

Summary Brief of

# **LOST AND ALONE:**

Addressing the Crisis of  
Unaccompanied and Separated  
Children in Post-Earthquakes  
Northwest Syria and Southern Türkiye

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Section 8 includes the extended version of the Conclusion & Recommendations for ease of access, directly taken from the full report to provide a thorough overview within this summary brief.





A Syrian family who became displaced after losing their home to the Syria- Türkiye earthquake. © World Vision Syria Response, External Consultant

## 1. ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report presents the findings from a unique piece of research conducted by World Vision Syria Response in Northwest Syria (NWS) and Southern Türkiye, focusing on the February 2023 earthquakes' impact on unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) who were separated from their families during the disasters. It incorporates the diverse perspectives of caregivers, community members<sup>2</sup>, and, crucially, Syrian UASC in some of the areas most affected by the earthquakes. Highlighting the critical role of community-based alternative care systems, the report points out severe gaps in existing services for children without parental care and calls for increased prioritization of Syrian UASC in humanitarian responses to the Syrian conflict.

Furthermore, it notes the absence of specific details on the gender, disability, or refugee status of UASC in collected data, making these children largely invisible both as a group and in their diversity. The research provides critical new evidence on the situation of UASC in NWS and Syrian refugee communities in Southern Türkiye, underscoring an alarming data gap and advocating for targeted actions, programmes, and policies to support UASC and informal care arrangements in the region.

- The report draws on data from primary research conducted in February 2024 in earthquake-affected areas of NWS and Southern Türkiye. It aims to fill evidence gaps on the protection needs of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) by adopting an intersectional approach.
- The research focused on the specific vulnerabilities and protection risks of Syrian UASC in earthquake-affected areas, assessing existing services and community-based care mechanisms' effectiveness.
- The study collects data from two highly affected governorates in Northwest Syria (Aleppo and Idlib) and five provinces (Gaziantep, Hatay, Kilis, Adiyaman, and Şanlıurfa) in Southern Türkiye. The research methodology combines surveys with carers and community members, along with 8 focus group discussions (FGDs) involving girls and boys aged 8-17. FGDs are divided into unaccompanied and separated children, and children in family care. In Southern Türkiye, all children and adults included in the research are Syrian refugees. The primary research is complemented by an extensive evidence review, enhancing the understanding of the explored issues.

<sup>2</sup> Note: When the terms "community members" and "caregivers" are mentioned, they specifically refer to those we have interviewed for this study.





A girl holding a cat in a Turkish displacement camp.  
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## 2. COMMON TRENDS ACROSS NORTHWEST SYRIA AND SOUTHERN TÜRKIYE



**Data gap:** There is virtually no data on the situation or number of UASC. When data is available, it is not disaggregated, masking the diverse needs of boys, girls, and children with disabilities.



**Increased protection risks:** Child marriage, child labor and poor mental health in particular emerged as increasing child protection concerns in the months after the earthquakes, a trend confirmed by our research, accompanied by inadequate access to services.



**Family-based care:** Kinship care is the primary form of alternative care in both regions, with extended families and friends caring for UASC after the earthquakes. However, caregivers face financial and psychological challenges with insufficient support.

## 3. KEY FINDINGS IN NORTHWEST SYRIA



**Rise in UASC numbers post-earthquake:** More than half of the community members interviewed reported being aware of many UASC in their areas who lost parental care due to the earthquakes.



**Caregivers' challenges:** The earthquakes have exacerbated caregivers' financial and mental health challenges, significantly limiting their ability to care for UASC. Financial support is notably scarce.



**Increased vulnerabilities and protection concerns:** The disasters have intensified UASC's vulnerabilities, particularly affecting girls due to societal and gender norms. A significant portion of community members (84%) noted that child marriage, child labour, exploitation, and mental health issues have become more prevalent protection concerns for UASC post-earthquake. Child marriage rates have risen, indicating heightened risks especially

for unaccompanied and separated girls, but also affecting some boys due to safety and financial stress. Community members reported a noticeable increase in child marriages among UASC, particularly in Idleb, driven by deteriorating living conditions and the absence of caregivers. Additionally, more children are being pushed into labour and out of school, worsening an already critical learning crisis. Economic need and family loss are cited as primary reasons for the increase in child labour post-earthquake.



**Mental health deterioration:** The mental health needs of UASC have worsened, with a vast majority of caregivers identifying signs of psychosocial distress such as sadness, loss of interest, low energy, and anxiety as top concerns since the earthquakes.



**Societal and cultural impacts:** The research found differing perceptions between governorates regarding the impact of cultural norms on UASC protection. For example, in Aleppo, cultural and societal norms were seen as having a negative impact on UASC protection, while in Idleb, cultural beliefs were viewed more positively due to values encouraging the care of orphans.



**Unmet needs:** The current level of assistance is insufficient, failing to meet the mental health, psychosocial, and financial needs of UASC. Both caregivers and a large majority of community members report that child protection services are inadequate in addressing key protection risks like child marriage and child labour.

## 4. KEY FINDINGS IN SOUTHERN TÜRKIYE



**Increased number of UASC:** There's been a significant increase in UASC, with 80.4% of community members aware of many such cases within their communities following the earthquakes



**Insufficient support:** Across the board, 44% of caregivers receive no assistance at all for the children they look after, with those in Hatay and Adiyaman being particularly undersupported. Where support is available, it mainly consists of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), awareness sessions, and financial assistance, though it's significantly lacking in most areas.



**Impact on caregivers:** The earthquakes have exacerbated caregivers' financial struggles and mental health issues, affecting their capacity to provide care. This impact varies significantly between locations.



**Exacerbated vulnerabilities and protection risks for UASC:** The earthquakes have heightened the vulnerabilities and protection risks for UASC, particularly for girls who are disproportionately affected according to 90% of community members. Child marriage and child labour have increased due to deteriorating living conditions, with significant location-based differences in awareness and reporting of child marriages.



**Increased child labour:** 90% of community members across various locations have observed a rise in child labour, attributing this to financial necessity, family separation, and pressure. They report that the earthquakes have acted as a 'push factor' for increased child labour.



**Mental health concerns:** A significant number of caregivers report prevalent mental health issues among UASC, including depression, trauma, and earthquake phobia, with a unanimous increase in mental health concerns since the earthquakes among caregivers.



**Cultural and societal influences:** Cultural norms and societal attitudes have a mixed impact on the protection of UASC, with some caregivers noting a negative influence while others highlight positive

aspects. For example, in Kilis, cultural and societal norms were seen as having a negative impact on UASC protection, while in Hatay, cultural beliefs were viewed more positively due to values encouraging the care of orphans.



**Ineffective support systems:** The effectiveness of support systems and basic services for UASC is questioned, with vast majority of caregivers rating MHPSS and child protection services as the least effective. A large majority of community members believe that current services do not meet the needs of children.

## Overview of recommendations

While our report's detailed recommendations provided at the end of this brief are contextualised to NWS and Southern Türkiye, they are framed around the following overall priorities:



**Enhanced data collection:** Improve the collection and sharing of data on UASC, emphasizing their diversity and the various informal and formal alternative care systems, particularly community-based ones.



**Prevention of family separation:** Make the prevention of family separation during emergencies and support for family reunification top priorities.



**Increased support for caregivers:** Boost support for parents, families, and caregivers through financial and in-kind contributions, along with mental health and emotional support, to foster a nurturing and stable environment for children and prevent family separation.



**Enhance access to essential services:** Enhance UASC's access to quality, equitable, and specific essential services, especially mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), child protection, and education.



**Capacity building for child protection workforce:** Strengthen the skills and capacity of the child protection workforce in key areas of UASC programming like prevention of separation, case management, family tracing, reunification, and foster cross-sectoral coordination for holistic prevention and response strategies.



**Awareness and understanding:** Increase the awareness and understanding among community actors and caregivers of the specific risks and needs of UASC in their area, including the barriers they face accessing support and services in accordance with their rights and best interests.



**Participation of UASC:** Ensure the meaningful participation of UASC, community members, and caregivers in the planning and implementation of policies and programmes.





A Syrian family who became displaced after losing their home to the Syria- Türkiye earthquake. © World Vision Syria Response, External Consultant

## 5. KEY POINTS FROM THE REPORT REGARDING THE TWO REGIONS

- The 2009 Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children support the Convention on the Rights of the Child, emphasizing that alternative care should be family-based. They specifically address the needs of children in emergencies and those outside their country of habitual residence, including UASC. A UN General Assembly resolution in December 2019 further stressed the importance of family and community-based care and the need for improved data collection and efforts to prevent unnecessary family separation.
- The February 2023 earthquakes underscored the inherent vulnerability of children to natural disasters, particularly affecting those under five due to their specific physiological and developmental needs.
- Over 1.7 million children, many of whom were forcibly displaced, lived in poverty in the devastated regions of NWS. In Türkiye, even before the earthquakes, one in three children lived in poverty, a situation exacerbated by the country's financial challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic's aftermath.
- While all children in NWS and Southern Türkiye within the earthquake zones were affected, not all were impacted equally. The disasters amplified existing vulnerabilities, with violence against children increasing due to factors like gender, displacement, refugee status, disability, age, and family status.
- One immediate impact of the earthquakes was a significant rise in family separations, driven by factors such as parental death, homelessness, displacements, and socio-economic hardships.
- UASC are among the most vulnerable during emergencies, facing heightened risks of harm, violence, and exploitation due to the loss of protective family environments. Intersecting vulnerabilities further exacerbate these risks.
- Efforts for family reunification were hampered by the lack of data collection systems for UASC and the absence or loss of civil documentation. It's estimated that at least 537 children lost a parent, and there were at least 800 UASC in NWS as of April 2023, though these figures are likely underestimated.

- Over a decade of conflict has led to a documentation crisis in addition to the gender discriminatory laws that hinder Syrian women from passing citizenship to their children, increasing the risk of legal statelessness and exposure to violence.
  - Cultural factors contribute to family separation, for example, the divorce or re-marriage of a caregiver or parent – especially a mother – may lead to children being abandoned.
  - The absence of systems to collect data on UASC and a database for displaced people significantly obstructed reunification efforts post-disaster.
  - Kinship care, primarily by extended family or friends, is the main form of alternative care for UASC in NWS, with almost 60% of such children in 2021 living under such arrangements. However, the conflict and earthquakes have eroded this community-based support, with significant disparities in caregiver experiences across different locations.
  - Our research indicates that a significant majority of caregivers we interviewed, despite facing challenges they mentioned such as **displacement, loss of livelihoods, and deteriorating mental health due to earthquakes and insecurity**, are taking care of these children without prior experience. These adversities, **compounded by financial hardships**, have disrupted social support systems, yet caregivers continue to provide care amidst such crises.
  - There is no state assistance for kinship carers, and humanitarian responses often fail to provide adequate support (including cash transfers to support UASC's access to basic services).
  - This lack of support, combined with the earthquakes and the challenges posed by displacement, has led to an increase in unregulated residential care, unsupervised living, and child-headed households.
  - Child-headed households, excluded from cash transfer programs (as they are under 18 ) and with limited access to aid like shelter and food, increasingly find themselves unsupported and vulnerable to exploitation by those in power.
  - The report distinguishes between family-based care (kinship and foster care) and residential care (such as orphanages).
- However, all types of alternative care currently lack systematic checks, registration, monitoring, and safeguarding systems, exposing children to a wide range of protection risks.
- The report highlights a significant rise in children, especially unaccompanied and separated children, engaging in hazardous labour such as rubble clearing, with many facing exploitation, forced recruitment, and trafficking. **A majority of community members in Aleppo and Idlib reported worsening conditions driving this increase.**
  - The earthquakes severely damaged educational infrastructure, affecting 1,000 primary and secondary schools in NWS and causing a 25% increase in out-of-school children, totaling 1 million children without access to education.
  - Prior to the earthquakes, a vast majority of Syrian children in NWS were already showing severe stress and anxiety symptoms. The situation has worsened post-earthquake, with a notable increase in mental health issues among children and caregivers alike.
  - The research *underscores the heightened vulnerability of UASC with disabilities, who face increased risks of violence, early marriage due to stigma, and are often overlooked by humanitarian efforts.* **Our research found that more than half of interviewed caregivers identified mental disabilities as the area with the highest level of needs among UASC, followed by physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, and cognitive disabilities respectively.**
  - Despite some support, **over half of caregivers believe that UASC's mental health and financial needs are unmet**, with child protection systems (provided by local authorities or I/NGOs) described as only "slightly" effective. The effectiveness of child protection services was rated lower in Idlib compared to Aleppo.
  - The findings indicate significant deficiencies in the quality and adequacy of child protection services in NWS, with fragmented systems, lack of common standards, and mistrust between local authorities and NGOs contributing to the gaps. Essential services like MHPSS and protection assistance are less accessible post-earthquake by the children as highlighted by community members.





A Syrian girl in front of her tent in a displacement camp.  
© World Vision Syria Response Partner, Hand in Hand for Aid.

- The earthquakes in Southern Türkiye have brought to light a significant crisis involving unaccompanied and separated children, revealing new protection concerns and exposing the vulnerability of these children. An estimated 3,500 children lost one or both parents, with a portion remaining unidentified or missing post-disaster.
- The lack of comprehensive data on UASC underscores their invisibility in government policy and humanitarian responses, exacerbated by the absence of specific laws for their protection despite a general legal framework.
- Türkiye's legal framework, including the Temporary Protection Regulation and directives from the Ministry of Family and Social Policies (MFSP), outlines the treatment and rights of UASC. However, the implementation is inconsistent, leaving many UASC without guardians, state care, or access to essential services. The aftermath of the earthquakes saw an increase in UASC not being properly identified or disappearing, highlighting ongoing issues with child protection.
- Kinship care is prevalent among Syrian refugees, yet it receives minimal recognition and support from authorities and humanitarian agencies. *Caregivers we interviewed reported facing significant challenges exacerbated by the earthquakes, including emotional distress and financial hardship, impacting their ability to provide care.*
- **The importance of community support (and in some cases institutional care) for children without families and affected by the earthquakes was emphasized by children we spoke to in Southern Türkiye.**
- The earthquakes resulted in new children being unaccompanied or separated and have intensified their vulnerabilities, particularly Syrian refugee children, by affecting already impoverished communities (around 40% households in the affected areas lived below the poverty line, compared to around 32% nationwide). Protection risks such as child marriage has increased, *many cases in the southeast (and within the Syrian community) were reported.*
- **60% of interviewees in Southern Türkiye**

**were aware of new child marriages following the disasters and 70% of interviewees in Kilis thought that more children were at risk of getting married early after the earthquakes.** *Across all provinces, deteriorating living conditions was the reason reported for post-earthquake child marriages.*

- **UASC also told us of the increased practice of child marriage in their community due to economic hardship, loss of guardians, and societal and familial expectations.** For girls, *child marriage was also perceived to be the “answer” to instability and lack of shelter, and for some a way out of overcrowded living conditions.*
- Türkiye has made efforts to combat child labour through a comprehensive policy and legal framework, including ratifying International Labour Organization conventions, implementing a national program against child labour, and declaring 2018 as the “Year of Elimination of Child Labour.” Despite these efforts, child labour was increasing even before the 2022 earthquakes, with at least 2 million child workers, a number that doubles during summer months. *Syrian refugee children, particularly boys in urban areas, are more affected due to poverty, lack of employment opportunities for adults, and barriers to education, leading them to work in hazardous industries.*
- The 2023 earthquakes exacerbated the situation by destroying educational facilities and disrupting the education of nearly four million children, including 350,000 refugees and migrants. This disruption has likely contributed to increased school dropouts and child labour, especially among Syrian refugee children facing pre-existing socio-economic challenges and barriers to education access.
- **Community members and caregivers we interviewed have observed increased risks of child labour post-earthquake, with a significant majority noting that the earthquakes have been a ‘push factor’ for child labour and exploitation.**

*Children have been forced into hazardous work environments due to economic hardship, loss of family members, and the need to support their families, often working long hours for low pay and facing physical and emotional exhaustion. Community members noted that street work (vending/begging) became the most relevant type of child labour after the earthquakes, followed by manufacturing (e.g. factories, workshops).*

- **UASC in Gaziantep and Hatay told us that they were having to work in hazardous and demanding environments to support themselves (and in some cases, their siblings) even before the earthquakes.** *Other children also explained that while they were not working before the disasters, they have had to start working after the earthquakes.* Echoing adults’ perceptions of the reasons for increased child labour, children told us that the main reasons for engaging in child labour after the earthquakes *were economic hardship, loss of family members or caretakers, and the necessity to support remaining family members.* **Children also reported working in the informal sector across various industries such as hospitality, construction, and garment. Some also reported collecting and selling scrap metal.** They told us of the **long working hours and being under-paid, and shared how physically and emotionally exhausting this work is. Some children also reported sustaining injuries.**
- A World Vision assessment in May 2023 showing over half of the children distressed by memories of the disaster. The lack of support and existing vulnerabilities have intensified their psychological trauma. **Community actors and caregivers report widespread mental health issues among UASC, with up to 86% of caregivers noting symptoms like low energy, loss of interest, and anxiety.** The earthquakes’ impact has forced children to confront the loss of homes, education, and loved ones, pushing them into new hardships and upending their sense of normalcy and stability.



- Unaccompanied and separated refugee children with disabilities, particularly following the earthquakes in Türkiye, face heightened challenges compared to their non-disabled peers, including increased risks of violence, stigma, discrimination, and exclusion as reported by caregivers we interviewed. Children we spoke to elaborated on the many barriers faced by their peers with disabilities irrespective of their family status, such as physical limitations, social exclusion, lack of access to education and employment, and the profound effect of the earthquakes on their mental health and well-being.
- **The earthquakes have exacerbated issues for these children, displacing them to sites lacking proper sanitation, medical care, and necessary assistive devices such as wheelchairs.**
- A year after the earthquakes, the critical needs of these children remain unmet, with access to basic services and safety being a primary challenge. Caregivers and community members note significant gaps in access to essential services like education, mental health support, and protection, with current support systems (by local authorities or I/NGOs) deemed “moderately effective” in some governorates and “least effective” in others.
- When considering different types of services, a majority of caregivers said that health and education services were “moderately effective”, compared with a higher prevalence of respondents across locations reporting that child protection and MHPSS were “least effective”.
- Community members echoed caregivers’ views on UASC’s reduced access to essential services, in particular MHPSS and child protection. *According to them, the main services less frequently accessed by UASC after the earthquakes are MHPSS, protection, education, safe spaces and health respectively.* Child protection and MHPSS were also reported as being “least effective”.
- Research highlights a significant discrepancy between the growing protection needs of children and the funds allocated to child protection in response to the Syrian crisis and post-earthquake efforts in Syria and Türkiye. Despite an increase in children needing protection- from 6 million in 2021 to 6.4 million in 2022- child protection funding for Syria was only fulfilled at 15% that year. The sector remains under-prioritized, with no specific funding targets for child protection, even as emergency funding increased following the earthquakes. The Syria Earthquake Flash Appeal 2023 and the Türkiye Earthquake Flash Appeal 2023 did not meet their funding requirements for the protection sector, receiving only 62% and 67% respectively. Similarly, the Syrian Arab Republic Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) 2023 and the Humanitarian Response Plan 2023 were significantly underfunded, with only a small fraction of the required funds for the protection sector being met. *Challenges in tracking child protection funding, especially for unaccompanied and separated children, persist due to its categorization under the broader “Protection” sector and the lack of specific indicators for child protection interventions.* **This makes it difficult to determine the exact amount of funding directed towards child protection efforts.**



A brother taking care of his sister in a displacement camp.  
© World Vision Syria Response Partner, Nasaem Khair.

## 6. KEY STATS FROM THE REPORT



9 in 10 people in Northwest Syria displaced by the earthquakes had already been displaced at least once by the conflict.



In the 10 Turkish provinces affected by the earthquakes, 1 in 10 of the local population was a Syrian refugee.



In February 2024, 1 in 3 children who lost their homes still lived in temporary housing.



In Syria, every child under the age of 12 has known nothing but conflict, violence or displacement.



1.7 million of the 4 million refugees and asylum-seekers currently registered in Türkiye are children.



In 2022, 57% of internally displaced people (IDP) camps in NWS did not have access to primary schools and 80% to secondary schools.



Key World Vision research finding: 67% of community members reported knowing many UASC in their community who have lost parents in the earthquake.



In 2022, only a mere 13% of households in Northern Syria had the needed official documentation.



A survey on alternative care in the region found that 91% of child protection actors who responded felt that UASC boys had no support or that it was inadequate. The same was felt to be true regarding UASC girls, indicated by 84% of respondents.





89% of over 2 million children in NWS are in need of child protection assistance.



On average, 60 working children are killed every year in Türkiye.



In 2020, almost one in five of all recorded suicide attempts and deaths in Northwest Syria were children.



Throughout 2023, as a result of funding challenges, services were disrupted in 35 Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) and 17 WGSS closed down.



Key World Vision research finding: 80% of community members surveyed by World Vision reported knowing of many UASC in their community who lost parents in the earthquakes.



Around half of Türkiye 3.7 million refugee and migrant population were affected by the earthquakes, a majority of whom are Syrians under temporary protection status.



A brother taking care of his sister in a displacement camp.  
© World Vision Syria Response Partner, Nasaem Khair.

## 7. SELECTED QUOTES FROM ALL OVER THE REPORT

“A girl married after the earthquake due to an urgent need for care and financial support. Marriage was the only solution for her.” - Girls FGD, 13-17 years old, Aleppo.

“Our neighbor was alone after his family died in the earthquake. His grandfather married him off as he was the only remaining family member. I feel sad for him; it’s not good to marry so young.” –Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Idleb.

“I am afraid of the sounds of airplanes and sleeping alone in a dark room, but after the earthquake, I am afraid of high buildings and any sudden shaking, which causes me intense fear.”- Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Idleb.

“Before the earthquakes, I was worried about power outages, lack of food, continuous movement, and displacement due to war and conflicts. After the earthquake, I became more afraid that buildings would collapse, we would remain under the rubble, and I would lose my grandparents, who care for me.”– Girls FGD, 8-12 years old, Idleb.

“My cousin suffers from difficulties in speaking and walking due to the war. She struggles to play with us, and some people bully her because of her condition. She feels lonely and sad as a result of social interaction difficulties and her disability.” - Girls FGD, 8-12 years old, Idleb.

“I used to cry at school when I saw my friends come with their families while I was alone. My friend’s mother started taking me with her son daily so that I wouldn’t be alone.” - Boys FGD, 8-12 years old, Hatay.

“After losing my family in the earthquakes, we stayed with my married aunt. Her husband evicted us all, including his wife. Friends heard about our situation and gathered funds for us, and we rented a house, covering the expenses for a good period.” - Girls FGD, 13-17 years old, Gaziantep.

“I heard about many children who got married after the earthquake because they lost their families and their support and anchor. Marriage was an alternative to having a family with them. I think this marriage will fail because both parties are still in their childhood, and marriage requires responsibility.”–Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Gaziantep.

“Many girls got married, especially after the earthquakes, because they were looking for a place to live after their houses were destroyed and they were displaced, and the tents are too cramped for them with more than one family in the same tent, meaning a large number of siblings forced them to rush into marriage. I feel injustice and inequality compared to other children. Unfortunately, because the earthquake did not affect everyone, it only chose some cities.”–Girls FGD, 13-17 years old, Gaziantep.

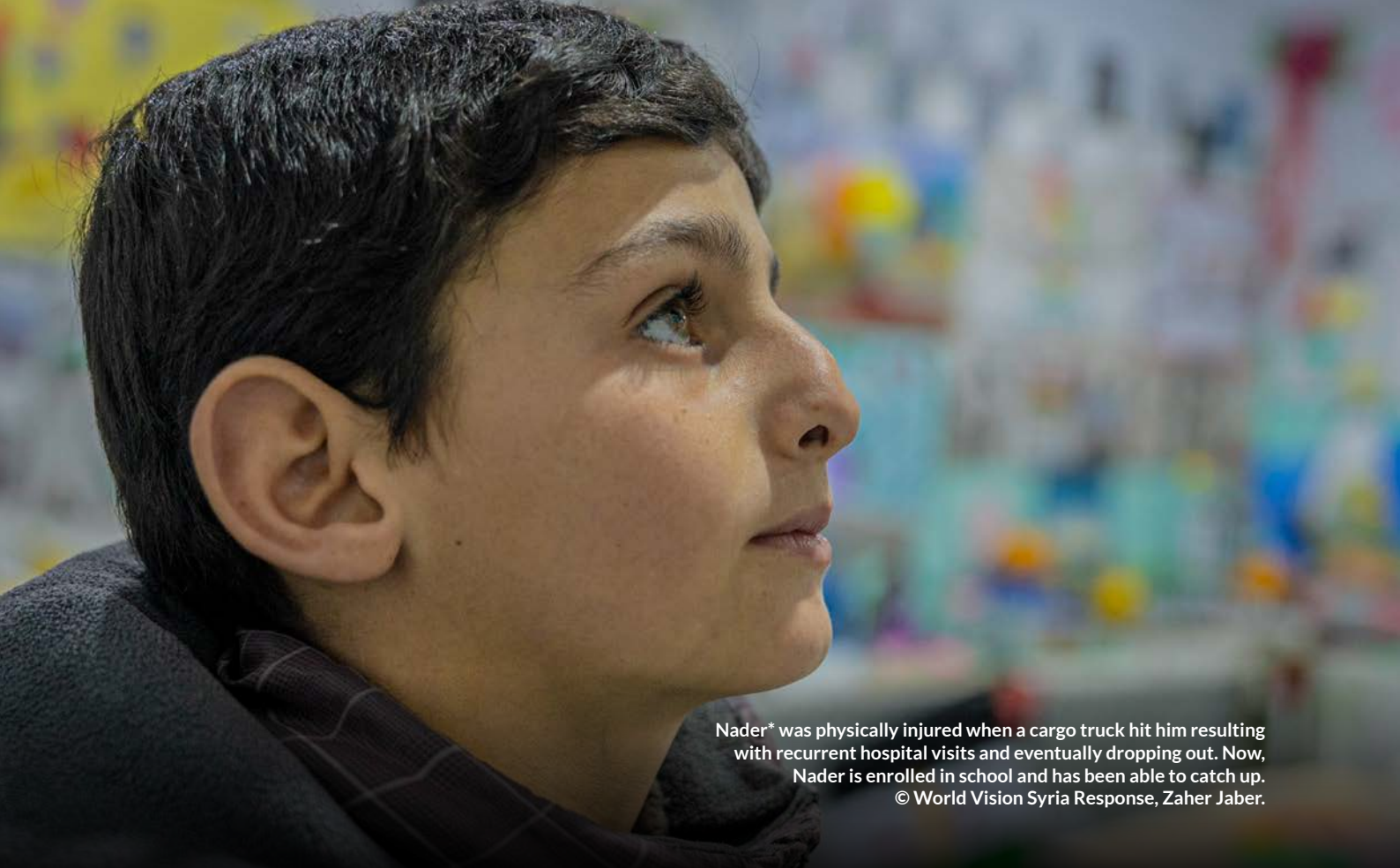
“I worked in many jobs, like factories and workshops, to secure a livelihood for me and my siblings. I could not continue my studies fully, and my work experience was horrible. I worked long hours as a worker, but the pay was half that of an adult.” - Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Gaziantep.

“Some children have started working in collecting scrap metal from where the building debris is dumped. These kids go every day to gather iron, copper, and aluminium.” - Boys FGD, 8-12 years old, Hatay.

“Fear has become my companion. I’m afraid of any movement or sound. I’m afraid of losing my new loved ones, my neighbours, and my friends, and my new school, after I tried hard to fit in a new place where I don’t belong and alone without my mom and dad.” - Girls FGD, 13-17 years old, Gaziantep.

“Children with disabilities may face challenges in mobility, communication, social integration, and may also suffer from bullying, as well as in building and maintaining friendships.” - Boys FGD, 13-17 years old, Kilis.





Nader\* was physically injured when a cargo truck hit him resulting with recurrent hospital visits and eventually dropping out. Now, Nader is enrolled in school and has been able to catch up.  
© World Vision Syria Response, Zaher Jaber.

## 8. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This report provides a unique and unprecedented insight into the situation and needs of UASC in NWS and unaccompanied and separated Syrian refugee children in Southern Türkiye. It spotlights the lack of data on the number and situation of UASC in both regions, and articulates why those children have been disproportionately impacted by the earthquakes.

Using primary data, the report also explores why the overlapping and complex negative effects of the disasters on UASC in NWS and unaccompanied and separated Syrian refugee children in Türkiye did not happen in a vacuum. It argues that the disasters exacerbated existing inequalities and disproportionately affected some of the most marginalised children who were already severely disadvantaged by conflict, poverty, and their family and refugee status, and whose resilience and ability to cope with the disasters were severely eroded.

The report also provides the first intersectional analysis of the consequences of the earthquakes on UASC. While all UASC faced heightened protection risks, they were all not affected equally. Gender, disability, refugee status and socio-economic factors and cultural and social norms have influenced the

degree of children's exposure to the aftershocks of the earthquakes. Unaccompanied children in NWS had the least resources and support to protect themselves and to cope with the immediate aftershocks and the longer-term impacts of the earthquakes. As a result, they faced staggering protection risks.

By sharing the unique contributions from caregivers, community members and children themselves, the report also provides an unprecedented picture of the needs of unaccompanied and separated children, and the critical gaps in the services they require. Children are falling through the cracks of weak, under-resourced and poorly coordinated care and protection systems. As a result, their most urgent and significant needs, especially MHPSS and child protection, are not being met. In addition, despite their critical role, caregivers of unaccompanied and separated children have been unable to meet their needs after the earthquakes due to insufficient support received from local authorities and I/NGOs, despite facing additional challenges.

Although the research primarily focused on kinship care for unaccompanied and separated children, other types of alternative informal care that are predominant in NWS and in refugee communities in Southern Türkiye, in particular supervised

independent living arrangements and siblings living in child-headed households. Children in unsupervised living conditions are at the highest risk of deprivation of their basic needs and of violence. However, there is a significant research gap on this form of alternative care.

*The earthquakes have exposed the long-standing neglected crisis of unaccompanied and separated children in Northwest Syria and Türkiye. Family separation is a silent and growing emergency that has failed to be prioritised by humanitarians and donors alike, as seen in the post-earthquakes responses. Preventing family separation and addressing the needs of UASC in times of crises must become a priority. In addition, humanitarian actors must recognise and address the impacts of multiple factors of vulnerability such as gender, age and disabilities, on the protection risks for UASC and the care arrangements they need.*

## Key recommendations - NWS

### 1. BETTER DATA & PRIORITISATION



Improve existing data collection systems for unaccompanied and separated children, with a focus on disaggregated information (gender, age, refugee status, disability) to improve short and longer-term prevention and response strategies.



Mainstream and strengthen data collection systems to identify unaccompanied and separated children, and children at risk of family separation as part of protection and multi-sectoral assessments during and in the aftermath of emergencies. These should include the identification of families at risk of separation, children in kinship care, foster care and in unsupervised living arrangements.



Map number and locations of residential facilities and identify key monitoring indicators for children in institutional care.



Prioritise programming to prevent and respond to family separation in times of emergencies and protracted conflicts, and include specific indicators and outcomes that focus on meeting the needs of unaccompanied and separated children in their diversity, preventing family

separation and case management and family reunification.

### 2. INCREASED SUPPORT TO PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS



Provide parents with financial and other forms of child support to enable them to meet the needs of their children and prevent family separation due to financial hardship.



Provide caregivers with adequate support for the unaccompanied and separated children in their care especially due to increased financial challenges after the earthquakes.



Ensure parents and caregivers have access to community based and stepped approach to MHPSS to prevent an increase in negative changes in parenting/ caregiving and a decrease in warm and responsive parenting and caregiving.



Implement a concerted and systematic approach by the Syrian government, UN, and humanitarian actors to facilitate children's access to recognised civil registration documents and reforming Syria's gender discriminatory nationality law and practices.



Increase caregivers and community members' understanding and awareness of heightened protection risks for diverse groups of unaccompanied and separated children.

### 3. IMPROVE QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES, ESPECIALLY MHPSS AND CHILD PROTECTION



Prioritise and provide targeted and tailored funding to meet the needs of UASC in their diversity and integrate children's emotional and psychological well-being across education, health and protection interventions in the Humanitarian Response Plans for Syria and the Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund's annual allocations.



Monitor the access of unaccompanied and separated children to essential services and identify key barriers to access.





Invest in capacity building for mental health service providers to enable them to identify and address unaccompanied and separated children’s mental health conditions and support families and caregivers.



Increase child protection actors’ awareness and understanding of unaccompanied and separated children’s vulnerabilities and heightened exposure to violence and neglect.



Increase coordination between humanitarian actors, local authorities, community actors and caregivers in order to increase the chances of reuniting them with family members and identify children at risk.



Invest in and strengthen the capacity of child protection actors on unaccompanied and separated children, and provide ongoing support and funding for specialised protection services and community-based care for them.



Ensure meaningful and inclusive participation of unaccompanied and separated children and their caregivers during the planning and delivery of the Syria’s humanitarian response, and incorporate their views and needs in humanitarian response plans, including in the Refugee, Resilience Regional Plan responding to the Syrian crisis.

## Key recommendations – Southern Türkiye

### 1. BETTER DATA



Prioritise registration and documentation processes for unaccompanied and separated refugee children.



Improve existing data collection systems for unaccompanied and separated migrant and refugee children, with a focus on disaggregated information (gender, age, disability) to improve short and longer-term prevention and response care and protection strategies.



Increase data collection on the number and conditions of unaccompanied refugee children in various forms of alternative care including foster and residential care institutions.



Provide Refugee, Resilience Regional Plan (3RP) sector partners with technical capacity on data collection specific to unaccompanied and separated refugee children to facilitate the collection of data to improve evidence-based programming, inform advocacy efforts and policy development.



Produce a situation analysis on unaccompanied and separated refugee and migrant children in Türkiye.

### 2. PRIORITISE AND SUPPORT KINSHIP CARE FOR UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN WHEN ALL OPTIONS FOR FAMILY REUNIFICATION AND REINTEGRATION HAVE BEEN EXHAUSTED



Provide adequate and multiple forms of support for unaccompanied and separated children in their care, including financial and in-kind assistance, training on child development and trauma-informed care, and respite care services.



Ensure caregivers have access to MHPSS to prevent an increase in negative changes in caregiving and a decrease in warm and responsive caregiving.



Ensure that kinship care for unaccompanied and separated refugee and migrant children is considered and prioritised in development of relevant national policies and interventions, ensuring that their needs are recognised and addressed.



Ensure that Türkiye’s national policies on alternative care include supporting safe and effective kinship care for unaccompanied and separated refugee children.



Increase caregivers and community members’ understanding and awareness of heightened protection risks for unaccompanied and separated children in their diversity.

### 3. STRENGTHEN CHILD PROTECTION AND CARE SYSTEMS



Expand and resource the independent monitoring mechanism for child protection and care services, outlining reporting procedures for identified issues and ensuring feedback loops for improvement, and ensuring effective coordination with local authorities, community-based protection structures, care providers and I/NGOs.



Expand on the independent monitoring mechanism by outlining reporting procedures for identified issues and ensuring feedback loops for improvement.



Invest in and strengthen the technical capacity of child protection workers to inspect and monitor child protection and care systems, and ensure that cultural competency training is provided to better understand the specific needs of diverse groups of unaccompanied and separated children.



Ensure that the foster care system does not discriminate against non-Turkish children who should have access to the same services as their Turkish peer.



Increase child protection actors' awareness and understanding of unaccompanied and separated refugee and migrant children's vulnerabilities and heightened exposure to violence and neglect.



Address systemic challenges such as discriminatory policies and language barriers that impact unaccompanied and separated refugee children's access to essential services.



Prioritise and adequately fund inclusive services for refugee children, including MHPSS, child protection and education.



Invest in capacity building for MHPSS to enable them to identify and address the mental health conditions of unaccompanied and separated children.



Increase coordination between humanitarian actors, local authorities and community actors to deliver targeted projects for unaccompanied and separated refugee children in their diversity.



Invest in and strengthen the capacity of child protection actors on unaccompanied and separated children and provide ongoing support and funding for specialised protection services and community-based care for UASC, including through the 3RP for Türkiye and Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund.



Ensure the meaningful and inclusive participation of unaccompanied and separated children and their caregivers in relevant policies and programmes, including through facilitating their participation in planning and implementation.

### 4. IMPROVE REFUGEE CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO ADEQUATE SERVICES, ESPECIALLY MHPSS AND CHILD PROTECTION



Improve unaccompanied and separated refugee children's access to legal documents.

**Across all priority areas set out above, the voices, perspectives and experiences of unaccompanied and separated children in their diversity must be heard and acted on by all concerned stakeholders engaged in delivering assistance and services in NWS and Southern Türkiye.**



Children playing with the muddy roads in a Syrian displacement camp. © World Vision Syria Response Partner, Syria Relief and Development.



## 9. WHAT CHILDREN WE SPOKE TO ASKED FOR

### Northwest Syria

- Inclusive and safe recreational spaces and the opportunity to play and learn.
- A stable environment and a place to call home
- Safety
- Family and community involvement in their lives
- Kindness and support
- Financial aid and provision of essential needs such as food, clothing and shelter.
- Vocational training for children
- Adoption and care support



### Southern Türkiye

- The opportunity to go to school
- Community-based support systems
- Kindness
- Recreational activities
- Better infrastructure and community engagement to enhance their daily lives and safety
- Safe shelter/home with a caring family
- Psychological and emotional support to help deal with trauma and loss of loved ones
- Financial assistance for education

