R4HSSS

Research for Health System Strengthening in Syria

أبحاث لتقوية النظام الصحي في سوريا

NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2024

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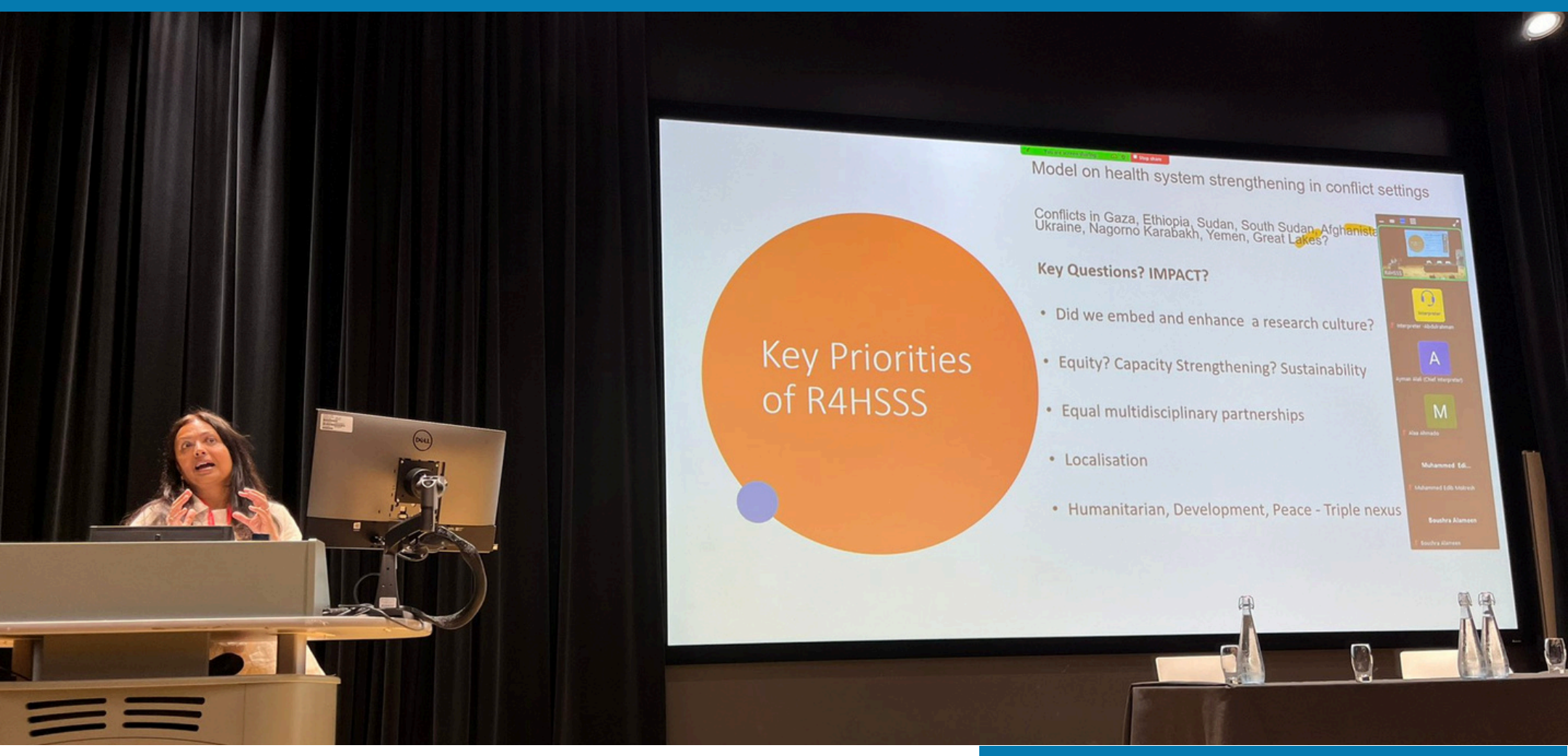


Fifth Research for Health in the Syrian Conflict Annual Conference 2024

The Fifth Research for Health in the Syrian Conflict" Annual Conference, held at the Bush House Auditorium at King's College London (KCL) on May 16, 2024, in London, brought together leading global health experts, researchers, and humanitarian practitioners to address the urgent health issues caused by the Syrian conflict. Organized by the Research for Health Systems Strengthening in Syria (R4HSSS), in collaboration with KCL and other key partners, the conference featured powerful keynote addresses by experts like Professor Preeti Patel and Dr. Rim Turkmani. The Fifth Annual Conference featured several insightful sessions.

In the Humanitarian Aid session, Ayla Alkharrat presented on the effects of aid politicization in Syria. Dr. Mohamed Ahmado discussed infection prevention and control in conflict zones, while Dr. Ibrahim Bou-Orm explored the resilience of northern Syria's health systems. Dr. Bushra Al Ameen shared perspectives on breast cancer in conflict, and Dr. Zedoun Alzoubi examined health responses to natural disasters. Diana Rayes and Thurayya Zreik also highlighted the cascading impacts of attacks on healthcare and power dynamics within humanitarian groups.

K2P Policy Fellowship Programme

The R4HSSS project partnered with the American University of Beirut to conduct a Policy Fellowship Programme. The objectives of the programme have been successfully met by empowering fellows to enhance their leadership and strategic thinking skills in health policy. Through immersive experiential learning and workshops, fellows engaged with researchers and policy professionals to build capacity in evidence-informed decision-making. They developed practical public health policies aimed at controlling infectious diseases in northern Syria. The fellows' progress was supported through coaching, mentoring, and follow-up sessions, enabling them to implement impactful health policies within their organizations

Forgotten Individuals in Northern Syria – People with Disabilities – Webinar

In March 2024, the Forgotten Individuals in Northern Syria – People with Disabilities webinar shed light on the overlooked struggles of disabled individuals in conflict zones. Hosted by the Idlib Health Directorate and R4HSSS, it featured powerful stories from survivors and experts.

Mr. Hamdo Salat, Head of Disability at Idlib Health Directorate and a polio survivor, highlighted the growing challenges faced by people with disabilities due to ongoing conflict and disasters like the 2023 earthquake.

Syrian athlete **Ms. Dimaa Aktaa**, who lost her leg in a bombing, shared her inspiring journey of resilience and called for a shift in societal attitudes towards disabilities.

Ms. Mariam Abdulrazak Drobah, born blind, spoke of overcoming barriers in education and the need for greater accessibility.

The webinar called for inclusive policies and stronger support systems to address the needs of disabled individuals, advocating for collaborative action to build a more equitable future in Syria. **Read the text piece here**

Kristen Meagher

Since its beginning, Ms. Kristen Meagher, our dedicated Programme Manager for the R4HSSS Project, has been instrumental in driving its success with her exceptional leadership, commitment, and passion. Her contributions have been pivotal in shaping the programme, fostering collaboration, and advancing the project's goals. Alongside her work, Kristen has been pursuing her PhD, showcasing her remarkable dedication to both professional and academic growth. We are thrilled to share that Kristen is now on maternity leave, having recently welcomed a beautiful baby girl. We send her our warmest congratulations and best wishes during this exciting new chapter!

News

R4HSSS Scholarship Student Graduations

Dr. Hiba Shelleh

Congratulations to R4HSSS Scholarship awardee Dr. Hiba Shelleh for completing her MSc in Blood Science at London Metropolitan University! Balancing work, family, and study, Dr. Shelleh made a significant impact in her field, from improving blood bank policies to conducting training for healthcare staff and teaching at Free Aleppo University. As a technical advisor for WATAN, she helped establish the first blood bank network in northwest Syria. Her pioneering research on RBC phenotyping for thalassemia patients has greatly improved transfusion safety and patient care.

Dr. Shelleh is deeply grateful to R4HSSS for their support throughout this transformative journey, which she views as a personal achievement and a valuable contribution to the region's healthcare system.

Dr. Safwan Alchalati

The R4HSSS scholarship has provided an invaluable opportunity to advance my academic and professional journey in medical education. This MSc program has transformed my life, equipping me to drive impactful change in Syria’s medical education by enhancing the skills of health professionals, ultimately improving healthcare quality and well-being.

Though I’ve held various roles in medical education over the past decade, this is my first experience with a structured academic program in the field. Through my studies, I identified gaps and areas for improvement in my previous practices.

Balancing distance learning with the demands of daily professional life was challenging, yet my commitment to my personal growth and my community's progress helped me overcome these hurdles and graduate with distinction.

I have already implemented several practical concepts learned in my role as chairman of the Syrian Board of Medical Specialties (SBOMS), enhancing the education and training of resident physicians. I am now focused on sharing this knowledge with colleagues at SBOMS and within Syria’s medical community through training and workshops.

Being among the few selected for the R4HSSS Scholarship is an honor and a responsibility. I am deeply grateful to everyone who made this scholarship possible, and I am dedicated to using my experience to help build a resilient health system that supports the safety and stability of our people.

News

Empowering Future Leaders in the Syrian Health System

We are excited to present a new video showcasing a significant initiative of the R4HSSS Project. Through this initiative, we have supported 16 students in pursuing their online master's studies at universities in the UK. This program has not only transformed their lives but has also advanced their careers in health systems.

Watch the Video: Meet two exceptional students as they share their inspiring journeys and discuss how this support has profoundly impacted their personal and professional lives.

Nur Waty Barakat is honoured to have been selected for a prestigious scholarship from UOSSM in partnership with King’s College London. This invaluable opportunity will support her in advancing her educational and professional goals, enhancing her career in public health, and empowering her to make a meaningful impact in the field. She has also transitioned into a new role as Nutrition Cluster Co-lead for Northwest Syria with Save the Children International, where she is excited to collaborate with UNICEF and partners to address critical nutrition challenges in the region.

Okba Doghim’s journey toward a Master’s in Sexual and Reproductive Medicine at the University of South Wales has been transformative, thanks to the support of the R4HSSS scholarship. Balancing a full-time professional role, Okba delved deep into sexual and reproductive health (SRH), expanding theoretical knowledge and gaining empathy for those in need of SRH services. Now a consultant with UNFPA and Programs Director at SRD, Okba applies his expertise in SRH and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) integration to positively impact communities in northwest Syria, committed to addressing urgent SRH challenges and improving lives.

Watch here

WHO Project - Health Facilities Assessment Analysis

R4HSSS partnered with the WHO to implement the Harmonised Health Facility Assessment (HHFA) project in Northwest Syria, led by Dr. Abdulkarim Ekzayez. The project represents a pivotal effort to enhance the understanding of health facility capacities in a region severely affected by conflict. The partnership between R4HSSS and WHO was initiated to address the significant data gaps in health system performance, which have hindered effective health planning and resource allocation.

Customising the WHO's HHFA tool for the unique challenges of Northwest Syria was a critical step in ensuring the tool's adaptability to the local context. The field team, comprising seven data collectors, two data managers, and two field researchers, undertook an unprecedented effort, conducting primary data collection on 373 health facilities and integrating secondary data from an additional 60 facilities. This is the first comprehensive, large-scale primary data collection initiative of its kind in the region, setting a new standard for health facility assessments in conflict zones.

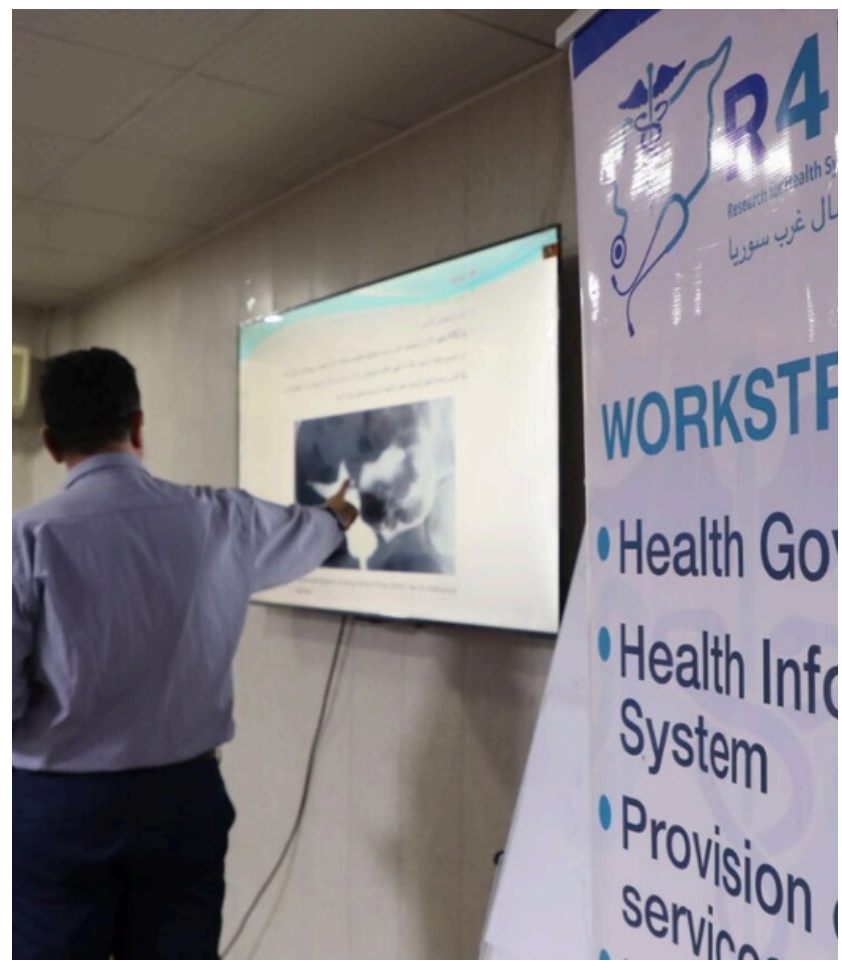
The implications of this project are far-reaching. For WHO and the Health Cluster, the robust data gathered will significantly enhance coordination and decision-making, allowing for more precise identification of gaps and needs within the health system. This is particularly crucial given the current decline in humanitarian funding, which necessitates more strategic and efficient use of available resources. With a detailed, evidence-based understanding of facility capabilities, the local health directorates are now better equipped to engage in forward-looking health planning.

In an environment where resources are scarce, the findings from this assessment will help the local health authorities prioritise interventions, improve service delivery, and optimise the use of existing health infrastructure. The data will also support the development of more sustainable health system strategies, enabling the local directorates to make informed decisions about resource allocation, workforce distribution, and service coverage. This will be instrumental in maintaining essential health services, despite funding challenges, and in promoting a more resilient and responsive health system in the long term.

The Syrian Board of Medical Specialties (SBOMS) Trainings

SBOMS has completed its first Pediatric & Neonatal Mechanical Ventilation Course for 13 pediatric resident doctors. The training combined theoretical sessions and hands-on practice, covering key ventilation methods and real clinical case studies. This essential course aims to enhance residents' skills in managing critical cases, improving the quality of care provided to children in intensive care units.

SBOMS conducted a specialised training in Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility for 17 Obstetrics & Gynecology residents. The program covered the causes of female infertility, diagnostic methods like hysterosalpingography (HSG) and laparoscopy, and treatments including ovulation induction, IUI, and IVF. Special cases such as PCOS and OHSS were also addressed. This training equips our physicians with essential skills to enhance patient care in fertility treatment.



SBOMS has successfully concluded its Basic Surgical Skills (BSSC)/Basic Operative Surgical Skills Course (BOSS), attended by 16 residents from General Surgery, Orthopedics, Neurosurgery, Urology, and Pediatric Surgery across 8 hospitals in northern Syria. The course covered essential surgical techniques, including gowning and gloving, instrument handling, suturing, wound management, bowel anastomosis, and an introduction to minimal access surgery and damage control principles. Residents also received hands-on practice using surgical equipment to refine these skills.

The Syrian Board of Medical Specialties (SBOMS) Trainings

SBOMS recently completed a three-day Management of Emergency Cases of Internal Diseases course for 15 resident doctors in Internal Medicine and Family Medicine from seven hospitals in northern Syria. The training covered essential life support skills, including CPR, advanced airway management, AED use, and the early treatment of apnea, cardiac arrest, and stroke. Residents also learned to manage arrhythmias and enhance teamwork in critical care settings.

SBOMS recently completed a two-day Colposcopy course for 10 Obstetrics and Gynecology resident doctors. The training focused on the use of the Colposcopy device, which is essential for diagnosing and monitoring cervical cancer. Participants gained both theoretical knowledge on cervical cancer screening and practical skills in performing and interpreting Colposcopy results.

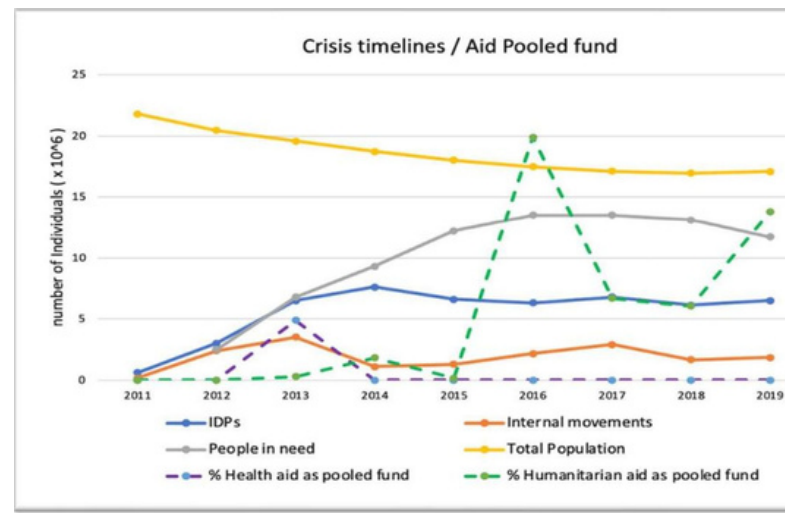
SBOMS has completed a three-day Abdominal Ultrasound course for 15 Internal Medicine resident doctors. The training focused on essential diagnostic skills, including abdominal aortic and cardiac ultrasound, lung and chest scans, and examinations of the gallbladder and bile ducts. This course, part of SBOMS's continuous efforts under the R4HSSS project, aims to improve the diagnostic abilities of resident doctors in hospitals across northern Syria.

Publications

Vaccination governance in protracted conflict settings: the case of northwest Syria - Read here

Ronja Kitlope Baatz, Abdulkarim Ekzayez, Yasser Najib, Munzer Alkhalil, Mohammad Salem, Mohammed Ayman Alshiekh & Preeti Patel

This publication investigates the perspectives of healthcare professionals working in Syria amidst ongoing conflict. It highlights the immense challenges they face, including resource shortages, safety concerns, and the psychological toll of working in such a precarious environment. The study highlights the need for targeted support and interventions to improve healthcare delivery in conflict-affected areas.



Percentage of health and humanitarian aid as pooled fund concerning the key crises indicators, 2011–2019. IDPs, internally displaced persons.

An analysis of humanitarian and health aid harmonisation over a decade (2011– 2019) of the Syrian conflict - Read here

Munzer Alkhalil, Abdulkarim Ekzayez, Kristen Meagher, Maher Alaref, Rim Turkmani, Aula Abbara, Zedoun Al Zoubi, Nassim El Achi, Preeti Patel

This study evaluates the harmonisation of health and humanitarian aid in Syria from 2011 to 2019, revealing that aid efforts did not align with increasing humanitarian needs. It found a lack of coordination in the early years, with improvements seen after the adoption of the Whole of Syria approach in 2015. The paper calls for alternative coordination mechanisms, independent of international political constraints, to improve aid effectiveness.

Infection prevention and control in conflict-affected areas in northeast Syria: A cross-sectional study - Read here

Mohamed Alaa Ahmado, Muaaz Alghajar, Amina Olabi, Kristen Meagher, Preeti Patel, Abdulkarim Ekzayez

This paper explores the difficulties in implementing Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in conflict-affected regions, focusing on Syria. It highlights the impact of ongoing conflict on healthcare infrastructure, access to essential services, and the population's overall health. The study underscores the need for targeted strategies to overcome these barriers in achieving UHC in such challenging environments.

Health systems in conflict: amplifying the role of evidence in strengthening health system resilience - Read here

Preeti Patel

The publication emphasises the need for stronger data collection and evidence-sharing to support health system resilience in conflict zones, where health infrastructure often suffers severe impacts. It advocates for locally-led health governance, community-based approaches, and international reforms to improve the effectiveness of health responses amid crises, while highlighting the role of partnerships in promoting sustainable, culturally appropriate care.

AI in conflict zones: the potential to revitalise healthcare in Syria and beyond - Read here

Munzer Alkhalil, Aula Abbara, Caroline Grangier, Abdulkarim Ekzayez

This publication examines the compounded effects of the pandemic on mental health in conflict zones like Syria. It explores how pre-existing stressors from prolonged conflict, displacement, and healthcare disruption have exacerbated mental health issues during the pandemic. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions to address the mental health crisis in such vulnerable settings.

Publications

Health information management systems and practices in conflict-affected settings: the case of northwest Syria - Read here

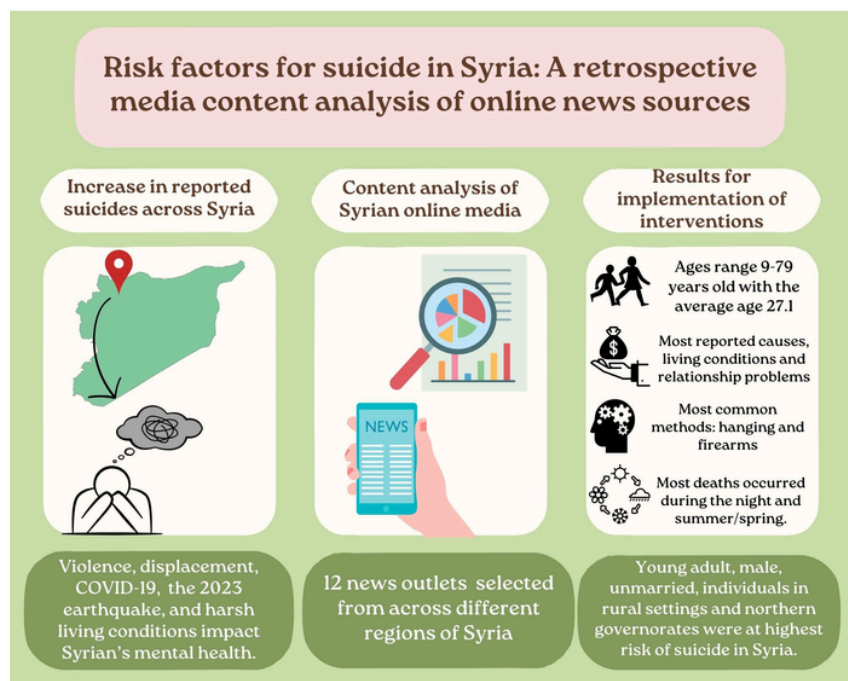
Reem Ladadwa, Mahmoud Hariri, Muhammed Mansur Alatras, Yasir Elferruh, Abdulhakim Ramadan, Mahmoud Dowah, Yahya Mohammad Bawaneh, Wassel Aljerk, Preeti Patel, Abdulkarim Ekzayez & Nassim El Achi

This publication examines how the protracted Syrian conflict has profoundly affected health determinants and access to healthcare. It reviews evidence of the degradation of health infrastructure, increasing mental health issues, and the spread of diseases due to displacement and violence. The study highlights the pressing need for international intervention to address these significant health challenges.

Demographics and risk factors for suicide in Syria: A retrospective media content analysis of online news sources - Read here

Salma Almidani, Mohammad Abo Hilal, Marwa Alghadban, Omama Abou Helal, Manal Alkourdi, Juman Kannan, Abdulkarim Ekzayez, Preeti Patel and Nassim El Achi

This paper analyses suicide trends in Syria using data from online news sources. It focuses on identifying demographic patterns and risk factors, including age, gender, and socio-economic conditions contributing to suicide incidents. By utilising media reports, the study provides insight into the psychological and societal impacts of the ongoing conflict on the mental health of Syrians.



BLOG Social Health Determinants (SHD) in Syria - Abdulhakim Ramadan

Abdulhakim Ramadan's blog highlights the severe public health challenges in Syria due to the ongoing conflict since 2011. Using the Dahlgren and Whitehead model, he explains how infrastructure collapse, displacement, and a lack of basic services have significantly worsened health outcomes. With millions affected, including children and refugees, he calls for urgent, multi-level interventions to restore peace, rebuild infrastructure, improve healthcare access, and support education to address these pressing issues.

Read here

Photo: Children walking through a neighbourhood in Zabadani, rural Damascus, in Syria - "Don't lose focus on Syria, UN envoy tells Security Council | UN News."