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EVERY DAY COUNTS: The social, economic and psychological costs and resulting risks of not investing in the education system in Syria

CONTENTS

Situation in Syria in 2022	1
Top ten economic, social and psychological costs of failing to invest in education	2
1. A decrease in the quality and availability of education services.....	2
2. A further loss of human capital in Syria, affecting the ability of parents to provide for their children as well as the productivity and development of the economy and country	3
3. A decline in the status of girls and young women leading to child marriage and impacting the socioeconomic status of the families and a society as whole	3
4. Chronic stress resulting in poorer mental health in children and young people	4
5. Increased levels of violence and crime	4
6. Increased rates of child labour.....	5
7. Increased education inequality, which puts a strain on community relations and can become a driver for conflict and instability risks in Syria	6
8. Lowered resilience in children, young people and families.....	6
9. Cumulative detrimental social and economic effects on children and their families	7
10. Pressure for families and young people to migrate to seek opportunities abroad.....	7
What can UNICEF do?	8
What are the investments required?	10
Anticipated cost benefits resulting from secondary and higher education	11
Key takeaways	12



SITUATION IN SYRIA IN 2022

Children and their families in Syria have survived extreme circumstances since 2011. The damage inflicted on the country by 11 years of violent conflict has been exacerbated by the pandemic and a rising economic crisis over the last three years. UNICEF estimates that, in 2022, 6.98 million children aged 3–17 years and 211,320 education staff were in need of humanitarian assistance; 2.4 million children were out of school; and 1.6 million children were at risk of dropping out. Despite the successes of the ‘No Lost Generation’ initiative, Syria might now lose a generation of children after all, while waiting for the right circumstances to make the right investments in education.

Education can protect children, families and communities from the consequences of conflict and poverty. It supports children’s psychosocial well-being and gives them dignity and hope for a better future. Education can improve economic growth, health, women’s empowerment, and individual and community resilience and involvement. Creating ‘welcoming schools’ where children acquire cognitive and life skills prepares them to become pillars of their families and communities. Education also can mitigate the worst effects of humanitarian crises, including conflict, crime and poverty.

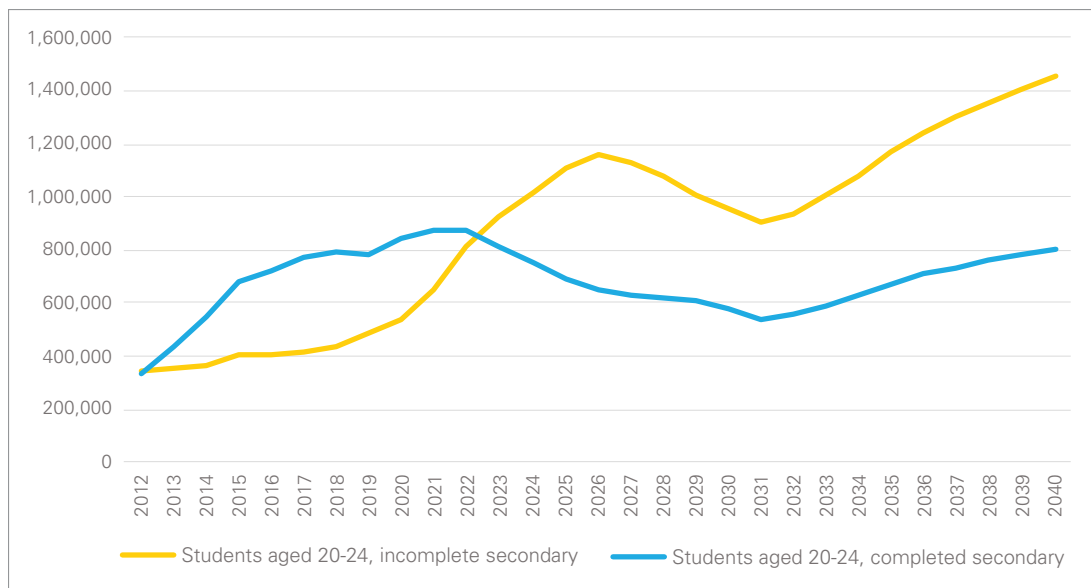
For more than a decade, international donors have consistently and generously funded education services in Syria, providing a refuge for children living through violent conflict. This has mostly taken the form of rehabilitating schools, providing school supplies or setting up informal community-based learning centers. Efforts are needed at scale, however, to enable the education system to deliver

for the majority of Syria’s children who attend; are working to transition back to; or may return to Syria and need to be integrated into public schools. This cannot be achieved without investment in the formal education system.

A UNICEF-commissioned [Syria Education and Development Investment Case \(SEDIC\)](#) prepared by the [Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies \(VISES\) of Victoria University \(Melbourne\)](#) looked at what will happen if new investments in the education system are not made.

Key among their findings was a projected significant decrease in students completing secondary school by 2030 (see Figure 1), which in return would result in fewer women than men gaining access to tertiary education in Syria in years to come (see Figure 3 below). While in 2014 – 3 years after the start of the conflict – half of children leaving school (285,000 girls and boys) were still able to complete secondary education with a school certificate, an increasing number of children have since been forced to flee the country or drop out of school, or were otherwise prevented from accessing public education. As a result, fewer children have since graduated from secondary school. As of 2023, only 40 per cent of students (120,000 children) are projected to graduate with a secondary certificate. Graduation rates are projected to continue to fall to 25 per cent by 2032, when only 115,000 Grade 12 students are projected to graduate, while 341,000 (75 per cent) will not. Only a quarter of students completing secondary school will have significant consequences for the local economy, well-being, and community resilience.

Figure 1. Percentage of students completing and failing to complete secondary school in the absence of new investments in the education system.



Source: Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University. Figures for 2013–2021 are estimated; figures for 2022–2040 are projected.

TOP TEN ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL COSTS OF FAILING TO INVEST IN EDUCATION

The outcomes of not investing in the education system will be dire. VISES has identified ten critical risks of failing to immediately invest in the Syrian education system. While the failure to invest alone is not the sole cause of these risks, it is a significant contributor.

1. A DECREASE IN THE QUALITY AND AVAILABILITY OF EDUCATION SERVICES

The Government of Syria’s spending on the Ministry of Education has fallen dramatically. From 2011 to 2022, the share of the national budget allocated to education dropped from 7.1 to 3.6 per cent. In real terms, allocations have decreased by 78 per cent compared to 2011.¹ Continued investment of the international community in non-formal education is creating a parallel system that could attract families and children away from the formal system. Only two-thirds of the country’s 19,663 schools are still operating,² directly affecting the 2.4 million children who are out of school and 1.6 million children estimated to be at risk of dropping out.

Meanwhile, each additional year a child spends in education could result in a 10 per cent increase in their private income as an adult, while contributing to their mental and physical health, resilience and ability to protect themselves from violence.

What are the consequences for Syria? Fewer educated Syrian children will enter the workforce with the skills to improve their lifelong earnings or the resilience to support their families and their communities.



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¹ UNICEF Syria, Budget Brief: The 2021 State Budget in Syria, August 2021.

² OCHA Syria, [Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic](#), 2020. (Latest available data).

2. A FURTHER LOSS OF HUMAN CAPITAL IN SYRIA, AFFECTING THE ABILITY OF PARENTS TO PROVIDE FOR THEIR CHILDREN AS WELL AS THE PRODUCTIVITY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ECONOMY AND COUNTRY

The departure of an estimated 5.6 million Syrians³ to neighboring countries has drastically hollowed out the country's human capital. Many refugees came from the professional classes, leaving too few teachers, doctors, engineers and other skilled workers to meet the needs of the country. Any social and economic recovery for Syria will need a new generation of skilled young graduates to fill these gaps and increase economic productivity.

What are the consequences for Syria? There will be immense opportunity costs resulting from a failure to strategically invest in education recovery programming. The Syrian economy has contracted in half since 2011.⁴ Slower economic recovery will drive continued unemployment, low household earnings and slow GDP growth for the country. Lower numbers of young people will complete secondary and tertiary education meaning fewer “highly skilled” workers and even highly skilled graduates will face poor job prospects and low wages as the country faces slow GDP growth levels. This will leave more families dependent on assistance to meet their basic needs.



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3. A DECLINE IN THE STATUS OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN LEADING TO CHILD MARRIAGE AND IMPACTING THE SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS OF THE FAMILIES AND A SOCIETY AS WHOLE

Educated women are key to strengthening child, family and community resilience. Yet too many Syrian girls are dropping out of school and becoming young adults without having had the opportunity to develop their skills, become economically independent or contribute to society. In Syria, girls are less and less likely to be in education. In 2021, around 91 per cent of female children aged 6–11 were in education, but this drops to 84 per cent among girls aged 12–14 with a slight improvement to 86 per cent for those aged 15–17. Meanwhile, only 31 per cent of young women were in tertiary education in 2021.⁵ In the northern governorates, almost 60 per cent of young girls and women aged 15–29 are not in education, employment or training.

Assessments in Syria have shown serious increasing trends in child marriage: 72 per cent of assessed communities reported child marriage in 2022 and 26 per cent reported that child marriage is common or very common for girls.⁶

What are the consequences for Syria? The number of girls who can afford or who are permitted to attend secondary education and transition to university will remain low. As a result, they will remain marginalized compared with young men. The prospect of low lifetime earnings will have consequences for young women's ability to provide for their children's health, education and other needs. Outside of school, girls are exposed to social isolation and lack the knowledge and confidence to delay marriage or face the threat of gender-based violence. Child marriage increases rates of early pregnancy, infant mortality and young women dying in childbirth and reduces the health of the next generation.⁷ Overall, the impact will lead to economic loss and developmental challenges for the community and the country as a whole.

³ UNHCR, [Operational Data Portal](#), 8 September 2022.

⁴ OCHA Syria, [Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic](#), 2022.

⁵ OCHA Syria, [Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic](#), 2021.

⁶ OCHA Syria, [Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic](#), 2022.

⁷ WHO, [Adolescent Pregnancy](#), January 2020.



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4. CHRONIC STRESS RESULTING IN POORER MENTAL HEALTH IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Living under chronic stress affects children’s development and performance at school, as well as their social functioning and relationships with their families, and can lead to anxiety and depression.

In Syria, one in eight children in school have poor mental health and need specialized psychosocial support. Around half of children have been out of school since the crisis began and are unlikely to be receiving any mental health support. Family breakdown is also increasing, partly as a result of poverty and families living under persistent stress, and this adds to children’s distress.⁸

What are the consequences for Syria? Untreated mental health problems in adolescents and young people tend to persist into their adult years. Failing to invest now in ‘welcoming schools’, staffed by teachers trained to manage children affected by the crisis and equipped with relevant programmes to promote children’s well-being and prevent violence, along with the general lack of competent school counsellors and social workers, is likely to result in increased rates of mental health problems in the future. This will undermine the Syrian people’s resilience and ability to rebuild their communities and will lead into unhealthy societies more broadly.

5. INCREASED LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND CRIME

Children under 10 years old who witness violence are more likely to become delinquent and violent. Criminal behaviour in adolescents can lead to poor performance at school and leaving school early. Dropping out of school can lead to disengaged adolescents and young people becoming involved in crime, if they are not already. Adolescent criminal behaviour is also strongly linked to adult crime.

In the context of Syria, there is a risk of children being recruited and radicalized if they are out of school, and the availability of quality schooling can help mitigate that risk.

UNICEF does not have data on violence and crime in Syria, however, the Global Peace Index ranked Syria the third least peaceful country in the world in 2022.

What are the consequences for Syria? Violence and the threat of violence are prevalent in Syria, where one third of the population is internally displaced and active conflict continues in parts of the country. This will have consequences for the health and safety of the children and families affected, and for future generations and society as a whole.



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⁸ Save the Children, [A better tomorrow: Syria's children have their say](#), March 2019.



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6. INCREASED RATES OF CHILD LABOUR

More than one quarter of children aged 5–11 and over one third of children aged 12–14 who are working are out of school.

The crisis has dramatically reduced livelihood opportunities and impoverished millions of households, with 90 per cent of households living in poverty.⁹ Children – and boys more so than girls – are often taken out of school to act as the family's main breadwinner. Working at a young age, especially doing hard and dangerous work, damages children's bodies, growth and development and their prospects in life. Young men in Syria also increasingly opt for military assignments at home and abroad to earn an income, adding to the trend of militarization.

Education is a vital prerequisite for combating poverty, empowering and protecting children from hazardous and exploitative labour and sexual exploitation, promoting human rights and democracy, protecting the environment and influencing population growth.

What are the consequences for Syria? Child labour puts children and their families at a lifelong disadvantage. Increasing rates of child labour, including hazardous work, will have an impact on future generations, including diminishing economic recovery and development and perpetuating poverty.

⁹ OCHA Syria, [Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic](#), 2021.

7. INCREASED EDUCATION INEQUALITY, WHICH PUTS A STRAIN ON COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND CAN BECOME A DRIVER FOR CONFLICT AND INSTABILITY RISKS IN SYRIA

Unequal access to and quality of education among groups within a country creates tensions that can increase the risk of future conflict; at the same time, conflict exacerbates existing education inequalities. Conversely, equity in educational opportunities reduces the risk of conflict among communities. Reduced inequalities in education between gender groups has shown to reduce the risk of violent conflict by 37 per cent.¹⁰

The crisis in Syria has resulted in extreme inequalities in access to education, especially quality education. The discrepancy in access to the educational opportunities – between the children most affected by the war and those in safer regions – contributes to a further fragmentation of society.

What are the consequences for Syria? The long-term education inequalities between population and gender groups will further sour community relationships. Children's reduced ability to gain skills and knowledge that prepare them for the labour market will create resentment and social grievances that are likely to become a source of tensions that could and should be avoided.



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8. LOWERED RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES

The social fabric in Syria has suffered tremendously since the conflict began in 2011, and children are growing up in communities plunged into poverty and socio-economic insecurity. Families have been separated by displacement and communities shattered.

Children can be surprisingly resilient to such challenges. However, resilience is affected by a range of characteristics such as cognition, self-esteem and social support, which are developed in a supportive educational environment. Education can help children and their families and communities become resilient in the face of conflict and disasters by developing the skills required to manage and resolve tensions and conflict.

What are the consequences for Syria? Children's education will continue to be disrupted, and where learning occurs it will be under sub-optimal circumstances. Stressors triggered by poverty and the aftermath of the conflict affect children's ability to perform effectively and efficiently – in school or in the workplace; and will leave their marks on self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-regulatory capacities. This in return will affect their ability to forge relationships, and to support their families and communities.

¹⁰ UNICEF 2016, 'Education Inequality and Violent Conflict: Evidence and Policy Considerations'.

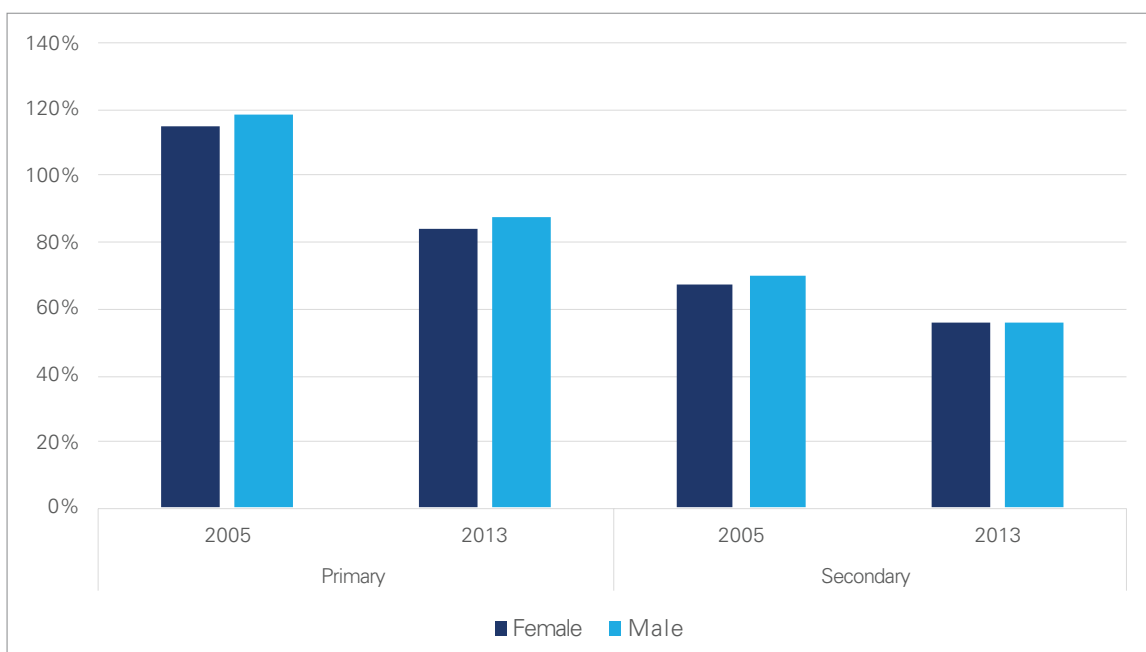
9. CUMULATIVE DETRIMENTAL SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EFFECTS ON CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

The risks considered above are not fixed: their impact will accumulate over time and have serious consequences for families and communities.

For example, before the conflict began, Syria had a literacy rate of over 90 per cent for men and women, and enrolment in primary school was nearly universal (97 per cent) for both boys and girls. Meanwhile, after two years of conflict, in 2013, gross enrolment rates in both primary and secondary schools were already significantly lower than in 2005 (Figure 2), and they have been declining ever since.



Figure 2. Gross enrolment rates in primary and secondary schools in Syria in 2005 and 2013



Source: Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University.



10. PRESSURE FOR FAMILIES AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO MIGRATE TO SEEK OPPORTUNITIES ABROAD

Education creates two parallel push-factors for migration. Families with school-aged children, and some children and young people on their own, may migrate in search of better educational opportunities, seen as a key to a more secure future. A weak economy, meanwhile, may prompt well-educated migrants to leave in search of higher earnings.¹¹

What are the consequences for Syria? Families will continue their often-perilous migration journeys, seeking a better future for their children, and searching for better educational opportunities.

¹¹ UNICEF Working Paper: Education solutions for migration and displaced children and their host communities.



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WHAT CAN UNICEF DO?

Through the partnership with the Victoria Institute for Strategic and Economic Studies, UNICEF commissioned an economic modelling exercise to determine investment returns of various internationally recognized ‘education for

resilience’ interventions,¹² should these be rolled out in the Syrian context.

The package of evidence-based ‘education for resilience’ interventions proposes to:

1. Increase time in school, by

- providing conditional cash transfers and food vouchers to lower secondary school students
- improving the school infrastructure by building new schools and improving existing schools with an emphasis on girl-friendly facilities
- running awareness-raising ‘Back to Learning’ campaigns

2. Improve learning outcomes, by

- running remedial and accelerated education programmes in all public schools
- recruiting and retraining teachers, and providing incentives to attract teachers who have left the profession
- updating teaching practices to improve student–teacher interactions and meet learners’ needs more effectively
- supporting distance learning to allow students to take advantage of remote learning opportunities

3. Support students with personal and social problems arising from the crisis, by

- creating schools that provide a welcoming environment and curb bullying
- running ‘youth readiness’ programmes that provide psychosocial support for children and young people with mental health issues, allowing them to focus on learning
- running informal programmes to help children who have dropped out of school to return and children who are struggling academically to stay in school and transition to higher grades
- providing upper secondary conditional cash transfers – as a targeted reward – to help older children, and girls in particular, complete secondary school at a critical time

4. Provide the skills needed to enter the workforce, by

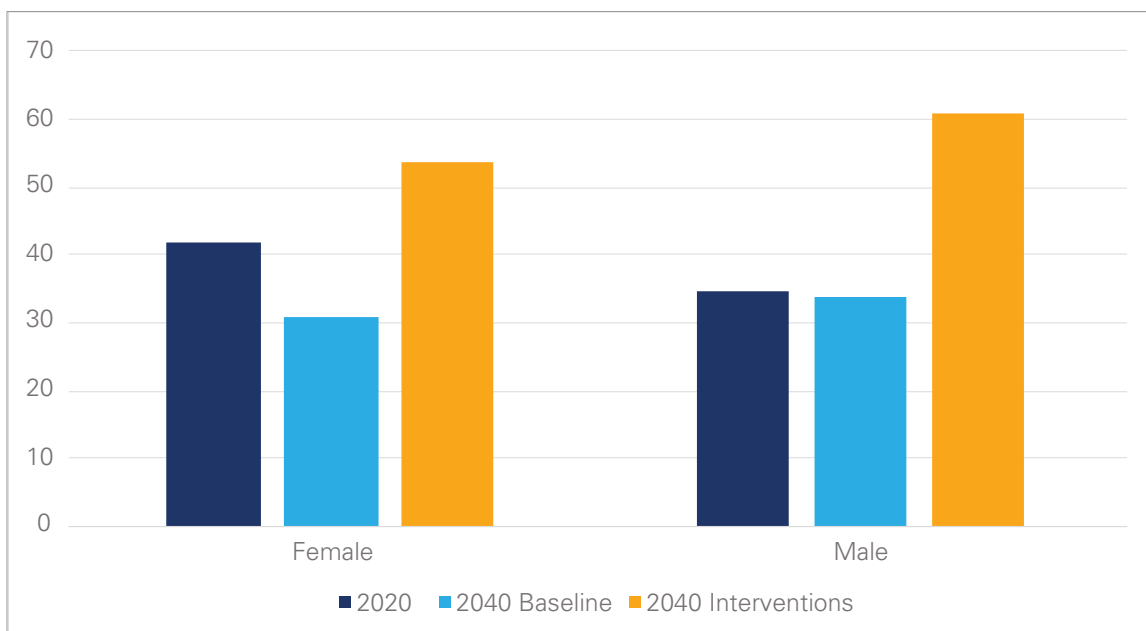
- expanding trade certificate and vocational training programmes to give children and young people skills relevant for employment
- promoting social innovation and entrepreneurship programmes for young people disadvantaged by poverty, gender, disability or ethnicity

¹² Damon, A., Glewwe, P., Wisniewski, S. and Sun, B. 2019, ‘What education policies and programmes affect learning and time in school in developing countries? A review of evaluations from 1990 to 2014’, *Review of Education*, vol. 7, pp. 295–387.

The modelling results (see Figure 3 and 4) indicate that the package of evidence-based ‘education for resilience’ interventions would increase Syrian children’s school attendance and thereby improve the quality of their learning

and the cognitive, social and vocational skills they would bring to the workforce, as well as school completion rates for both girls and boys. They would also protect children from social, psychological and economic harm.

Figure 3. Projected school completion rates, with and without the package of interventions



Source: Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University. Figures for 2013–2021 are estimated; figures for 2022–2040 are projected.

If these interventions were implemented, by 2040, 61 per cent of young men would leave having completed upper secondary school, compared with only 34 per cent if there is no new investment in education, a difference of 27 percentage points. For young women, it would mean that 54 per cent would leave having completed upper secondary school, compared with only 31 per cent if there is no new investment in education, a difference of 23 percentage points.

The dramatic increase in children’s schooling projected in this analysis would considerably reduce the crippling social costs Syria currently incurs, due in part to the unavailability of quality education services for all.

For example, if girls complete good-quality schooling:

- They are less likely to be married – and have children – while they are still children.
- They are more resilient and self-confident, which protects them against gender-based violence and economic exploitation.
- Having knowledge and skills allows them to make better-informed decisions about work, marriage and pregnancy.
- They are better able to manage their own and their family’s health.

If boys complete good-quality schooling:

- They gain the knowledge and skills they need to earn a decent living, educate their own children and contribute to their communities’ resilience.
- They avoid doing hard and dangerous work at an early age, which helps to protect their future health.
- They are less likely to become militarized.
- They are less likely to become involved in crime and violence.



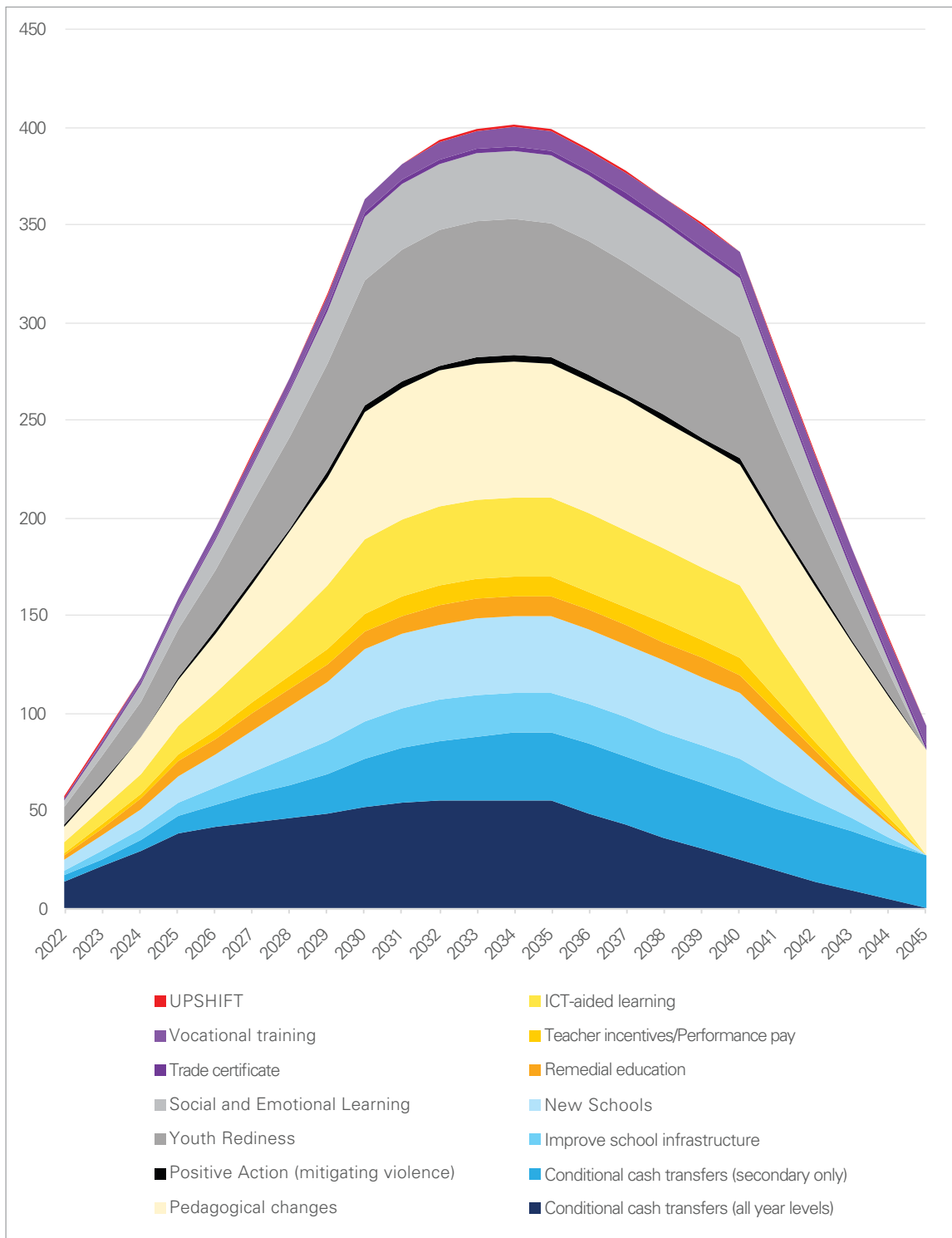
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WHAT ARE THE INVESTMENTS REQUIRED?

According to this study, a fully-funded 'education for resilience' national recovery programme would require initial investments of about \$50 million in 2022 (the first year) to be increased in subsequent years up to \$400 million by

2034. The costs are projected to remain above \$300 million per year until 2040. Figure 4 illustrates the modelled formal and nonformal intervention costs for the 14 education interventions detailed above.

Figure 4. Modelled formal and non-formal intervention costs in total and by intervention, US\$ million



Source: Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University.



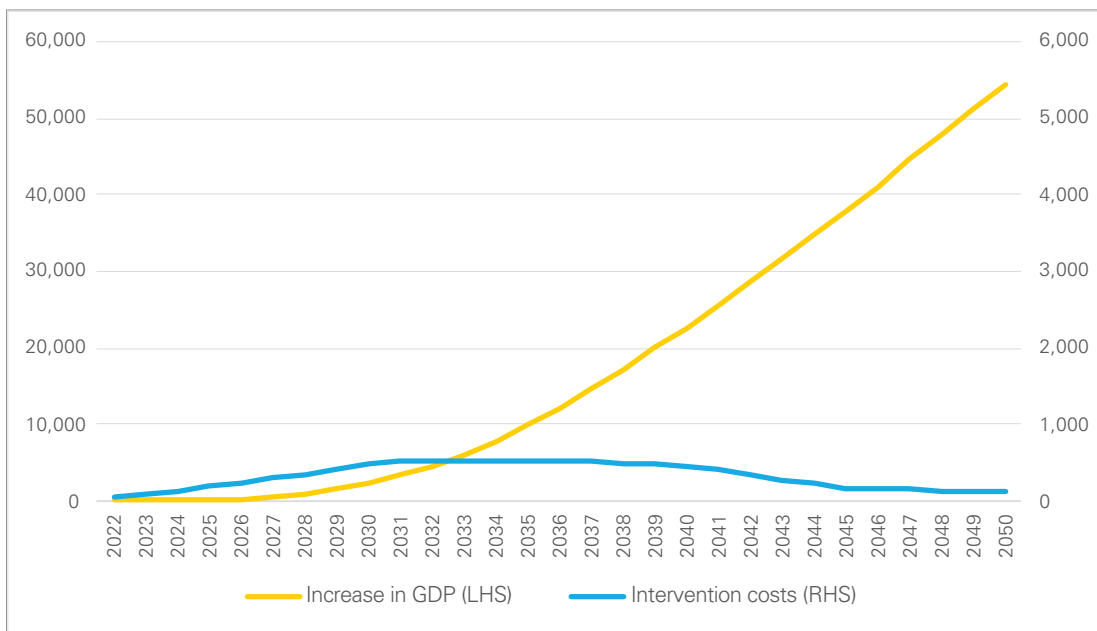
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ANTICIPATED COST BENEFITS RESULTING FROM SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The study also included a cost-benefit analysis. The economic benefits of secondary and higher education are higher skill levels, greater employment opportunities and

more productive economic outcomes for the community and the society at a whole – with a potential to increase annual GDP growth from 4 to 6 per cent. This means that by 2050, the economic return is \$42 for every \$1 invested. By 2030, the returns would already be \$2.50 for every \$1 invested.

Figure 5. Potential increase in Syrian GDP based on a fully-funded ‘education for resilience’ recovery programme



Source: Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Education systems need investment now:** The failure to invest in education is increasing the risk of violence and poverty now; these risks will only worsen cumulatively with each year they are not addressed. Investments in the education system are needed immediately and at-scale.
2. **Education is a transformative investment for children:** Investing in education systems can increase the number of children in school by 45 per cent, and school completion rates by 25 per cent. Attending school reduces the likelihood of children suffering psychosocial distress and of them becoming involved in child marriage, child labour, violence and crime, and even military activity.
3. **Education is a critical driver of gender equity:** Girls have a right to an education. Education unlocks the realization of women's rights to health, and social and economic participation. Completing their education gives girls the space to develop and contribute to their families and society and empowers them to protect themselves from violence.
4. **Education inequalities strain social cohesion:** Syrians see education as a desirable social good; as such, unequal access leads to social grievances that are at times addressed violently. Quality education allows children to acquire cognitive and life skills and increase their sense of cooperation and hope. It prepares them to be agents of change, building social cohesion and peace in their families and communities.
5. **Education has a high economic return on investment:** Reducing the social costs of non-investment in education, including child labour, will in turn reduce the economic harm to this generation of Syrian families and the next. Families will become less likely to migrate. The package of evidence-based 'education for resilience' interventions would have a long-term economic return of \$42 for every \$1 invested. By 2050, those who have been educated in the recovery programme are projected to produce almost 40 per cent more GDP per annum than had there been no recovery programme.



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The furthest from help.
The most excluded.
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And never give up.

Reference

Rasmussen, B., Sheehan, P., Symons, J, Maharaj, N. and M. Kumnick (2022). Syria Education and Development Investment Case [SEDIC] Technical Note: Economic, Social and Psychological Costs and Risks Resulting from Not Investing in Education Systems in the Syrian Arab Republic. Report to UNICEF Syria. Melbourne: Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies.

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