



UPINION

Engaging directly with affected community members in Sweida: understanding displacement and humanitarian needs

September 2025

Key findings

These findings result from a conversation hosted by Upinion with communities in South Syria, highlighting the most pressing humanitarian needs, displacement challenges, and concerns identified by respondents.

- Widespread displacement crisis: the majority of our respondents got displaced. A considerable portion of homes (32%) of the displaced are completely destroyed, and only 15% remain intact and ready for return. A majority of those displaced (82%) are hosted by families or relatives.
- Acute safety concerns: 34% of respondents do not feel safe in their current locations (whether displaced or in their own homes) due to ongoing armed conflict, sectarian targeting, and lack of basic necessities.
- Severe humanitarian needs: Food insecurity (63%), lack of clean water (55%), and lack of safe shelter (51%) are the most critical issues. Other urgent needs include job opportunities/income (64%), health care/medicine (49%), and mental health support (37%).
- Limited access to aid and fragile support networks: UN agencies are seen as the most critical actors for aid (74%), followed by international and local NGOs for half of the respondents. The Syrian government's perceived role is negligible (1%).
- Support networks are often limited to moral or emotional help from family and friends, with many reporting no support at all.
- Barriers to return: Major obstacles to return include extensive infrastructure damage (73%), persistent security risks (68%), and limited access to basic services (52%). One-third of respondents cited the occupation of their homes by others. Emotional trauma and fear also significantly hinder return.
- Family separation: While 71% of families remained together, 23% reported the separation of some family members, and 5% reported missing family members.
- Strong desire for direct engagement: An overwhelming majority (88%) of respondents expressed interest in directly sharing their experiences and needs with key policy-makers and donors with a stake in the situation, highlighting a strong desire for their voices to be heard and included in high-level decision-making.

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Introduction

This report summarizes key findings from a Upinion conversation held with its online Syria panel between **August 4th and September 5th, 2025**. **271 respondents** started the conversation, and **250** completed it. The conversation focuses on Syrians currently residing in South Syria (mainly in the province of Sweida), while also including some respondents outside this area whose family members were directly affected by the escalation. It aims to gather their perspectives, concerns, and most urgent needs on the current situation and escalation of violence in southern Syria.

Context and goal of the conversation

On July 12, armed clashes erupted between local armed groups in southern Syria following a series of reciprocal abductions, with Syrian security forces later intervening.¹ Since then, violence has intensified across southern Syria, particularly in the Sweida and Daraa provinces, resulting in a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation for civilians. Additionally, Israeli airstrikes targeting military sites in Sweida as well as elsewhere in Syria, further complicated the security landscape and humanitarian response efforts. As of the 10th of August 2025, the International Committee of the Red Cross reported nearly 200 000 people displaced and over 1500 killed.² Against this backdrop, Upinion launched an online conversation to understand the humanitarian needs and experiences of affected communities in these areas.

The overarching goal is to gather information and assess the humanitarian situation in Sweida province after recent escalations, identifying needs for international support while sharing real-time concrete and reliable information about the few available aid points with community members.

The assessment of humanitarian needs encompasses several key themes: an analysis of displacement dynamics, including family separation, an evaluation of shelter conditions, and an exploration of future intentions (stay, move, or return). Additionally, the analysis focuses on evaluating current safety, access to aid and basic necessities, and social support structures. The ultimate goal is to identify requirements for international assistance and advocacy, potentially leading to a Real-time Engagement (RTE) session with key policy and decision-makers from the EU and other regions.

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165620>

² <https://www.icrc.org/en/article/syria-operational-update-icrc-response-southern-syria#:~:text=As%20of%2010th%20August%2C%20it,people%20displaced%20within%20the%20governorate.>

Community voices must be **meaningfully included in donor discussions and decision-making**, and Upinion's two-way communication tools, namely the Digital Engagement Platform (DEP) and the RTE platform, effectively contribute to the process of participation. Upinion previously hosted sessions connecting key decision makers with affected communities worldwide, and the response has been clear: communities consistently express a strong desire to engage in direct dialogue with donors and stakeholders about the decisions that shape their lives.

Methodology



The study's methodology was based on a conversation facilitated through Upinion's Digital Engagement Platform (DEP). This initiative, independently launched by Upinion, aimed to gather immediate input and be responsive to the recent escalation of violence in Sweida province. Upinion has developed this online platform that allows it to securely connect and stay in touch with marginalized or hard-to-reach communities, including people in crisis and displacement-affected countries. The in-house developed platform enables Upinion to engage real-time with people in the same way they connect with their friends and families, using messaging apps like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, which are also widely used in Syria. This outreach was facilitated by a Upinionator³ who assisted with trust-building, conversation dissemination, and retrieving useful and timely information to share back with respondents.

Information sharing

The DEP enables Upinion to send tailored, neutral information to respondents about relevant services or initiatives in their area, thereby turning the conversation into an information exchange. In this light, information regarding support services in South Syria was shared with all respondents to maintain the two-way communication loop between Upinion and its communities. The information was cross-checked with local actors on the ground to guarantee its accuracy and applicability to the specific contexts within South Syria. This sets the study's methodology apart from traditional surveys, as participants become active agents engaged in and influenced by knowledge exchange, rather than being simply providers of data.

Demographics

The volatility of the current context has resulted in significant displacement and has disproportionately affected certain minority communities. Moreover, the dynamics of sectarian

³ A community member who assists Upinion's community manager in recruiting new respondents locally. Upinionators help build trust and facilitate meaningful participation by bridging the gap between Upinion and the local communities.

violence may have distinct impacts across different demographic groups, making it essential to account for these differences when interpreting findings.

Recognizing these distinctions is critical not only for accurate interpretation of the data but also for informing protection strategies, ensuring equitable aid delivery, and designing interventions that are responsive to the differentiated needs of affected populations. Without such demographic sensitivity, policies risk overlooking vulnerable groups or inadvertently reinforcing existing patterns of exclusion.

Of the 271 respondents who provided their demographic information, 64% were female and 36% were male, which equates to a male/female ratio of 1:1.8.

Age distribution was as follows:

- 32% were between 36-45
- 23% between 46-55
- 22% between 26-35
- 11% over 55
- 8% between 18-25
- 5 respondents were younger than 18

Given the scale of displacement in Syria, with approximately 187 200 people displaced due to the hostilities in Sweida which have escalated since mid-July⁴, particular focus was placed on engaging displaced communities.

Among respondents, 77% have been displaced or reported their family being displaced since the start of the hostilities, for 23% who have not been displaced.

Out of those displaced, 68% (n=210) were displaced within Syria, 7% were displaced within Syria since the start of the hostilities but have returned home, 3% were displaced outside of Syria and have since returned.

Currently, 94% reside in Sweida, 4% preferred not to answer, and 1 respondent was in Daraa and 2 in Damascus.

In terms of group identification, this conversation focused on people from the Druze community, who have been primarily affected by the wave of armed attacks in and around Sweida

⁴<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-flash-update-no-9-escalation-hostilities-sweida-governorate-28-august-2025>

Governorate⁵. As a result, 88% of respondents from this sample identified with a minority group, 9% who did not. 3% preferred not to answer.

Representativeness

Upinion does not aim to establish statistical representativeness through its findings, as the conversations conducted for research purposes constitute qualitative or quantitative inquiries that do not simulate a reflection of the actual population. When comparing our distribution to actual country distributions, readers are invited to see for themselves how our samples can be reflective of a larger tendency.

Main findings



Displacement situation

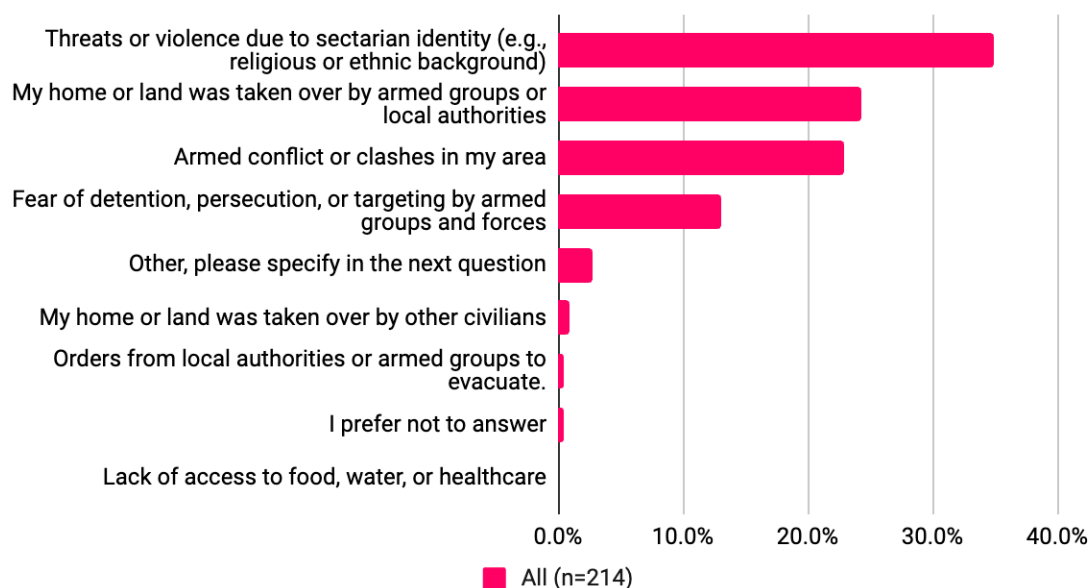
This section dissects the answers of **people who were in Sweida province during the July 2025 escalation of violence**.

87% (n=248) of respondents who were in Sweida during the escalation of violence got displaced. Of those, 62% are still displaced, and 25% were temporarily displaced during the hostilities but have now returned. Only 13% of those who were in Sweida during the July 2025 escalation of violence remained in their homes, with 9% of those hosting displaced individuals.

Threats or violence due to sectarian identity was the primary reason for leaving home among 35% of respondents (n=214), followed closely by homes or land being taken over by armed groups or local authorities (24%), armed conflict or clashes in the area (23%), and fear of detention, persecution, or targeting by armed groups and forces (13%).

⁵<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/08/syria-un-experts-alarmed-attacks-druze-communities-including-sexual-violence>

Figure 1. Reasons for leaving – Respondents inside Sweida



The majority of respondents (98%, n=213) who left their homes stayed with friends or family within Sweida province, either in another part of Sweida city (42%) or in a rural area within the province (56%). Only a small number (3 respondents) moved outside of Sweida province but remained within Syria.

The vast majority (81%, n=150) of displaced individuals are hosted by other families or relatives, indicating a strong reliance on community and familial support networks. A smaller percentage rented new housing or stayed in public facilities like schools or mosques (6% respectively). Only 3% are in damaged or abandoned buildings and 2% in temporary shelters.

Feelings of safety

This section dissects the answers of **people who were in Sweida province during the July 2025 escalation of violence**.

A majority (61%, n=242) of the respondents who were in Sweida during the escalation indicated feeling somehow safe where they are now, suggesting a sense of precarious security rather than absolute safety. A substantial portion (34%) explicitly stated they do not feel safe, highlighting prevalent safety concerns. Only a small minority (5%) reported feeling completely safe.

With these findings underscoring widespread insecurity, respondents were asked to describe the reasons for feeling unsafe in their current areas of residence in South Syria. Their accounts (n=77) highlight multiple, overlapping sources of insecurity, including ongoing armed conflict, sectarian targeting, deprivation, and psychological trauma.

Many reported fear stemming from active clashes, shelling, and gunfire, with one noting: **“There are constant clashes and explosions. We sleep fully dressed and our bags are ready so that we can leave the house at any moment.”** Sectarian threats and extremist activity were also prominent, particularly against minority communities, as illustrated by a respondent who stated: **“Fear that terrorist groups will enter my city again and kill me, my family, my husband and my friends.”** In addition, siege conditions and lack of basic necessities, such as water, food, medicine, and electricity, exacerbate insecurity, while limited protection from authorities and repeated violations of truces reinforce fear and uncertainty.

Family situation

This section was addressed to all respondents, including **those who were in Sweida during the escalation of violence and those who were not, but had family members there.**

Out of people who were in Sweida and people who had family there, the large majority (72%) of respondents (n=265) indicated that their families remained together. A smaller proportion (23%) reported that some family members were separated but not missing, while 4% stated that some family members were missing.

Regarding missing family members, 3 respondents (n=11) reported 1 missing, 4 reported 2-3 missing, and 3 reported more than 5 missing, with 1 respondent preferring not to disclose.

The main cause of family separation was fleeing violence (61%, n=71), followed by the imposed siege (47%). Infrastructure breakdown, specifically lost contact due to damaged communications, also played a significant role (28%). Desperate measures included purposely sending family members away for safety (24%), while abduction/kidnapping (18%) and arrest/detention (16%) were also notable causes. Open answers (9%) highlighted a combination of violence, security threats, and infrastructure breakdown. This complex issue in South Syria stems from both direct conflict and its devastating societal and infrastructural impacts.

Access to basic needs

This section dissects the answers of **people who were in Sweida province during the July 2025 escalation of violence.**

When asked about their (lack of) access to basic needs in their current area, food insecurity was highlighted as the most critical issue, affecting 62% of respondents (n=235), followed closely by a lack of access to clean water (54%) and safe shelter (49%). Additionally, 40% reported insufficient access to medical assistance, highlighting significant healthcare gaps. Overall, only a small fraction (12%) reported having access to all their basic needs in their current location, underscoring the severe humanitarian distress in the area.

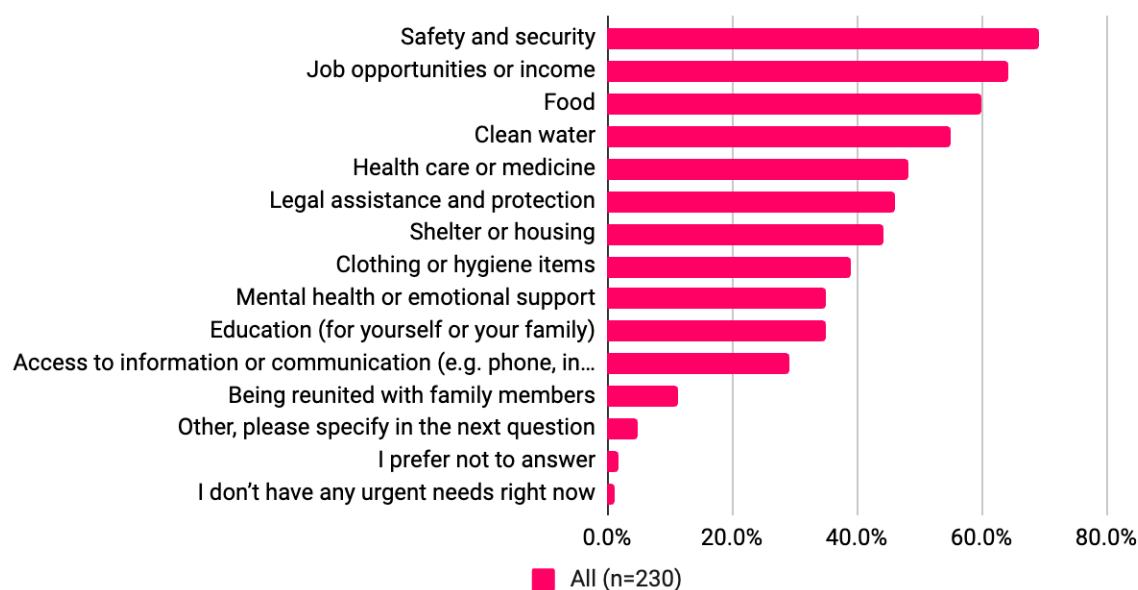
Current most urgent needs

Irrespective of their access to basic needs, respondents were later asked to specify what they most urgently required in order to enable a more comprehensive assessment of the type of support needed in their situation.

Responses (n=230) reveal that communities in South Syria face urgent and overlapping needs across multiple dimensions of survival and protection. Safety and security (69%), food (60%), and job opportunities or income (64%) emerged as the most pressing concerns, underscoring both immediate survival priorities and the need for longer-term economic resilience. High proportions of respondents also reported lack of clean water (55%), shelter or housing (44%), and health care or medicine (48%), highlighting critical humanitarian gaps. Beyond material needs, mental health and emotional support (35%) was frequently cited, reflecting the psychological toll of ongoing violence and displacement. The fact that only 1% of respondents reported no urgent needs underscores the acute vulnerability of the population.

Open responses (n=11) pointed to needs beyond immediate survival, including electricity and fuel for wells and bakeries, financial support, and safe housing. Others highlighted home repairs, mobility assistance, and psychological support for children and families, reflecting the depth and diversity of unmet needs in South Syria.

Figure 2. Most urgent needs - Respondents inside Sweida



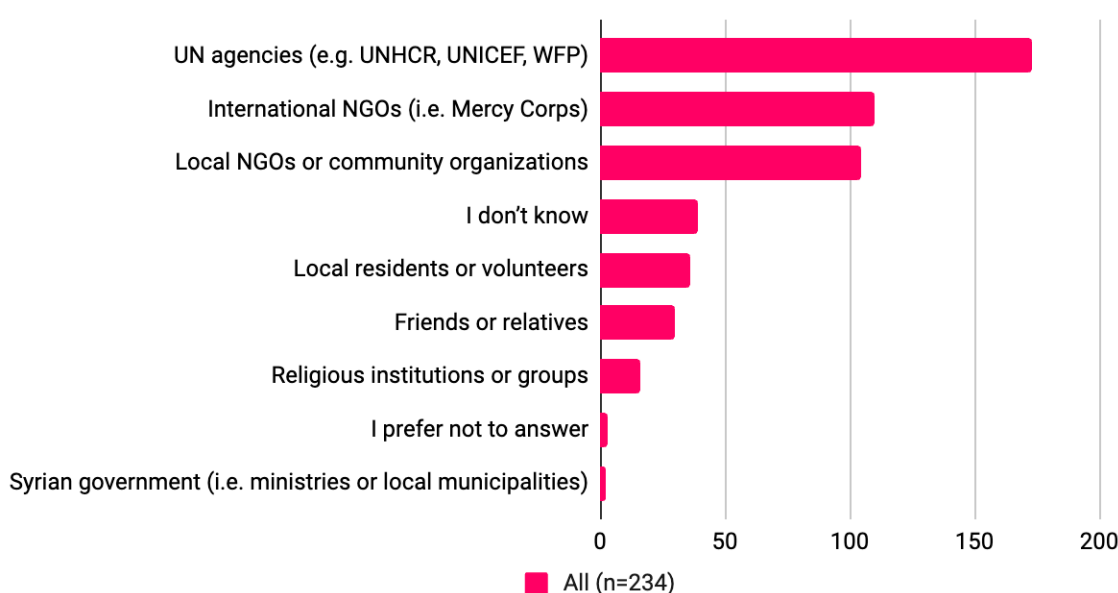
Trust in aid actors

This section dissects the answers of **people who were in Sweida province during the July 2025**

escalation of violence.

Respondents shared which actors they believe could contribute most to meeting their basic needs. UN agencies are seen as the most critical actors, identified by 74% (n=234) of respondents, followed by international and local NGOs at 47% and 45% respectively. In contrast, the Syrian government has a negligible perceived role, with only 1% of respondents recognizing their possible contribution. Community-level support, including local residents/volunteers and friends/relatives, plays a significant but secondary role at 15% and 13%, while 17% of respondents are unsure which actors can contribute most.

Figure 3. Trust in aid actors - Respondents inside Sweida



Support network in current location

This section dissects the answers of **people who were in Sweida province during the July 2025 escalation of violence.**

Respondents (n=230) subsequently described what their support networks looked like in their current locations. Support networks were contextualized as people or groups that can be relied on for help, advice, or emotional support in their area. The results revealed highly uneven access to assistance and emotional backing amid ongoing conflict and deprivation.

While some reported having family, friends, and neighbors as primary sources of support, many emphasized that these networks are limited to moral or emotional help rather than material aid. As one respondent explained, **“We all try to support each other but in reality we all need support,”** highlighting the strain on local solidarity under siege conditions. Others noted the presence of NGOs or organizations like the Syria Arab Red Crescent, though access was often

limited: **"We have no idea who can help us, but we hope that our voice reaches all countries. Sweida is a disaster area, with a complete shortage of food and drinking water."** A significant portion of respondents reported having no support network at all, describing acute shortages of food, water, medicine, and basic necessities, with one stating, **"There is absolutely no support. We are unable to secure our most basic needs... We are in a real tragedy."** Overall, these responses underscore that support networks in South Syria are fragile, uneven, and heavily dependent on family or local communities, while formal humanitarian assistance remains insufficient to meet basic needs.

Home damage and barriers to safe return

This section dissects the answers of **people who were in Sweida province during the July 2025 escalation of violence**.

A large proportion of homes (30%, n=212) are completely destroyed, indicating severe impact from escalations. An additional 17% of houses are partially destroyed or looted, further exacerbating the displacement crisis. Only a small percentage (18%) of homes remain intact and ready for return. Another 22% are damaged but repairable, suggesting a potential for recovery with adequate support. Overall, 69% have been partially damaged or destroyed, highlighting the widespread need for repair or reconstruction. A notable 10% of respondents are unsure about their home's condition, likely due to the impossibility to check on property.

While a majority of respondents (65%, n=150) indicated they were planning to return home, many required support for rebuilding or repairs (60%). In addition, a notable proportion (27%) do not feel safe enough to return to their homes, which underscores the critical need for housing reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts to facilitate the safe and dignified return of displaced populations in South Syria. 3% were unsure and 3% had already returned.

A major barrier to return for displaced individuals in South Syria is the extensive damage to infrastructure (72%, n=148), followed by persistent security risks (68%) and limited access to basic services (50%). In addition, one-third of respondents cited the occupation of their homes by others (32%), while more than a third highlighted emotional trauma and fear (34%) as significant obstacles. These findings underscore that beyond material reconstruction, security guarantees, psychosocial support, and property restitution must be addressed before displaced populations can meaningfully consider return.

Call to donors

This section was addressed to all respondents, including **those who were in Sweida during the escalation of violence and those who were not, but had family there**.

Affected Syrians (n=228) from the ongoing violence in Sweida are issuing a unified and urgent plea to decision-makers, detailing a multifaceted crisis that extends beyond a single need. The

most pressing demand (over 40 responses) is for security and protection. As one respondent urgently stated, **"I demand safety and peace from injustice, killing, and tyranny. My affected community lacks the necessities of life. I demand respect for humanity, women, and protection for my children."** This security crisis is compounded by a severe humanitarian emergency, with over 30 responses detailing the lack of basic necessities. One resident described the situation as catastrophic, noting, **"We lack everything in Sweida: electricity, water, medicine, and most importantly, food: flour, milk, canned goods, sugar, everything, even salt and grains."** Beyond immediate relief, over 20 responses call for reconstruction and economic recovery, with appeals for compensation for destroyed property. One individual's message powerfully linked this to a global appeal: **"Compensation for my house that was robbed and then completely burned down... The whole world must stand with us and help us. Our homes are in ruins."** A final theme (over 10 responses) is the need for psychosocial support and dignity, as evidenced by a plea to protect: **"Children's hearts are filled with sadness, fear, and anxiety. We demand respect for humanity, women and the protection of my children."** The messages collectively form a powerful request for a comprehensive international response that includes security guarantees, urgent aid, and long-term reconstruction to allow them to live with dignity and safety.

As for family members of people who were in Sweida during the violent events (n=22), their voices centered around three main priorities: **(1) humanitarian access** (16 responses), including lifting the siege on Sweida and opening humanitarian corridors to allow food, water, fuel, and medicine to reach civilians; **(2) international protection** (14 responses), particularly from government forces, militias, and extremist groups, with many calling for UN involvement to ensure safety; and **(3) accountability** (11 responses), with repeated demands for impartial international investigations into massacres, kidnappings, and other violations. Beyond emergency needs, participants also stress the importance of reconstruction, financial assistance, and livelihood recovery (9 responses), alongside protection for vulnerable groups (7 responses) such as women, children, and minorities, including psychosocial and gender-sensitive support. Underpinning these demands is a broader aspiration for peace, dignity, and coexistence (6 responses): **"We are all one people... It is now the time to live in security, peace, and prosperity."**

Real-time engagement with key decision-makers

This section was addressed to all respondents, including **those who were in Sweida during the escalation of violence and those who were not, but had family there.**

Via its in-house developed Real-Time Engagement (RTE) platform, Upinion can host conversations in real time between community members and key stakeholders. This tool is designed to help facilitate the participation and inclusion of community voices in decision-making processes, by providing a direct, safe, and anonymous channel of communication, and has already facilitated successful engagement between communities from Lebanon, Türkiye, Yemen, and Syria and senior UN leadership and high-ranking government representatives.

After introducing and contextualizing the purpose of the RTE platform to respondents, a large majority (87%, n=250) expressed interest in directly sharing their community experiences and needs with representatives from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This indicates a strong desire for their voices to be heard by high-level decision-makers. Only a small percentage (less than 1%) explicitly stated "No" to participating, while 10% were "not sure" and 2% preferred not to answer. This suggests that the primary barrier to engagement is not disinterest but potentially a lack of awareness or clear opportunity.

These findings are crucial for understanding the potential for direct community engagement in crisis-affected regions. They demonstrate that communities are not only willing but eager to participate in discussions that directly impact their lives. This direct feedback can provide valuable, unfiltered insights into humanitarian needs and displacement challenges that might otherwise be missed through traditional reporting channels. For decision-makers, this opportunity for dialogue can inform more targeted and effective humanitarian responses, ensuring that interventions are genuinely aligned with community priorities and experiences.

Community recommendations

Enhance responsive humanitarian support in southern Syria

- **Allocate resources to address the most critical needs** identified by respondents, including food security, clean water, safe shelter, healthcare, and job opportunities/income.
- **Acknowledge and support existing community networks** by recognizing the existing reliance on family and community support networks and explore ways to bolster these informal systems.
- **Ensure UN access and funding** to support the critical role of UN agencies and international NGOs, which communities identify as key trusted actors for aid delivery and support.

Invest in protection and security initiatives

- **Fund programs that aim to mitigate ongoing armed conflict**, prevent sectarian targeting, and ensure the safety of minority communities, as these are primary drivers of displacement and insecurity.
- **Condition support on adherence to international humanitarian law and human rights principles** by ensuring all humanitarian responses prioritize protection principles and establishing robust accountability frameworks to address grievances.
- **Ensure an accurate understanding of vulnerable groups' situations and evolving needs** by facilitating continuous engagement initiatives and proactive outreach efforts to hard-to-reach communities.

Enable safe and sustainable return

- **Support reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts** by providing funding for the repair and reconstruction of damaged homes and essential infrastructure, recognizing that extensive destruction is a major barrier to return.
- **Advocate for property restitution and legal clarity on housing, land, and property (HLP) rights** by supporting initiatives that address disputes over occupied homes and prevent secondary displacement.

- **Increase funding for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services** to address the trauma and fear caused to affected populations by repeated exposure to violence and displacement.

Engage with affected communities

- **Implement secure and confidential channels for communities to provide feedback on humanitarian aid, protection concerns, and program effectiveness** similar to Upinion's two-way communication approach with its Digital Engagement Platform.
- **Prioritize funding and technical support for local organizations and community groups** to design and implement their own solutions, fostering ownership and sustainability.
- **Support mechanisms**, like the Upinion RTE platform, **that enable real-time, secure communication** between crisis-affected communities and high-level decision-makers to ensure aid is directly aligned with community needs and priorities.

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