The Politics of Impoverishment and Targeted Destruction in Syria: Toward Integrating the Economic Dimension into Transitional Justice Processes

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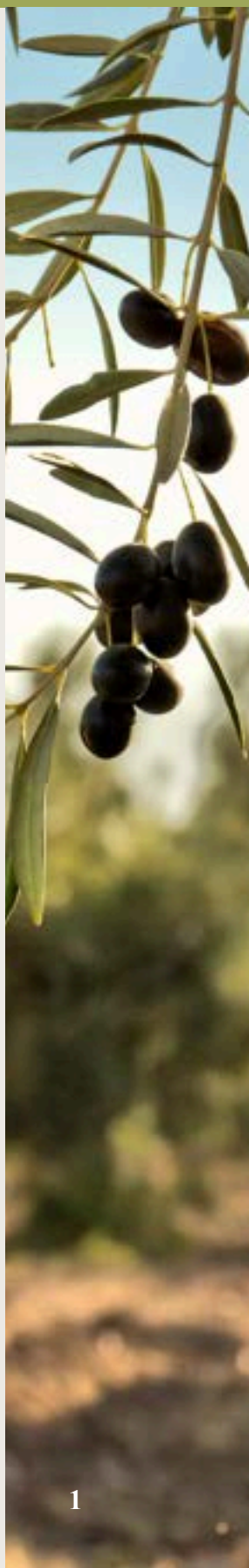


Executive Summary

Following the overthrow of the Bashar al-Asaad regime in December 2024, the Syrian Arab Republic faces acute challenges for its reconstruction. While government of al-Sharaa has initiated transitional justice (TJ) debates, these have majorly prioritized legal accountability for war crimes and enforced disappearances, largely excluding economic reconstruction and reparations from a TJ perspective. The agricultural sector, which represents the backbone of the Syrian economy, was systematically dismantled during the war through a combination of direct warfare, the weaponization of water, the abandonment of lands due to the conflict, and illegal dispossession of farmers' lands. In the Idlib and Hama governorates, located in the Orontes River basin, the deliberate destruction of orchards, which represented both economic livelihoods and cultural identity, has created a cycle of poverty, displacement, and social fragmentation. In order to achieve justice and sustainable peace, these economic roots of the conflict need to be addressed. If they are not, the Syria government may fail to achieve the long-term stability that is essential for lasting peace. This report investigates the hypothesis that reparations aimed at reinvigorating agriculture of olive and pistachio orchards through financial, institutional, and logistical support, can positively influence social cohesion and reconciliation in Hama and Idlib, when comprehensively integrated into a context-sensitive transitional justice mechanism that both addresses economic losses and priorities of local farmers. The study follows a qualitative design that combines desk-view research and field methods. A comprehensive literature review on transitional justice and social cohesion theory was fundamental to build the basis of the study, as well as post-conflict transitional justice in Colombia, Zimbabwe, Tunisia, and

The report then integrates primary and secondary data from the Colombia and Zimbabwe context, semi-structured interviews with Syrian NGO representatives, IO and INGOs, agricultural engineers and agroecology experts, and three Syrian farmers who were affected by the war. The geographical focus is the Idlib and Hama governorate, without specific knowledge of where the project will be piloted, as that is up to Geo Expertise's discretion.

By looking at the several pillars of destruction that led to people's complete livelihoods and destroyal of orchard trees that were over centuries old, we explored initiatives in Colombia and Zimbabwe that might be replicable in the Syrian context, aiming at creating collective economic structures to successfully rebuild social trust, reduce violence, and reinvigorate orchard production. Addressing social issues and economic troubles through a transitional justice framework is necessary for the prevention of renewed conflict. Targeted destruction, water scarcity, legal dispossession, and the erosion of social capital all influence the recommendations of the Pilot Project Framework this report presents. Without addressing these issues comprehensively, no justice will be served to those affected. Thus, to operationalize the findings, the report proposes a pilot project for Geo Expertise to implement in a village or two located in the two governorates of study. These combine the three main aspects of destructions, namely the targeted destruction of arable land and irrigation infrastructure, the institutional and militarized dispossession of lands and farms, and the erosion of the social fabric, as well as a Sylvo-Arable Agroforestry Model that seeks to restore soil structure, manage water more effectively, and generate immediate income for those affected. The recommendations are structured as follows:



Executive Summary

1. **Mapping and Demining: Conduct soil testing and GIS mapping to identify UXOs before interventions.**

2. **Land Tenure Advocacy: Launch a campaign to update land ownership records, ensuring equitable rights for displaced farmers and widows.**

3. **Transitional Financial Support: Establish a "Transition Fund" to provide direct cash transfers to farmers for the interim tree maturation period.**

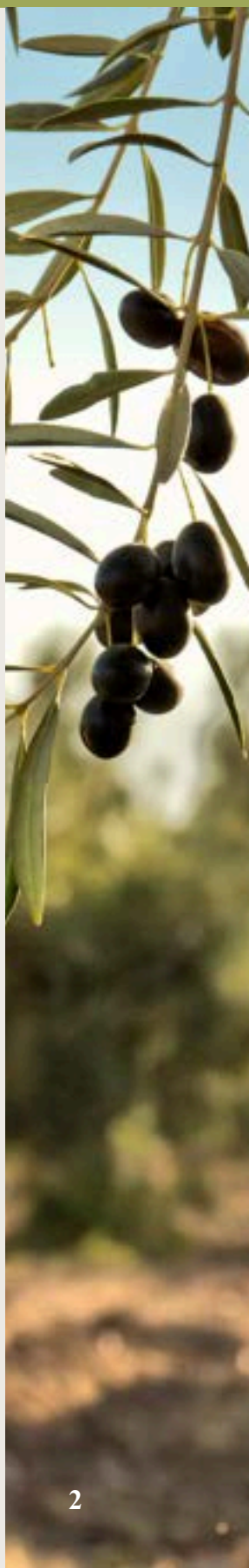
4. **Water Infrastructure: Prioritize the installation and repair of solar-powered and diesel-fuelled water pumps as well as the implementation of drip irrigation systems to maximize water efficiency.**

5. **Agroforestry Implementation: Co-design farm layouts that intercalate olives and pistachios with carbon trees, as well as cover crops to maximise nitrogen fixation, reduce water evaporation, and provide interim harvests to offset fruit-tree production times.**

6. **Socialization through Knowledge Exchange: Promote networks and instances for socialization between farmers and all members of rural communities to foster trust and social cohesion.**

7. **Local Committees and Participatory Governance: Establish Local Agroecology Committees composed of farmers and other community members to oversee resource allocation, market access of farm products, and organize themselves based on needs and interests.**

Reintegrating the agricultural sector into the transitional justice framework is not merely an economic necessity, but a prerequisite for durable peace in Syria. It is therefore necessary to shift from a reactive, aid-based approach of interventions to a proactive, reparatory model centered on agroforestry, human rights, and land justice, in which stakeholders can transform agriculture into a driver of reconciliation. The pilot may provide a scalable model for integrating agricultural reparations into broader reconstruction initiatives.



1. Introduction

On the morning of December 8, 2024, Damascus witnessed a new beginning with the fall of the Assad regime after 55 years in power, realizing the long-held aspirations of many Syrians who had risen against authoritarian rule in a movement that later developed into a multifaceted conflict. The agricultural sector, which used to account for a large portion of the Syrian economy, has been damaged by both war and climate change, worsening social conditions for many Syrians.[1] Targeted destruction of fruit trees and water infrastructure as a method of warfare have had devastating effects, exacerbated by factors such as climate change and land dispossession. Addressing these issues through a transitional justice strategy is paramount to reconstruct a nation divided by years of war.

Discussions surrounding transitional justice in Syria have stopped being a theoretical question for the future, but became a practical discussion for the present. However, the debate has focused on bringing war criminals from the Assad regime to justice and investigating enforced disappearances carried out during the conflict.[2] Thus far, there has not been a strategy that incorporates an economic component to transitional justice, despite its importance for the reconstruction of the country. Addressing these issues through a transitional justice strategy is paramount to reconstruct a nation divided by years of war.

This report explores the link between economic conditions and social cohesion through orchard-farming agriculture, aiming to answer the question: Can reparatory measures influence reconciliation and peace within agricultural communities in Idlib & Hama, Syria? How can a transitional justice mechanism include reparations to address the agricultural sector?

We hypothesize that reparations, specifically aimed at reinvigorating agriculture through financial, institutional, and logistical support, can positively influence social cohesion and reconciliation in the area of study, when integrated into a context-sensitive transitional justice mechanism that addresses both economic losses and the priorities of local farmers.

Focusing on the Governorates of Idlib and Hama in the Orontes river basin, this research aims to shed light on the conditions needed for an effective development project that incorporates economic reinvigoration of the agricultural sector in order to promote reconciliation, peace, and improvement of farmers' livelihoods.

[1] NPR Staff, How Could A Drought Spark A Civil War?
[2] SJAC, A Roadmap for Transitional Justice in Syria; Aboueldahab, Process Over Outcome: Rethinking Transitional Justice in Syria; ICTJ, Where We Work - Syria.

The study provides an overview of the history and current state of both agriculture and conflict in Syria, analyzing the ways in which agricultural inputs were used as political tools for the regime to maintain power and the subsequent harms they posed to Syrians. An in-depth look at both pistachio and olive trees is then taken, given these are the orchards the project focuses on given their importance in Syria's agricultural sector and cultural identity. The impact of the war on said sector is reviewed, taking into account the subsequent economic decline of the sector, displacement and land dispossession in rural areas, and the extent of the damage caused to water infrastructure. The temporal relevance of this research is outlined, as at the time of writing Syria's transitional government confronts the task of reconstruction, and has largely excluded the importance of economic reinvigoration in the transitional justice framework.

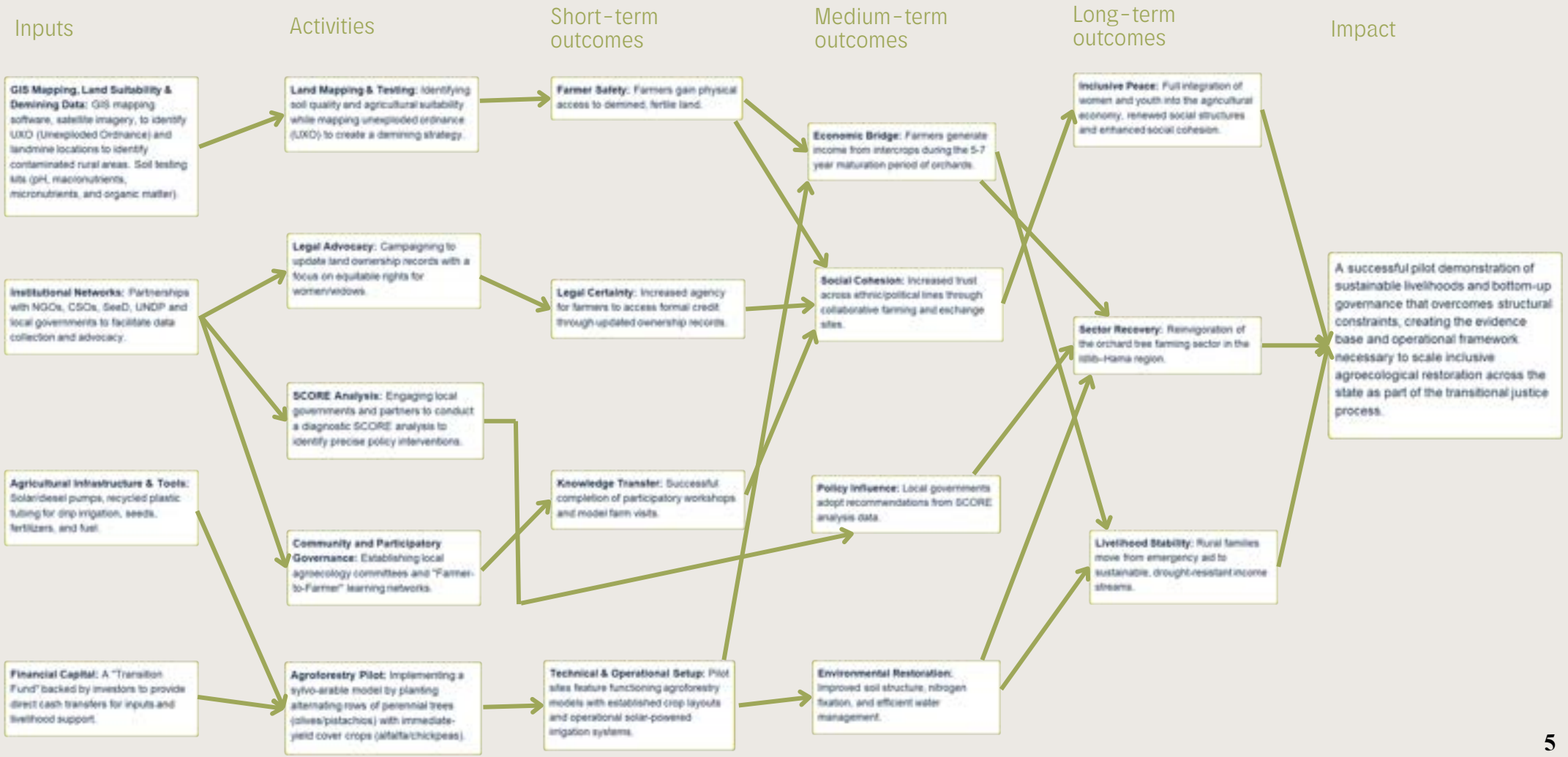
The literature review provides the theory and foundations of transitional justice, with a particular focus on reparations, and the link between economic opportunity. The theoretical framework is later complemented by a brief overview of selected case studies in post conflict areas and the lessons extracted that may be relevant for the Syrian context.

Section 4 discusses the methodology of the work, mainly outlining the qualitative design of the research. The findings focus on lessons extracted from case studies, namely Colombia and Zimbabwe, and an analysis of the interviews. The discussion section explores possible paths in which agricultural revitalization can be used to support transitional justice and social cohesion in Syria. These discussions include the potential of agroforestry as well as insights from NGOs and Syrian stakeholders who have first hand experience of the effects of the war on agriculture and valuable knowledge on the needs of future interventions. Limitations of our research, as well as the steps taken to minimize them, are discussed, before presenting a comprehensive list of recommendations for Geo Expertise to implement. Lastly, the report ends with a comprehensive conclusion, followed by two annexes.

Theory of Change

Problem Statement

Syria's agricultural sector has been devastated by over a decade of conflict, displacement, and drought, leaving farmland destroyed, water infrastructure dismantled, and communities displaced from land they cannot legally reclaim. Simultaneously, years of division and competition over scarce resources have eroded the inter-communal trust on which sustainable agricultural recovery depends. Economic collapse, a land justice gap, social fragmentation and climate issues are compounding crises that need to be addressed holistically in order to create the conditions necessary for sustainable agricultural recovery and long-term peace and reconciliation. To navigate these overlapping crises, the following Theory of Change posits that specific strategic inputs will catalyze a sequence of outputs and outcomes, leading to these intended effects:



2.Mapping the Landscape: Understanding Agriculture and Conflict in Syria

2.1 Geographical Scope

Our focus is on the area spanning southeastern Idlib Province and northern Hama Province, which was subjected to a scorched-earth campaign by former regime forces and their allies, resulting in the widespread destruction of homes and the deliberate felling of trees.

Additionally, the area is of strong agricultural importance. Prior to the conflict, the basin provided 25% of Syria's agricultural production, with 295,000 hectares under irrigation.[5] The war had a severe effect on the Orontes basin: conflict caused a 70% drop in crop production, mainly due to destruction or deliberate interruption of irrigation schemes.[6] By 2013–2014, the basin was a frontline area: pro-regime forces controlled about 40% of the territory, opposition forces another 40%, with the rest being contested.[7] Territorial divisions often overlapped with sectarian geography: Alawite-dominated west, Sunni-dominated east, plus Christian, Shia, Ismaili, Turkmen, and Kurdish enclaves. Within this framework, around three-quarters of the basin's 4 million inhabitants were displaced within three years.[8]

The displacement caused by extreme poverty, the decrease in agricultural outputs, and danger caused by the war, paired with the social fragmentation in the governorates, underscores the need for transitional justice frameworks to address both agricultural destruction and social tensions in the area.

Although the area of study encompasses two governorates, the selection of one village for the implementation of a pilot project will be determined up to the discretion of Geo Expertise.

2.2 The Place of Agriculture in Syria under the Baath Regime

The Baath regime's transformation of Syrian agriculture from a traditional sector into a strategic pillar of political legitimacy has left a legacy of institutional distrust that complicates modern recovery efforts. While the agrarian reforms of the 1960s successfully

[3] Al Zaraee & Shaar, The Economics of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.
[4] FAO, Syrian Arab Republic - Emergency and Recovery Plan of Action 2025-2027, p.3.
[5] Haj Asaad & Jaubert, Geostrategic Stakes and the Impact of the Conflict in the Orontes River Basin, p.180.
[6] Ibid., p.182.
[7] Ibid., p.182.
[8] Ibid., p.174.

dismantled the traditional landlord class,[9] they simultaneously precluded autonomous rural mobilization by subordinating cooperatives to state structures. Although cooperatives were formally integrated into the planning system in 1964,[10] they were rendered mere administrative intermediaries rather than active drivers of economic growth and empowerment, with the regime maintaining control over production, pricing, and trade of strategic crops. In doing so, the state effectively decoupled collective action and economic agency while preventing cooperatives from developing as independent institutions capable of representing farmers' interests. This institutional design created a dependency trap: by positioning itself as the sole intermediary between peasants and markets,[11] the regime progressively eroded the organizational capacities required for autonomous rural coordination. Participation in cooperative structures is thus viewed as a tool of surveillance, rather than a mechanism for mutual benefit, reflecting a profound trust deficit generated by this legacy of state capture.

This institutional fragility became particularly evident following Bashar al-Assad's shift toward liberal economic reforms in the 2000s. The sudden lift of agricultural subsidies which the sector previously relied on,[12] paired with the absence of social protection and the pressures of climate change,[13] resulted in the deterioration of material conditions and a widening of economic inequalities for many Syrians.[14] Under these conditions, the historical association of cooperatives with state surveillance and coercion continues to undermine their legitimacy among farmers. Therefore, any viable reintroduction of cooperatives or other collaborative structures must challenge existing narratives while demonstrating governance structures that are visibly independent from state control. The rural population will be persuaded of their utility only if these organizations are materially proven to function as instruments of economic sovereignty and mutual aid, rather than as extensions of political subordination.

[9] Seurat, État et paysans en Syrie, p.259.
[10] Ahmed Haj Asaad, Myriam Saadé-Sbeih, and Ronald Jaubert, "La crise agraire du bassin de l'Oronte : de la planification centralisée aux projets agro-industriels"
[11] Ibid, p.260.
[12] Joseph Daher, Syria: The Social origins of the uprising, Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung
[13] Francesca De Châtel, The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution
[14] Abboud, Economic liberalization and social transformations in pre-war Syria.

2.2.1 The Regime Era: Water as a Tool of Control and Effects of Climate

Understanding how water was used by the Assad regime as a tool of control and the effects this had on water resources is key to understanding the current situation and challenges of the agricultural sector. Under the Assad regime, water was instrumentalized to prioritize political and economic goals over sustainability and local needs.[15] Unregulated well-drilling rights were granted to loyalists.[16] Agricultural policies emphasizing national self-sufficiency led to a rapid and massive expansion of irrigation systems, more than doubling irrigated lands between 1985 and 2010.[18] By the 2000s, agriculture consumed 90% of national water resources, with growing reliance on groundwater extraction.[19]

The proliferation of unlicensed wells led to overexploitation of the sources,[20] with water scarcity and pollution becoming a critical national concern. Available annual water per capita dropped to just 882 m^3 in 2005, well below the World Bank's water poverty threshold of 1000 m^3.[21] The government attempted to mitigate the emergency through new legal frameworks and investment plans, such as Water Law No. 31 (2005), which sought to modernize irrigation while introducing sanctions for over-consumption.[22] A subsequent initiative in 2006 pledged SYP 72 billion (USD 1.4 billion at the time) for infrastructure upgrades over the next five years.[23] However, despite written legislation, these measures were never implemented, failing to tackle both water pollution and depletion.

The 2006–2010 drought worsened vulnerabilities related to water. As surface water sources dried up, farmers increasingly turned to groundwater, deepening the cycle of depletion. Aquifers were rapidly exhausted, water tables fell, and the increased use of deeper groundwater heightened water salinity.[24] The resulting decline in agricultural productivity contributed to rural economic distress and displacement. Some studies identify these

[15] Haj Asaad, Hydropolitics and Peacebuilding in Syria's Reconstruction.
[16] Northrup, The Growing Power of Water in Syria.
[17] Haj Asaad, Hydropolitics and Peacebuilding in Syria's Reconstruction.
[18] Daher, Water Scarcity, Mismanagement and Pollution in Syria, p.7.
[19] Northrup, The Growing Power of Water in Syria.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Verner, Adaptation to a changing climate in the Arab countries.
[22] Fanack Water, Water Management in Syria.
[23] Daher, Water Scarcity, Mismanagement and Pollution in Syria, p.10-11.
[24] Atik et al., Irrigation Water in Northwest Syria, p.2.

dynamics as contributing factors to the 2011 unrest, although the origins of the conflict remain complex and multifaceted.[25]

All of these factors combined underscore the importance of tackling the vast water issues faced by Syrians. Without a proper water management policy, agricultural reconstruction cannot be done sustainably, posing even grander challenges given the nation's vulnerability to climate change impacts.

2.2.2 Pistachio and Olive Production in Syria

The rationale for focusing this orchard restoration project on olives and pistachios lies not only in their economic importance in the region, but also because these fruit trees represent a core component of Syria's culture and identity.

Before the 2011 uprising and the war that proceeded, Syria was a major player in olive and pistachio production, being the fourth largest exporter of both olive oil and pistachios in 2005.[26] Beyond the economic importance of these trees, both olives and pistachios are believed to have first been discovered in the times of the Assyrians, close to 3,500 B.C., in what is now modern-day Syria and Turkey.[27] Therefore, they represent a significant part of the region's culture and identity, and thus efforts to preserve them are paramount.

In Syria, olive trees covered over 65% of the total fruit-tree area,[28] with 52% of production taking place in Idlib and Aleppo. There, production relied on rainfed agriculture rather than irrigation from underground water.[29] In contrast, pistachios were mostly produced in the Hama governorate, which accounted for 60% of the total national output, with the town of Murk alone producing 40,000 of the country's total 63,000 tons of pistachios.[30]

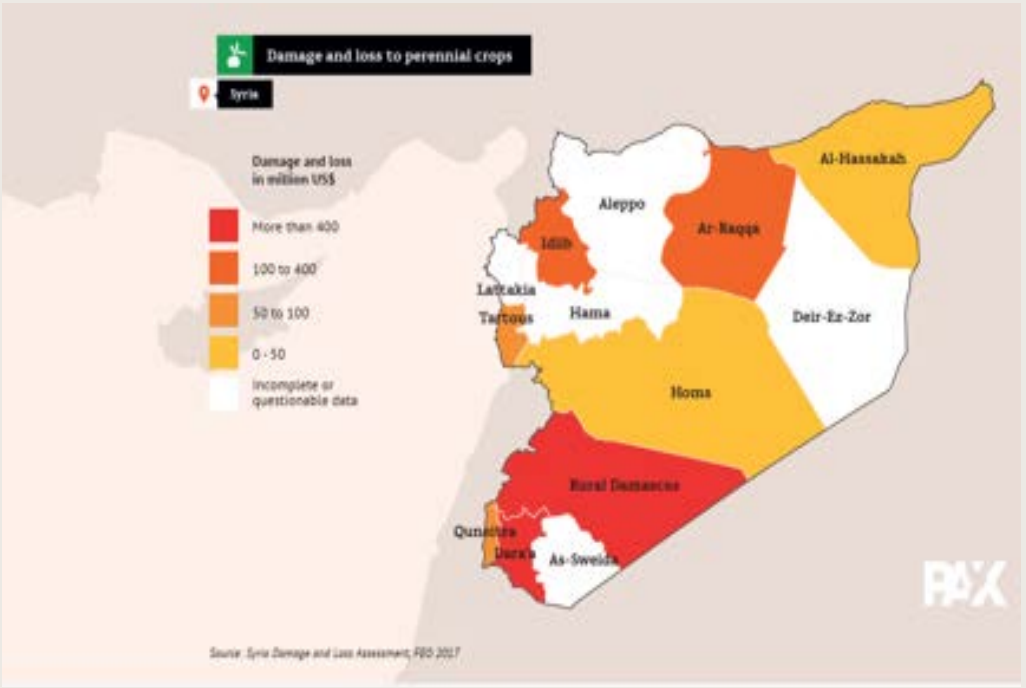
Despite its major difficulties, reinvigorating olive and pistachio farming not only represents a fight for improving economic livelihoods for Syrians, but also resistance to uphold and maintain Syrian history and identity.

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[25] Northrup, The Growing Power of Water in Syria.
[26] El Ibrahem, Abdine, and Dragotta, The Olive Oil Sector in Syria, and Dellair, Syria's 'Golden Tree' Rises Again | Syria Untold | حكاية ما انحكت.
[27] Ibid.
[28] El Ibrahem, Abdine, and Dragotta, "The Olive Oil Sector in Syria."
[29] Ibid.
[30] Obeid, "Syria's 'Golden Tree' Rises Again."

2.3 The Impact of the War on Agriculture

During the war, the agricultural sector deteriorated due to multiple interconnected factors. As many agricultural areas became active warzones, fighting and explosive remnants of war led to widespread destruction and contamination of arable land.[31] The orchards in the area were under the control of former regime forces, who cut down olive trees, looted pistachio harvests, and, in some cases, deliberately burned orchards. These factors continue to limit safe access for farmers to cultivate the land. Beyond the militarized destruction of trees, increasing prices, lower purchasing power, and harsh weather conditions drove local populations to log trees for firewood and charcoal, leading to severe deforestation in Idlib, Latakia, Tartous, and Hama.[33]



[31] Simon, Farmers Plow the Future; Human Rights Watch Report, Syria: Landmines, Explosive Remnants Harming Civilians.
[32] BBC News, "Syrian Military 'Burning Farmland in Rebel-Held North.'"; Al-Aswad, "Scorched Earth: How a Decade of War Destroyed Syria's Farmlands."
[33] Najim et al., "PAX - Axed and Burned." p. 25-28



Tree cover loss in Qah, Idlib governorate. PAX, Axed and Burned, p.27.



Fields of olive trees, 2025 - the trees were cut down and the field is mined - southern countryside of Idlib. Photos by Ahmed Haj Asaad.

2.3.1 Economic Dimensions of Agricultural Decline

Despite years of conflict, the agricultural sector remains a core component of the Syrian economy and livelihoods. Reinvigoration of the agricultural sector is, therefore, central to Syria's post-conflict recovery. During the first six years of war, agriculture's share of GDP rose from approximately 19% prior to the conflict to an estimated 26%.[34] However, this expansion does not reflect genuine growth, but the relative contraction of other economic activities and a forced reallocation toward subsistence-oriented production.

Domestic agricultural production plays a key role in mitigating food insecurity and limiting exposure to volatile international markets, particularly in the context of currency depreciation and constrained import capacity. As such, the deterioration of agriculture has implications that extend beyond the sector itself, exacerbating rural impoverishment, increasing dependency on external aid, and heightening the risk of further social and economic instability. Restoration is not simply a matter of sectoral recovery, but a prerequisite for broader economic resilience and social cohesion. However, this stabilizing

[34] FAO, Counting the Cost - Agriculture in Syria after Six Years of Crisis, p.1.

role is constrained by deep structural limitations stemming from the Assad regime and subsequent war that must be addressed for agricultural recovery to be viable.

Farmers faced a sharp increase in the cost of essential inputs such as equipment, seeds, and fertilizers, alongside a significant reduction in purchasing power due to currency depreciation.[35] Inputs like seeds and fertilizers are now priced in US dollars to shield sellers from inflation,[36] while agricultural products are still sold in Syrian pounds in local markets. The latter remain largely cash-based and operate under limited access to foreign currency for most producers and consumers. This currency mismatch creates a structural imbalance that directly affects farmers, as rising production costs are not offset by proportional increases in market pricing. As a result, the economic viability of agricultural activity is reduced, discouraging investment, and in many cases, forcing farmers to scale down production or abandon cultivation altogether.

The deliberate destruction of fruit trees as a means of warfare in rural southern Idlib and Hama further harmed the sector, as these trees were often decades old. This constitutes not only an immediate loss of income, but a destruction of long-term productive capital, introducing a temporal lag in recovery that extends well beyond the cessation of violence, because new trees require several years of care and significant financial investment before returning to productive capacity. As a result, farmers' livelihoods have been drastically reduced,[37] with no guarantee that restored productivity and renewed trade opportunities will translate into sustainable profits under current market conditions.

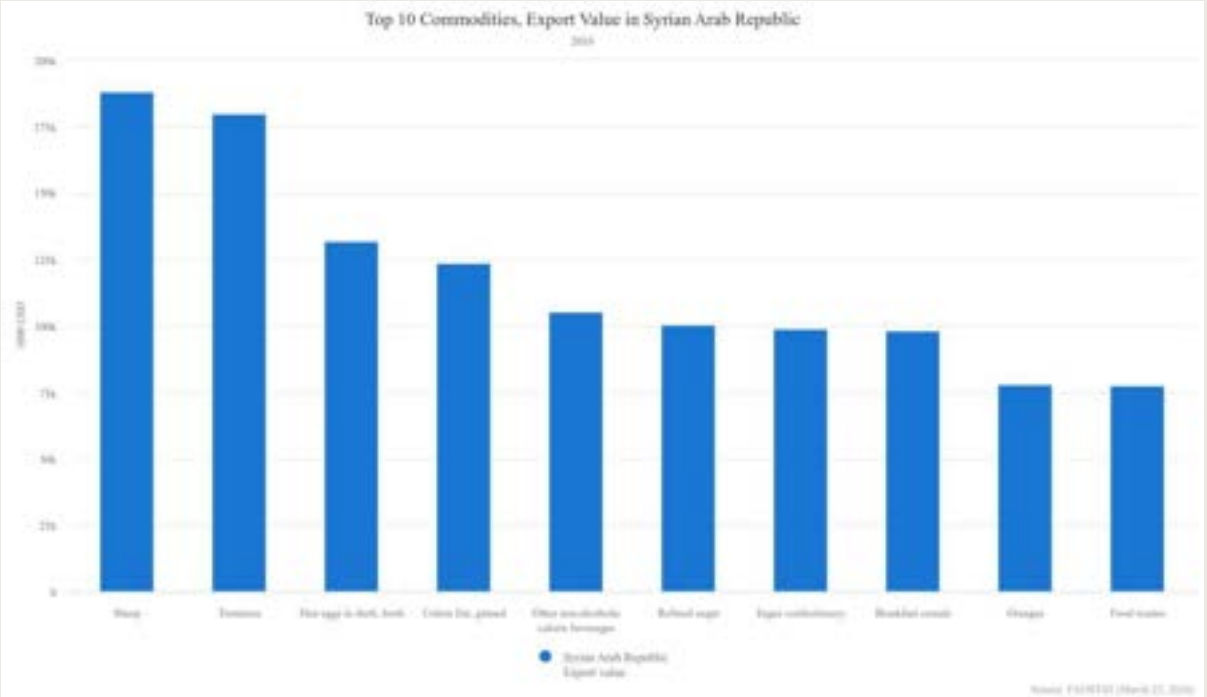
This structural fragility is also reflected in export patterns. Comparing Syria's olive and pistachio exports in 2024 to pre-2010 levels illustrates the impact of the conflict on the sector.[38] Although the available data is limited to exports, it can still provide useful insights. The dominance of olive oil in 2024 exports, compared to a more diversified pre-2010 agricultural export base, suggests a degree of relative resilience within olive production. This may be linked to specific characteristics of olive cultivation, including the ecological durability of olive trees and their ability to remain productive under adverse environmental

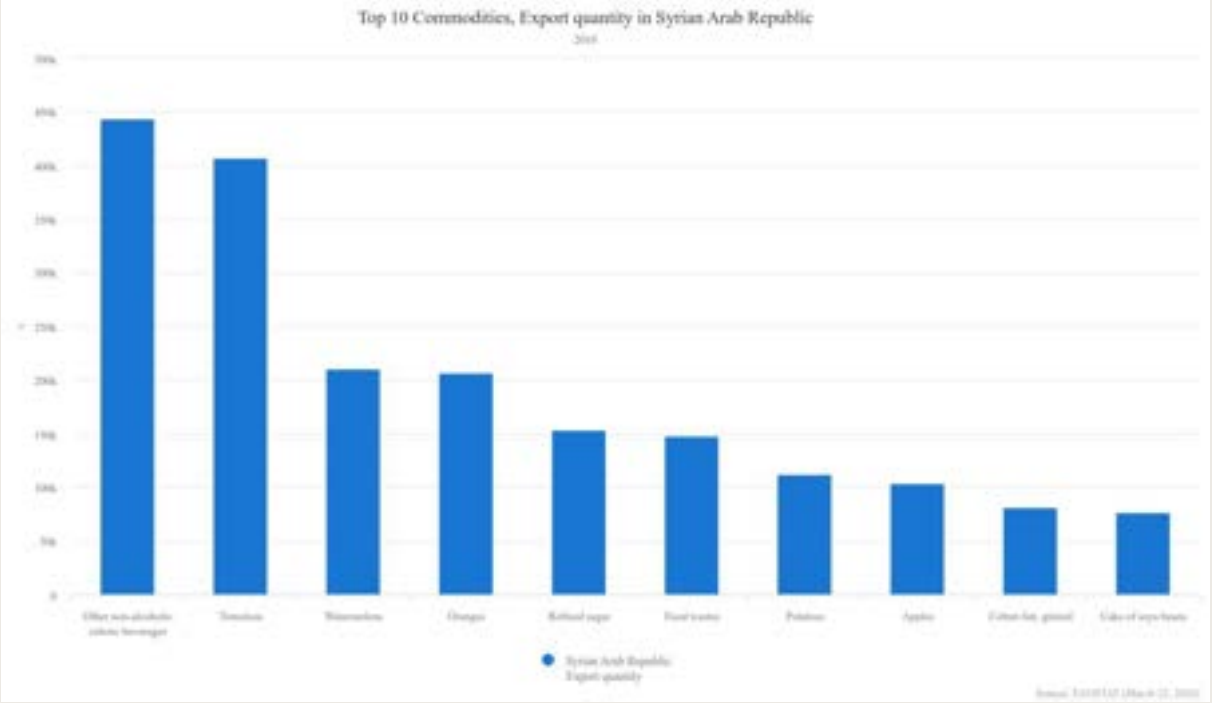
[35] Baladi & Ibrahim, Syria's Strategic Crops in Decline.
[36] Hakouk, Rising Prices in Syria, Two Experts Assess the Economic Situation.; Al-Attar, Syria's Agricultural Crisis.
[37] SANA, Agricultural lands turn barren as a result of overcutting trees in Idleb.
[38] FAO, FAOStat, Commodities by Countries, Syria. (At the time of writing, the 2024 report is the most recent data available.)

conditions. This is also partly explained by the geographical distribution of production, as olive trees are mainly cultivated in areas that were less affected by direct conflict.[39]

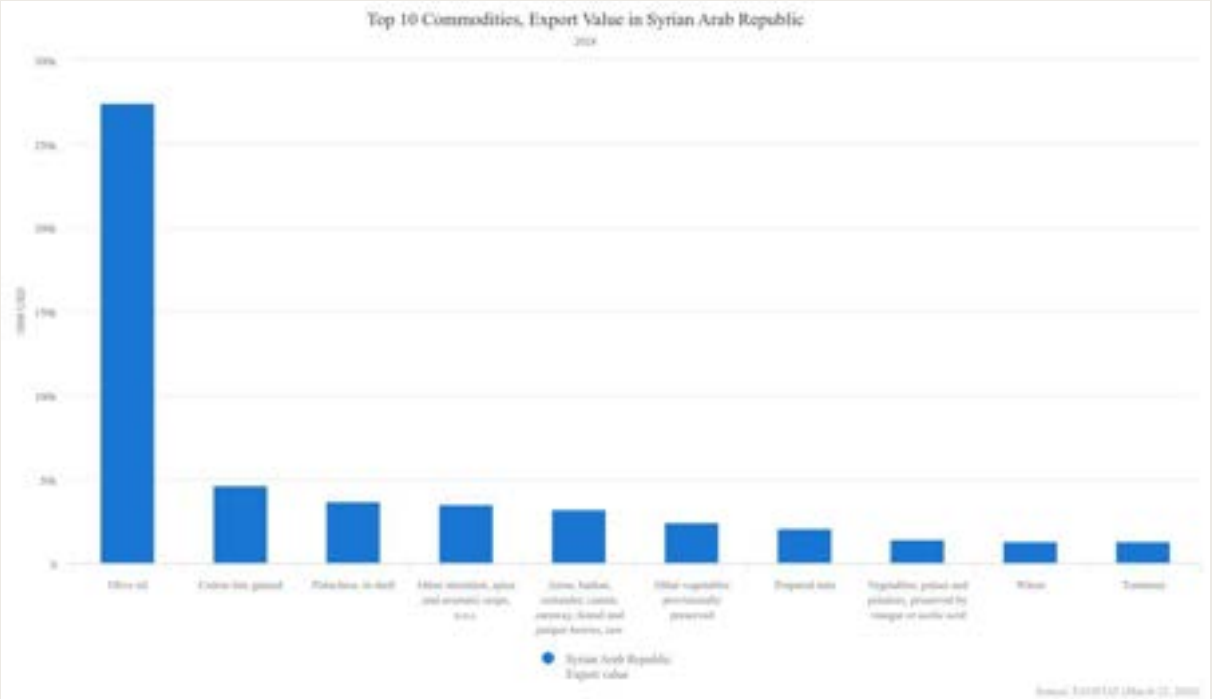
Ultimately, while the resilience of the olive sector demonstrates that recovery is possible, a sustainable restoration of the agricultural sector in general depends on resolving the market distortions that currently hinder its overall development.

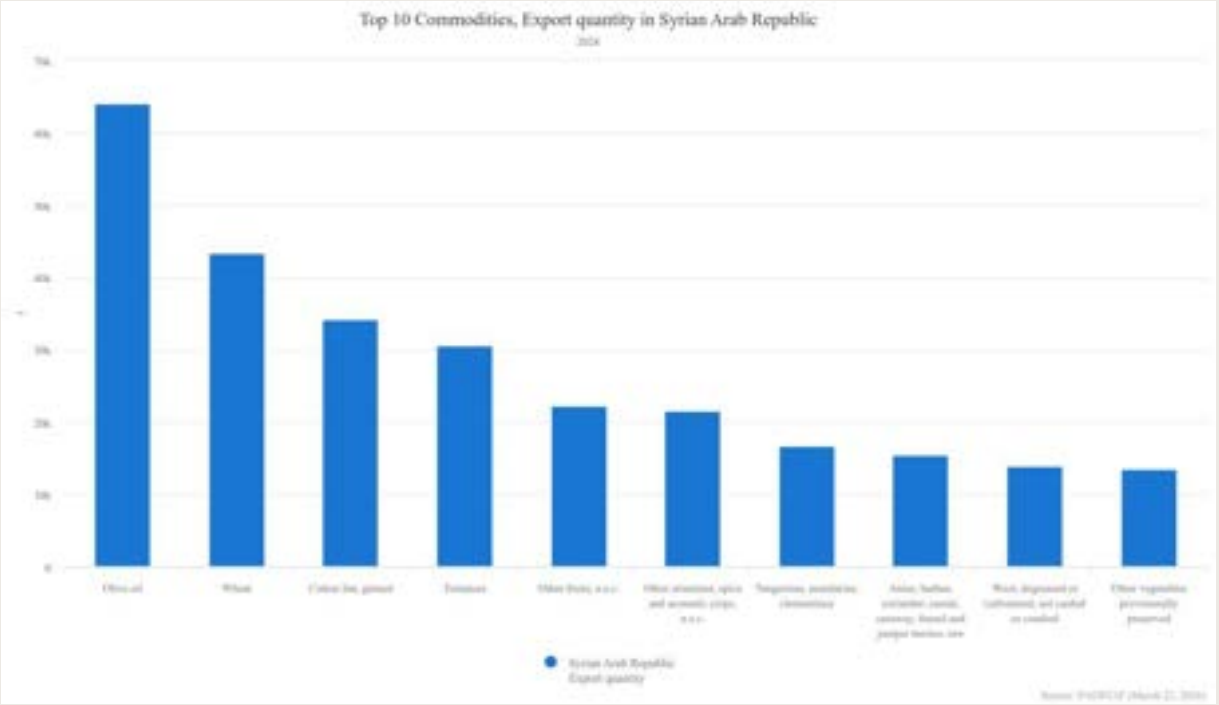
[39] Safwan A. Mohamad, Syrian crisis repercussions on the agricultural sector: Case study of wheat, cotton and olives





Exports of the Syrian Arab Republic, value and quantity, 2010





Exports of the Syrian Arab Republic, value and quantity, 2024

2.3.2 Displacement from Rural Areas and Land Dispossession

Displacement from rural areas and land dispossession caused by the war are one of the primary drivers of decreased agricultural capacity. Without securing land tenure and facilitating the return of the rural workforce, agricultural restoration will remain strategically impossible.

Due to water scarcity and the lack of a supportive government reaction, rural-to-urban migration already began in 2006.[40] The war further intensified and accelerated displacement, with primary drivers shifting from environmental and governance-related pressures to direct insecurity and armed conflict.[41] This resulted in a profound loss of agricultural labor and local knowledge, compounding the decline in agricultural activity; today it constitutes a severe structural deficit in the sector.

The restoration of livelihoods, however, requires more than the physical return of farmers; it also necessitates the restoration of legal ownership, which has been systematically eroded by legislative dispossession. Law No.10 of 2018, passed by the Assad regime and framed as a necessary framework for post-conflict development,[42] functioned as a bureaucratic trap formalizing the systematic land dispossession of displaced people. By imposing impossible logistical and evidentiary requirements on 'redevelopment zones' , the regime institutionalized property confiscation.[43] Owners struggled to return within strict deadlines to confirm their ownership claims, while in many circumstances, the necessary legal documentation had been lost or destroyed altogether during the conflict.[44] Critiqued by Human Rights Watch and Syrians for Truth and Justice, this legalised dispossession created a permanent barrier for farmers who cannot resume production on land they no longer legally own.[45]

This barrier was further reinforced by a model of predatory land governance in Northwest Syria. Following the 2019 military offensives in Hama and Idlib, authorities seized over 440,000 dunums (44,000 hectares) of agricultural land, including lands used for pistachios, wheat, and olives,[46] through government-controlled 'Peasants' Unions'. Through these unions, lands were rented to government loyalists without any compensation to original owners.[47]

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[40] Migration and the Syria Conflict, Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory
[41] Eklund, Mohr, Dinc. Cropland Abandonment in the Context of Drought, Economic Restructuring, and Migration in Northeast Syria
[42] The Tahrin Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), "Law No. 10 of 2018."
[43] Ibid.
[44] Human Rights Watch, Q&A: Syria's New Property Law.
[45] Syrians for Truth and Justice, Syria: Law No. 10 of 2018 Is a Tool to Continue the Arbitrary Confiscation of Property; Human Rights Watch, Q&A: Syria's New Property Law; Lund, Dispossession or Development? The Tug of War over Syria's Ruined Slum Dwellings.
[46] Human Rights Watch, Syria: Government Stealing Opponents' Land.
[47] Syrians for Truth and Justice, The Syrian Government Is Seizing Large Swathes of IDPs Lands in Hama and Idlib Suburbs; Human Rights Watch, Syria: Government Stealing Opponents' Land.

Meaningful agricultural restoration must therefore be paired with interventions that fully address land tenure and the return of displaced populations in order to reconstruct local agricultural knowledge that was lost through the war.

2.3.3 Destruction of Water Infrastructure

Water infrastructure is a fundamental aspect of agricultural recovery and must be addressed to provide for improved livelihoods in Idlib and Hama. Syria's water crisis represents a compounding systemic failure in which direct destruction, operational collapse, and market distortion have mutually reinforced one another to produce conditions that persist beyond active conflict. The outbreak of the conflict in 2011 transformed water infrastructure into a direct tactical weapon, used by all major parties, particularly regime forces.[48]

This reinforced a systemic fragility that continues to sabotage regional recovery. Water infrastructure and irrigation services were frequently caught in the crossfire or deliberately targeted, with 46 documented attacks in 2019 alone, as evidenced by a UN investigation.[49] Of these, eight were reported in Idlib, depriving 250,000 people of access to clean, usable water,[50] which fundamentally eroded the public health landscape, resulting in 9,000 cases of waterborne disease reported in Idlib that same year.[51]

Physical destruction has been compounded by a broader operational collapse, where chronic electricity and fuel shortages, coupled with lack of maintenance and leakage rates of up to 60%,[52] have rendered the remaining network largely inoperable. By 2021, only half of Syria’s WASH systems were operational, with national water supply dropping by 40% compared to pre-war levels.[53] This paralysis shattered agricultural resilience and forced a shift toward fragmented, high-cost alternatives such as uncontrolled groundwater extraction, effectively privatizing a public necessity and accelerating the unsustainable depletion of local aquifers. Consequently, the increasing difficulty of accessing groundwater for irrigation has driven farmers into a shadow economy of unregulated tankers and corrupt distribution networks. By transforming a basic right into an unaffordable luxury,[54] this systemic failure ~~creates a prohibitive cost barr~~ier that directly undermines the economic viability of restoring orchard-based livelihoods in Idlib and Hama.

[48] Abbara et al., Weaponizing Water as an Instrument of War in Syria, p.2.
[49] United Nations Security Council, S/2021/315.
[50] Abbara et al., Weaponizing Water as an Instrument of War in Syria, p.5.
[51] Ibid., p.6.
[52] Syrian Future Movement, Syria’s Water Crisis Between Climate Change and Dysfunctional Management.
[53] Daher, Water Scarcity, Mismanagement and Pollution in Syria, p.12.
[54] Syrian Future Movement, Syria’s Water Crisis Between Climate Change and Dysfunctional Management.

3.Literature Review

3.1 Transitional Justice

This section discusses how transitional justice, specifically land restitution and agricultural recovery, fits the Syrian context. It identifies the expected goals, the frameworks that inform these measures, and the main challenges involved.

3.1.1 Theory and Foundations

Transitional justice is defined as "the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation".[55] It contributes to restoring a peaceful and just society in the aftermath of conflict, authoritarianism, or widespread violations of international humanitarian law and large-scale human rights abuses.

Transitional justice should not be understood as a self-contained subject, but as part of a holistic and intersectional approach that extends beyond the transitional period.[56] It draws on multiple disciplines, including law, sociology, political science, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and religious studies, as well as development and forestry.[57] In addition to achieving accountability, justice, and reconciliation, its ultimate goal is to dismantle multiple structures of inequality that caused the crisis and hinder transition.

Due to each case's uniqueness, transitional justice tools must be tailored to the specific circumstances of each case. While individual measures have their own immediate objectives, the ultimate goals of transitional justice, such as the establishment of the rule of law, respect for human rights, and the inclusion of marginalized populations[58] can only be achieved when a multitude of instruments are applied in combination. [59]

Transitional justice instruments can be classified into four different types:[60]

1. Retributive, aimed at punishing perpetrators through prosecutions, fines, and lustration, as well as nonactions in terms of pardons and amnesties.
2. Reparatory, aimed at recognizing harms suffered by victims and ameliorating their suffering.
3. Revelatory, aimed at finding the truth, including truth commissions and the opening of secret archives.

[55] UN Secretary General, The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice, p.4.
[56] De Greiff, Transitional Justice as Ordinary Justice, p.3-4.
[57] David, What We Know about Transitional Justice, p.152.
[58] UN Secretary General, The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice, p.12.
[59] De Greiff, Theorizing Transitional Justice, p.41.
[60] David, What We Know about Transitional Justice, p.154.

4. Reconciliatory, aimed at rebuilding peaceful coexistence and reconciling a divided society.

Transitional justice seeks to balance retrospective justice, addressing past wrongs, with prospective justice, aiming to build a society resilient to future abuses and conflicts.[61]

A central challenge for transitional justice lies in reconciling conflicting goals, including the pursuit of justice alongside peace, truth alongside stability, and short-term recovery alongside deeper structural reforms.

3.1.2 A Focus on Reparations

Reparations constitute a key pillar to transitional justice, as they "aim to reduce inequity arising from the original injustice, and in the process, decrease the suffering of the offended."[62] On the individual level, reparations acknowledge the harms suffered by victims and provide forms of redress such as restitution, rehabilitation, or financial compensation. On the societal level, they can contribute to rebuilding trust, strengthening civic participation, and reinforcing the rule of law.[63] Reparations act as corrective measures, seeking to restore the situation that would have existed had the violation not occurred.[64]

Reparations take various forms; material measures may include cash payments, employment support, and the restitution of property or livelihoods,[65] which aim to restore victims' practical well-being. Symbolic measures, such as official apologies and memorials,[66] recognize and validate the suffering of victims while affirming their status as rights-holders and citizens.[67] Reparations may also be collective, addressing harms experienced by communities and supporting the rebuilding of shared infrastructure or social networks.

However, several issues arise. The ideal outcome, full restitution, is often unattainable, and monetary compensation cannot replace non-monetary losses or restore pre-violation circumstances.[68] Reparations alone are therefore palliative and inherently inadequate,[69] and, if not paired with broader, long-term efforts by the state to address

[61] Webber, Forms of Transitional Justice, p.112.
[62] Moon, Who'll Pay Reparations on my Soul?, p.189.
[63] Gallen & Moffett, The Palliative Role of Reparations, p.499.
[64] Ibid., p.500.
[65] Ibid., p.500.
[66] UN Secretary General, The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice, p.18.
[67] See General Assembly resolution 60/147, art.22.
[68] Satz, Countering the Wrongs of the Past: The Role of Compensation.
[69] Gallen & Moffett, The Palliative Role of Reparations.

structural injustices, redistribute power and resources, will not succeed in promoting social cohesion and providing guarantees of non-recurrence.[70]

Reparations can support social cohesion by restoring dignity and recognizing victims as rightful citizens, thereby reducing resentment, revenge, and social fragmentation while strengthening trust in state institutions and between citizens.[71] However, their success depends on an inclusive and participatory design to avoid poorly designed processes over who qualifies as a victim,[72] which would undermine their potential for reconciliation and even exacerbate anger or frustration.[73]

3.2 Reviving Agriculture in Post-Conflict Contexts

In many post-conflict contexts, agriculture represents the largest sector of the economy and serves as a primary source of livelihoods for most households. Reviving agriculture is thus essential in post-conflict reconstruction, as it supports economic recovery and fosters community resilience and trust among farmers and rural communities.[74]

Long-term agricultural recovery should not merely aim to restore pre-conflict systems. Instead, it must address pre-existing inefficiencies and structural inequalities. Promoting reconciliation and durable peace requires engaging not only with the technical or economic aspects of agricultural support, but also with rebuilding social capital and dynamics that impact agriculture.[75] Therefore, material support, such as providing seeds, tools, fertilizers, and infrastructure, must be paired with retraining agricultural ministry staff and its agents, and new legislation and regulations to support land use and production.[76]

Nonetheless, agricultural recovery faces multiple challenges. Poorly targeted food aid intended to sustain households before the first harvest can disincentivize local production and create a dependency syndrome that undermines future capacity building efforts.[77] Yet, if such aid is not distributed equitably to vulnerable farmers in war-affected areas, it may generate tensions and resentment.

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[70] See Moon, Who'll Pay Reparations on My Soul, p.7: the Argentinean Madres de Plaza de Mayo firmly refused compensation, as they argued they were meant to buy their silence, arrest the truth recovery process and avoid bringing perpetrators to trial.
[71] De Greiff, Justice and Reparations.
[72] Kochanski, The “Local Turn in Transitional Justice”.
[73] Gallen & Moffett, The Palliative Role of Reparations, p.503.
[74] Rohwerder, Supporting Agriculture in Protracted Crises, p.19.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Muscat, Reviving Agriculture in the Aftermath of Violent Conflict, p.78.
[77] Rohwerder, Supporting Agriculture in Protracted Crises, p.20; Muscat, Reviving Agriculture in the Aftermath of Violent Conflict, p.79.

Issues also arise with the type of seeds provided, specifically when they are unsuitable for the soil type, or when farmers are attached to previous seed varieties harvested, making them skeptical and reluctant to cultivate new crops.

Insecurity over land tenure further complicates recovery. Conflict often results in arbitrary evictions, land occupations, and the destruction of land records. It is for this reason that effective post-conflict agricultural policies must be paired with measures that aim to restore secure access to land, which ultimately "allows people to grow food, make an income, and reestablish economic and social relationships." [78]

3.3 Economic Opportunity and Social Cohesion

Following Chan et al.,[79] social cohesion can be understood as the quality of relationships among the members of a society, shaped by shared norms and attitudes that guide interactions across different areas of social life. The literature distinguishes between horizontal and vertical dimensions of social cohesion. Horizontal social cohesion refers to trust, cooperation, and solidarity among individuals and social groups. It can be further divided into bonding ties, that is, strong, inward-looking connections within homogeneous groups such as families or close-knit communities, and bridging ties, which link diverse groups and facilitate cooperation across social, ethnic, or economic divides, a very important factor in a multiethnic context such as the Syrian one. Vertical social cohesion, on the other hand, captures the relationship between citizens and the state, particularly in terms of institutional trust, legitimacy, and perceived fairness.[80]

One of the primary forces influencing social cohesion is economic interest.[81] Empirical research by Vergolini found that economic vulnerability negatively influences cohesion,[82] a pattern expanded upon by Cho[83], who argues that this often reflects a strategic, risk-averse response: since unreciprocated trust can have a devastating effect on individuals with limited resources, the latter may withdraw from social cooperation to prevent further loss. This withdrawal reduces their access to social capital, understood as the social networks that provide vital information and opportunities,[84] trapping them in a vicious circle of

[78] FAO, Land Tenure Studies No. 8, p.32, 3.44.
[79] Chan et al., Reconsidering Social Cohesion: Developing a Definition and Analytical Framework for Empirical Research, p.289.
[80] Vicarini and Mackway-Jones, Dialogue for Social Cohesion, p.15.
[81] Vergolini, Does Economic Vulnerability Affect Social Cohesion?, p.4-5.
[82] Ibid., p.16.
[83] Cho, Economic Conditions and Social Cohesion, p.29-30.
[84] Adler and Kwon, Social Capital, p.23; Berger-Schmitt, Considering Social Cohesion in Quality of Life Assessments, p.409-411.

material poverty, social alienation and deprivation.[85] Material deprivation, i.e., the inability to access the goods, services, and opportunities necessary to participate in a way identified as appropriate in the community,[86] is amplified by what Runciman defined as relative deprivation,[87] which captures the subjective experience of inequality. Historical evidence further illustrates this dynamic. During the Great Depression, the regions in Germany that experienced the highest levels of unemployment and austerity also endured a sharp decline in citizen's trust in institutions, which created fertile ground for the rise of the Nazi party.[88]

In contrast, contexts characterised by inclusive governance and strong social protection demonstrate how effective institutions can mitigate the negative effects of economic vulnerability on social cohesion. Evidence from social-democratic welfare regimes indicates that even individuals with limited resources maintain relatively high trust in institutions and society.[89]

Taken together, these findings point to a mutually reinforcing relationship: inclusive governance and economic opportunity strengthen social cohesion, and in turn, high levels of cohesion strengthen governance and allow for more economic opportunities by facilitating cooperation, compliance with rules, and collective problem-solving.[90]

The literature analysed therefore supports the hypothesis that economic opportunity positively influences social cohesion, a dynamic that is especially critical in the Syrian context, where restoring agricultural livelihoods, particularly in areas affected by the destruction of olive and pistachio production, can play a key role in rebuilding trust, strengthening community resilience, and supporting long-term stability.

3.4 Case Studies from Post-Conflict Areas

For this project, a comparative lens was used to better understand the dynamics at play in post-conflict settings, specifically where agriculture, land reform, and attempts at rebuilding economic structures are involved in transitional justice processes. The cases studied include Colombia, Zimbabwe, Tunisia, and The Gambia. Similarly to the Syrian context, each of these countries experienced conflicts that included political violence, displacement, and subsequent land restitution problems. Additionally, the study of these cases

[85] Council of Europe, Promoting the Policy Debate on Social Exclusion from a Comparative Perspective, p.14.
[86] Vergolini, Does Economic Vulnerability Affect Social Cohesion?, p.6.
[87] Runciman, Relative Deprivation and Social Justice.
[88] Galofré-Vilà et al., Austerity and the Rise of the Nazi Party.
[89] Vergolini, Does Economic Vulnerability Affect Social Cohesion?, p.16-17.
[90] Chatterjee et al., Leveraging Social Cohesion for Development Outcomes, p.7.

highlight weak institutional capacity as a prime limitation in introducing effective top-down transitional governance mechanisms. The cases of Colombia and the Gambia in particular illustrate the dangers of this weakness and further illustrate the propensity of overambitious initiatives to fail when created outside of the scope of existing institutional capacity.[91] Research on the Tunisian context furthers this notion by highlighting the need for region-specific interventions rather than broad policies that may not be appropriate or equitable in localities that experienced conflict in different ways.[92] In lieu of national top-down approaches, the literature on Zimbabwe's conflict affirms that grassroots mechanisms may be the most appropriate form method when implementing transitional justice mechanisms, especially where institutional capacity and trust is low.[93] Lastly, the cases of Tunisia and Colombia reiterate the connection between economic opportunity and the recurrence of violence in post-conflict settings,[94] and provide us with successful examples of how agroecology can be a useful tool for agricultural resilience for agricultural resilience. Taken together, this literature highlights a clear gap: although the importance of localized, participatory, and institutionally realistic interventions in post-conflict settings is emphasized, limited attention has been given on how these insights can be applied to holistic agricultural restoration in Syria, particularly in relation to orchard farming and long-term rural recovery.

For a detailed description of each case study, please refer to Annex II.

[91] ICTJ, From Principles to Practice - Challenges of Implementing Reparations for Massive Violations in Colombia, p.9 and Manneh, Challenges in Financing Reparation Programs in Transitional Justice Contexts, p.4.
[92] Robins et al., Transitional justice from the margins: Collective reparations and Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission, p.94.
[93] Thomson & Jazdowska, Bringing in the Grassroots: Transitional Justice in Zimbabwe, p.77.
[94] Robins et al., Transitional justice from the margins: Collective reparations and Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission and Navarrete-Cruz, Birkenberg, and Birner, Factors Influencing the Development of Rural Producer Organizations in Post-War Settings, p. 694.

4.Methodology

The approach for this project involves a qualitative design, integrating a literature review, comparative case studies, and semi-structured interviews. This approach is the best fit for the research question, as it is necessary to gain a profound understanding of the social and economic dynamics of the area of interest, identify the needs of victims and what they perceive as necessary to maintain and uphold peace, while also analyzing initiatives linked to agriculture and social cohesion in other post-war communities. This ensures a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the context in Hama and Idlib, as well as potential interventions.

The sources used for the literature review mainly concentrate on transitional justice and social cohesion theories, with a focus on reparations and transitional justice for farming communities, along with studies linking peacebuilding and social cohesion to agricultural practices. The literature includes books, journal articles, peace accord databases, NGO and IO reports, Commission of Inquiry documents, news sources and primary records from global reparation programs. Including a vast array of sources for the information used in the investigation is key, as transitional justice tools aren't a one-size-fits-all solution, and it allows for the mitigation of source bias.

Drawing on the literature, relevant case studies have been selected, based on their objectives, mechanisms, results, and contextual similarities with the rural Syrian context. The goal was to conduct an analysis of reparation and agricultural programs in other post-conflict settings that involve economic compensation, agricultural support, community engagement for peacebuilding, and/or land reform. The present focus is mainly on initiatives and reparations programs in Colombia and Zimbabwe, but examples from other nations and localities also contribute to our knowledge gathering and empirical evidence. In contrast with the case study sub-section in the literature review, the comparative case study section focuses on concrete empirical evidence and lessons learned from cases that are valuable for designing our program. The cases were assessed according to the types of mechanisms used, their effectiveness, the challenges encountered, and their applicability to Syria. Lessons learned from these case studies guide the development of a practical, evidence-based reparations program that prioritizes participation from various members in the communities, and long-term sustainability.

To have a better understanding of local needs, the state of the soil, and the main challenges farmers currently face in regards to olive and pistachio trees, semi-structured interviews were conducted with local NGOs. The semi-structured format allowed us to have a common set of questions per interest group while allowing interviewees to expand on issues they considered particularly important, letting the conversation flow and be led by both interviewer and interviewee. The online format was chosen since most respondents were based abroad. All interviews were conducted with fully informed consent, as outlined in the Ethics Protocol, as well as recorded, and transcribed. We interviewed 3 Syrian NGO representatives as well as 5 experts on agroforestry, agriculture and the SCORE Index. Additionally, we obtained secondary interview data with 3 local farmers selected by Geo Expertise. All interviews were analyzed thematically through an inductive manner. After transcribing the conversation and reading the transcripts numerous times, segments of the text were coded by attaching thematic labels to ideas and concepts that arose in the various interviews. These codes were grouped into broader themes. This form of analysis enabled us to find recurrent patterns, drawing attention to the most relevant issues necessary to address orchard-farm recovery and social cohesion.

The interview sampling method was of a purposive nature, in which Geo Expertise, our research partner, connected us with individuals from Syrian NGOs, while we directly contacted professionals working in our areas of focus.

By integrating these sources and by pairing them with an examination of agricultural methods capable of fostering social cohesion, the research aims to inform the development of a pilot project for future implementation in Hama and Idlib.

5.Findings

5.1 Key Lessons from Case Studies

5.1.1 Lessons from Colombia

Although the geopolitical and agricultural landscapes of Colombia and Syria differ significantly, both nations share a history of protracted violence, massive internal displacement, and the resulting erosion of land rights and agricultural security. Consequently, the Colombian experience serves as a critical laboratory for Syria, offering proven strategies to transform displaced populations into agents of economic and food-system recovery.

The ALGO Nuevo Model:[95] From Conflict Crops to Social Cohesion and Sustainable Livelihoods

The primary lesson for post-conflict Syria is that agricultural recovery can function as a mechanism for restoring communal trust, neutralizing the influence of non-state armed actors, and disrupting cycles of violence. The *ALGO Nuevo* project, implemented by *Mercy Corps* in the Cauca department in Colombia, supported over 3,200 agricultural producers in the transition from illicit coca cultivation, a primary driver of deforestation and local violence, toward sustainable, legal, and diversified value chains,[96] backed by technical training and awareness-raising.[97] Crop diversification alone, however, is insufficient if not accompanied by stable access to markets and reliable value chains, as the feasibility of production ultimately depends on the ability to commercialize outputs under predictable and fair conditions. To this end, the *ALGO Nuevo* project relied on collective economic structures, specifically through a strategic partnership with the local coffee growers' cooperative, *Caficauca*. This collaboration integrated farmers into formal trade networks that guaranteed fair pricing and direct consumer access, effectively replacing the hierarchical and exploitative structures imposed by armed groups with a transparent,] horizontal governance model. By aligning individual livelihoods with collective economic interest, a social shield was created, through which mutual trust was rebuilt and the operational space for armed actors was diminished, leading to a measurable decrease in local insecurity. These outcomes reflect broader findings from the Colombian context, where Rural Producer Organizations (RPOs) have been shown to contribute to peacebuilding in post-conflict contexts by strengthening self-governance, establishing monitoring mechanisms, and creating norms regarding market

[95] Petersen-Green, "Growing Peace, One Coffee Farm at a Time".
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.

relations.[98] In this sense, economic activity, when exercised collectively, is a resilience strategy that helps social cohesion and reduces incentives for re-engagement in violence. For post-conflict Syria, this Colombian experience suggests that cooperative-based agricultural recovery could serve as a powerful tool not only for food security but as a primary mechanism for restoring communal trust and neutralizing the influence of non-state armed actors.

The *ALGO Nuevo* project also demonstrates that securing land access through the formalization of property rights is an essential building block for long-term stability, not a mere legal formality. In the Colombian context, providing official land titles to nearly 370 families transformed their farms into legitimate assets that were recognized and protected by the law.[99] This legal security allowed farmers to access formal credit and bank loans that were previously unavailable, providing the financial foundation needed to move beyond subsistence-level production. For Syria, where over a decade of conflict and mass displacement has decimated property records and created deep agricultural insecurity, this experience is vital. It shows that, in order to overcome uncertainty and the constant threat of further dispossession, restoring land records is an essential issue to be addressed.

The Escuelas Campesinas de Agroecología (Peasant Agroecology Schools, or ECAs)

For post-conflict Syria, agricultural recovery must move beyond technical assistance to become a primary mechanism for social reconstruction and the restoration of institutional trust. The Escuelas Campesinas de Agroecología (ECAs), which emerged in Colombia's Cauca department, provide a blueprint for this transition by prioritizing the visibility and autonomy of rural communities.[100] Unlike top-down training, these schools facilitate a "dialogue of knowledge" that transforms individual experiences into collective wisdom, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of agricultural heritage. By embedding farming practices within collective governance over common goods, such as soil, water, and seeds, this model reconstitutes both social and ecological systems.

This horizontal approach is highly relevant for Syria, as it strengthens food sovereignty by reducing dependency on expensive external inputs while simultaneously reinforcing social cohesion through shared agricultural and knowledge production.

[98] Navarrete-Cruz, Birkenberg, and Birner, Factors Influencing the Development of Rural Producer Organizations in Post-War Settings, p. 692.
[99] Petersen-Green, "Growing Peace, One Coffee Farm at a Time".
[100] Álvarez Ramírez & Castaño Arcila, Escuelas Campesinas de Agroecología y Custodios de Semillas en los andes tulueños.

Importantly, this also has implications for generational continuity in agriculture: by engaging younger generations through practical and participatory learning, such models can help reframe agriculture as an attractive and gainful livelihood activity. This is particularly significant in Syria, where rural outmigration and the ageing of the farming population threatens the long-term sustainability of the sector.[101]

Ultimately, the ECA model would allow Syria to rethink recovery as a process of empowerment, treating rural communities as active custodians of knowledge and agency rather than passive beneficiaries of externally designed interventions. In a context where rebuilding legitimacy is as urgent as restoring the land itself, this model offers a proven pathway toward long-term territorial and social stability.

5.1.2 Lessons from Zimbabwe

In addition to our case study on Colombia, an analysis of the conditions surrounding transitional justice in Zimbabwe is helpful to understand socio-economic implications of conflict as it relates to the agricultural sector. Similarly to Syria, Zimbabwe has experienced years of violent political conflict, with a brutal land reform policy that led to the displacement of over a million farmers.[102] The disruption of the lives and livelihoods of farmers in particular is an important angle to consider, as farmers in Idlib and Hama have been similarly impacted throughout the war and after.

SCORE and the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus: Important Considerations for Social Cohesion

The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index, or SCORE, is a tool used to measure indicators of peace in post-conflict societies and offers a useful framework to analyze the conditions necessary for peacebuilding and social cohesion in post-conflict Syria.[103] The Zimbabwe study is especially relevant because it highlights how economic opportunity, amongst other indicators, shapes social cohesion at the individual, intergroup, and national levels within the transitional justice process. Because the conflicts in both Zimbabwe and Syria have left each country with fragmented social landscapes, weak governance, and major agricultural disruption, this analysis identifies significant factors and interventions when

[101] FAO, Syrian Arab Republic - Emergency and Recovery Plan of Action, p.4.
[102] Thomson & Jazdowska, Bringing in the Grassroots: Transitional Justice in Zimbabwe, p.80.
[103] The Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development: Towards National Cohesion in Zimbabwe.

considering the reinvigoration of Syria's agricultural sector as a means to drive social cohesion.

The data reported in this study show that economic opportunity is a key determinant in promoting peaceful relations because it allows for access to basic needs and reduces conditions that intensify division.[104] Low employment and earning opportunities are considered a major concern for individual citizens while also functioning as a major source of tension between groups. The study also shows how conflict affects welfare and access to services through harms such as destruction of or displacement from home, destruction of crops, slaughter of livestock, depletion of food, and loss of access to markets.[105] In both the Syrian and Zimbabwean contexts, this dynamic demonstrates that agricultural production and welfare are mutually reinforcing: in areas where agricultural activity may persist, destruction of infrastructure limits mobility, and thus access to markets, contributing to increased food insecurity. For Syrian farmers, inability to sell their crops may lead to the abandonment and degradation of agricultural activity because it would be detrimental to their wellbeing, as demonstrated by our interviews with NGOs.[106] Data from Zimbabwe's score analysis suggests that interventions must address compounding disruptions rather than treating agriculture, access, and livelihoods as separate issues.[107]

In Zimbabwe, SCORE is tailored to analyze the Masvingo and Manicaland provinces, which experienced the broader conflict in distinct ways, demonstrating that local conditions require specialized strategies. This logic is relevant to Syria, where governorates such as Idlib and Hama faced unique conflict-related challenges that might differ from other regions. The design of the index and its prioritization of province-level indicators further reinforce the argument that in a country where there are diverse ethnic, socio-economic, and geographical conditions, different localities require distinct interventions. For Syria, this implies that any effective project must be grounded in local realities.

SCORE demonstrates that national cohesion cannot be achieved without dedicated efforts to build cohesion at the individual and intergroup levels.[108] The importance of interventions at these levels supports the notion that localized bottom-up approaches can be more impactful when compared to sweeping top-down approaches. A critical look at the

[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Gironde, Christophe. interview conducted by Chelsea Robinson and Isabel Walton Ugas. n.d.; World Vision. Interview conducted by Itzhak Dorai
[107] The Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development: Towards National Cohesion in Zimbabwe.
[108] Ibid.

specific disruptors to social cohesion and its necessary interventions further support the conclusion that, while top down transitional justice mechanisms contribute to positive peacebuilding outcomes, it would be remiss to decenter or deprioritise bottom-up processes. The study highlights the importance of effective governance, in conjunction with economic opportunity as a key determinant of social cohesion. This relationship is particularly relevant in the Syrian context: while transitional justice mechanisms have been introduced during and after the conflict, the transitional government currently lacks the capacity to implement comprehensive and impactful initiatives across all governorates. In this context, locally driven approaches to economic reinvigoration and social cohesion may serve as a critical strategy in the interim. Over time, as governance structures may stabilise, these bottom up processes may complement and reinforce the formal governance mechanism.

Overall, this analysis on Zimbabwe's propensity for social cohesion strongly supports our hypothesis that a focus on reparations and the reinvigoration of Syria's agricultural sector can positively influence social cohesion and reconciliation in Idlib and Hama. The SCORE study's emphasis on economic revitalization's potential contribution to national cohesion is also reinforced by the success of the use of cooperatives in Colombia's transitional justice process. These common threads in post-conflict economic and agricultural capacity building may suggest a viable strategy for implementation of a successful project in Syria.

Despite the valuable lessons that can be drawn from Zimbabwe's SCORE analysis, limited collaboration with members of the Zimbabwean government weakened its overall depth and contextual precision.[109] This underscores that a credible SCORE analysis depends on meaningful collaboration among trusted NGOs, CSOs, communities, and both local and national government actors. If a similar approach is applied in Syria, careful attention must be paid to which actors are included, since the legitimacy and usefulness of the analysis will depend on the quality of that collaboration.

[109] Baldet, Bertrand. Interview. Conducted by Elisa Andreolli & Chelsea Robinson. 2026.

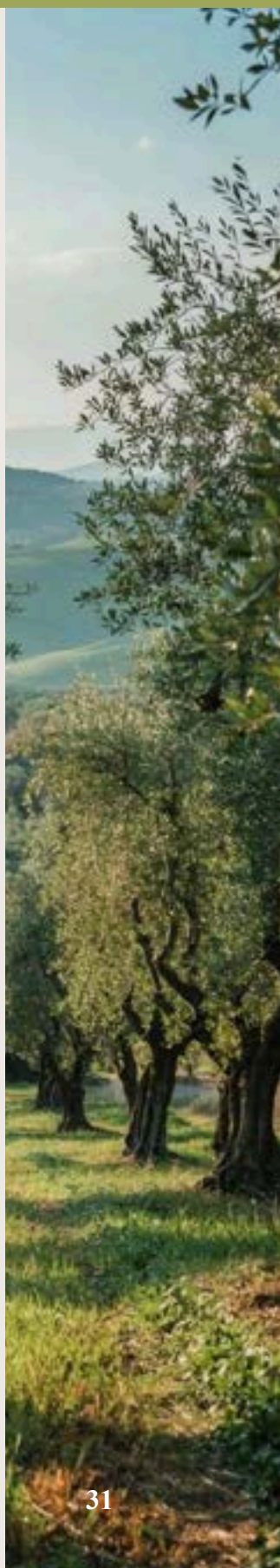
5.2 A Farmers' Perspective

The interviews conducted with farmers offer critical insights into the social role of agriculture and specific impacts of the conflict, despite the small sample size. The data reveals a complex social fabric. While participants described a long-standing traditional culture of mutual aid and support, this solidarity is currently under strain. Two out of three farmer testimonies highlight the fact that although the rural community remains supportive, cooperation nowadays is difficult due to poverty and displacement.[111] However, there is still unity despite differences, as stated by farmer #2:

> "Our relationship remained good because what bothers me bothers them, and what makes me happy makes them happy – we are of the same fabric".[112]

Similarly, farmer #3, when asked about social divisions within his village and neighboring ethnic groups, stated that "There are no divisions because everyone shares the same pain.[113] The presence of solidarity between farmers in rural societies allows them to face hardships better, highlighting how important trust and knowing each other is for social cohesion and recovery. Although worsened by the war, this pre-existing solidarity and trust network is a key basis for reconstruction and social cohesion.

Reliance on agriculture varies among the respondents. Farmer #1 relies on agriculture for 90% of their income, Farmer #2 affirmed it accounted for 75%, which they supplement with government and animal husbandry work, and finally Farmer #3 only relies on farming for 25% of its household income. Thus for some, agriculture functions as a pillar of family survival, while for others it is a complementary source of income.[114] Despite this variance, insights highlight the continued prominence of the agricultural sector in Syria.



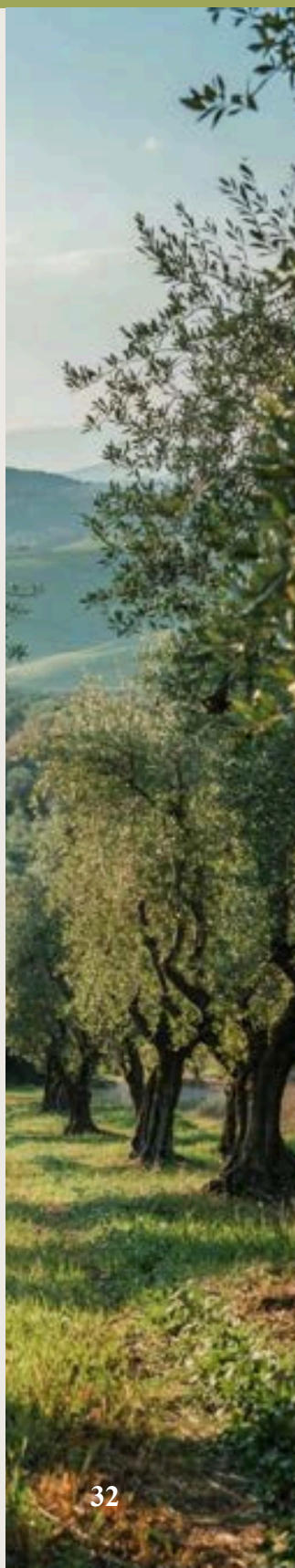
[111] Syrian Farmers #1,#2, & #3. Conducted by Dr. Ahmed Haj Assaad. 2026.
[112] Syrian farmer #2. Interview. Conducted by Dr. Ahmed Haj Asaad. 2026.
[113] Syrian Farmer #3. Interview. Conducted by Dr. Ahmed Haj Asaad. 2026.
[114] Syrian Farmers #1,#2, & #3. Interview. Conducted by Dr. Ahmed Haj Assaad. 2026.

5.2 A Farmer's perspective

The displacement and poverty caused by the conflict damaged both agricultural production and the social fabric. Farmers described deliberate destruction to their orchards, with trees not only being cut but also completely uprooted, rendering the land unproductive for regeneration, while others were logged for illegal firewood or cleared for IDP camps. The cutting of trees was emotionally hard for many farmers.[115] A significant amount decided not to return to agriculture, and sold the land, mostly to investors living in the Gulf or Europe.[116]

All three farmers attribute these actions to the former Assad regime, characterizing it as a strategy of "humiliation and impoverishment".[117] The displacement of farmers further severed their connection to the land, with one stating that their land was occupied by regime supporters without granting the original owners any compensation. A shared sentiment from the three farmers reveal a sense of government responsibility with the farmers expressing a desire for government support and interventions aiding the identification of perpetrators and recognition of damage, as well as a mechanism for reparations. This underscores a demand for transitional justice, in which justice is not viewed as merely legal accountability but as the restoration of land and livelihoods. Farmers' consensus is that external support is currently insufficient, and that state-led interventions are essential to alleviate social tensions generated by the conflict. This shows that although bottom-up approaches are fundamental given the state's lack of capacity and initiative in social justice initiatives, external support should be focused on increasing state capacity and mobilizing action from Syrian authorities.

Despite the limited number and variety of interview data from Syrian farmers in either Hama or Idlib, these findings give important insights to victim's needs and their social context. Prior to these discussions, the data pointed towards an extremely fragmented society, in which solidarity and cooperation were extremely rare. Knowing that all of these farmers believe in their community and care for each other is fundamental when looking at the social fabric of a society that has been so affected by armed conflict.



[115] World Vision. Interview. Conducted by Itzhak Dorai. 2026.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Syrian Farmers #1, #2, & #3. Conducted by Dr. Ahmed Haj Assaad. 2026.

5.3 Synthesis of Findings: A Causal Loop Approach

In the Syrian context, a causal loop diagram (CLD) is particularly useful as it allows for the synthesis of the multiple economic, social, and environmental dynamics affecting the agricultural sector into a single analytical framework. It helps identify how different drivers, such as water scarcity, displacement, land degradation, and economic pressures, interact and reinforce one another in ways that might not be immediately visible.

What makes CLDs particularly useful is how they represent the system as a whole and highlight the feedback loops within it. These loops can be reinforcing, meaning they amplify change in the same direction,[118] or balancing, meaning they counteract change and tend to stabilise the system.[119] There is no fixed starting point or direction for reading the diagram; the relationships are circular and interdependent. The positive and negative signs only indicate the correlation between two variables, not the overall outcome of the system.

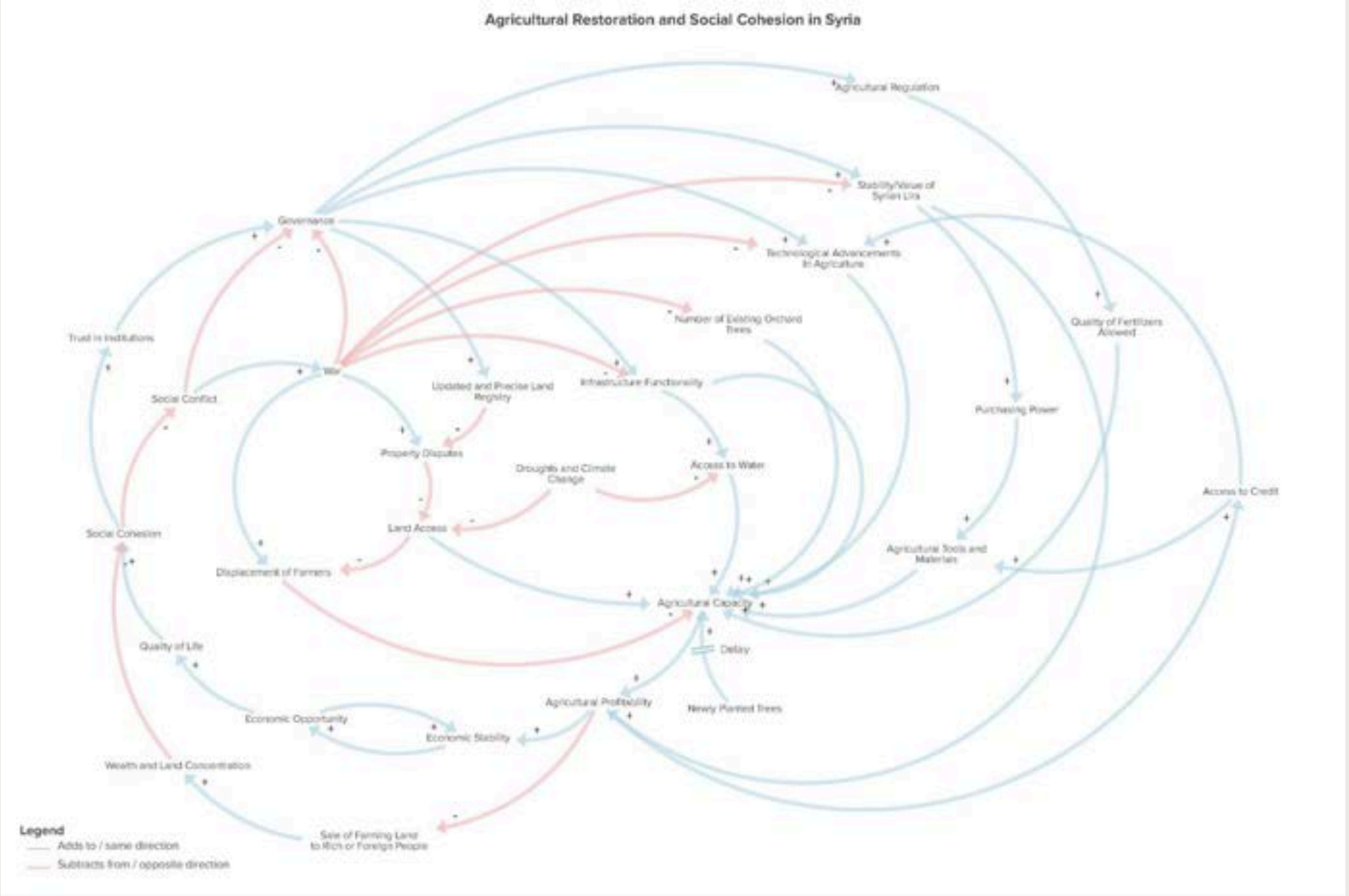
A central finding of this analysis is the vicious cycle triggered by the destruction of olive and pistachio orchards, in which conflict and economic insecurity mutually exacerbate one another. The loss of trees directly reduces economic stability, increasing vulnerability and fueling grievances among affected communities. These grievances have a negative impact on social cohesion and heighten the risk of local tensions or cycles of retaliation, further undermining stability and discouraging long-term investment in agriculture.

Critically, the CLD illustrates that providing new trees is a necessary but insufficient intervention on its own. Because of the significant time delay before orchards reach maturity and the interconnected elements that influence agricultural capacity, the success of replanting depends on concurrent interventions. These include restoring water infrastructure, securing land tenure, and increasing the purchasing power of farmers to obtain essential materials. This comprehensive approach is essential: without it, the success of partial interventions is often undermined by unaddressed negative patterns that remain dominant in the system. As agricultural capacity improves, it initiates a virtuous cycle where social cohesion is strengthened, supporting resilient local systems and reducing the structural incentives for conflict. These dynamics illustrate a reinforcing feedback structure in which agricultural recovery and peacebuilding mutually

[118] This means that when one element increases, the connected element also increases, or when one decreases, the other also decreases.

[119] This means that when one element increases, the connected element decreases or vice versa.

sustain one another through multiple interconnected pathways. Ultimately, the CLD highlights that agricultural recovery in Syria cannot be understood through isolated sectoral interventions, but must be approached as a systemic process shaped by interacting economic and social feedback mechanisms.


Agricultural Restoration and Social Cohesion in Syria
Agricultural Regulation
Governance
Stability/Value of Syrian Lira
Technological Advancements in Agriculture
Number of Existing Orchard Trees
Quality of Fertilizers Allowed
Trust in Institutions
War
Updated and Precise Land Registry
Infrastructure Functionality
Social Conflict
Purchasing Power
Property Disputes
Droughts and Climate Change
Access to Water
Access to Credit
Social Cohesion
Land Access
Agricultural Tools and Materials
Displacement of Farmers
Agricultural Capacity
Quality of Life
Delay
Agricultural Profitability
Newly Planted Trees
Economic Opportunity
Economic Stability
Wealth and Land Concentration
Sale of Farming Land to Rich or Foreign People
Legend
Adds to / same direction
Subtracts from / opposite direction

6.Discussions

Designing an orchard tree restitution project in Syria is inherently complex, because, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the issues that impact agriculture are numerous and interconnected, and must be addressed in order for the project to function properly. The project must prioritize the creation of resilience and economic autonomy for farmers, specifically considering how they can be supported during the tree maturation period. Without support mechanisms for farmers during this interim period, the intervention risks becoming unsustainable and not achieving its intended long-term impact. As highlighted in the literature, short-term solutions such as food aid may alleviate immediate needs but often risk creating forms of dependency when not paired with strategies that strengthen local livelihoods. This underscores the need for approaches that can simultaneously provide short-term support and foster long-term resilience, opening the discussion to alternative models such as agroforestry.

6.1 Grains Green Dialogue 2026

As part of the Applied Research Project, our group participated in a roundtable about agriculture in post-war Syria in Lyon, France. The session brought together practitioners, researchers, and representatives from organisations working on agriculture and recovery in Syria. This experience helped shape our understanding of the agricultural landscape in Syria and the direction of our research with the main insight being the potential of agroecology and agroforestry as a promising pathway for agricultural reinvigoration in Syria.

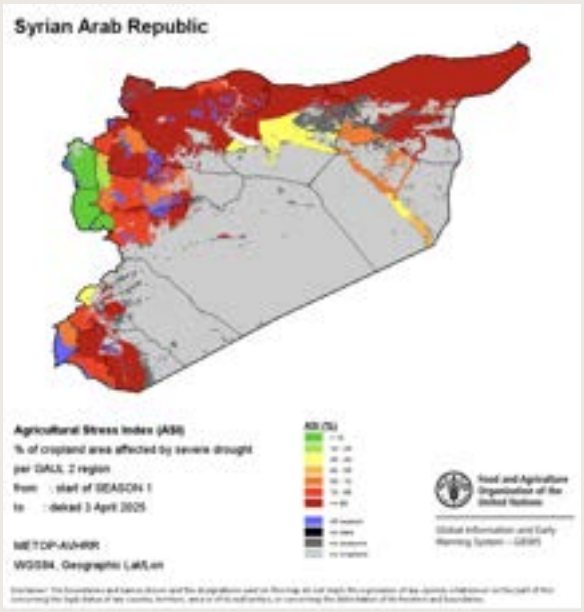
The roundtable also highlighted that, in a post-conflict context, the question of scale, local, national, or international, is central to understanding where meaningful impact can be achieved. Local action is crucial, given the diversity of experiences across regions and the fact that the people who best understand what needs exist are those living in these communities. However, local action alone is often not sufficient to address systemic issues. National-level interventions are essential for legal reforms, infrastructure rehabilitation, and institutional capacity. Syria's weakened institutions and fragmented governance landscape present significant challenges, limiting the potential of action that could be taken at such scale. International actors also play an important supportive role through funding, technical expertise, and capacity-building, but their interests should not overshadow locally driven processes and local agency or reproduce external dependencies.

Confirming our research thus far, the panelists claimed that agricultural recovery cannot be separated from questions of governance, justice, and social cohesion. Public policies must not merely restore pre-war agricultural systems but also address pre-existing inequalities, promote fair land access, secure property rights, and provide for inclusive governance. Rebuilding trust, social cohesion, and institutional credibility is as critical as providing material support such as seeds, tools, or infrastructure. Training for agricultural ministry staff and local authorities was also identified as essential to ensure long-term and sustainable change.

Overall, this roundtable helped us confirm that our research must prioritise the perspectives of affected communities and that long-term solutions require coordinated and sustained action across multiple levels of governance.

6.2 On the Necessity of Tackling Water Issues

Addressing the multiple vulnerabilities and structural limitations of Syria's water system while ensuring reliable and sustainable water access is an indispensable prerequisite for the long-term success of agricultural rehabilitation strategies in Idlib and Hama. This transition is a matter of survival for the agricultural sector, which is currently facing severe water stress, worsened by the accelerating effects of climate change. Recent years have been characterized by prolonged drought conditions, with 2025 being the worst year in decades.[120]



FAO, Syria: Agricultural Stress Index (ASI) - 2025.
The Idlib region is in red, meaning that the agricultural stress is high.

[120] Granville, Syria's Worst Drought in Decades Pushes Millions to the Brink.

Groundwater depletion rates now exceed 150% of their annual recharge,[121] further intensifying pressure on already depleted water systems. Without a comprehensive government mitigation plan, these depleted water systems have become the primary bottleneck impeding any meaningful post-conflict recovery.

The urgency of the crisis is most visible in regions such as Idlib, where orchard cultivation serves as the economic and agricultural backbone. Unlike annual crops, orchard cultivation requires sustained investment and irrigation over multiple years, making it highly sensitive to fluctuations in water availability, cost, and quality. Because traditional rainfed agriculture is no longer viable due to intensified droughts, the rehabilitation of olive and pistachio orchards now depends entirely on technical irrigation. If water insecurity is not resolved, irregular irrigation will not only reduce yields, but also cause long-term tree loss, effectively nullifying any restoration efforts and threatening the economic viability of entire communities.

Bridging this gap requires a synchronized shift in technology and governance. On the technical side, the adoption of more efficient irrigation methods, such as drip irrigation,[122] could significantly reduce water use while maintaining productivity. The integration of solar-powered pumping systems may also help mitigate dependence on unreliable electricity and fuel supplies, which have been a major limiting factor during and after the conflict. In addition, several localized initiatives, such as the Mobile Wastewater Treatment Plan,[123] have demonstrated the potential of wastewater reuse for irrigation, particularly for small-scale farmers in water-stressed regions like Idlib. However, wastewater use for drip irrigation systems is extremely difficult to carry out on a big scale, as particles that might not be fully dissolved will most likely clog the system.[124]

However, the transition requires more than just technical repairs. It needs a governance reform that provides a robust and transparent regulatory framework including: tiered consumption tariffs; a stringent licensing system for groundwater extraction along with a monitoring body to regulate illegal wells; and the standardized adoption of water-efficient building technologies to ensure equality of access to water for everyone.[125] Such campaigns

[121] Syrian Future Movement, Syria's Water Crisis Between Climate Change and Dysfunctional Management.
[122] Ugas, Carlos. Interview. Conducted by Elisa Andreolli and Isabel Walton. 2026; à Hauariki, Quentin conducted by ARP17 group. 2026.
[123] Climate Resilience Project, TOGETHER! Towards a Climate Change Resilient Future in Syria.
[124] Ugas, Carlos. Interview. Conducted by Elisa Andreolli and Isabel Walton. 2026
[125] Syrian Future Movement, Syria's Water Crisis Between Climate Change and Dysfunctional Management.

have been started by civil society organisations to pressure the transitional government, demanding that water policy reforms and sustainable spending be treated as urgent national priorities.[126]

By moving toward these resilient, localized solutions, water can be transformed from a primary driver of vulnerability into the foundation of a self-sustaining agricultural future.

6.3 Trust-building Activities and the Importance of Socialization

Agricultural interventions that seek to influence social cohesion need to include activities and spaces that promote socialization between community members. Without some initial level of trust between different community members and no clear, common objective, there is no empirical evidence that agricultural restoration will lead to social cohesion. Dr. Gironde, a political economist specializing in peasant life and agroecology, highlighted the importance of pre-existing social conditions and how that ultimately influences cooperation of community members through an agroecological project.[127] The insights from Dr. Gironde's interviews and SCORE confirmed the necessity of including trust-building, socializing initiatives in our recommendations.

Given the high-risk of investing in different modes of agriculture and initiating orchard farming after almost complete destruction, farmers and stakeholders must trust each other and agree on priorities in order to choose to cooperate. The data recorded from the interviews with farmers is promising because although there are differences in beliefs and ethnicities, there is also an environment of cooperation between neighbors and community members.[128] This pre-existing sense of community, paired with agroecological activities such as learning networks, workshops, and community meetings, should provide space for all farmers and community members to interact with one another regularly, cooperating for the revitalization of all farms in the area.

6.4 Agroforestry: A New Path?

Given our findings on the degraded state of the soil, the weaponization and scarcity of water, and the displacement of communities, a strong viable pathway for agricultural reinvigoration in Idlib and Hama is the adoption of an agroforestry model. This is not only a theoretical preference or an environmental alternative, but a strategic imperative for survival

[126] Ibid.
[127] Gironde, Christophe. Interview. Conducted by Chelsea Robinson and Isabel Walton, 2026.
[128] Farmer #1, #2, #3. Interviews. Conducted by Dr. Ahmed Haj Asaad. 2026.

and improvement of livelihoods. The multiple decades of drought, illegal logging, and conflict-induced deforestation have stripped the land of its structural integrity. Evidence from case studies, the interviews with agronomists and farmers, and the "Grain Greens Dialogue" roundtable confirm that traditional restoration methods will be insufficient for the arid and semi-arid conditions in Hama and Idlib. Agroforestry, defined as an ancient land use practice that involves the deliberate integration of trees, crops, and livestock on farms,[129] offers a quasi self-sustaining solution that tackles specific failures and shortages of the current system: water scarcity, soil erosion, and economic volatility. Agroforestry thus represents a strong strategy to restore the land, marking a possibility to shift away from conventional farming methods, as continuing to rely on monoculture would be a gamble that farmers cannot afford to lose.

The Green Revolution and its repercussions have led many to question conventional food systems and seek alternatives that reconcile society with the environment. For many in non-Western contexts, sustainable agriculture has always been the norm, but new terms have risen to nominate alternative pathways to food consumption and the search for food sovereignty and community. By integrating trees and farmland, it is expected that outputs will improve in quality and increase in quantity. Water management is more efficient, animal welfare is enhanced, biodiversity is strengthened, and fertilizer and pesticide use decreases or becomes obsolete due to the introduction of natural pest control provided by local birds and insects. Furthermore, effects of climate change are tackled through the improvement of soil quality and water conservation. Livelihoods are expected to improve, as diversified agroecosystems allow for staggered income through the year, strengthening economic resilience of the farmers and their communities.[130]

Carob trees have been a fundamental part of land restoration in arid and semi-arid areas where agroforestry is being implemented. These trees are extremely valuable in ensuring the health of ecosystems, as they support biodiversity, improve soil fertility, aid in water conservation, and allow for traditional livelihoods to be sustained. In addition, they are native to Syria, eliminating any risk that may arise from the introduction of invasive species.

The Agroecological Farm in the Siliana Governorate of Tunisia, for example, applies a silvo-arable system which can serve as a model and basis of knowledge transfer to design farms in Hama and Idlib.[131] Its landscape is characterized by rolling hills and shallow valleys

[129] Antony Joseph Raj, Agroforestry: Theory and Practices.
[130] TransforMed, Dryland Agroforestry: Case Studies From the Maghreb Region.
[131] Ibid.

with eroded soil, similar to the natural settings in which olives are grown in Idlib. The systems applied in the Agroecological Farm combine diverse orchards: olive, almonds, and figs, complemented with carob and acacia trees for soil nutrition and stability. In between orchard lines, intercropping with cover crops minimize competition between the trees.[132]

A similar agroforestry model can be applied to Hama and Idlib if consented upon and piloted by farmers. By intercalating lines of orchard trees (olives, pistachios, carobs) with lower crops such as chickpeas, favas, alfalfa and vetch, soil fertility will be increased and tree production will be stimulated, while simultaneously saving water. In this way, a symbiosis is created that not only reinstates soil health, but eases the work of farmers. Mulching, composting, and avoiding tillage also aid in overall soil rehabilitation and managing water scarcity.[133]

Given the current rates of water scarcity in Idlib and Hama, access to water will most likely pose one of the biggest challenges, as new orchard trees need consistent watering. Technical irrigation thus needs to be explored, as the same plot of land will have multiple species that need to survive for agroforestry to work accordingly.[134]

A notable issue that may arise when implementing such a project revolves around social beliefs and behaviors in rural Syria. A former farmer from Daraa (southwestern Syria) noted that despite his support for an agroforestry model, many elders may be against this approach. Beliefs in the area uphold that for orchard planting, the area in between trees must be completely clean, without any plants, making local beliefs hesitant towards a system such as agroforestry.[135] However, we cannot ascertain that the same beliefs hold for farmers in the North of Syria, meaning this will need to be further investigated prior to implementing a pilot project. Regarding crop diversification, practices call for every farm to grow the same crops so that when grazing occurs, the damage will be equal to all farms. These are not necessarily hard limitations, but two important considerations when promoting an agroforestry system.

Lastly, agroforestry is not only a scientific movement, but also a social one; upholding peasant rights and respecting their struggles is a fundamental aspect of the system. This notion holds with our research on the link between agriculture and social cohesion. Socialization initiatives aimed at peasant and community organization are fundamental to promote cooperation and trust. These measures may include teaching spaces through

[132] Ibid.
[133] Gironde, Christophe. Interview. Conducted by Chelsea Robinson and Isabel Walton. 2026.
[134] Ugas, Carlos. Interview. Conducted by Elisa Andreolli and Isabel Walton. 2026; Gironde, Christophe. Interview. Conducted by Chelsea Robinson and Isabel Walton. 2026.
[135] Former farmer. Interview. Conducted by ARP17 group. 2026.

farmer-to-farmer networks and workshops, markets for product exchange, and visits to model farms. The aim is to promote socialization between farmers, families, and community members that may not necessarily be a part of the agricultural value chain. The inclusion of women is paramount for the initiative to be properly inclusive. Women's work tends to be overlooked in agricultural spaces despite their work including both caretaking and farm labor. Ensuring that women are capable of attending the workshops, going to the farm visits, and being involved in the decision-making of the community is primordial to the construction of a socially equitable initiative. In order for the reactivation of orchard tree farms to stand as a mechanism that fosters social cohesion and justice, it is essential to ensure a participatory approach that includes everyone in the decision-making process.

6.5 Seeds: Beyond Technical Support

Seeds represent the foundational input of agricultural systems. As such, their absence renders any agricultural restoration project unfeasible. Here, the term "seeds" is employed metaphorically to refer to reproductive material. In the case of olive trees, this primarily consists of vegetative propagules (i.e., cuttings) rather than botanical seeds. While seeds are frequently categorized as merely technical input, they constitute a critical foundation for community resilience and long-term agricultural sovereignty. Therefore, boosting seed production and exchange at the local level, rather than providing it as part of emergency aid packages, is most likely to have an empowering effect on the communities in question.[136] The use of local seeds is particularly relevant in olive and pistachio tree restoration. While some farmers increasingly rely on Spanish olive seeds, which have shorter maturation periods and are more productive.[137] The use of native ones must be strongly encouraged in order to respect local culture and tradition.

In Syria and beyond, seed exchange opportunities represent not only a vital aspect of agricultural restoration, but also an opportunity for community members to come together to strive towards a common objective. Given the extent of orchard destruction in Syria, where over 45% of the population relies on agriculture for their livelihood,[138] rebuilding the seed system represents a fundamental step in restoring agriculture. An approach that combines local seed exchange, seed fairs, workshops, and reunion spaces for community members to learn how to build and care for nurseries and seedlings would positively influence both agriculture and social dynamics.[139]

[136] Action Against Hunger (ACF-USA), Agroecology Case Study: De Dinechin, Replanting Syria's Lost Heritage.
[137] World Vision, Interview Conducted by Itzhak Dorai. 2026.
[138] FAO Launches Its Emergency and Recovery Plan of Action to Restore Agriculture in Syria.
[139] FAO Launches Its Emergency and Recovery Plan of Action to Restore Agriculture in Syria; De Dinechin, Replanting Syria's Lost Heritage.

Syria is the only nation that has ever withdrawn seeds from the Svalbard seed vault.[140] However, there has been little to no follow up confirming the utilization of retrieved seeds. Furthermore, it is unknown whether these included pistachio and olive tree seeds. This lack of information highlights broader gaps in coordination and traceability within agricultural recovery efforts, indicating that the effectiveness of such interventions depends not only on access to resources, but also on transparency and sustained institutional cooperation across government bodies, NGOs, and actors within the agricultural value chain.

In this regard, it is fundamental to support local initiatives, some of which are already present in the Idlib governorate. In 2025, farmers from across Syria met in al-Dheibeh to organize peasant autonomy through *baladi*, or indigenous, seeds.[141] During the war, Walid al-Youssef and other farmers carried these seeds with them into exile, seeking to preserve their culture through the safe-keeping of native seeds.[142] Since the end of the conflict, those who returned to Syria, regardless of their ethnicity, all spoke **'the language of the soil'**, meaning that no matter their differences, they were united for the same goal.[143]

6.6 The Place of the International Community

Much of the technical information included in this research derives from interviews with representatives from NGOs and agroecologists across the broader international community. The wealth of information and insights received from these conversations, coupled with the fact that government capacity in Syria is not yet sufficient or not willing to aid the agricultural sector through transitional justice mechanisms, indicates that there is indeed a space for the international community to take part in this process.

Most importantly, players from the international community can contribute to the evidence and knowledge sharing process. Working with Syrian ministries, NGOs, and CSOs, international actors and experts can provide evidence-based insights on successful implementations in their respective areas of expertise that can be adapted to the Syrian context. For instance, agroecologists working in other geographical areas can assist in the conception of agroforestry models in conjunction with Syrian farmers who better understand how such models can be adjusted to better fit the unique needs and conditions of a given

[140] A vault in Norway built to store and protect the world's seeds in the case of and ecological disaster. Crop Trust, An International Rescue Mission from Syria to Svalbard.
[141] De Dinechin, Replanting Syria's Lost Heritage.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.

locality. Multilateral actors and NGOs can also assist Syrian institutions by coordinating efforts across the many different issues that contribute to the struggles surrounding the agricultural sector. Water infrastructure and institutional trust cannot be addressed by communities alone; international organizations can provide capacity building assistance, funding, and non-financial resources to aid in the development of these components.

Lastly, the international community's tools and resources can be cross-referenced and adapted in ways that, although not immediately interconnected, allow different elements of NGO and IO programming to be combined to produce better outcomes. While the international community has much to offer to aid Syria's rebuilding efforts, it is important to note that any action done by non-Syrians should prioritize the promotion of agency amongst Syrians so that they can determine the future of their own country and livelihoods on their own terms. Projects implemented should be designed to include an exit strategy that allows the Syrian people to continue this work in the long term without additional burdens being placed on them. For instance, the FAO's ERP mentions the introduction of advanced technological inputs to bolster agricultural outputs.[144] Such contributions from international partners should only be provided if Syrians can realistically maintain inputs long after international partners complete their work in Syria. In keeping with this, an interview conducted with an FAO representative stipulates that the organization plans to work with local communities in order to ensure that the system can be independently sustained in the long term.[145]

7.Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged in relation to this research and are as follows:

Firstly, the project was not granted permission by the Geneva Graduate Institute to conduct interviews with farmers in the affected regions, despite the fact that such interviews were clearly stated as part of the methodology in the project proposal from Geo Expertise.[146] Despite the inclusion of this method and the approval of the proposal by both Geo Expertise

[144] FAO Launches Its Emergency and Recovery Plan of Action to Restore Agriculture in Syria.
[145] FAO Syria Representative. Interview. Conducted by Isabel Walton. 2026.
[146] "Empirically, the study will rely on remote surveys and semi-structured interviews with affected farmers in key areas such as al-Qusayr, the Damascus Ghouta, and the Idlib countryside. These interviews will be conducted through local contacts and digital communication tools, and will aim to document the nature of the damage incurred, the economic consequences, and perceptions of justice and reparations among rural communities." ARP Partner Proposals 2025-2026, p.60.

and the Graduate Institute, which suggested that ethical concerns were already considered, as a group we recognize we should have prioritized ethical considerations earlier and more comprehensively in our research. A detailed ethics protocol (Annex I) was created to address these concerns but the interviews were nonetheless rejected. Nevertheless, this document was extremely useful in shaping the interviews and future research.

As a result, the study relies on semi-structured online interviews with NGOs and government officials, which allowed for valuable institutional and technical perspectives, as well as farmer interviews transcripts which were made available by Geo Expertise. However, the sample size of three farmers that own their land is not representative of the broader rural population in the area of study, given not all farmers do not have legal documentation proving that they own the land on which they work. Conducting these interviews ourselves and having a larger, more representative sample size would have allowed us to get a granular image that captured lived experiences more accurately along with the opportunity to create follow-up questions to clarify some narratives that might have arisen during interviews. As these actors are the most important beneficiaries of this research, any pilot project would directly impact them. Further research should therefore ensure that their voices are centered.

Another issue related to the interviews, is that online calls were the only viable method for the team to talk to relevant actors. This limited our ability to grasp non-verbal communication and pick up on cues that are only understandable through in-person formats. Additionally, physical presence tends to result in higher trust levels, which significantly affects the outcomes of the interviews.

Furthermore, interview participants were reached through existing local contacts and partner networks, which might have created a sampling bias. This was mitigated to the furthest extent by using purposive sampling, aiming to include a diverse range of NGOs, humanitarian actors, and government officials with different positions, perspectives and knowledge. The interview findings were analyzed in complement to other sources of data, including NGO reports, and secondary testimonies from farmers.

An additional limitation is the language barrier that existed. Only one out of four members on the research team spoke Arabic, resulting in an overreliance on only one interpretation. Additionally, where human transcription was not used, an AI transcription tool was substituted. The use of AI in this regard risks the loss of significant and nuanced information being excluded from outputs.

The lack of women and youth respondents to our interviews leaves a gap in information about the lived realities of this demographic, affecting proper policy recommendations for this sector. We acknowledge that mentioning women and youth in our recommendations without engaging in meaningful research on these demographics is concerning as it perpetuates the marginalization of these groups. Further research should explicitly incorporate women's voices and their issues given most of the literature reviewed did not include a gendered approach.

8.Recommendations

Given the complexity of issues at hand, the practical applicability of our findings depends on extensive stakeholder engagement, institutional coordination, government involvement, and financial capacity. A major point of contention in the reinvigoration of orchard tree farming is the long time horizon involved: perennial crops such as olives and pistachios require several years before they become productive, making them a slower and a less immediate visible form of agricultural recovery. Any project to tackle the reinvigoration of these orchards needs continuous funding and support. This might limit the feasibility of such projects, as political shifts or renewed social tensions can further destabilize the agricultural sector, with investors being reluctant to commit large sums of money.[147]

The lack of a clear legal framework poses another major limitation, as many laws and regulations have yet to be updated from the time of the Assad regime. Changes to legislation, particularly during such a transitional period, evolve slowly over time, meaning that we cannot foresee which changes may be implemented and in what ways they might influence the success or failure of any restoration project.

We acknowledge that the range of intervention areas identified are broad and their implementation across the wider Idlib–Hama region exceeds the operational capacity of a single non-profit organisation such as Geo Expertise. However, the organisation could contribute through the implementation of a pilot project targeting one or two villages, while also engaging in broader advocacy efforts in collaboration with other actors present in the territory. In this sense, coordination across local initiatives and the gradual scaling of bottom-up efforts may offer a more feasible pathway for addressing the structural constraints identified above.

The recommendations for the construction of a pilot project are the following:

[147] FAO Syria Representative. Interview. Conducted by Isabel Walton. 2026.

Recommendation 1: Mapping Agricultural Suitability

Goal: Map soil quality and identify areas suitable for agriculture. Identify where unexploded ordnance remains present and engage in demining where possible.

Strategy:

- Carry out soil testing by collecting samples, to have a comprehensive analysis of pH, macronutrients, micronutrients and organic matter.
- Use GIS mapping to identify, locate and map unexploded ordnance that might be present in rural areas.
- Partner up with organizations and IOs working on demining in Syria to create a demining strategy in Hama and Idlib.

Rationale: Identifying the quality of land and the presence of unexploded ordnance in the areas of intervention is an essential first step to have access to uncontaminated, fertile land and ensure that agricultural restoration can take place. Identifying, locating and mapping unexploded ordnance is also important to guarantee physical safety for farmers and their families.



Recommendation 2: Advocating for Land Ownership Records Updates

Goal: Update land ownership records

Strategy:

Launch an advocacy campaign to prompt government action on updating land ownership records, ensuring equitable property rights that consider social justice issues arisen during the conflict.

Rationale:

During the war, there was massive displacement and land dispossession, and land ownership records were not updated. Ensuring a just ownership over land is essential in order to overcome uncertainty and the constant threat of further dispossession, giving farmers agency and allowing them to access formal credit and bank loans that would otherwise not be available. Casualties provoked by the conflict disproportionately affected men, leaving many widows behind. Their inclusion is therefore essential to guarantee equitable livelihoods to women-led families too.



Recommendation 3: Conducting a SCORE Analysis

Goal: Urge local governments to conduct a SCORE analysis in conjunction with SeeD and UNDP.

Strategy: Build an NGO and CSO network to approach local governments; engage and cooperate in the data collection process needed for the analysis.

Rationale: SCORE analysis is an important diagnostic tool used to more precisely identify important interventions. A focus on policy interventions aimed at local governments would contribute to filling the gaps left by top down transitional justice processes, governance, and capacity, factors that are needed to allow for smoother implementation of recommendations tailored to farmers and communities. Furthermore, a successful SCORE analysis relies on a trusted and reputable network of NGO and CSO partnerships for proper implementation and data collection.



Recommendation 4:A Syrian Agroforestry Model:



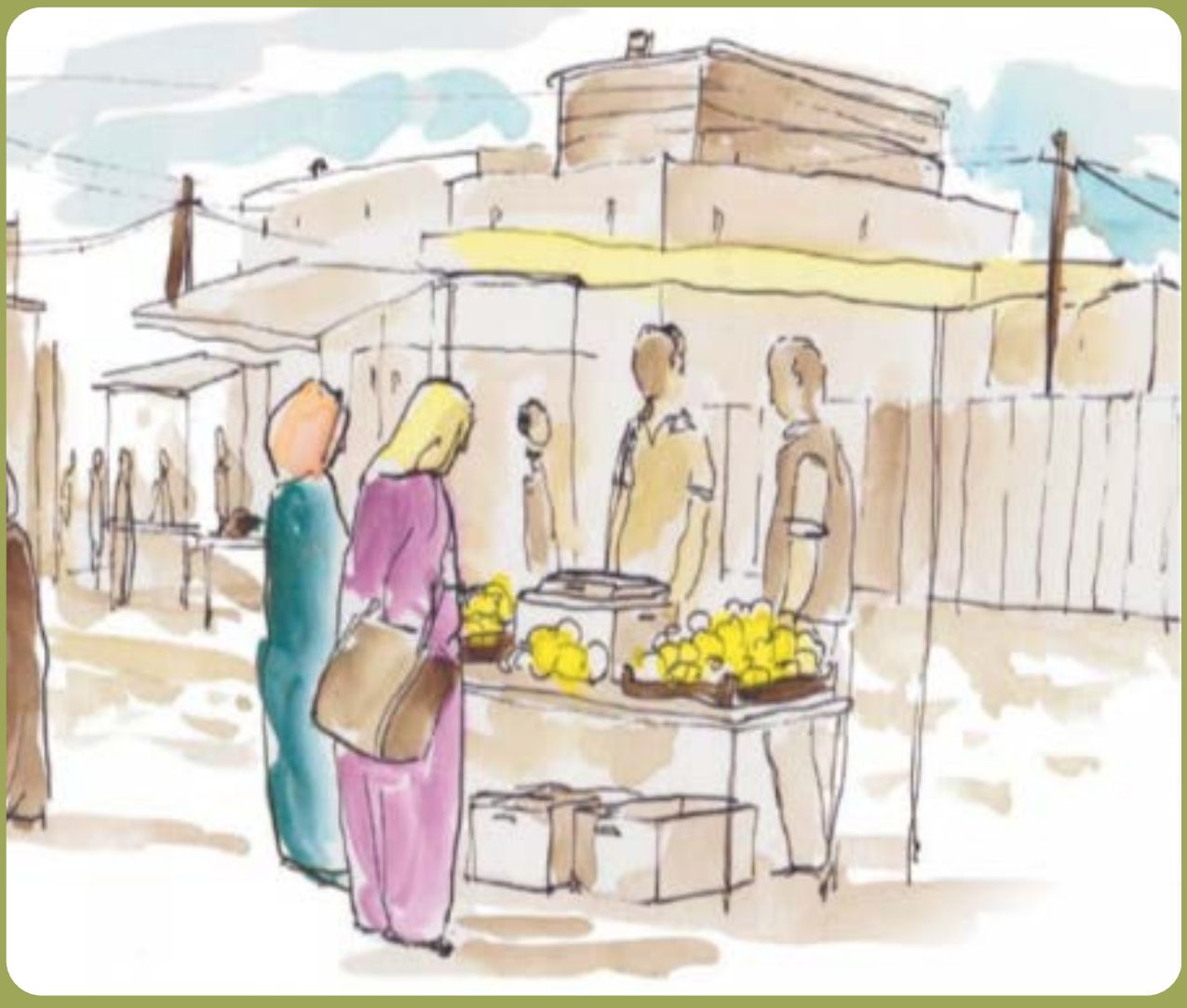
By integrating a sylvo-arable agroforestry model and economic strategy for the governorates of Hama and Idlib, this intervention seeks to prioritize immediate economic viability for farmers, ecological regeneration, and socialization aspects to improve social cohesion within the villages to sustain peace.

Recommendation 4.1: Transitional Financial Support

Goal: Establish a "Transition Fund" to cover the investments needed to recover agriculture, including the purchase of seeds, tools, fertilizers, and fuel, especially in the years between planting and the year the orchard becomes productive (5 years approximately).

Strategy: Find investors to create a fund that distributes money through direct cash transfers to farmers.

Rationale: The creation of a transition fund is necessary to mitigate personal investment risks and facilitate access to inputs for farmers. Direct cash transfer is more respectful of human dignity and more efficient than in kind donations, because it supports farmers' agency.



Recommendation 4.2: Technified Irrigation Infrastructure

Goal: Launch a targeted infrastructure restoration program focused on water access and efficiency.

Strategy:

- Irrigation system: Implement drip irrigation as the favorable standard for new agroforestry plots.
- Cost mitigation strategy: Use recycled plastic tubing to reduce initial costs. Every year, as trees grow, more lines of irrigation will be needed, increasing the financial need to improve and add on to the drip system.
- Water access: Invest in the installation or repair of solar powered or diesel fueled pumps to access groundwater.

Rationale: Without this technical intervention, the project will be extremely difficult to carry out, as technified irrigation is the only way deep-rooted trees and shallow-rooted cover crops will be able to grow within the same plot and in conditions of water scarcity and drought. Water infrastructure must be treated as a core component of reparations, not as an add-on.



Recommendation 4.3: Implementation of a Sylvo-arable Agroforestry Model:

Goal: Co-design a farm layout for each participating community in village-farm meetings in a participatory manner.
Strategy: Plant alternating rows of perennial orchards (olives or pistachios) interspersed with Carob trees, along with cover crops and intercrops (alfalfa, fava beans, chickpeas, vetch) for the first 3-5 years until orchard gives its first harvest.
Irrigation method: Drip irrigation is the most appropriate mode for this model because it supports the dual-layered system of fruit-trees and shallow-rooted cover crops, while simultaneously being the most efficient and least wasteful. Once trees are grown and productive, irrigation methods should change according to the farmer's needs and resources, as drip irrigation becomes more expensive and less efficient when roots grow bigger and deeper.
Rationale: An agroforestry model is a sustainable method of farming that moves away from monoculture in order to help the soil structure and fertility, manage water more efficiently and allow for ongoing crops in order for farmers to not depend on a sole resource. Carob trees are non-invasive, native trees known for their soil structure restoration and nitrogen fixation capabilities, making them ideal candidates for areas with eroded soil. Their inclusion in the farms mitigates the risk of further soil degradation while providing a drought-resistant income stream. The intercropping strategy aids with maximizing nitrogen fixation, minimizing soil erosion, and aiding with water management in arid and semi-arid areas.
Economic benefit: By intercalating cover crops in between the orchards, these crops provide a harvestable yield within months, creating an interim income stream to offset the large number of year olives and pistachios needed to mature (5-7 years).



Recommendation 4.4: Crop Diversification

Action: Enforce a "No Monoculture" motto within participating communities.
Strategy: Differentiate crop portfolios between neighboring farms (e.g., Farm A focuses on chickpeas and favas, Farm B on alfalfa)
Rationale: Uniform production will not encourage exchange, and will instead lead to market saturation and price collapse. Diversifying the regional portfolio is thus fundamental for the communities to reduce risks, and to create an interdependence that will encourage trade and cooperation instead of pure competition.





Recommendation 4.5: Socialization and Promotion of Trust through Knowledge Experience

Goal: Promote the dissemination and uniformity of sustainable agroforestry knowledge to support agricultural regeneration and community involvement.

Strategies:

- Establish a "Farmer-to-Farmer" learning network, recognizing agroforestry not only as an agricultural practice, but also as a social movement, and including all members of the community, irrespective of their religion, ethnicity, or political views.
- Regularly conduct participatory workshops for farmers to share their traditional knowledge; continuously learn new agroecological techniques; transmit agricultural skills to younger generations; render agriculture an attractive and gainful livelihood activity; strengthen generational continuity in agriculture; and foment participation and learning from all members of the community.
- Facilitate Model Farm visits, that must be accessible for regular visits from different farmers and community members.
- Design and organize monthly Community Exchange sites to facilitate low-cost or non-monetary exchange of produce between communities and farmers.
- Implement targeted inclusion protocols for women by integrating childcare support, scheduling activities during non-peak hours, or school hours, and ensuring flexible meeting formats.



Rationale:

- Without socializing activities among farmers and different community members, agroecology on itself will not influence social cohesion. An inclusive environment is essential to build trust and avoid sentiments of anger, frustration and revenge. These actions will give the farmers and community members spaces to choose how to organize themselves. Reinforcing solidarity between farmers is key to preserving and protecting social cohesion. We avoid the explicit use of the term “cooperative” due to the negative connotations surrounding such structures stemming from the Baath regime, but we encourage Syrians to design cooperation strategies, in whatever way fits best.2
- Youth involvement is essential to guarantee the full recovery of the sector in the long-term.
- Farm visits are necessary for farmers to see concrete evidence of success, which might encourage farmers to invest in a shift towards agroforestry.
- Community exchange sites aim to reduce direct competition by encouraging crop diversity rather than monoculture, and influence trust and social bonds across lines.
- Inclusion protocols aim to remove barriers related to domestic responsibilities and labor intensity, seeking to ensure equitable participation and the full recognition and integration of women' s knowledge and labor within an agroforestry model.



Recommendation 4.6: Local Committees and Participatory Governance

Goal: Establish local agroecology committees composed of farmers irrespective of their ethnic group, NGO representatives, community members, and local authorities.

Strategy: The committees will oversee allocation of resources, resolve disputes, and adapt plans to local realities. Regular meetings are necessary to check on the progress or issues that may arise.

Rationale: Top-down imposition has not worked. The success of this model depends on local ownership, ensuring that the "co-design" process leads to genuine social cohesion and cooperation, ensuring long-term sustainability in order to rebuild people's livelihoods in the post-war period.



9.Conclusion

This report has shown that the destruction of Syria's agricultural sector was not only a byproduct of war, but a deliberate and systemic effort to dispossess people of their lands, livelihoods, and basic necessities. Our research sought to answer two questions: *Can financial reparations influence reconciliation and peace within agricultural communities in Idlib and Hama, and how can a transitional justice mechanism include reparations to address the agricultural sector?*

Taken together, the findings support the notion that reparations for the agricultural sector should not be treated as a secondary component of transitional justice, but as a central one. Reinvigorating agriculture through an agroforestry-based model can simultaneously strengthen social cohesion, provide consistent agricultural outputs, and sustain the livelihoods of farmers. In this sense, reparations must go beyond symbolic recognition and instead provide for the material restoration of a sector that was deliberately targeted and deeply degraded.

Understanding the context of Idlib and Hama was essential to grounding this analysis. These governorates experienced the conflict in distinct ways, and their agricultural decline cannot be separated from the effects of the civil war, the repressive policies of the Assad regime, climate change, and the long-term dispossession of water and land. The centrality of orchard trees, especially olives and pistachios, to both the Syrian economy and rural identity further underscores the scale of the damage. Recovery in these areas must therefore be understood not simply as economic reconstruction, but as a **necessary step toward r estoring the social and material foundations of everyday life.**

The literature review helped establish the conceptual basis for this argument by linking transitional justice to reparations, agricultural recovery, and the relationship between economic opportunity and social cohesion. The comparative case studies then provided practical lessons for what such a model might look like in Syria: Colombia showed how farmer-to-farmer knowledge transfer and collective structures can support economic resilience and community trust, while Zimbabwe demonstrated the importance of localized, evidence-based approaches to social cohesion and post-conflict recovery. Together, these cases reinforced the need for interventions that are participatory, context-sensitive, and socially grounded.

Methodologically, this report drew on a qualitative approach combining a literature review, comparative case studies, and semi-structured interviews with Syrian NGO

representatives, experts, and farmers. This approach made it possible to connect theory with lived experience and to ground the proposed pilot project in both comparative evidence and local needs. The interviews in particular confirmed that any successful intervention must respond to the practical realities faced by Syrian farmers, including land access, market participation, and the viability of continued farming.

The causal loop analysis further showed that agricultural decline cannot be separated from broader processes of displacement, weakened trust, and structural disruption. Recovery therefore requires more than isolated technical fixes. It must address the interconnected harms created by war and dispossession, while also creating space for cooperation, participation, and long-term sustainability. For these reasons, **the project proposed in this report should be seen not simply as an economic and agricultural recovery initiative, but as a transitional justice and social intervention aimed at restoring livelihoods, rebuilding trust, and supporting durable social cohesion in post-conflict Syria.**

We therefore recommend that Geo Expertise create a pilot program in Idlib and Hama that includes mapping suitable areas for agricultural revival, advocating for updated land ownership records, conducting a SCORE analysis in collaboration with trusted local and international actors, and establishing an agroforestry model supported by a transition fund, sustainable irrigation methods, and participatory farm design. If successfully implemented, the pilot could provide a scalable model for integrating agricultural restoration and economic reparations into broader transitional justice efforts in Syria, demonstrating how recovery initiatives can contribute not only to material reconstruction, but also to reconciliation, social cohesion, and durable peace.

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Annex I: Ethics Protocol

Ethics Protocol - ARP17
The Politics of Impoverishment and Targeted Destruction in Syria: Toward Integrating the Economic Dimension into Transitional Justice Processes

1. Project Overview

Project Title: Applied Research Project 17 - The Politics of Impoverishment and Targeted Destruction in Syria: Toward Integrating the Economic Dimension into Transitional Justice Processes

Student Researchers: Elisa Andreolli, Itzhak Dorai, Chelsea Robinson, Isabel Walton Ugas

Faculty Lead: Dr. Claire Somerville

Institutional Backing & Partners: Geneva Graduate Institute (IHEID) in collaboration with GeoExpertise, specifically with Dr. Ahmed Haj Asaad.

Research Questions: *Can financial reparations influence reconciliation and peace within agricultural communities in Idlib & Hama, Syria? How can a transitional justice mechanism include reparations to address the agricultural sector?*

Research Objectives & Methods: Our objective is to design a project for restarting agriculture for farmers whose land was destroyed during the war in the Idlib region, with the aim of promoting social cohesion. In order to do so, we will conduct qualitative, semi-structured, remote interviews with multiple stakeholders to be able to understand the real needs of beneficiaries through a bottom-up approach.

Ethical Statement and Commitment: This research is grounded in the Geneva Graduate Institute's General Statement and Code of Practice, emphasizing the principles of respect, honesty, integrity, and social responsibility. We strictly commit to the principle of "do no harm," ensuring that we minimize any potential adverse consequences for participants. We recognize that farmers in Hama and Idlib, having experienced the trauma of war, constitute a vulnerable group and will be treated with the highest degree of care and protection. Furthermore, this project adheres to the principle of non-discrimination, treating all participants fairly and without prejudice regardless of their status or background. We pledge full compliance with Swiss law, including the Federal Act on Data Protection (FADP), and all relevant local regulations in the jurisdictions where we operate.

2. Participants and recruitment

2.1 Participant Identification

- Farmers affected by the Syrian Civil War (2011-2024) including armed conflict, displacement, economic precarity and destruction of their orchard-tree farms.

- Local and central government officials related to agriculture, such as the Ministry of Agriculture or the local government of the Hama/Idlib Governorate.
- NGO staff working on agriculture and social cohesion in Idlib and Hama governorate.

2.2 Rationale for Stakeholder Selection and Research Relevance

These three actors are relevant because each provides different perspectives and knowledge that are essential for designing an effective program to reactivate orchard-tree farming while promoting (or seeking to promote) social cohesion in Syria.

Farmers affected by the Syrian Civil War are the primary beneficiaries of this research and have direct and fundamental experience with the challenge that is agricultural recovery, including land damage, loss of trees, displacement, economic insecurity, and food insecurity. Interviewing them is fundamental to identify their current needs, their perceptions on the conflict (and on the possible solutions), their most pressing barriers to reactivate their orchards, access to resources needed, and perceptions of social dynamics within their communities. Their insights are primordial to ensure our research and program creation is grounded in local realities and responsive to the farmers' priorities, ensuring a decolonial plan to aid them.

Local and central government officials related to agriculture, such as those from the Ministry of Agriculture or local authorities in the Hama and Idlib governorates, are important because they are the main actors shaping agricultural policy at a regional or national level. The recovery strategies need to be built and supported by the government in order to have the capability to succeed. Understanding their role helps assess the feasibility of implementing agricultural support initiatives, identify opportunities for coordination with government-led recovery efforts, and learn about and if they have any initiatives under way.

NGOs working on agriculture and other projects in Idlib and Hama bring practical on-the-ground experience from ongoing or past projects in the region. The staff working in these organizations often have detailed knowledge of local conflict dynamics, community relationships, and effective strategies and insights for rebuilding livelihoods in post-conflict settings. Furthermore, NGO perspectives can help us identify best practices to follow, potential risks, and give us information on what has worked or has not worked from their experience in the area.

It is thus necessary to interview these three different types of stakeholders in order to get a holistic, complementary view and information on the local needs, the institutional frameworks, and practical implementation strategies, which are all crucial for our research question and the development of our program.

2.3 Participant Selection

Our Partner, Dr. Ahmed Haj Asaad, will provide contact information for NGOs, farmers, and, where possible, government actors connected to our research. To avoid coercion

and ensure participation is fully voluntary and consensual, interviewees will not be informed about who has accepted or declined to participate. Refusing to participate will have no impact on aid, services, or relationships between actors involved. No financial incentives will be offered for participation and we will take care to minimize any potential harm and ensure all interviewees feel comfortable and safe during the online interview process.

3. Risk and Benefit Assessment

To ensure full adherence to the "do no harm" principle, these are some of the potential risks we have identified with our interview questions:

3.1 Psychological Risk

Asking participants to reflect on their experiences from the conflict may trigger traumatic memories and cause undue stress and anxiety, even if the questions are seemingly neutral.

Remedy: Questions will be shared with interviewees before the interviews take place so that they can better understand the scope of the interview. Interviewees will be clearly informed of potential risks and will be ensured that they do not have to answer any questions that they do not feel comfortable answering and that they can stop the interview at any point without consequence. Interviewees will be able to take breaks when needed. Our interview questions will be framed neutrally and avoid any direct graphic mention of violence and other sensitive information unless voluntarily provided by the interviewees. If a participant shows signs of distress, the interview will be paused immediately. At this point the interviewers will ask the interviewee(s) if they would like to stop, take a break or continue. The interviewees wishes will be respected and not questioned. Additionally we will suggest that our project partner provide the interviewees with information on mental health support that is available to them. The interviewers are prepared and have been trained on how to deal with vulnerable stories and situations in the context of the interviews.

3.2 Social Risks

Interview participants may face risks related to security within their communities if the answers they provide are shared and deemed controversial. There is also a risk of farmers being perceived as "informants" by their community members or government officials.

Remedy: Interviews will be conducted virtually with both interviewers and interviewees in a secure setting of their choosing. As outlined in our sections on confidentiality, anonymity, and data management (Sections 5 and 6), our data will be treated as confidential and managed accordingly. As previously stated, interviewees will be provided with a copy of the questions that will be asked and will be informed that they do not have to answer any questions that may pose social risks. Recruitment will be conducted in a way that does not publicly identify participants, no public lists of participants will be created and participation will not be disclosed to third parties.

3.3 Political and Security Risks

Interviewees may be at risk of facing repercussions from government authorities or armed actors for their participation in the interview. Statements about governance, armed actors, or land redistribution may create risk if disclosed. Furthermore, farmers may fear surveillance.

Remedy: As outlined in our section on confidentiality, anonymity and data management below, our data will be treated as confidential and managed accordingly. As previously stated, interviewees will be provided with a copy of the questions that will be asked and will be informed that they do not have to answer any questions that may pose political and security risks. No questions will require participants to identify specific armed groups, political actors, or assign blame. Additionally, our monitoring of the situation in Syria has found that government surveillance in the new transitional government is not employed as it was under the Assad regime, therefore, we believe that political and security risks are low.

4. Collection of voluntary informed consent

Informed consent:

Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study as well as the modalities of the interviews:

- Research themes: The discussion will focus on the evolving challenges faced by the agricultural sector across three critical phases: pre-conflict period, during the conflict, and in the post-conflict reconstruction and recovery phase. challenges faced by the agricultural sector before, during and after the war
- Each interview will last approximately between 45 minutes to one hour.
- Audio documentation: For the purposes of data integrity and verbatim accuracy, the interviews will be recorded, subject to the participant's explicit consent.

Voluntary Nature: Participation is entirely voluntary; individuals can choose not to participate or withdraw at any time without consequence.

Confidentiality/Anonymity: Personal information will be kept confidential, and participants will be anonymous in all reports and publications.

Data Use: Data will be used solely for research purposes and will not be shared with third parties without consent.

Obtaining Consent: Consent will be obtained orally and documented via audio at the commencement of each interview session, the researchers will outline the research project and explain how the interview will progress in order to obtain the participant's full consent before beginning the interview. Participants will be asked to provide explicit verification for the following categories:

- Study participation: Voluntary agreement to engage in the research.

- Audio Recording: Permission to record the session for the purposes of verbatim accuracy of interview answers.
- Anonymized Quotation: Consent to include de-identified direct quotes in the final report and related academic outputs.
- Name Attribution: Optional provision reserved for public officials or experts who explicitly choose to be identified for their professional insights.

Scripted statements for oral consent: The following standardized script will be read to the participant in Arabic to ensure consent is fully informed.

- "Having understood the research themes and your right to withdraw at any time, do you voluntarily agree to participate in this study?"
- "Do you grant permission for this conversation to be audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of our records?"
- "Do you agree with the use of anonymous direct quotations from this conversation in our final research report?"
- "(For officials/experts only): Do you provide explicit consent for your name to be associated with specific quotations in the final output?"

5. Confidentiality, anonymity and when identification is possible

This project applies a rigorous framework for data de-identification and privacy.

5.1 Standard Anonymization Protocols

Default Anonymization: As a general principle, all farmers and the majority of NGO personnel will be fully anonymized in all research outputs to ensure their personal and professional safety.

Traceability Mitigation: To prevent the accidental re-identification of participants, the research will exclude real names or exact job titles that could serve as "easily traceable details".

Use of General Descriptors: Participants will be characterized using broad, non-identifying descriptors (e.g., "a male smallholder farmer in his 40s from the Hama countryside") to maintain their anonymity while preserving the context of their insights.

5.2 Informed Identification of Experts and Public Figures

Value-Based Identification: Identification is reserved for public officials or NGO experts whose specific role or expertise adds significant value to the research findings.

Explicit Consent and Right of Review: Naming an individual is contingent upon receiving their explicit consent for attribution. Furthermore, such participants will be granted the right to review any content or quotations associated with their name before the final output is finalized, to ensure that no misinterpretation of their words takes place.

6. Data Management and Protection

This project adheres to the strict data standards of the Geneva Graduate Institute to ensure the safety of participants and the integrity of the research.

6.1 Confidentiality and Recording

All data will be treated confidentially and used anonymously unless specified otherwise and agreed to by participants. All research data will be documented as comprehensively and clearly as possible, preserving it from accidental loss or destruction. Furthermore, we will maintain transparent and accurate records of all research to allow for verification and replication while protecting the participants confidentiality and identities.

6.2 Secure Storage and Encryption

- Research data will be stored safely and protected from unauthorized access in compliance with Swiss legislation, funding agency provisions, and Institute guidelines.
- **Personal and Sensitive Data**: All such data will be stored securely on password-protected drives as instructed by the Geneva Graduate Institute.
- **Separation of Identifiers**: Participant identifiers (names or contact details) will be stored separately from interview transcripts in locked files or secure digital environments.
- **Encryption**: Given the high-risk nature of research in Hama and Idlib, all highly sensitive data will be encrypted in addition to password protection.

6.3 International Data Transfer and Border Crossing

- All data collected outside of Switzerland will cross borders electronically and be stored directly on the dedicated drive at the Geneva Graduate Institute via a **secured VPN connection**.
- **Contingency Measures**: If local conditions in Syria prevent temporary access to the VPN, data will be stored on password-protected hard drives accessible only to the research team.

6.4 Data Use and Retention

- Data will not be used for any purpose other than that for which it was originally obtained.
- Research data will be preserved or, where necessary, destroyed in compliance with the relevant regulations of the Geneva Graduate Institute once the retention period ends.

6.5 Software and Processing Tools

- To ensure that no raw data is exposed to public clouds, all interview recordings and transcripts will be uploaded directly to the Geneva Graduate Institute's secure drive, LEAF, via VPN.
- **Transcription & Translation**: To ensure accuracy and efficiency, we will use TurboScribe.
    - **Security Protocol**: We only use tools that offer end-to-end encryption and explicitly state that data is not used to train AI models. The software's security and privacy policy can be found here.
    - **Anonymization Before Processing**: Where possible, audio will be de-identified (removing names/locations) before being uploaded to any third-party translation or transcription service.
- **Human Oversight**: All automated transcriptions and translations will be manually reviewed by the research team to correct any cultural misinterpretations or technical errors that could misrepresent the needs of the agricultural communities.

7. Researcher Safety and Conflicts of Interest

7.1 Researcher Safety (Remote Protocol): Although no physical travel to Hama or Idlib is planned for the Geneva-based research team, we adhere to the Institute's imperative for the protection of researchers by managing digital and psychological risks to the utmost extent:

- **Digital Security**: Since our partner Dr. Haj Assaad is the point of contact between interviewees and the research group, we will communicate to him to suggest using Signal or Protonmail in order to ensure encrypted platforms are being used to prevent surveillance or interception.
- **Psychological Wellbeing**: As this research involves politically sensitive issues and experience of violence, the team will hold regular debriefings with Dr. Claire Somerville and Dr. Claudia Seymour to manage potential secondary trauma from witnessing graphic accounts of war.
- **Local Partner Safety**: We will ensure that our partner, **GeoExpertise**, follows local safety protocols. We will not request interviews in high-risk locations or during high-risk times that could jeopardize interviewees' physical safety. We are continuously checking to see if our area of interest moves from somewhat-stable to high-risk before, during, and after the interviews are carried out.

7.2 Avoidance of Conflicts of Interest: We are committed to maintaining the highest degree of integrity and ensuring that personal or professional relationships do not induce bias:

- **Independence from Partners**: While collaborating with GeoExpertise, the research team maintains full autonomy over the design, methodology, and analysis of the data.
- **Neutral Sampling**: To prevent inappropriate influence on findings, participants will be recruited through diverse channels to ensure the sample is not limited only to those favored by our partners or local authorities.

- **Transparency**: We will transparently acknowledge any financial or logistical support received and ensure that such support does not dictate the research conclusions or lead to biased conduct.
- **Non-Interference**: We commit to leaving the research field in a state that does not preclude future access by maintaining a neutral and professional stance with all local stakeholders.

8. Interview Process

The interviews will be semi-structured, and therefore open to follow-up questions. This will allow us to give more freedom to the interviewees, and avoid sensitive topics that might trigger re-traumatization and cause security risks.

We will aim at interviewing national government officials and local NGOs before farmers. This will allow us to:

- **Gain Practical Experience**: Practice our interviewing techniques and the flow of the semi-structured format with professionals before engaging with more vulnerable populations.
- **Gather Contextual Intelligence**: Use the insights from NGOs and officials to understand current on-the-ground sensitivities, which helps us better protect the dignity, rights and safety of the farmers.
- **Refine Risk Mitigation**: Improve our ability to spot signs of distress or psychological stress during a conversation by first observing how experts discuss these topics.
- **Validate the Methodology**: Ensure our approach to restarting agriculture is grounded in current institutional realities before asking farmers about their specific needs and hopes for justice.

8.1 Logistics and Translation Procedures

Interview Language and Material Translation: All interviews will be conducted in Arabic. To ensure participants fully understand the research context and their rights, all interview questions and the informed consent scripts will be translated from English into Arabic by our project partner, Dr. Haj Asaad.

Bilingual Team Facilitation: Interviews will be conducted by at least two research team members to ensure complete data collection. Each session will consistently include Itzhak Dorai, who possesses the necessary linguistic proficiency in Arabic to facilitate direct communication.

Translation Infrastructure: The team will seek to utilize professional translation technology, exploring equipment rental options from the Geneva Graduate Institute Library, the University of Geneva's Faculty of Translation and Interpreting, or other relevant institutions.

Contingency Interpretation Plan: In the absence of specialized translation hardware, Itzhak Dorai will provide consecutive interpretation into English. This methodological approach ensures that the second interviewer can remain an active participant in the semi-structured dialogue and intervene with follow-up inquiries as needed.

8.2 Interview Questions

Ministry of Agriculture:

1. What is the government's strategy to support the agricultural sector?
2. What are the main difficulties faced by the Syrian agricultural sector? What is the government's answer to these challenges?
3. Do you have a mechanism for dialogue with farmers in the area?
4. Is there a plan being built to rebuild the agricultural sector in the affected areas? What is the envisioned timeline? If there is a plan, is there any action to support them in the meantime while the agricultural sector recovers?

Local authorities:

1. Has the governorate taken any initiatives to support the agricultural sector? Is there cooperation with the central authorities in Damascus for that sector?
2. Do you have any mechanism for dialogue with farmers in the area?
3. What are the main challenges for the agricultural sector in the Idlib governorate?
4. Are efforts being made to develop/improve a land database? What are or would be the components of this database, and how would it be made accessible?
5. Do you notice any local tensions amongst people in the governorate? What are the reasons for this? In what ways do these tensions manifest?
6. What are some of the challenges to social cohesion in your governorate?

<u>NGOs:</u>

1. What do you think the main issue related to agriculture is in the area?
2. Do you notice any clear tensions between social groups in the governorate? How do economic grievances intersect with social or sectarian sectors?
3. Have there been any previous efforts to rebuild the agricultural sector and reconstruct farmers' livelihoods? What are some lessons from the past that should not be repeated? What is your NGO doing ?
4. Do you have a mechanism for dialogue with farmers in the area?
5. Are there specificities about the soil and the land that impact agriculture? Are there any farming techniques or methods that might be useful for farming reconstruction in the communities?
6. In Colombia, where there have been efforts for agricultural compensation and reconstruction after the war, they have relied a lot on cooperatives (explain). Do you think farming cooperatives could help face the challenges your community faces in the attempts to restart farming practices?

Farmers:

I. Background & Land Relation

1. How long has your family been rooted in agriculture in this region, and what is your current relationship to the land (owner, tenant, or sharecropper)?
2. Before the changes of the last decade, what were you mainly growing, and how did farming support your household's livelihood?
3. In the past, how did farmers in your village typically cooperate or support each other during the planting or harvest seasons?

II. Impact on Livelihoods (Status & Resilience)

4. What are the most significant changes you've observed in local farming, such as costs, water access, or soil quality, over the past several years?
5. Of the crops or trees you traditionally grew (like olives or pistachios), which have proven to be the most resilient to the environmental and physical challenges in your area?
6. How has the damage to resources like irrigation or specialized machinery affected your community's ability to remain self-sufficient?

III. Current Challenges & Social Cohesion

7. Are you currently able to farm? If so, what was the most important factor that allowed you to restart your activities?
8. What are the three biggest practical challenges you face as a farmer today (e.g., seeds, fuel, land clearing, market access)?
9. How would you describe the current level of trust and cooperation among neighbors in your farming community today?
10. In your opinion, what are the main factors that currently create divisions or misunderstandings between different groups in the rural countryside?

IV. Future Solutions & Reparations

11. When you think about "justice", what does that look like in relation to your livelihood and land?
12. We are looking at "cooperatives" as a way to build spaces for farmers to organize and communicate among producers. Do you believe this community-led initiative could help resolve local tensions while promoting production?
13. What specific types of support (technical, financial, or social) do you think would be most effective at rebuilding trust between people in your village?
14. Which institutions or organizations (NGOs, local committees, or agricultural banks) do you currently feel are best placed to manage support for farmers fairly?
15. Looking forward, what is your primary hope for the next generation of farmers in Hama and Idlib?

9. Conclusion

The research team for ARP17 acknowledges that this protocol serves as a binding framework for our research. We reiterate our full commitment to the **Geneva Graduate Institute**

Research Ethics Guidelines, specifically the principles of "do no harm," participant dignity, and data integrity. We recognize that ethical dilemmas may evolve during the research process and commit to continuous consultation with our Faculty Lead, Dr. Claire Somerville, our partner, Dr. Ahmed Haj Asaad, and the Head of ARP and Practice, Claudia Seymour, to resolve any emerging issues.

Student Researchers:

- Elisa Andreolli: _____ Date: _____
- Itzhak Dorai: _____ Date: _____
- Chelsea Robinson: _____ Date: _____
- Isabel Walton Ugas: _____ Date: _____

Faculty Lead Endorsement:

- Dr. Claire Somerville: _____ Date: _____

Partner Organization (GeoExpertise):

- Dr. Ahmed Haj Asaad: _____ Date: _____

Head of ARP and Practice:

- Dr. Claudia Seymour: _____ Date: _____

Annex II: Contextualisation of Case Studies

This annex analyses several case studies that offer real-life illustrations of how social cohesion, farming, and reparations can contribute to post-conflict rural areas; it presents several mechanisms implemented globally that inform our program development.

1. Colombia

Over 6 million people were displaced in Colombia due to the conflict, as a result of murders, enforced disappearances, sexual, and gender-based violence.[148] Finding solutions to issues regarding land restitution has proven extremely challenging due to a lack of financial resources and weak institutional structures.

Correa's work on the issues of implementing reparations in Colombia speaks to the aim of providing meaningful redress to all victims of serious crimes committed by government agencies or armed groups. However, the Victims and Land Restitution Law of 2011 proved overambitious, and most of the implemented work focused on victims of forced displacement, marginalizing those victims of serious human rights violations.[149] The collective reparations plan warns other policymakers to beware of overambition relative to their resources and capabilities.

Sanchez and Velasco's examination of the same law focused on how institutional design shapes effectiveness in transitional justice.[150] It highlights that the reason why land restoration fails has to do with administrative hurdles such as bureaucratic bottlenecks, unclear procedures, and limited communication with displaced populations (victims).[151] Staff capacity and procedural clarity are two key elements when implementing effective restitution and reparation programs. Both agree on the institutional importance of transitional justice, which poses a challenge in the Syrian context as institutions remain weak in the post-Assad era. This is a top-down approach to compensation, which proves that although policies may be well-intentioned, they often fail when they do not consider the practical realities within the affected communities.

Studying agrarian initiatives and policies within the Colombian context is a key tool for agricultural projects in Idlib and Hama, as our interest group consists of farmers and

[148] ICTJ, From Principles to Practice - Challenges of Implementing Reparations for Massive Violations in Colombia, p.1.
[149] Ibid. p.9.
[150] Camilo-Sánchez & Velasco, Institutional Design and Transitional Justice, p. 225.
[151] Ibid. p. 227.

victims who have been affected by land and crop destruction. Navarrete-Cruz et al. pose that Rural Producer Organizations (RPOs) aid peacebuilding in post-conflict settings. Its main factors for success include self-governance, monitoring schemes (to ensure rules are respected), and the creation of norms regarding market relations.[152] Economic activity is a resilience strategy, which ultimately aligns with the hypothesis from this study: that economic activity (agriculture), exercised as a collective activity, helps social cohesion and peace. Despite market volatility, the act of engaging in economic activity at a small scale through RPOs prevents civilians in these communities from re-engaging in violence.[153] This research focuses on areas with a large presence of the FARC-EP, as they held control of the area and provided services and security, while relying on rural Community Action Boards to legitimize their authority, influencing the success of these RPOs. The benefits of these organizations are manifested through improved market access, developing self-governance that empowers small communities, and enhanced social cohesion in a post-war setting.[154]

Löhr et al. pose that social cohesion plays a key role in peacebuilding in post-war settings.[155] When it is weak, conflicting community interests can exacerbate tensions, whereas strong shared interests can foster cooperation when proposed initiatives are inclusive, equitable, and context-sensitive.[156] Findings suggest that fostering environmentally sustainable agricultural practices has the potential to promote social cohesion among farmers, which in turn contributes to peacebuilding, mainly driven by four action areas: agroforestry, cooperatives, certification, and trade/policy.[157] This piece is particularly insightful for the research, as it creates a conceptual bridge between social cohesion and policy levers directly created in post-conflict rural areas. These initiatives are key to study within the context of post-conflict Syria, and highlight the areas that one must be aware of in terms of the risk of relapse into violence. Agroforestry is particularly of interest due to our focus on orchard-tree farmers.

Del Rio et al. posit agroecology as a grassroots approach to strengthen social cohesion and resilience through the management of natural resources in farmer communities.[158]

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[152] Navarrete-Cruz, Birkenberg, and Birner, Factors Influencing the Development of Rural Producer Organizations in Post-War Settings, p. 692.
[153] Ibid., p. 694.
[154] Ibid., p. 709.
[155] Löhr et al., Social Cohesion as the Missing Link Between Natural Resource Management and Peacebuilding, p.2.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid. p.20.
[158] Chavez-Miguel et al., Agroecology as a Grassroots Approach for Environmental Peacebuilding, p.36.

Farmer-led Agroecology Peasant Schools (ECAs) push education that strengthens the social fabric and supports socio-economic recovery in affected villages, which, through the fostering of social cohesion and resilience, help to build peace. The concept of environmental peacebuilding can guide the work as it is based on the idea that, through the sustainable management of resources and landscapes in a bottom-up approach, trustbuilding and collaboration are encouraged, two key factors that need to be fostered in the Syrian communities this research focuses on. A key takeaway for Syria's success is to be wary of overly economic-focused ECAs, which weaken education and social claims. Participatory agroecological education can be a transitional justice tool, and careful, power-sensitive design is essential to the research of transitional justice in Syria, as it may reproduce local inequalities if the high-level power imbalances are left unaddressed.

2. Tunisia

Tunisia's conflict stems from long-standing socio-economic tensions between wealthier coastal regions and marginalized interior areas, which deepened under authoritarian rule through a weaponized economic policy. This divide culminated in the 2011 Revolution, sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation and broader demands for dignity, freedom, and peace.

Tunisia's Organic Law on Transitional Justice introduced a more novel approach by recognizing geographically marginalized groups as collective victims. It mandated the Truth and Dignity Commission (IVD) to identify these zones and recommend reparations addressing structural and systemic issues. Robins et al. examine the IVD's work, which identified 11 of Tunisia's 24 governorates as victim zones and proposed reintegration through improvements in agriculture, industry, education, health, and sanitation.[159]

Robins et al. identify key weaknesses in the IVD's approach, including vague legal definitions, imprecise recommendations, failure to address structural inequality, and the inability to effectively transfer power from the central government to marginalized areas, and the continued presence of former regime actors.[160] The authors go on to suggest that addressing disparities between marginalized and central regions through participatory

[159] Robins et al., Transitional justice from the margins: Collective reparations and Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission, p.94.
[160] Ibid., p.7.

budgeting, affirmative action, decentralization, and local engagement could strengthen reparative efforts.[161]

Tunisia's geographically grounded approach to reparations and its focus on "victim zones" can be useful for the study of Syria's post-conflict recovery, specifically in the contexts of rural Hama and Idlib, which have experienced similar forms of violence, displacement, and socioeconomic struggle. The application of a similar regional lens would allow for tailored reparations that meet the needs of these areas and the affected populations. This observation supports insights from Geoexpertise that a "one size fits all" approach is not suitable for Syria, where the conflict's impact varied widely by region.[162] Additionally, Robins et al. note the inverse relationship between economic opportunity and the recurrence of violence. This suggests that where livelihoods are restored, conflict diminishes. This conclusion is central to our research question as it investigates whether economic reparations can be used to restore peace.

3. The Gambia

Similar to the Assad Regime, the Yahya Jammeh dictatorship of The Gambia was characterized by massive human rights violations, which left the country's infrastructure, institutions, and economy in a fragile state, making the successful implementation of reparations as part of a transitional justice framework difficult.

Manneh examines the challenges of financing reparations programs, including inefficient and complex cash distribution, difficulty of defining victims, and preference for truth commissions over direct payments. In the context of The Gambia, challenges include budget constraints, competing interests, corruption, weak administrative systems, lack of political will, and insufficient victim inclusion. [163]

The Gambian Victim Reparation Act mandates that the reparation fund must be sourced from money appropriated by the National Assembly, the proceeds of the sale of assets seized from the former president, grants, and donations.[164] External funding comes with political impediments, but options include grants, donations, and international aid from sources such as the United Nations Transitional Justice Project.

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[161] Ibid.
[162] As per Dr. Ahmed Haj Asaad, project partner, during a project briefing, October 2025.
[163] Manneh, Challenges in Financing Reparation Programs in Transitional Justice Contexts, p.4.
[164] The Gambia, Victim Reparation Act, art.5.

The case of The Gambia offers critical insight for our research on Syria, specifically when considering the financial and institutional limitations presented. Sustainable approaches must consider the "who" and "how" of financing reparations programs, as overambitious schemes are unlikely to succeed where there is low institutional trust and limited capacity. These limitations help qualify our research, as Syria, much like The Gambia, faces weak infrastructure and institutions post-Assad.

4. Zimbabwe

For decades, political rivalries in Zimbabwe fueled violence throughout the country. The ZANU-PF was the dominant political party until the rise of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which emerged from a labor-driven grassroots movement led by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions. Founded in 1999 as a working-class coalition, the MDC quickly grew to 700,000 members and expanded into a broader alliance with middle-class advocates focused on economic justice and political change.[165] The rise of the MDC posed a threat to ZANU-PF, which responded with violence and repression during elections and implemented a violent and self-serving land reform program, which resulted in the displacement of over one million commercial farmers and their families.[166]

In 2008, ZANU-PF lost, for the first time since independence, the parliamentary majority. This event, paired with economic collapse, led the regime to change its political strategy and enter into a power-sharing agreement with MDC. An "Organ on National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration" was established by the new inclusive government. However, the leadership of both parties has been reluctant to implement the Organ's agenda: the former because they want to ensure that the political and personal interests of their members are protected; the latter because they value the existence of the coalition more than the functioning of the truth and reconciliation program.[167]

Thomson & Jazdowska note little success with calls for reconciliation rejected due in part by the fact that Zimbabwean society "has not yet undergone a full transition".[168] The authors argue that a bottom-up grassroots approach involving local ownership in the transitional justice process would be the most suitable option for the country.[169] Their paper

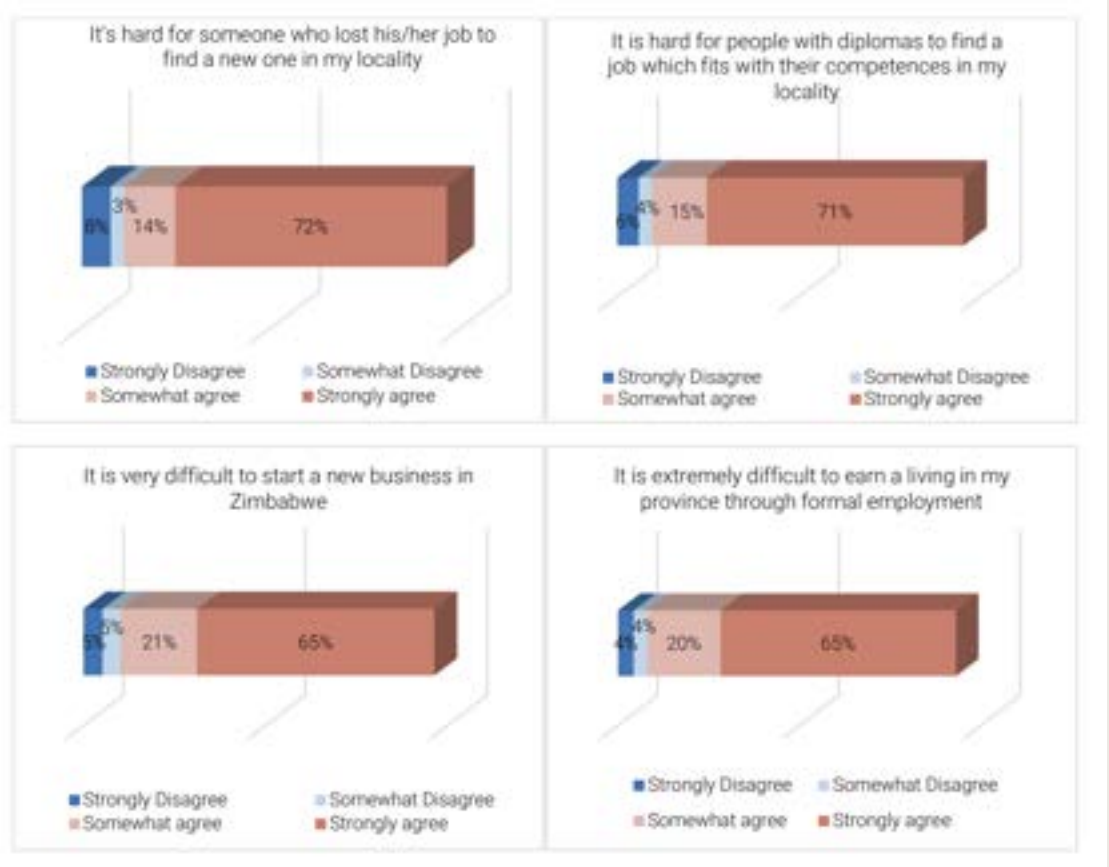
[165] Alexander, Zimbabwean Workers, the MDC & the 2000 Election, p.387.
[166] Thomson & Jazdowska, Bringing in the Grassroots: Transitional Justice in Zimbabwe, p.80.
Laurie, Mugabe Targets Agriculture: Land Reform or Political Gimmick?, pp.1-20.
[167] Ibid., p.83.
[168] Thomson & Jazdowska, Bringing in the Grassroots: Transitional Justice in Zimbabwe, p.82.
[169] Ibid., p.77.

describes a participatory project where victims first share experiences of violence in a safe forum, which makes them feel heard, relieved, and recognized. Such an activity can reduce people's trauma, enabling people to then address issues of accountability and justice in a frame of mind that is less drenched in anger, frustration, and devastation. After the initial support phase, participants (who should have a diverse educational background) are introduced to the notions and methods of transitional justice. Lastly, they are asked about which methods are, in their opinion, the most effective for the specific situation. Such a project cannot take place in a one-time workshop; it needs time and capacities. What the international community can do is to educate and facilitate, but the process must be community-led. For instance, the leader of the meetings shall be a trusted member of the community, rather than the project leader or some other external actor.

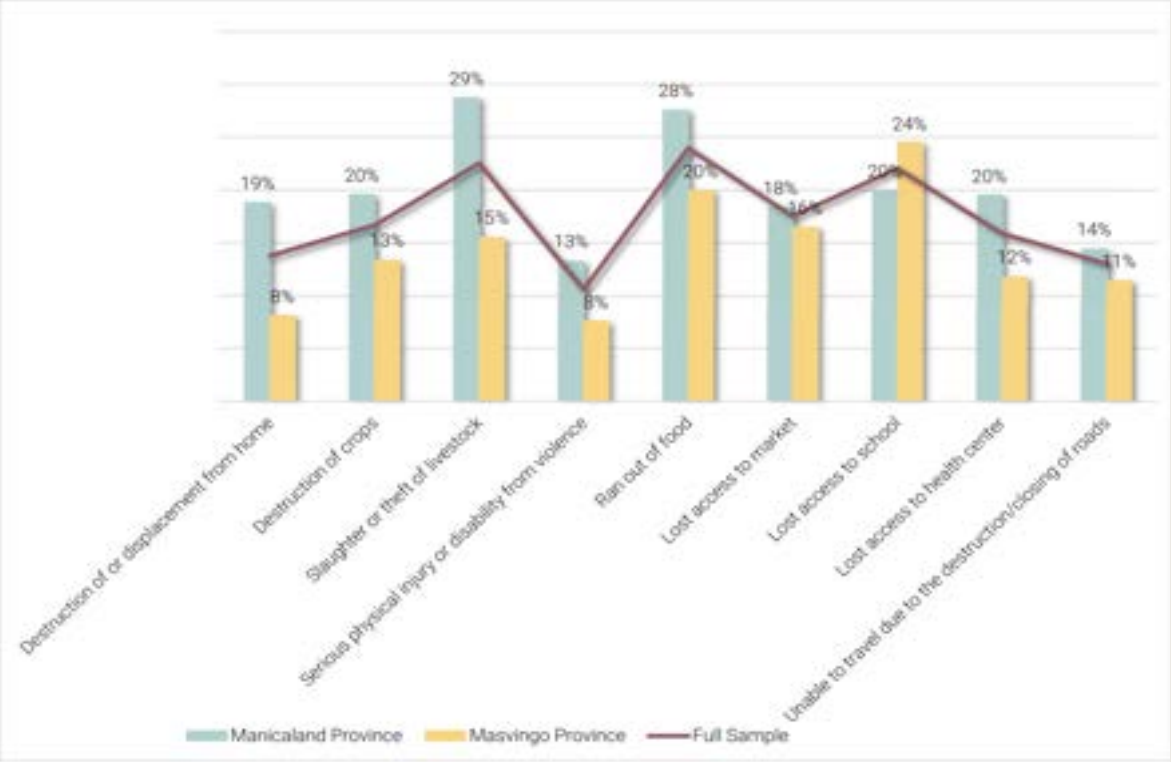
A grassroots movement that focuses on labor, economic justice, and democratic transformation could be applicable in the Syrian context. Similar to Zimbabwe, the Syrian people have been in the middle of violent power struggles and have long been frustrated with the lack of democratic rule, as evidenced by the fact that the civil war began with mass pro-democracy protests. While top-down transitional justice mechanisms may not be guaranteed under the transitional government, Thomson and Jazdowska's proposal suggests that grassroots movements can evolve into platforms to address economic grievances and demand political change, both in Zimbabwe and in Syria: local organizing among Syrian farmers and laborers may serve as a foundation for future reparations and broader transitional justice efforts, and this is particularly relevant given the grassroots nature of our project.

Although not part of Thomson & Jazdowska's argument, it is worth briefly revisiting MDC's grassroots origins. Though the party later became part of elite coalitions, its early rise from labor organizing and popular mobilization illustrates how bottom-up efforts can pressure stagnant regimes to shift course, even if in bad faith. This is particularly relevant for Syria, where no substantial transitional justice framework has been established since the end of the Assad regime. The MDC's trajectory shows that grassroots energy, even if later co-opted, can still cause shifts in the political landscape. A similar dynamic could emerge in Syria if local organizing is empowered from below rather than imposed from above.

Annex III: Graphs from SCORE Zimbabwe



Survey Responses. 'Toward National Cohesion in Zimbabwe', Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (2022)



Percentage of respondents who reported the following challenges affected more than 10 households in their community. 'Toward National Cohesion in Zimbabwe', Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (2022)