



act:onaid

Policy Paper

**Youth and Young Women
in Early Recovery in Syria**

**Policy Brief Dissemination
and Stakeholder Dialogue**

Executive Summary

Youth and young women are already doing recovery. The question is whether recovery systems will recognise and resource their leadership.

Syria's early recovery is unfolding while humanitarian needs remain high and the country undergoes major political and institutional change. The February 2023 earthquakes intensified existing displacement, economic hardship and service disruption, but they also made something highly visible: **when formal response systems were delayed, overstretched or unable to reach communities, youth and young women were already organising.**

Across the research, youth and young women described receiving displaced families, opening and managing temporary shelters, securing tents and rental support, distributing food and non-food items, supporting water and sanitation services, rehabilitating schools and public spaces, providing psychosocial and educational support, and helping communities identify and communicate their needs. Young women played particularly important roles in reaching women and girls, identifying needs that standard assistance packages overlooked, providing psychosocial and care support, and connecting organisations with people who could otherwise be difficult to reach.

These were not simply acts of spontaneous volunteering. Interviews with civil society organisations, local authorities, humanitarian actors, ActionAid partners, youth representatives and community participants show that youth and young women frequently performed functions essential to recovery: **mobilising community resources, interpreting needs, maintaining services, connecting communities with organisations, mediating social tensions and rebuilding trust.**

The earthquake therefore did not create youth leadership. **It exposed capacities, networks and forms of community legitimacy that had already been developing through years of crisis and displacement.**

One youth-led initiative described its earthquake mobilisation simply as “fazaa”—a collective response driven by solidarity with affected families. Another explained how its organisation “opened its doors to everyone” and relied on neighbours, volunteers and community resources to respond. What began as emergency mobilisation subsequently developed into more structured civic and humanitarian engagement.

Importantly, the research identifies cases where this trajectory continued beyond volunteering. Members of one youth network that mobilised during the earthquake later moved into formal roles in civil society, humanitarian organisations and political and public institutions, including project management and political affairs positions. ActionAid staff similarly reported seeing young people who had participated in youth platforms and partner initiatives progress into professional humanitarian roles and, in some cases, positions of greater public responsibility. This suggests that **community-led emergency action can become a pathway into longer-term civic and institutional leadership when young people have opportunities, accompaniment and space to develop.**

The earthquake increased recognition but not necessarily power

The earthquake strengthened recognition of local organisations and informal initiatives across the humanitarian system. A UN respondent described it as an important opportunity for smaller local organisations: localisation received greater attention, new localisation mechanisms emerged, and local actors gained greater visibility and access to funding.

Yet this recognition has not consistently translated into influence.

Across the evidence, a recurring distinction emerged between **being involved in implementation and having authority over decisions**. Youth and young women may be consulted, mobilised, trained or contracted to deliver activities, while programme priorities, budgets and funding modalities remain largely determined elsewhere. A UN respondent described local participation as much stronger in implementation because donors and UN agencies often arrive with the programme, funding and agenda already defined, leaving limited room for local organisations to change them.

This creates a central contradiction in Syria's recovery: **the actors closest to communities can carry substantial responsibility for delivery while having relatively little authority over what recovery looks like**.

The same problem affects young women in particular. Their contributions are frequently concentrated in protection, psychosocial support, care, mediation, community communication and social cohesion. These functions were essential during the earthquake and remain important during recovery, yet they are less visible within recovery frameworks that prioritise physical infrastructure and easily measurable outputs. Much of this work also remains voluntary or poorly resourced.

Four barriers prevent demonstrated capacity from becoming sustained leadership

The research points to four interconnected barriers.

First, participation narrows as recovery becomes more formalised. During emergencies, youth and young women are valued for their speed, flexibility and community access. Once planning, financing and coordination become more institutionalised, participation increasingly depends on registration, organisational status, professional networks and access to formal decision-making spaces. Youth consequently remain heavily represented in implementation and outreach but much less in priority-setting, budgeting and oversight.

Second, funding arrangements favour established organisations. Short grant cycles, delayed approvals, complex compliance requirements and donor risk aversion make it difficult for smaller youth- and young women-led initiatives to sustain their work. Respondents repeatedly described funding arriving after needs had changed or ending just as community structures and trust had developed. Registration can enable access to resources, but requirements are inconsistent and can push informal groups towards premature institutionalisation.

Third, young women face additional barriers to leadership. Mobility restrictions, social expectations, harassment and digital risks, unpaid care responsibilities and limited access to coordination spaces affect whether young women can participate consistently and safely. At the same time, respondents warned that the designation “women-led” can itself become a funding label without corresponding control over budgets, staffing or organisational decisions.

Fourth, participation too often stops at consultation. The strongest concern across stakeholder groups was not whether youth were invited into activities, but whether their involvement changed anything. Participation becomes meaningful when youth and young women can influence priorities, programme design, resource allocation and adaptation—not simply attend meetings or deliver decisions made elsewhere.

What the evidence says works

The research also identifies practical approaches already demonstrating how this gap can be narrowed.

Longer-term and flexible funding allows locally rooted initiatives to respond as needs change rather than repeatedly rebuilding programmes around short grant cycles. Proportionate compliance arrangements can protect accountability without requiring every informal initiative to become a fully institutionalised organisation before it can participate.

Sustained accompaniment also matters. Respondents distinguished between one-off training and learning that combines technical support with practice, mentoring, institutional development and actual responsibility. The earthquake itself became an important learning environment: young people developed skills in coordination, rapid decision-making, volunteer management, communication and community assessment because they were using those skills in real situations.

Physical civic spaces can provide another important foundation. ActionAid's Youth Hubs, connected through its Global Platforms network, illustrate how investment before an emergency can translate into response capacity when a crisis occurs. Young people who had previously participated in preparedness activities were able to draw on those skills during the earthquake. The hubs also provide spaces where young people can meet, learn, organise campaigns and develop collective initiatives in locations where such opportunities are otherwise limited.

ActionAid's wider partnership model offers another relevant lesson. Its Syria programming operates through local partners and combines a mandate to prioritise women and youth with partner and community consultation. Evidence from ActionAid and its partners shows the value of maintaining flexibility toward informal community groups while retaining non-negotiable safeguarding standards. ActionAid's experience also illustrates the potential for youth participation to move beyond programme delivery: youth involved in campaigns select issues and activities themselves, while advocacy and communication training helps them take more visible leadership roles.

These examples do not remove the structural barriers identified in this research. They demonstrate that **different institutional choices are possible**.

Five priorities for Syria's recovery

The findings point to five immediate priorities for donors, UN agencies, INGOs, local organisations and recovery authorities:

- 1. Give youth and young women decision-making roles, not only delivery roles.** Their participation should extend to recovery priorities, programme design, budget trade-offs, adaptation and oversight. Participation should be assessed by what changed because of their input, not by how many young people attended.
- 2. Finance recovery according to recovery timelines.** Longer-term, flexible and sequenced funding is needed to sustain community structures across emergency response, stabilisation and early recovery. Compliance requirements should be proportionate to the size and risk of funding, with intermediary or accompaniment models available for credible informal groups.

3. **Create pathways from volunteering into paid and institutional leadership.** Emergency volunteering should not become a permanent source of unpaid labour. Youth who demonstrate capacity should have routes into paid recovery work, organisational leadership, coordination and public decision-making.
4. **Recognise social infrastructure as recovery infrastructure.** Protection, psychosocial support, care, social cohesion, safe civic spaces and community networks are not secondary to rebuilding roads and facilities. They help determine whether communities can use, trust and sustain physical recovery investments. This is particularly important for recognising the contribution and leadership of young women.
5. **Protect community legitimacy while organisations formalise.** Registration and institutional development can strengthen sustainability, but formalisation should be gradual and supported. Recovery systems should recognise credible community structures, internal governance and social trust rather than equating organisational scale or legal status with legitimacy.

The policy choice now

Syria is at an unusual moment. The emergency response has generated evidence of what locally rooted youth and young women can do, while recovery and governance arrangements are still being shaped.

The choice is therefore not whether to “include youth” in recovery. **They are already part of it.**

The more consequential question is whether the systems emerging around Syria's recovery will convert the legitimacy, experience and capacity demonstrated during crisis into sustained influence—or return youth and young women to the margins once formal institutions, funding mechanisms and coordination structures consolidate.

The evidence in this paper suggests that doing the former requires more than additional youth projects. It requires changing **who participates in decisions, who controls resources, what kinds of work count as recovery, and how community-rooted actors are supported as they move from informal mobilisation towards longer-term leadership.**

If that shift is made, the legacy of youth and young women's earthquake response can extend beyond a story of extraordinary mobilisation in crisis. It can become part of the institutional and civic foundations of Syria's recovery.

