

# Transitional Justice

From the Perspective of Syrian Youth

The sketches presented in the report were drawn by participants in the focus groups that were organized by Dawlaty during the study.



“Your turn has come, doctor.” These few words were scribbled on a wall in the syrian town of deraa by a group of 14-year-olds on a fateful day of march 2011. What could have been (dis)regarded as simple venting by a group of young boys against the ‘doctor’, i.E. Syrian president bashar al-assad, or more generally against four decades of one family’s authoritarian rule that started off with hafez al-assad; landed these boys into the hands of the security forces. Their young age did not protect them from being tortured or killed.

These words shall be remembered as the very beginning of the syrian tragedy—what has now possibly become the world’s worst conflict in decades. It is a conflict resulting in cycles of violence marked by chemical attacks; laying siege to civilian populations; forced displacement; systematic torture leading to tens of thousands of deaths in custody; mass-scale detentions and enforced disappearances; and bombing of hospitals, schools and civilians. The children of deraa sowed the seeds that led to the anti-assad protests, spreading from deraa, to damascus and aleppo, and other cities and towns around syria. These children have paid too expensive a price for any child.

More than five years down the line, these children have become young adults, most of them and their peers across the country have endured the loss of loved ones, been abducted, and physically and psychologically scarred. They have been actively recruited into armed groups and some have taken part in the fighting. They have also missed critical years of education and career beginnings, necessary building blocks to set the foundations for any dignified life they may hope to have in the future.

But what shall also be remembered is the breath-taking courage and speed with which syrian youth was able to regroup and organise itself. Indeed, despite a history of authoritarian rule that barred any civil society formations pre-dating the revolution, many enthusiastically engaged into setting up civil society and grassroots organisations; catering to their communities, undertaking relief work, education and raising awareness activities, documenting violations, waging a communications war on social media platforms in a way no authoritarian rule can repress, and relaying their experiences through multiple platforms—in effect building the grounds for any future attempt to engage in an informed reflection about post-conflict syria.

Dawlaty’s work, including this report, is an intrinsic part of this equation. It examines the syrian people’s aspirations to move forward, gain time, learn, gather information and knowledge; but above all, to weave the threads of a new just, democratic syrian soci-ety.

This report underscores the importance of engaging with young syrians. By gathering their views, needs and experiences; it lays the ground to including them in any meaningful post-conflict processes, if they are to be agents of positive change. As it states, this report is time-bound and restricted in its geographic scope, as most initiatives taken on by civil society organisations generally are, but it is a necessary read for anyone seeking more insight into the experiences and views of this vital age group. More importantly, it attests to the absolute importance of integrating this group into any future decision-making processes. Indeed, from within syria or from their places of exile, in the years to come, young syrians will definitely be the main force driving change in the country— regardless of the military and political outcome of the conflict.

**Lynn maalouf**

Co-founder of act for the disappeared  
former head of lebanon program, international centre for transitional justice

## Foreword

This is the first field study conducted by Dawlaty on transitional justice from the perspective of young people. The study focuses on young people for several reasons. First of all, they are often neglected within the context of transitional justice, both as recipients and implementation partners. Secondly, the organisation's policy is to target young people with our programmes. Perhaps more importantly, however, young people are among the segments most targeted with attacks and violations. In some cases, they are perpetrators of such attacks and violations. Young people represent a large portion of the conflict's victims, and a significant part of armed groups, both governmental and non-governmental. Despite these facts, young people are excluded from decision-making processes to deal with attacks and violations when implementing transitional justice mechanisms.

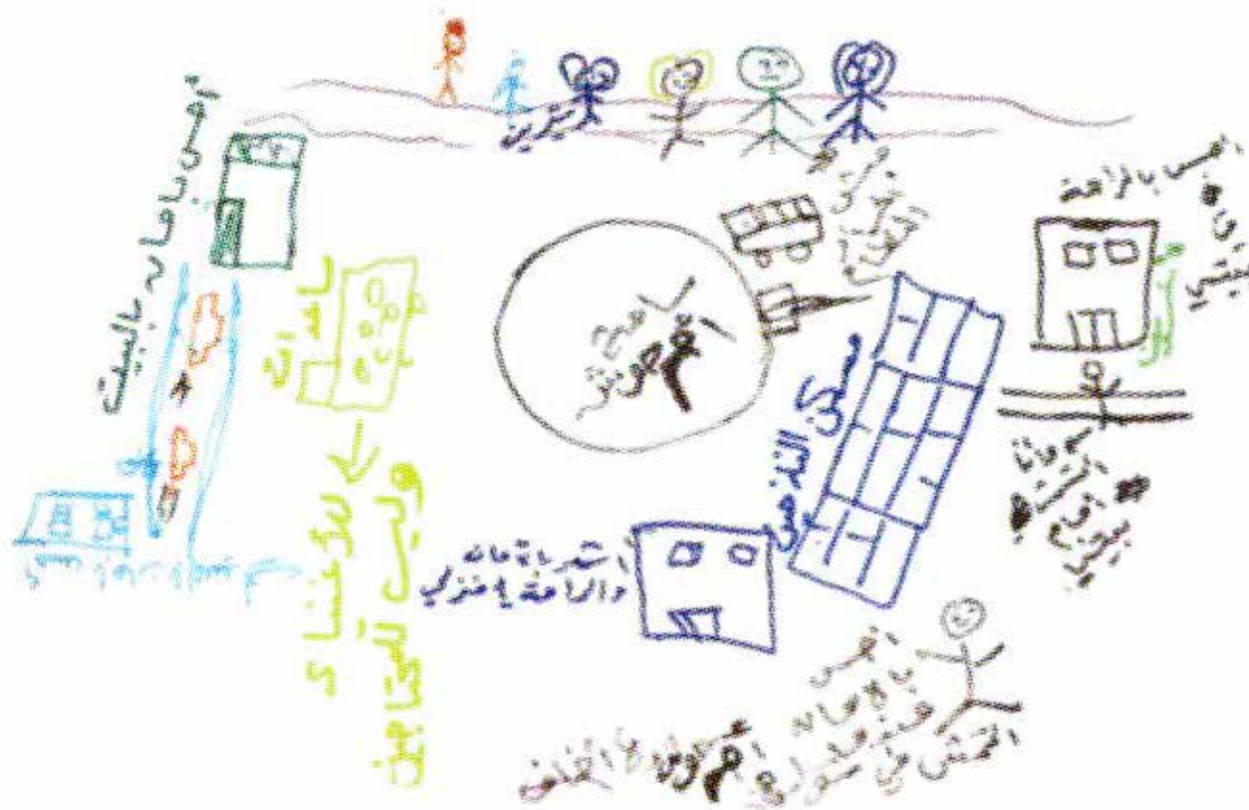
This does not mean that all young people are either victims or perpetrators. One of the key facts this study shows is that young people understand the concept of transitional justice in different ways. Some dismiss it as a useless mockery; some understand it as a process of amnesty and reparations, while others think of it as a system of punishments that should be directed at the regime alone. Digging deeper with young respondents, we have come to realise that their cynicism towards transitional justice comes from an impression they hold that the mechanisms and priorities of accountability, amnesty, and reconciliation are somewhat contradictory. Young people perceive that accountability and justice, on the one hand, and amnesty and reconciliation, on the other; cannot be sought at the same time. Many are seriously concerned that perpetrators of crimes may evade punishment.

In addition to being legitimate and realistic, these concerns reflect young people's understanding of similar experiences in countries that prioritised peace over justice, as well as their observation of neighbouring countries, where war criminals have not only escaped justice, but also have been leaders and officials in consecutive cabinets after the conflict ended. More importantly, these concerns indicate that Syrian and international civil society organisations have not been comprehensively explaining the mechanisms of transitional justice, focusing only on amnesty and reparation, and neglecting other judicial and non-judicial mechanisms.

It is imperative, as such, to provide young people with accurate, comprehensive information about transitional justice, in such a manner that would clarify how investigation to uncover truth; accountability, justice, and reparation; institutions reforms; demilitarisation; and amnesty and reconciliation; among other concepts and mechanisms; are, in fact, all parts of the same process, rather than contradictory procedures. For example, it is necessary to explain that amnesty policies do not exonerate those who committed murder, war crimes, or crimes against humanity. It is equally important, however, to explain the role of political deals that include concessions on justice to advance conflict-ending measures and achieve peace. Moreover, there is a need to emphasise the role of young people, local communities, and civil society organisations in mobilising social forces, creating media support for victims, involving victims in justice achievement processes, and lobby for peace with justice.

As limited and modest as it is, this study shows that young people are not just victims who need some guidance or help. They are not a mere target demographic, nor are they a group to survey nor implementers of programmes and policies; rather, they are true partners, and active agents within their communities. Thus, measures directed at young people should not be limited to providing care and rehabilitation services. They should aim to involve young people in thinking, planning, and acting to end the conflict, achieve justice, and institute profound reforms for a democratic Syria. Transitional justice initiatives in Syria must include youth specific components, directed at young people, and built on the belief in, and commitment to, the role of young people as partners and active counterparts.

**Mustafa Haid**  
Chairperson of Dawlaty



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## INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, inspired by revolutions in other parts of the Middle East, Syrians rose up to demand freedom, dignity, and justice. Their demands were met with violence and brutal repression by the Syrian regime. As the revolution went on, Syrians were not only resisting their government; they also had to face extremist groups trying to hijack their revolution and country. Consistent violations of humanitarian law were committed, including, but not limited to, targeting civilian infrastructure, indiscriminately attacking civilians, and starvation tactics. Widespread human rights and humanitarian law violations have been coupled with crumbling services and infrastructure, and increased poverty. Today, the death toll exceeds 470,000, by some estimates, with almost two million injured; hundreds of thousands detained, kidnapped, and disappeared; and over half of the population displaced.<sup>1</sup>

Young people have been at the forefront of the revolution, leading protests on the ground and innovating nonviolent tactics, as well as designing and implementing many humanitarian initiatives that support and sustain communities. As the conflict continues, however, the majority struggles due to decreased opportunities to education and livelihoods, and are often expected to take on additional responsibilities to care for their families. They often face greater risk of recruitment to armed group, exploitative labour, and sexual exploitation. Seen as less vulnerable and innocent than young children, and, at the same time, not identified as actors with the same responsibilities adults have; young people are often under-supported in humanitarian programming, and ignored or marginalised in decision-making processes, aiming to arrive at mechanisms that may respond to violations that this group experiences.

A growing body of evidence suggests that young women and men can, and in fact do, play active roles as agents of positive and constructive change. Their engagement in peace-building and transitional justice processes is essential to creating and sustaining peace. In December 2015, Un Security Council resolution number 2250 stipulated that young people can play a crucial role in peace and stability processes during

and post-conflicts. It urged member states to provide the technical, logistic, political, and financial support to include young people in peace and conflict resolution mechanisms and institutions.

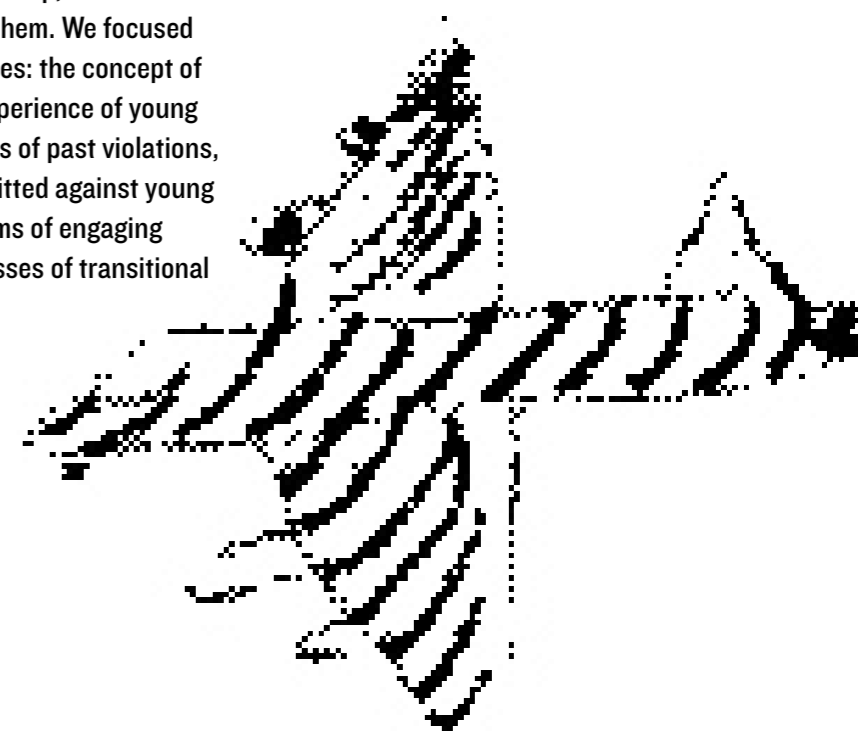
This milestone recognition of the role of young people comes from various facts about this demographic. Youth are currently the largest growing demographic the world has ever known, and they form the majority in most countries affected by armed conflict. In Syria, they account for up to 30% of the population<sup>2</sup>, and as such they constitute an important group to mobilise for conflict resolution and prevention, peace building, and stability. However, programming for adolescents and young people remains limited, and ignores their important role as agents of change and peace. There is a need to provide the youth with basic needs, knowledge, and skills; as well as create opportunities for them to engage constructively in their communities. In addition, inclusive policies, that would allow them to engage and participate in peace and conflict resolution processes and mechanisms, need to be adopted.

## ABOUT DAWLATY

Dawlaty is a Syrian non-profit organization which aims to enable civil society actors, particularly young men and women, to become active participants in achieving a democratic transition in Syria. The organisation works with partners in the civil society to promote concepts of nonviolence, transitional justice, and citizenship; by building skills and opportunities for civic engagement, community mobilisation and advocacy. This report explores the experiences of young people and their priorities in order to encourage and advance the development of programmes that build skills, knowledge, and networks for youth to participate in transitional justice in Syria after the end of the conflict, as well as support them to have a meaningful engagement in their communities in the current context.

In this report; Dawlaty aims to shed light on the human rights violations committed against young people in Syria, how they cope with them and engage in their communities, and what their views they hold on transitional 'justice concepts and mechanisms. This report is based on consulting young people by Dawlaty on two phases. In the first phase, we explored the violations that young people experience and how they deal with them, in addition to understanding young people's views of various concepts and mechanisms related to transitional justice. In the second phase, we tried to delve deeper and look at how these mechanisms overlap, as well as how young people regard them. We focused our attention on four themes: the concept of transitional justice, the experience of young people as victims/survivors of past violations, the violations being committed against young people, and the mechanisms of engaging young people in the processes of transitional justice.

This report is a part of Dawlaty's efforts to enable the engagement of civil society actors in general, and young men and women in particular, in future transitional justice processes in Syria. The report is also the result of working with young people in the 18-30 age group, as they constitute a demographic that is not targeted or engaged with in a serious fashion, and that must be engaged if we are to build a just, democratic, and peaceful future for Syria.



<sup>1</sup> Syrian Centre for Policy Research. 2014. Alienation and Violence Report.

<sup>2</sup> Statistical Population. Central Bureau of Statistics – Syrian Arab Republic. 2004. Accessed on 9/22/2016 at <http://www.cbssyr.sy/people%20statistics/popmoh.pdf>

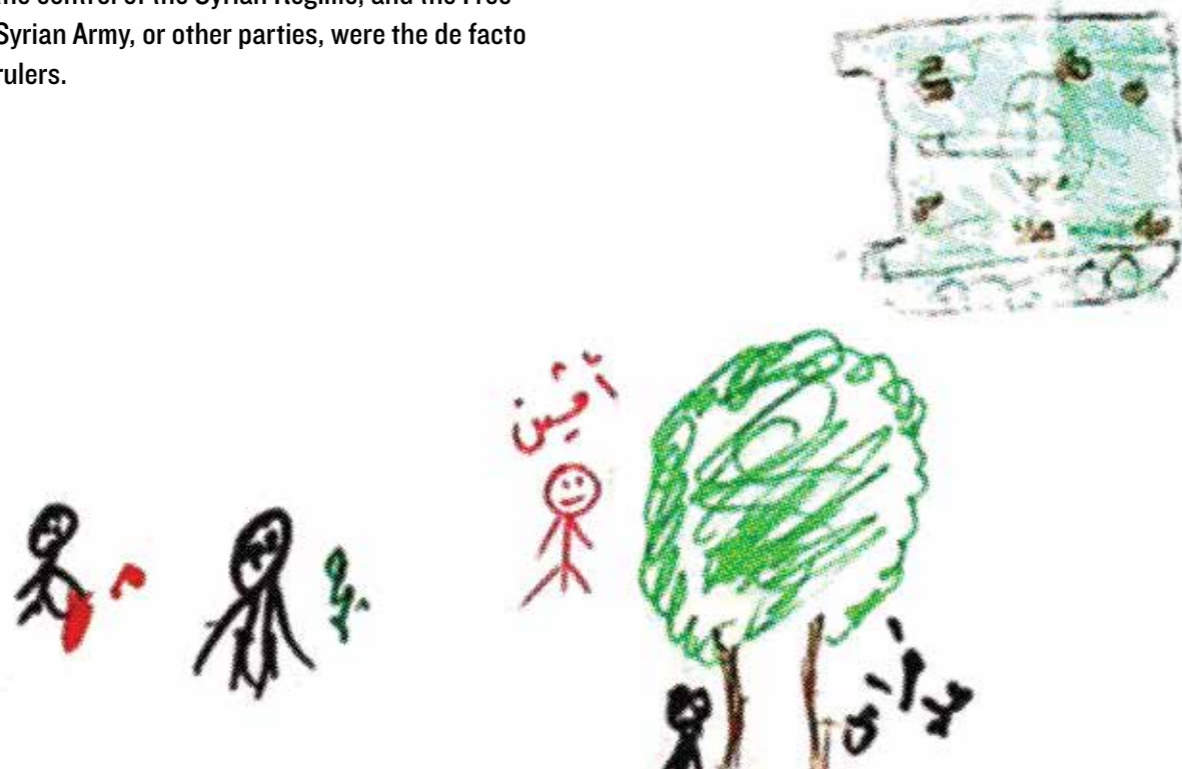
# METHODOLOGY

The study, which was conducted to generate this report, used multiple tools to consult young people in the 18-30 age group, as well as key informants in their communities, mainly inside Syria. In its first phase, the study focused on governorates in Northern Syria and covered 6 communities. Additional interviews were conducted in Lebanon and Turkey to access displaced groups from areas to which we did not have access. Questionnaires were answered by 518 young women and men, and 54 focus group discussions were held. In the second phase, the study included nine new communities in the North and South of Syria; including 529 young women and men respondents to questionnaires, 34 participants in focus group discussions, and 48 interviewees. Additionally, 44 community leaders were interviewed, including teachers, local council representatives, among others.

The communities that were targeted by the study were all in non-government held areas, controlled by various non-state actors. In addition to seeking geographic diversity, Dawlaty chose communities based on access and the ability to identify a field team in these areas without unjustifiable risks or extreme security situations. The study covered 15 areas, three of which were under siege, or hard to reach (including one controlled by the Islamic State) during the time of the field work. The areas were distributed throughout Syria; in the governorates of Aleppo, Idlib and Hasakeh in the north of the country; and Rif Damascus, Qunaitra, and Daraa in the south of the country. All of these areas were outside the control of the Syrian Regime, and the Free Syrian Army, or other parties, were the de facto rulers.

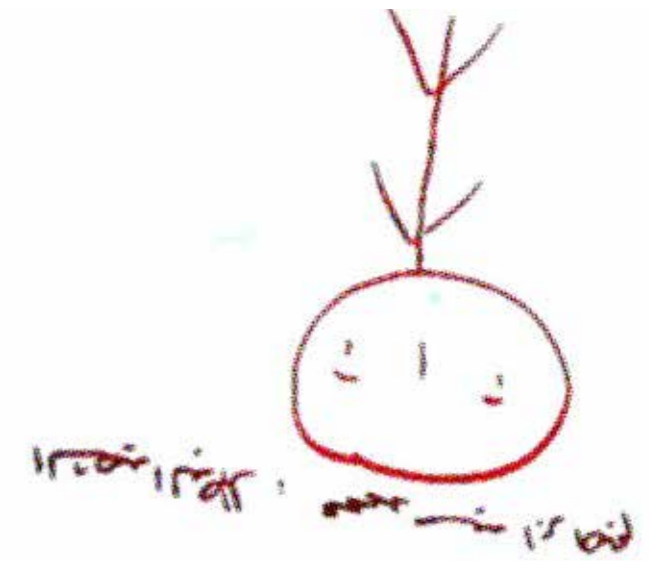
A total of 22 field workers was recruited for the study. They received on-site training when feasible, and virtual training when the mobility of the field team was constrained. The trainings were technical (data collection, interviewing skills, etc.) and content specific (concepts associated with transitional justice, youth engagement, etc.). The training was also a chance to test the face validity of the instruments tools used; problematic terminology was revised and/or simplified.

The study participants were chosen the 15-30 age group. The lower bound of the age was raised to 18 after noticing that younger participants were not interacting easily with the concepts or the questions of the study.



**Table I. Distribution of tools used in the study according to each study phase**

	Number of people Surveyed	Meeting with Leaders/Elders	In-depth interviews with victims/survivors	Focus group discussions
Phase I	518	-	-	54
Phase II	529	44	48	34



## STUDY LIMITATIONS

There were several challenges and limitations to the study that arose either from the study design, or the context of the areas in which the study took place. Even though the study covered several areas in Syria and reached a diverse sample of respondents and participants, the research team was not able to operate in areas under the control of the Syrian Regime, nor in areas under the control of extremist armed groups. As such, young people from those areas were not included in the studies; thus, their experiences of the conflict, and the violations that they faced, were not captured in the data. The results and conclusions that we reach, therefore, cannot be directly generalised over the entire country.

Moreover, the field workers faced various challenges when attempting to engage potential respondents to participate in the

study due to the security situation in each area. Some people were concerned about any adverse repercussions of their participation in the study, especially among those who were displaced from areas that were under the control of the Regime and were considering returning back to their homes, owing to the economic hardship that they are facing where they were. Some people also became suspicious about the aims of the study when they knew that it was posing questions about violations that they faced, while others did not see any future benefit for these studies and declined to participate.

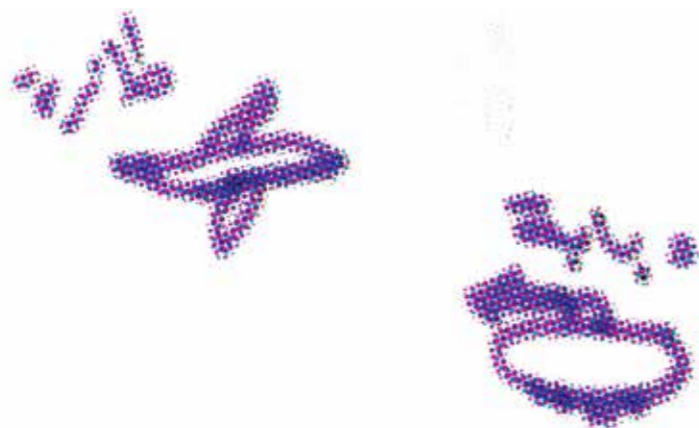
## VIOLATIONS FACED BY YOUTH

Young people share a lot of the risks and hardships with others in their communities that come from living through a context of war. In addition, they face additional risks and challenges that are often not recognised as a priority by communities, nor by humanitarian and human rights actors. This is true of the violations that they face; for young people share many of the violations faced by the population at large, whether they are individually targeted, collectively punished, or randomly caught up in the violence and lawlessness. However, young people also face violations that are peculiar to the specific phase of their lives and which impact on their future.

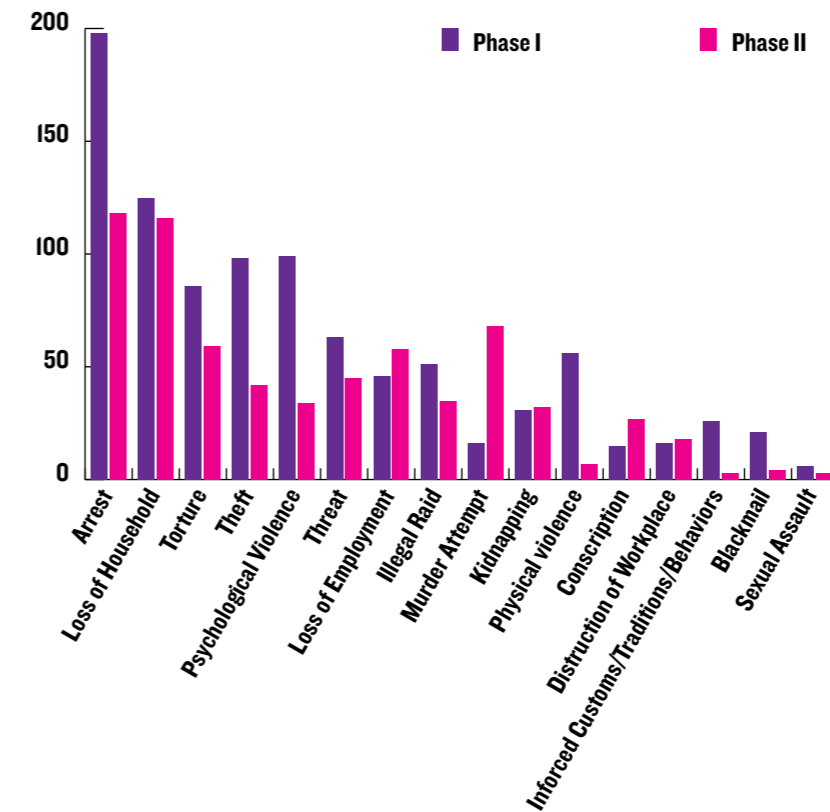
When asking young people about the violations that they experienced, we opted to use a variety of wordings to convey what we meant by the term “violation”. In order to not simply focus their answers on the prevalent definitions of “human rights violations” (i.e. mass scale crimes or violations bound by a strict human rights framework), we asked respondents about assaults and attacks against their personal dignity. Using this wording, we aimed to convey our interest in covering abuses and injustices by which they felt hurt or violated on a personal level. Thus, we were able to record violations that we did not include in the spectrum of violations for which we were screening (e.g. loss of educational opportunities).

Young people reported arbitrary arrests, detentions, and torture while in detention, as well as the loss of their homes/households as

the most common violations that they suffered. On a personal level, young people experience various forms of violence such as threats, kidnapping, murder attempts, and physical injuries. Though very few of the respondents mentioned experiencing or witnessing forms of conscription, sexual assault, or customs and behaviours that are forced upon them by the party in control of the area, we assume that these violations are more common than they are reported. However, we were not able to detect these experiences due to respondents’ concerns of social stigma. On one hand, sexual violence and assaults are viewed by the Syrian society as a “dishonour”, while conscription into armed groups can be rationalised as a person’s duty to defend his community. Figure (1) presents the percentages of the last three violations each respondent to the survey experienced.



**Figure 1. Distribution of the last three violations each respondent experienced. The number of violations reported in each of the two phases were combined.**



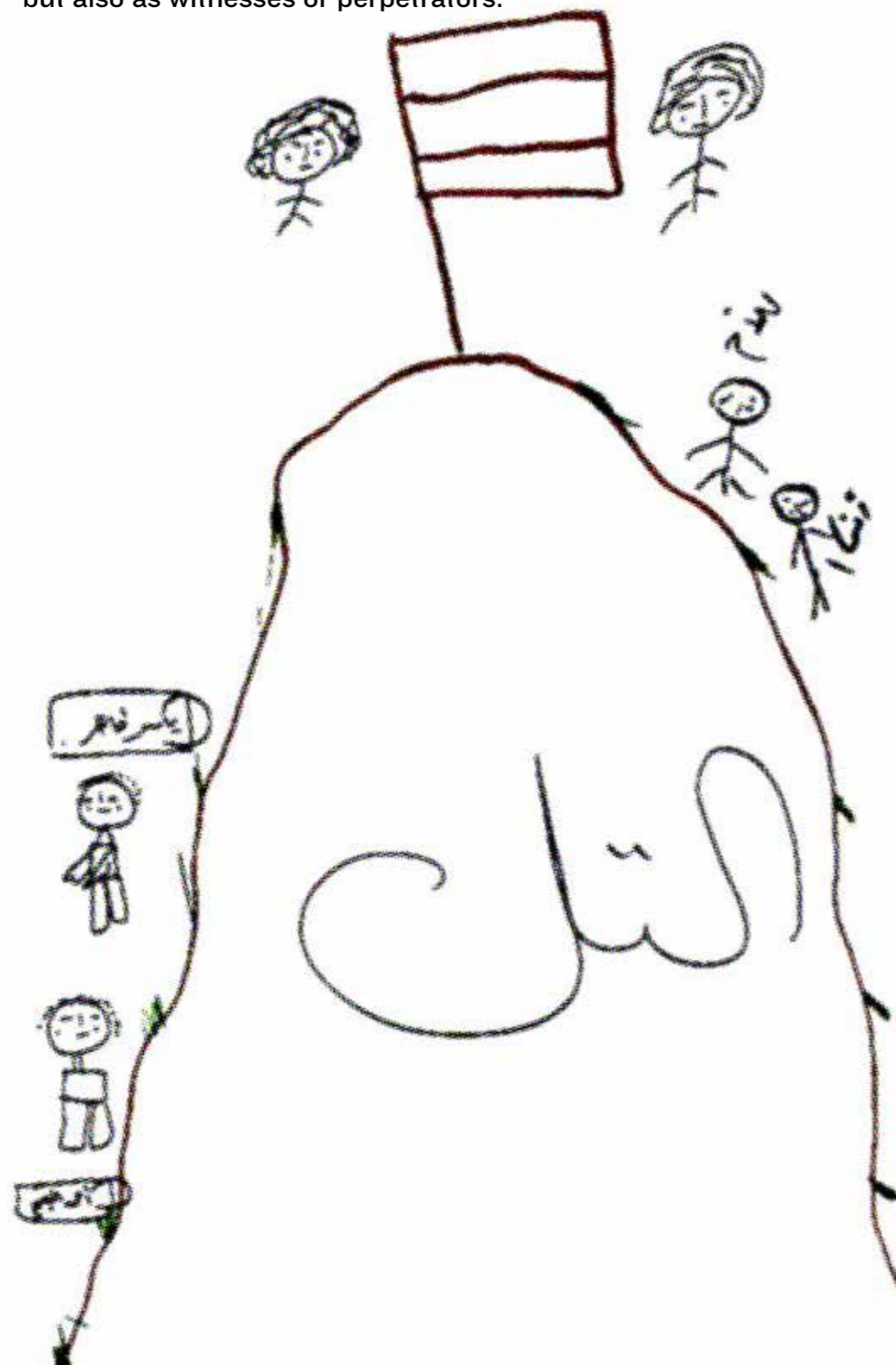
## REPORTED ABUSES

A violation which came up strongly in focus group discussions, but was not evident in survey results, was denial of access to education. Loss of educational opportunity was a recurrent violation that many young people mentioned, and one that they thought was an important factor to address in future transitional processes. The denial of access to education was seen not only as a violation in the present but one that affected their future as well. Young people felt that their inability to continue their education meant that they could not prepare for the rest of their lives. Though education is usually included in response work and relief efforts, we note the possibilities that could be explored by integrating it more clearly within the mechanisms of transitional justice.

## VIOLATIONS PERPETUATED BY YOUNG PEOPLE

To better understand the experience of young people in the conflict, we asked respondents about their participation, or that of their relatives, in violations against others. The question was worded in a 'vaguer way' in order for the question to be less threatening to respondents. Over ten percent of respondents (56 out of the 529) mentioned that they or one of their relatives participated in committing violations. Though we do not note a difference in the possibility of having committed violations by the respondents by gender or age, it is noticeable that the frequency of committed violations was lower among women and older respondents. While this issue needs

more examination and investigation, answers to this question demonstrate the need to engage with youth in a more nuanced way, not just as victims, but also as witnesses or perpetrators.



## VIOLATIONS COMMITTED BY YOUNG PEOPLE AND/OR THEIR RELATIVES

**Table 2. Distribution of the number and percentage of violations committed by a respondents or one of his/her relatives, (by gender).**

Number of Violations Committed	Females		Males		BOTH	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
One	22	95.1	22	66.7	44	78.6
Two	1	4.4	10	30.3	11	19.7
Three	-	-	1	3.0	1	1.8
Total	23		33		56	
		%		%		%

**Table 3. Distribution of the number and percentage of violations committed by a respondent or one of his/her relative, (by age).**

Number of Violations Committed	18-24		25-30		BOTH	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
One	23	74.2	21	84	44	78.6
Two	7	22.6	4	16	11	19.7
Three	1	3.2	-	-	1	1.8
Total	31		25		56	
		%		%		%

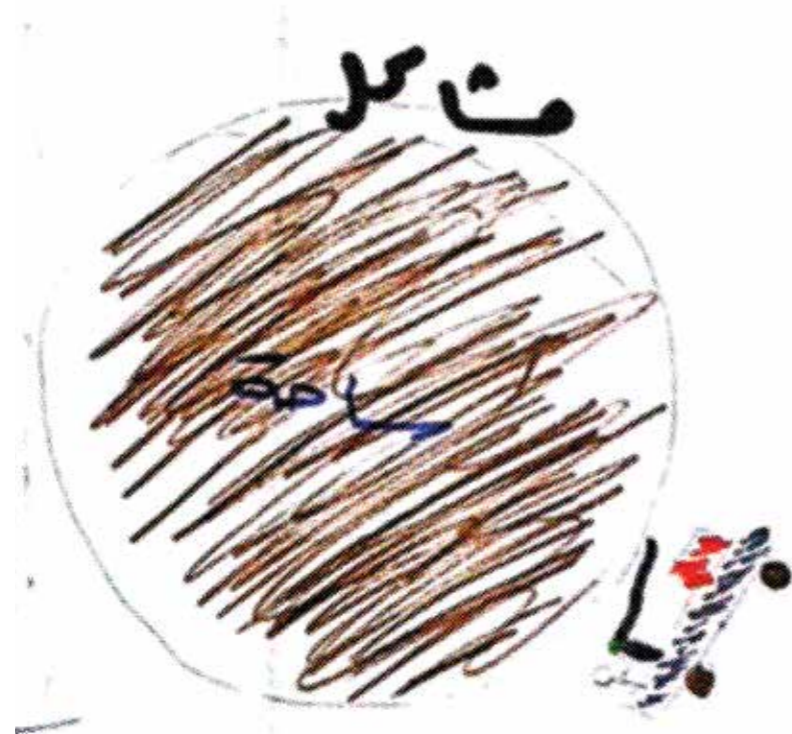


## COPING WITH VIOLATIONS

Questionnaire results indicated that young people seldom ask for help or advice when they experience a violation. Less than half of the respondents (49%) who experienced any violation ended up asking for any form of support. This low tendency to seek support may be due to the fact that most interventions available following any violation are usually limited to documenting the incident without offering any tangible services.

Out of the respondents who did seek any form of help or advice, almost half (48%) did not receive any form of compensation or redress for the violation, and only had their story documented. When young people do seek advice or help, they usually go to their families or close social networks (25% and 13% respectively). In some cases, young people seek out help from armed groups in control in their areas (13%). Seeking out assistance from armed groups is more likely to happen in cases of kidnapping or detention to put pressure on the perpetrator (who could be from another armed group) to release the person in its custody, negotiate a ransom, or include the name of the person in a coming prisoners swap.

In in-depth interviews with young victims, we explored experiences that they went through, their personal reactions to them, and their ways of coping with them, and their communities' reaction to them. Most of the interviews that we collected centred around experiences of detention, the forced disappearance of someone close, and injuries that caused a physical disability. The reactions and coping techniques differed from one person to another, but most of interviewees mentioned that the support of their families and close social networks was what helped them cope well with their experiences the most.



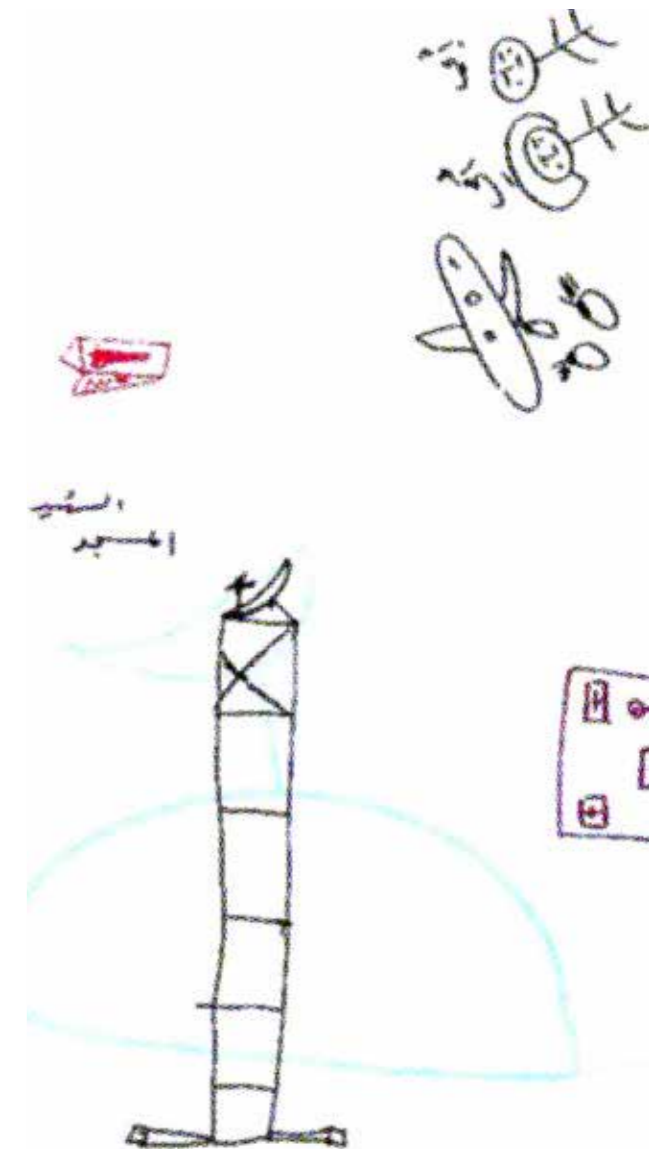
## DETENTION

Detention was the most recurrent violation faced by participants in the study. While they themselves and their families received support from various sources, this support differed according to the context of the detention. Respondents who were detained usually found support coming from their parents and family members, who would attempt to find their whereabouts. Yet there is always concern that their family member would get arrested in the process. Young people who were detained also found considerable support from their communities, especially those of small towns and villages. Many local councils played an important role in documenting cases of arrests and following up on them.

Yet there are some cases where the person who was detained found that the community around him/her was not supportive. When the person was known to be an activist or to have participated in revolutionary activities, it was considered that the person was aware of the risk they were taking and less deserving of sympathy and support. People who were detained by armed groups in control of their areas also found little support from their communities. Some groups are viewed as liberators, hence their actions were tolerated and/or justified. A 25-year-old man from Qunaitra explains: "Everyone in my village remained silent, and I do not blame them... Everyone in my village has a terrible memory of the presence of the regime's army, so they believe that the new liberators, namely the Free Syrian Army, who freed them from the evil of the regime... had the right to do what they saw fit." Women who were detained also found support from their parents and communities, yet they also noted a tone of blame for the "embarrassment" that their detention brought on their relatives. Their main complaint was that their families restricted their space and mobility following their release from detention.

The clan mediated with the Free Syrian Army forces for my release. I stayed secluded in my house for a very long time. The people looked at me as though I had betrayed the clan until I was arrested by the regime and managed to get out safely. Friends and family visited me to check if I was okay and ask if I had seen any of the people that they know and were arrested. Despite how hard it was, it was the reason why I was accepted back into my community.

-- As told by one of the participants (28 years old man from Qunaitra)



## KIDNAPPING

Young people who had a family member forcibly disappeared or missing found support from their communities who showed sympathy and compassion towards them, and at times tried to help with minor gestures (food baskets, moral support, etc.). However, many of those around them were not very open about their support due to fear of the party responsible. Family members of the missing and the disappeared did not find an official group or an organization that would deal with their concerns and help finding their family

members. For those who were kidnapped, the party that was responsible was usually known and easier to communicate with than in the case of a person who goes missing. Kidnappings were usually carried out for the purpose of exchanging prisoners or for ransom. But when it comes to those missing or forcibly disappeared, they are usually taken because of their political work/activism or because they were engaged in humanitarian aid activities, making the kidnapping both the means and the goal.

It happened almost two and a half years ago. I was going to work (...) in the company bus with my colleagues when we were stopped by a masked armed men. They kidnapped us and took us to an area under their control. We were presented to the commander of the group who executed my four male colleagues by slitting their throats right in front of me. Then they released the rest of the girls after threatening to kill them if they returned to work in that area again. As for me, the commander of the group took me to another area and told me that he could rape me but he wouldn't do that because he was a religious man, and that he was giving me a choice between marrying him and having my throat cut open like my colleagues. He was already married to two women. I was petrified, and I begged him to let me go with my friends, but he insisted.

I was forced to marry him out of fear for my life, but I felt like I was dying every night he would rape me under the pretence of marriage. I hated him and I hated my body. For two years, I was not allowed to leave the house that I lived in with his wives and children, or even look out the windows. He never allowed me to call my family or anyone. I did not ask anyone for help. For more than two years, I was completely alone. I did not have the right to talk to anyone except his wives and children, who were not doing any better than I was. I got used to spending most of my time alone, and when that criminal was not in the house, I would teach his children how to read and write since he would not let them go to school. I did it in secret, out of fear that he would punish me or the children or the other wives.

This imprisonment went on for two years until he was killed in one of the battles in the area and I was free. I had no contact with the outside world whatsoever, and I did not know if my family was looking for me or not. When I was finally free to leave, I could not leave the liberated areas out of fear of being interrogated by the regime for being a captive by one of the extremist Islamic factions. I am living alone with my child and I still do not know if I love him or hate him.

--Narrative of a woman in her 20s.

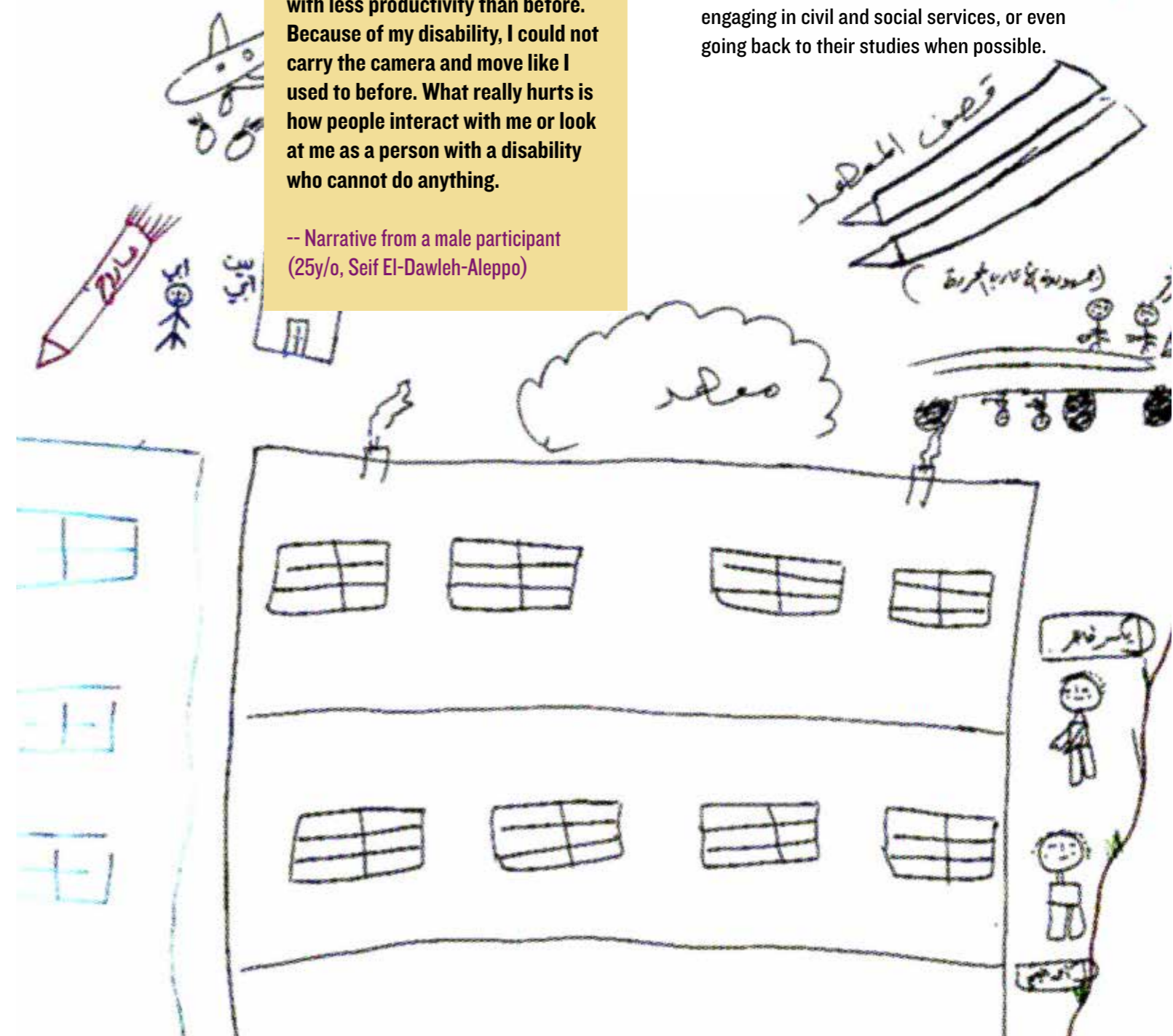
## DISABLED BY WAR

Young people with physical disabilities due to a past injury have to deal with a shortage in medical supplies and services. This has resulted in many of them losing functions in a limb and/or organ, and sometime led to amputation. Most of these injuries and the resulting disabilities are due to the regime's bombing in the first place, but some young people also sustained these injuries from being caught in a cross fire, beatings and torture during raids and detentions, landmines, or sniper bullets.

These young people suffer from isolation and loneliness to which they succumb for various reasons; such as the lack of medical services to alleviate their suffering, their inability to complete tasks they were performing before, and the accumulation of various burdens that they feel helpless to solve. The reactions of sympathy with which their communities meet them are another source of discomfort for them. With the lack of any trustworthy, effective mechanisms of accountability and justice, in their view, many of them expressed a desire for vengeance, mostly through dreams of them taking revenge against those they deem responsible. Yet, some of these young people were able to overcome their reality by engaging in civil and social services, or even going back to their studies when possible.

After spending a year in therapy, I decided to go back to work, though with less productivity than before. Because of my disability, I could not carry the camera and move like I used to before. What really hurts is how people interact with me or look at me as a person with a disability who cannot do anything.

-- Narrative from a male participant (25y/o, Seif El-Dawleh-Aleppo)

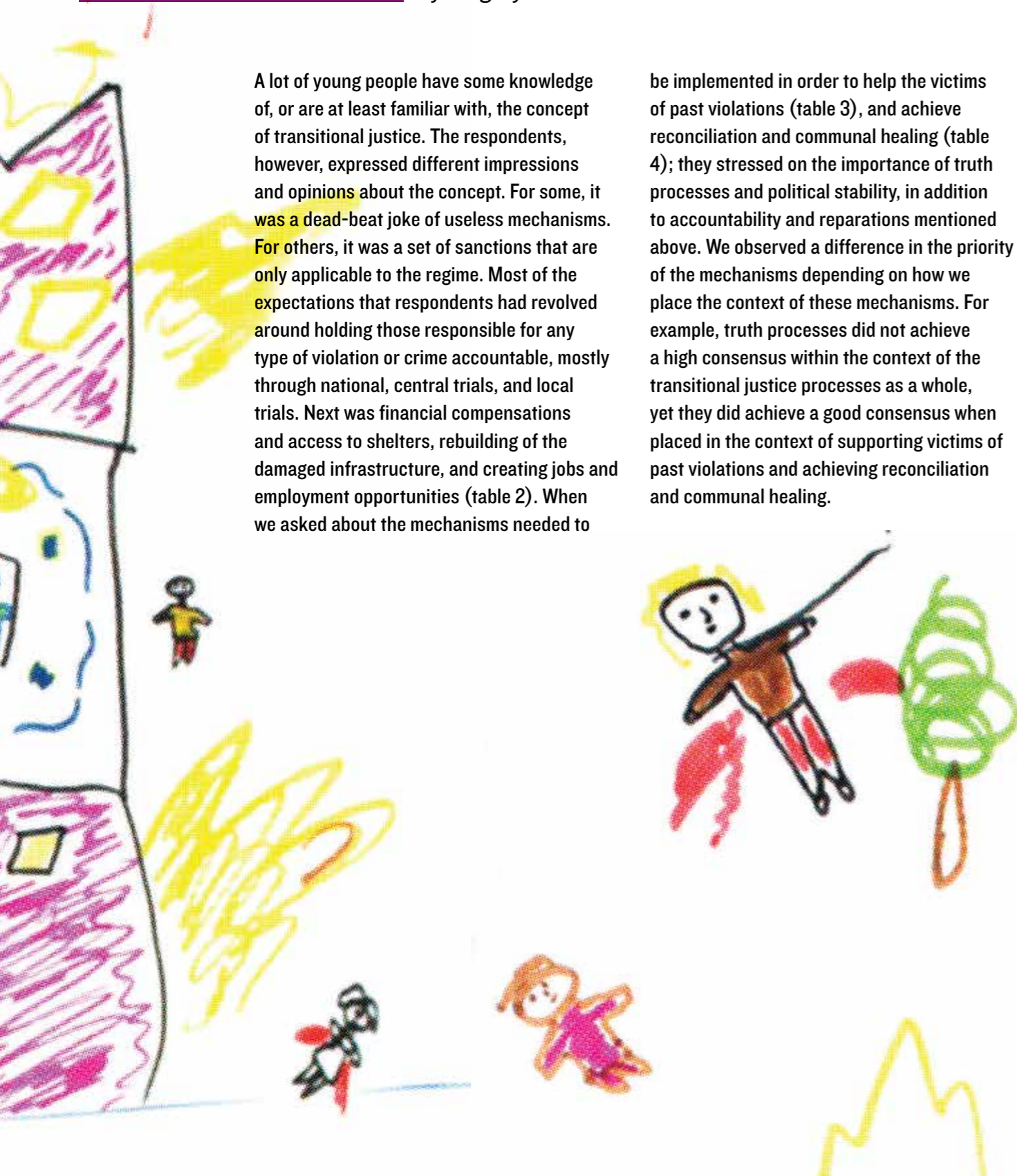




At the end of each phase of the study, we reserved a section to ask about transitional justice and its mechanisms. We tried not to ask about them directly during the interviews, to avoid explaining them, until after the interviews were done, so that we do not bias the respondents' answers. The sampling frame did not target young people who were trained or participated in workshops on transitional justice and its mechanisms. Those who did participate in these trainings were considered a part of the natural diversity of the sample of young Syrians.

A lot of young people have some knowledge of, or are at least familiar with, the concept of transitional justice. The respondents, however, expressed different impressions and opinions about the concept. For some, it was a dead-beat joke of useless mechanisms. For others, it was a set of sanctions that are only applicable to the regime. Most of the expectations that respondents had revolved around holding those responsible for any type of violation or crime accountable, mostly through national, central trials, and local trials. Next was financial compensations and access to shelters, rebuilding of the damaged infrastructure, and creating jobs and employment opportunities (table 2). When we asked about the mechanisms needed to

be implemented in order to help the victims of past violations (table 3), and achieve reconciliation and communal healing (table 4); they stressed on the importance of truth processes and political stability, in addition to accountability and reparations mentioned above. We observed a difference in the priority of the mechanisms depending on how we place the context of these mechanisms. For example, truth processes did not achieve a high consensus within the context of the transitional justice processes as a whole, yet they did achieve a good consensus when placed in the context of supporting victims of past violations and achieving reconciliation and communal healing.



## TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE PRIORITIES AMONGST YOUTH

Table 4. Distribution of the participants' views on the priorities of the mechanisms of transitional justice in Syria

	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Priority Degree
Central & national trials	25%	5%	3%	
Local trials	18%	9%	9%	
Hearing sessions	7%	2%	3%	
Shelters	7%	9%	9%	
Administrative and service infrastructure reforms	5%	7%	8%	
Confessions by previous perpetrators	5%	4%	2%	
General amnesty (does not include leadership positions)	5%	6%	2%	
Financial compensations	4%	10%	7%	
Reforming the judicial system	4%	7%	5%	
Truth-seeking	4%	3%	2%	
Rebuilding infrastructure	3%	9%	14%	
Job opportunities	3%	8%	13%	
Reforming the army	3%	6%	6%	
Lustration (purging government of officers responsible for violations)	3%	3%	5%	
Public apologies	1%	2%	0%	
Reforming the security forces	1%	6%	5%	
General amnesty	1%	2%	0%	
Support to national reconciliation efforts	1%	3%	5%	
Non-financial reparations	1%	1%	2%	

## HOW TO SUPPORT VICTIMS OF VIOLATIONS

**Table 5. Distribution of the participants' views on the steps needed to help/support the victims of past violations during the transitional phase**

	Frequency
Everyone who experienced a violation is a victim, we should move on	4.3%
It is a time of war; we should not look into the past	5.7%
They should be compensated for their suffering and their loss	29.8%
Truth should be known about the violations and the crimes	22.5%
Perpetrators should stand in a fair trial	26.3%
Perpetrators should ask the victims for forgiveness	3.5%
They can be referred to therapy and counselling	3.0%
I do not know	4.9%



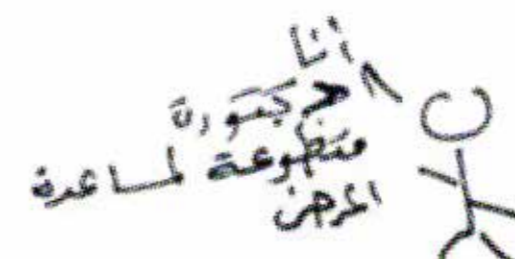
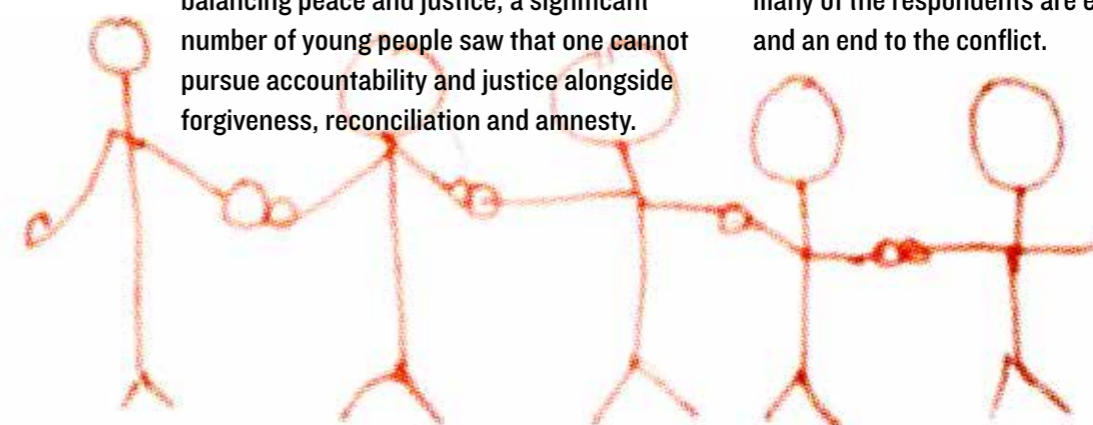
## HOW TO ACHIEVE COMMUNAL AND NATIONAL HEALING

**Table 6. Distribution of the participants' views on the steps needed to achieve communal and national healing during the transitional phase**

	Frequency
Amnesty	10.0%
Truth seeking	17.8%
Accountability	29.8%
Retribution	4.3%
Reparations	18.3%
Political stability	16.3%
I do not know	3.8%

The respondents saw a clear and direct connection between the necessity of holding people accountable for their crimes and holding trials for these crimes (figure 2). The interviewees, however, expressed a sense of dissonance between wanting justice and wanting the war to end. When asked about balancing peace and justice, a significant number of young people saw that one cannot pursue accountability and justice alongside forgiveness, reconciliation and amnesty.

Many young people expressed concern that forgiveness and reconciliation measures would mean that perpetrators would evade punishment. However, a preference was noted for prioritising the processes of reconciliation and peace over justice in the transitional phase. As the conflict enters its fifth year, many of the respondents are eager for peace and an end to the conflict.



## Views on peace and justice

<sup>4</sup> The Belfast Guidelines on Amnesty and Accountability. Transitional Justice Institute - University of Ulster. 2013. Belfast, Northern Ireland. Accessed on 9/22/2016 at <https://goo.gl/mnTJ2n>

The results indicate the need to link youth with the necessary information about the mechanisms of transitional justice, especially how reconciliation and amnesty may complement justice and accountability<sup>4</sup>. For example, it is important to remember the limitations of amnesty policies when it comes to exonerating perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

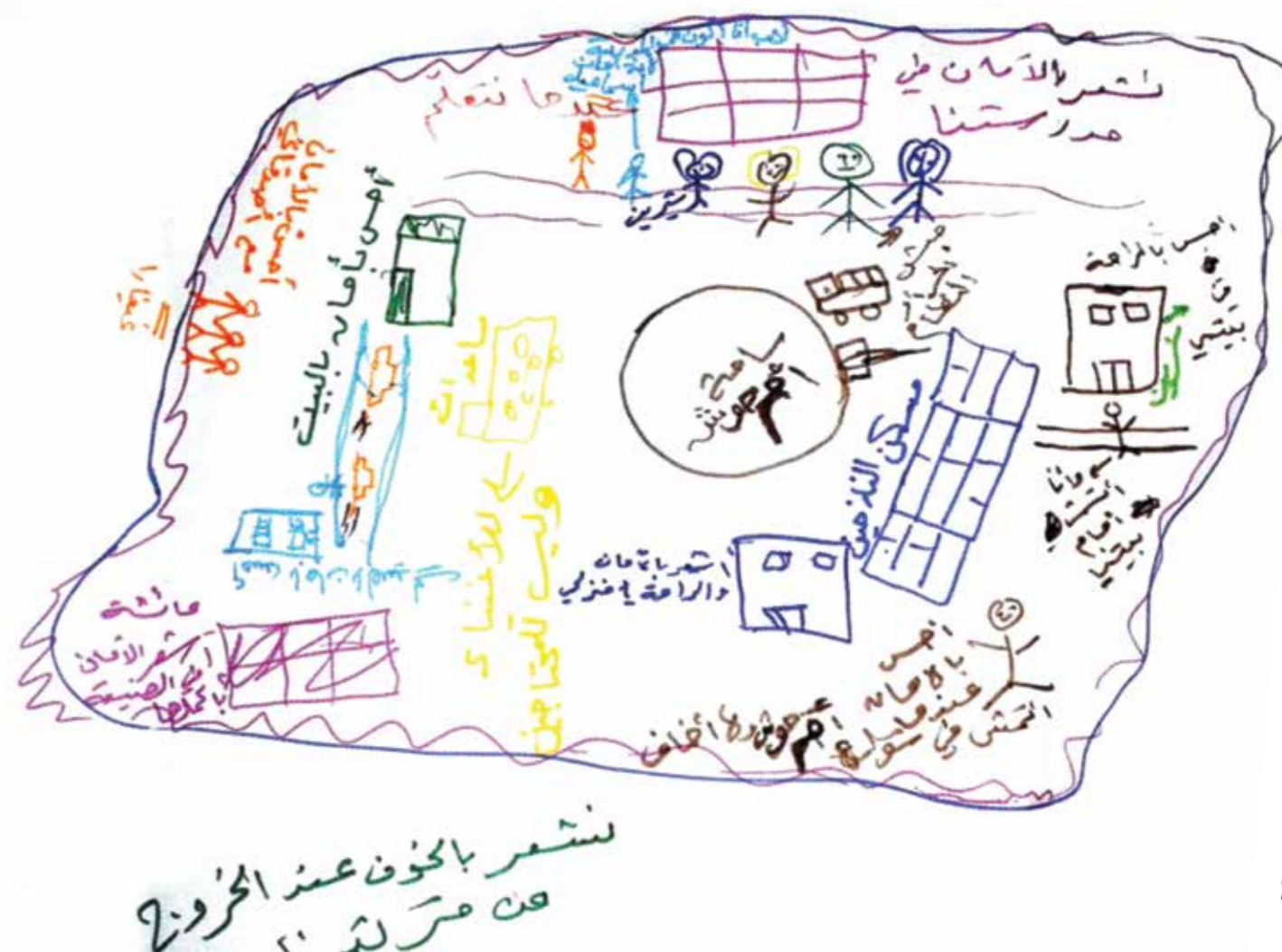
Another impression we get from participants' views is that concepts related to amnesty, reconciliation, and forgiveness are already conflated with several predispositions, due to vague language or political polarisation. Engaging the youth in transitional justice needs to ensure that these terms are adequately explained and carefully used.

**Table 7. Distribution of respondents answers on the mechanisms of Transitional Justice - Trials Alternatives Theme**

	Agree very much	Agree	Neutral/Not sure	Don't Agree	Don't Agree at all
If the state could not hold perpetrators accountable, the international community can take the necessary steps to ensure that justice takes place, e.g. international courts	15.2%	37.8%	20.2%	21.9%	4.9%
If the rights of the victims could be guaranteed, they can be compensated	19.8%	43.2%	17.3%	14.8%	4.9%
Local Trials (ones that are established at community-level) can respond to the needs of the victims for protection and ensuring their rights	12.7%	38.1%	26.1%	20.1%	3.0%
Inquiries about past violations and crimes are important to prevent them from happening again	42.4%	48.5%	5.1%	2.7%	1.3%
It is difficult to prosecute and hold perpetrators accountable	37.9%	31.1%	10.2%	18.0%	2.8%
The state should investigate crimes against humanity, and trial and punish perpetrators	53.2%	36.9%	7.2%	1.9%	0.8%

**Table 8. Distribution of respondents answers on the mechanisms of Transitional Justice - Communal Peace Theme**

	Agree very much	Agree	Neutral/Not sure	Don't Agree	Don't Agree at all
Amnesty policies don't contradict with the mechanisms of Justice and Accountability	24.6%	29.4%	15.7%	24.4%	5.9%
Priority can be given to peace, reconciliation, and stability over Justice in post-conflict context	14.2%	32.6%	16.7%	27.1%	9.3%
Advocating for holding perpetrators accountable might negatively affect the peace, reconciliation, and stability processes in the coming phase	7.2%	25.8%	21.6%	32.1%	13.3%

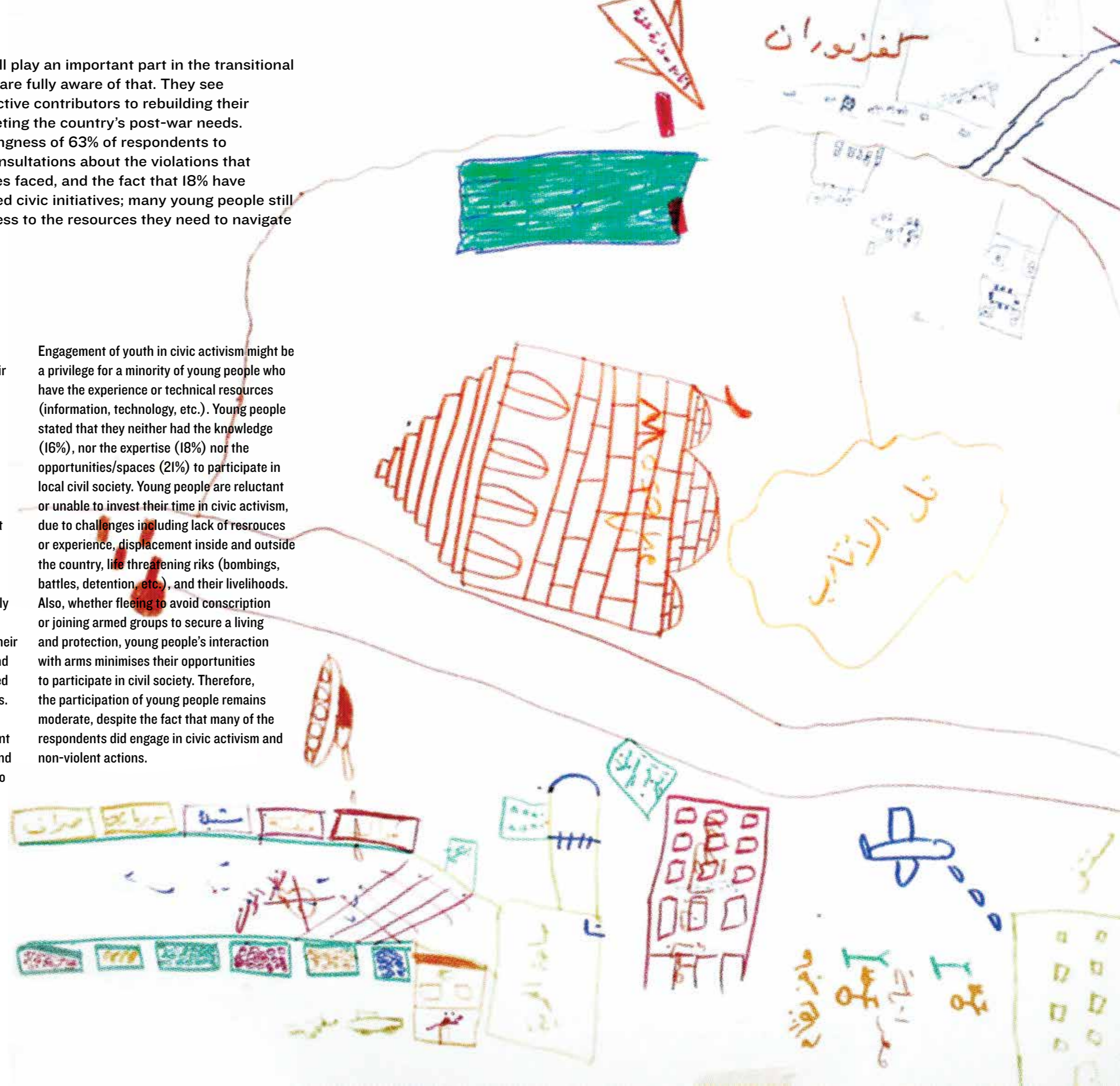


## PARTICIPATION

Young people will play an important part in the transitional phase, and they are fully aware of that. They see themselves as active contributors to rebuilding their country and meeting the country's post-war needs. Despite the willingness of 63% of respondents to participate in consultations about the violations that their communities faced, and the fact that 18% have participated or led civic initiatives; many young people still do not have access to the resources they need to navigate activist spaces.

Through the focus group interviews, young people indicated that many of them and their friends have been active in humanitarian support within their communities; as volunteers in the Syrian Civil Defence units, humanitarian and rescue organisations, and initiatives like camp building and data collection. Similarly, many young women are involved in medical groups within their communities, including nursing and support to vaccination initiatives. Moreover, some youth supported educational activities by establishing alternative schools or tutoring others themselves; young women were highly visible in these spaces as well. On the other hand, many young people spend much of their time online using social media platforms, and in cafes and similar spaces, which is frowned upon by older members of their communities. Yet this might be unescapable when many young people are not able to find employment opportunities and almost all social, sport, and culture activities, that might be of interest to them, are not present.

Engagement of youth in civic activism might be a privilege for a minority of young people who have the experience or technical resources (information, technology, etc.). Young people stated that they neither had the knowledge (16%), nor the expertise (18%) nor the opportunities/spaces (21%) to participate in local civil society. Young people are reluctant or unable to invest their time in civic activism, due to challenges including lack of resources or experience, displacement inside and outside the country, life threatening risks (bombings, battles, detention, etc.), and their livelihoods. Also, whether fleeing to avoid conscription or joining armed groups to secure a living and protection, young people's interaction with arms minimises their opportunities to participate in civil society. Therefore, the participation of young people remains moderate, despite the fact that many of the respondents did engage in civic activism and non-violent actions.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

This study serves as a preliminary view on the perspective of young people and their coping strategies with the violations that they experienced within the current conflict. It is important to note that we understand the concepts on which we work, namely those related to transitional justice, quite differently from how young people on the ground understand them. Therefore, different definitions associated with the concepts of justice and accountability, the types of violations of interest, and the needs of the victims/survivors and their role within the transitional phase; must be thoroughly considered.

## ON METHODOLOGY

Due to restricted access, this study was conducted by young participants we recruited. It was confined to the areas within which our team could safely operate. This limited the geographic spectrum of the study to areas outside the control of the Syrian regime. Aiming to understand attitudes and perspectives of young people, this study had to rely on induction to draw its conclusions, rather than deducing these perspectives from a more inclusive sample frame.

Partnerships with groups working inside regime-controlled areas are necessary for connecting with larger, more diverse

samples that can accurately reflect different communities. We recommend that groups trying to understand the role of communities in the future process of democratic transition in Syria invest in reaching out to the communities living under the regime's rule, as well as those living outside of it.

From a practical angle, we advise against using online data gathering, since internet connection inside Syria is not yet reliable enough, and many young people do not have appropriate internet access. Instead, we recommend relying on first hand interviews such as interviews and focus groups.

## ON ACCESS TO EDUCATION

The right to access education needs to find a more central place in the spectrum of demands and needs. A large portion of young people are denied their right to access educational services and/or continue their own education.

Despite the concerns of many young people about the loss of their access to education, this right is currently not perceived as a problematic issue, or an issue of interest, when it comes to working on transitional justice in Syria. Interventions aimed to compensate for the loss of educational services, such as training programmes aiming to reintegrate young people in formal education, are still limited on a grass-root level.

The right to education cannot be suspended and only incorporated in transitional phase sometime in the future. Civil groups should seek investing a portion of their lobbying and efforts in implementing new mechanisms to revive the access of young people to proper education.

Moreover, we can also explore the ways educational programmes and mechanisms can serve the transitional process. Education in Syria has been highly affected by the Ba'ath party and the Assad regime's rule. In many cases, it has failed to acknowledge grave injustices while legitimising others and tolerating the marginalisation, if not the

elimination, of diverse cultures within the Syrian society (such as the case of prohibiting teaching the Kurdish language). There is a need to look at how education was used to fuel tensions and legitimise injustices, and how it can be used to promote the goals of transitional justice in the country.

## ON YOUNG PEOPLE AS ACTIVE AGENTS

We need to recognise young people as active agents in their societies, rather than mere recipients or victims who need a form of guidance. Initiatives that aim to create social change and promote transitional justice mechanisms in Syria should, therefore, carry youth-specific components. Such components should be based on this understanding and the commitment to hold young people as equal and active partners, as well as be able to address the different barriers to their participation (lack of knowledge and resources, livelihood stability and support, access to education, protection and safety, etc.).

Young people are perpetrators of violence as well as victims of it. We should, therefore, integrate strategies that combat and de-escalate violence within spaces that host young people; primarily through anti-militarisation campaigns that target conscription and voluntary recruitment.

Resources necessary to equip young people with the required skills and knowledge to access activist spaces should be provided by local civil society. Young people should be able to access services/resources that could mobilise them, and equip them with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that they need to participate in the transitional phase. It is important for young people to be able to navigate these spaces, for them to play a more prominent role in the phase to come.

We should be able to envision young people as important and equal partners in the transitional phase. In that sense, these processes should not be limited to supportive and rehabilitative services; rather, they should engage them as individuals who enjoy full rights within a community that is trying to carry radical, holistic, and fair reforms for everyone.

## ON ENGAGING YOUTH IN TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

We can encourage young people to engage in the process of transitional justice by raising awareness/knowledge, and outreach programmes designed for young people. These programs should be aimed to introduce the youth to the different mechanisms of transitional justice and how they can access them when the time comes.

Such resources and materials should be youth-friendly and relatable to the reality of young people. They should also employ language that is not foreign to young people; rather, a language to which they can relate, and that interacts closely with their own. Efforts should also be aimed to create youth-friendly and

community spaces that serve as platforms to mobilise young people.

One crucial issue, in our view, is the dissonance in understanding concepts of reconciliation/amnesty and justice/accountability. It would be important that young people understand how these concepts complement one another in the process and mechanisms of transitional justice. Non-governmental organisations and civil society groups can play a central role in delivering accurate and reliable information to young people about these mechanisms.

## ON ENGAGING VICTIMS/SURVIVORS OF PAST VIOLATION

International entities, as well as local/central and elite groups function as gateways for victims and survivors of past violations who are seldom afforded the space to speak out on their own behalf and in defence of their interests. These organisations advocate for the needs and political rights of victims without engaging with the social and economic factors that engender the marginalisation of the people for whom they advocate. Their narrow focus may be linked to conditional funding and specific mandates within their advocacy agenda.

In that sense, limiting the work with victims/survivors to documentation of the violations that they experienced, severely lowers the value and importance that they place on it. Similarly, seeking their participation in meetings, focus groups, and other similar participant-driven information gathering and crowd mobilisation platforms might equate to the investment of a day's work or to undertake additional expenses (transport, day care, etc.); scarce resources that young people perceive useful to them. Documentation activities, for example, should be coupled with an efficient and useful service (either direct or through referral and follow up) that would encourage young people to seek assistance when they

need it. Transitional mechanisms should not be limited to providing reparations and uncovering the truth around the violations and their perpetrators; they should also be sensitive to the living realities of victims and survivors, and ensure that their needs are met, without forgetting updating victims and survivors are on the status of these mechanisms.

Young people can play an important role when they engage in committees of victims/survivors by making them sensitive to their lived reality, in all its different forms. This can extend to challenges faced by young women due to gender issues, including restrictions on mobility and their participation in societies in which they live. Local groups should aim to provide access for the victims and survivors of violations to the resources they need. These may include information about the fate of the disappeared and the kidnapped, advance community support and acceptance for the victims/survivors, and provision of appropriate health and medical care (including mental health services and prosthetic body parts). Working directly with, and for, victims/survivors should guide the processes of transitional justice.







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**Beirut, Lebanon**

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**Dawlaty is a Syrian non-profit organization which aims to enable civil society actors, particularly young men and women, to become active participants in achieving a democratic transition in Syria. The organisation works with partners in the civil society to promote concepts of nonviolence, transitional justice, and citizenship; by building skills and opportunities for civic engagement, community mobilisation and advocacy.**

This report was developed with the financial support of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) and the Swiss Federal Department for Foreign Affairs. The views mentioned in the report do not necessarily reflect those of the supporting organizations.

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