AVSI is present in the Middle East since 1996 and has been at the forefront of the Syrian crisis response across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria since 2011. AVSI remains highly sensitive to the ever-changing dynamics characterising these contexts. This is why AVSI continuously assesses and adapts its humanitarian response to better serve the interest of affected populations as well as local and international actors.

In June 2020, in preparation of the IV Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, the European Union engaged in online consultation with local and international civil society organisations from inside Syria and the region on the basis of key thematic blocks. This document summarises AVSI’s strategic positioning regarding key challenges and recommendations provided by each AVSI country team, particularly in livelihoods, health, education, protection and social cohesion components and is meant to provide its positive contribution to the ongoing debates amongst national and international partners, civil society and individuals and answer to the question “what’s next?”.

**Position Paper**

**AVSI MIDDLE EAST**

### Challenges

Economic stagnation was exacerbated by COVID-19 lockdown and the crisis affected most vulnerable populations more severely by creating new needs and hampering access to income-generating activities and decent employment opportunities. Bureaucracy impediments and unequal offer of social safety nets impact access to employment in Iraq and Lebanon. In other cases, discrimination based on nationality drastically reduced labour opportunities for refugee population.

### Recommendations

- **Public sector’s economic development should be supported as an entry point to enable access to labour market**
- **Facilitating access to finance for private sector and reduction of sanctions must be taken into consideration to ease humanitarian response and allow bottom-up economic recovery.**
- **Livelihoods opportunities should respond to arising basic needs, food security and protection issues and should include demonstrated good practices such as cash for work programmes, agricultural projects and cash assistance.**

### Good Practices

In Syria, AVSI and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent supported women in East Ghouta to create agricultural gardens and poultry units. This ensured women empowerment, self-food sufficiency, enhanced quality of food and increased income generating opportunities.

In Lebanon, youths previously trained in agriculture are offered livelihood opportunities through internship, cash for work and entrepreneurship programmes, thus enabling them to access the labour market.
### Challenges

Cost of healthcare and difficulties in access to services preclude many vulnerable populations from seeking physical and mental healthcare. Lack of awareness continues to represent a major factor regarding mental healthcare.

### Recommendations

Financing for the response to COVID-19 cannot slowdown in this phase. Support to the public health system and facilitating access to physical and mental healthcare remain crucial priorities in this delicate moment.

Expertise exchange should be encouraged together with financial and material support to existing services.

Barriers regarding access to healthcare should be removed, for example through provision of transportation services.

Psychosocial support programmes should be increased, and awareness campaigns remain a key area of intervention.

### Good Practices

In Syria, AVSI provides free healthcare in three hospitals and supports health clinics thanks to the project ‘Open Hospitals’.

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### Challenges

Although access to education inside Syria slightly improved in the past year, the situation differed in Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. The COVID-19 crisis severely affected access to education throughout the region, causing the increase of dropout cases and child labour concerns.

### Recommendations

The creation of safe learning environments and provision of psychosocial support programmes in non-formal and formal education settings are crucial factors for enhanced access to education.

Non-formal education should be further sustained as quality alternative to formal education.

The link between education and livelihoods opportunities should be strengthened.

Strengthen the coordination and increase the efforts for the mutual recognition between education systems and certificates in the region.

### Good Practices

In Lebanon, AVSI adopted an integrated child protection approach in education, involving the community and running school-based interventions under the socio ecological model.

During COVID-19 lockdown, out-of-school children are supported through distant and blended learning programmes tackling retention, health and wellbeing.

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### Challenges

Protection concerns deteriorated significantly across the region, particularly following COVID-19 outbreak and related lockdown measures. The situation was further exacerbated by the beneficiaries’ impossibility to access to the protection and MHPSS services. Additionally, this opened the opportunity for increased discrimination based on nationality and gender-based violence (GBV).

### Recommendations

Increased focus on safety and security as well as GBV prevention programmes.

Provision of assistance and services to affected populations should be increased.

Barriers to obtaining legal status or documentation should be addressed as a way to fight discrimination and support equal access to services for all.

### Good Practices

In Jordan, women from refugee and host communities were trained on GBV and leadership skills and became leaders and positive role models. Every day they organise community initiatives to sensitize community members on the importance of education, the negative impact of child marriage and child labour, women’s rights and so on. These women reach out to their communities creating a more protective environment and strengthening community resilience.

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1 With the European Union “We are doing all the best to protect the gains made for children in Lebanon” [Source]
**Challenges**

The deterioration of economic situation across the region enhanced the risks for social tensions. The possibilities for refugees to return to their countries of origin are hampered by a series of factors; furthermore, protection risks such as child labour, child marriage and school dropout are on the rise. In order to avoid a dramatic increase in social tensions amongst host and refugee communities, holistic long-term approaches should be adopted to enhance social cohesion and respond to basic needs.

**Recommendations**

It is fundamental to increase efforts to reduce economic pressure on vulnerable individuals by increasing financial aid, particularly inside Syria.

Increased advocacy efforts are needed for more inclusive decision-making processes at local level, to avoid shrinking spaces for local Civil Society Organisations and to foster their inclusion in Syria and beyond in a post-emergency perspective.

**Good Practices**

In East Ghouta (Syria), where returnees, IDPs and host communities try to rebuild a pathway of social cohesion, four integrated interventions have promoted economic local growth. These fostered prevention of school dropout, rehabilitation of public spaces (schools & community centers), hygiene promotion, including COVID-19 response, through an inclusive decision-making processes, involving local civil society (SARC), community leaders, school directors, mayors, local entrepreneurs, etc.

**conclusions**

In conclusion, AVSI believes that sustainable solutions should be adopted throughout the region and should highlight a move from a humanitarian to a long-term development approach. Especially taking into account the expected economic and social side-effects in the post COVID-19 scenario.

Reconstruction inside Syria remains an important aspect to start crucial processes including the possible return of people to their homes. AVSI clearly recognises the strong political implications of reconstruction in Syria. Nonetheless, adopting sustainable solutions aiming at linking humanitarian and development approaches cannot be detached from this critical element. Finally, economic sanctions represent a particular challenge for labour opportunities in local communities as well as amongst IDPs. In addition, despite the granted exceptions, these have a severe impact on the delivery of humanitarian aid and on vulnerable populations.

In a moment of dire deterioration of the humanitarian situation and life conditions of many, the international community is asked to take bold decisions that allow responding to the increasing needs of vulnerable populations across the region.
Who we are

Created in 1972, AVSI is a not-for-profit organization, which carries out development cooperation and humanitarian aid projects throughout the world. AVSI works for a world where the person, aware of his/her value and dignity, is the protagonist of his/her own integral development and that of his/her community, even in crisis and emergency contexts. AVSI operates in various sectors: socio-educational, urban development, healthcare, vocational training, job creation, micro-entrepreneurship, agriculture, food security, energy, environmental protection, humanitarian emergencies, migration, democracy and human rights. In the MENA region, AVSI is present in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Syria and since recently in Tunisia. Since the start of the Syrian crisis, AVSI has been supporting refugee communities as well as vulnerable host communities with a focus on women and youth. AVSI works in education, health, livelihoods with the objective to support vulnerable populations to acquire professional skills. Mainstreaming protection in its programming has been a primary objective in this endeavour, ensuring gender-responsive programming and inclusion of people with disabilities. AVSI aligns with the development Agenda 2030 of the United Nations and with the common efforts towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals.

LEBANON


Some projects: Education and Child Protection, Psychosocial support activities, rehabilitations & upgrading of public schools, cash for work, vocational trainings, support to agriculture.

Main donors: EUTF, UNICEF, WFP, AICS, Private Funds.

JORDAN

Sectors of intervention: Livelihoods, Education, Protection.

Some projects: Vocational trainings, support to small and medium enterprise, education project for persons with special needs, cash for work, support to women employment.

Main donors: AICS, GIZ, EUTF.

SYRIA

Sectors of intervention: Livelihoods, Health, Education, Protection

Some projects: Support to hospitals and clinics providing free healthcare, education and child protection project, psychosocial support, activities, cash assistance, socio-economical support for women head of households.

Main donors: Poland, AICS, Hungarian Helps, UN-OCHA.

IRAQ


Some projects: Agricultural support activities and vocational training through TVET, cash for work.