



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

**Author/s:**

Olliff, L;Ghawi, L;Rejon, R;Lazzati, L;Verghese, D;Fernandez, B

**Title:**

How do Australia-based migrants help in times of crisis? A case study of diaspora responses to economic collapse in Syria since 2020

**Date:**

2023-12

**Citation:**

Olliff, L., Ghawi, L., Rejon, R., Lazzati, L., Verghese, D. & Fernandez, B. (2023). How do Australia-based migrants help in times of crisis? A case study of diaspora responses to economic collapse in Syria since 2020. School of Social and Political Science, The University of Melbourne.

**Persistent Link:**

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/344703>

# HOW DO AUSTRALIA-BASED MIGRANTS HELP IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

*A case study of diaspora responses to economic  
collapse in Syria since 2020*



December 2023



The research team is very grateful to members of the Syrian community in Australia who participated in this study for their generous contribution of time and valuable insights.

This study was made possible by funding from the Australian Research Council Linkage Grant Diaspora Humanitarians: How Australia-based migrants help in crises abroad (LP200200817), and from the University of Melbourne Faculty of Arts Policy Enhancement Grant 2022.

Research team contributors to this report:

Research co-design: Louna Ghawi, Louise Olliff, Lorenza Lazzati, Delvin Verghese, Bina Fernandez

Data Collection: Louna Ghawi

Data Analysis: Louna Ghawi, Louise Olliff, René Rejón, Lorenza Lazzati

Report Writing: Louna Ghawi

Report Production and Design: Lorenza Lazzati

Suggested citation:

Olliff, L., Ghawi, L., Rejón, R., Lazzati, L., Verghese, D., Fernandez, B. 2024. How do Australia-based migrants help in times of crisis? A case study of diaspora responses to economic collapse in Syria since 2020. University of Melbourne.

## CONTENT

Context.....	6
Main Activities.....	10
Needs.....	14
Modalities.....	16
Motivations.....	18
Collaborations.....	20
Impact & Effectiveness.....	22
Challenges.....	24
Recommendations.....	28



Photograph by Isaac Álvarez i Brugada  
CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 Deed | Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic

## About the research

In 2022, researchers from the University of Melbourne and Australian National University undertook a project exploring how Australia-based migrants (diasporas) help in times of humanitarian crises overseas. The project involved community researchers from eight diaspora communities (Afghanistan, Indonesia, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, Pacific Islands, South Sudan and Syria) to co-design methodology, engage communities and collect data to find out *how*, *why* and *what* was done by communities in Australia in response to specific crises or events. The project aims to better understand the strengths and challenges faced by Australia-based migrants responding to different kinds of crises (disasters, conflicts and complex crises), and to identify potential tools that can support diaspora communities in their responses in the future. More information about this project can be found at <https://diasporahumanitarians.com/>.



## About this report

This report is a summary of findings for the case study on the **Syrian diasporas' response to economic collapse in Syria following the introduction of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, also known as the Caesar Act**. Louna Ghawi was the community researcher leading the research for this case study, in collaboration with Professor Bina Fernandez (Chief Investigator), Dr Louise Olliff (Research Associate), Lorenza Lazzati (Project Officer) and Dr René Rejón (Research Associate). Data was gathered using the following mixed methods:

- **Interviews:** In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants from diverse backgrounds (age, gender, city of residence, and years living in Australia). Interviews were held by Zoom or in person (in Melbourne) in July 2022. Interviews were conducted mostly in Arabic and were audio recorded and then translated and transcribed. Transcripts were thematically coded using Nvivo.
- **Focus groups:** In July 2022, two in-person focus group discussions were held in Melbourne involving 7 participants. Focus group discussions were held in Arabic and were audio recorded, translated and transcribed. Transcripts were thematically coded using Nvivo.
- **Survey:** 86 community members completed an online survey in either Arabic or English (see appendix for survey sample). Data was analysed using Qualtrics.

The names of participants quoted in this report have been changed.



## FINDINGS:

### Crisis context:

#### How did the nature of the crisis shape diaspora responses?

According to a World Bank report, the Syrian economy shrank by more than 60% between 2010 and 2021<sup>1</sup>.

Prior to the onset of the 2011 Syrian conflict, the Syrian pound traded near 50 SYP to the US dollar. As of January 2021, it was formally trading at over 1,250 SYP and informally at over 3,000 SYP. Amidst a record increase in prices, it was reported that 90% of the Syrian population was living below the poverty line when this research was undertaken<sup>2</sup>. **The economic collapse in Syria that has had such a devastating social impact has complex drivers and does not have a clear start or end date.**<sup>3</sup> The introduction by the United States government of the Caesar Act<sup>4</sup> was chosen as a significant point in the timeline of economic collapse in Syria, and a marker by which research participants were asked to consider their responses to the growing humanitarian needs of the Syrian people.

The drawn out, slow-onset and complex nature of this crisis was undoubtedly a factor in the way in which Syrians in Australia mobilised. Many described the overwhelming sense that **'everyone is needy'**. They heard this from family and friends on a regular basis via phone calls and social media. However, the relaying of needs did not have the urgency of a sudden-onset crisis event or disaster; they told of the daily struggle of people they loved trying to put food on the table

and pay their rent, despite having jobs. As Jazmin says: 'People lack the necessities of a decent life.'

*The deteriorating economic conditions in Syria have left almost everyone needy, and so financial support is much more needed than moral or material aid. (Joseph, translation)*

*People in Syria suffer in ways no one could ever imagine. (Hatem, translation)*

The implications of **very broad sanctions affecting Syria** were a characteristic of this crisis that significantly shaped how the diaspora in Australia responded, with **severe restrictions placed on the transfer of money and goods to people in Syria.**<sup>1</sup> Sanctions impacted the way that aid was provided by humanitarian actors more broadly, meaning there was limited value in the diaspora trying to connect or collaborate with institutional actors. The existence of such wide-spread and far-reaching sanctions meant those in Australia with links to Syria could only work on **a very small and informal scale to reach family, friends and local communities**, and collective efforts were largely thwarted.

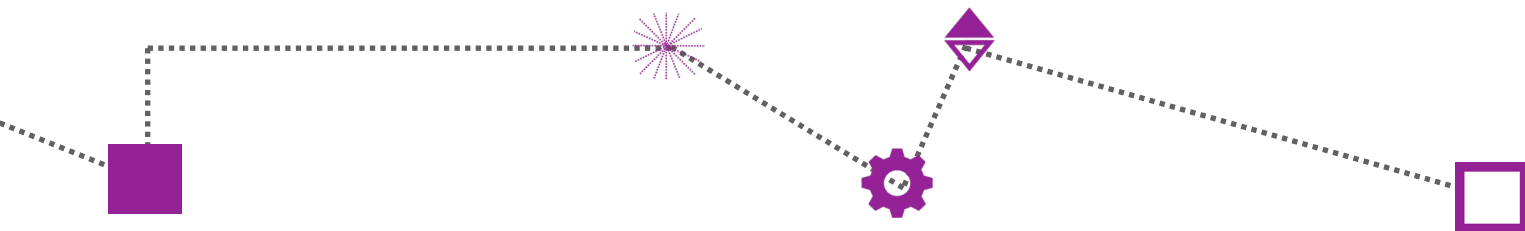
1 World Bank (2022). [The World Bank in Syrian Arab Republic](#), accessed 7 Sep 2023.

2 Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor (2022). [Syria: Unprecedented rise in poverty rate, significant shortfall in humanitarian aid funding](#).

3 Other shocks include the prolonged armed conflict, COVID-19 pandemic, a severe drought, deepening economic crisis in neighbouring Lebanon and Türkiye and the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine. See: World Bank (2022). [The World Bank in Syrian Arab Republic](#).

4 See: Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre (2021). [Fact Sheet 2: the US' Caesar Act](#)

1 Various sanctions have been imposed on Syria by governments (including Australia) and the United Nations since 2011. The impacts of wide-ranging sanctions have been described as preventing the importation of essential goods, hindering humanitarian responses and creating difficulties for Syrians to conduct financial transactions, to receive remittances, and to import medical supplies or food. Human Rights Watch describes the result of sanctions, including shortages in supplies and price increases (see Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, [Snapshot: Syria Sanctions Regime](#); Human Rights Watch (2023). [How Sanctions Affect the Humanitarian Response in Syria](#)).



*... any organisation operating in Syria would be exposed to legal risks because of the Caesar Act, which applies strict restrictions to money transfers to Syria. Furthermore, the Syrian regime limits any organisations that are trying to provide assistance because they fear they are supporting the opposition. Consequently, we are confronted with obstacles from both sides, and this explains why assistance is typically provided by individuals, small associations, or family/village groups rather than by organised community efforts. (Zakari, translation)*

*We wish we could conduct more formal initiatives, but circumstances prevent us from doing so. I'm not referring to financial circumstances, love, or a desire to support, but neither the laws nor regulations help us. (Jafar, translation)*



Palmyra - Photograph by Reibai  
CC BY 2.0 Deed | Attribution 2.0 Generic



## Diaspora context:

### How did characteristics of the Syrian diaspora in Australia shape responses?

Most of the participants in this research had lived in Australia for fewer than 10 years and had arrived on refugee or humanitarian visas having fled the 2011 Syrian conflict. <sup>1</sup>This participant profile reflected the Syrian diaspora in Australia more generally; as a **small community that is still establishing itself** and made up predominantly of people who have experienced conflict and displacement<sup>2</sup>. As such, the lack of established or cohesive community structures such as ethnic or ethno-religious associations meant that collective responses to the crisis were more limited.

*It has been seven months since I arrived here, and I haven't heard of the Syrian community yet. [...] There are no activities organised by the community itself, only individual meetings between friends, acquaintances, or families. As a result, if no officials are responsible for the Syrian diaspora community, how will funds be collected or raised? (Abbud, translation)*

*The Syrian diaspora in Australia is still a young community. The older diaspora community – people who arrived 35 years ago – included only a small number of Syrians. The new one also has few numbers when compared to other diaspora communities. Since the Syrian community is still in its early stages, these obstacles hinder its progress and force assistance to be delivered individually. (Rami, translation)*

As to why community structures like Syrian associations weren't well established, there was an

acknowledgement that **it would take time to build trust within the community**, particularly where the impact of the Syrian conflict continues to reverberate with divisions and mistrust. For those that are trying to or have established small diaspora organisations, the **focus has tended to be more on the settlement of Syrians in Australia** rather than on the assistance of Syrians overseas.

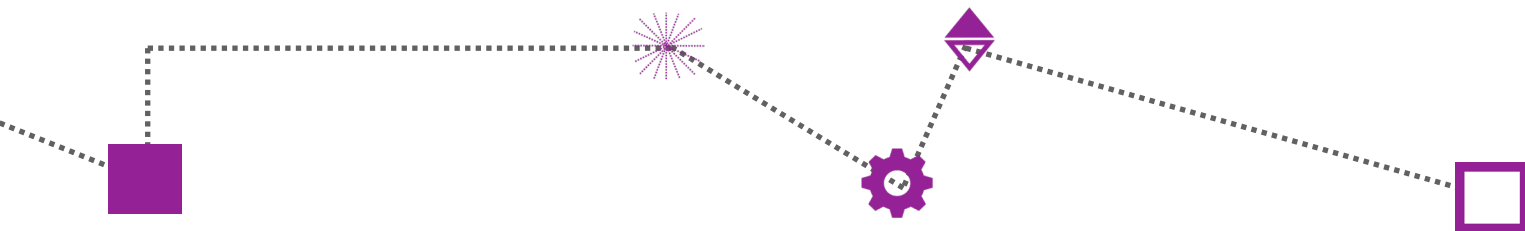
*I think it's going to be very difficult [to organise collectively]. Unfortunately, as a community [...] before the war, we thought we are one nation. But now, it's like everyone has his own opinion. Everyone is with the government or against the government, in addition to religious problems. I have a feeling that it's impossible. (Reem, translation)*

People were still primarily focused on establishing themselves in Australia and talked about having **limited capacity (resources and time) to support people in Syria** beyond immediate family.

*It's a very new community who's trying to establish itself here in Australia. That makes the response even harder, because we need to establish ourselves in Australia in order to help. So that's why everyone was telling me like, "I can help my family. I don't have time to volunteer, for example, in any initiative. Or I don't have extra money to donate because I barely— I'm learning the language. Or I'm just trying to find my pathway here." (Sarah)*

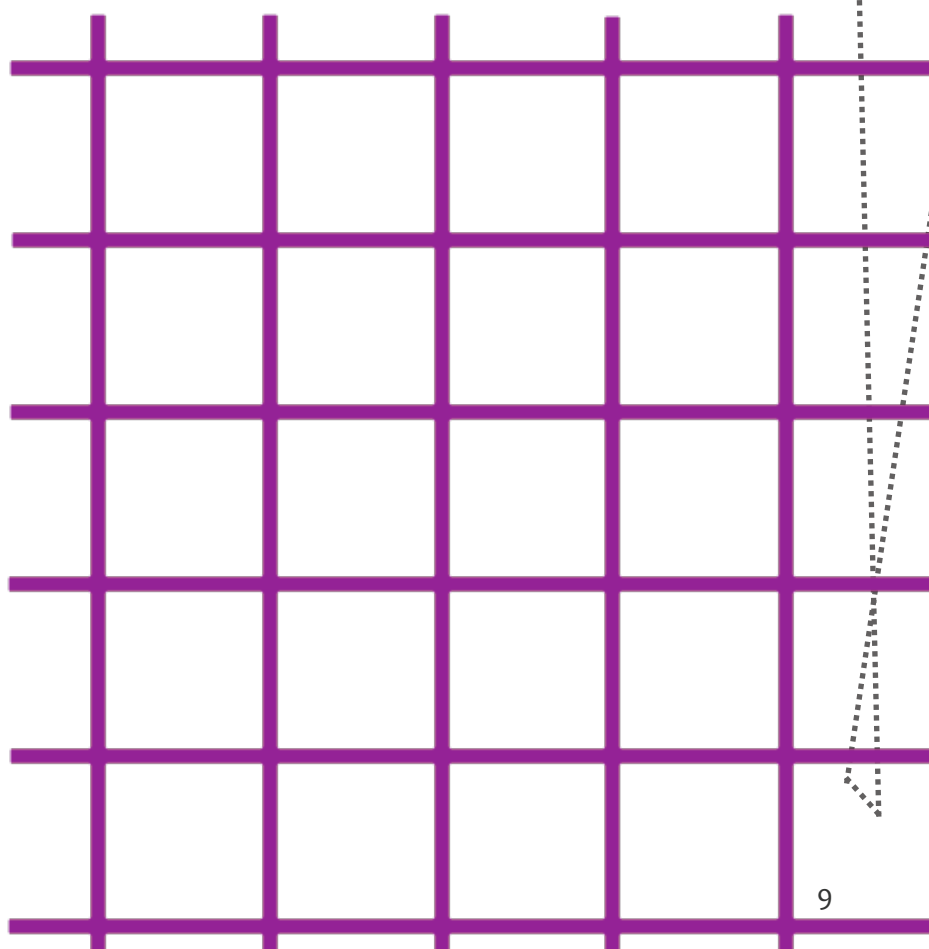
<sup>1</sup> 90% of survey respondents and 88% of interviewees had arrived in Australia in the past 10 years. Over 70% of survey respondents and interviewees arrived on refugee or humanitarian visas or had sought asylum.

<sup>2</sup> According to the [2021 Population Census](#), there were just over 29,000 Syria-born people in Australia, 53.6% of whom had arrived in Australia in the previous five years.



Finally, a characteristic that was described by several participants was that **Syrians in Australia simply felt drained** and had little energy to mobilise support for people back home. They felt drained by the conflict, by their refugee experience, by having to rebuild their lives again in Australia, and by the seemingly insurmountable challenges facing their family and friends back in Syria. As Saarah went on to explain:

*People are drained here. The word is 'draining'. Draining them even though they are here in Australia, because their thoughts, their hearts, their minds are with their families there. Which is making it hard for them to establish a new life here while their minds are down there. — I met this person who has to work night shifts in order to provide for the family down in Syria, while he's dreaming of owning a house [here].*





## Main activities: What did the Syrian diaspora do?

Most research participants described diaspora responses being at a **household-to-household** level, with people in Australia first-and-foremost responding to needs within their family networks, and occasionally contributing to meeting the needs of households in Syria that were not known to them but were facing acute challenges. To a lesser extent, there were **household-to-community** and **community-to-community level** activities, with individuals and small groups in Australia donating money or goods to smaller community-led initiatives in Syria.

### Financial Transfer

The most common activity described by participants in interviews, focus groups and surveys was sending **money (remittances) to family and friends** in Syria to cover day-to-day expenses.

*While my support is intended to improve the quality of their lives, there is no luxury, I just cover the basics. (Abadi, translation)*

*Some people hear about fundraising campaigns, but they prioritise sending money to their families. (Amal, translation)*

However, some also talked about their household or small community groups in Australia (groups of friends, church networks and small organisations) **contributing to crowdfunding initiatives** to help local Syrian-based organisations. For example, Zakari talked about a village where there was a problem with power generators and water pumps not working, and that people in Australia donated money to buy petrol and diesel to pump water to the homes. Money was also sent for food baskets that were distributed to poor families.

*Every day, I see posts on the [Facebook] page asking for help, whether it's for a child who needs surgery or a household that needs to pay rent. [Q. You help through posts like these, do you?] Yes, I can reach out to them through their phone numbers listed in the post or talk to one of my friends to assist me. (Leila, translation)*

To a lesser extent, participants in interviews talked about **fundraising efforts for initiatives aimed at helping people in Syria**. Again, these seemed to take place more through informal gatherings and social networks than through formal organisations or at scale. As Reem describes:

*We actually tried for a couple of years to do a lot of funding and fundraising. Even the guy here was my friend. He baptized his child and all the gifts, everything he asked, everyone liked to give money and he sent everything to Syria. He didn't take anything for himself. We tried; we did a barbecue one day, and there was some face painting, fundraising, and things like that. And we did send the money to Syria. (translation)*

### Sending material goods

Along with sending money, some people in the diaspora sent material items to Syria—specifically clothes, shoes, children's toys and books, and medicine for private consumption. One woman, for example, gathered all her children's unused clothes and books and sent them to family members in Syria rather than donating these locally. As Saarah describes: 'This is a new thing, that people are sending used items', which she said reflected the dire cost of living crisis in Syria and lack of availability and affordability of basic goods sourced locally.

## Psychosocial support

The activity that the greatest proportion of survey respondents said that they did 'a lot' was provide emotional support (55% did this 'a lot' and 36% did this 'a little'). This was described in interviews and focus group discussions in terms of regular phone calls and contact through social media. As Amal explained, 'we always make phone calls when hearing good or bad news from there'. In response to the question of what she did to help people back home, Reem simply said: 'Emotional support and money'.

*I provide them with emotional support by constant contact with them to see how they are doing and what they need. (Rami, translation)*

*My contributions are primarily financial aid and emotional support. (Hatem, translation)*

## Migration pathways

Finally, providing information and assistance to family and friends **applying for humanitarian visas to migrate to Australia** was also discussed in focus groups, although this was less evident in surveys. At the same time, a sense of futility was expressed about these efforts, which Reem described as 'very hard' because the Australian Government had reduced visas allocated to Syrians. As eligibility for humanitarian visas requires applicants to be refugees outside their country (i.e., not in Syria), support for migration pathways was perhaps less relevant in responding to the question of what the diaspora in Australia was doing to alleviate suffering caused by economic collapse for people in Syria.

**Louna:** Let me ask if anyone has ever assisted people in migrating here?

**Joseph:** Of course!

**Aharon:** Of course! Everyone is trying to do so.

**Joseph:** In reality, this is an amazing country where humans are respected, so everyone who experiences life here would love to bring their loved ones along



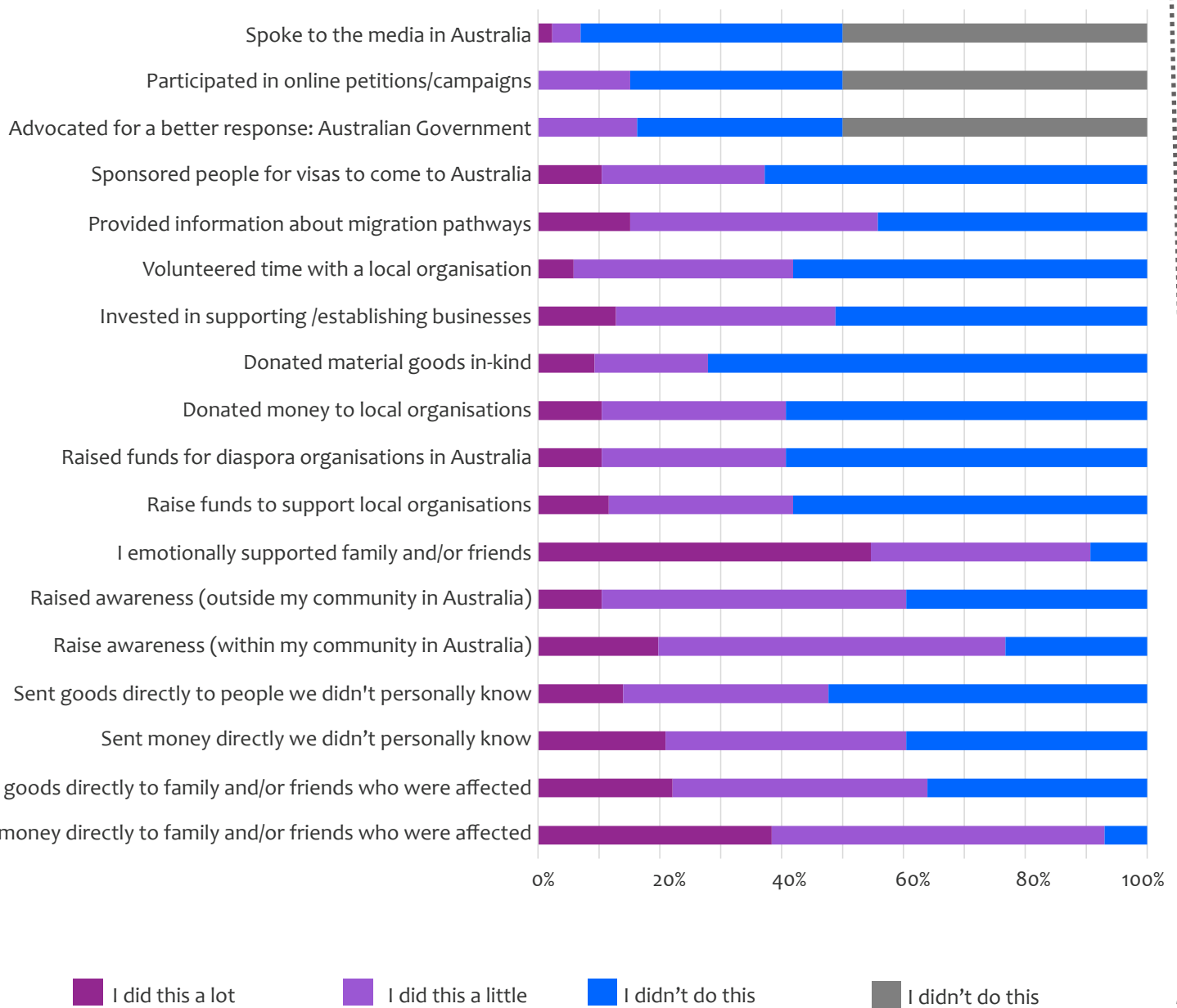


### Survey responses

Activities described in interviews and focus group discussions were generally reflected in **survey responses**, with 93% of respondents sending money and just over 90% providing emotional support to family or friends affected by the crisis. To a lesser degree, material goods were sent to family and friends (64%), and a significant number were sending money (60%) or goods (48%) directly to people they

didn't personally know. Awareness-raising about the crisis within the Syrian community in Australia was something that 78% of respondents said they did a little or a lot, and to a lesser but still significant extent, this awareness-raising was directed at non-Syrians in Australia (60%). Awareness-raising activities were not brought up in interviews and focus groups.

## Q. What did you do to respond to this crisis?





## Needs addressed:

What needs within crisis-affected communities were addressed?



**Livelihoods** – diaspora members supplemented the incomes of family and friends affected by the economic crisis, with remittances used to pay day-to-day cost of living expenses like rent, utilities, medical and education costs and basic household goods.



**Food and basic household goods** – Food baskets and basic household goods were distributed through local community networks (e.g., villages, churches) to vulnerable families.



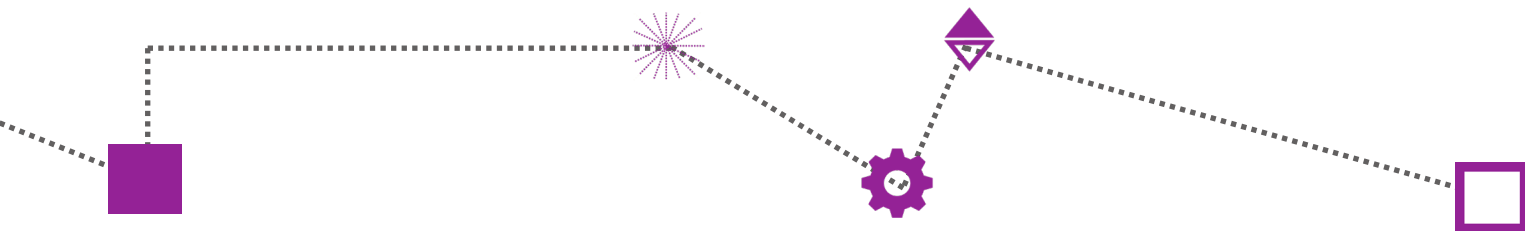
**Healthcare** – diaspora contributions went toward paying for medical care for Syrians with chronic conditions and disabilities. Medicines not available locally were sent from abroad.



**Infrastructure** – diaspora contributions went towards funding power generators, solar electricity installation, water pumps and wells at a village level.



**Care of vulnerable children** – Money was sent to support orphanages and to community members caring for orphaned children.

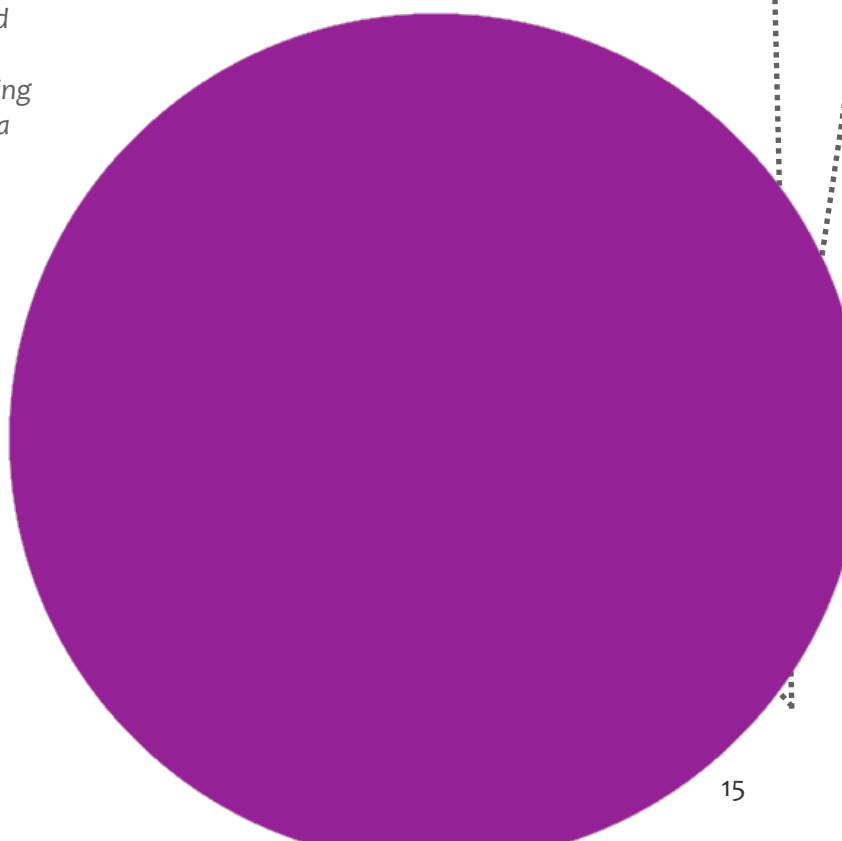


**How needs were identified** was discussed by several participants. While most responded to needs identified through regular direct contact with family and friends, others mentioned social media as a powerful tool for connecting those in the diaspora to those in need in Syria. Others mentioned the importance of people from Australia travelling back to Syria to understand needs not visible online and to make connections.

*It's mostly my family that provides me with the news, as they are going through the crisis themselves, so they're able to convey to us the reality of the situation, regardless of any other sources. (Gamila, translation)*

*Almost everything in the Wadi [area in Homs] is posted there, including news, incidents, requests for support, and events. [...] Every day, I see posts on the page asking for help, whether it's for a child who needs surgery or a household that needs to pay rent. (Leila, translation)*

*I gain a better understanding of reality mostly through Facebook and friends who have recently visited Syria. Since not everything that happens in Syria is being reported online, people from my community in Australia who travelled there would have seen for themselves how bad the health, social, and economic conditions are. I believe that suffering on the ground goes far beyond what is posted on Facebook, where people can only talk about general issues like transportation and high prices, but no one talks about the vulnerable poor people who are unable to communicate their suffering online. (Zakari, translation)*



## Modalities:

### What tools helped to facilitate diaspora responses?

**Social networks** were central to diaspora responses, with participants describing how family, friends and social groups were key to their responses. Faith-based networks were mentioned with some frequency, with money and goods being collected and/or distributed through church networks.

*If you want to give, you give to people I've joined multiple groups that are raising funds to support a small project for children in Syria or solve the issue of losing access to water as a result of the breakdown of the water well in Al-Husakah. Such temporary issues can be supported by these small groups. (Faizah, translation)*

*Yeah, just friends. We gather together, and we're sending the money to this church in Homs. (Reem, translation) people you trust and, at the end of the day, you give to your family. (Luisa)*

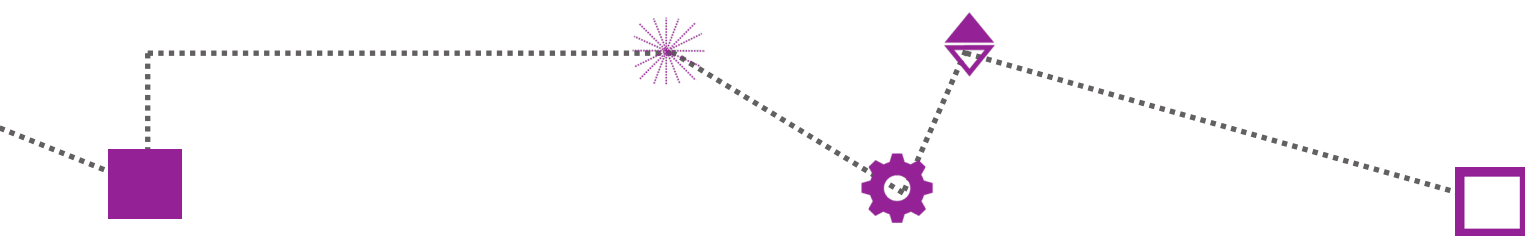
When describing how social networks help to get things done, **trust** was a strongly recurring theme. Simply put, people relied on trusted relationships to facilitate actions. As Amal said of why she sends money through her family: 'I am sure it is going to the right people.'

*It's all built on community trust and relationships.... We can't donate money to any community or organisation in Syria because we don't know how the money we send will be used. We can't track the money. We can't know what's going on. So, everything is sent built on relationships. (Sarah)*

*I feel uncomfortable engaging in collective support initiatives because I don't want to be kept in the dark about what happens with the money.... there is a lack of trust not because they are bad, but because we don't know them well enough to blindly trust them. I am very concerned about this issue. (Mazen, translation)*

Several **online tools** were described by interviewees as facilitating or shaping how diaspora networks in Australia responded to economic collapse in Syria. Accessible online tools were used to communicate with loved ones, share information, identify needs, coordinate and fundraise. This included **social media platforms** like Facebook groups. This was also reflected in survey responses, with Facebook and WhatsApp groups identified as a key source of information about the situation.



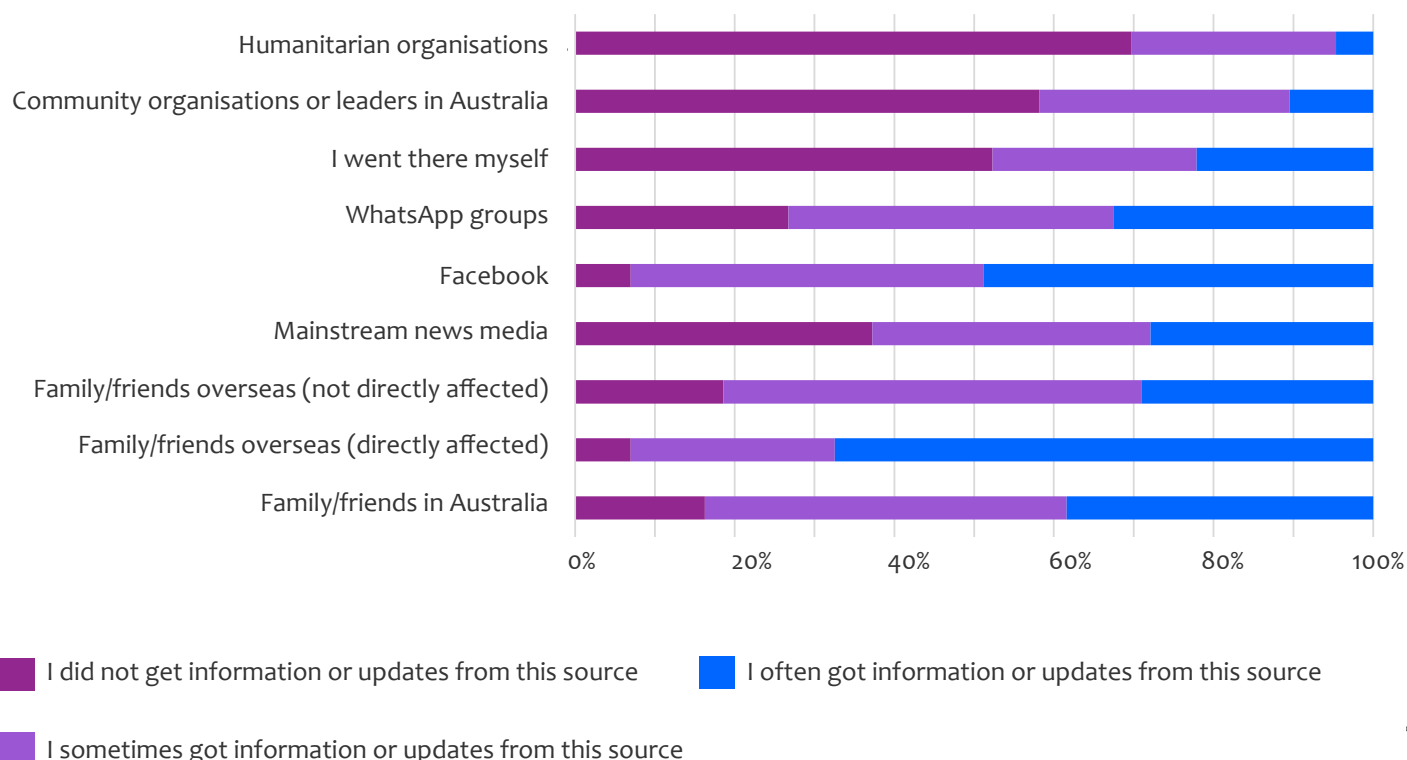


There was some discussion about modalities of sending material goods to people in Syria despite the difficulties posed by sanctions. Some families combined packages to reduce the cost of shipments from Australia. Others facilitated the purchase of goods in neighbouring countries and sent goods with people travelling to Syria. All of this was done on an informal and small scale. Indeed, **diaspora members travelling back to Syria** was described by participants as the most effective way to get both goods and small

amounts of money to family and friends while avoiding the risks and costs associated with more formal transfer channels.

*It's very hard, very difficult to send money overseas, especially to Syria. But it's through friends or someone who's going there or someone who's here and needs to give money over there, we try to manage to find a way. (Reem, translation)*

### Q. How often did you get information or updates about the crisis from this source?





## Motivations:

### Why did Syrians in Australia respond as they did?

The most common theme relating to motivations behind Syrian diaspora responses related to questions of morality. Participants spoke of their **obligation or duty to family** as well as a broader **moral duty to alleviate human suffering**. In knowing that people were suffering in Syria – something people in Australia understood from direct communication with friends, family and from social media – there was a corresponding moral duty that compelled them to act.

*I would help every Syrian if I had more money. In the first place, I provide assistance out of a sense of humanitarianism. In terms of supporting my family, I have a duty to do so. (Gimila, translation)*

*Since I left Syria, I've been providing assistance to the best of my ability, and I haven't stopped, nor do I have a choice but to continue providing it because the situation is too bad. I do my best to continue providing it because it's necessary. (Abadi, translation)*

Research participants also spoke of affective forces – of **feeling helpless, sad, angry or upset** – and sending money or goods as being a way to regain a sense of agency.

*It's really upsetting to read Facebook posts about people who cannot afford food or are reportedly eating from garbage. (Hatem, translation)*

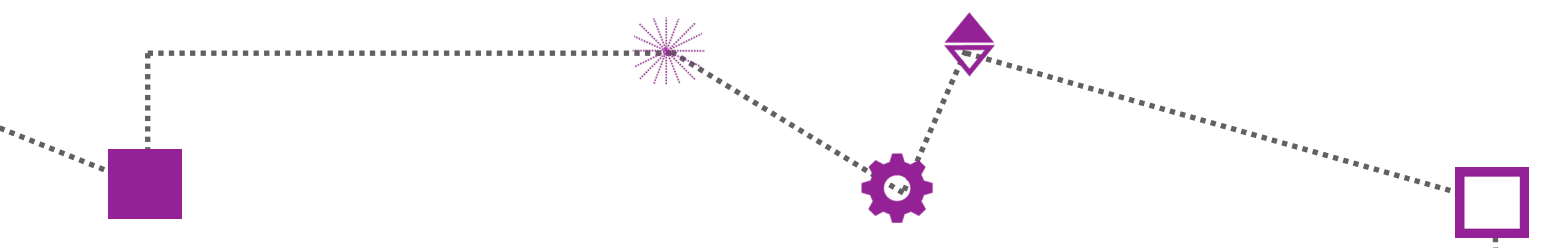
*I feel sorry for the country that was once full of blessings is now starving, with people unable to find food, a health system collapsing and people suffering. (Zakari, translation)*

*I felt helpless at first and then tried to help as much as I could, such as sending material goods, financial aid, etc. (Faizah, translation)*

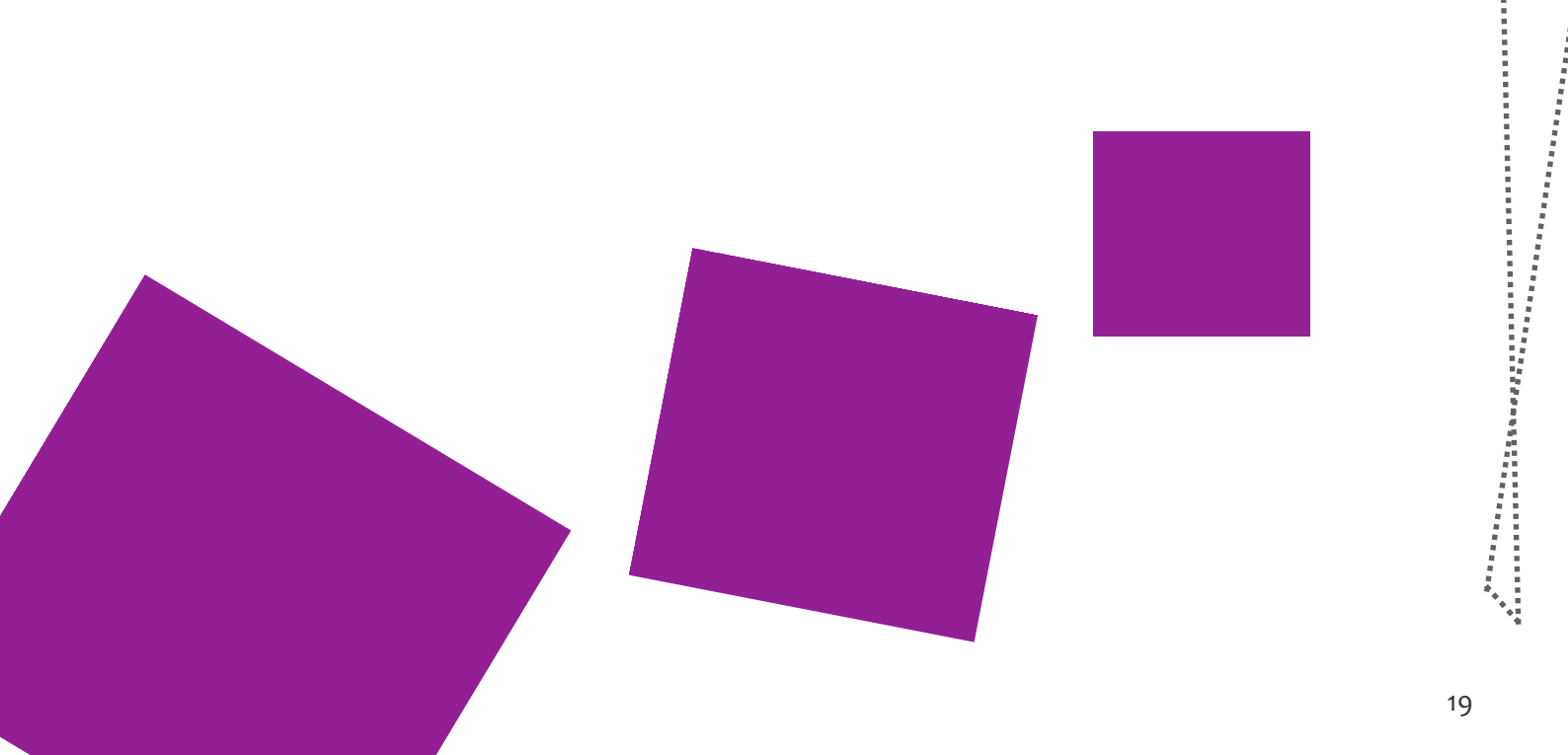
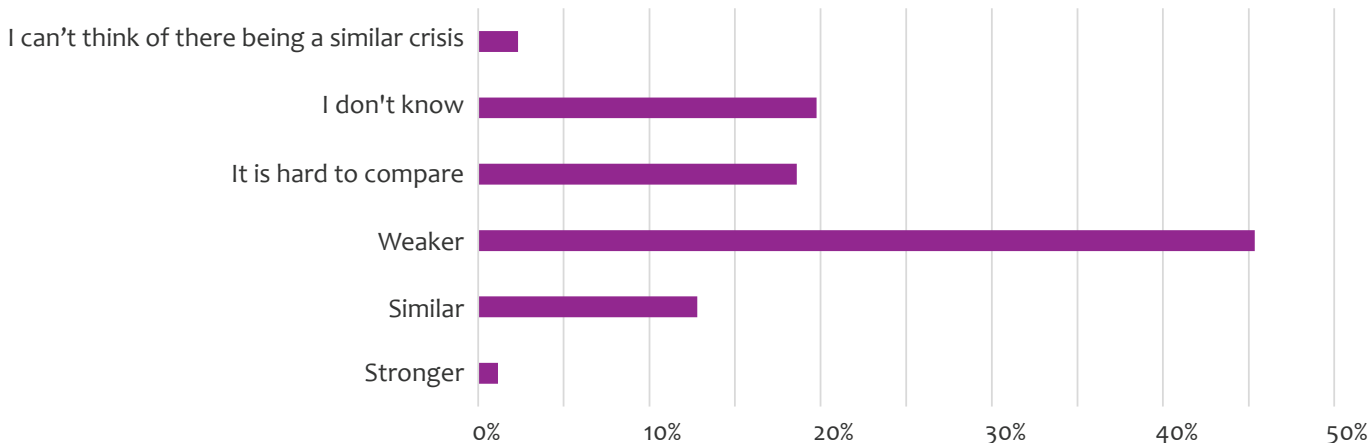
A **lack of motivation** was also talked about with regards to diaspora responses. Participants spoke of how their drive to respond had weakened over time and as the situation in Syria had deteriorated. As Reem describes:

*I think at the beginning of the war, everyone had motivations like, "I want to help my country. I want to help X". And then, all of a sudden, everything cooled down and no one really wants to help anymore for some reason. I don't know why. (translation)*

This lack of motivation can be seen in the response to the survey question asking how the diaspora's response to this crisis compared to past experiences, with the greatest number of respondents feeling that **the response to this crisis by the community was weaker than with previous crises**.



**Q. As compared to previous crises, do you think the community in Australia's response to this crisis was..?**



## Collaboration:

### How did the Syrian diaspora connect with other actors?

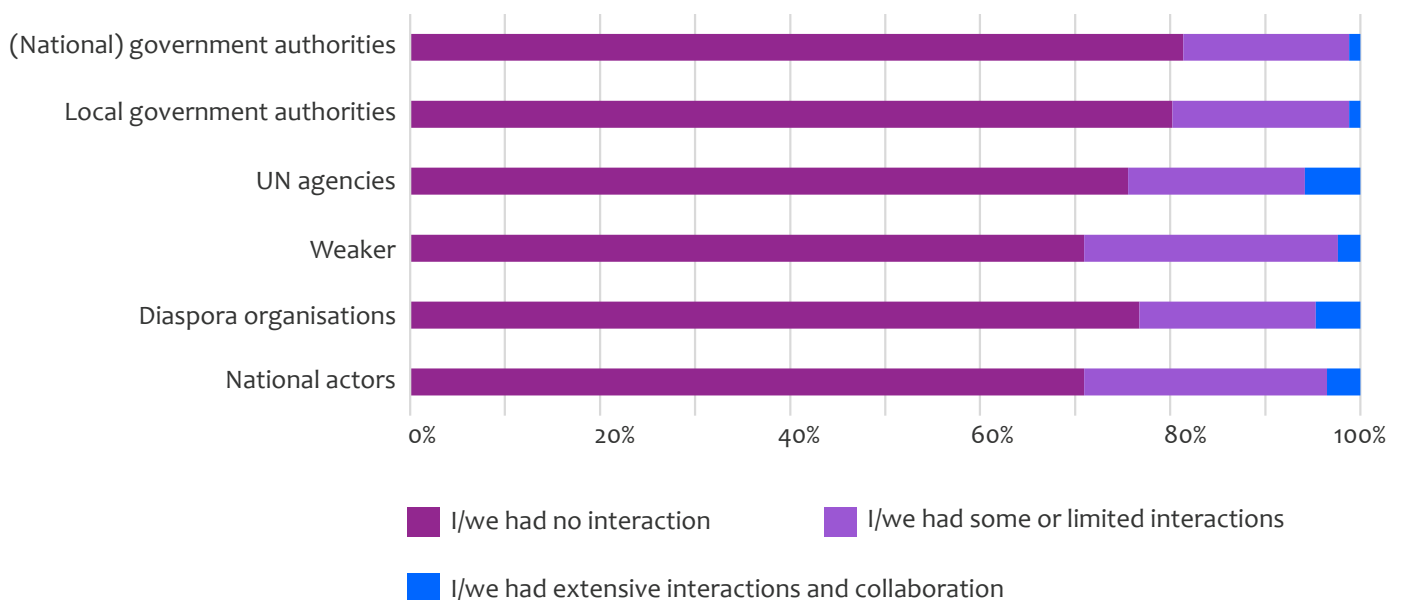
In terms of relationships between the Syrian diaspora in Australia and other actors responding to this crisis, the majority of **survey participants indicated they had little if any interaction with other actors**. Of the types of actors where there was 'some or limited interaction', diaspora organisations and national actors (broadly defined) were the most frequently mentioned. Even then, over 70% of respondents had no interaction with these actors.

In interviews and focus groups, **faith-based organisations** were mentioned by several participants,

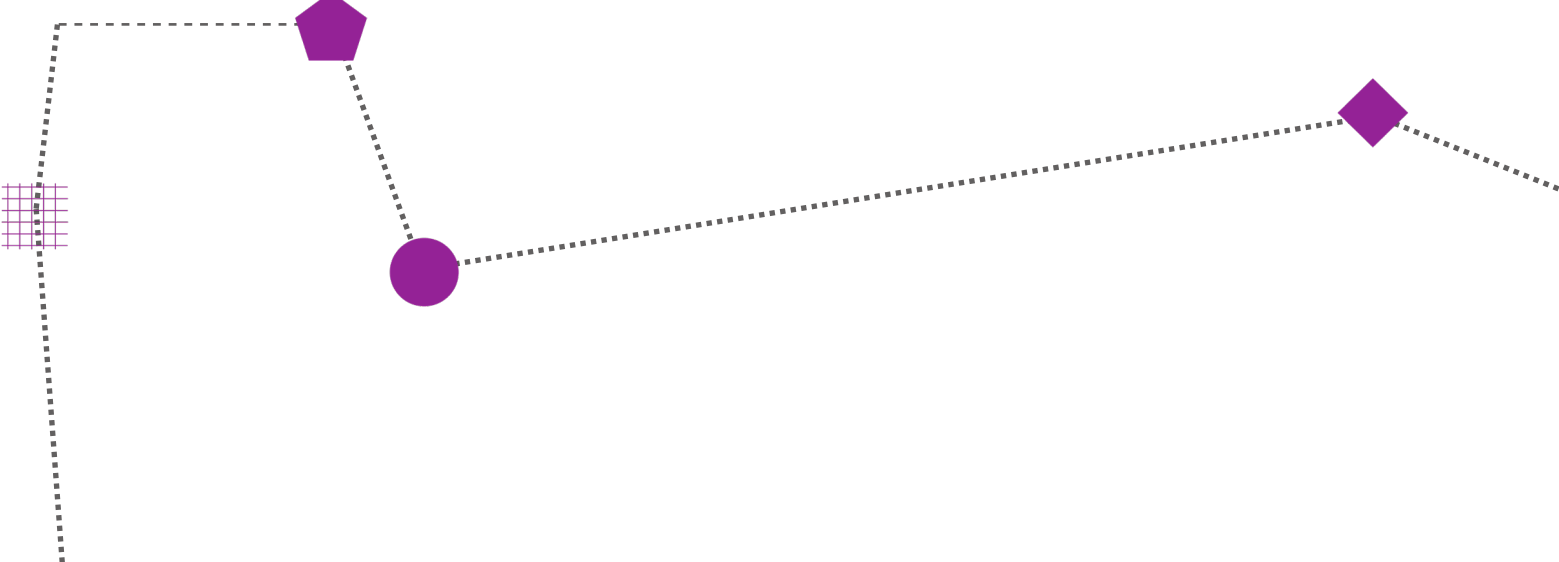
but also with hesitancy. For example, Hatem said: 'We must find safe methods to support people back home. We often hear about church organisations but are unsure whether or not they are trustworthy.'

That multi-stakeholder collaboration was not a feature of Syrian diaspora responses to this crisis should not be surprising considering the **limited scale and scope of the international humanitarian response to economic collapse in Syria**, and the risks faced by different humanitarian actors due to sanctions and a regime hostile to any perceived interference.

#### Q. How would you assess the level of interaction you (or your community) had with other actors responding to the crisis?







## Impact and effectiveness: What made a difference?

There were **mixed or conflicting views** among research participants about what was impactful or effective in diaspora responses to this crisis. Many thought that whatever was being sent from abroad was simply ‘**a drop in the ocean**’ and that addressing systemic issues that underlie economic collapse in Syria – which required the involvement of more powerful actors – would have far greater impact.

*Any amount of money you send will be like a drop in the ocean. (Amal, translation)*

*It has a small impact because, how much am I going to do? As much as I give emotionally or financially, it is still nothing compared to the huge impact they have and the financial crisis they are going through. It's very difficult for us to support as individuals. It needs big organisations. It needs big help. It's very small. (Reem, translation)*

*We want the sanctions to be lifted and they can restore their lives. Because most of the people in Syria have still got jobs and work, but the money has no value.... They're like: 'Why is the whole world and the Syrians outside doing nothing? We don't want the \$100 sent to us every month. We want the sanctions to be lifted.' (Saarah)*

Others thought that **even small assistance was still impactful** and meant something to the individuals whose lives were made better. As Hatem eloquently explains:

*Any amount of assistance would make a difference, especially for those with disabilities and those injured in the war. I remember one time that a group of people including me offered an electric wheelchair to someone who was paralysed, and he told me he felt like he was born again. So, yes, such assistance means a lot because people aren't numbers, so whatever the amount, it should make a big difference. (translation)*

*Half a loaf of bread is better than none at all. (Zakari, translation)*

Finally, some of the caution about whether diaspora responses were effective or impactful related to a concern about the **lack of fairness and oversight of diaspora initiatives**, with support primarily going to people who had family members outside Syria and there being little visibility or awareness among the diaspora about how goods and money sent from Australia were distributed and had impact.

*We can't compare effectiveness because it's individual responses. So, it's a minority [that are sending money], and a very few who are receiving that. For example, someone who has a mother and father and three other brothers in Syria, he might send the money only for the parents because he can't afford to send it to the rest of the families. But, for example, if you have three brothers here, they can support the whole family down there. (Saarah)*





## Challenges:

### What was difficult or didn't work?

One of the main challenges for diaspora members in Australia responding to economic collapse in Syria was the **lack of resources at an individual and community level**. This was discussed particularly in the context of many Syrians in Australia being new in the country, being 'tired' and having limited time and money to send overseas.

*People are tired. They're very drained because of the war. So they feel like they're not up to doing more than sending [small] assistance. Which just makes the assistance goods, sending money and this and that. But I believe there's a lot more to be done. (Saarah)*

*Being a new diaspora community there is no organisation to bring the Syrian community together and help them deliver their ideas to the Australian government, organisations, or any official or non-official body that can help. (Rami, translation)*

*No one is calling on the Australian government for help, and everyone is only doing what they can individually, which might not take us anywhere. (Hatem, translation)*

**Lack of coordination and challenges mobilising collective action** was seen as a major and related issue. The reticence of community members to get involved in collective organising meant the community were seen to have less influence and opportunities to advocate for systemic change.

*I don't mean they [diaspora orgs] aren't successful or haven't achieved anything. In fact, they've done a great job, but the Syrian crisis cannot be resolved without coordination among Syrian associations. (Jazmin, translation)*

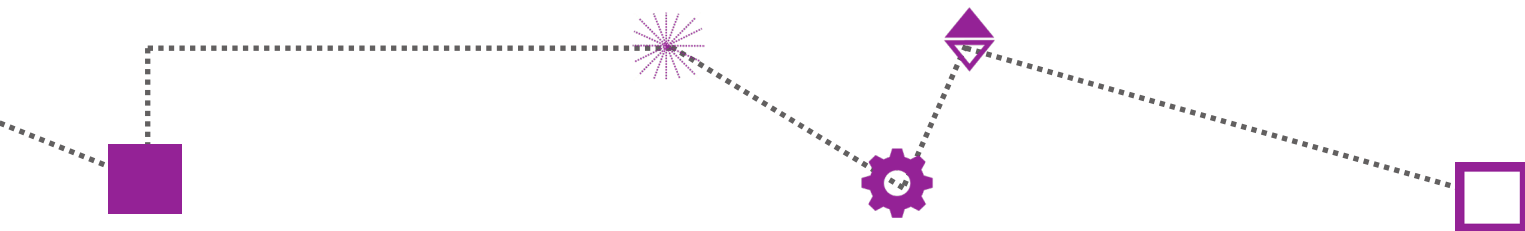
*A network of relations with civil society institutions and the government is necessary to influence decision-making. As of yet, we haven't influenced decision-making processes. Our connections to parliament members, ministers and government officials can help us convey to them what's happening in Syria, and together we can figure out a practical and organised way to provide assistance without facing sanctions. (Zakari, translation)*

On a practical level, **getting money and goods into Syria was a major challenge** for diaspora community members in Australia because of the high costs of money transfer, the time it took, and the risks faced by people trying to carry money or goods into Syria. This challenge was described by many participants:

*It's difficult to send money overseas. Having money transferred to Syria is much more complicated, and you may end up paying a lot more to have it delivered to the intended beneficiaries, and it may not reach them. (Leila, translation)*

*Money transfers are challenging since dollars aren't allowed to be transferred to Syria. They'll be received in Syrian currency and will be converted at low exchange rates, so the beneficiaries won't be able to benefit as much as they should. Another method that was unavailable due to the lockdown was sending money through another person. In general, to send small amounts of money or goods, several challenges have to be overcome which is sometimes mentally exhausting. (Abadi, translation)*

*We encounter obstacles and difficulties in money transfer and delivery to Syria. The government does not understand the transfer process, where people have to convert dollars at too-low exchange rates. To overcome this issue, we got the money transferred to Syria*



*through Lebanon. In addition, a person has to wait a month or two to receive money less than what was sent. So, yes, we have faced difficulties. (Joseph, translation)*

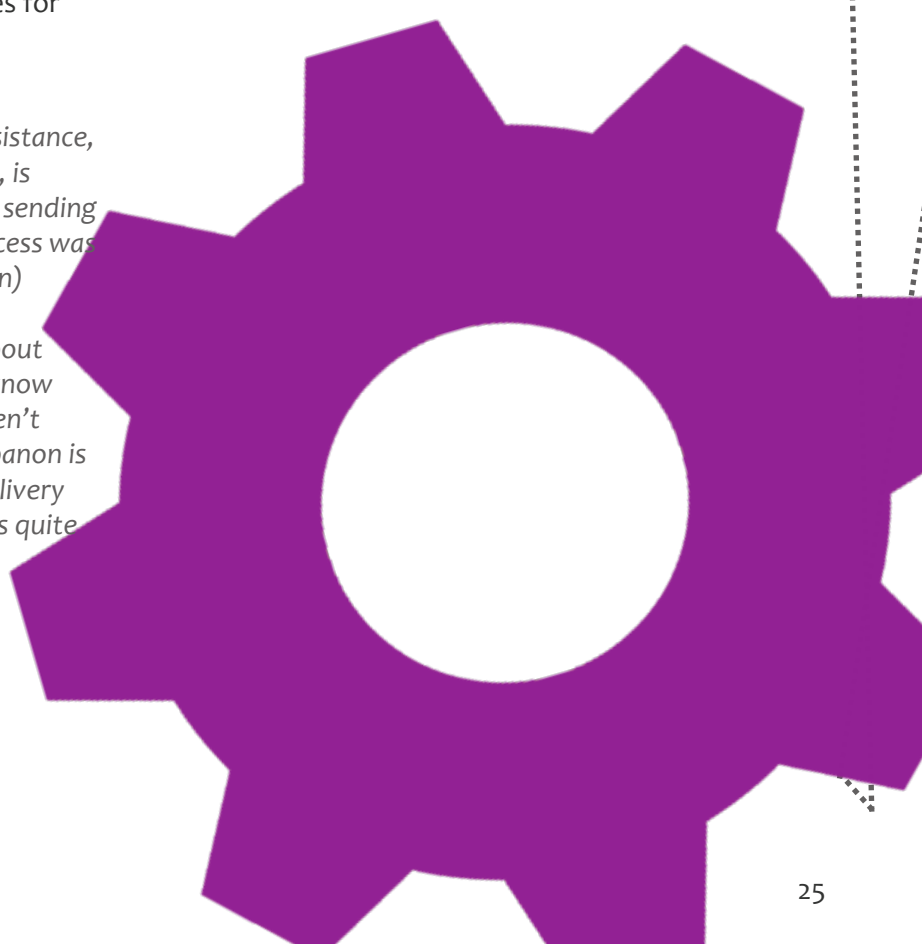
*I tried to send money through someone who is going there, but they may be subject to detention and investigation when the funds are converted into Syrian pounds. (Zakari, translation)*

**The lack of reliable and efficient postal services** between Australia and Syria was also a major challenge and source of frustration, with participants reporting complex, costly and time-consuming processes involved in trying to send material goods, with experiences reported of lost and damaged items, extremely high costs, and very long timeframes for delivery.

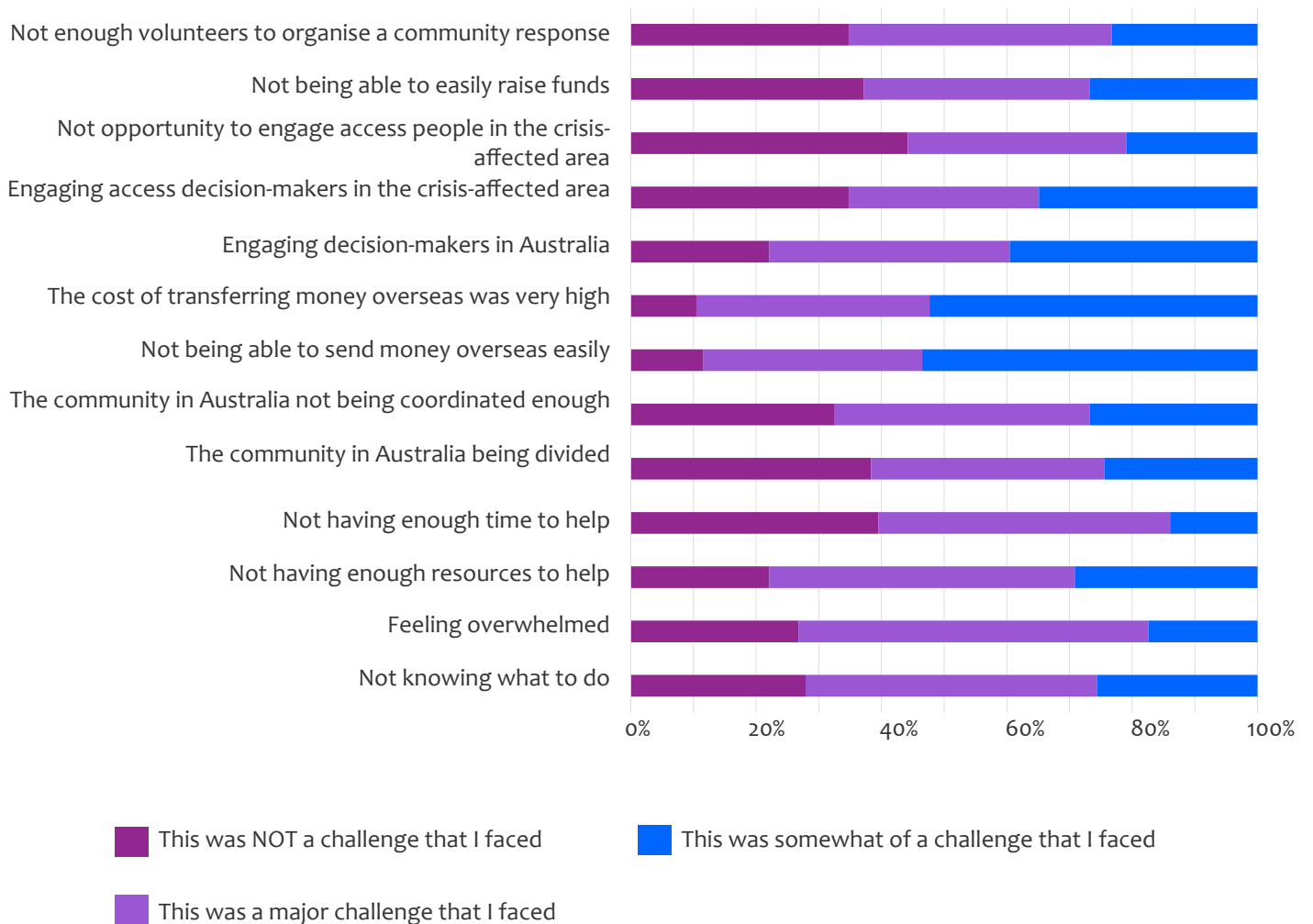
*The second issue is that shipping any type of assistance, such as food baskets, medications, and clothing, is challenging and time-consuming. We have tried sending through a shipment company here, but the process was inefficient and took too long. (Faizah, translation)*

*This was a truly complex process, and it took about six months to deliver the items. Many people I know deal with such companies, and their orders haven't been delivered for about a year. Shipping to Lebanon is another option, but there are problems with delivery from Lebanon to Syria, which makes the process quite difficult. (Abadi, translation)*

These **challenges were reflected in survey responses**, with more than half of the survey respondents indicating the major challenges they faced was how difficult and expensive it was to send money to Syria (this was somewhat or a major challenge for 89% of respondents). Engaging decision-makers in Australia and in Syria was also reported as a challenge, but to a lesser extent (79%). Approximately 60% of respondents thought that the community in Australia being divided and not having enough time to help was a challenge. Around 72% indicated that 'feeling overwhelmed' or 'not knowing what to do' were challenges for them.



## Q. Was this a challenge you faced in making a positive difference to the lives of people affected by the crisis?







## Recommendations:

### What could help diasporas respond to humanitarian crises in future?

Three overarching themes emerged from participants when asked what would help the Syrian diaspora in Australia respond to future humanitarian needs. This included:

- 1. Support to develop a cost-effective and accessible way to transfer money to people in Syria.**

There were various suggestions from participants about how the Australian government could assist the diaspora by supporting the development of safe and cost-effective ways of transferring money to people in Syria. There was strong support for finding ways for families in Australia to be able to support their loved ones in Syria and dissatisfaction with the disastrous effects of sanctions on everyday people. Practical suggestions included the establishment of a designated organisation to facilitate the transfer of individual and collective remittances and carving clearer humanitarian exemptions within the sanctions regime to smooth the way for more efficient and direct cash transfer channels.

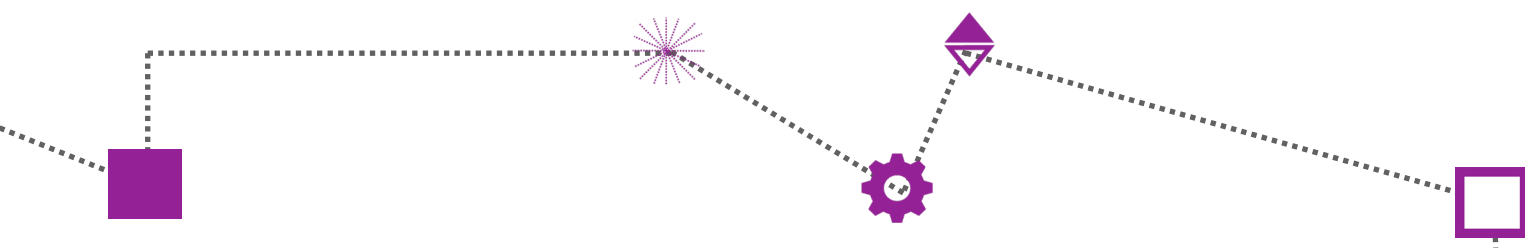
- 2. Support to establish and sustain diaspora organisations in Australia.**

Several participants recommended greater support be given to enable the Syrian diaspora in Australia to come together, connect and establish community associations or organisations. What this support could look like included: training and mentoring support to community leaders on establishing an association and on governance regulations in Australia, linkages to the formal humanitarian sector for advice and support with facilitating

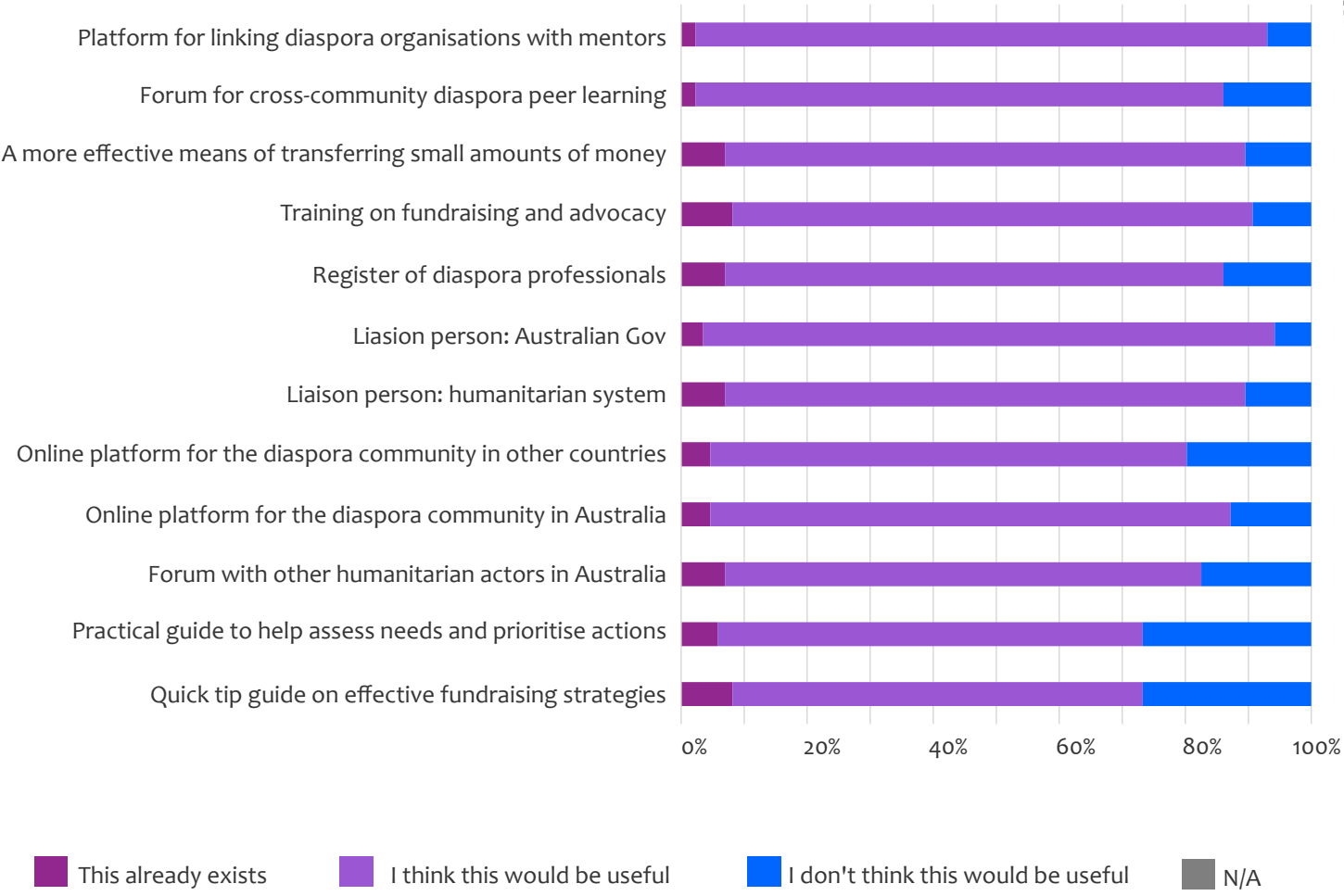
projects in Syria, and training or support to emergent organisations on communication, advocacy and fundraising strategies.

- 3. Collaboration between diaspora and humanitarian organisations to facilitate delivery of aid.**

There should be stronger engagement between institutional humanitarian actors (e.g., INGOs, governments) and diaspora communities. The humanitarian sector can help diasporas with procurement and delivery of goods, which is expensive and red tape and the sanctions regime makes it hard for more informal small-scale actors. Some participants spoke about their willingness to volunteer or to contribute to fundraising or donations of goods if there was a formal, safe and reliable channel to support initiatives in Syria, including through other organisations.



**Q. Do you think this tool would help your community to make positive difference if there is another crisis in the future?**



## Survey (Syria) Participant Demographics

Syria		
Country of birth	Syria	78 (90.7%)
	Australia	4 (4.7%)
	Other	4 (4.7%)
	Total	86 (100.0%)
Gender	Male	33 (51.6%)
	Female	55 (64.0%)
	Total	31 (36.0%)
Age	18-24	4 (4.7%)
	25-34	18 (20.9%)
	35-44	36 (41.9%)
	45-54	19 (22.1%)
	55-64	5 (5.8%)
	65-74	4 (4.7%)
	Total	86 (100.0%)
Years living in Australia	3-5 years	45 (52.3%)
	6-10 years	29 (33.7%)
	20+ years	6 (7.0%)
	< 1 years	3 (3.5%)
	11-20 years	3 (3.5%)
	Total	86 (100.0%)
In which visa did you first come to Australia?	Refugee or humanitarian	55 (64.0%)
	Family reunion	8 (9.3%)
	Permanent skilled migrant	6 (7.0%)
	Sought asylum	5 (5.8%)
	Student	4 (4.7%)
	Not sure	3 (3.5%)
	Born In Australia	2 (2.3%)
	Prefer not to say	2 (2.3%)
	Dependent	1 (1.2%)
	Total	86 (100.0%)





School of Social and Political Science