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ENTREPRENEURSHIP ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT **REPORT**

BUILDING RESILIENCE:
ECOSYSTEM MAPPING FOR ECONOMIC RECOVERY, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND MSME EMPOWERMENT IN SYRIA.

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ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

AGTECH	Agricultural Technology
EDTECH	Education Technology
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FINTECH	Financial Technology
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
HEALTHTECH	Healthcare Technology
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IP	Intellectual Property
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KII	Key Informant Interview
MSME	Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UI/UX	User Interface / User Experience
VC	Venture Capital
WEF	Water-Energy-Food

Glossary of

KEY TERMS

ENTREPRENEURSHIP ECOSYSTEM	The collective network of individuals, organizations and institutions that support business growth.
MSMEs	Businesses categorized by size, typically defined as having 1–10 employees, though the exact definition can vary depending on the country or organization. They usually operate with limited capital compared to large firms.
INFORMAL ECONOMY	Economic activities that are not regulated by government institutions, often lacking formal business registration.
DIASPORA	People of Syrian origin living abroad, especially those who left after 2011, who can contribute to local development through remittances, mentorship, or investment.
INCUBATOR	A program or space offering support (training, mentorship, funding) to early-stage startups.
ACCELERATOR	A time-bound program offering mentorship and investment in exchange for equity or performance milestones.
CIRCULAR ECONOMY	A model focused on sustainability, where resources are reused and waste minimized.
BLENDED FINANCE	The strategic use of development finance to mobilize private capital for development outcomes.
SEED FUNDING	Initial capital used to start a business, often from personal savings, friends/family, or early-stage investors.
EQUITY-FREE FUNDING	Capital provided to a startup or enterprise without the donor/investor taking ownership (equity) in return.
REVENUE-BASED FINANCING	A funding model where repayments are made as a percentage of the business's monthly revenue, rather than fixed installments.
WORKING CAPITAL	The cash a business uses to manage its day-to-day operations. Calculated as current assets minus current liabilities.
MICROFINANCE	Small-scale financial services (loans, savings, insurance) designed for individuals or businesses with limited access to traditional banking.

Glossary of

KEY TERMS

CROWDFUNDING	A method of raising capital by collecting small amounts of money from a large number of people, typically via online platforms.
CASH FLOW	The total amount of money moving into and out of a business. Healthy cash flow is essential for survival and growth.
LOAN GUARANTEE	A promise by a third party (often a donor or government) to repay a loan if the borrower defaults, used to reduce lender risk.
VENTURE CAPITAL (VC)	Investment provided to early-stage, high-potential startups in exchange for equity and often strategic guidance.
ANGEL INVESTOR	An individual who invests personal capital into startups, typically at an early stage, in return for ownership equity.
IMPACT INVESTMENT	Investments made with the intention to generate both financial return and measurable social or environmental impact.
GRANT	Non-repayable funds provided to support specific business activities, usually with reporting and impact requirements.
MATCHING GRANT	A type of grant where the recipient must contribute a percentage of the funding, often used to ensure shared investment and accountability.

02 ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN SYRIA

Pathways to economic recovery

This market study provides a comprehensive analysis of the current state of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and entrepreneurship in Syria, with a particular focus on the challenges and opportunities that have emerged in a post-conflict context. Drawing on field data, stakeholder interviews, and focus groups, the study examines sectoral trends, geographic concentrations, financing dynamics, regulatory barriers, and support mechanisms available to entrepreneurs. It aims to inform the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) on priority areas for intervention, to design targeted innovation and entrepreneurship programs, foster stakeholder collaboration, and support ecosystem revival. Backed by data-driven insights, the study highlights the role of entrepreneurship in driving economic recovery, job creation, and inclusive growth in Syria.

The study presents objective findings solely based on the primary and secondary research work and the participants' viewpoints and experiences. It is not partial to any interest from the Author, donor, or commissioning organizations. Additional analysis and recommendations represent the Author's opinion and are not necessarily representative of the reviewers' position.

This report was developed for **Sida**, led by **Berytech**, in partnership with **Startup Syria**, using a participatory and co-creation approach. It was shaped through close collaboration among experts, authors, Berytech experts and Syrian stakeholders to ensure inclusive, relevant, and actionable recommendations for ecosystem development.

Research

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to assess the evolving state of Syria's entrepreneurial ecosystem within a context marked by protracted conflict, economic instability, and institutional fragility. Combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the research aims to provide a snapshot of entrepreneurial activity, ecosystem dynamics, and emerging sectoral trends.

A nationwide online survey was conducted to capture the perspectives of key ecosystem players, including startup founders, MSME operators, and representatives of entrepreneurship support organizations. This quantitative exercise was complemented by a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with around 40 experts, investors, academics, policymakers, NGO representatives and local ecosystem leaders to provide deeper insights into the barriers, opportunities, and policy needs of Syrian entrepreneurs.

This report is built on a solid foundation of previous assessments and validated through direct engagement with entrepreneurs and stakeholders. It stands out for its focused approach on priority sectors and regions, offering practical, actionable recommendations that will guide program interventions to ensure their relevance and effectiveness within the Syrian context.

At the level of primary research, the report also adopts a comparative analysis between entrepreneurs' perceptions and those of ecosystem experts to identify commonalities, highlight differences, and address existing gaps. This approach helps build on shared strengths and uncover unified opportunities for impactful interventions.

A total of **143 respondents** completed the survey, offering a broad yet nuanced cross-section of Syria's fragmented entrepreneurial landscape. The sample included **109 entrepreneurs and MSME owners**, alongside **34 ecosystem stakeholders**, including directors of incubators, accelerators, donor-funded programs, and government-affiliated entities. The survey was administered in May 2025 and included respondents at various stages of business development:

idea stage (39%), early stage (38%), growth stage (18%), and mature enterprises (4%). Sectoral distribution was wide-ranging, with Information and Communications Technology (ICT),digital services (60) and a general "Other" category (58) comprising the majority. These were followed by light manufacturing and industrial services (10), agrifood processing and value-added agriculture (7), renewable energy and circular economy ventures (5), and tourism and hospitality (2).

SECTOR	RESPONSES
ICT and Digital Services	60
Other	58
Light Manufacturing & Industrial Services	10
Agrifood Processor & Value-Added Agriculture	7
Renewable Energy and Circular Economy	5
Tourism & Hospitality	2

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEYED BUSINESSES ACROSS SECTORS

The study categorizes enterprises into four primary types to reflect the diversity of business models within the Syrian context: (1) technology-driven and innovative startups; (2) traditional MSMEs such as restaurants and grocery stores; (3) informal and home-based businesses offering services like catering, childcare, photography, computer repair, and cleaning; and (4) larger, more structured businesses operating with formal registrations and established customer bases.

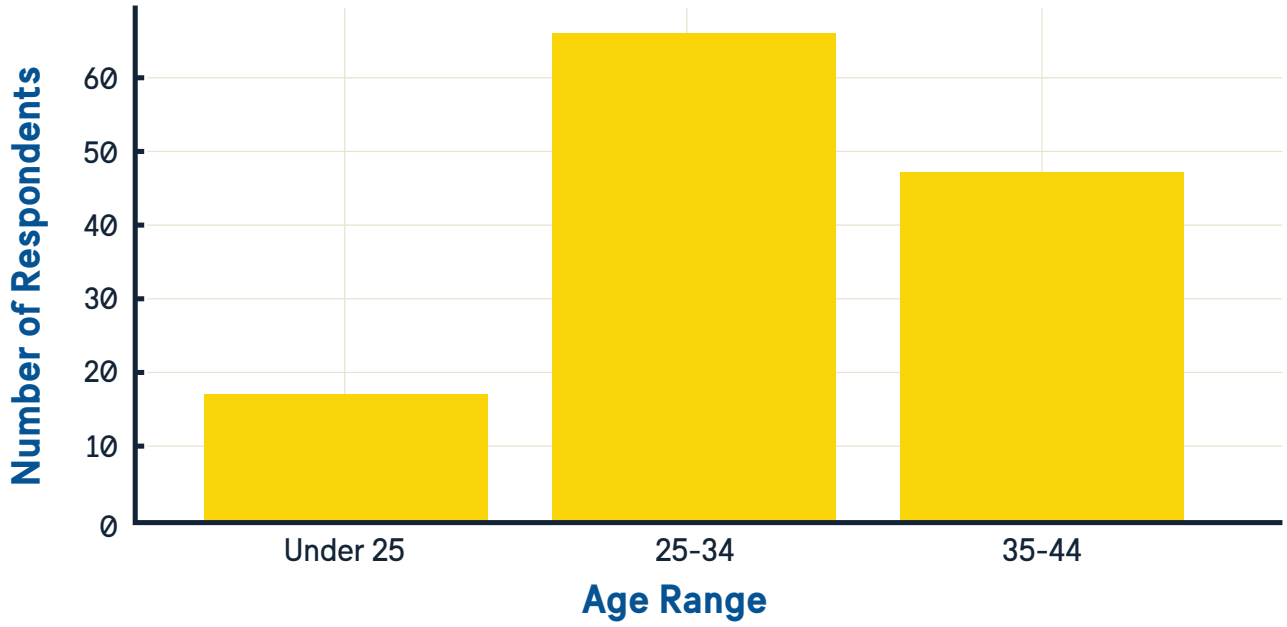
Participant identification and data collection were facilitated through a network of local partner organizations, as well as field volunteers who played a critical role in reaching entrepreneurs in underserved areas and those lacking internet access. To complement the survey data, a targeted set of interviews was conducted with stakeholders across sectors and regions to validate quantitative trends and surface practical recommendations. These conversations informed the development of case studies and policy-relevant narratives, with participants fully briefed on the study's objectives and the intended use of their insights.

This report recognizes certain limitations and does not claim to be exhaustive or statistically representative. The findings are shaped by the rapidly evolving socio-economic conditions and the fluid realities on the ground within Syria and are subject to rapid and frequent updates based on the evolving situation.

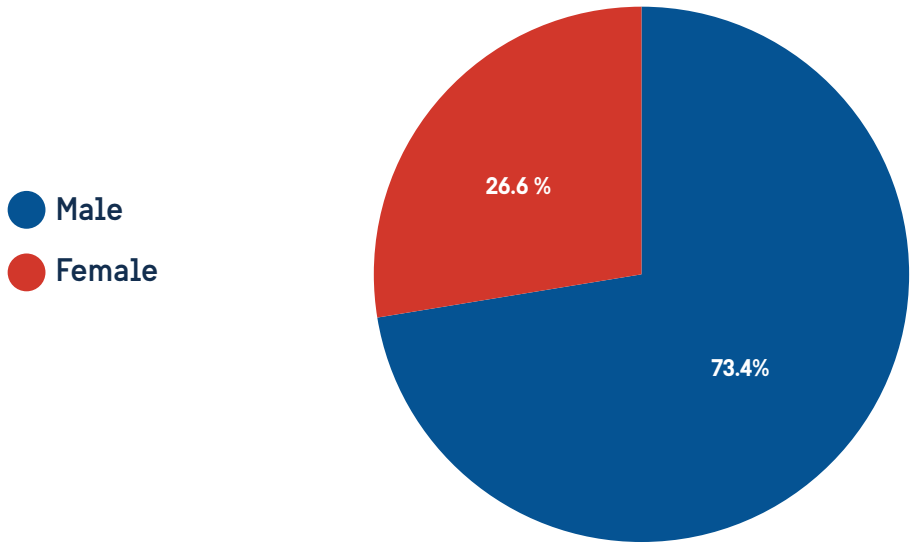
These dynamic factors, ranging from inflation and currency volatility to governance fragmentation and access constraints, inherently restrict the ability to provide a definitive or long-term analysis of the economic contributions and resilience of Syrian entrepreneurs. Nonetheless, the study offers a valuable foundation for further research, policy recommendations, and ecosystem engagement. It provides a solid foundation for assessing the current status of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, identifying what remains relevant, and envisioning potential recommendations in a post-conflict context.

The majority of respondents fell within the 25 to 44 age range. Specifically, 66 participants were aged 25-34, and 47 were aged 35-44. An additional 17 respondents were under 25. This age profile suggests that entrepreneurship in Syria is being mobilized by a young generation affected by war and economic instability, and motivated to bring global technologies to solve problems at home.

AGE DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

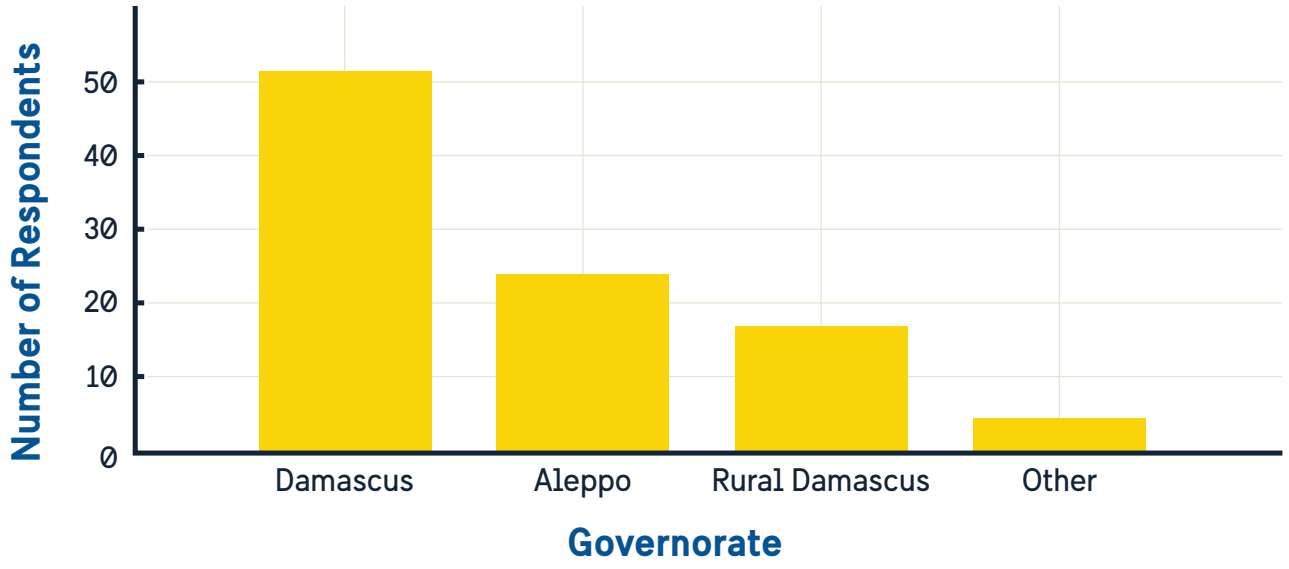


GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS



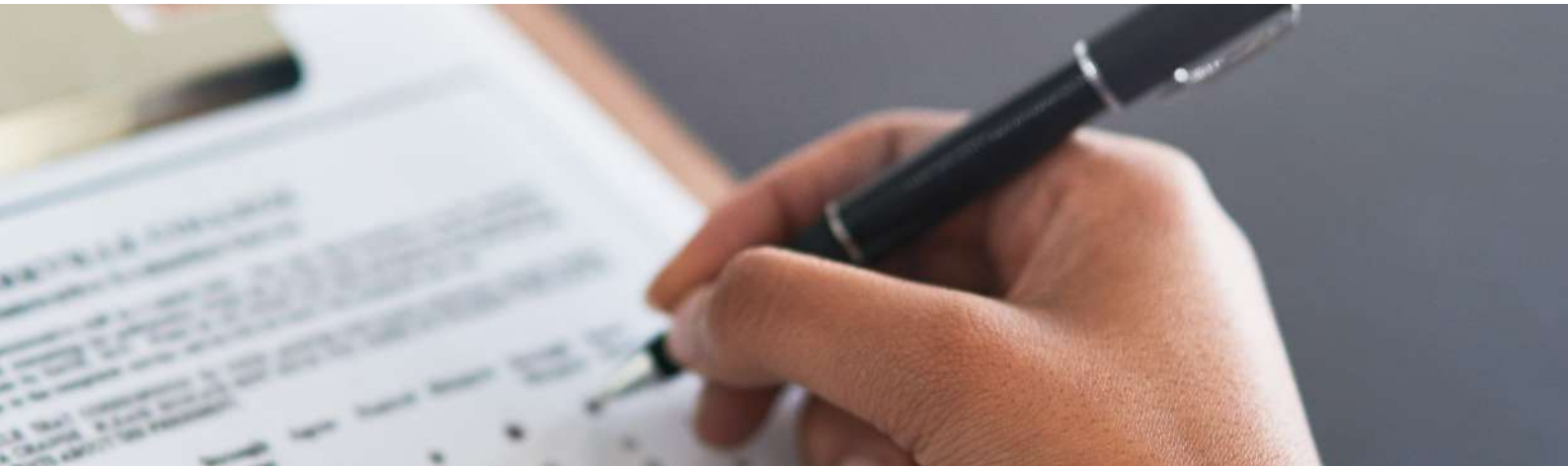
In terms of geographical distribution, the survey reached respondents across all major Syrian governorates. The largest share of respondents was in Damascus (52), followed by Aleppo (24), and Rural Damascus (19). Other governorates represented included Homs, Hama, Latakia, and Idlib, Daraa, Raqqa, and As-Suwayda,

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS



In addition to quantitative survey data, qualitative Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with seasoned Syrian ecosystem experts and prominent entrepreneurs. Their insights provided contextual depth to the survey responses, particularly regarding challenges related to infrastructure, funding, mentorship, and the need for a national innovation strategy.

This report recognizes certain limitations and does not claim to be exhaustive or statistically representative. The findings are influenced by rapidly shifting socio-economic conditions and the volatile realities on the ground. These dynamic factors inherently limit the ability to provide a definitive analysis of the broader economic impact of Syrian businesses, both in host countries and within conflict-affected areas. However, the evidence presented offers important insights into how entrepreneurship can act as a strategic entry point for long-term economic revitalization and inclusive recovery in Syria.



About
BERYTECH

Founded in 2002 as initiative by Université Saint-Joseph (USJ), Berytech is an internationally certified entrepreneurship support organization, dedicated to facilitating the inception and growth of innovative businesses in the knowledge, green, blue, and social economies. Berytech enables innovative entrepreneurs to create and develop their own startups and SMEs and be part of an interconnected community of entrepreneurs, creators, experts, innovators, and changemakers.

Leveraging its innovation track record in mapping Lebanese and regional innovation, entrepreneurship, and MSME ecosystems, Berytech has successfully designed and implemented high-impact entrepreneurship programs that have driven economic growth across key sectors.

Berytech is certified as an EU Business & Innovation Center and a member of the European Business and Innovation Centre Network (EBN), the UN Global Compact Network, ANIMA, and Fab Foundation. With its regional, impact-driven operations and its multidisciplinary team, Berytech offers people-centric, tailored support and fosters an empowering entrepreneurial environment for sustainable business success.

About
STARTUP SYRIA

Startup Syria is a founder focused organization established in Syria in 2013 to support founders start and scale their startups.

Startup Syria actively engages with both the local Syrian entrepreneurship community and the Syrian diaspora to foster the exchange of knowledge, resources, and expertise. The organization advocates with governments, donors and investors for better access, more funding and more favorable laws to enable startups to lead the way in the rebuilding of a new Syria.

Startup Syria provides Syrian founders with the tools and networks they need to grow and scale their ventures, creating spaces for dialogue, connecting entrepreneurs with mentors and experts, and engaging with emerging founders seeking to launch their entrepreneurial journeys.

Executive SUMMARY

This report provides a comprehensive, integrated data-driven analysis of Syria's Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and broader entrepreneurship ecosystem. The study draws on a nationwide survey of 143 respondents and over 40 key informant interviews and focus groups conducted by Berytech with a diverse group of ecosystem stakeholders.

The findings reflect a complex entrepreneurial landscape shaped by over a decade of conflict, economic collapse, and institutional decay. Despite these challenges, entrepreneurship remains a vital pathway for resilience, livelihood generation, and long-term recovery.

The Syrian entrepreneurship ecosystem is heavily fragmented and, in many areas, operating at minimal capacity.. Geographically, entrepreneurial activity is largely centered in urban hubs, with Damascus accounting for 36% of surveyed ventures. Peripheral and conflict-affected regions such as Qamishli, Daraa, and Raqqa show significantly lower startup activity due to insecurity, service gaps, and limited access to markets.

Most enterprises remain in the early or idea stage, with limited scalability opportunities amidst low-level mentorship and funding support. Despite systemic constraints, entrepreneurs remain highly motivated and see entrepreneurship as a viable path to future self-reliance.

Access to finance remains the top hurdle blocking business growth for entrepreneurs, followed by legal restrictions, political instability, poor infrastructure, and lack of business support. Only 14.3% reported receiving any form of institutional support, and government-backed assistance was almost non-existent (1%). Many entrepreneurs resort to informal mechanisms such as remittances, crypto payments, or registering businesses abroad to stand a chance of going past the pre-seed stage.

Among sectors studied for this research, ICT and digital services lead in maturity and volume, followed by agrifood, light manufacturing, and renewable energy, which remain largely underdeveloped. The agriculture and agritech sectors, in particular, were highlighted for their potential to create jobs, strengthen food security, and build climate resilience. Emerging opportunities also lie in FinTech, gaming, EdTech, and HealthTech, although each faces unique regulatory and infrastructure hurdles.

Ecosystem stakeholders agree that current support structures are insufficient, with many programs offering only short, generic training. There is an urgent need for long-term mentorship, practical incubation, and mobile-first or digital-friendly support tools. Both entrepreneurs and experts called for better coordination between actors, including universities, NGOs, and private sector players.
Experts emphasized the strategic importance of the Syrian diaspora in providing mentorship, skills transfer, and access to international markets. However, diaspora engagement remains fragmented. Structured programs that match diaspora professionals with local entrepreneurs by sector and specialization are urgently needed.

Executive SUMMARY

Survey and interview data converge on a set of actionable recommendations:

- Expand access to capital through equity-free seed funding, revenue-based finance, and donor-matched grants.
- Strengthen incubators, accelerators, and university linkages with the private sector.
- Develop sector-specific programs targeting agritech, renewable energy, and digital innovation.
- Prioritize entrepreneurship in public education and vocational training systems.
- Create structured platforms to engage the diaspora in mentorship and investment.

While Syria's entrepreneurship ecosystem is still in its formative stages, it holds significant potential for catalyzing economic recovery and resilience. Targeted donor interventions, especially those that are decentralized, inclusive, and aligned with sector-specific and geographic needs, can play a transformative role.

These findings underscore that Syria's entrepreneurial future depends not only on capital, but on trust-building, institutional reform, and the strategic cultivation of local and global networks to transform the current reality and take advantage of the country's full potential.

INTRODUCTION

Syria's entrepreneurship ecosystem is navigating a deeply challenging environment shaped by over a decade of conflict, economic collapse, and infrastructure devastation. Despite these hardships, a spirit of resilience and innovation persists among local entrepreneurs striving to launch and sustain businesses in highly constrainedconditions.

The crisis, which began in 2011, has triggered widespread displacement, disrupted markets, and eroded investor confidence in the country's financial and economic structures. Yet, small business owners, NGOs, and international development agencies have emerged in this transitional landscape to play a key role in supporting entrepreneurial activity as a pathway for recovery and economic revitalization. These actors are helping address siginificant gaps in services and resources typically provided by the public and private sectors.

Syria has a large young and relatively educated population, with universities in major cities like Damascus and Aleppo still offering degrees in fields such as business, engineering, and IT. However ongoing instability and limited opportunities have contributed to a significant brain drain, weakening the domestic talent pool and reducing the availability of experienced professionals.
Physical and digital infrastructure remains a critical constraint. Years of conflict have damaged roads, power grids, internet connectivity, and basic utilities in many areas. Nevertheless, grassroots initiatives and NGOs are actively working to overcome mitigate these challengesby supporting entrepreneurship through training, mentorship, and micro-grants. In relatively stable zones, new co-working spaces and incubators are emerging, creating essential hubs for collaboration, innovation, and support.

Access to finance remains severely limited. Despite some progress made recently, traditional sources of investment such as banks and venture capital, largely scared off during years of violence, remain inactive due to perceived risks and instability. Entrepreneurs often rely on microfinance institutions, diaspora support, international NGO funding, and community-based or crowdfunding efforts. There is a growing shift toward resilience-focused funding from international donors aiming to empower local economic actors as part of broader reconstruction strategies.

In alignment with swedish priorities and the overarching objectives of the ecosystem mapping project, this report focuses on startups and MSMEs driving digitalization and green entrepreneurship. These cross-cutting themes encompass key sectors such as agrifood systems, renewable energy, sustainable water management, and environmentally conscious business practices. Targeting these areas presents strong potential for fostering inclusive and resilient economic growth, particularly in post-conflict Syria, where infrastructure gaps and limited service delivery present both challenges and opportunities for innovation-led development.

In summary, Syria's entrepreneurship ecosystem is fragile but alive, sustained by community resilience, youthful energy, and support from non-traditional actors. While significant barriers remain, especially in terms of infrastructure and funding, the ecosystem offers glimpses of potential for rebuilding livelihoods and promoting long-term stability through innovation and enterprise.

03 SYRIA'S ECONOMIC COLLAPSE
and the Urgency of Entrepreneurial Renewal

Entrepreneurship in Syria holds immense potential as a catalyst for post-conflict recovery, offering solutions to economic, social, and developmental challenges. Despite years of war, sanctions, and economic collapse, Syrian entrepreneurs have shown an ability to excel, particularly in tech-based sectors like e-commerce, digital health, and fintech. Most small businesses today, nevertheless, remain in early stages, shaped by individual survival efforts or aid-funded initiatives, and operate in a fragile ecosystem with minimal infrastructure, limited access to capital, and outdated regulations.

More than a decade of conflict has fundamentally eroded Syria's economic landscape, leading to one of the most severe economic collapses in modern history. Since 2011, the country's GDP has contracted by over 60%, with the destruction of more than 70% of its infrastructure and the loss of an estimated 3 million livelihoods.

This collapse has triggered soaring rates of unemployment, rising from 14.9% in 2011 to nearly 58% by 2014. As of late 2024, over 90% of Syrians were living below the poverty line, with nearly 70% dependent on humanitarian assistance for basic survival. Yet, even humanitarian responses are faltering: only 12.5% of the UN's $1.25 billion UN Syria humanitarian appeal had been funded that year, signaling growing donor fatigue and diminishing lifeline assistance.

Within this deteriorating environment, MSMEs and grassroots entrepreneurial initiatives have emerged as critical rescue options. Despite systemic challenges ranging from collapsing infrastructure and currency devaluation to sanctions and regulatory paralysis, hundreds of startups remain active across Syria. These ventures, though often small and informal, reflect a combination of grit, necessity, and local innovation.

Syria's recovery faces major challenges, including:

- Damaged infrastructure
- A complex aid environment
- High youth unemployment

However, these conditions also present opportunities. The focus is on empowering local communities through targeted entrepreneurship support and sustainable, high-impact interventions that foster inclusive economic recovery.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
of similar economies

Lebanon

Lebanon's experience amid its deep economic crisis post-2020 offers valuable insights and inspiration for Syria's recovery. Despite Lebanon's devastating collapse, unprecedented brain drain, education decline, and a crumbling institutional and financial system, Lebanese youth have demonstrated remarkable resilience through survival entrepreneurship, pivoting toward digital agriculture, local manufacturing, e-commerce, and micro-enterprises. Key sectors such as wholesale and retail, manufacturing (including agrifood and creative industries), ICT and business services, and tourism emerged as promising areas for youth employment and entrepreneurship. These sectors leveraged Lebanon's remaining assets: a multilingual, educated workforce, digital adaptability, and strong diaspora ties. However, their growth remains contingent on critical structural reforms and supportive policies.

Syria, facing parallel challenges such as sanctions, devastated infrastructure, youth displacement, and institutional fragility can draw on Lebanon's adaptive trajectory to craft its own recovery roadmap. By prioritizing youth-led sectoral innovation, embracing digitization, and enabling entrepreneurship as a tool for resilience, Syria can begin to unlock economic opportunities even in adversity. The adaptive behaviors of Lebanese youth reflect patterns already emerging in Syria, underscoring the relevance of Lebanon's survival entrepreneurship model. Syria can also adopt Lebanon's use of ecosystem health-check frameworks, such as those developed by Arabnet, to systematically evaluate and strengthen core components like talent, finance, infrastructure, and policy. Furthermore, replicating the crisis-resilient, digital-first models of Lebanese institutions such as Berytech can help Syrian incubators operate under duress. Finally, Lebanon's continued engagement with its diaspora for mentorship and financing offers a replicable model for Syria to formalize its own global networks and channel external support into long-term ecosystem development.

To guide Syria's entrepreneurial recovery, key lessons from Lebanon include adopting ecosystem check frameworks to assess core areas like talent, finance, and infrastructure; supporting youth-led micro-innovation in sectors like agriculture and e-commerce; building adaptive, digital-first incubators modeled after Lebanese examples; and strategically engaging the diaspora.as mentors, investors, and connectors to global networks.

Jordan

Jordan offers a compelling case study for entrepreneurship under structural pressure, with insights that can inform Syria's pathway to recovery. Despite facing chronic resource scarcity, high youth unemployment (over 40%), regional instability, and a prolonged refugee crisis, Jordan has steadily invested in building a resilient entrepreneurial ecosystem. Anchored by strong public-private partnerships, donor-backed infrastructure, and regional integration, Jordan has emerged as a hub for innovation in the Levant.

Key sectors, such as information and communication technology (ICT), healthtech, clean energy, logistics, and financial services have benefited from targeted initiatives and a regulatory environment that, while complex, is increasingly supportive of startups. Institutions like the King Hussein Business Park, Oasis500, and the Innovative Startups and SMEs Fund (ISSF) have helped nurture Jordanian founders, while international actors such as the World Bank, GIZ, and USAID have co-invested in capacity-building and funding pipelines. Jordan's Investment Window, regulatory sandboxes, and digital economy frameworks provide useful benchmarks for Syria as it begins to consider startup legislation and governance.

For Syria, Jordan's experience underscores the value of building institutional continuity and trust, even in fragile economic settings. Syria can draw lessons from Jordan's ability to localize global development frameworks, translating donor priorities into scalable national programs. Equally relevant is Jordan's investment in tech-focused education, digital skilling, and workforce readiness, particularly through platforms like Luminus and the Al Hussein Technical University, which align education outputs with market needs. Syrian policymakers and ecosystem builders could adapt similar approaches by fostering vocational innovation, streamlining business registration, and piloting public-private accelerators.

Furthermore, Jordan's strategic use of blended finance, diaspora capital, and sovereign wealth contributions to fund its startups illustrates how diverse funding mechanisms can catalyze local entrepreneurship. Syria may benefit from establishing hybrid investment tools mixing grants, equity, and revenue-based financing to reach early-stage founders operating in high-risk contexts. Ultimately, Jordan's ecosystem demonstrates that even without abundant natural resources or political stability, a clear vision, ecosystem coordination, and regulatory reform can unlock entrepreneurship as a force for economic resilience.

04 Research
KEY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Syrian entrepreneurs expressed a cautious assessment of the current startup and MSME landscape. According to survey results (Figure 1), 52.4% rated the environment as "acceptable," suggesting that while basic entrepreneurial activity is possible, the ecosystem lacks the support, coordination, and infrastructure needed for meaningful growth. Another 24.8% described the environment as "poor," while only 14.3% considered it "good." Only 2.9% rated it "excellent," underscoring limited confidence in the ecosystem's performance.

Syrian founders surveyed by Berytech have said that support,where it exists, is largely insufficient and does not meet their current needs. Respondents reported either receiving no institutional support or relying on self-arranged mechanisms to create and sustain their ventures.

While the majority of entrepreneurs described the status quo of the ecosystem as 'acceptable,' many agree that constraints remain in place and hinder the conduct of business. Access to finance, incubation programs, and lack of adequate infrastructure remain the top concerns for founders, a view largely shared by support organizations. Founders also listed a raft of challenges which they ranked according to severity. Insecurity and political instability, legal restrictions, and poor infrastructure were among the most extremely challenging concerns.

Networking and collaboration opportunities were highlighted as two important factors for future success among support organizations Founders, for their part, aspire to create more jobs and launch new products as part of their next goal.

These perceptions reflect a broader fragmentation across the entrepreneurial landscape. Stakeholders often operate in silos, with little coordination or shared vision, leading to duplicated efforts and missed opportunities for synergy. Without a coherent national roadmap and stronger ecosystem alignment, the enabling environment for startups will remain constrained, limiting the sector's potential to contribute to Syria's recovery.

HOW DO YOU RATE THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND MSMEs IN SYRIA 105 out of 144 people answered this question

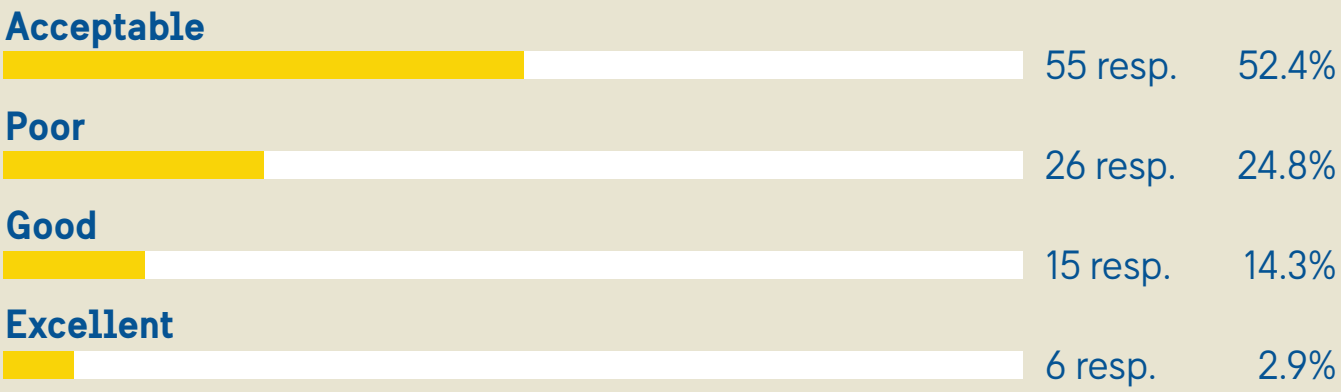


FIGURE 1: EVALUATION OF CURRENT SYRIAN ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

I. Major Cities Dominate Entrepreneurship

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

Over the past 14 years, Syria's entrepreneurial ecosystem has become increasingly fragmented, with the development of startups and MSMEs diverging significantly across cities. Each region has followed a distinct trajectory shaped by local conditions, access to resources, and levels of stability.

For example, areas such as Qamishli and Daraa currently exhibit minimal entrepreneurial activity, accounting for only 0.71% and 1% of recorded startup presence, respectively. In contrast, other regions demonstrate higher concentrations of entrepreneurial engagement, stronger support infrastructure, and greater operational accessibility. Drawing on data compiled in the Rising from the Rubble report by Startup Syria, the following urban centers have been identified as priority clusters for ecosystem analysis and development planning.

DAMASCUS	The capital represents the largest and most diverse startup hub in the country, with a dense concentration of ICT, services, and urban-focused MSMEs. Its urban infrastructure and skilled labor base make it a strategic anchor for economic revitalization.
ALEPPO	Historically a commercial and industrial center, Aleppo shows emerging signs of entrepreneurial activity, particularly in the trade and agrifood sectors. Targeted support in rural Aleppo can bolster MSMEs linked to agriculture and value-added processing.
HOMS	As an industrial corridor, Homs holds significant potential for renewable energy and light manufacturing MSMEs. Neighboring Hama can also be integrated into this focus area due to its similar sectoral profile and recovery needs.
IDLIB	Despite security volatility, Idlib has become an emerging hub for small-scale businesses, especially in the informal and home-based sectors. Support for market linkages and green business models can amplify its role in economic stabilization.
LATAKIA	This coastal region benefits from relative stability and emerging activity in food processing, tourism, and green entrepreneurship. Its port access also positions it for future regional trade integration.

The chart below reveals significant regional variation in perceptions of the entrepreneurial environment in Syria. Homs shows the highest dissatisfaction, with 86% rating conditions as “fair” and 14% as “very poor.” Aleppo and Damascus also reflect limited optimism, while Latakia and Idlib present more favorable views, with higher ratings for “good” and “excellent.” These differences highlight the uneven distribution of ecosystem support and opportunity across regions.

HOW DO YOU EVALUATE THE CURRENT SITUATION OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SMEs IN SYRIA

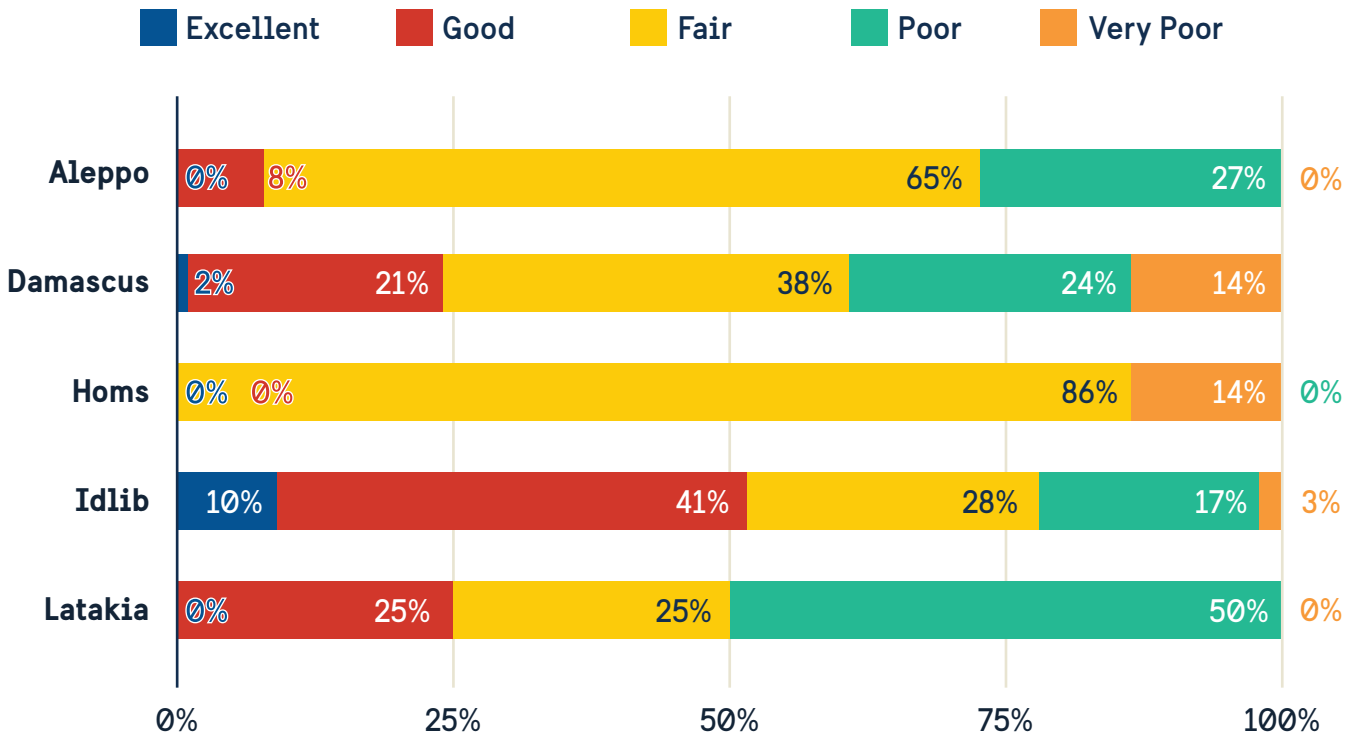


FIGURE 2: EVALUATION OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP ACROSS GOVERNORATES

II. Insecurity Is Top Barrier FACING SYRIAN ENTREPRENEURS

Despite a growing entrepreneurial spirit and the emergence of MSMEs across Syria, business owners continue to operate in a highly constrained environment. The long-term effects of conflict, compounded by economic collapse and institutional fragility, have created a series of interlocking barriers that hinder startup growth, sustainability, and scalability. These barriers are not only structural, but also deeply systemic affecting every stage of the entrepreneurial journey, from ideation to expansion.

The table below outlines the core challenges identified through field research, stakeholder consultations, and survey data, followed by a detailed analysis of their implications for Syria's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

INSECURITY AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY	Ongoing conflict and governance fragmentation create unpredictable conditions, discourage investment, and disrupt day-to-day business operations.
LEGAL AND REGULATORY RESTRICTIONS	Complex, outdated, and unclear laws make business registration and compliance difficult, particularly for startups in emerging sectors.
POOR INFRASTRUCTURE	Limited access to electricity, internet, transport, and reliable water supply severely hampers productivity and service delivery.
ACCESS TO FINANCE	Entrepreneurs face major hurdles in securing funding due to the absence of venture capital, weak banking systems, and restrictive sanctions.
SHORTAGE OF QUALIFIED WORKERS	The education-to-employment gap, brain drain, and limited vocational training contribute to a scarcity of skilled technical and managerial talent.
DIFFICULTY ACCESSING MARKETS	Internal fragmentation and external trade restrictions limit startups' ability to expand, export, or engage in cross-border commerce.
LACK OF GUIDANCE AND BUSINESS SUPPORT	Entrepreneurs lack access to mentors, incubators, and business development services, particularly outside major urban centers.

TABLE 1: CHALLENGES FACING MSMES IN SYRIA

To contextualize these findings, survey participants were asked not only to identify which challenges they encountered but also to assess the **degree of severity** each posed to their business. Respondents were presented with three challenge difficulty ratings: "somewhat challenging," "moderately challenging," and "extremely challenging." This approach does not provide a statistically calibrated measure of impact, but it offers valuable, self-assessed insight into how entrepreneurs perceive and experience these obstacles in practice.

This layered evaluation adds depth to the analysis by distinguishing between widespread but manageable issues and more acute, growth-limiting constraints. Understanding how entrepreneurs themselves perceive these challenges allows policymakers and support organizations to prioritize interventions and design solutions that reflect the lived realities of Syria's business community. Addressing these interlinked challenges will require a coordinated response involving regulatory reform, infrastructure rehabilitation, expansion of financing tools, and the decentralization of business support services. Only through such integrated efforts can Syria's entrepreneurial ecosystem transition from survival mode toward sustainable recovery and inclusive economic development.

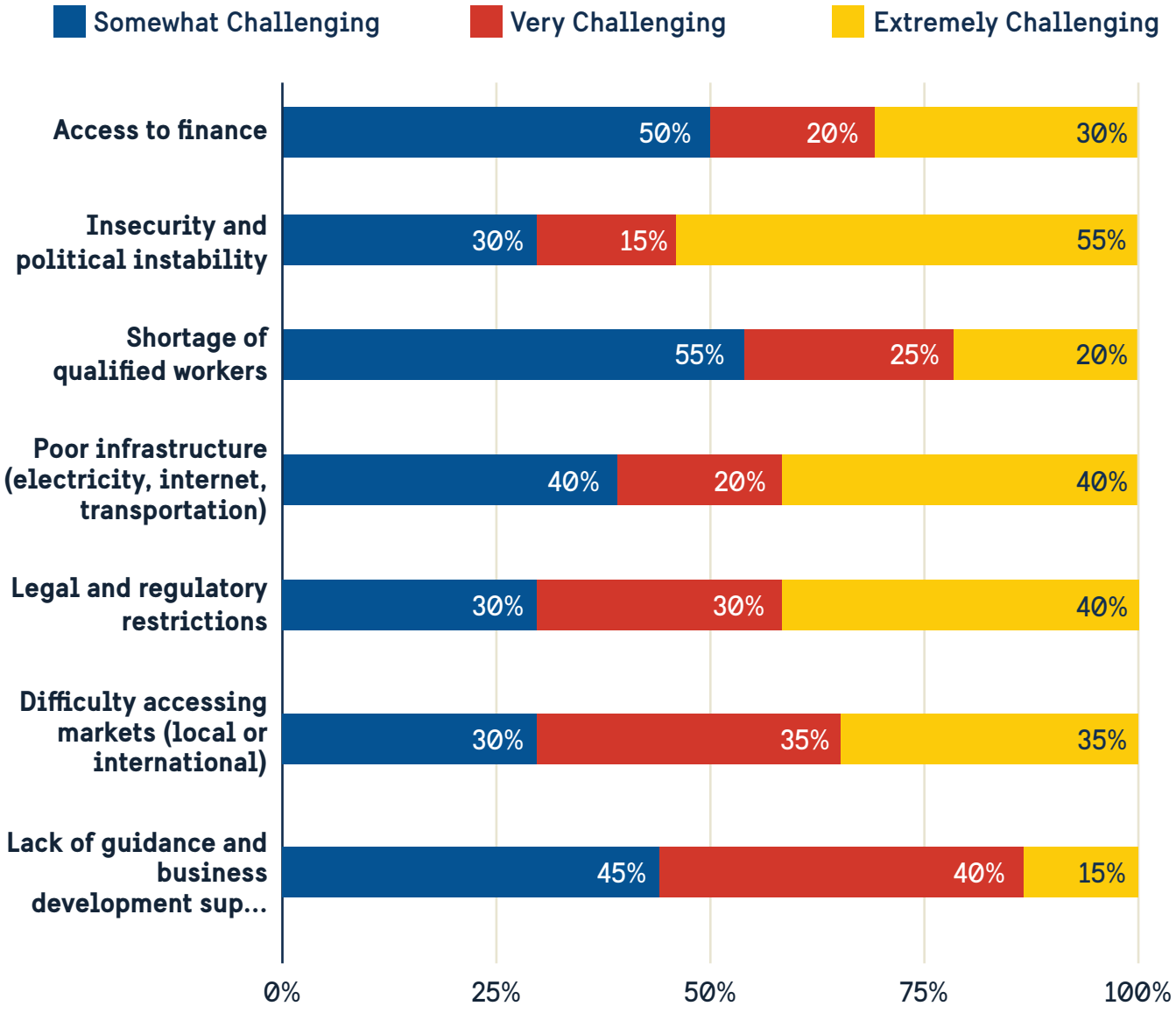


FIGURE 3: RANKING OF CHALLENGES FACED BY SYRIA MSMEs

III Entrepreneurial Support Systems REMAIN INSUFFICIENT

The entrepreneurial support landscape in Syria remains fragmented, informal, and largely insufficient to meet the needs of emerging startups and MSMEs. Most entrepreneurs operate without access to structured guidance, technical assistance, or institutional backing, relying instead on personal networks and improvised solutions. This absence of comprehensive support infrastructure represents a critical bottleneck to ecosystem growth.

Survey results reveal that only **14.3%** of respondents have received assistance from non-governmental organizations or development programs, and **12.4%** have engaged with a business incubator or accelerator. Support from diaspora networks (**6.7%**), universities (**4.8%**), and microfinance institutions (**3.8%**) remains even more limited. Alarmingly, only **1%** of entrepreneurs reported receiving any form of support from government entities.

These figures underscore the limited reach, visibility, and inclusivity of Syria's current support ecosystem. While NGOs and incubators have made some progress, the absence of coordinated, accessible, and scalable support services - particularly in rural or high-risk areas - continues to constrain entrepreneurial growth. Mentorship and peer-to-peer learning, widely recognized by founders as critical success factors, are notably underdeveloped. Expanding these support systems will be essential to advancing a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem in Syria.

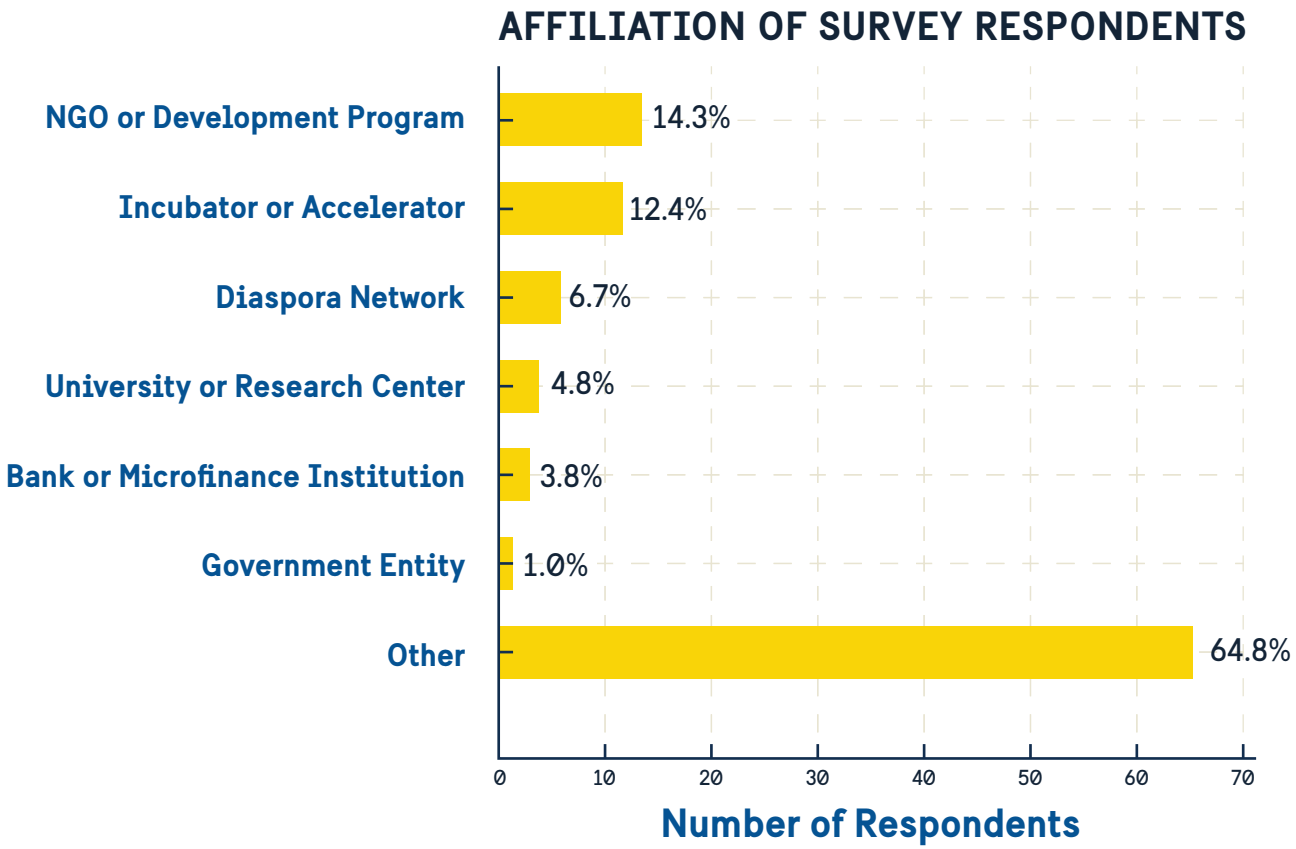


FIGURE 4: SUPPORT RECEIVED BY MSMEs

IV. Access to Finance REMAINS A PRIORITY

Among the many challenges facing Syrian entrepreneurs, the lack of access to finance stands out as the most urgent and widespread barrier. Whether in the form of seed capital, grants, or investment, financing consistently emerged across the survey as the top obstacle - and often the most "extremely challenging" issue reported by founders. This gap not only stifles startup growth but also weakens the broader ecosystem, creating a ripple effect that hinders innovation, scalability, and job creation.

The needs expressed by both entrepreneurs and ecosystem support organizations reveal overlapping structural deficits. Founders overwhelmingly cited the difficulty of securing financial resources, but they also pointed to a lack of incubation programs, poor infrastructure, and limited access to digital tools and markets. Support organizations echoed many of these concerns, emphasizing the need for investment, technical training, and inclusive programming that targets women, youth, and green businesses.

These findings reflect a fragmented support landscape in which both service providers and entrepreneurs are under-equipped to drive sustainable impact. Addressing the financial gap must go hand-in-hand with strengthening foundational services - such as mentorship, infrastructure, and digital access - so that financing, when available, can be deployed effectively. Without tackling these systemic weaknesses, even well-funded interventions may fail to achieve long-term results.

Top needs according to MSME owners:

- 77.1% cited difficulty accessing finance (grants, loans, or investment) as a critical but unmet need.
- 60% pointed to a lack of incubation and acceleration programs.
- 46.7% highlighted infrastructure weaknesses, such as electricity, water, and internet.
- 44.8% lacked digital tools and technologies necessary to operate or scale.
- 39% identified the absence of market linkages and supply access.
- 35.2% said they lacked guidance and mentorship.
- 31.4% pointed to regulatory and policy-related obstacles.

Top needs identified by ecosystem support organizations:

- 80.6% identified access to finance and investment as the most critical need.
- 58.1% pointed to business management skills and training.
- 41.9% emphasized the importance of programs targeting women and youth empowerment.
- 38.7% highlighted the need to improve access to local and international markets.
- 38.7% also emphasized support for green and sustainable businesses.

MOST NEEDED OR MISSING SUPPORT FOR ENTREPRENEURS

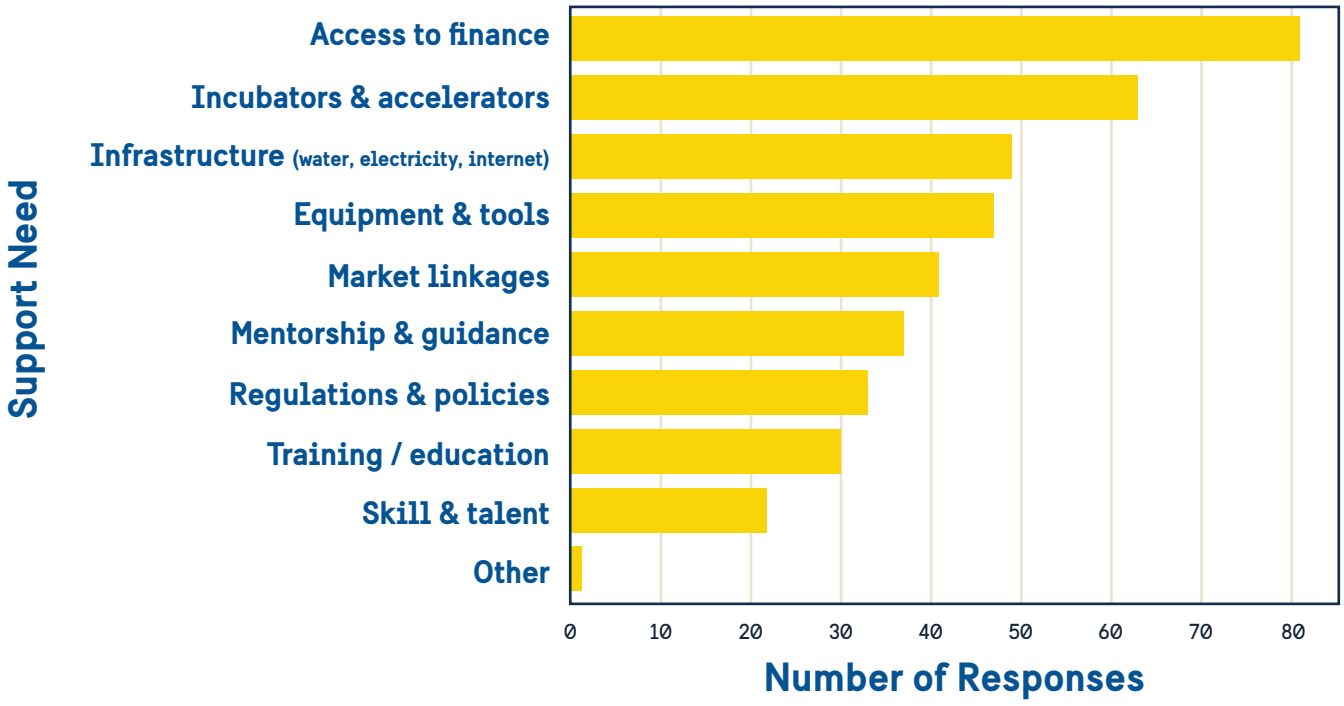


FIGURE 5: TYPE OF SUPPORT NEEDED ACCORDING TO SMEs

TOP NEEDS FACED BY MSMEs IN SYRIA

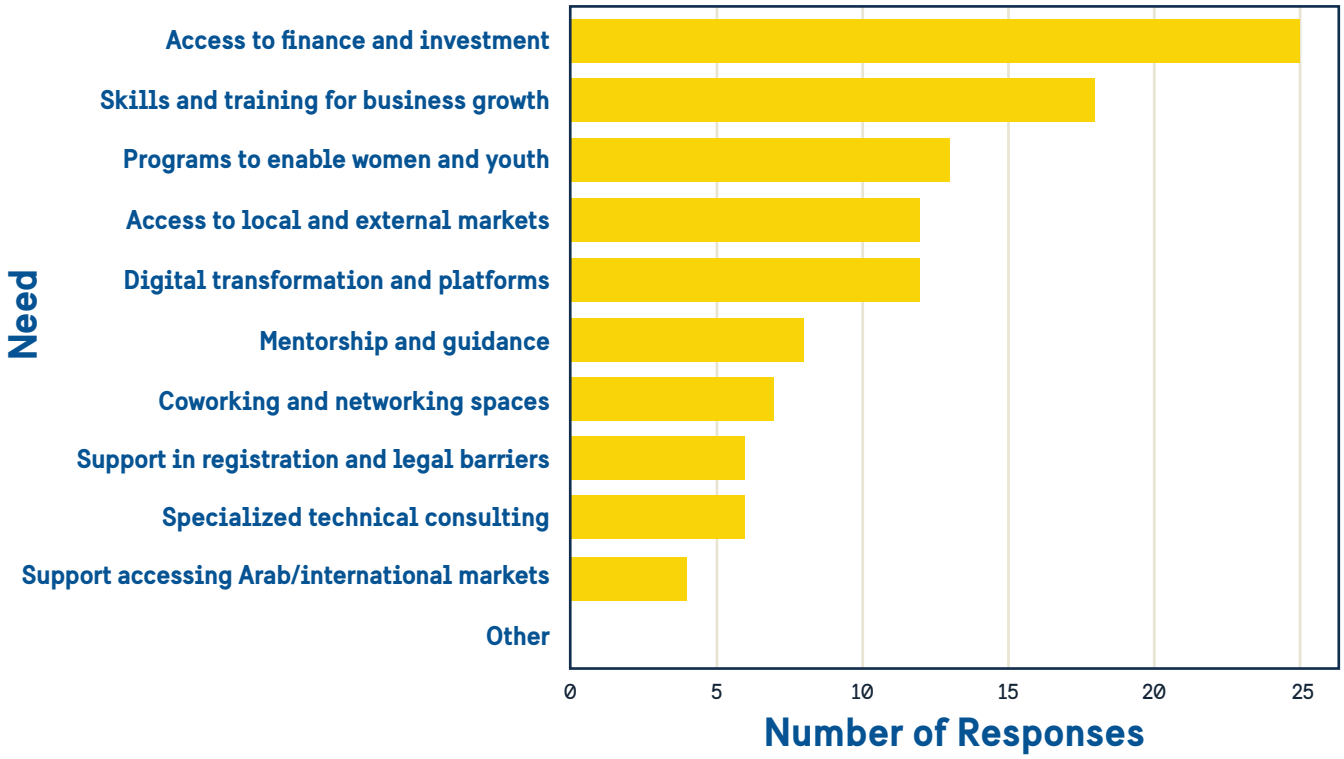


FIGURE 6: TYPE OF SUPPORT NEEDED ACCORDING TO ECOSYSTEM SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

05

SECTOR-SPECIFIC ANALYSIS

As Syria works to rebuild its economy, sector-focused entrepreneurship offers a strategic pathway for recovery, resilience, and inclusive growth. Investing in key economic sectors can help address urgent national needs, close critical market gaps, and stimulate job creation, especially for youth, women, and rural communities. Sectoral development also enables more targeted support from policymakers, donors, and ecosystem support organizations by aligning interventions with areas of high impact and feasibility.

This section explores how sector-specific entrepreneurship can contribute to Syria's economic revitalization, drawing on contextual challenges, innovation potential, and emerging opportunities across different industries.

I. Enterprise Stage by Sector
A SNAPSHOT OF MATURITY LEVELS

The "Sector / Stage" chart highlights the early-stage nature of Syria's entrepreneurial ecosystem, with most ventures concentrated in the idea or 0–2 year stages. This trend is especially pronounced in agrifood, manufacturing, and renewable energy sectors, where few businesses have progressed beyond the initial phase. ICT and digital services show slightly more maturity, with a presence across all stages including some established startups, indicating stronger ecosystem support and scalability potential.

Sectors such as tourism, renewable energy, and agrifood remain largely undeveloped beyond the conceptual or early phases, pointing to structural barriers such as funding gaps, infrastructure limitations, and regulatory hurdles. The limited number of ventures in the growth or established stages across most sectors suggests that while entrepreneurial activity is emerging, targeted interventions are needed to support business survival, scalability, and long-term impact.

SECTOR / STAGE

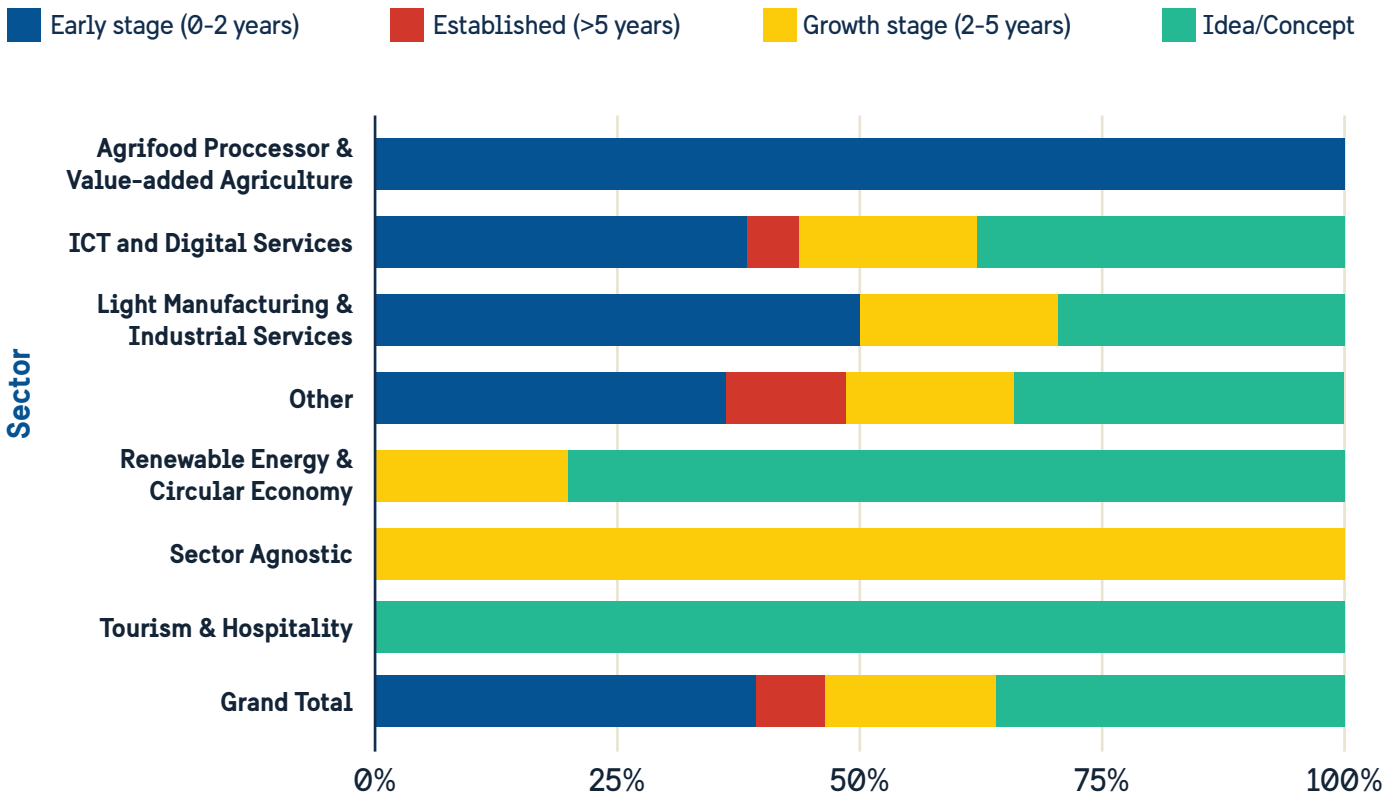


FIGURE 7: BUSINESS STAGE DISTRIBUTION ACROSS SECTORS

II. Sector-Specific Priorities for VENTURES IN SYRIA

Figure 8 shows the distribution of startups and MSMEs across key sectors in Syria. ICT and Digital Services represent a significant share at **41.96%**, reflecting the growing role of tech-driven solutions in a fragile context. However, the largest portion, **42.65%**, falls under the "Other" category, suggesting a high concentration of businesses operating in informal, mixed, or unclassified sectors. Industrial Services (6.99%), Agrifood and Rural MSMEs, and Renewable Energy have much smaller shares, highlighting the need for targeted support to stimulate growth in these underrepresented but strategically important sectors.

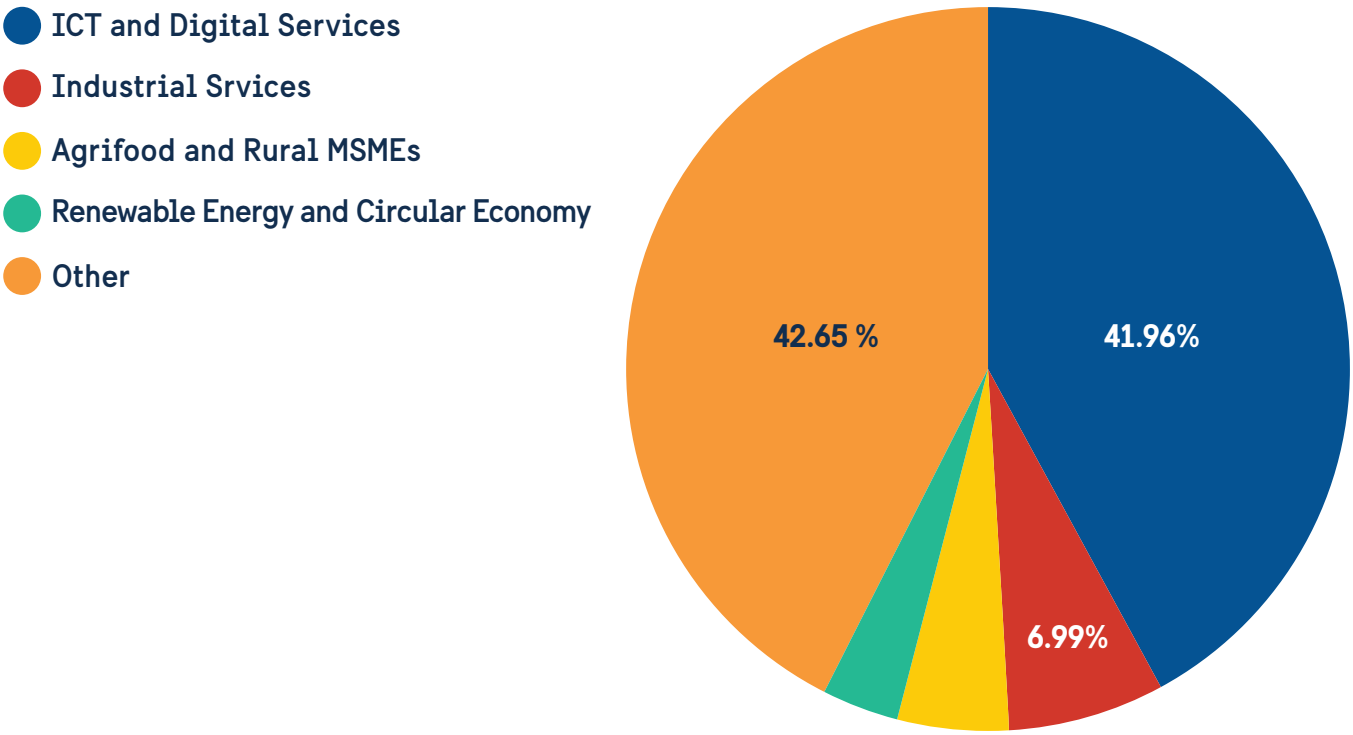


FIGURE 8: BUSINESS DISTRIBUTION PER IDENTIFIED SECTORS

SECTOR	SECTORIAL BACKGROUND	OPPORTUNITIES	LIMITATION AND CHALLENGES
AGRIFOOD AND RURAL MSMEs	The agrifood sector has historically been a pillar of Syria's economy, contributing approximately 23% to GDP prior to the conflict. Today, with agricultural output reduced by over 50% and rural poverty deepening, revitalizing this sector through MSME-led innovation is critical for both food security and employment. Its relevance to the Water-Energy-Food (WEF) nexus makes it central to sustainable rural development.	• Agro-processing and value-added food production • Sustainable farming and climate-resilient agriculture • Community-based food distribution systems	• Extensive infrastructure damage • Severe water scarcity • Limited access to modern farming tools and technologies
ICT, DIGITAL TOOLS, AND MANUFACTURING	The ICT and digital innovation sector have shown resilience and growth despite conflict, with over 200 active startups. Digital entrepreneurship enables youth participation, scalable solutions, and access to underserved communities, particularly in education, health, and commerce.	• E-commerce and mobile payment systems • Online education and learning platforms • Telemedicine and digital health applications	• Limited digital literacy among the population • Unreliable internet and power infrastructure
RENEWABLE ENERGY AND CIRCULAR ECONOMY MSMEs	Energy access is among Syria's most urgent challenges, with national electricity coverage declining from 99% in 2010 to just 32% today. Renewable energy and circular economy solutions are essential for powering MSMEs, supporting industrial recovery, and ensuring sustainable resource use particularly in rural and industrial zones.	• Solar installations for small businesses and community hubs • Waste-to-energy initiatives and circular economy models • Local water conservation and purification projects	• High initial investment requirements • Shortage of technical expertise and skilled labor

III Sector-Specific Barriers to ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN SYRIA

As Syria's entrepreneurial landscape begins to re-emerge across diverse sectors, it becomes critical to understand not only the systemic challenges affecting entrepreneurs as a whole but also how these challenges vary across sectors. This allows for more tailored, context-sensitive interventions that respond to the realities on the ground in agrifood, ICT, manufacturing, renewable energy, and other segments of the economy.

The chart below provides a comparative overview of the most pressing challenges faced by entrepreneurs, as reported across five major sectors. These include: access to finance, political instability, shortage of skilled labor, weak infrastructure, regulatory barriers, market access issues, and lack of business support.

Key insights include:

- Renewable energy and circular economy ventures face the most severe combination of barriers, with nearly all indicators scoring above 4 out of 5 in difficulty. This reflects both the technical complexity of the sector and its dependence on stable infrastructure and regulatory clarity.
- Agrifood and value-added agriculture is heavily impacted by infrastructure constraints, market access challenges, and skills shortages, all of which undermine the potential for rural-led economic recovery.
- ICT and digital services show slightly lower challenge scores across the board, though legal restrictions and workforce gaps remain prominent. This may reflect relatively better adaptability and informal market penetration in the tech sector.
- Light Manufacturing and Industrial Services are moderately affected across all categories, with finance, infrastructure, and business support emerging as key pain points.
- The "Other" category, likely representing informal and mixed sector ventures, shows a more balanced distribution of challenges, with a spike in skilled labor shortages and market access difficulties.

These findings emphasize the need for sector-specific support strategies that go beyond blanket interventions. Addressing the entrepreneurial needs of a tech founder in Damascus will require a different approach than supporting a rural agribusiness in Homs. Programs targeting financial access, legal reform, infrastructure development, and capacity-building must be tailored to the distinct realities of each economic sector if Syria's entrepreneurship ecosystem is to become a meaningful engine of recovery.

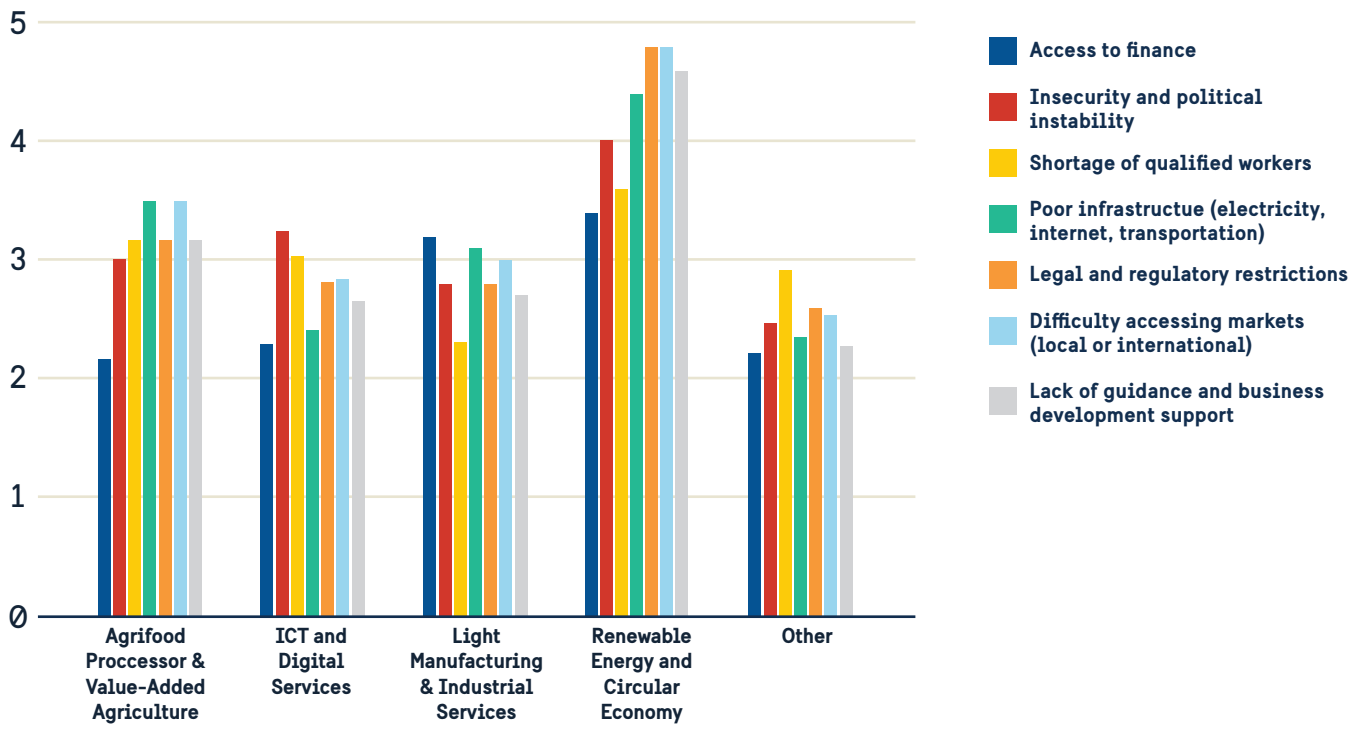
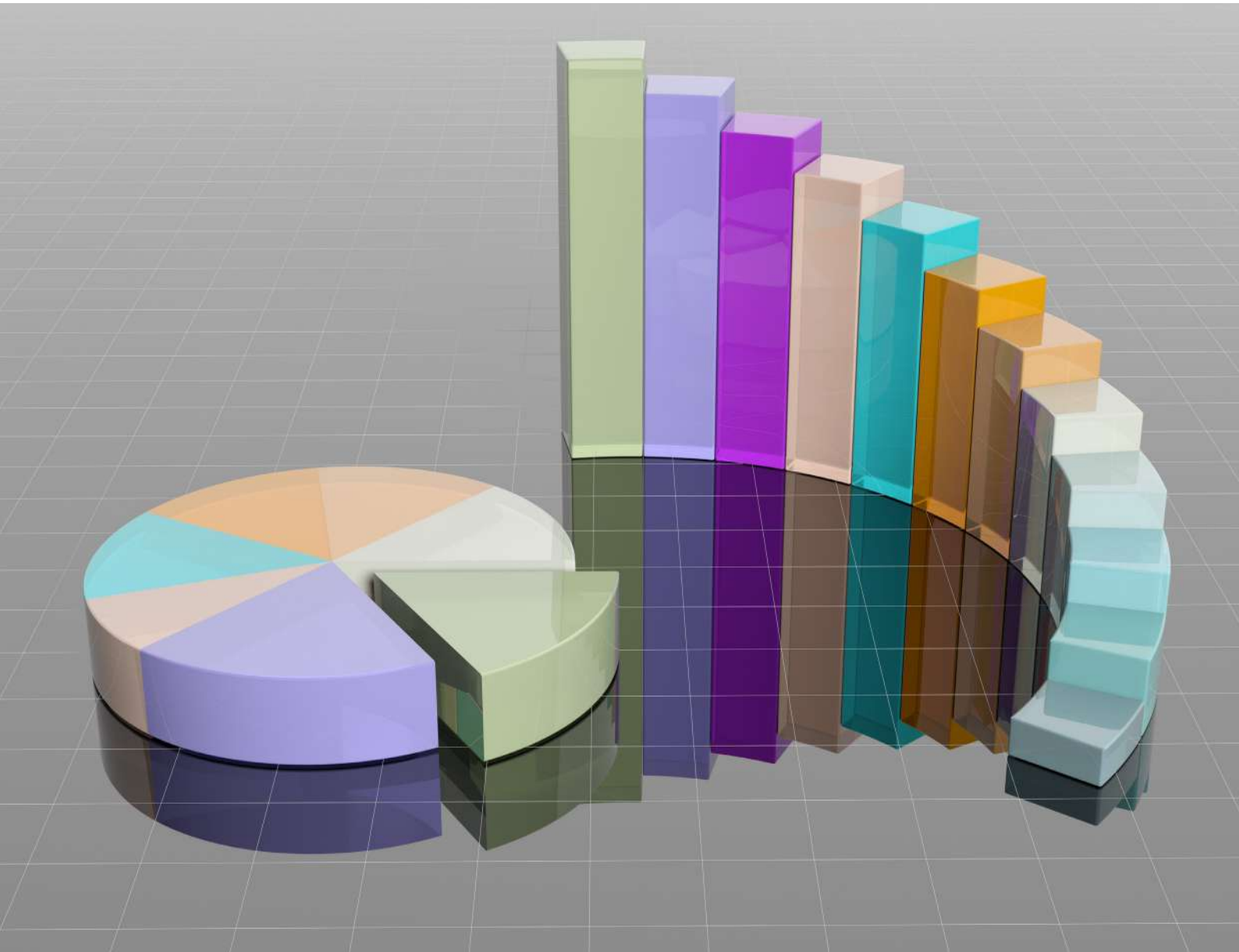


FIGURE 9: CHALLENGES FACED BY MSMEs ACCORDING TO SECTOR



Survey responses (Figure 10) highlight a clear set of barriers limiting the growth of digital services and ICT-based entrepreneurship in Syria. The most frequently cited challenge is access to funding, with over 35 respondents identifying it as a critical constraint. This suggests that despite high demand for digital solutions, early-stage ventures face severe capital shortages that prevent them from scaling or even starting.

Poor internet connectivity and a lack of guidance from or access to innovation incubators s are also prominent issues, each cited by more than 20 respondents. These point to infrastructure and ecosystem weaknesses, where unreliable digital access and absence of structured support hinder entrepreneurs' ability to experiment, network, and grow.

Low digital literacy among users further complicates adoption of digital services, indicating that beyond supply-side constraints, there is also a significant demand-side barrier. This hampers market uptake for innovations in sectors like e-learning, e-health, and fintech.

Challenges such as weak intellectual property (IP) protection, limited access to developers and tech talent, and other context-specific issues were mentioned less frequently, but still represent meaningful friction points for ICT startups. These reflect systemic gaps in the legal, human capital, and regulatory environment needed to foster a thriving digital economy.

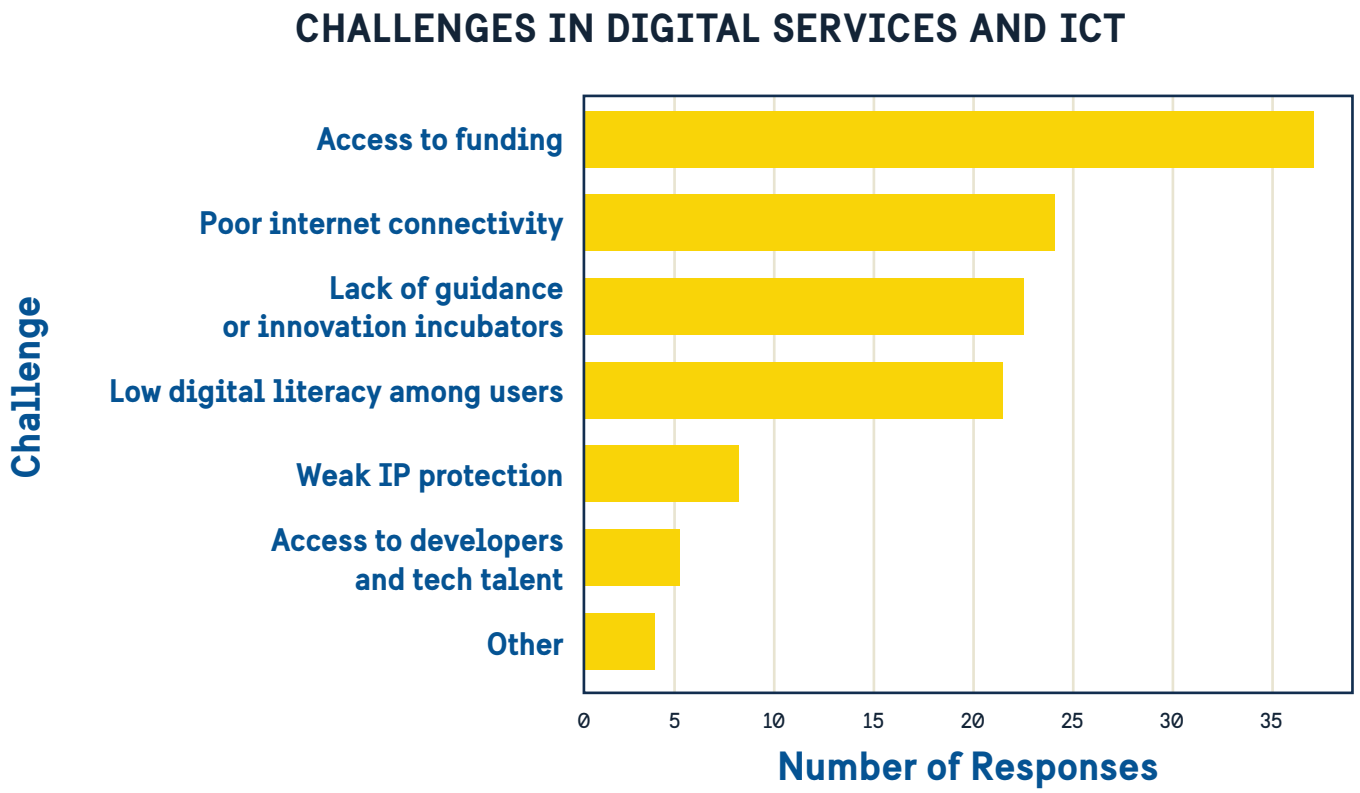


FIGURE 10: CHALLENGES FACED BY MSMES IN THE ICT SECTOR

Technological transformation in Syria's new entrepreneurial landscape

While business experts and founders agree that technology is key to any chances of Syria rejoining the global business landscape, existing barriers stifle progress. In addition to 79.2% who believe that difficulty accessing finance is the top obstacle to growth in the tech and digital services sphere, other fundamental challenges persist. Connectivity remains alarmingly weak according to half of the respondents, while 48% think the absence of guidance or innovation incubators is holding back any technological advances.

Critically, widespread digital literacy gaps among users, identified by 45.8% of participants, show that education and mentoring will have a huge role to play in building the next generation of founders in Syria. Lack of tech-savvy culture not only restricts market reach but also reduces demand for digital services in general. This could ultimately limit the revenue stream and discourage investors from committing resources.

According to Fadi Mujahid, CEO and Co-founder at Green Mawared and agritech expert, "Combining entrepreneurship with technology [should be] a natural step" in a sector like agriculture. It is the job of official entities like farmer support offices, known in Syria as Extension Services, to encourage farmers, who have always been hesitant, to adopt new technologies in farming. It is a step that he said required a mindset shift.

Among youth, there has been more appetite to learn and acquire new skills. According to Firas Enayeh, CEO at MO Advertising, "Syrians have good access to the technical side, not only coding, but things like design, UI, and UX. They have been working on themselves for the past 10 years aggressively using e-learning. But what they lack is integrating this knowledge into the real workforce market."

Laith Rikabi, Co-founder at SEED and Deputy CEO at Fransabank, suggested "transferring knowledge from diaspora professionals working in technology, healthcare, education and agriculture through virtual sessions or curated learning content," as a way to upskill founders on a variety of skills.

Tawfiq Al-Nehlawi, Data Management Assistant, Development Coordination Officer at the United Nations, agreed that tech-based learning was critical. "If I were to design one high-impact entrepreneurship support programme in Syria, it would be a 12-month 'CraftTech Bridge Accelerator' that connects young digital freelancers and tech graduates with traditional craft artisans, especially women, to co-create marketable products combining heritage skills and digital innovation. The programme would help these joint teams access local and online markets through e-commerce, digital branding, and impact investment matchmaking.

Syria's agrifood, water, and energy landscape

Based on the Emergency and Recovery Plan of Action 2025–2027 developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization, Syria's agrifood sector faces deep challenges after years of conflict. These include widespread damage to agricultural infrastructure, limited access to land due to insecurity and landmines, and disrupted governance and support systems. Mass displacement and data gaps further hinder effective planning, while climate change, natural disasters, and weak institutional capacities exacerbate food insecurity. Women and youth remain marginalized in recovery efforts, and a lack of reliable, localized data continues to limit strategic interventions.

The key priorities for agrifood recovery and resilience in Syria focus on restoring agricultural productivity, enabling inclusive livelihoods, rebuilding institutions, and strengthening risk management systems. Immediate actions include emergency support for crop and livestock production and the rehabilitation of irrigation and agricultural infrastructure, especially in areas with high return potential. To ensure long-term sustainability, efforts must promote climate-smart agriculture, natural resource management, and urban farming, while creating income-generating opportunities for women, youth, and local MSMEs. Institutional rebuilding is also critical, with emphasis on reestablishing extension services, regulating inputs, and developing conflict-sensitive governance and land tenure policies. Finally, closing data gaps and building early warning systems are essential to support anticipatory action, disaster risk reduction, and coordinated planning across regions and stakeholders.

In the context of Sweden's ongoing efforts to support sustainable development and economic resilience in fragile settings, the agriculture and agri-food processing sectors in Syria emerge as critical pillars for inclusive recovery. The latest data from FAO and other international actors underscore the scale of the challenge: prolonged drought and infrastructure degradation have pushed food insecurity to alarming levels, with over 14 million people in need and widespread crop failures, particularly wheat, a staple crop. However, these challenges are also giving rise to localized innovation. FAO's Emergency and Recovery Plan (2025–2027) targets nearly 10 million rural Syrians with interventions focused on rehabilitating irrigation canals, reintroducing climate-resilient seeds, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Within this framework, the role of women-led and home-based agri-food processing has grown significantly, not only as a survival mechanism but as a driver of entrepreneurship. Supported by voucher schemes and training programs, rural women are producing marketable food products from their homes, many of which are now transitioning into formal MSMEs and community cooperatives.

For Sweden and other development actors interested in strengthening Syria's entrepreneurial ecosystem, these developments highlight key areas for catalytic support. MSMEs in the agrifood sector, particularly those led by women and youth, have demonstrated potential to generate income, preserve food security, and foster social cohesion, even under crisis conditions. Supporting value-added production, cooperative development, and climate-smart agricultural techniques aligns with Sida's commitment to localized, inclusive, and sustainable development. Moreover, linking these small rural enterprises to renewable energy solutions (e.g., solar-powered irrigation and processing) creates cross-sector synergies that reinforce both environmental and economic resilience. Integrating these lessons into donor-supported programming provides a timely opportunity to nurture scalable models of recovery that can serve as entry points for broader transformation of Syria's food systems and rural economies

WEF water and energy for food nexus

In Syria's post-conflict recovery landscape, the Water-Energy-Food (WEF) nexus has emerged as a strategic priority, interlinking agriculture, energy access, and water management. Significant steps have been taken at the institutional and policy levels to address the interdependencies of these sectors. Notably, the Ministry of Energy and Water Resources has launched large-scale solar-powered water pumping stations in regions such as Idlib and Aleppo.

A key example is the 1.5 MW solar installation at al-Arshani, southwest of Aleppo, now supplying clean water to over 57,000 people. This aligns with Syria's broader ambition under the Renewable Energy Law No.23 (2021), which aims to generate 2.5 GW of solar and 1.5 GW of wind energy by 2030, supported by dedicated funding and investment incentives. Regional institutions such as ESCWA have complemented this effort by building a Water-Energy-Food Nexus Community of Practice, promoting integrated policy and capacity development.

Implementation on the ground involves a wide spectrum of actors. The Ministry of Energy continues to lead solar pump deployment and grid restoration, while agencies like FAO have distributed off-grid solar units powering egg incubators, directly benefiting more than 700 rural households in poultry production. International NGOs, including CARE, Mercy Corps, and the IRC, have delivered impactful interventions, such as rehabilitating irrigation canals, promoting wastewater reuse, and providing direct grants to climate-vulnerable farmers. At a larger scale, development agencies like GIZ and ESCWA are supporting institutional training on nexus governance, and private sector players are exploring public-private partnerships, including large-scale gas-solar hybrid energy projects and local solar panel assembly proposals.

Despite these efforts, the sector faces serious challenges. Years of conflict have resulted in the destruction of two-thirds of Syria's water infrastructure and up to 66% of electricity generation capacity. Grid access in rural areas has declined drastically, with many regions experiencing just 0–14 hours of electricity per day. Water scarcity is further compounded by climate change and river flow reductions, notably a 50% drop in the Euphrates River and groundwater depletion estimated at 2.2 billion m^3 since 2011. While solar-powered irrigation is expanding rapidly, particularly in northeastern Syria, this shift has led to unregulated over-extraction, with the number of active wells tripling in some governorates. At the same time, the renewable energy market suffers from low-quality imports, price volatility, and a lack of standardized local manufacturing.

Amid these constraints lie significant opportunities for MSMEs and startups. Local entrepreneurs are increasingly active in solar pump installation, battery maintenance, and small-scale food processing powered by renewable energy. These emerging value chains could be formalized through targeted training and vocational programs led by FAO, GIZ, and similar institutions. Startups focused on IoT-driven precision irrigation, cold storage, and agrivoltaics represent another critical avenue, echoing proven models promoted by global initiatives like Water and Energy for Food (WE4F). Additionally, wastewater reuse and canal management are areas ripe for innovation by local MSMEs, as demonstrated in pilot programs by CARE. The potential for local solar panel manufacturing also presents a promising job creation strategy, while reducing import dependency and improving quality assurance.

To fully realize the potential of the WEF nexus in Syria, several strategic actions are recommended. First, there is a need to institutionalize integrated governance, bringing together ministries, donors, and nexus communities under a shared framework. Expanding solar irrigation must be regulated and linked to water efficiency measures, such as pairing with precision irrigation systems. Donors and development actors should invest in capacity building for local service providers, offering vocational training and grants to solar pump MSMEs. Dedicated catalytic funding for agri-energy startups, especially in cold chains, IoT solutions, and remote sensing, will further enable scalable innovation. Finally, investing in local solar panel assembly and component manufacturing could both stabilize the sector and serve as a foundation for Syria's green recovery.

06

EXPERTS PERSPECTIVES ON THE SYRIAN ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

To complement the survey data, nine in-depth key informant interviews were conducted with a diverse group of experts deeply engaged in Syria's entrepreneurial and MSME landscape. These individuals represent a cross-section of the ecosystem, including startup founders, private sector executives, development practitioners, investors, and ecosystem enablers. Their combined experience spans sectors such as technology, agriculture, finance, education, and development, both within Syria and in regional or diaspora contexts. The interviews provided critical insights into structural gaps, sectoral opportunities, and the practical challenges entrepreneurs face on the ground.

FINDINGS FROM EXPERT KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

I. The entrepreneurial ecosystem IS YET TO BE DEFINED

"We don't have a rigid ecosystem at all.
Even if we opened the country tomorrow, the ecosystem isn't ready."

Abdel Malek Al-Mouzayen, co-founder and vice president of BeeOrder.

Main takeaways:

- **Syria lacks a coherent, integrated entrepreneurial ecosystem.**
- **Stakeholders such as universities, banks, startups, and support institutions operate in silos with little to no coordination.**
- **Regulations remain outdated, unclear, and inconsistently enforced, stifling formal registration and innovation.**

Experts interviewed for this study described a Syrian entrepreneurial ecosystem largely held back by multiple, intertwining restrictions. A lack of clarity in legal and regulatory procedures was identified as a major barrier. This ambiguity results in entrepreneurs facing delays to registration, among other discouraging consequences. Experts also warned that to bolster the ecosystem, proper tax incentives and intellectual property protection must be offered from the beginning.

"There are laws, but they're outdated, vague, and ineffective. This creates legal confusion for founders and stifles innovation," said Firas Enayeh, CEO at MO Advertising. Tawfiq Al-Nehlawi, Data Management Assistant Development Coordination Officer at the United Nations, echoed this sentiment, noting that "startups often operate under legal uncertainty and rely on informal workarounds like cryptocurrency or peer-to-peer transfers."

In agreement with findings in the survey, decimated physical infrastructure and inadequate digital infrastructure emerged in focus group conversations as a challenge compounding the struggle for founders. Despite recent encouraging developments – which saw the Syrian government sign a series of agreements to supply electricity and energy – the country is yet to have reliable electricity and internet access. This has had a significant impact on productivity and innovation, particularly in digital and technical sectors, according to the experts. "Weak infrastructure, especially electricity and internet, holds back every step of startup development," Rikabi noted.

Coordination among key players has also represented a hurdle in helping the ecosystem take shape. "Ecosystem coordination is crucial. Support organizations and beneficiaries must collaborate closely to adapt to daily and contextual challenges," said Ahmad Helmi, Co-founder and Initiative Manager at Taafi who thinks this element belongs to the top bracket of programmatic needs.

Helmi also pointed to the psychosocial dimension that continues to be overlooked in ecosystem design. "Many youth face psychological burdens such as survivor's guilt and isolation, particularly without family support." He argued that a functioning entrepreneurial ecosystem must incorporate mental health support and responsive programming tailored to young people and returnees seeking to rejoin the workforce.

II. Range of sectors offer opportunity DESPITE CHALLENGES

"We were among the most food-secure countries.
We can be again, but we need youth, innovation and investment in agripreneurship."

Fadi Mujahid, CEO and Co-founder at Green Malware.

Main takeaways:

- **Agriculture and agritech are viewed as critical for job creation, food security, and climate resilience.**
- **Gaming, HealthTech, EdTech, and creative industries offer export potential and local service innovation.**
- **FinTech is promising but constrained by legal, banking, and infrastructure barriers.**

Despite a raft of structural weaknesses, experts stressed that some sectors provided fertile ground for growth and innovation. In an agrarian society like Syria's, agriculture and agrifood processing emerge as obvious candidates, offering immediate potential for job creation, export growth, and food security. Agritech solutions such as smart irrigation, local seed production, and sustainable input systems were seen as necessary at this stage.

Gaming emerged as a surprising but very relevant field. Experts believe Syria has local talent that excels in storytelling and script writing. Over years of conflict, many spent a lot of time playing games, which they can now develop. Gaming, experts believe, is easy to export.

FinTech is another popular field but has significantly higher friction within the current economic and financial climate. While promising in theory, outdated financial infrastructure, lack of payment gateways and legal uncertainty make it more resistant to breakthrough. Yet despite these challenges, many saw it as a necessary area for future growth, particularly as digital transactions increase and alternative finance tools like vouchers, tokens or crypto-based services gain ground in the informal economy.

Other sectors consistently cited as promising include HealthTech and EdTech, both of which aim to bridge service gaps in healthcare and education. "The declining education system can be supported by private innovation, especially in digital learning and hybrid models," said Al-Nehlawi.

Meanwhile, renewable energy was viewed as both a 'necessity and an opportunity.' Chronic electricity shortages have created urgent demand for alternative power sources, with solar energy startups gaining ground. Creative industries, fashion, and cultural heritage products also continue to attract interest due to Syria's rich artisanal history, particularly when paired with e-commerce platforms for wider market access. "The Syrian market is a good laboratory for non-traditional innovation," said Sinan Hatahet, Director of Invest in Syria. "We need solutions that work in non-stable economies, not just copy-pasted ideas from elsewhere."

Over the years, digital freelancing increasingly became a vital source of income, particularly for youth working remotely via online platforms to offer services such as web design, development, and green freelancing. However, this remains fragile without formal training and global certification opportunities. “Many are eager to work with external clients but face severe payment and operational constraints,” Helmi noted, emphasizing the importance of cross-border payment solutions and formal digital education pathways.

From the development implementer’s perspective, Marija Joffe of ACTED noted that while ACTED focuses on traditional business models tied to value chains like agriculture and cooperatives, urban sectors like digital services and tech entrepreneurship still represent significant potential. However, Joffe stressed that interventions in these sectors must be tailored to the regional context and reflect the real capacity and needs of the business.

While **Dr. Nibal Idlebi**, Senior Advisor on Digital Transformation and Innovation Policies, reflected on the challenges related to enabling environments and policy frameworks, she also emphasized how lessons learned from neighboring countries could provide valuable insights and guidance.

“If I could make one change to improve the entrepreneurship and MSME ecosystem in Syria, I would focus on developing the regulatory and legislative aspects of the sector. Even though there may be current challenges in implementation, this is the foundation for improvement.

I would build on several Arab initiatives in this area, such as Tunisia’s experience, as well as Morocco’s, Jordan’s, and Lebanon’s. It is an opportunity to benefit from Lebanon’s experience in this field. Of course, we can also mention the Gulf countries, even if their high-income context differs from Syria’s, as well as Egypt, which, as a middle-income country, has made significant progress in developing its entrepreneurship sector through various measures”

III. Constructing a functioning SUPPORT SYSTEM

"There needs to be a strengthening of university engagement and entrepreneurship education. We need to promote innovation, problem-solving, and a culture of entrepreneurship across society."

Laith Rikabi, Co-founder at SEED and Deputy CEO at Fransabank.

Main takeaways:

- **Long-term mentoring, practical incubation, and coordinated program delivery are major gaps.**
- **Educational institutions must be integrated to embed entrepreneurship in early learning.**
- **Cultural transformation is required to shift from short-term training to real capability building.**

The chronic inadequacy of existing support structures was a recurring theme across interviews. Building blocks like mentorship, incubation, and access to practical guidance were flagged by key interviewees as some of the most critical forms of support that remain underdeveloped in Syria.
With the context oversaturated with short and insufficient training programs, the need for in-depth, long-term mentoring becomes more urgent. This, experts said, will need a coordination body that could organize, scale, and align programs, plugging support gaps.

Incubators and accelerators play an important role in integrating the different elements in the ecosystem under one umbrella with a clear objective. This can happen by enhancing university-based incubators and creating strong links with the private sector. In Syria today, business leaders think there is a gap in hands-on, experiential learning environments like Living Labs or Pre-Accelerators, where youth can test and validate ideas in real-world contexts.

Supporting the entrepreneurship ecosystem cannot happen without a cultural shift. Entrepreneurship is sometimes reduced to a buzzword, lacking substance or sustained support. "We're graduating 'entrepreneurs' after a three-day training, no one knows what their project is or whether it can succeed," Enayeh warned. One way to help create that transformation is to encourage education. Another tactic identified is to bring a mix of experiences together and promote shared knowledge. "This stage is very important. And maybe this is what should start with schools and universities: building is the culture of entrepreneurs. And then we can move to the second stage, which is those who are able to enter a program or start projects," Enayeh added.

Beyond the programmatic design, several experts underlined the importance of strengthening institutional infrastructure to ensure effective implementation and sustainability. "There is a need to reinforce the adoption of clear and transparent procurement systems and processes and capacitate stakeholders accordingly," said Mutasem Syoufi, Executive Director of The Day After. Without such foundations, coordinated support remains vulnerable to fragmentation and inefficiency.
Stakeholders who took part in focus groups agreed that without serious investment in mentorship, incubation, and cultural transformation, Syria's entrepreneurship ecosystem risks remaining fragmented and ineffective. But with coordination, targeted support, and public-private-university collaboration, these gaps can be gradually bridged.

IV. Navigating ecosystem UNCERTAINTY AND RISKS

"There are people who started like this: They go and register a company for $500 and suddenly discover that the calculations weren't correct and they didn't set a real budget."

Firas Enayeh, CEO at MO Advertising and Chairman at Esmero España S.L

Main takeaways:

- **Entrepreneurs face severe legal, financial, and market risks due to institutional and infrastructure gaps.**
- **Informal practices (e.g. crypto, remittance) are widespread but hinder long-term growth.**
- **A lack of risk assessment, planning, and tolerance for failure weakens startup resilience.**

The entrepreneurial journey in Syria remains largely fraught with high financial uncertainty and operational risk. Founders navigate this environment with limited institutional support and, often, minimal preparation. The result is an ecosystem where improvisation replaces planning, and where informal and alternative methods become the norm for survival.

Experts described an atmosphere where most entrepreneurs operate in a grey zone, launching businesses without adequate risk assessment or feasibility studies. "There's a widespread absence of market research," explained one expert. "Many founders jump in without fully understanding the cost, demand, or logistics of their product." The consequences are often quick burnouts, with capital lost early due to miscalculations or unrealistic expectations.

"Startups often operate under legal uncertainty and rely on informal workarounds like cryptocurrency or peer-to-peer transfers," said Al Nehlawi. These adaptive practices are sometimes necessary but come at a cost: they limit scalability, discourage external investment, and reinforce the fragility of entrepreneurial ventures.
Structural dysfunctions, inc
luding poor law enforcement, lack of transparency in procurement, and inconsistent legislation, pose major challenges to institutional development and investor confidence.
Some interviewees warned of Syria drifting into a state where it becomes a 'freelancers' hub,' where people are locked into low-value, isolated remote work that doesn't contribute to national economic growth.

A related issue is psychological strain. Founders operate in a high-risk environment with little margin for error. Several experts mentioned the cultural fear of failure, compounded by the lack of social safety nets or second-chance opportunities. This discourages experimentation and suppresses innovation.

Despite the challenges, some experts argue that this volatile environment presents an opportunity for designing resilient models that respond to non-stable economies. "Syria could be a lab for testing solutions for fragile contexts," said Hatahet. "But only if we stop copying models from stable countries and start building models tailored to our reality."

V. Diaspora founders to contribute with **KNOW-HOW AND MENTORSHIP**

"The Syrian diaspora remains an underutilized pillar of support for the local entrepreneurship ecosystem, despite its vast financial and intellectual capital. Their engagement can be activated through innovative tools tailored to their interests and the realities on the ground in Syria."

Laith Rikabi, Co-founder at SEED and Deputy CEO at Fransabank.

Main takeaways:

- **Diaspora professionals can fill gaps in mentorship, sector knowledge, and international exposure.**
- **Engagement remains fragmented and needs structured platforms for matching and collaboration.**
- **Concerns over competition exist but most experts agree on the net benefits of diaspora involvement.**

The Syrian diaspora, scattered across the globe, holds immense untapped potential to speed up the recovery and evolution of Syria's entrepreneurship ecosystem. Interviews with experts consistently highlighted how diaspora founders and professionals, particularly those embedded in global innovation hubs, can offer more than financial support. They can bring strategic expertise, international exposure, and access to global networks that are currently missing from the Syrian landscape.

One of the most important contributions diaspora actors can make is in the area of mentorship. Structured guidance from experienced Syrian professionals abroad was repeatedly cited as a critical gap. Interviewees suggested launching curated programs that match local entrepreneurs with diaspora mentors based on sector and specialization. "There is a wealth of talent among Syrians abroad, technologists, designers, lawyers and marketers, who can support startups remotely or through short-term engagements," noted one expert. "The key is creating accessible, low-barrier platforms that make it easy for them to get involved."

However, despite this promise, the current reality is fragmented and inconsistent. Diaspora involvement often depends on personal ties or chance encounters during short visits to Syria. There is little in the way of structured, long-term programs that facilitate engagement at scale. As a result, valuable expertise and investment potential remain largely dormant.

Experts raised different views on how injecting new blood in the ecosystem would affect competition: "Some local founders see returning diaspora entrepreneurs as having an unfair advantage: access to capital, foreign networks, even better visibility among donors. That creates tension." While this concern is valid, most interviewees emphasized that the long-term benefits of diaspora engagement outweigh the risks. The solution, they argued, lies in fostering collaboration rather than competition.

To make this collaboration work, a few practical steps were suggested, including establishing formal mentorship platforms or online incubators that bridge diaspora and local talent; creating diaspora micro-VC funds that offer equity-free seed capital in exchange for structured support; and launching ambassador programs where diaspora professionals represent sectors, mentor founders, and link Syrian startups with global events and networks.

As Mujahid put it, “We have youth, we have ideas, we need the world’s support, but especially our own people who have succeeded abroad. They can be the bridge between where we are and where we want to go.”

VI. Constructing a functioning SUPPORT SYSTEM

"Donor and project fund disbursement models are not aligned with market realities and must be adjusted based on entrepreneurs' timelines and evolving local conditions."

Ahmad Helmi, Co-founder and Initiative Manager at Taafi.

Main takeaways:

- **Syrian banks and financial systems are ill-suited for startup financing.**
- **Alternative funding models, such as equity-free seed, revenue-based finance are better suited to fragile contexts.**
- **Regulatory reform and investor education are essential to mobilize local and diaspora capital.**

With the official Syrian banking system largely dysfunctional amid continued restrictions and international sanctions, entrepreneurs and MSMEs operate in an economy dominated by informal financial flows. Cash liquidity, especially USD and Euros, is scarce, and most business transactions are conducted in Syrian pounds at volatile black-market rates. This currency instability significantly reduces purchasing power and increases the cost of doing business.

"Syria remains disconnected from the SWIFT system, and sanctions continue to restrict international financial flows, particularly for NGOs," said Syoufi. He added that improvements to the financial system are contingent on better risk management and regulatory clarity.

In this context, hawala networks have become a lifeline for startups and MSMEs seeking to access capital, import equipment, or finance operations. Entrepreneurs rely on these informal money transfer systems to receive remittances from abroad, convert cash, and make cross-border payments in the absence of functioning banks. While hawala offers speed and flexibility, it also exposes businesses to risks including poor exchange rates, lack of accountability, and limited traceability. As a result, informal funding remains essential yet insufficient for building a sustainable and scalable entrepreneurial ecosystem.

As transpired in focus groups, entrepreneurs rely on informal or semi-formal channels to receive payments and transfers from abroad. Many use money transfer services such as Western Union or local hawala systems, which often deliver funds in Syrian pounds leading to currency devaluation and loss of capital during conversion.

Across all KII interviews, focus groups, and survey responses, this gap emerged as one of the most consistently cited and structurally limiting. For early-stage startups especially, the lack of accessible capital threatens the viability of even the most promising ideas.

The formal financial system in Syria is widely seen as unfit for supporting entrepreneurship. Traditional banks operate under outdated lending models, requiring collateral, guarantees, and proof of stability that most startups simply cannot provide. “Banks are unable to support startups. They don’t understand the model. What we need is VCs willing to take a risk,” said Rikabi. This mismatch between the needs of startups and the risk appetite of financial institutions leaves entrepreneurs with few viable options.

The lack of familiarity with global funding norms inhibits not only the ability to access capital but also to communicate effectively with potential investors, according to one Muhammad Hanana, who thinks Syrians’ resilience and adaptability will still stand them in good stead when called upon. “Syrians have high resilience. And they know how to work in the worst ways. Investors should invest in these Syrian companies. Because they have the know-how. They know the customers. They know the ecosystem. And they have a lot of experience. It's true that they don't know terms like angel investors, VC. But they know family and friends. So they have the basic knowledge. And they have great ability.”

Firas Enayeh, CEO of MO Advertising, emphasized that financing isn’t always the core problem, provided entrepreneurs can reach a certain level of maturity. “Once you have a solid idea, financing isn’t impossible. The problem is getting to that point without the tools and exposure.” This underscores the broader theme: finance cannot be separated from ecosystem development. Without training, mentorship, and access to markets, ideas rarely become investment-ready.

Many experts advocated for alternative financing mechanisms tailored to Syria’s fragile context. Among the most frequently mentioned were revenue-based financing that allows startups to repay according to cash flow, rather than fixed debt schedules. Another suggestion was to provide equity-free seed funds to lower the risk burden on early-stage founders.

“ACTED avoids rigid grant templates, opting for customized support based on individual business viability,” said Joffe. Cash support is distributed via hawala networks and structured in cost-sharing models that reflect the real capacity of each enterprise.

More critically, several experts called for regulatory reforms to create a more enabling environment for investment. This includes introducing tax incentives for high-risk capital, simplifying registration procedures, and formalizing crowdfunding platforms. Without these adjustments, Syria will continue to struggle to attract either domestic or international capital into its startup scene.

There is also a cautionary note to consider: informal funding, such as remittances, cryptocurrency transactions, or peer-to-peer lending, while adaptive, lacks accountability and scalability. Experts agreed that while these methods have enabled some level of entrepreneurship, they cannot form the foundation of a national innovation strategy.

Unlocking finance will require more than donor funding or one-off grants. It will require rethinking risk, redefining capital, and building financial institutions, or at least intermediaries, that understand the unique conditions under which Syrian entrepreneurs operate.

VII. Constructing a functioning SUPPORT SYSTEM

"We support a project and train it. We give it a seed fund, and it starts. But there is no monitoring or evaluation. There is no impact assessment."

Muhammad Hanana, entrepreneur and project manager.

Main takeaways:

- **Training is often short, generic, and delivered with limited relevance or follow-up support.**
- **Practical learning environments (Living Labs, mentorship, mobile-friendly tools) are urgently needed.**
- **Impact depends on quality, relevance, and application, not the quantity, of training sessions.**

Across interviews and focus groups with ecosystem stakeholders, training emerged as both a core pillar of support and a deeply flawed component of the current entrepreneurial landscape. While most entrepreneurship programs in Syria incorporate training modules, interviewees expressed concern over their limited depth, quality and relevance.

Criticism centered on how training sessions are delivered. Programs are often short, overly generic, and detached from real-world challenges faced by entrepreneurs. "We're graduating 'entrepreneurs' after a three-day training," warned Firas Enayeh, "no one knows what their project is or whether it can succeed." The emphasis on fast delivery, often driven by donor timelines, undermines the potential for deeper learning and long-term impact.

Muhammad Hanana raised similar concerns, noting that many founders are repeatedly cycled through the same content: "There are business leaders who have already taken this training 10 times. Why do you have to bring him back? Every day of the training, they want to take a business plan, or a business model canvas, and what are the characteristics of a business owner? Patience, intelligence, and problem solving."

The delivery methods themselves are also misaligned with the needs of early-stage entrepreneurs. Experts highlighted the absence of hands-on, experimental formats like Living Labs, bootcamps, and real-time mentorship. Instead, training is often built around rigid classroom formats or PowerPoint-heavy workshops.

Laith Rikabi emphasized the importance of shifting toward experiential learning: “We need structured guidance from experienced mentors. It’s not just about learning theory, founders need to apply what they learn, test ideas, and get feedback from people who’ve done it before.”

Another critical gap is post-training support. Entrepreneurs often receive training without any follow-up assistance in applying their knowledge. As Hanana put it: ‘Without access to practical implementation, tools, or continuous support, entrepreneurs struggle to translate lessons into viable business outcomes.’ Several experts stressed the importance of using low-bandwidth, mobile-first training methods, particularly for remote and underserved areas. Tools like WhatsApp groups, short video modules, and Telegram-based discussion forums were seen as more accessible and sustainable.

ACTED’s multi-year support models, according to Joffe, prioritize capacity-building alongside financial investment, recognizing that a single training course cannot shift business viability without consistent follow-up and real-world mentorship.

Going forward, training must evolve beyond short-term delivery. Founders need sector-specific, context-sensitive learning that includes mentorship, practical exercises, and tailored follow-ups. Investing in this shift will be essential to equip Syrian entrepreneurs not just with knowledge, but with the confidence and ability to apply it.

“ACTED fosters sustainable economic recovery in Syria through a flexible, inclusive, and context-driven approach , strengthening value chains, tailoring support to local realities, and combining investment, training, and adaptive measures to ensure relevance, resilience, and lasting impact. Collaboration, transparency, and knowledge-sharing among stakeholders are key to ensure impact on the ecosystem and contribute to Syria’s economic recovery.”

Marija Joffe, Country Director ACTED.

07

ALIGNING ENTREPRENEUR NEEDS AND ECOSYSTEM PRIORITIES:

A comparison between entrepreneurs and experts

This section provides a comparative review of perspectives from Syrian entrepreneurs alongside ecosystem support organizations and expert insights, and reveals broad agreement on the core challenges facing the country's entrepreneurial ecosystem, mainly finance, infrastructure, legal ambiguity, and underdeveloped support services. However, notable divergences emerge in how each group envisages the solutions needed to deal with these challenges. The following is a summary of focus groups, surveys and KIIs conducted with targeted respondents.

WHERE ENTREPRENEURS AND EXPERTS ALIGN >>>

I. Access to finance as a CHRONIC BARRIER

Entrepreneurs consistently cited access to funding as the single most urgent and unmet need. Experts agreed, highlighting the dysfunction of Syria's banking sector and the absence of angel networks, VCs, or revenue-based financing as key hurdles on the way to speedy economic recovery.

> "We support a project and train it. We give it a seed fund, and it starts. But there is no monitoring or evaluation. There is no impact assessment."

Laith Rikabi

> "Entrepreneurs are being taught that grants are the only solution, but these are often disconnected from sustainability or ownership"

Muhammad Hanana

For import and export activities, most transactions are conducted through regional intermediaries or limited external partnerships, often without a clear legal framework due to sanctions and the inability to open international bank accounts.

In the absence of formal infrastructure for digital payments or cross-border e-commerce, some founders have resorted to registering legal entities abroad (e.g., in Turkey or the UAE) to gain access to global markets and financial systems. While these workarounds provide temporary relief, they underscore the urgent need for legal and regulatory reforms that acknowledge the realities of Syria's digital economy and facilitate integration into regional and international trade networks.

II Infrastructure as a COMPOUNDING CHALLENGE

Infrastructure constraints, including constant power cuts and weak internet connection, and lack of sufficient co-working spaces. Entrepreneurs cited these as affecting everything from delivery timelines to basic business continuity. Experts pointed out that legal frameworks are equally outdated, causing delays in registration and contributing to informality.

> "There are laws, but they're outdated, vague, and ineffective. This creates legal confusion for founders and stifles innovation"

Firas Enayeh

> "Startups often operate under legal uncertainty and rely on informal workarounds like cryptocurrency or peer-to-peer transfers."

Tawfiq Nehlawi

III Fragmented SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Both groups emphasized the fragmented nature of current support initiatives. While founders described a patchwork of incubators, NGOs, and friends and family support, experts described an absence of integration between ecosystem players.

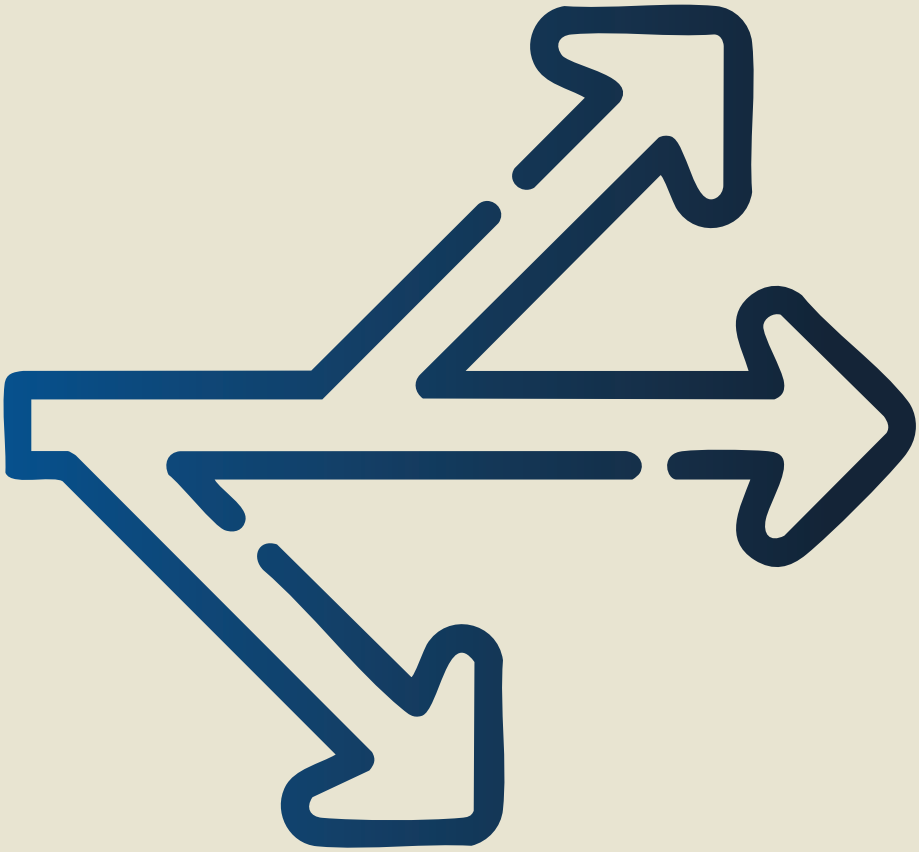
> "We have the banking sector, the startups, and the universities. All of these are elements of the ecosystem, but they don't have touchpoints yet."

Abdel Malek Al-Mouzayen

> "The entrepreneurial ecosystem in Syria remains fragmented, with weak coordination between key actors."

Bashar Saaduddin Aljbawi

WHERE ENTREPRENEURS AND EXPERTS DIVERGE >>>



IV Over-reliance on SHORT TRAINING SESSIONS

Entrepreneurs sometimes see training as helpful, but experts broadly question its effectiveness without follow-up mechanisms.

> "We're graduating 'entrepreneurs' after a three-day training.
> No one knows what their project is or whether it can succeed."

Firas Enayeh

> "The support programs of organizations are limited in time.
> There's no real impact assessment."

Muhammad Hanana

V Diaspora ENGAGEMENT

Both groups value the diaspora but frame their role differently. Entrepreneurs view diaspora contributions as mentorship or co-investment. Experts emphasize that engagement must be systematized and depoliticized.

> "The Syrian diaspora remains an underutilized pillar...
> Their engagement can be activated through innovative tools."

Laith Rikabi

> "Those who come from outside should be mentors,
> not competitors. Support must prioritize inside entrepreneurs first."

Muhammad Hanana

VI. Unlocking investment bottlenecks
KEY TO REVIVAL

A clear data bank is needed to clarify the vision for students and founders

Said **Maya Taki, Project Manager at Growfast accelerator.**

Legislative laws are essential. It is essential to work, as many people want to invest and offer investments but are afraid. So, investment laws must be in place to protect investors from outside and protect their rights because they want to help the people of the country but need laws to protect them. The same applies to young people who will receive these investments; legislative laws are essential.

VII. Enhancing capacities through
EFFECTIVE TRAINING

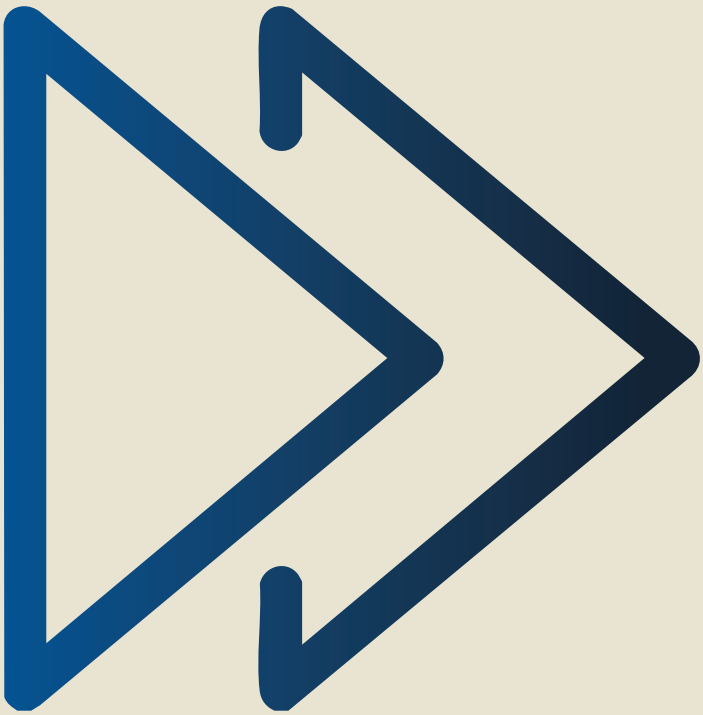
In entrepreneurship, there is nothing called theoretical,

Said **Maya Taki**

The training process must be re-evaluated, so changing the training system is essential, meaning it should be specialized, for tourism, education, FinTech, management, or HealthTech. You need training from the sector itself, on the one hand, and on the other hand, it is practical training and is completely from reality.

08

THE WAY FORWARD: ENTREPRENEURS LOOK TO THE FUTURE WITH HOPE.



Despite the volatile context, Syrian entrepreneurs are looking to the future with ambition. When asked about the future of their ventures over the next three years, the majority expressed plans that reflect growth, innovation, and expansion:

- 66.7% of founders cited job creation as their top priority.
- 63.8% planned to launch new products or services, indicating a strong interest in innovation.
- 59% aimed to expand into new markets, both locally and potentially across borders.
- 56.2% hoped to strengthen their digital and technical capabilities, underscoring the growing relevance of digitalization.
- 41% intended to seek external funding, highlighting ongoing constraints in local capital availability.

Meanwhile, ecosystem support organizations outlined a complementary yet more structural set of needs to improve their effectiveness:

- 61.3% prioritized the establishment of long-term funding partnerships, pointing to a gap in sustainable financing.
- 58.1% emphasized the importance of networking and matchmaking opportunities, to bridge the disconnect between various actors in the ecosystem.
- 51.6% called for enhanced technical training and support, particularly in areas where digital skills and business capabilities are lacking.

A clear indication that can be deduced from both sets of answers is that while ambition exists , infrastructure and the ecosystem more broadly are lagging. Syrian founders have a desire to grow and innovate while support organizations are working to make this possible.

ENTREPRENEURS' VISION FOR THE NEXT YEARS

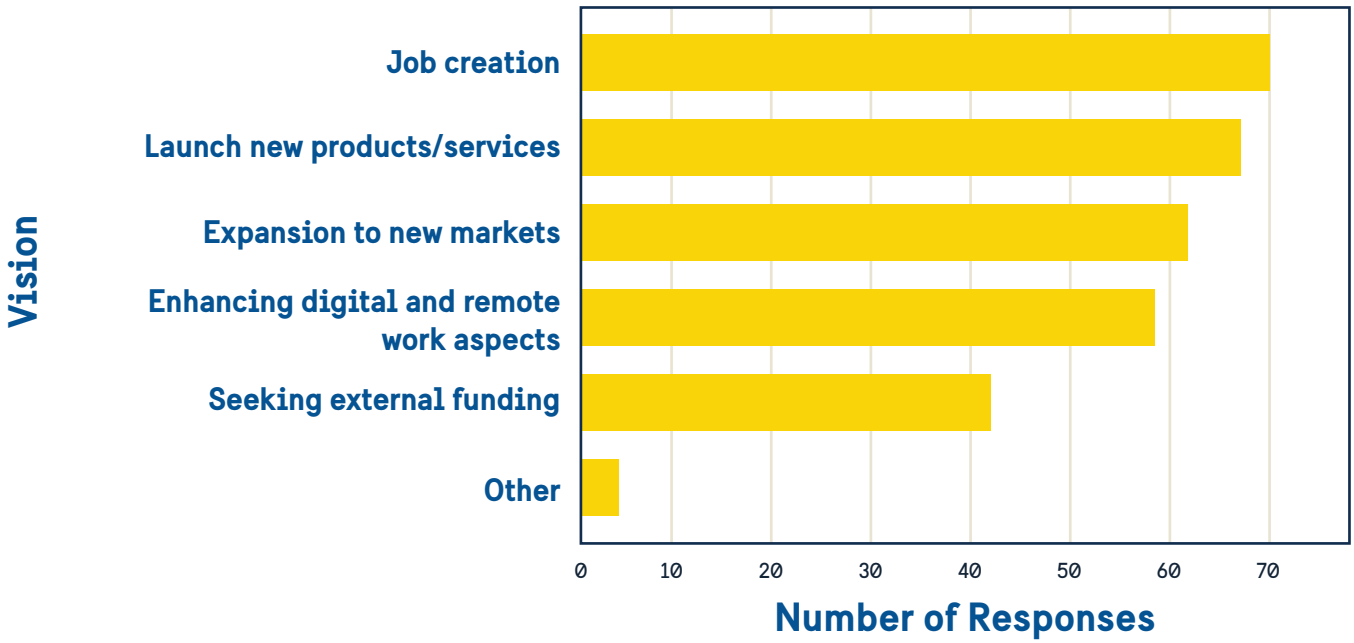


FIGURE 11: ENTREPRENEURS' OUTLOOK FOR THE NEXT THREE YEARS

SUPPORT NEEDED TO ENHANCE ORGANIZATION EFFECTIVENESS

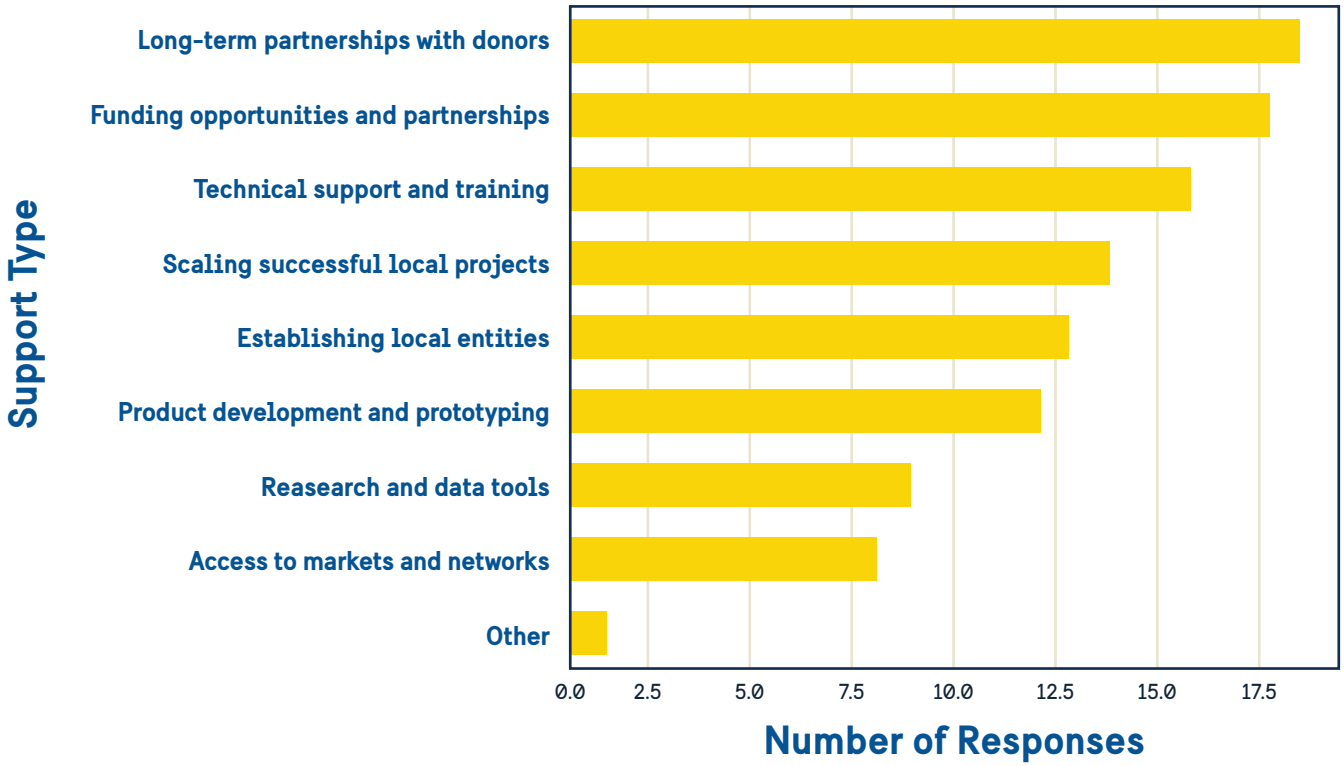


FIGURE 12: SUPPORT NEEDED TO ENHANCE ORGANIZTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT

SWOT Analysis of Syria's Entrepreneurial Landscape

A comprehensive understanding of Syria's entrepreneurial ecosystem requires a balanced assessment of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The SWOT framework below, developed using data from surveys, interviews, and ecosystem mapping efforts, offers an integrated view of the key internal and external factors shaping entrepreneurial potential in the country.

S — STRENGTHS

Founder agility:
- High entrepreneurial intent among youth despite crisis conditions.
- Growing digital fluency and use of low-cost tech for business creation.
- Cultural adaptability and resilience among founders.
- Informal networks and community-based solutions supporting startups.
- Diaspora interest in re-engagement and mentorship.

Youth-driven innovation potential:
- A strong base for entrepreneurial growth if equipped with the right support and resources.

Sectoral growth opportunities:
- High-potential sectors like e-commerce, agri-tech, healthcare, and renewable energy offer promising avenues for startup development.

Rising women entrepreneurship:
- Female participation has increased significantly, especially in micro-enterprises.

Digital platform adoption:
- Growing reliance on social media and digital tools.

W — WEAKNESSES

Ecosystem fragility:
- Fragmented and siloed ecosystem with weak coordination mechanisms.
- Outdated legal framework and absence of startup-friendly regulations.
- Weak public-private collaboration and unclear government role.
- Low availability of skilled workforce for technical or managerial roles.
- Severe infrastructure and connectivity deficits which hinder startup operations.

Deep funding shortages:
- Insufficient funding, driven by economic instability, sanctions, and underdeveloped banking.
- Limited access to capital markets and diversified financing tools.
- Restrictive and outdated financial regulatory environment, with complex business registration, high taxes, and unclear investment and IP frameworks.

Cultural gaps:
- Geographic and educational disparities, where support is concentrated in major cities.
- Cultural and political barriers, including risk aversion, low market demand, gender inequality, and ongoing insecurity.

O — OPPORTUNITIES

Growing market interest:
- Regional market integration and cross-border digital trade.
- A shift from local-focused ventures to startups targeting MENA and global markets, supported by hybrid business models.
- Expansion of donor-backed innovation and inclusion programs
- Interest in green entrepreneurship and circular economy from funders.
- Syria's potential integration into regional EU programs like Erasmus+ and the New Pact for the Mediterranean offers pathways for deeper cooperation, skills development, and international collaboration.

Competitive local and diaspora talent:
- Experienced entrepreneurs returning to Syria bring global networks, skills, and investment that can revitalize the ecosystem and boost innovation across sectors.
- Syria's skilled workforce, low operational costs, and increasing local supply chain activity position it as a cost-effective hub for startups to scale and innovate.

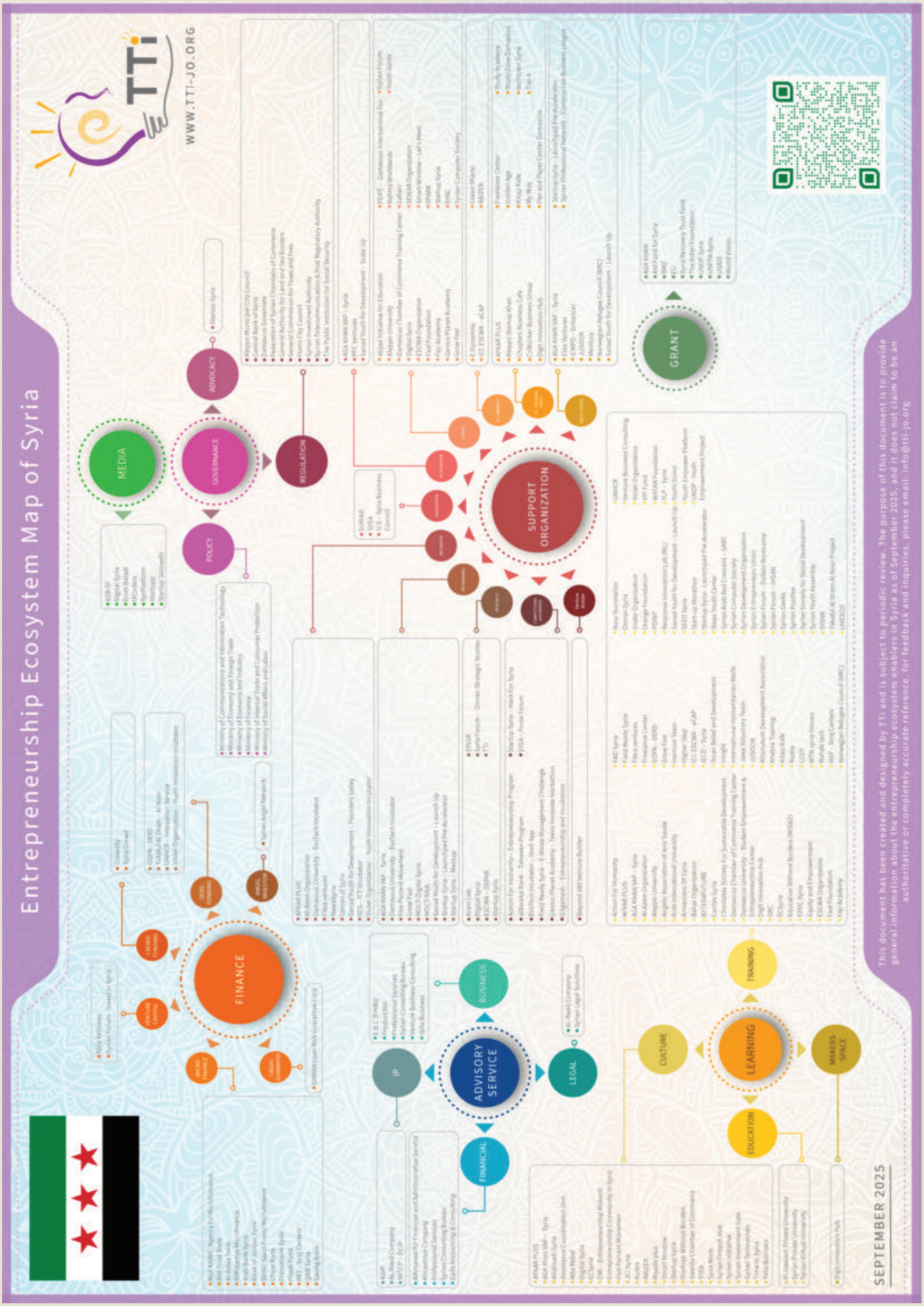
Digital and impact-driven growth:
- Embracing digital transformation and expanding in IT, fintech, e-commerce, and social impact sectors such as healthcare, education, and renewable energy.
- Accelerators, incubators, and bootcamps are likely to grow through partnerships, improving early-stage funding and mentorship access.

T — THREATS

Political and economic instability:
- Economic instability and hyperinflation reducing market confidence.
- Continued political fragmentation and insecurity in key regions.
- Fluctuating regulatory enforcement and inconsistent rule of law.

Over-reliance on aid:
- Brain drain and continued outmigration of entrepreneurial talent.
- Dependence on humanitarian aid crowding out sustainable enterprise models
- Weak trust in financial institutions.
- Unreliable electricity and internet services disrupt daily operations, while a fragile banking system, compounded by low public confidence and restrictive financial regulations, hinders access to capital, discourages formal transactions, and limits the scalability of entrepreneurial ventures.

ECOSYSTEM MAPPING



09

FROM INSIGHTS TO STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines consolidated strategic recommendations for donors and implementing partners aiming to support entrepreneurship and MSME development in Syria. These recommendations are grounded in field research, surveys, expert interviews, roundtable inputs, and desk review as part of this study. The structure balances sector-specific, geographic, and stakeholder-targeted guidance to offer actionable insights across the Syrian entrepreneurial landscape.

The first part is a set of recommendations made by survey participants and experts interviewed for this research. The second part is a list of recommendations by the authors of this report.

I. Shared recommendations by STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Based on the analysis of secondary data, and primary data including both survey responses and key informant interviews, the following shared priorities emerge:

- Establish integrated support structures that connect incubators, universities, banks, and investors.
- Develop funding mechanisms that go beyond traditional grants by introducing equity-free seed funding, revenue-based financing, and blended finance models that combine donor and private capital to de-risk investments.
- Build investment readiness through technical assistance and business development support, a necessity in helping SMEs attract funding.
- Establish local and regional investor networks, including diaspora engagement to enhance access to capital, while results-based financing can incentivize impact-driven growth.
- Ensure the government takes a leadership or coordinating role, particularly in regulating the market and offering tax incentives.
- Shift training programs toward practical outcomes, long-term mentorship, and impact tracking.
- Encourage needs-based innovation over trend replication, especially in high-need sectors like agriculture, water, and climate resilience.

II. Recommendations by STUDY AUTHORS

A GEOGRAPHIC PRIORITIES

1. Damascus

These recommendations recognize Syria's regional diversity and propose targeted, localized interventions in the studied governorates. . Each location has unique entrepreneurial dynamics, security conditions, sectoral strengths, and challenges that demand context-specific donor responses.

Strategic relevance: Major urban hub with digital economy concentration and educated youth.

Recommendations:

- Support scalable digital service startups and diaspora-led mentorship platforms.
- Develop sector-specific accelerators (e.g., FinTech, EdTech, Agtech, digital design).
- Strengthen e-commerce and online education infrastructure.

2. Aleppo and Rural Aleppo

Strategic relevance: Trade and agrifood processing potential; large rural hinterland.

Recommendations:

- Promote cooperative MSMEs in agriculture and rural manufacturing.
- Invest in solar energy pilots and mobile agro-processing units.
- Restore degraded industrial infrastructure through donor-backed grants.

3. Homs and Hama

Strategic relevance: Legacy industrial base and solar potential.

Recommendations:

- Launch clean energy innovation hubs and vocational training centers.
- Revitalize light manufacturing clusters and solar panel assembly projects.
- Introduce circular economy models in rural micro-enterprises.

4. Latakia

Strategic relevance: Relative stability, coastline, and tourism assets.

Recommendations:

- Fund green startups and MSME-readiness programs for trade/export.
- Boost ecotourism and sustainable hospitality models.
- Support agro-tourism cooperatives and digital marketing for heritage products.

5. Idlib and Northwest Syria

Strategic relevance: High informal entrepreneurship despite insecurity.

Recommendations:

- Empower home-based and women-led businesses via mobile platforms.
- Pilot low-bandwidth training tools for rural and conflict-affected areas.
- Support circular economy and waste-to-product innovations.

B SECTOR-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Tailored strategies to support high-potential economic sectors can drive inclusive recovery. Priority areas include agriculture, ICT, renewable energy, circular economy, manufacturing, and critical public services like education and health.

1. Agrifood & Rural MSMEs

- Promote climate-smart agriculture by supporting scalable solutions such as solar-powered irrigation systems, drought-resistant seed varieties, water-efficient processing technologies, drip and precision irrigation, wastewater reuse for farming, and nature-based solutions like agroforestry and soil regeneration techniques, to ensure sustainability and resilience.
- Establish rural processing incubators and community storage solutions.
- Link local agripreneurs with diaspora expertise and trade networks.
- Promote entrepreneurship and support SMEs and agribusinesses involved in value addition (e.g., food processing, packaging, storage).
- Provide start-up grants, technical assistance, and mentorship for youth- and women-led ventures in agriculture and food systems.
- Strengthen local cooperatives, community organizations, and farmers' associations for market access, innovation, and collective action.
- Launch training programs across technical, climate-smart farming, and agri-business entrepreneurship.
- Restore and transform Syria's agrifood systems into sustainable, inclusive, resilient value chains through innovation-driven programs to secure food supply, empower youth and women entrepreneurs, and foster rural economic recovery.
- Expand equipment voucher schemes and incubation for ventures, supporting the formation of women-led cooperatives, and integrating MSMEs into regional incubators offering training in production, certification, and marketing.

2. Digital Services & ICT

- Scale UI/UX bootcamps, coding, and digital literacy in underserved regions.
- Develop freelancer-to-startup bridges and remote work hubs.
- Invest in FinTech, digital education, e-health, and logistics pilots.
- Promote ICT entrepreneurship by enabling remote work opportunities, digital skills training, and online service provision. Support should focus on building digital capabilities among youth and women, expanding access to freelance platforms, and encouraging the growth of tech-enabled startups.

3. Renewable Energy & Circular Economy

- Provide grants for solar energy MSMEs and water-efficient agriculture.
- Build demonstration hubs for the circular economy in Homs and Aleppo.
- Train local technicians in solar repair and battery maintenance.
- Support circular economy and sustainable energy solutions by promoting low-cost, locally sourced material reuse, waste-to-product initiatives, and urban farming. Programs should prioritize resource efficiency, renewable energy integration, and local sustainability, especially in areas with limited infrastructure.
- Combine water and energy interventions (solar, wastewater reuse) with agrifood hubs.
- Institutionalize Nexus Governance: Promote cross-sector coordination through a nexus community of practice, linking ministries and development partners under an integrated WEF approach.
- Support renewable and circular MSMEs: Train and formalize solar service providers (e.g., pump installers, battery repair) and expand local circular solutions like solar-powered processing and micro-grids.
- Boost Agri-Energy Startups: Provide targeted financing for innovations in precision irrigation, cold storage, IoT tools, and agrivoltaics adapted to local needs.
- Enhance market access and infrastructure by supporting cooperatives, digital marketing platforms, bundled WEF investments and cash-for-work programs targeting irrigation and processing needs.

4. Manufacturing & Light Industry

- Rehabilitate industrial zones using matching grants and safety upgrades.
- Support micro-enterprises in materials reuse, upcycling, and repairs.
- Link MSMEs to vocational institutions for upskilling.

5. HealthTech & EdTech

- Support scalable hybrid education solutions in declining school systems.
- Enable telehealth and health delivery models through mobile platforms.
- Involve diaspora health professionals in short-term mentorship.

C CROSS-CUTTING RECOMMENDATIONS

To build a resilient entrepreneurial ecosystem, systemic enablers such as finance, talent, infrastructure, and governance must be strengthened. These recommendations aim to address foundational gaps that affect all sectors and geographies.

1. Sector-Focused and Scalable Acceleration support aligned with Syria's Priorities

- Develop tailored incubation, acceleration, and pre-seed tracks aligned with startup and SME maturity levels (ideation, early, growth) and Syria's competitive sectors(agritech, cleantech, water-energy- food nexus)
- Prioritize sectors and cross-sector innovations with high potential for recovery and job creation, agrifood, green energy, circular economy, digital services, HealthTech, and EdTech.
- Design community- and market-driven thematic programs on:
  - Post-conflict business resilience
  - Sustainable and green enterprise models
  - Digital transformation and scalability
- Embed geographic equity by establishing hybrid (online/offline) programs reaching rural and underserved regions.

2. Access to Finance and Investment with Contextualized and Alternative Instruments

- Launch tailored financing options for early-stage MSMEs such as equity-free seed funding, revenue-based finance, blended finance models and diaspora-backed micro-VCs.
- Establish Investment Readiness and Technical Support Programs, providing comprehensive support to prepare SMEs for fundraising, including gap assessments, business planning, legal structuring, and pitch development.
- Mobilize Results-Based Financing for Impact Ventures based on reaching agreed-upon performance or green impact milestones.

- Adopt a flexible, cost-sharing financial support model, avoiding rigid processes and templates, combining in-kind and cash contributions, tailored to each business's size and capacity, ensuring accountability, relevance, and long-term sustainability.
- Promote digital vouchers, in kind service vouchers, crowdfunding, and community-based finance, especially in informal and underserved markets.
- Strengthen financial intermediaries and reform regulatory frameworks to include startup tax incentives, frameworks for green and impact investment and facilitation of business registration.
- Educate founders on investment readiness and impact measurement, embedding environmental finance frameworks and global funding tools.

3. Training and Capacity Building

- Move beyond generic training to experiential, sector-specific formats.
- Establish Living Labs, mobile-first training, technical assistance and follow-up mentorship.
- Create evaluation mechanisms, performance tracking and certification tracks for agri-tech, solar energy, and e-commerce.
- Foster peer learning communities (e.g., business clubs, founder networks) to enable shared problem-solving and collaboration.
- Consider topics focused on crisis resilience and business continuity, growth planning and sustainable scaling, sector-specific insights, digital transformation, impact funding, community-rooted innovation models and leadership.

4. Support Infrastructure and Coordination

- Create regional resource centers combining incubation, legal, and digital services.
- Formalize a national entrepreneurship coordination task force.
- Map ecosystem support organizations to reduce duplication and improve support coverage.

- Enhance support in underserved regions through mobile units, digital hubs, and localized community-based programming.
- Facilitate subsidized access to digital tools, e-commerce platforms, and affordable connectivity, with a focus on women and youth entrepreneurs transitioning to digital markets.

5. Diaspora Engagement

- Establish a Diaspora Mentorship Platform for structured knowledge exchange to bridge local-global ecosystem gaps
- Support diaspora co-investment models and returnee accelerator programs.
- Leverage diaspora for global market linkages, advisory boards, and sector champions.

6. Policy and Governance Reform Priorities for an Entrepreneur-Friendly Environment

- Draft a National Entrepreneurship Framework with legal modernization and IP protection.
- Enable open banking, mobile payments, and fintech innovation.
- Promote startup inclusion in public procurement and NGO-contracted services.
- Introduce tax incentives and fee waivers for early-stage businesses and green ventures, including ESG-linked clauses and simplified compliance procedures.

7. Inclusion and Resilience

- Design dedicated programs for women, displaced youth, and rural entrepreneurs.
- Embed psychosocial support and business resilience coaching.
- Promote a national campaign to destigmatize failure and champion local innovation.

8. Ecosystem Enablers

- Implement train-the-trainer programs to empower local NGOs, community-based organizations, and emerging support structures in urban and rural areas in entrepreneurship programs delivery.
- Build public sector strategy and capacity to adopt innovation-friendly governance, improve startup procurement mechanisms, and coordinate with ecosystem stakeholders.
- Launch awareness campaigns and events to reshape societal perceptions of entrepreneurship, innovation, and long-term value creation.

D STAKEHOLDER-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Different support organizations play distinct roles in shaping Syria's entrepreneurial landscape. It is important that stakeholders align their efforts to maximize impact.

1. For Donors

- Support multi-year, results-oriented entrepreneurship programs.
- Fund catalytic capital tools and early-stage risk-tolerant investments.
- Encourage ecosystem-wide collaboration and localization of aid delivery.

2. For Policymakers

- Streamline registration, licensing, and tax procedures for MSMEs.
- Build an enabling regulatory environment for digital and green sectors.
- Strengthen cross-ministerial coordination for entrepreneurial development.

3. For Financial Institutions

- Develop alternative products: low-interest loans, microfinance, and diaspora co-investment vehicles.
- Leverage donor-backed guarantees to reduce risk for early-stage MSMEs.
- Digitize access and increase financial transparency.

4. For Ecosystem Organizations

- Facilitate collaboration, not competition, between incubators, NGOs, and private actors.
- Empower entrepreneurs to co-design programs.
- Ensure services are gender-responsive and adapted to local realities.

5. For Academia

- Integrate practical entrepreneurship into university and TVET curricula.
- Establish innovation labs and campus-based accelerators.
- Support applied research, competitions, and student-led ventures.

10 CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore both the fragility and the potential of Syria's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Entrepreneurs across the country continue to operate under extreme constraints, marked by insecurity, outdated regulations, infrastructure decay, and limited access to finance.

Yet, despite these barriers, the ecosystem shows signs of resilience, innovation, and a strong entrepreneurial spirit, especially among youth and rural communities.

Key findings highlight that:

- Access to finance remains the most urgent and widespread barrier across all sectors and regions.
- The support ecosystem is fragmented, with minimal coordination between incubators, government bodies, universities, and private sector actors.
- Digital and ICT sectors show promising growth, while agrifood, renewable energy, and light manufacturing remain largely untapped and under-supported.
- The need for sector-specific and regionally tailored interventions is critical to ensure equitable and sustainable growth.
- Training and capacity-building efforts need to shift from short-term and generic models toward deeper, mentorship-driven, and applied learning formats.
- The Syrian diaspora and regional partners can play a pivotal role in bridging knowledge, investment, and innovation gaps.

In this transitional period, regional cooperation, particularly with the Lebanese and Jordanian entrepreneurial ecosystem, can act as a critical lever to initiate and accelerate development within Syria. Lebanon, despite its own crises, has nurtured a resilient support environment for entrepreneurs, and others demonstrating valuable experience in managing entrepreneurship programs in fragile contexts.

Lebanese support organizations offer significant know-how in incubation, investment readiness, and ecosystem coordination, which could be adapted and shared to strengthen Syria's nascent structures. Additionally, Lebanon's financial services infrastructure, diaspora networks, and access to regional markets can serve as practical conduits for Syrian MSMEs to connect with resources, markets, and support mechanisms they currently lack.

Lebanon's proximity, both geographically and contextually, makes it an ideal launchpad for cross-border initiatives, including joint training programs, virtual incubation platforms, and regional financing mechanisms tailored to fragile environments.

To help Syria's entrepreneurial ecosystem shift from survival to sustainable growth, regional collaboration will play a vital role. Donors are encouraged to support initiatives that:

- Encourage peer learning between neighboring countries, allowing Syrian entrepreneurs to benefit from practical experiences and tested models in similar contexts.
- Build on Lebanon's expertise in supporting startups, incubating ventures, and applying innovative financing solutions, offering Syrian stakeholders tailored guidance and cross-border opportunities.
- Develop joint regional platforms that foster innovation, resilience, and economic cooperation through shared programs, services, and investment networks.

By fostering partnerships within the region, donors can enable more context-relevant, scalable, and sustainable solutions for Syria's economic recovery.

By adopting a coordinated, inclusive, and regionally integrated approach, donors can help lay the foundations for a thriving entrepreneurial landscape in Syria, one that not only drives economic recovery but also offers long-term pathways to stability, inclusion, and growth.

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ENTREPRENEURSHIP ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT **REPORT**

OCTOBER 2025

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