KII-CSO-01 | NW Syria | CSO; FGD-03 | Aleppo | Community participants).

Women respondents further noted that participation is often conditional rather than substantive. As one participant explained, women are included only when their views align with existing power structures:

"Young women are only allowed into decision-making if they are obedient, invisible, or repeating what others want to hear."
(KII-CSO-01 | NW Syria | CSO)

Despite years of investment in women's empowerment, respondents noted that representation remains largely performative, with minimal translation into political or institutional influence. As the KII-YTH-01 | NW Syria | Youth representative shared, women's participation outcomes remain starkly limited, with parliamentary representation at only 1.5%.

06. What Works: Enablers and Good Practice

Across Syria's early recovery landscape, youth and young women are already sustaining recovery efforts. As one youth-led initiative observed, recovery does not begin with institutions alone, but with society's capacity to organise and respond when space is available:

"Society is more important than institutions and governments. It has the ability to recover, but it needs space."
(KII-YTH-01 | NW Syria | Youth representative)

This section identifies ten enabling conditions that have allowed youth- and young women-led initiatives to operate effectively during early recovery.

06.1. Flexible and predictable funding as an enabler of continuity and trust

Flexible and predictable funding emerged as a critical enabler allowing youth- and women-led initiatives to sustain engagement beyond the immediate emergency phase. In Syria's volatile recovery environment, short funding cycles and delayed approvals were consistently reported to undermine programme continuity, community trust, and the confidence of local implementation structures. One local partner described this erosion as follows:

"After six months, the community loses trust, and the committees lose confidence in themselves."
(KII-PAR-03 | NE Syria | Local partner organisation)

Youth-led initiatives emphasised that funding flexibility enabled them to adapt activities in response to rapidly changing conditions on the ground. Rather than being constrained by rigid project designs, flexible grants allowed initiatives to adjust priorities in line with evolving needs:

"They told us the grant was flexible support, we could adjust activities to what the reality required."
(KII-YTH-01 | NW Syria | Youth representative)

By contrast, delayed funding was often reported to arrive after needs and priorities had already shifted, reducing relevance and impact:

"We applied eight months earlier, and the grant only arrived two months ago because we lacked registration and a formal bank account — by then, a lot had changed."
(KII-YTH-01 | NW Syria | Youth representative)

Longer-term funding horizons were consistently linked to sustainability and meaningful impact, rather than framed as a reduction in accountability:

"A six-month project doesn't create sustainability, a two-year project creates real impact on the ground."
(KII-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner CSO, women-focused programming)

06.2. Intermediary and convening roles of INGOs and platforms

Local partners highlighted the critical role of international NGOs and structured platforms in enabling youth- and young women-led initiatives to navigate complex political, governance, and coordination environments. INGOs and platforms act as intermediaries between initiatives and authorities, donors, and coordination mechanisms, facilitating communication, access, and participation (KII-PAR-01 | NW & NE Syria | Local partner organisation).

At an operational level, platforms support initiatives by mapping opportunities—such as meetings, trainings, and events—and disseminating this information across networks. Respondents reported that the Women-led Organizations Platform led by UN Women supported approximately 30–32 women-led initiatives, enabling them to engage selectively in activities aligned with their capacities and geographic presence (KII-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner CSO, women-focused programming).

Good practice was associated with structured governance arrangements, particularly the presence of a dedicated Coordinator and Steering Committee. These structures were described as helping to manage participation, reduce tensions, and mitigate competitiveness when opportunities are limited. By contrast, arrangements where a single local organisation acts as a host were described as more likely to reproduce unequal power dynamics and place disproportionate burdens on initiatives (KII-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner CSO, women-focused programming).

06.3. Consortium-based and collaborative approaches

A recurring good practice emerging from the data is the adoption of consortium-based approaches when supporting youth- and young women-led initiatives. Local partners emphasised the importance of engaging initiatives collectively and directly from the outset, rather than competitively or through ad hoc selection processes (KII-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner CSO, women-focused programming).

Effective consortium models were described as requiring two parallel tracks of support:

- I. Technical support addressing skills, systems, and compliance requirements; and**
- II. Collaborative support focused on trust-building, transparency, and collective decision-making.**

Treating initiatives equitably—regardless of size or volunteer numbers—was highlighted as central to preventing both overt and unconscious bias, which can otherwise shape visibility, access to funding, and representation in coordination spaces (KII-PAR-02 | NW Syria | Local partner CSO, women-focused programming). This approach aligns with donor trends whereby funding is increasingly channelled through networks, platforms, or consortia rather than individual organisations, particularly where these arrangements create entry points for newer initiatives with foundational capacities.

06.4. Meaningful integration of youth- and women-led actors across the programme cycle

Good practice was identified in the systematic integration of youth- and young women-led perspectives across programme stages, from strategy and design through implementation and MEAL. Local partners described engaging youth and young women-led networks in community consultations and needs assessments to ensure that programme priorities reflect lived experiences and local realities (KII-PAR-01 | NW & NE Syria | Local partner organisation).

These inputs informed activity selection, targeting criteria, and risk mitigation measures, particularly in protection, social cohesion, and livelihoods programming. Youth and young women's perspectives were also incorporated into proposal development and fundraising through community-driven evidence and feedback (KII-PAR-01 | NW & NE Syria | Local partner organisation).

During implementation, youth- and young women-led groups played active roles as facilitators, mobilisers, and initiative leads. Participatory MEAL approaches, including accessible feedback mechanisms and community validation, enabled young women and youth to inform adaptive programming. While structural, cultural, and capacity-related barriers persist, these practices demonstrate concrete pathways for engagement beyond consultation.

06.5. Capacity strengthening linked to practice and community access

Capacity-strengthening approaches that combined training with direct community engagement emerged as a strong enabling practice. One initiative described an initial focus on training youth and young women teams, followed by practical engagement that enabled them to assess community needs, gain acceptance, and provide informed recommendations (KII-PAR-01 | NW & NE Syria | Local partner organisation).

This supported a shift from pre-selected interventions towards more responsive, community-driven programming. Youth and young women's insights directly informed activity design and proposal development, strengthening alignment between interventions and community priorities (KII-PAR-01 | NW & NE Syria | Local partner organisation).

Targeted capacity-building support for young women-led groups—covering gender-based violence prevention and referral, psychosocial support, legal awareness, and community initiative design—enabled young women to move from emergency response roles to more sustained leadership positions. Participants demonstrated increased confidence and initiative-taking, resulting in young women-led awareness activities and strengthened peer support networks (KII-PAR-01 | NW & NE Syria | Local partner organisation).

06.6. Experiential learning and practice under pressure

Across civil society perspectives, learning through practice—particularly during the earthquake response—was consistently described as more impactful than formal training alone. Youth and young women developed practical skills including field leadership, rapid decision-making, volunteer management, and community communication under pressure (KII-CSO-01 | NW Syria | CSO, women-focused programming & youth engagement).

Young women, in particular, gained experience in managing small initiatives, coordinating with organisations, using simple digital tools for documentation and follow-up, and mobilising communities. These skills enabled them to deliver trusted and context-appropriate early recovery responses (KII-CSO-01 | NW Syria | CSO, women-focused programming & youth engagement).

Youth civic actors reinforced this, emphasising that leadership, coordination, and trust-building competencies emerged primarily through action during emergencies, supported by proximity to and understanding of local communities (KII-CSO-02 | NW Syria | CSO, youth civic engagement & governance).

06.7. Enabling roles of local authorities

Local government actors identified facilitative practices supporting youth and women's Local government actors identified facilitative practices supporting youth and young women's engagement, including legal approvals, coordination support, information-sharing, and access to training venues. Government institutions described their role as both technical and material, supporting training delivery and coordination with other actors (KII-GOV-01 | Idlib | Local government, Director of Social Affairs).

These practices were framed as contributing to participatory and collaborative relationships between authorities and communities. However, access to early recovery and reconstruction coordination mechanisms remains uneven, with young women-led and smaller organisations often excluded due to capacity and infrastructure requirements (KII-UN-01 | NW Syria | UN agency, women-focused programming).

06.8. Mandate-driven and partner-led support to youth and women's leadership

ActionAid's support was consistently described as mandate-driven, with a clear prioritisation of young women and youth shaping funding priorities, programme design, and delivery approaches (KII-AA-01 | Syria programme | ActionAid). This included economic empowerment interventions linked to young women's leadership, vocational pathways supporting income generation and community participation, and the establishment of safe physical spaces such as Youth Centres and Youth Houses (KII-AA-01 | Syria programme | ActionAid; KII-AA-02 | regional | ActionAid – policy and advocacy).

A key enabling practice was ActionAid's exclusive delivery through Syrian partners, coupled with a structured co-design approach involving partners, community stakeholders, and direct consultation with young women and youth. This approach was described as safeguarding relevance and responsiveness in volatile conditions, while enabling youth and young women to participate meaningfully across programme stages (KII-AA-01 | Syria programme | ActionAid; KII-AA-02 | regional | ActionAid – policy and advocacy; KII-PAR-01 | NW & NE Syria | Local partner organisation).

06.9. Investing in civic infrastructure for youth agency

ActionAid's investment in youth civic infrastructure—particularly through Youth Hubs within its Global Platforms network—enabled a transition from emergency mobilisation to more durable youth engagement. Youth committees initially focused on needs assessments and volunteer mobilisation, before progressing towards professionalisation, digital skills, safeguarding, and social enterprise development (KII-AA-01 | Syria programme | ActionAid).

Two operational effects were highlighted. First, youth who had accessed hubs and preparedness training prior to the earthquake were able to act as frontline responders when the disaster occurred, translating preparedness into immediate capacity (KII-AA-02 | regional | ActionAid – policy and advocacy). Second, hubs provided critical “breathing space” in socially and geographically isolated areas, offering youth a place to gather, collaborate, and exercise agency where few alternatives existed. This was framed as protection of civic agency rather than solely a psychosocial intervention (KII-AA-02 | regional | ActionAid – policy and advocacy). This approach is reflected in ActionAid's ongoing investment in youth hub models in Syria.

ActionAid also played an advocacy role in maintaining attention on protracted recovery needs as earthquake-related funding declined, while sustaining partner-led engagement amid political uncertainty and administrative delays (KII-AA-01 | Syria programme | ActionAid; KII-AA-02 | regional | ActionAid – policy and advocacy).

06.10. Flexible engagement with informal groups while maintaining safeguards

Another enabling practice was ActionAid's deliberate prioritisation of social presence and community legitimacy over formal legal status when engaging youth- and young women-led groups. Groups without registration or formal documentation were able to collaborate where they were established within the community and recognised by residents, facilitating engagement with volunteer committees, scouts, and informal youth networks (KII-AA-01 | Syria programme | ActionAid).

At the same time, non-negotiable safeguarding standards—such as Codes of Conduct and PSEA requirements—were maintained through partners, balancing flexibility with safety. Criteria including age, community embeddedness, and inclusion of young people with disabilities were applied to ensure relevance and protection (KII-AA-02 | regional | ActionAid – policy and advocacy)

06.11. Box A. Initiatives that began with the earthquake and continued into early recovery

The Community Participation Team has been active since 2021 as a youth-led voluntary initiative focused on civic awareness and participation based on rights and responsibilities. The team comprised a wider network of volunteers operating across Idlib, Hama, Damascus, Aleppo, Tartous, Latakia, and Homs. Today, the team includes 69 active volunteers.

Youth engagement was built primarily through training activities and informal dialogue spaces, which brought young people together to discuss issues affecting their communities which gradually led to expansion of a connected and motivated youth network.

During the February 2023 earthquake, this network rapidly mobilised and assumed a first responder role. The team provided immediate emergency assistance, including tents for affected families, financial support to rent housing for households who had lost shelter, and the distribution of non-food item (NFI) kits.

Beyond emergency relief, the earthquake marked a turning point in the team's evolution. The same youth who mobilised spontaneously were engaged in targeted localisation trainings focused on community initiative design, civic awareness, and social context analysis. These efforts strengthened youth-led teams at the local level and supported their transition into more structured humanitarian and civic roles.

As a result, several youth members have since moved into formal positions within civil, political, and humanitarian institutions, including roles in political affairs secretariats and project management positions within national organisations. This experience demonstrates how youth-led civic initiatives can evolve from informal mobilisation during crises into sustained and impactful engagement.

Women-led, needs-based response and early recovery

The Syriana Hope Initiative significantly expanded its role following the February 2023 earthquake by delivering a women-centred, needs-based response. From the second day of the emergency, assistance was tailored to women's specific needs and provided based on direct verification rather than standardised packages, ranging from housing support and private sanitation facilities to access to essential medication.

During the response, the initiative identified gaps in gender-sensitive programming and conducted a focused assessment, which strengthened its credibility and contributed to increased donor and partner support. Strong community trust enabled Syriana Hope to reach hard-to-access villages in Jindires that had not previously received assistance and to facilitate access for other organisations, assuming a role not previously filled by women-led actors in the area.

Activities have continued beyond the emergency and remain ongoing today, with a focus on strengthening women's economic participation, skills, and engagement in local development and decision-making. This approach is viewed by the organisation as a direct contribution to early recovery.

However, following the liberation of Syria, the operational landscape has shifted. While access to new geographic areas and partners has expanded for many actors, increased competition has led to reduced funding and heightened uncertainty for local, women-led organisations such as Syriana Hope Initiative.

07. Policy Recommendations

07.1. Recommendations for donors

1. 1. Adopt Syria-specific compliance and contracting modalities that protect agility while managing risk

In Syria, institutionalisation enables funding but often limits agility, while informality enables speed and trust but raises safeguarding and fiduciary risks. Current donor compliance frameworks treat this as a binary, excluding credible youth- and young women-led actors.

- Establish a dedicated scheme for youth-led initiatives with compliance requirements that are proportionate and appropriate to their capacity
- Implement capacity-building activities for potential partners to enable them to meet and comply with these requirements
- Allow fiscal sponsorship or intermediary arrangements that manage risk without transferring decision-making control.
- Avoid funding rules that privilege scale over contextual legitimacy, which concentrate resources among large organisations.

2. Align recovery financing with community recovery time, not grant cycles

Evidence shows that 6–12 month recovery grants disengage just as trust and capacity begin to stabilise, dismantling local structures and undermining recovery.

- Move away from short, stand-alone recovery grants or set a clear vision beyond short-term funding if the duration of funding cycles cannot be changed.
- Fund sequenced recovery pathways across response, stabilisation, and early recovery.
- Allow adaptive re-sequencing as displacement, access, and post-earthquake realities shift.

3. Manage geographic funding shifts to avoid new fractures

Post-transition funding shifts toward newly accessible areas are experienced locally as abandonment, particularly in long-term displacement hubs such as NW Syria, with risks for trust and social cohesion.

- Avoid zero-sum geographic reallocations.
- Apply a no-abandonment principle, pairing expansion with clear transition planning.
- Assess the social and political effects of reallocation decisions..

4. Fund participation where it changes decisions, not where it signals inclusion

In Syria, participation that does not influence budgets, priorities, or modalities deepens frustration and increases protection risks, especially for young women.

- Require evidence that youth and young women influenced priority-setting and adaptation decisions, such as co-designing donor strategies with youth, as well as co-designing implementation projects between implementing organisations and youth-led initiatives.
- Assess participation by what changed, not who attended.
- Resource participation safely, including transport and protection measures..

07.2. Recommendations for UN agencies, INGOs and CSOs

1. Treat fairness and accountability as core recovery outputs

Across Syria, the legitimacy deficit in recovery is driven less by lack of activity than by opaque selection, informal gatekeeping, and the absence of credible ways to challenge decisions. Expanding services without addressing fairness risks reinforcing grievance and mistrust.

As one CSO noted: “What exists in many cases is decorative participation – youth are present for photos, not for real decision-making.”

- Make enforceable accountability systems a condition of recovery programming, including:
 - public eligibility and selection criteria;
 - documented justification for selection and recruitment decisions;
 - accessible complaints and appeals channels with clear response timelines;
 - conflict-of-interest declarations for staff and committee members..
- Embed functional feedback and challenge pathways designed around how concerns are actually raised in Syria (e.g. trusted intermediaries, WhatsApp numbers, in-person focal points where safe).
- Protect complainants especially youth and young women through anonymous reporting options and by avoiding complaint pathways controlled solely by implementers or local power-holders.

2. Fix the “proposal speed trap” that makes co-design impossible

Evidence from across Syria is clear: demands for full proposals within days undermine meaningful engagement, raise expectations that cannot be met, and increase Do No Harm risks.

- Adopt two-step funding processes:
 - Step 1: funded rapid scoping and co-design (including paid time for youth and young women’s engagement);
 - Step 2: full programme funding based on co-designed priorities, risks, and modalities.

Treat assessment, participation, and co-design as funded programme components, not unpaid prerequisites absorbed by local actors.



A humanitarian worker from ActionAid delivers essential earthquake relief supplies to affected communities in Syria in 2023. Credit: ActionAid Arab Region.

3. Prevent “young women-led” label capture and sponsorship-based control

Evidence highlights persistent gender-washing and dependency dynamics, where young women-led status becomes a compliance label rather than a measure of power.

- Move beyond formal titles and apply functional verification of young women-led organisations, assessing who:
 - controls bank accounts and budgets;
 - approves staffing and programme decisions;
 - signs contracts;
 - represents the organisation externally.
- Where fiscal sponsorship is used, require safeguards that protect autonomy, including capped fees, decision-making protections, and clear exit pathways.
- Avoid partnership models that permanently position young women-led organisations as sub-contractors without routes to independent authority and resource control.

This addresses the political economy behind stalled gender localisation.

4. Embed youth and young women in recovery governance not only delivery

Across Syria, youth and young women are mobilised as responders and implementers, but largely excluded from recovery planning and prioritisation.

- Institutionalise youth and young women’s participation in recovery and sector planning spaces, including as observers or members with defined roles.
- Apply clear representation rules that are rotating, geographically inclusive (including long-term displacement areas), and mandate-based no connection-based.
- Avoid confining youth and young women to “social” portfolios; include them in discussions on infrastructure, livelihoods, services, and governance.

5. Transition youth from unpaid response labour into paid recovery roles

Prolonged reliance on unpaid youth labour is eroding trust, sustainability, and recovery capacity.

- Ensure that donors require implementing partners to share administrative and overhead costs with youth-led initiatives.
- Create clear pathways from emergency volunteering into paid recovery, livelihoods, or civic roles.
- Stop using “participation” as a substitute for employment where responsibilities are continuous, skilled, or high-risk.

Recovery cannot be built on exhausted volunteerism.

6. Treat protection and safety as recovery design requirements

In Syria, recovery participation exposes young women and some young men to heightened risks, including harassment, GBV, reputational harm, and unsafe mobility.

- Integrate safeguarding, safe mobility, and risk mitigation across all recovery sectors, not only protection programmes.
- Avoid engagement models that increase visibility without protection.
- Recognise care work, psychosocial support, and social cohesion as core recovery functions, not temporary add-ons.

7. Invest in accompaniment and equitable partnership, not one-off capacity building

Evidence shows that youth- and young women-led initiatives are most effective when support is sustained and practice-based, rather than limited to one-off trainings. Capacity development should be grounded in equitable partnership and power-shifting, recognising youth as active partners in a mutual exchange of contextual knowledge and institutional expertise.

- Pair funding with structured accompaniment that extends beyond a single project cycle, including governance support, safeguarding, mentoring, and ongoing follow-up.
- Design partnership models that explicitly value and integrate youth-led contextual knowledge alongside organisational technical and international experience.
- Avoid training-only approaches that increase exposure and responsibility for youth without corresponding authority, institutional backing, or duty-of-care mechanisms.

07.3. Recommendations for local governance and coordination structures

1. Correct the “heavy early recovery bias” that structurally excludes young women-led actors

Early recovery coordination in Syria is currently defined by what is easiest to count and contract: roads, buildings, utilities. While necessary, this infrastructure-heavy framing sidelines young women-led organisations whose comparative advantage lies in social stabilisation the very domains that determine whether recovery holds.

- Adopt a balanced early recovery framing that treats recovery as the combination of:
 - Physical infrastructure (housing, services, rehabilitation); and
 - Social infrastructure (safe mobility, protection risk mitigation, psychosocial support, care systems, livelihoods, community cohesion, civic and youth spaces).
- Explicitly recognise social infrastructure as a core stabilisation function, not a secondary or “soft” add-on.
- Enable young women-led organisations to lead early recovery, by:
 - recognising protection, care, livelihoods, and social cohesion as legitimate recovery leadership domains;
 - o revising eligibility and leadership criteria that privilege only large, technically equipped actors.

2. Formalise youth and young women’s participation without over-formalising their work

Across Syria, youth and young women already perform recovery and governance functions in practice. Yet participation remains meaningful only when it changes priorities and trade-offs; repeated meetings without decision impact deepen cynicism.

- Allocate defined participation roles for youth and young women within local councils, recovery committees, or advisory bodies, with clarity on decision relevance.
- Require decision windows, not endless consultations: for each recovery programme, ensure youth and young women influence at least:
 - priority-setting (what comes first); and
 - budget trade-offs when context or access shifts.
- Document what changed because of youth and young women’s input.
- Avoid regulatory practices that deter initiative, including:
 - Discretionary closures;
 - Sanctions without due process;
 - Informal gatekeeping that suppresses civic, youth-, or young women-led action.

3. Apply proportionate regulation that enables recovery rather than suppressing it

Heavy approval and punitive enforcement mechanisms risk choking the very grassroots action that makes recovery possible. Not all credible youth- and young women-led initiatives can meet full institutional requirements immediately and treating this as failure undermines recovery capacity.

- Apply graduated, risk-based oversight, rather than blanket or punitive enforcement.
- Pair oversight with facilitation and guidance, supporting emerging initiatives as governance and compliance mature.
- Distinguish between credible community actors and opportunistic entities without penalising grassroots initiatives collectively.

Regulation should stabilise recovery, not silence it.

4. Protect civic space as a recovery condition, not a political afterthought

In Syria, recovery is inseparable from civic trust, social organisation, and the ability to act collectively. When youth and young women engage under fear of exclusion, retaliation, or arbitrary restriction, recovery capacity erodes.

- Ensure youth and young women can participate without fear linked to identity, affiliation, geography, or perceived risk.
- Avoid practices that convert coordination into control rather than facilitation.



Survivors gather amidst the rubble in Northwest Syria in the immediate aftermath of the devastating February 2023 earthquakes. Credit: Violet Organization

08. What Success Looks Like

Hands of Peace – Rural Development Association (Idlib)

The Hands of Peace initiative illustrates what early recovery can look like when youth and women are treated not as auxiliary volunteers, but as social and economic actors shaping post-crisis cohesion.

Launched in Jabal al-Summaq, Idlib, the initiative combined economic recovery with civil peacebuilding through a women- and youth-run food processing centre (Khairat al-Reef). Widowed women and young people produced local food products while deliberately embedding reconciliation into distribution: food baskets were shared with Druze families alongside personal messages of solidarity from Muslim women.

What makes this initiative policy-relevant is not scale, but function. It simultaneously:

- Generated livelihoods for women affected by loss and displacement
- Rebuilt trust across divided community groups
- Strengthened local supply chains by sourcing from nearby farmers

Anchored recovery in social legitimacy rather than formal authority





At the "Hands of Peace" centre in Idlib, participants produce local foods and build community trust, modeling a youth- and women-led approach to post-earthquake recovery that integrates livelihoods with reconciliation. Credit: [Photographer/Organization Name]

A Community-Led Recovery in Practice: The Kafa'at Initiative

In Northwest Syria, recovery succeeds where it is embedded in everyday life rather than imposed through programmes. The Kafa'at initiative in Qalaat al-Madiq demonstrates what this looks like in practice.

Following the February 2023 earthquake, the initiative brought together displaced and conflict-affected women to combine livelihood recovery with psychosocial support and care-sensitive design. Weaving training was paired with life-skills sessions, emotional support, and childcare—reflecting women's own articulation of what makes participation possible, not just productive.

Participants moved beyond short-term coping toward income generation, local market engagement, and collective confidence. As repeatedly echoed across FGDs, the value of such initiatives lies not only in income, but in restoring agency, social connection, and dignity.

"I did not just learn a skill. I learned that I can stand again." (FGD participant, women-led initiative, NW Syria)



Women engaged in the community-led Kafa'at initiative in Qalaat al-Madiq, weaving for income while accessing life-skills sessions and emotional support, a holistic model for recovery in post-earthquake Northwest Syria. Credit: The Kafa'at Initiative.

The Art Forum (By Default Team, Aleppo)

The Art Forum, led by the By Default youth team in Aleppo, shows how youth-led initiatives can become durable recovery infrastructure when given space to grow.

Established inside the Directorate of Culture, the Forum transformed an underused public venue into an open civic space hosting art workshops, film screenings, music events, and public discussions. Youth, young women, and persons with disabilities participated not as beneficiaries, but as organisers and creators.

More than a cultural project, the Forum functioned as a platform for dialogue, social connection, and collective healing in a city recovering from conflict, the earthquake, and political rupture. As activities expanded, the initiative adapted organically—demonstrating local governance capacity, flexibility, and accountability in practice.

What began as a youth initiative evolved into a community art network, sustained through local ownership rather than external control—illustrating how modest, flexible support can convert informal youth action into long-term recovery assets.

“It is no longer just an initiative. It has become a community art network.” (Youth initiative lead, By Default Team, Aleppo)



Members of the By Default team facilitate a public discussion or art event at The Art Forum in Aleppo, showcasing how youth-led initiatives build flexible, community-owned infrastructure for recovery. Credit: By Default Team.

09. Conclusion

This policy paper has shown that youth and young women are not an emerging constituency in Syria's recovery they are already its backbone. From the immediate response to the February 2023 earthquake to the uncertain post-transition moment following December 2024, youth- and young women-led actors have sustained services, mediated social tensions, protected vulnerable groups, and improvised governance where formal systems were absent or contested. Yet the evidence also demonstrates a persistent disconnect those most relied upon in practice remain least recognised in policy, least resourced in funding frameworks, and most exposed to risk without protection.

Early recovery in Syria is no longer a transitional technical phase; it is a contested political and social process in which legitimacy, trust, and collective futures are being renegotiated. If donors, UN agencies, and international partners continue to treat youth and young women as implementers rather than decision-makers, recovery efforts risk reproducing the same exclusionary dynamics that undermined resilience before the earthquake and the political rupture that followed. Aligning policy with reality requires more than rhetorical support it demands deliberate shifts in power, financing, and institutional design that recognise youth and young women as central architects of Syria's recovery, not its invisible labour force.



ActionAid and Violet Organization confer during the 2023 "Working together for recovery" conference, part of their partnership to advance locally-led recovery strategies in Northwest Syria. Credit: Violet Organization

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Youth development committee members convene as part of ActionAid's "Active Youth Growth" initiative, which empowers young leaders to advocate for justice and sustainable change in communities across Syria. Credit: ActionAid