MANAHEL

SYRIA EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Reimagining inclusive and safe education after rupture

Lessons from Manahel on systems strengthening in Syria

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01

Introduction: What does systems strengthening look like when the system itself is changing?

Conflict, displacement, and natural disasters create an urgent need to protect children and provide them with a safe and inclusive educational environment, even as the institutions responsible for providing that security come under greater pressure. In emergencies, education offers more than continuity of learning: when schools are safe and inclusive, they can provide stability, psychosocial support and protection from harm at a time when children are particularly vulnerable. Education also helps prevent learning loss, addresses inequalities exacerbated by crisis and lays the foundations for longer-term recovery and resilience.[1,2] Girls and boys, in all their diversity, cannot wait for political stability before their schools become safer and more inclusive. Unsafe and exclusionary schools undermine education's central purpose: to enable children to learn. In a country that is rebuilding after conflict, the consequences of hostile and discriminatory learning environments extend beyond individual children. Safeguarding and inclusion are fundamental to education's effectiveness and to its contribution to recovery.

Education work in crisis-affected contexts must meet children's immediate needs while strengthening the institutions they will rely on in future. This is especially difficult when political authority is contested, when national counterparts are absent or changing, and where even agreed improvements lack the resources needed for implementation. It is critical in such conditions to ask where programmes should begin and what would help progress take hold. Manahel's experience in Syria offers practical lessons to help answer these questions.

Working through war, the February 2023 earthquakes, and the political transition, the Syria Education Programme (SEP), better known as Manahel, sustained and deepened its work on safeguarding and gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI). This paper examines the choices behind that work, including how the programme engaged with Education Authorities, connected institutional responsibilities with practice in schools and communities, and responded as opportunities and constraints changed.

Three propositions guide the paper:

Systems strengthening can and should begin before the system is stable. Programmes can pursue immediate improvements for children while developing institutional practices and capabilities that may endure beyond programme support.

Progress requires connected work across Education Assemblies (EAs), schools, families, and communities. Institutional commitments need practical support and engagement with the relationships and social norms shaping children's lives.

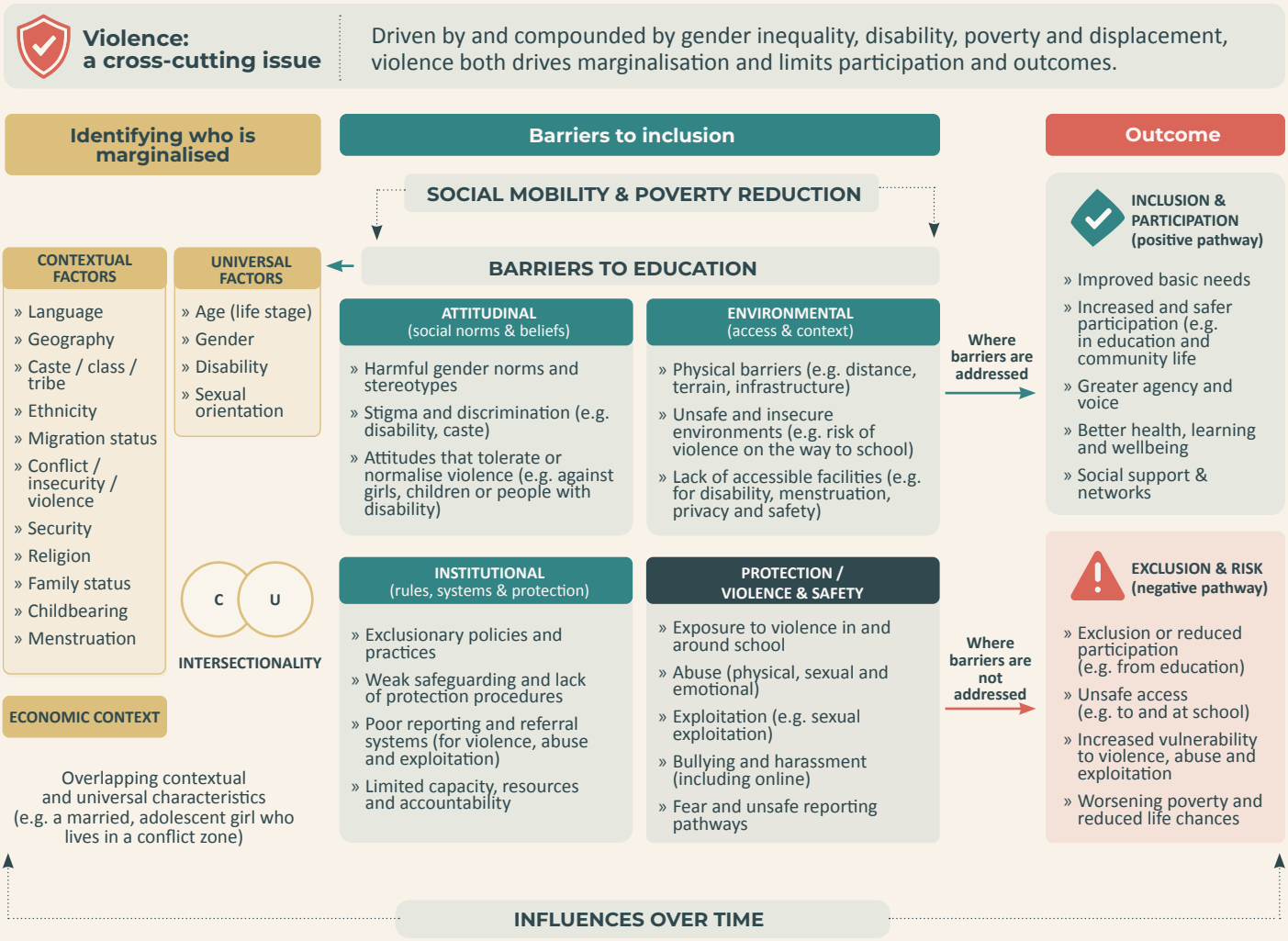
The transition from programme-supported improvements to sustained systems change requires deliberate work. Political openings create possibilities; implementation, resources, and accountability determine whether those possibilities translate into lasting improvements.

[1] UNESCO (2026), What you need to know about education in emergencies https://www.unesco.org/en/emergencies/education/need-know
[2] INEE (2024), INEE Minimum Standards https://www.inee.org/minimum-standards

For Syrian education and child protection stakeholders, this paper offers reflections on how to build on this programmatic experience, particularly in the next phase of the Manahel project (due to start in 2027). For the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and other donors and practitioners, the paper examines what sustained, pragmatic engagement can achieve; outlines what the programme requires and where its limits lie; and offers lessons that can be applied across contexts.

GEDSI is central to this paper and to Manahel's work. Gender norms and unequal power relations shape children's exposure to violence, determine whose education is prioritised, and signify whose concerns are heard. Disability, poverty, and displacement can compound these inequalities. For education actors concerned with gender-based violence and violence against children (VAC), strengthening an education system means examining who that system protects, who it excludes, and what needs to change. Figure 1 below illustrates this.

Figure 1: GEDSI and VAC interact[3]



[3] Diagram built on and adapted from: DFID Girls Education Challenge (2018) Thematic Review Understanding and Addressing Educational Marginalisation: Part 1: A new Conceptual Framework for educational marginalisation. Original tool designed by Rachel Booth and Jess Mony for Social Development Direct. Adapted by Danielle Cornish-Spencer.

1.1. The experience and evidence informing this paper

Manahel is an education programme funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and implemented by Chemonics UK alongside Syrian and international partners, including Social Development Direct (SDDirect). The programme — which has operated since 2018 and focuses on Idlib and Aleppo — supports primary school-aged children in accessing safe, inclusive, and high-quality education.

The programme combines teacher support and classroom learning improvements with safeguarding, psychosocial support, and GEDSI. It works with EAs, schools, parents, and communities to improve education provision and strengthen the capacity to manage education. Manahel's work now also includes providing technical assistance to the Ministry of Education on national safeguarding policy and practice.

By July 2026, Manahel had reached more than 950,000 students with safe and inclusive education provision while strengthening education systems through the education directorates (EDs) in Aleppo and Idlib. (For more information on the EDs in Northwest Syria, see Box 2, below)

This paper draws on programme experience, selected case studies, and four studies, including (1) a desk review of safeguarding risks; (2) research into adults' perceptions of VAC and school safeguarding arrangements; (3) a community GEDSI study; and (4) a review of EAs' knowledge, attitudes, and practices. Together, these sources help explain the programme's decisions, assess progress, and identify unfinished work.

Table 1: Parallel timelines – The changing Syrian context and Manahel

DATE	SYRIA: Conflict and broader context	MANAHEL: Programme development
2011	**Conflict begins.** The uprising in March develops into armed conflict followed by mass displacement and disruption to education (UNHCR).	Manahel has not yet begun.
2018	**Education provision during conflict.** Insecurity and displacement disrupt schooling in Northwest Syria.	**Manahel (SEP) begins.** Support starts for primary education in Idlib and Aleppo through teacher support, learning, safeguarding, and GEDSI (sep.manahel.org).
2019-2021	**Further displacement and COVID-19.** Pandemic-related school closures follow escalating violence in the Northwest (unicef.org).	**Delivery adapts.** Manahel introduces remote learning in 2020 and establishes Community Committees to connect schools, families, and improve safeguarding principles (sep.manahel.org).
2022	**Economic crisis deepens exclusion**. Poverty and deteriorating services increase protection risks and pressures towards child labour and child marriage (UNICEF Middle East and North Africa).	**Disability advocacy grows.** Manahel supports the establishment of the Association of Caregivers for Children with Disabilities (sep.manahel.org).

2023 February	**Türkiye-Syria earthquakes.** Idlib and Aleppo are severely affected, adding school damage, displacement, and protection needs (syria.unfpa.org).	**Emergency adaptation starts.** Manahel expands psychological first aid, adjusts support for children and caregivers, and undertakes light repairs to damaged schools where possible (sep.manahel.org).
Early 2024	**Natural and manufactured upheavals.** Conflict and earthquake recovery overlap; education disruption and economic hardship continue (unicef.org).	**SEP II launches.** The programme launches publicly in February; an improved safeguarding policy receives ED approval and is disseminated from January to February (sep.manahel.org).
2024 December onwards	**Political transition.** The Assad government falls on 8 December, opening a new period of national institutional change (Meetings Coverage and Press Releases).	**A route to Damascus emerges.** Established Idlib counterparts move into national authority, allowing Manahel to build on existing relationships in its national engagement.
2025	**National education reform.** The Ministry of Education announces a unified school calendar and education framework in September; an October ministry circular prohibits physical and verbal abuse of pupils (www.unicef.org).	**Expansion and national technical assistance begin.** Support extends to 150 additional schools in September, bringing the programme to 367 schools; work with the ministry develops on safeguarding policy and practice (sep.manahel.org).
2026	**Commitment to non-violent schooling reaffirmed.** On 16 September, the ministry reiterates its prohibition of physical and verbal abuse (sana.sy).	**Evidence for the next phase develops.** The ED/EA GEDSI scan and community GEDSI analysis examine institutional and household barriers to safe, inclusive education. This paper maps lessons learned and actions for the future.

1.2. The structure of this paper

While **Section 1** sets the programme's contextual and technical scene, **Section 2** traces the development of Manahel's safeguarding and inclusion arrangements — from engagement with EAs in Northwest Syria and implementation in schools and communities to emerging national engagement following the political transition. **Section 3** draws on programme research to examine how change occurred across the system, exploring how institutional commitments, relationships, implementation experience, and social norms reinforced or constrained progress at different levels of the education system. **Section 4** considers what is required to translate programme experience into a nationally owned capability, setting out five priorities for the next phase: (1) Adapting approaches to different contexts, (2) strengthening implementation, (3) maintaining connections with everyday experience, (4) testing equity, and (5) deliberately transferring capability to education institutions. Finally, **Section 5** draws out lessons for systems-strengthening programmes in other conflict-affected and transitional contexts.

02

From fragmented provision to an emerging national system

This section outlines how Manahel's approach to safeguarding and inclusion evolved as the institutional and political context changed. It follows the programme from its initial engagement with EDs in Northwest Syria, through the development and implementation of safeguarding arrangements in schools and communities, to its more recent engagement with the Ministry of Education following the political transition.

Figure 2.1: Manahel's safeguarding and inclusion trajectory

Manahel's approach developed through four broad stages:

1	**Working through existing institutions.**	In the absence of a recognised national ministry counterpart in the areas where it operated, Manahel worked with EDs and Education Assemblies responsible for organising and overseeing education in Northwest Syria.
2	**Developing institutional arrangements for safeguarding.**	Engagement with the EDs expanded from operational coordination into the joint development of safeguarding policy, roles, procedures, and accountability arrangements.
3	**Supporting implementation in schools and communities.**	Providing safeguarding officers, conducting staff training, making reporting and referral arrangements, and monitoring and engaging with parents and communities reinforced implementation in Manahel-supported schools.
4	**Building on experience when the political context changed.**	Following the December 2024 political transition, established counterparts moved into national roles, creating an opportunity for programme experience from Northwest Syria to inform engagement with the Ministry of Education.

The above progression was neither linear nor uninterrupted.

Conflict, displacement, the February 2023 earthquakes, resource constraints, and changing political authority continually affected what could be implemented and how.

2.1. Manahel's route to systems strengthening

Manahel's route to systems strengthening began with EAs that were already keeping schools functioning in Northwest Syria. Within a country divided by conflict, EDs and associated local structures continued to organise education. At the time, the programme had no recognised national ministry counterpart it could work with in its areas of operation. Still, it had institutions with responsibilities, staff, and established relationships with schools.

Working through those institutions enabled Manahel to connect support to individual schools with the organisations responsible for overseeing them. Safeguarding and inclusion gradually became part of this broader institutional engagement.

Figure 2.2: What is an education directorate in the Northwest Syria context?



Before December 2024, an ED in opposition-held Northwest Syria was a subnational education authority responsible for organising and overseeing education within its area. In Aleppo and Idlib, where Manahel worked with the ED to support education, EDs led strategic planning, developed education policies, managed resources, and oversaw implementation; under them, local education assemblies supervised the day-to-day running of schools.



EDs provided an institutional link between education policy and school practice. Their responsibilities included supervising and supporting teachers, coordinating with organisations that supported education, and introducing policies and procedures across schools. Manahel's engagement included work on teacher development, safeguarding policies, teacher codes of conduct, reporting arrangements, and disciplinary procedures.



These institutions operated within a fragmented and changing governance environment and faced substantial constraints associated with conflict, limited resources, and reliance on external support.

2.2. Building institutional ownership of safeguarding

Manahel's relationships with the EDs initially centred on the practical day-to-day coordination and logistical arrangements needed to deliver education in Manahel-supported schools. Over time, the scope of engagement widened to include EDs as counterparts in developing, adapting, and overseeing safeguarding arrangements. Manahel introduced the EDs to practical safeguarding measures through existing institutional arrangements, including codes of conduct, designated safeguarding responsibilities, and procedures for raising and responding to safeguarding concerns.

Working with the EDs on safeguarding was not a straightforward technical exercise. Safeguarding raised questions about professional authority, accepted disciplinary practices, and adult responsibilities towards children. Gender and disability also shaped how some of these issues were understood. The programme therefore had to work through institutional processes while maintaining clear commitments to girls' and boys' safety and inclusion.

As experience accumulated, the programme developed and formalised institutional safeguarding arrangements through a more comprehensive safeguarding policy, investigation procedures, and disciplinary standards. The process was iterative: implementation exposed gaps, generated learning, and informed subsequent institutional decisions. This helped establish safeguarding as an ongoing responsibility of education authorities and schools rather than a set of requirements introduced solely through programme support. The approach continued to evolve as the programme and its counterparts gained implementation experience. The aim was not to create a separate Manahel safeguarding system, but to develop arrangements that education authorities and schools could increasingly use and oversee themselves.

CASE STUDY 1

From difficult conversations to institutional safeguarding

Introducing safeguarding within the education system in Northwest Syria required engaging with and challenging established attitudes towards discipline and teacher authority regarding children's behaviour. Physical and psychological punishment were widely normalised in schools (and in homes, though Manahel's influence here is limited), and were sometimes reinforced by traditional beliefs and interpretations of religious teachings. Even where the need for change was recognised, limited accountability arrangements and teachers' lack of access to alternative disciplinary approaches presented significant barriers. Concerns also arose that restricting corporal punishment would undermine teachers' authority.

Manahel addressed these challenges by building on schools' existing protective role. Earlier programme research suggested that many children regarded schools as relatively safe despite the surrounding conflict. This provided an entry point for discussions with EDs about making schools emotionally and psychologically safer. Political economy analysis helped identify influential actors and inform engagement with education authorities and communities throughout the process.

Rather than starting with a comprehensive policy and associated sanctions, Manahel worked with EDs to set manageable commitments and build the capacity needed to implement them. During the first year, these pledges included agreeing to a concise code of conduct; delivering teacher training followed by coaching and learning circles; and identifying school-based safeguarding focal points and initial reporting channels, including complaints boxes and a hotline. Existing social counsellor roles provided an entry point for embedding safeguarding responsibilities within school structures, while learning circles enabled teachers to reflect on disciplinary practices and learn from colleagues who demonstrated positive disciplinary alternatives.

As implementation progressed, discussions of reported incidents revealed differences in how forms of abuse were recognised. Physical punishment became increasingly open to challenge, whereas shouting and verbal aggression remained more readily accepted. Sexual abuse posed particular difficulties around terminology, stigma, and boundaries between education authority responsibilities and law enforcement. These experiences informed the progressive development of clearer risk categories, reporting and investigation procedures, and disciplinary arrangements enforced by EDs. Together, these elements contributed to a more comprehensive safeguarding policy, which was launched at a Northwest Syria conference in 2021.

Important limitations to child protections remained. Community committees and awareness-raising campaigns helped extend safeguarding discussions beyond schools, but the programme's influence over harmful practices at home was limited. Reporting instances of abuse also remained uneven. While reported cases increased in Manahel-supported schools, data shared by EDs indicated lower reporting in schools outside the programme. Recognising that reporting figures do not necessarily reflect the prevalence of abuse, Manahel and the EDs used this evidence to examine gaps in awareness and reporting practices beyond programme-supported schools.

The experience outlined above illustrates how institutional safeguarding arrangements developed through practical implementation, sustained negotiation, and progressively clearer accountability; policy emerged from this process rather than served as its starting point.

2.3. Moving from policy into school practice

Manahel supported the implementation of safeguarding in schools once all levels of the education system agreed on institutional safeguarding arrangements. Safeguarding officers served as designated points of responsibility; safeguarding instructors at the education assembly level provided an additional layer of support, coordination, and coaching for school safeguarding officers across subdistricts. Staff received training to recognise and respond to concerns. The programme established reporting and referral arrangements, while monitoring and engagement with school leaders and EDs created ways to follow up on cases. Regular learning sessions also helped reinforce safeguarding responsibilities and responses to emerging support needs. Engagement with parents and communities extended the work beyond the classroom.

The programme was implemented in exceptionally difficult circumstances. The February 2023 earthquakes caused extensive damage and displacement in Idlib and Aleppo, including by prohibiting the use of schools as shelters. Manahel adapted its support by incorporating psychological first aid and other measures for children and caregivers into its ongoing safeguarding and inclusion work despite a substantially more pressured operating environment.

The programme also increasingly generated evidence about how children experienced safeguarding and inclusion. Research on VAC; community GEDSI; and education-authority knowledge, attitudes, and practices identified encouraging signs as well as ongoing weaknesses (see Section 3).

2.4. A changing political context and a route to national engagement

The political transition beginning in December 2024 changed Syria's institutional landscape substantially, including education.

Education officials who worked with Manahel in Idlib moved into national positions within the new government. These officials' familiarity with the programme's work and with safeguarding implementation in Northwest Syria was now accessible at the national level. This continuity of relationships enabled the newly established Ministry of Education to explicitly request Manahel's support in extending safeguarding arrangements nationally.[4]

Unlike the earlier engagement in Northwest Syria, where considerable effort was needed to establish safeguarding as an institutional priority, the national engagement began with a clear request for technical support because political will was already established. However, the broader institutional responsibilities and relationships involved in national safeguarding also introduced new complexities, requiring a different approach to engagement and sequencing.

Manahel's invitation from the national government to support education nationwide coincided with broader moves towards a more unified education system. By 2025, Manahel expanded support to an additional 150 schools across Idlib, Aleppo city, and the Aleppo countryside and began providing technical assistance to the Ministry of Education on safeguarding policy and practice.

The ministry's prohibition of physical and verbal abuse of pupils now provides a national policy environment in which safeguarding implementation can be developed further. At the same time, national-level engagement makes the task more complex. Approaches developed through work in Idlib and Aleppo must now be considered across regions with different institutional histories, capacities, resources, and social contexts.



Because safeguarding must be implemented in schools across Syria, Manahel has had to change the scope of its programming; its earlier work focused largely on developing and supporting safeguarding practices through specific EAs and schools.

The emerging question is how far the experience, knowledge, and capabilities developed through Manahel's work can contribute to a nationally owned system. That is the question to which the next section turns.

[4] Manahel did not influence the political transition or the subsequent national commitment to non-violent schooling. Those developments resulted from a much wider political process outside the programme's control. What changed for Manahel was the level at which its accumulated experience could potentially be used.

03

How change became possible across the system

Manahel's experience suggests that safer, more inclusive education did not result from change at any single level of the education system. Progress was more likely where institutional commitments, school practice, family and community engagement, and girls' and boys' protection mechanisms reinforced one another. Conversely, gaps at any level could weaken change elsewhere. For example, a safeguarding policy could establish expectations for school staff, but its effectiveness depended on whether staff understood their responsibilities, reporting mechanisms were accessible, EAs provided oversight, and children and families trusted the arrangements in practice.

Understanding the dynamics between levels provides a useful way to understand the programme's experience. The socio-ecological model serves as an analytical lens rather than a description of the programme's design. It highlights interactions amongst the different levels that shape children's experiences, while the Manahel experience adds an explicitly institutional dimension: how learning and capability can move between schools, subnational education authorities, and — increasingly — national government (see Table 2).

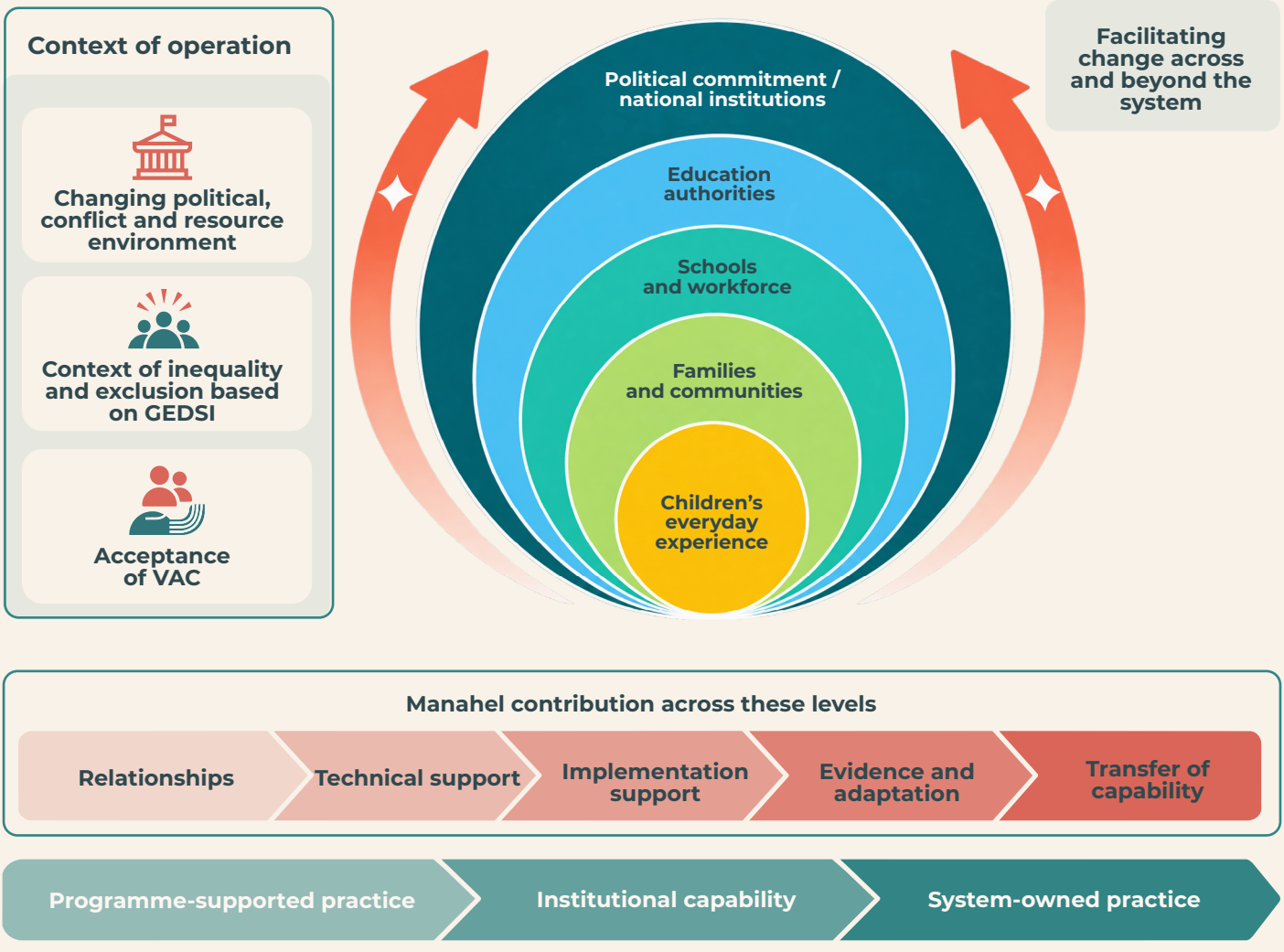
Table 2: A systems-change pathway for safe and inclusive education

Level	What needed to change	Manahel's contribution	Why surrounding levels matter
Children	Greater ability to learn safely, participate, and seek help when harm occurs.	Safeguarding arrangements, reporting routes, psychosocial and inclusion support.	Children can use protection mechanisms only if adults respond appropriately and the mechanisms are accessible, trusted, and safe.
Schools and teachers	Everyday practice, teacher behaviour, school leadership, and safeguarding responsibilities.	Safeguarding officers, training, reporting and referral arrangements, leadership engagement, and implementation support.	Institutional expectations, available resources, and norms within families and communities shape school practice.
Families and communities	Greater support for safe and inclusive education and for children to disclose concerns.	Parent and community engagement, Community Committees, and dialogue around safeguarding and inclusion.	Community norms can reinforce school change or undermine it, including through attitudes towards discipline, gender, disability, and children's roles.
Education authorities	Institutional ownership, policy, oversight, and capability.	Co-develop safeguarding policy, provide technical assistance, monitor, joint problem-solving, and sustain institutional relationships.	Policy gains meaning through implementation in schools; implementation experience also generates evidence that can inform institutional decisions.
National system	National architecture, standards, accountability, and implementation capability.	Emerging technical assistance to the ministry and transfer of lessons from Northwest Syria.	National commitments require subnational and school-level capability to change children's everyday experiences.

Around these levels sits a changing political, conflict, and resource environment (see Figure 2). Manahel operated amid war, displacement, the February 2023 earthquakes, and a major political transition that began in December 2024. These conditions shaped what was possible at different points in the programme and underscored an important distinction: programmes can influence institutional capability and practice, but they do not control the political conditions within which systems change occurs.

Manahel's role evolved as the political environment changed. The programme combined direct implementation support with convening, technical assistance, and evidence generation and sustained work alongside education institutions. The longer-term question is whether these functions can become embedded within those institutions rather than remain dependent on programme support. Findings from Manahel's research on perceptions of VAC are encouraging. The programme has also made progress in shifting safeguarding from programme-supported arrangements towards greater institutional responsibility, first through Education Directorates and, more recently, through engagement with the Ministry of Education. However, this transition is ongoing. Safeguarding responsibilities, capacities and accountability mechanisms are not yet fully embedded within a sustainable, nationally owned education systems. This distinction is important for the analysis that follows.

Figure 3: Manahel's work to facilitate change across different levels of the education system



3.1. Change was stronger when different levels reinforced one another

Manahel's safeguarding work illustrates how different levels of the education system interact. Although safeguarding policy developed alongside the EDs created institutional legitimacy and common expectations, policy adoption alone was insufficient: Safeguarding officers, staff training, reporting routes, referral arrangements, and monitoring and engagement with school leaders and parents were needed to translate institutional commitments into real-world practice.

Research from Manahel-supported areas provided some evidence that these safeguarding arrangements were being applied in practice. Staff and caregivers frequently identified safeguarding officers as trusted contacts and reported that harsh punishment by teachers had become less frequent than in previous years. While these findings did not establish programme impact, and the research captured adult accounts rather than directly measuring children's experiences, they suggested that institutional commitments were more meaningful when sustained implementation supported them.

The contrast with Aleppo city — where Manahel had not been implementing — further illustrates the impact of implementation support, although it should not be treated as a control comparison. In Aleppo city, reporting arrangements were described as less clear, less well understood, and less strictly enforced, with perpetrators taking limited accountability. There was also uncertainty about accessible routes to report for children with disabilities. This demonstrates that policy architecture requires the people, relationships, and routines needed to function.

Our research results also explain why systems strengthening cannot stop at the institutional boundary. Manahel's community-level research found that there was support for girls' education, yet barriers persisted, especially around household expectations regarding girls' domestic roles. For boys, there was an expectation that they contribute to household income. Girls and boys, including those with disabilities, continued to experience barriers to their education such as inaccessible infrastructure, transport costs, limited specialist provisions, documentation, and poverty.. Institutional change can therefore be undermined when the surrounding material and social environment continues to exclude specific children despite there being largely positive social norms around their inclusion.

3.2. Relationships connecting different parts of the system

Manahel's initial engagement with EDs centred on the practical coordination required to sustain education. Over time, this created space for joint problem-solving and more substantive discussions around safeguarding, including practices and norms that could be sensitive or contested. The programme could therefore work with counterparts to introduce a policy and adapt arrangements as implementation generated new problems and learning opportunities. This is important for systems strengthening because formal organisational structures do not necessarily ensure that information moves effectively between levels. The practical experience of schools needs to reach those responsible for policy and oversight, while schools need to understand and implement institutional expectations. Manahel's sustained engagement helped connect these institutions.

The same relationships later acquired a different significance. Following the political transition beginning in December 2024, education officials Manahel worked with in Idlib moved into national positions. As a result, relationships and implementation experience that was developed under one governance arrangement became relevant to the emerging national system. Manahel did not cause this political opening and could not have predicted its form. The programme's contribution was that is happened to develop relationships and practical experience that could be used when the opening occurred, and then acting on that opportunity.

This suggests that relationships can themselves constitute a form of systems infrastructure. They can preserve institutional memory, enable difficult conversations, connect implementation with decision-making authorities, and create continuity when formal structures change.

3.3. Implementation-generated knowledge that could travel through the system

The direction of influence did not flow only from policymakers to schools. Implementation also generated knowledge about what policy needed to include and what institutional support was necessary to make it meaningful. Within Manahel, this learning was not limited to formal research or periodic reviews; safeguarding concerns emerging during routine implementation also informed ongoing decisions about professional support and prevention. This created a practical feedback mechanism through which school-level experience could influence programme responses and institutional support, rather than being confined to managing individual incidents.

Experience with reporting mechanisms, safeguarding officers, referrals, teacher practice, and community engagement exposed practical barriers that policy design alone would have struggled to identify. The results from both the VAC and GEDSI norms research that Manahel conducted in 2025 and 2026, respectively, further demonstrated that different groups of children encountered protection systems differently. Girls could be deterred from reporting by shame and reputational concerns, boys by expectations of strength, children with disabilities by isolation and inaccessible communication channels, and younger children by mechanisms that assumed literacy. These issues fundamentally affected whether a safeguarding system functioned for girls and boys in their full diversity.

A complaints mechanism cannot be considered effective simply because it exists. A policy cannot be considered implemented solely because schools have received it. A system that protects some children more effectively than others remains incomplete.

This implies that evidence on children's and communities' experiences needs to move upwards through the system. National and subnational institutions need mechanisms to identify where formal arrangements are inaccessible, are implemented inconsistently, or produce unequal outcomes. These institutions also need mechanisms for adapting policy and support accordingly.

3.4. Social and institutional norms changed at different speeds

Manahel's experience also cautions against treating institutional change as evidence that underlying norms have changed at the same pace.

The programme's research found that support for equality and inclusion coexisted alongside continuing beliefs about women's suitability for leadership, the capabilities of people with disabilities, accepted disciplinary practices, and the differentiated expectations of girls and boys. Formal rules can therefore move faster than the assumptions that shape how people interpret them. At the same time, institutional practices can reshape expectations over time. Consistent safeguarding messages, changes in teacher practice, and engagement with parents and communities can create opportunities to question previously accepted behaviours. This interaction is important, even when the extent and durability of changes in social norms remain difficult to establish.

The reverse can also occur: Families and practitioners may support safer or more inclusive schooling while being unable to realise it because transport, infrastructure, staffing, or specialist services are unavailable. The constraints identified through Manahel's community GEDSI social-norms research demonstrate that attitudes, institutional capacity, and material resources must be considered together.

Systems strengthening therefore requires more than alignment between policy levels. It also requires attention to the social norms, incentives, resources, and professional practices through which formal commitments are translated into everyday behaviours.

CASE STUDY 2

How system change became visible: An example from one school

Safeguarding incidents provided an important opportunity to examine how institutional responsibilities operated in practice. In one case involving a teacher's physical abuse of children, the investigation resulted in the ED taking disciplinary action against the teacher. However, Manahel's review identified concerns about whether the initial decision was proportionate to the violation under the agreed disciplinary framework. The subsequent review illustrated the importance of consistent accountability standards and the continued need for technical engagement to support their application.

These experiences informed a safeguarding approach that combined agreed disciplinary standards with flexibility in investigation arrangements. While the disciplinary framework was reviewed periodically, investigations could be adapted according to the nature and severity of individual cases, including by establishing dedicated investigation committees.

In 2020, safeguarding instructors were introduced at the Education Essembly level to support groups of school safeguarding officers across subdistricts. School officers escalated concerns to these instructors, who then helped identify appropriate investigation committee members to participate in investigations where required. The instructors also coached school safeguarding officers and reviewed recurring incidents to identify patterns requiring further attention.

Importantly, the response to safeguarding concerns extended beyond disciplinary action against individual staff members. Safeguarding instructors discussed emerging patterns with EDs and other organisations supporting schools, helping inform preventive activities. Within Manahel, this process involved adapting weekly psychosocial support plans to address recurring concerns, such as bullying. Safeguarding instructors also used these insights to identify learning and refresher training needs among school safeguarding officers, while school-level awareness-raising through safeguarding magazines and posters reinforced key messages.

This experience illustrates how safeguarding arrangements can connect individual accountability with professional learning and prevention across schools. It also highlights the importance of intermediate institutional roles that can translate school-level concerns into wider responses rather than treating each reported incident as an isolated event.

Manahel did not attempt to influence every level of the education system at once. Its experience instead shows how progress at one level can create opportunities elsewhere, and how weaknesses in one part of the system can hold back broader change. Its contribution has been to strengthen connections between policy and practice; schools and EAs; institutional arrangements and community realities; and, increasingly, between experience in Northwest Syria and national policy.

The latest challenge for Manahel — and for Syria — is not just primarily to demonstrate that safer and more inclusive practices can be supported within a group of schools. It is to determine which capabilities must be embedded within the emerging national education system and how to do this across a more diverse institutional and social landscape.

04

From programme experience to national capability

Syria's political transition has fundamentally changed Manahel's operating context. Before December 2024, the programme pursued systems strengthening through EAs that operated within a fragmented governance environment. The political transition now offers an important opportunity for the programme to contribute to an emerging national education system that changes, rather than removes, the systems challenge.

The ministry's prohibition of physical and verbal abuse of pupils provides a stronger national mandate for non-violent education in future. Manahel's experience can help inform how such commitments can translate into school responsibilities, reporting arrangements, professional practice, and institutional oversight. But political commitment itself does not constitute implementation. Therefore, the next implementation phase should be understood as a transition from programme-supported capability towards a nationally owned capability. This phase requires that the system:

I. Does not simply scale the Northwest model

Although the experience developed in Idlib and Aleppo provides a substantial body of practice, relationships, and learning that can inform expansion across Syria, it should not be treated as a ready-made national model.

A national system encompasses far greater institutional, geographic and social diversity than the areas where Manahel originally worked. Different regions will have different experiences of conflict, governance, institutional capacity, community norms, and service availability. The task for Manahel's next iteration, therefore, is to identify which principles and capabilities should be consistent nationally and which aspects of implementation need to be adapted locally.

Core safeguarding expectations, survivor- and child-centred principles, accountability, and non-discrimination should not be negotiable through adaptation; however, implementation mechanisms may need to vary. This will require (a) a thorough understanding of the context and norms in each governorate to deliver GEDSI- and VAC-related knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and skills; (b) an assessment of existing policies and practices in each governorate; and (c) a governorate-level rollout plan. This contextual understanding could be drawn from research (based on research conducted by Manahel) and/or existing evidence assessing institutional capacity and practices. Manahel recommends a phased, adaptive, and context-sensitive approach shaped by ministry priorities.

II. Builds implementation capability alongside national architecture

National policies, guidance, and structures are vital, but their effectiveness will depend on whether institutions at every level have the capabilities and resources to apply them. The experience described in this paper suggests that this includes — at a minimum — defining responsibilities clearly, identifying capable school leadership, recruiting staff who understand safeguarding, preparing functioning reporting and referral arrangements, conducting subnational oversight, linking services, improving mechanisms for learning and adaptation, and ensuring that there are sufficient resources to maintain these functions.

Given these recommended assessments, Manahel's next phase should avoid an overly policy-centred definition of systems strengthening. The relevant test will determine whether appropriate national frameworks exist and whether schools and education authorities can use them consistently and effectively.



III. Preserves the connection between national policy and everyday experience

As Manahel moves towards providing technical assistance at the national level, it will be important to maintain strong links with Education Directorates and schools. Much of the programme's experience of strengthening safeguarding and inclusion has been developed through practical engagement with education personnel, children and communities. Without mechanisms to capture this experience and sustain support for implementation, there is a risk that national policies and procedures become disconnected from the realities of schools, including the barriers children face in accessing safe and inclusive education.

Manahel's safeguarding and inclusion work is valuable at the national level because it is grounded in years of practical experience across the socio-ecological model, rather than being limited to only one level. As the approach expands across Syria, the programme should protect this connection with the people and institutions responsible for implementation.

Evidence from schools, teachers, parents, communities, and — critically — children should inform the evolution of national safeguarding and inclusion arrangements across all levels of the system. Monitoring should therefore examine not only compliance, such as whether schools have adopted required procedures, but also whether those procedures are understood, accessible, and trusted. Particular attention should be paid to those least able to use them.



IV. Makes equity a test of whether the system works

The research underpinning this paper demonstrates that formal provision can obscure unequal access. For example, reporting mechanisms may exist while remaining inaccessible to younger children or children with disabilities due to, for example, physical barriers or age appropriateness of reporting mechanisms. Social expectations may make disclosure particularly difficult for girls or boys in different ways. Poverty and household pressures can prevent children from benefiting from nominally inclusive education. The next phase therefore needs to ask not only whether the system works, but for whom.

Before establishing reporting mechanisms and implementing policies in each area, disaggregated evidence and qualitative enquiry should identify which children are least protected or included and why. Beyond identifying inequalities, institutions should use this evidence to adapt practices, allocate resources, and strengthen accountability — positioning equity as a measure of how well the system responds. This will help ensure that reporting routes are accessible to children in all their diversity, that prevention measures respond to their different needs, and that systems are accountable.



V. Transfers capability deliberately

Long-term systems strengthening means being clear about which functions should eventually sit within the education system itself rather than continue to depend on Manahel or other externally funded projects.

As Syria rebuilds, there is a real opportunity from the outset to put protection and inclusion at the heart of the education system. Building in these systems now is likely to be more effective than trying to retrofit them later, once structures and ways of working are already established. It also means being clear that the government is the primary duty bearer for the safety, protection, and inclusion of all children in its schools. The role of non-government actors is to help strengthen the government's ability to meet those responsibilities while continuing to uphold their own safeguarding and accountability duties.

In practice, this means distinguishing between temporary support and functions that need to become part of the routine responsibilities of the education ministry, education authorities and schools. Technical assistance should help those institutions build the confidence and capability to identify problems, adapt policy, support implementation, monitor what is happening in practice, and respond to new safeguarding and inclusion challenges.

The key question at the point of programme transition is therefore not simply whether a policy, tool, or process has been handed over; it is whether the system can sustain the programme's functions without relying on the programme itself.

CASE STUDY 3

From Northwest Syria to Damascus

Manahel's experience strengthening safeguarding systems in Northwest Syria since 2018 provided an important foundation for national-level engagement following the December 2024 political changes. The newly established Ministry of Education requested support to replicate this experience nationally, marking a significant shift in the programme's conditions for engagement. Whereas earlier work with EDs required sustained efforts to establish safeguarding as an institutional priority, the national ministry's request provided an initial basis for ownership and demand for technical support.

National engagement presented different challenges. Safeguarding responsibilities extended beyond the Ministry of Education to other government institutions, including the ministries responsible for social affairs, justice, and higher education. Their mandates, relationships, and decision-making authority introduced complexities that Manahel could not address through its established education-sector relationships alone. An updated political economy analysis in 2026 further highlighted the need to examine accountability mechanisms carefully, particularly where institutional change could be difficult to influence.

These considerations informed a different sequence of technical assistance. Rather than immediately transferring the safeguarding framework developed in Northwest Syria, Manahel proposed beginning with a national workshop led by the Ministry of Education. Its primary purpose was to give the ministry a platform to articulate its commitment to advancing safeguarding nationally, while bringing together other government institutions and education partners to build consensus on its importance and agree to practical next steps.

The proposed process would then support the development of a basic Safe Schools Framework that initially focuses on prevention, minimum standards, and practical school-level responsibilities. More complex questions concerning accountability, referral arrangements, and inter-ministerial responsibilities would require further consultation and examination. Testing selected measures in schools would provide learning opportunities before considering broader implementation.

Transferring learning across institutional contexts involves more than replicating established tools or procedures. While Manahel's experience in Northwest Syria provided a technical starting point, national-level progress depends on creating space for ministry leadership, building broader institutional agreement, and sequencing reforms according to what is politically and operationally feasible. At this stage, the approach represents an emerging pathway for institutional change rather than an achieved national safeguarding reform.

05

Lessons beyond Syria

Manahel's experience offers several valuable lessons for programmes working to strengthen education systems in other conflict-affected or transitional contexts. The programme's value lies not in providing a model that can be copied directly, but in showing how sustained engagement, adaptation, relationship-building, and investment across different levels of the system can help create the conditions for safer and more inclusive education.

Some aspects of Manahel's trajectory are specific to Syria, particularly the movement of established counterparts from Northwest Syria into the national government. This transfer created an opportunity that other programmes may not encounter in the same way. Even so, the underlying approaches and lessons are highly relevant beyond Syria and can be adapted to different institutional, political, and social contexts. The broader lessons are to:

I. Start systems work before conditions are perfect

Conflict-affected systems are rarely institutionally empty. Even where national authority is contested or fragmented, organisations, professional relationships, administrative routines, and individual leaders can develop longer-term capability. Waiting for institutional stability can delay improvements that children need immediately and cost opportunities to strengthen existing institutions.

II. Treat relationships as infrastructure

Technical reforms depend on relationships through which problems surface, disagreements are negotiated, evidence is discussed, and responsibility is progressively transferred. Manahel's experience shows that these relationships can have value beyond their immediate purpose. When institutions change, trusted professional relationships can preserve continuity and create routes for previous learning to inform new structures.

III. Work vertically and horizontally across the system

Policy change alone cannot create safe and inclusive schools, nor can isolated school-level interventions produce durable systems change if institutional incentives and community norms pull in the opposite direction. Programmes need to understand how authority, practice, resources, and social norms interact across national institutions, subnational authorities, schools, families, and communities.

IV. Not confuse political commitment with systems change

A ministerial announcement, national policy, or formal prohibition can create a powerful enabling environment. It does not mean, however, that staff behaviour, institutional incentives, community expectations, or children's access to protection have changed at the same speed.

The reverse is also true: Programmes can strengthen practices, relationships, and institutional capabilities before the national political environment becomes favourable. Nevertheless, approaches developed without government engagement often struggle to endure beyond programme funding.

For these reasons, programmes should strengthen institutions so they are ready to act when political opportunities emerge, while recognising that no programme can create those opportunities on its own.

V. Plan explicitly for the transition from programme capability to system capability

A programme can demonstrate an effective approach while leaving the system dependent on programme staff, funding, or technical support. Because of this, scaling activity is not the same as institutionalising capability.

From the beginning, systems programmes should ask: Who will eventually perform this function? What capability will they require? What resources and accountability will sustain it? How will we know that the function is continuing when programme support reduces?

These questions are particularly important in fragile and transitional settings, where institutional structures themselves may change continually.

06

Conclusion

Manahel's experience shows that systems strengthening can begin even amid conflict and institutional uncertainty. By working with education authorities, schools, and communities, the programme helped connect safeguarding and GEDSI commitments to practical support and accountability. The relationships and learning that developed through this work provided a foundation for national engagement when political conditions changed. The broader lesson to take from Manahel's journey is that protecting girls and boys now and strengthening the institutions they will depend on in future can (and should) be pursued together.

For Syria today, the opportunity is to embed safeguarding and inclusion as the national education system rebuilds. This requires government leadership, sustained resources, and institutions equipped to translate commitments into practice across diverse contexts. Donors and technical partners can support this transition by investing in the people and capabilities needed to sustain protection beyond programme funding. Gender equality, disability, and social inclusion must remain central to this work, with progress being assessed through the experiences of girls and boys whose access to education and protection is most constrained.

The lasting value of this work will depend on whether these changes become reliable features of children's everyday lives: whether girls and boys, in all their diversity, can learn safely, participate openly, seek help easily, and trust fundamentally that adults will respond appropriately. Building institutions that can sustain those conditions is the task ahead. Girls' and boys' safety and inclusion must be a fundamental measure of success for Syria's education system.

Syria Education Programme

Manahel is funded by UK International Development
and implemented by Chemonics UK with Syrian and international partners.

Cover photo: Primary school children taking part in a literacy lesson at a Manahel-supported school, November 2025.