

# LANGUAGE FOR RESILIENCE

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN ENHANCING  
THE RESILIENCE OF SYRIAN REFUGEES  
AND HOST COMMUNITIES

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*The Language for Resilience* report sets out findings related to the language needs of refugees and host communities affected by the Syrian crisis. It examines the role and importance of language in supporting the resilience of people, communities and institutions hardest hit by the crisis, in particular how language can enhance protection and decrease vulnerability.

The authors carried out desk and field research in Jordan, Iraq (Kurdistan Region), Lebanon and Turkey – interviewing teachers, Ministry of Education officials, children, parents, volunteers, and INGO/NGO staff.

The aim was to understand how language programming and tools, when strategically implemented as part of wider humanitarian and development efforts, can enhance resilience at all levels in a community by:

- Giving people a voice and acting as a tool to support social cohesion.
- Providing individuals with the language skills they need to access work, services, education and information.
- Helping schools, universities and educators in host communities handle influxes of refugee students with different home languages, attainment, and psycho-social needs.

## BACKGROUND

The Syria Crisis is the largest political, humanitarian and development challenge of our time. As the conflict in Syria enters its 6th year, most of the over 4 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq see little prospect of returning home in the near future and have limited opportunities to restart their lives in exile. The international community has committed to support these people and the countries and communities hosting them, and to reduce the need for refugees to risk their lives reaching safety elsewhere. Enhancing resilience at individual, community and institutional levels is a key focus of this support. Resilience in this report is defined as improving 'the ability of individuals, households, communities and institutions to anticipate, withstand, recover and transform from shocks and crises' (3RP).

## ROLE OF THE BRITISH COUNCIL

Since 2012, the British Council has been building on over sixty years' experience on the ground, by working to support stability in host countries and increase access to opportunity for host communities and refugees.

Since the start of the crisis, the British Council has:

- Worked in over **20,000 public schools in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq**; delivering major public school system strengthening programmes and school leadership training.

- Collaborated with the Open University to provide academic and language skills programmes and greater access to higher education through an innovative online learning programme. This programme will directly benefit **3000 Syrian refugees aged 18-30**.
- Supported over **128,000 children in Lebanon and Jordan** to access quality education through our work on improving teacher capacity to address inclusion and integration in the classroom. This is helping to address barriers to access and reasons for drop-out.
- For those outside the school system, the British Council is providing incentives to enter and stay in non-formal education, through **improving the quality of catch-up classes**, or providing sought after English language.

## FINDINGS

The report identifies five interconnected ways in which language is an essential component in enhancing the resilience of individuals, communities and institutions. It identifies the protective factors in each strand and the vulnerability factors.

### 1. Home language and literacy development: creating the foundations for shared identity, belonging and future study through home language use

Children's access to education in their home languages is a crucial factor.

Research shows that proficiency in a home language is vital to successful learning in school. It also affects success at learning any additional languages which may be required. In addition, proficiency in home languages enhances resilience by giving access to the maintenance of a shared culture, sense of belonging and identity.

### 2. Access to education, training and employment

Across the region, there is a recognition of the important role of education, training and employment opportunities to protect vulnerable people and enhance their resilience. Language competency was highlighted in all of the countries as vital for securing access to education, training and employment. Many refugees have problems accessing information and applying for education and training courses due to their lack of language proficiency. Professionals also identified a need for language programmes to provide greater access to professional documentation and training. English was identified as a high priority in Jordan, the Kurdistan region of Iraq and Lebanon. In Lebanon French was also needed by some refugees. In Turkey children and adults need to quickly learn Turkish to access formal schooling and employment opportunities.

### **3. Learning together and social cohesion: language-learning activities as a basis for developing individual resilience, ensuring dignity, self-sufficiency and life skills**

This theme links the role of language with the development of life skills for enhancing personal and community resilience. Language learning can improve engagement with host communities and public services, particularly where host communities have low levels of Arabic proficiency and where public services are delivered in a foreign language, such as Turkey. A shared interest in language learning, often English, also provides a means to bring people together to communicate and build relationships, acting as a vehicle for people to tell their stories, gain skills vital for self-sufficiency, interact with each other, express emotions and celebrate diversity. Programmes can bring people from different communities together to learn a language as well as foster intergenerational learning within communities with family programmes.

### **4. Addressing the effects of trauma on learning: language programmes as a supportive intervention and a way to address the effects of loss, displacement and trauma on behaviour and learning**

Language can be linked to enhancing resilience by its potential role in helping refugees to address the effects of loss, displacement and trauma. Language gives a voice so that stories can be heard and understood. The effects of trauma are often displayed in learning situations but psycho-social interventions do not always need to be seen as separate interventions to language learning. Language learning can provide opportunities for safe spaces, where students work through the effects of trauma in learning by exploring personal experiences and feelings through creative activities, play and storytelling. This can be particularly powerful in the safety of a second or third language.

### **5. Building the capacity of teachers and strengthening educational systems to create inclusive classrooms: professional training for language teachers to build institutional resilience**

For UNDP (2015), the core of the resilience-based development response is the support of national systems. This theme explores the links between institutional providers of language and education programmes and the resources needed by teachers to support vulnerable students. In resilience building, these resources are protective factors. Professional development for teachers, particularly in the areas of creating inclusive classrooms, understanding the effects of trauma on learning, and teaching in multilingual and multicultural classrooms is seen as vital

in developing the ability of public education providers to withstand the influx of large numbers of students with different language competencies and backgrounds. The report also highlights the barriers education providers and teachers face when attempting to implement innovation at both the class room and systemic levels. These barriers, which create vulnerability in the implementation of such training were identified as a lack of space in the curriculum and the complex integration of assessment, teacher training and the size of national education systems.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The report examines existing language programmes and provides suggestions for building on these in order to better meet the scale of the need. These programming recommendations focus on five main areas in both the formal and non-formal sectors:

- Multilingual programming, including home language development
- Language learning for tertiary education, vocational and professional training and employment
- Community language learning and social cohesion language projects
- Language activities as supportive psycho-social interventions
- Teacher development for inclusive language education

It also recommends utilising the existing UN-led coordination structure on the ground to improve organisation, quality and understanding of language programming, through for example a Language Sub-Group within the Education Sector Working Group.

More broadly, for improving the international response to language needs in crisis contexts, the authors recommend exploration of a 'Language Vulnerability Index' – a tool for measuring how an individual's vulnerability is affected by their language profile, based on a range of linguistic and environmental factors.

The British Council plans to use this report to build on the existing foundations for language education in the Syria Crisis Response, working with language sector partners and those already providing resilience and protection for refugees and host communities in Syria and neighbouring countries. Language for Resilience will also be a topic of discussion and presentation at fora in the region and globally, with a view to seeing how the lessons from this crisis can be applied elsewhere in the world to support others affected by conflict and displacement.

