

The Role of Urban Resilience Strategies in the Economic Recovery of Post-Conflict Aleppo

Enhancing Livelihoods of the Host, Returnee, and Displaced Communities

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Abstract

Aleppo hosts a large population of remainees, returnees, and internally displaced people. Over the past decade, the city has experienced massive economic decline; the extensive destruction of Aleppo's infrastructure has exacerbated the situation, resulting in a significant deterioration in residents' livelihoods. The literature on post-conflict recovery notes that appropriate and well-managed rehabilitation planning and implementation can contribute to local economic recovery. This paper argues that urban resilience strategies could revitalise and promote economic recovery, by providing much-needed short and long-term job opportunities designed inclusively according to each group's particular circumstances and capacities. A mixed methodology with an exploratory approach was employed to investigate urban deficiencies in Aleppo as perceived by three community groups: remainees, returnees, and IDPs. The paper identifies the most needed urban facilities and services by each group and concludes with urban resilience projects that provide inclusive and equitable livelihoods, improved transport, open spaces, and training centres. The paper recommends constructive collaboration between internal and external actors to finance, design and invest in urban resilience projects to enhance livelihoods, meet the overarching needs of the community, and boost local economic recovery.

Keywords

Post Conflict, Aleppo, Urban Resilience, Economic Recovery, Livelihood, IDPs.

1. Introduction

Aleppo or "Halab," is one of the world's oldest inhabited urban areas; historically, it has been known for its multicultural community, as well as its extensive urban economic, social, cultural, and institutional capital (UN-HABITAT, 2014). Over the past ten years, the literature on Aleppo has predominantly focused on its severely damaged eastern half; which was previously under the control of the opposition. Little attention, however, has been paid to the other half of the city, the western half, which has acted as a haven for different groups of residents, both old and new. Aleppo's current population is made up of three different groups: the remainees, who stayed in their homes during the war, the returnees, who returned to their homes after migration or displacement, and the internally displaced people (IDPs) who were forced to flee their homes. Aleppo's residents have witnessed a significant deterioration in their livelihoods; the decline has been exacerbated by the massive destruction of the city's main sectors,

infrastructure, and services, secondly, by unprecedented international financial sanctions, and thirdly by the significant devaluation of the Syrian pound. The growing number of job-seekers, due to the massive influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the continual resident return movements from 2017 onward, have created an enormous demand on employment opportunities. These problems raise the following questions: how can economic recovery be started in post-conflict Aleppo, which actors should be involved, and by which strategies can recovery take place.

Post-conflict economies are generally characterized by unsound financial systems, high rates of unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure to meet increased demands. Even when the international community takes part in financing and implementing recovery plans, national actors must take the lead. The sporadic attempts of Aleppo's residents to adapt to sudden changes by reviving their livelihoods through informal mechanisms of survival demonstrate great innovation, adaptation, and resilience. However, such informal economies if not addressed, may exacerbate social inequality and negatively impact economic recovery.

Through that lens, this paper seeks to investigate means of enhancing Aleppo's post-conflict economy from an urbanist's perspective. It argues that urban resilience strategies could bolster economic recovery and sustain livelihoods. This can be achieved by rebuilding infrastructure and providing needed facilities as well as introducing appropriate and inclusive economic activities; which will, in return, help create opportunities for employment in intensive public works projects and provide support for local Aleppo enterprises.

The paper will address urban deficiencies in Aleppo as perceived by three community groups (remainees, returnees and IDPs). It calls upon local and international actors and practitioners to work constructively together to focus on and support the priorities that Aleppo residents identify in order to set the foundation for recovery plans to help secure a better future for all inhabitants of this ancient city.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Economic Recovery in Syria

In recent years, spurred by the growing number of conflict zones worldwide, there has been increased interest in, and focus on, the study of post-conflict recovery in various disciplines; ' this notion has been at the core of research in fields such as Development Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies. Additionally, it often overlaps with more traditional subjects such as Economics and Sociology (Barakat & Zyck, 2009). In any given conflict setting, loss is an inevitable outcome of strife; It can result in the destruction of not only social capital but can also cause severe damage to state economy. (UNDP, 2008). Barakat asserts that post-conflict recovery can contribute to the reactivation of economic and social development and the creation of peaceful environment that will prevent a relapse into violence (Barakat, 2020, p:10). In order to limit such regression, post-conflict recovery strategy, and policy must be anchored in local engines and projects of economic recovery (UNDP, 2008). That raises certain questions: for example, which actors could lead, design, and finance economic recovery plans? When can they be started? And by which means?

One possible option, local financing for funding reconstruction and recovery plans is not realistic in post-conflict settings (Abboud, 2014). This is because post-conflict economies are generally characterized by weak regulatory authorities, unsound financial system, endemic corruption, high rates of unemployment, as well as inadequate or inefficient infrastructure to meet increased demands (Billon et al., 2000), (ILO,

2010). Since 2011, the Syrian economy has declined markedly due to the massive destruction of industrial and commercial businesses, and international financial sanctions; these have significantly contributed to the sharp devaluation of the Syrian pound.¹ In addition, the ongoing exodus of many businessmen, industrialists, and craftsmen who have emigrated or transferred their activities to neighboring countries has further exacerbated the situation (Syrian Economic Sciences Society, 2018).

When conflict breaks out, a country's economic activities are often transformed to different types of informal economies;² these are often characterized as being mostly chaotic, unregulated, often violent, and criminalized (Lewis et al., 2019). An unofficial coping or survival economy generally emerges. This type of informal economy is usually established by the civilian population and various enterprises and workers (UN Desa, 2010); it occurs spontaneously as an informal mechanism of survival and support and indicates the resilience of local community. However, unfortunately, such spontaneous economic recovery may also exacerbate social inequality (ILO, 2010); for example, an individual's personal needs may be met without consideration for the needs of the broader community (Vöckler, 2019). Syria has witnessed a continuing rise in informal economic activities linked to the conflict; these include some illegal activities³ as well as legal and civic coping activities.⁴ The extent of these activities will vary according to the region and province (Syrian Center for Policy Studies, 2011). Such informal activities in post-conflict settings in countries like Syria can, if not addressed, linger long after the conflict and ultimately negatively impacting the transition to economic recovery and development (Lewis et al., 2019).

The international community often takes part in financing and implementing reconstruction and recovery plans. Although the international community has a fundamental role in supporting post-conflict recovery, national actors must also take the lead (UNDP, 2008). Additionally, some studies show that the intervention agenda of international agencies may sometimes prioritize the programs of the donor country without taking into account the priorities of the conflict-affected communities which could severely impact the economic recovery of these strife-torn communities (Abboud, 2014). Hence, there is a profound need for timely and appropriate co-ordination and collaboration, both by international and local bodies in the recovery process.

To start an economic recovery plan, the United Nations (2009) developed a three-track post-conflict employment policy (UN Desa, 2010). Track A and B focus on war-affected and vulnerable individuals by providing temporary and medium-term jobs, strengthening local skills, and rebuilding economic and social infrastructures with high-visibility, labour-intensive public works programmes that go hand in hand with short-cycle training programmes (UNDP 2008: 74-75). "Activities amenable to this approach include access infrastructure, and the reconstruction or rehabilitation of public buildings" (UNDP 2008: 75). Indeed, the socio-economic reintegration of conflict-affected groups is intimately related to the capacity of local economies to create and sustain job opportunities. Therefore, the primary target should focus on assisting affected groups who lost livelihoods and assets or those who need to be reintroduced to the labour market, including returning IDPs.

¹ Syrian pound reached a record-breaking low of 2,000 pounds to the dollar in 2020. Goodridge, Hugo, "Charting the dramatic collapse of Syria's national currency".

² UNDP categorizes three conflict economies: combat, shadow, and coping economy (UNDP, 2008).

³ Such as smuggling and the sale of smuggled commodities.

⁴ Such as the technical and educational training necessary to enter productive activities.

2.2. Urban Resilience Strategies (Recovering Infrastructure and Needed Activities):

Although armed conflict in Aleppo stopped a few years ago, deprivation, poverty, homelessness and insecurity have continued to increase. (Teba, 2020). Damage assessment conducted in 2017 indicated that the conflict had severely impacted all main city sectors including infrastructure and services. Over 43% of the inner-city road network, 25% of bridges and 65% of peripheral roads are damaged or in need of repairs (World Bank Document, 2017). The success of economic recovery and livelihood support strategies is strongly linked to the success of efforts to rehabilitate local infrastructure and replace damaged physical capital which can thus help create opportunities for employment in public works projects and provide support for local enterprises (Goovaerts et al., 2005).

This paper argues that urban resilience strategies can be utilized as a means to enhance economic recovery. It advocates bolstering resilience over reconstruction; urban reconstruction can be regressive in post-conflict settings and implies the return to the status quo ante (Kumar, 1997, p 2); this may suffice the needs of the pre-war community but fails to adequately deconstruct the weaknesses and vulnerability factors after the conflict (Barakat & Zyck, 2009). Urban resilience is defined as the capability of a city to maintain during, recover from, and adapt to changes in the system, induced by destructive (conflict-related) events (Rademaker et al., 2018). It focuses on the material challenges faced by marginalized communities, and their ability, to meet and adapt to these challenges (Meerow et al., 2019), and it supports diverse livelihoods and employment opportunities (Rockefeller Foundation, 2015). The notion of resilience to shocks, i.e. urban resilience, on the other hand, is more practical, realistic, and effective than reconstruction; it has both a community and operational aspect (Hay et al., 2019). International organizations and private groups such as the Rockefeller Foundation⁵ promote the concept of urban resilience which has also gained traction among urbanists who have utilized urban intervention to tackle post-conflict problems⁶ (Sampaio, 2016).

The strategy for urban resilience consists of three stages: maintaining, recovering, and learning. The recovery stage is in response to the specific needs and deficiencies that occur in the wake of an event. These may include addressing infrastructure, urban services, and other facilities and activities (Rademaker et al., 2018). When infrastructure and needed facilities are in place and adequately functioning, they enable the society's progress and contribute to physical, health and socioeconomic wellbeing. Therefore, access and provision of these essential services is essential to effective recovery in post conflict settings. The local community is the right driver for identifying these essential services since the effects of conflict are felt mostly by them. In reality, however, their needs and perspectives are rarely represented (Hay et al., 2019) or taken into consideration. Indeed, stakeholders perceive infrastructure priorities based on their respective vision of what the desired outcome should be rather than on an accurate understanding of what is actually needed (Hay et al., 2019). Urban resilience does not lead to positive outcomes unless its strategies are implemented and integrated among the different actors, which can produce tangible and sustainable gains for the whole community (Davis, 2012).

⁵ <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/>

⁶ Such as segregation and crime in Latin America and South Africa, through transforming street patterns, revitalizing slums and improving mobility (Sampaio, 2016).

3. Methodology

The research utilized a mixed methodology, including an exploratory approach to collect cross-sectional qualitative and quantitative data in the form of focused interviews and a questionnaire. The studied sample included three groups mainly residing in the western half of the city of Aleppo city (remainees, returnees, and IDPs). Data was collected in September 2020 in two phases:

Phase 1: Semi-structured Interviews: Five semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with residents from different groups and CSO actors in Aleppo. This helped the researcher gain a more in-depth understanding of people's personal experiences and helped formulate the leading questions of the survey.

Phase 2: Online Questionnaire: This phase involved sending the online questionnaire via WhatsApp, a social media platform, as the target population was not accessible by the researcher. IDPs and returnees were approached using CSO contacts working in Aleppo at the time of data collection. The questionnaire was in Arabic and participants were directed to different sets of questions based on their residential status.⁷ This helped the researcher categorize responses appropriately.

The questionnaire included thirteen open and closed questions investigating three main urban-related issues:

- The post-conflict impact on livelihoods on Aleppo's urban structure.
- The availability of training and career development centres (TDCs) and how accessible they are to all groups.
- The availability of essential urban services and facilities.

The majority of respondents were female as the questionnaire was primarily sent to female groups via WhatsApp. However, this had no impact on the results since the questionnaire required respondent data about the whole family. The survey was closed after four days when the targeted number of participants was achieved. A statistical analysis method (Excel) was used to analyse each group's results and examine the corresponding data. It is imperative to mention that survey results are not statistical but rather indicative and thus reflect a prevailing trend.

4. Results and Discussion

A total of 143 Aleppine respondents participated in the survey, predominantly from the western half of the city: 49% of whom were remainees, 24% were returnees, and 27% were IDPs. IDPs and returnees were mainly distributed to residents in middle to low-income neighbourhoods in south-western parts of the city like Salahuddin, Ansari, and Saifuddaula. These neighbourhoods are amongst the most conflict affected areas in Aleppo (REACH, 2019) (Figure 1). The displacement period varied from less than one year to more than six years (Figure 2); however, the vast majority of respondents reported being displaced from six to nine years. Additionally, 43% of IDPs have experienced multiple displacements.

⁷ Remainee, Returnee or IDP.

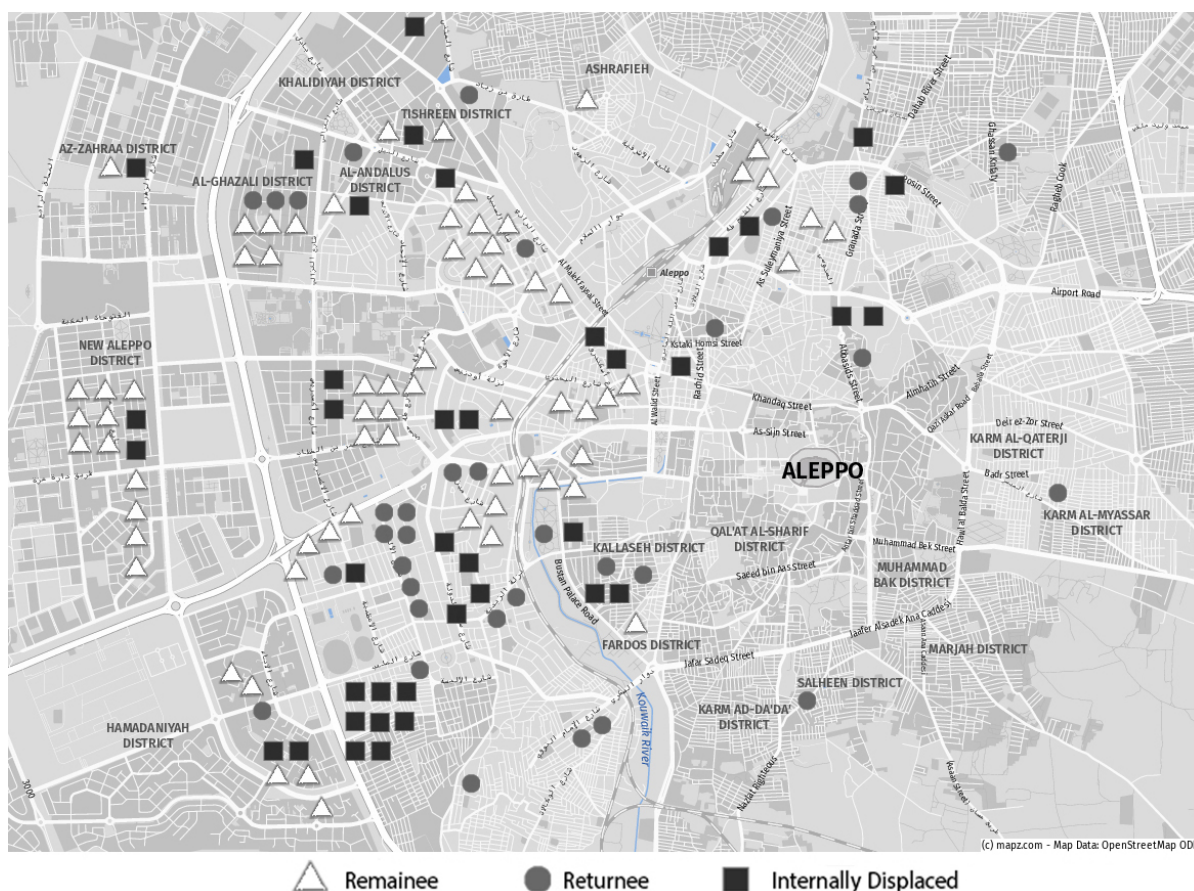


Figure 1. Geographical Distribution of Sampling groups in Aleppo City, Source: Author

In terms of age groups: more than half (55%) of respondents were of working-age, ranging from 26 to 49 years, 28% were under 25 years of age, and 15% were over 50. The educational level of working-age respondents differed significantly among the groups, in that IDPs were generally less well-educated while the majority (86%) of the remainees reported having completed higher education. The highest number of technical institute graduates was among returnees. The highest level of illiterates, or those with less than high-school education, was among the IDPs (Figure 3).

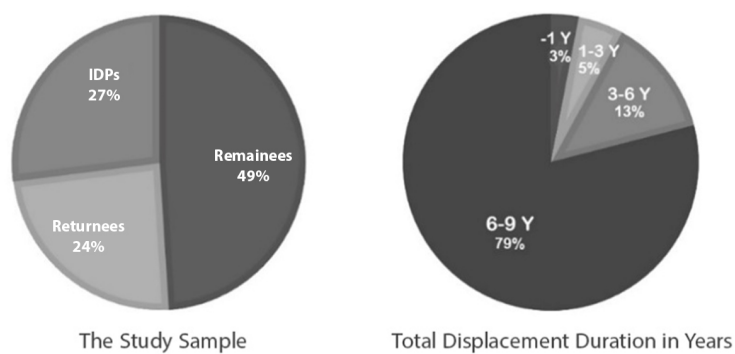


Figure 2. Study Sample Characteristics, Source: Author

Two questions asked about the post-conflict impact on livelihoods with regard to Aleppo's urban structure. The first question asked whether residents thought the current urban structure impeded their livelihoods. Only 14% of respondents felt that poor urban structure negatively affected their livelihoods; however, they did not elaborate on how it is affected.

This could be due to a lack of clarity in the question; it was either too broad or too ambiguous. The term "Urban Structure" is rarely used in the Aleppine dialect, so its use in the question limited the number of responses. The author notes that survey questions needed to be more carefully and appropriately worded so as to be clearly understood by all respondents in each study group.

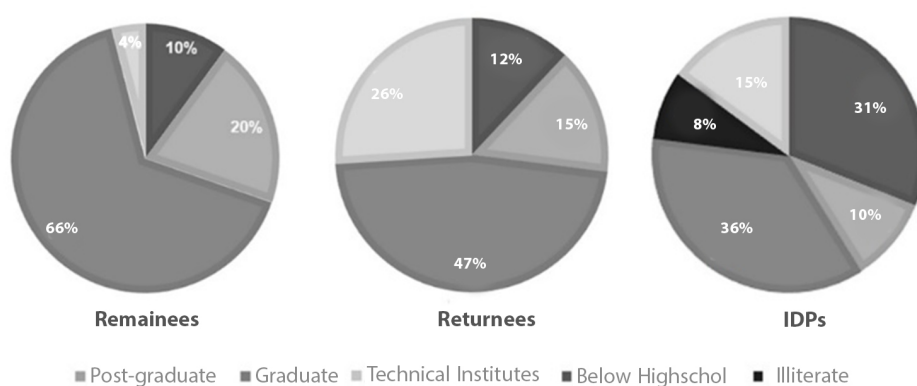


Figure 3. Educational Level of Sampling Group, Source: Author

The second question asked about the impact of the transportation system on livelihoods. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned the lack of a good transportation system. "The act of going to work is my biggest livelihood obstacle! Due to the current gasoline crisis, I cannot afford to use private transportation, and public transportation is extremely congested [during the] times we are supposed to maintain social distance", said a Remainee who goes to work by bus. During the data collection period, the entire city of Aleppo suffered from an acute gasoline crisis which led to a shortage of vehicle fuel. Using public transportation was considered dangerous due to the Covid-19 pandemic and for many, private transportation was too costly. An interviewee stated that a trip inside Aleppo using private transport could cost up to 6% of the average monthly salary. The lack of good public transport has created another hurdle and increased traffic congestion and stress.

Developing an adequate infrastructure and promoting alternative transportation methods, such as cycling, could play a significant role in relieving transport stress. However, participants were not too keen on the idea. "I would like to use a bike, but it is not very common, everyone will look at me, and I will not feel comfortable," said a remainee. In Aleppo, like everywhere in Syria, it is socially unacceptable for women and girls to ride bicycles, in addition, cycling is perceived as a childish activity. Several new youth initiatives such as the "Come on Let's Bike" initiative started in 2013 in Damascus, promote cycling and its beneficial impact on physical and mental health. The initiative has encountered many problems due to the lack or absence of bike paths, rough pavement and bad roads, and reckless driving habits in the city (same source). To encourage people to cycle, there needs to be a change in mindset.

Star (1999: P. 381) argues that infrastructure is shaped by the conventions of a community of practice (Star, 1999), something that is abundantly lacking in Aleppo and Syria in general. The success of such initiatives is tied up with the government and the CSO; it is necessary to challenge traditional stereotypical gender roles as well as promote and facilitate alternative, sustainable, and less costly modes of transportation. Stakeholder support is also essential; this could be achieved by investing in safe cycling infrastructure design projects in Aleppo.

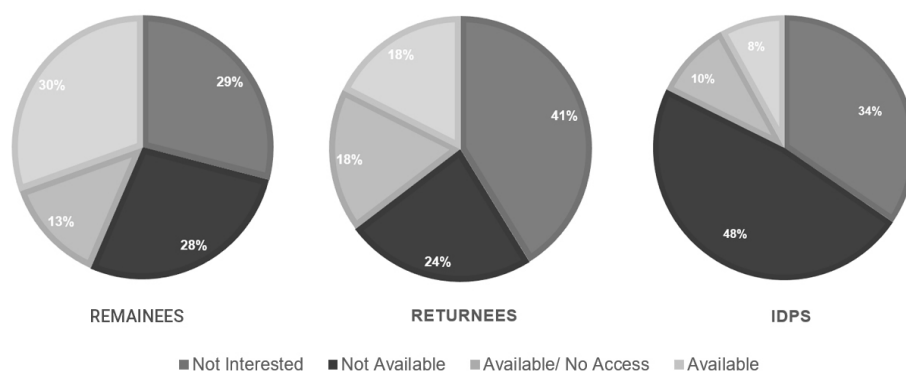


Figure 4. Availability of Professional Development and Training Centers, Source: Author

Figure 4 shows two main attributes in terms of accessibility to TCDCs: firstly, IDPs have minimal access to TCDCs, whether or not these centres are available in their current neighbourhoods. Only 8% of IDPs claimed they have access to training centres, whereas almost half (48%) do not. In addition, 10% said that although such centres exist near their current residence, they cannot access them. One interviewee, a board member in Namaa’ Development Organization,⁸ stated that the UNHCR, in collaboration with its national partners, has provided a number of entrepreneurship/business training programs for the conflict-affected community. However, many of these programs focus predominantly on returnees, whereas in actuality, it is the IDPs, who, due to their continuous displacement, most often encounter difficulties accessing these centres. The majority of IDPs have been displaced for six to nine years. Living for almost a decade in a neighborhood without decent access to training centers or career development programs is an alarming development (Figure 5).

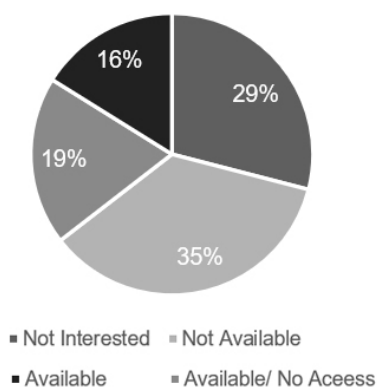


Figure 5. Availability of Training Centers to IDPs who have been displaced for six to nine years. Source: Author

The second attribute interpreted from Figure 4 is that returnees (41%) are the group least interested in pursuing training opportunities and courses, compared to 34% and 29% among IDPs and remainees, respectively. Returnee participants did not expand their answers; however, it is recommended that their disinterest in training and professional courses, despite better accessibility than IDPs, be further investigated.

⁸ Namaa’ is a non-profit organization run entirely by women. <https://www.facebook.com/Namaa.Aleppo/>

Figure 5 identifies which facilities each group in Aleppo city regards as essential. The questionnaire results show that the services residents actually need are different from what is on offer in Aleppo. Interviewees noted that new restaurants, coffee shops, and retail stores are opening throughout the city, despite many personal financial problems. However, the chart below shows that only 19% of total participants use them, including remainees who showed the least interest in these places. However, these venues do have customers. “Prices are incredibly high at restaurants and cafes, yet they are full of customers all the time. There is even a waiting list!” said a remainee. The proliferation of such places can be seen as evidence of the lack of alternative productive activities that the community needs but stakeholders do not consider. Educational and religious centers also did not garner much interest from survey respondents. Interestingly, according to Syria’s damage assessment in 2017, most schools continued to function during the conflict (World Bank Document, 2017).

As for the facilities IDPs and returnees need in particular: more than half (53%) of IDPs expressed their need for TCDCs near their residence as well as mental health centres; additionally, many returnees (56%) prioritize open spaces, followed by having libraries and cultural centres in their area. This response clearly suggests that local actors, stakeholders, and INGOs should encourage and direct investments based on local society’s needs, this could be done in partnership with the Syrian government.

Open spaces, parks, and children’s play areas ranked first as the most needed facilities; these are perceived as safe spaces to release stress and escape poor living conditions.

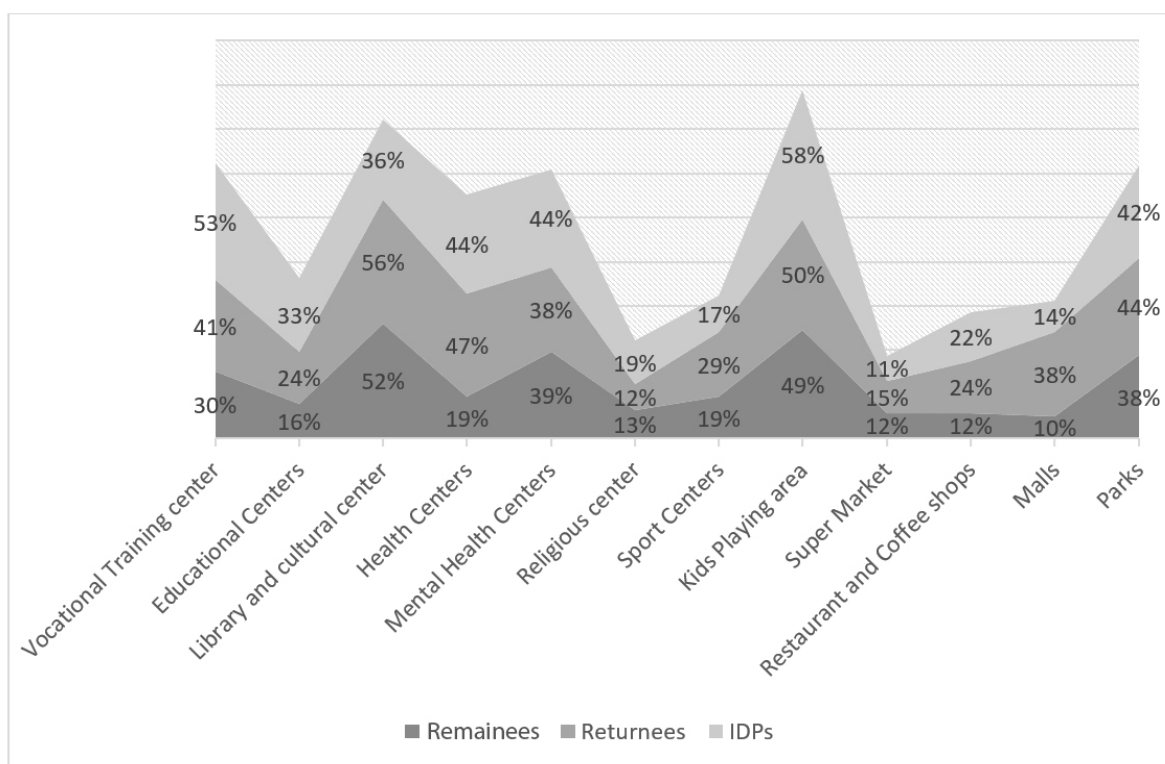


Figure 6. Missing Urban Services and Facilities according to Aleppo’s resident groups, Source: Author

Unfortunately, many of Aleppo’s public squares and parks were severely impacted during the war due to wanton destruction, bombardment, vandalism, neglect, and damaged facilities (toilets, lighting, urban furniture, safe children’s play areas) (Figure 6). Some have also become hangouts for loafers, perverts, hooligans, and unsavoury and anti-social practices. Damaged and neglected open spaces include Bustan

Al-Qasr Park, Al-Itha'aa Corniche (serving south-western areas), Saadullah Al-Jabri Square (adjacent to the public park in downtown Aleppo), and Tariq Bin Ziyad Park that serves the Al-Ashrafia area.

The successful rehabilitation and revitalization of open and green spaces are crucial to promoting urban resilience, urban renewal and entrepreneurship; this could help support the local economy by attracting more investment. More importantly, accessible open spaces improve mental health by allowing residents to engage in group activities, expand social networks, and reduce fear and distrust. This can be achieved by adopting creative strategies for financing and managing public open areas, focusing on strong partnerships between governments and stakeholders, and community involvement in the decision-making process to ensure equitable access by all groups.

5. Findings and Conclusions

When designing a questionnaire directed to the whole Aleppine community, it is crucial to carefully and accurately choose appropriate words and terms used in the local dialect. This makes it easier for respondents to understand questions and respond appropriately. The research survey results show that an accessible TCDC is seen to be an urgent necessity for the majority of IDPs. This is likely due to the low educational level of most IDPS which limits their chances of working for public and private companies, enterprises, or organizations. Secondly, the lack or absence of access to a TCDC reduces their chances of acquiring and developing new occupational skills to meet market needs. In contrast, many of the returnee respondents expressed a lack of interest in pursuing training or career development courses. The place they migrated to or were displaced from before returning to Aleppo might have impacted their responses, which possibly is worth investigating.

Inadequate infrastructure and transport systems were among the top reported challenges to livelihoods. Cycling, as an alternative means of transportation can alleviate traffic congestion and high transportation costs, is still perceived as odd or socially unacceptable. Private transport is generally limited to the affluent and elite, while public buses have become crowded and unsafe. The study did not investigate those who are interested in using an alternative method of transportation (cycling) to work. However, responses show that promoting cycling and developing cycle lanes and paths can help reduce transport issues and challenges in the future.

Findings show that stakeholder investments in Aleppo are mainly directed to fast-profit and consumer-based projects. According to respondents, these projects may meet their community's needs for the short-term, but they do not meet their ambitions and aspirations for the long-term. Restaurants, coffee shops, and malls were identified as the least important public facilities. In contrast, libraries, cultural centres and mental health centres were chosen as the most needed facilities by the majority of participants, especially returnees and IDPs. In addition, most respondents ranked open spaces, parks, and children's play areas first as the most needed facilities, especially by those living in the south-western neighbourhoods. Such spaces are perceived as safe zones which can be visited to release stress and temporarily escape poor living conditions. It is advisable that the rehabilitation, and reconstruction of existing facilities and establishment of new facilities and services should be prioritized in the city of Aleppo's recovery plans.

6. Recommendations

This paper emphasizes the need for constructive collaboration between all internal and external parties involved in rehabilitating and revitalising Aleppo. This includes CSOs, government, stakeholders, and

international actors and donors, all of whom can help to design and invest in urban resilience projects that provide inclusive and equitable short and long-term job opportunities.

This would include projects such as:

- The rehabilitation of open spaces and parks throughout the city. This can be implemented by employing local engineers, graduate specialists, self-employed workers/entrepreneurs, and hourly-paid workers as part of “Cash for Work” projects to design and rehabilitate these spaces and keep them accessible and maintained.
- Establish and secure vocational and professional development centres near vulnerable and affected neighbourhoods and ensure IDP accessibility at a nominal charge.
- Plan and develop cycle paths and lanes throughout the city.
- Create and secure parking areas near workplaces and major landmarks (i.e., the Citadel and its bazaars). This can reduce traffic congestion and daily transportation costs.
- Invest in establishing libraries and cultural centres to serve the host community, especially returnees, who voiced a need for the same. In addition, develop plans to have only women, especially breadwinners, run and administer these centres.
- Support projects to restore damaged enterprises and lost livelihoods through the reconstruction, rehabilitation, and/or maintenance of commercial and industrial shops and workshops.

To conclude, this paper provides the basis and framework for future stand-alone studies or map-out survey instruments in Aleppo. It is an open invitation for researchers and practitioners concerned with socioeconomic justice, inclusion, and urban recovery, to learn more about the needs and ambitions of the remaining population in Syria and develop plans and projects that can provide them with the decent life they deserve.

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