Key principles for community-based organizations supporting voluntary returns

Community-based organisations (CBOs), sometimes called community-led organisations, play a critical role in supporting their communities, especially in contexts where return movements are organized at community level. Their proximity to refugees and relationships with authorities on both sides of the border often place them in a unique position to assist.

This note aims to support CBOs engaged in community-organized voluntary returns while ensuring key protection safeguards. Recognizing and encouraging the important work of CBOs on the ground, this note should not replace the role of humanitarian actors, nor formalize informal movements, but rather is a tool for CBOs involved in voluntary returns.

It is important to recall that voluntary return must be **informed, safe, and dignified**, and CBOs have a key role to play in upholding these principles. This includes ensuring refugees receive **accurate, neutral, and balanced information**, helping them make their own decisions, and referring vulnerable cases to UNHCR. To ensure these efforts genuinely protect the **rights, safety, and dignity** of returnees, it is essential that these core principles are **clearly understood, consistently applied, and effectively communicated**. These are not only best practices for community engagement in return processes—they also serve as **critical legal and protection safeguards** to prevent unintended harm and maintain trust within the community.

Key messages to help refugees make an informed choice

- **Stay well informed** of developments in your area of return, including security, access to services, and living conditions.
- **Have a plan for return via safe routes**. Consider needs or vulnerabilities in your family.
- **Have a plan for where you will live** and how you will meet basic needs once in Syria.
- **Take this decision as a household**, based on the most up-to-date information. No child or vulnerable adult should be left behind without support.
- **Gather all required documents** to exit Lebanon and enter Syria (valid ID, family booklet, or travel permit).
- **As much as possible, bring any documents** that may be needed to register civil events in Syria (e.g., births, marriages, deaths).

Voluntariness: respecting free and informed choice

People return for many personal, social, or economic reasons, and their decision-making is shaped by complex factors. That is why this process is about **accompaniment**.

> *People have a right to return to their own country and a right not to be forced back to danger (the principle of 'non-refoulement'). CBOs support **informed choice**—providing neutral information to those exploring return and respecting those who decide to stay.*

Return must always be a free decision, without pressure, coercion, or incentives or ties to aid.

- Give people **time and accessible, clear, unbiased information** to make a **well-informed choice**. Explain risks, benefits, and alternatives in simple tailored language.
- **Do not actively encourage** return. Support those who approach with questions or intentions.
- Encourage people to **contact their networks** to verify conditions in Syria.
- Ensure **personalized support and refer for counselling** those with limited ability to fully assess consequences of return, notably those with vulnerabilities or specific needs (older persons, persons with disabilities, caregivers of young children, people facing legal issues).
- Ensure the community knows that **choosing not to return is also valid and respected**.

Safety: prioritizing secure and protected returns

Returns should be **safe** for a person and their family. CBOs have a responsibility to help people **understand, avoid, or limit risks** and connect them to qualified actors to check legal, security, and protection issues, especially for those with specific needs.

> *Unsafe or irregular travel can lead to detention, abuse, trafficking, mines/unexploded ordnance harm, or loss of fee waivers. CBOs inform, warn, and refer. They do not organize movement.*

- Advise returns **only via official and recognized border crossings** (Masnaa, Arida, El Qaa), in coordination with UNHCR and relevant authorities. No **unsafe, informal, or unverified routes.**
- Help people understand **dangers of irregular return**, including:

Trafficking & exploitation	Smuggling networks	Landmines & explosives	Conflict areas	Loss of legal process or fee waiver
Risks for women, children, those with specific needs	Risks of extortion, abuse, arrest	Risk of harm in border or return areas	Risk of legal or physical harm	Risks at informal crossing points

- Do not take money or "book seats" for anyone; refer to recognized actors organizing transport
- Refer **people with vulnerabilities** (older persons, single women, children without parents, persons with disabilities, survivors of violence) who need support to UNHCR protection partners
- Always inform people about available **protection mechanisms and complaint channels**

> *Facilitating or encouraging unsafe return can result in serious harm and accountability risks for the organization or individuals facilitating return.*

Dignity: ensuring respect and empowerment

Dignity means equal treatment, non-discrimination, privacy, and choice. People who stay and people who return are both entitled to respect, information, and access to basic services.

- **Treat every person with dignity, respect, and empathy**, regardless of their choice.
- **Avoid all forms of stigma**, labelling, or discriminatory treatment
- If relevant, hold **separate safe discussions** (e.g. women, youth) to reduce stigma.
- **Protect privacy.** Do not publicly identify who plans to return unless they choose to share.
- Recognize returnees' **capacities and aspirations** and support reintegration by connecting them to services. Ask about skills, documents, or needs (work, school, health). [With consent, an SMS/WhatsApp check-in after return can flag any issues early].
- Use **neutral and respectful language.** Avoid expressions that may suggest judgment, pressure, or urgency. Test messages with women, men, youth, and persons with disabilities.
- Incorporate **messaging** on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, Child Protection, and Gender-Based Violence referral pathways.
- Provide **opportunities for questions and feedback**

Family Unity: avoiding separation

Family unity is a core protection principle. Children (under 18) and dependent adults should not move—or be left behind—without safe caregiving and the right documents.

- **Encourage families to return together**, but **each adult must voluntarily decide**.
- Refer **children left behind**, **dependent vulnerable adults** without support, or a returning family travelling with a separated or unaccompanied child to UNHCR's protection partners.
  - **Dependent vulnerable adults:** adults who, due to illness, old age, or disability need family/community support to care for themselves and who would lack support if family returns without them. UNHCR can support the family with transport to return together or can support the vulnerable dependent adult staying behind.
  - **Separated child:** A child not with their parents but accompanied by another relative. **Unaccompanied child:** A child without parents/any relative. UNHCR's child protection partners will do a child protection assessment to determine the child's best interests, how family can be supported to return with the child, and what support is available.
- If a family wants to return urgently without all members, **pause and alert UNHCR immediately**.

Separated child/custody issue/orphan	Child returning alone	Dependent vulnerable adult at risk of being left
• **Refer immediately** to UNHCR child protection partners • Do not advise or facilitate return before the **partner's child protection/best interest assessment** • Support family to prep documents (birth certificate, family book, custody paper) • Ask if the family wants to trace the parents	• Children should never return unaccompanied • If you are aware of a case, notify UNHCR's **child protection partners** immediately	• Refer if the adult would **lack adequate support** if separated from family • Do not support return if this risk exists without first consulting UNHCR

Exit from Lebanon and Entry into Syria: Documentation requirements

> *Children and adults must have **valid documents** to exit Lebanon and enter Syria. Visit help.unhcr.org/Lebanon for more information*

Accepted documents for exiting Lebanon and entry into Syria

- Passport (valid or expired) for all family members; photos or copies are accepted
- National ID card; photos or copies are accepted
- Military ID (for males aged 18+)
- Individual civil extract (with or without photo)
- Torn or damaged passport, provided essential biodata is legible
- Family booklet, as long as the child is accompanied by one parent
- Valid Laissez-Passer issued by the Syrian Embassy in Beirut, if none of the above is available

> **IMPORTANT:** A refugee certificate or Repatriation Form is **not** accepted as a standalone document for entry to Syria. However, if accompanied by copies of prior documentation, it may assist identity verification at the border or facilitate issuance of a civil extract in Syria

For children born in Lebanon

- **If accompanied by both parents**: a birth notification or birth certificate (even if only issued by a Mukhtar) is accepted.
- **If accompanied by the mother only**: the mother should carry a copy of the father's ID card, as Syrian authorities may assess the father's nationality to approve entry to Syria.

For children born in Lebanon whose birth is not registered to the level of Nofous

- Return can be processed but families may face bureaucratic obstacles in Syria.
- Counsel families: *Due to current bureaucratic procedures in Syria, registering a birth may require legal proceedings such as initiating a lawsuit. It is recommended to register births in Lebanon at least to the level of Nofous to facilitate recognition of the birth in Syria. UNHCR can provide referrals for legal assistance if needed*.

▶ **The final decision on registration remains with the parents**

Key tips for CBOs

- Always **confirm border rules and legalization requirements** before travel. These may change.
- Help families identify their documents and refer them for assistance to obtain or replace any.
- Ensure data protection and consent when handling sensitive documents. Obtain consent before transmitting documents for referrals, send securely, and delete copies once completed.
- Do not keep any personal information about refugees approaching the CBO with an interest to return. Keep track of how many people expressing interest.

Reintegration: Documents to facilitate in Syria

> *Having the right documents makes it easier to access services, prove identity and nationality, enrol in school, get medical care, reclaim property, and reunite with family members in Syria.*

To facilitate a smoother reintegration, families should gather key documents **before departure**. CBOs can help families understand **what documents matter and why, and how to obtain them**.

Start early. Some procedures, like getting civil extracts, stamps from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), or legalization at the Syrian Embassy, can take time.

Key tips for CBOs

- **Encourage early preparation**: Remind families to start organizing documents as soon as return is considered. Suggest keeping **originals in a folder and save digital photos** on their phone.
- **Direct to trusted information**: Refer families to UNHCR's HELP site (help.unhcr.org/Lebanon) for updated detailed guidance on useful documents and how to obtain or replace them.
- **Emphasize benefits**: Explain that documents like IDs, birth or marriage certificates, school or medical records, or proof of residence in Lebanon can support access to services in Syria and may help with school enrolment, compensation, or legal matters.

Recommended documents to prepare

- National ID cards, civil extracts, or passports (valid or expired) for all family members
- UNHCR certificates (latest version)
- Laissez-Passer if no ID is available [Contact Syrian Embassy in Beirut]
- Civil status documents (birth, marriage, death certificates)
- Medical records/reports (for chronic illnesses or disabilities, vaccinations for children)
- School certificates and transcripts for children
- Military service documents (for males aged 18+)
- Travel authorization if returning with children without the other parent
- Proof of ownership or use rights to your house/land/property in Syria

Health: Medical preparedness before return

> *Good health before travel is essential to ensure a safe and smooth return journey, especially for those with chronic conditions, pregnant women, and young children.*

Recommended documents to prepare

- Medical reports and test results
- Prescriptions and treatment plans
- Hospital records
- Antenatal care cards (for pregnant women)
- Vaccination cards for children

Key tips for CBOs

- Encourage returnees to **assess health status and medical needs** in advance of travel.
- Advise families to **collect medical documents** before departure

Chronic Conditions (e.g., diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure)

- Advise people to bring enough medication to last **at least 2–3 months** after arrival.
- Stress the importance of **bringing prescriptions or medical summaries**. Digital copies on a phone can help if papers get wet or lost.

Pregnancy

- Before 28 weeks: advise to bring the **antenatal care report** and carry **prenatal supplements** (e.g., folic acid) for at least two months
- Third trimester (28–40 weeks): encourage **delaying return** until after birth. If travel cannot be delayed, obtain a doctor's travel letter stating gestational age and fitness to travel.

Children under 5 Years

- Ensure children have **up-to-date vaccinations before travel**. Ask for a stamped vaccination card or printout; take a phone photo backup.
- Advise to **check vaccine records** at a Primary Health Center or UNHCR Reception Center
- Remind that **vaccinations are free** for all children up to 18 years of age at these locations.

Referrals to UNHCR: person with specific needs or protection concerns

> *CBOs are not expected to conduct full assessments*.

Refer to UNHCR with the **consent** of the refugees if:

- **Children or vulnerable adults would be left behind** or separated
- A returnee **lacks key documents** that may hinder border crossing or reintegration in Syria;
- **Serious protection concerns** or a return area was recently affected by conflict/ insecurity
- Return appears to involve **coercion, misinformation, or pressure** from family or others.

Referrals allow UNHCR to provide **specialized counselling, protection support, and follow-up**. CBOs should encourage people to contact UNHCR directly for sensitive or complex situations.

UNHCR support: Information and counselling

Up-to-date information: help.unhcr.org/Lebanon

Call: UNHCR National Call Center at 04726111
Contact: UNHCR Online Contact Form (help.unhcr.org/Lebanon/contact-us)
Visit: a Community Development Center (CDC) in your area