

Investing in Syrian Humanitarian Action **ISHA**  
الاستثمار في العمل الإنساني في سوريا **ISHA**

# Technology-based Learning Assessment Findings Report

June 2016



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More than five years since the conflict in Syria began, over 11 million people have been killed or forced to flee their homes, and an estimated 13.5 million men, women and children are still in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria. The Syrian humanitarian crisis is one of the most complex and tragic in history that has changed the world and the face of humanitarian response.<sup>1</sup>

The protracted crisis has impacted all aspects of humanitarian work in Syria and increased the need for assistance specifically at the local level where international aid organizations have limited access to enter and deliver operations inside the country. This has led the international humanitarian community to rely heavily on remote management and to form partnerships with local Syrian organizations who often have limited experience in humanitarian work. As the crisis drags on, many of these organizations are overstretched, taking on too much work and putting themselves at risk to provide aid throughout the country, despite limited resources, a lack of sector experts, and high turnover rates of staff.

Addressing the knowledge needs and providing professional development opportunities among Syrian humanitarian aid workers is essential to the immediate emergency response situation, especially given that many are new to the sector. While many Syrians plan on returning to their regular jobs after the crisis, it may not be possible for everyone. Consequently, relevant training will also be necessary because humanitarian work could become a long-term career option for many in the future. In addition to the growing need for training, remote learning has become one of the primary options for delivering learning to the aid workforce across the country. Remote learning is particularly relevant in besieged areas as it is becoming more and more challenging, dangerous, and costly for aid workers to cross the border into neighboring countries to attend face-to-face training.

In response to the growing need for demand-driven capacity development and skills building, a consortium of three non-profit organizations- Mercy Corps, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and DisasterReady.org- is implementing the Investing in Syrian Humanitarian Acton (ISHA) program. Given its overarching goal of strengthening the knowledge, skills, and capacity of Syrian civil society organizations, providing on-the-job remote learning options for the wider community Syrian humanitarians is a primary component of the program.

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<sup>1</sup> Reliefweb: Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Snapshot (30 June 2016). Retrieved from: <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-humanitarian-snapshot-30-june-2016-enar>

One of the key goals of the Investing in Syrian Humanitarian Action (ISHA) program is to develop an online learning program that targets the top priority needs and relevant topics to support Syrian humanitarian organizations' response to the Syrian crisis. As a first step, DisasterReady conducted a technology-based learning assessment among local and international humanitarian organizations with operations inside Syria to understand their challenges, the knowledge and skills they need to perform their jobs more effectively, their preferences when learning online, and the benefits to them of an online learning program.

Putting the needs of the Syrian humanitarian organizations at the center of the ISHA learning program is fundamental to providing a meaningful and engaging program that gives aid workers access, from any location, to free online courses and resources as well as opportunities for knowledge sharing through a web-based learning portal. The learning program aims to help strengthen skills and knowledge in order to increase the effectiveness of aid workers and the impact they have on providing aid in Syria. This program will also support the professional development of aid workers new to the humanitarian sector by enhancing their knowledge of humanitarian work and broadening their skillset, better positioning them for jobs and new career opportunities. The ISHA technology-based learning program will be focused on humanitarians in the whole of Syria and will also be made available and free to anyone in the world through the DisasterReady.org portal. Learning resources for the ISHA online learning program will be developed and made available over time on the portal.

The ISHA Technology-based Learning Assessment was conducted by DisasterReady.org in collaboration with the Orange Capacity Building Organization (Orange) through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and an online survey in both Arabic and English from 22 May through 17 June 2016. Prior to the assessment, the DisasterReady team conducted a desk review and a series of consultations (17) with capacity building teams and members of the stakeholder groups to determine appropriate tools and approach (online survey, KIIs and FGDs) for the assessment. The assessment's main objective was to gather key information using both qualitative and quantitative research methods to get deeper insight into the learning landscape and the needs of aid workers in Syria in order to establish a suitable design and delivery format for the ISHA Technology-based Learning Program. The key objectives were to identify:

- knowledge gaps and priority learning needs of humanitarian staff working in Syria
- online learning preferences and technology constraints
- incentives to motivate learners to engage in self-paced, online learning especially while working in high-stress, emergency situations

**636** participants completed the online survey over a four-week period. The survey was designed for humanitarians, frontline staff, and volunteers that deliver assistance at the community level inside Syria all of whom represent the target audience for the ISHA online learning program. The survey, available in Arabic (619 respondents) and English (17 respondents), asked multiple-choice questions and a few open-end questions to gather first-hand information from the target audience on their priority knowledge needs; personal preferences and past experience learning online; and individual access to the internet and devices inside Syria. The survey was sent to international, national and local organizations providing humanitarian assistance inside Syria with the request that it be forwarded to all levels of local staff and volunteers as well as any staff from partner organizations that are based and working in Syria.

**115** people working for organizations with staff members or partners operating inside Syria participated in the 18 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and 13 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The DisasterReady team conducted key informant interviews and focus group discussions with a range of professionals from international non-governmental organizations, local non-governmental organizations, UN Agencies with remote teams in Syria, and regional capacity building teams and firms based out of Jordan and Lebanon. In addition, the Orange team led focus group discussions in Turkey and Syria with both Syrian and international non-governmental organizations. Key informant interviews were conducted with 1-2 participants in person in Amman, Jordan and over the phone with colleagues working out of Beirut, Lebanon, while focus group discussions were held in person with an average of about 8 participants out of Amman, Jordan, Gaziantep, Turkey and Bab Al-Hawa, Syria. These targeted discussions provided a unique opportunity for professionals with different roles and backgrounds to provide more in-depth insight on the key themes of the assessment and to shed light on the challenges their organizations are facing with remote management and supporting Syrian partners, frontline staff, and volunteers who deliver assistance at the community level. In addition to gathering assessment data, the interviews and group discussions also provided a unique opportunity to raise awareness among organizations and teams about local capacity building initiatives targeting humanitarian aid workers in the region and to create new opportunities to exchange knowledge, share content, and collaborate on existing learning programs. Notes taken from the interviews and focus group discussions were aggregated by question and topic, and analyzed along with the online survey responses included in this report.

# Participant Profile

Overall, a total of 751 people working for a wide range of organizations participated in the ISHA Technology-based Learning Assessment. The online survey targeted Syrian humanitarians and field staff operating inside Syria while the 115 participants who took part in the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Syria represented over 76 different organizations; 56 of which were Syrian non-profit organizations. The roles of participants from KIIs and FGDs ranged from regional directors, chairmen, managers, capacity development officers, HR managers, cluster support officers, partnership advisors, program managers, information and technology experts, cross border operations leaders, project and field staff as well as local content and training providers. The stakeholder groups for the key informant interviews and focus group discussions are outlined in the table below:

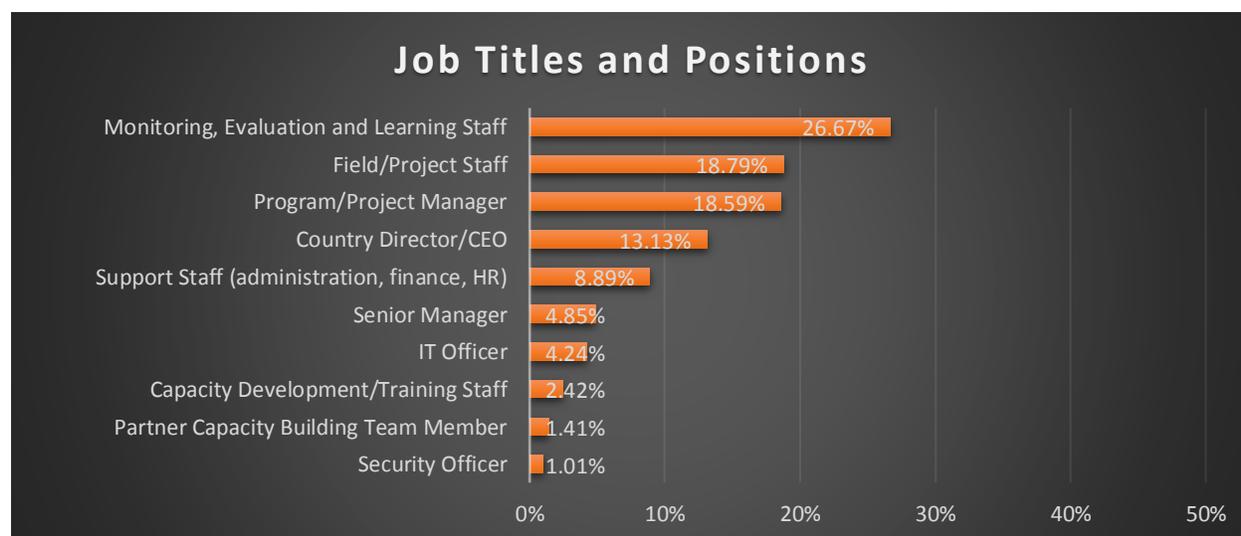
Participants from interviews and focus group discussions	Jordan	Lebanon	Turkey	Syria
International non-governmental organizations working in remote teams (INGO, UN, Syria diaspora)	7	2	15	5
Local non-governmental organizations	10	1	27	14
Leaders of Syrian networks, groups and coordination bodies	-	-	5	-
Local council members	-	-	-	9
Staff from coordination bodies or other groups (INGO cluster co-leads, IVCA, OCHA)	2	-	2	-
Capacity development and training teams of different organization types	9	-	3	-
IT staff of different organization types	2	-	2	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>28</b>

## Participants from the Online Survey

As shown in the graphs below, the 636 survey participants represented a broad range of different types of organizations, job positions, locations of work in Syria, and years of experience in humanitarian work. Ensuring diversity in the participant pool was critical to getting a comprehensive view of the learning landscape in Syria.

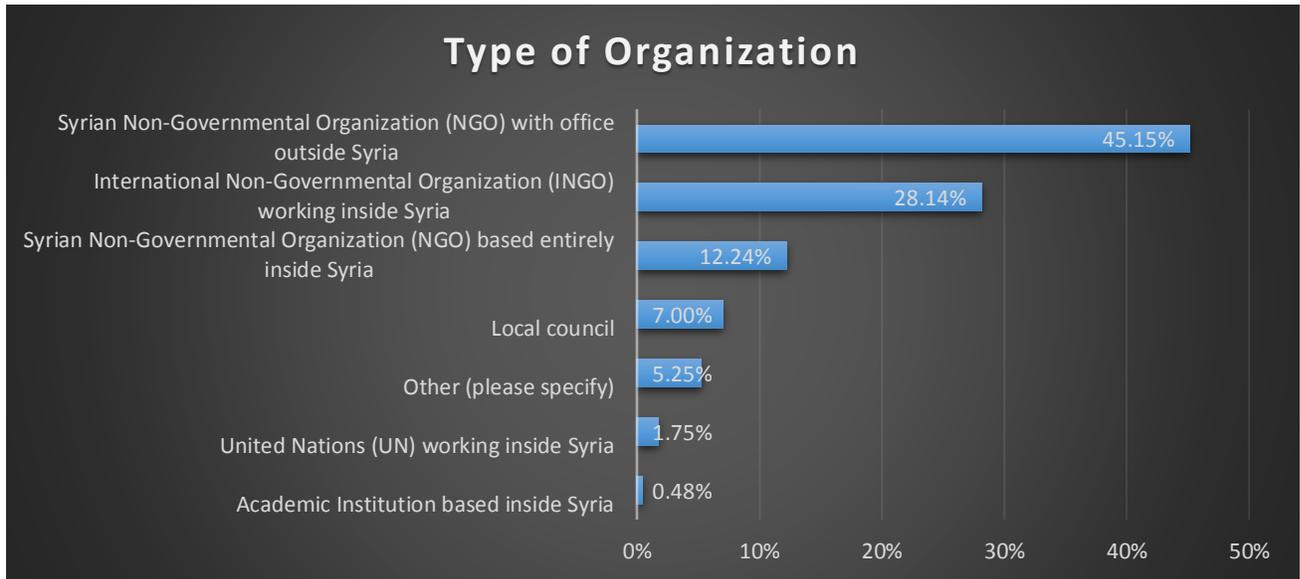
### Q: Please select the job title that best describes your position.

The highest percentage of participants were Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Staff (26%), followed by Field or Project Staff (18%), then Program or Project Managers (18%).



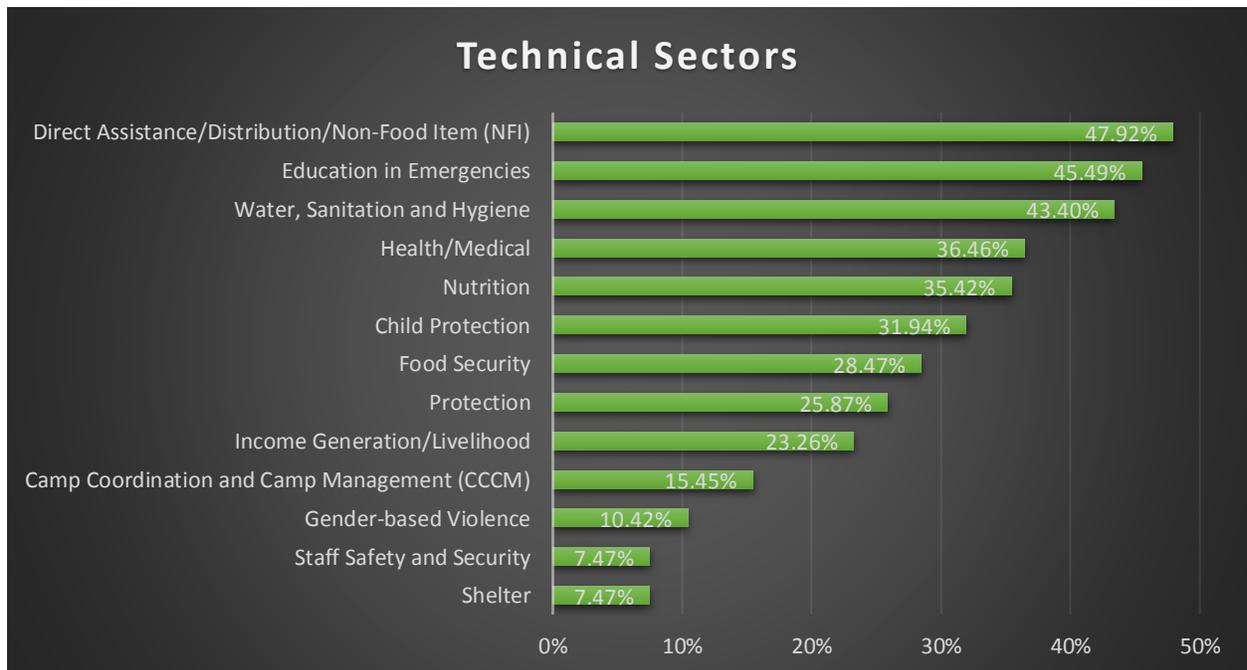
**Q: What type of organization do you work for?**

Almost half of survey participants are staff working for Syrian non-profit organizations with offices based outside Syria (45%), followed by staff of international non-profit organizations working inside Syria (28%). Participants who answered “Other” included: volunteer groups providing social and community services inside Syria.



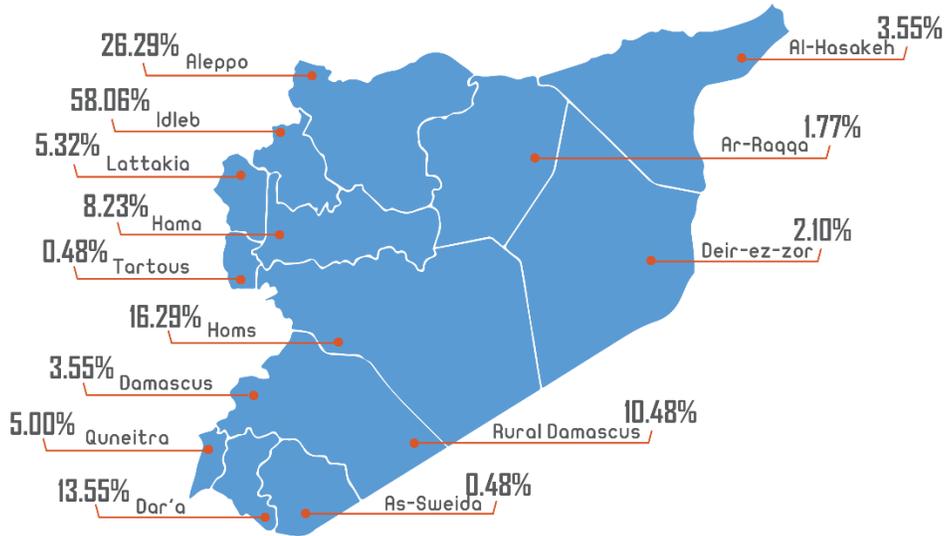
**Q: In which technical sector(s) does your organization work? (Select all that apply)**

Most organizations work in multiple sectors covering all areas of humanitarian aid. The top sectors were direct assistance or the distribution of non-food items (NFIs) (47%), education in emergencies (45%), followed by Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) (43%).



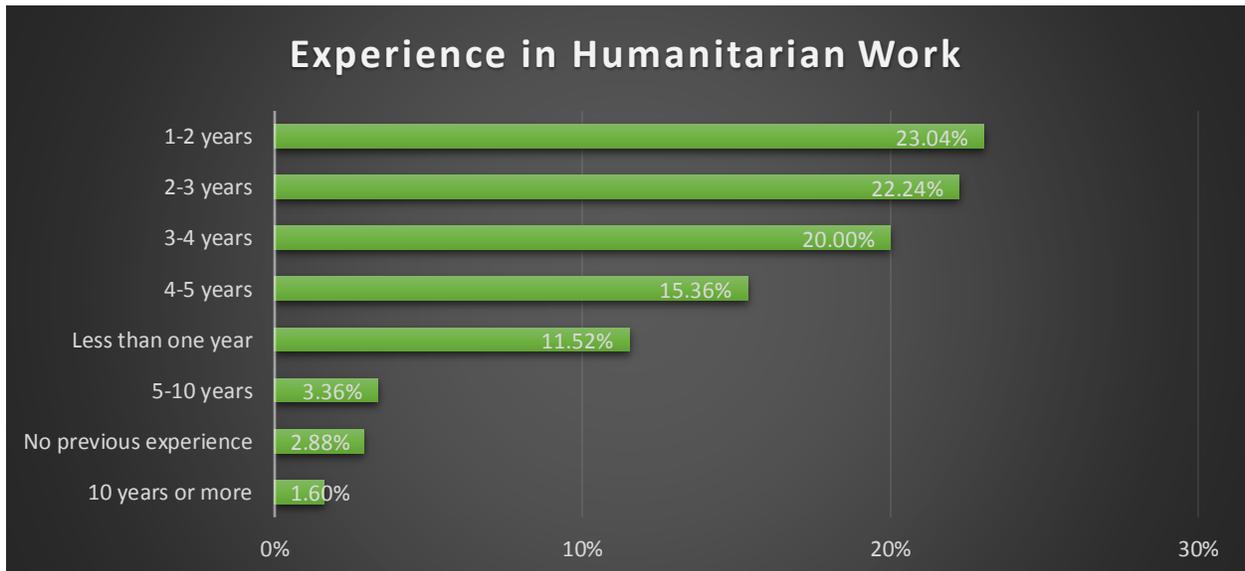
**Q: Where does your organization work in Syria? (Select all that apply)**

Participants' organizations work throughout a number of different areas in Syria. Idleb Governorate represented the largest percentage of total organizations at 58%; while As-Sweida and Tartus made up less than 1% of all overall respondents. These variations are most likely due to the differences in the humanitarian context and needs, access and security issues.



**Q: How many years of experience do you have in humanitarian work?**

Most participants have one to two years' experience in humanitarian work.



# Learning Needs: Online Survey Results

Online survey participants were asked to rate using a four-point scale, as shown in the table below (and then averaged), how important it was for them to receive online resources and training on topics across four categories: humanitarian standards, project management and operations, management and personal development, and technical areas.

I do not need to know this for my job	Not important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important
0	1	2	3	4

**Q: Humanitarian Standards: Please indicate how important it is for you to receive online resources and training on the following topics.**

The top priority needs in the humanitarian standards category were related to child protection; accountability to crisis-affected people; safety and security procedures; and vulnerability issues.



**Q: Project Management and Operations: Please indicate how important it is for you to receive online resources and training on the following topics.**

Assessment findings show that all topics related to project management and operations are considered important for the majority of humanitarian aid workers operating inside Syria regardless of the technical field in which they are working. Maintaining successful partnerships was the top need as well as project cycle management.



**Q: Management and Personal Development: Please indicate how important it is for you to receive online resources/training on the following topics.**

Survey responses show that managing relationships with the different organizational departments is key, specifically in areas of team management, effective communication, and mastering practical skills in using IT systems and desktop applications.

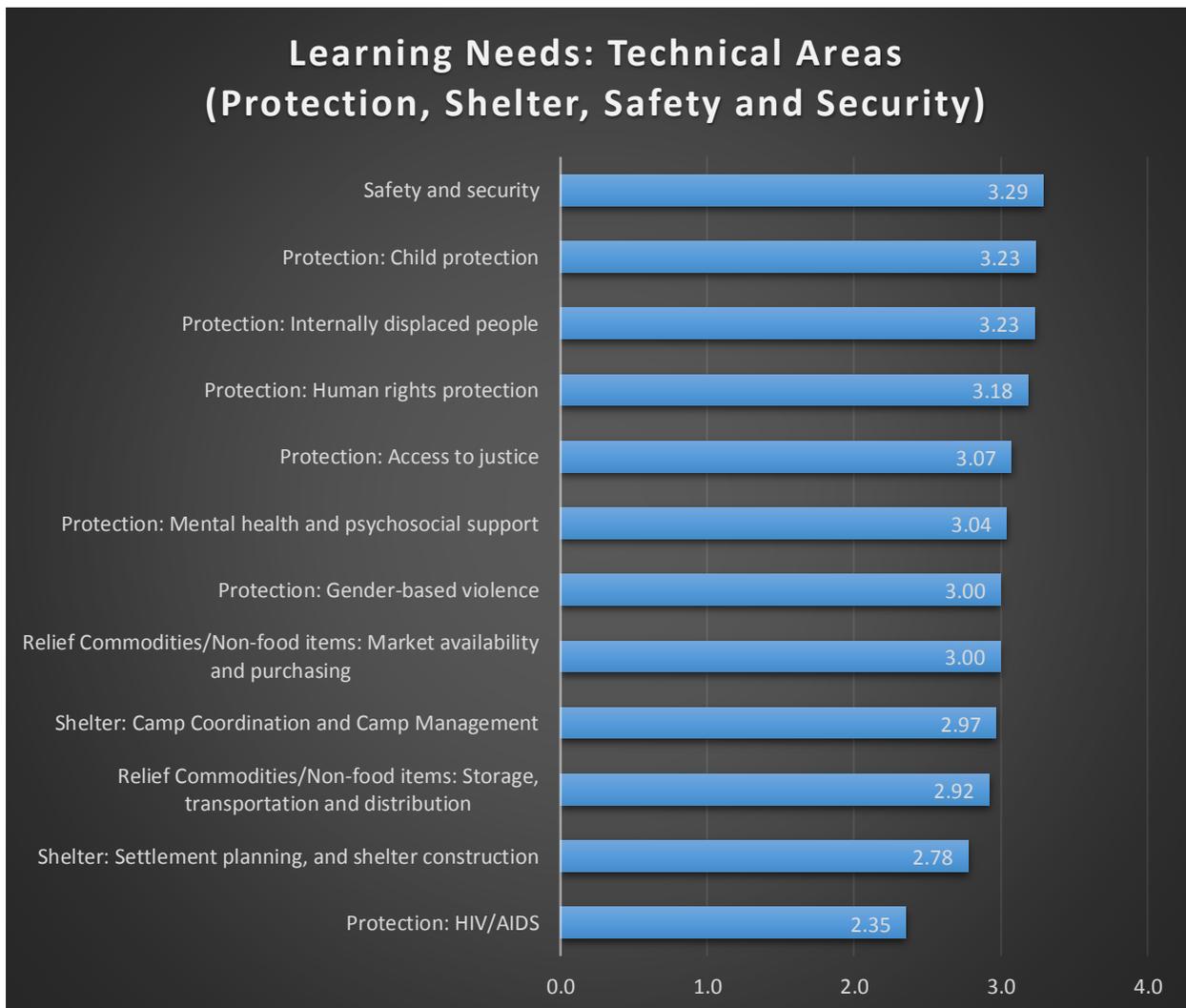


**Q: Technical Areas: Please indicate how important it is for you to receive online resources and training on the following topics** (protection, shelter, safety and security, education, livelihoods, food security, nutrition, M&E, WASH, health, disaster risk reduction, environment and climate change)

The top five priority technical topics in order of importance are:

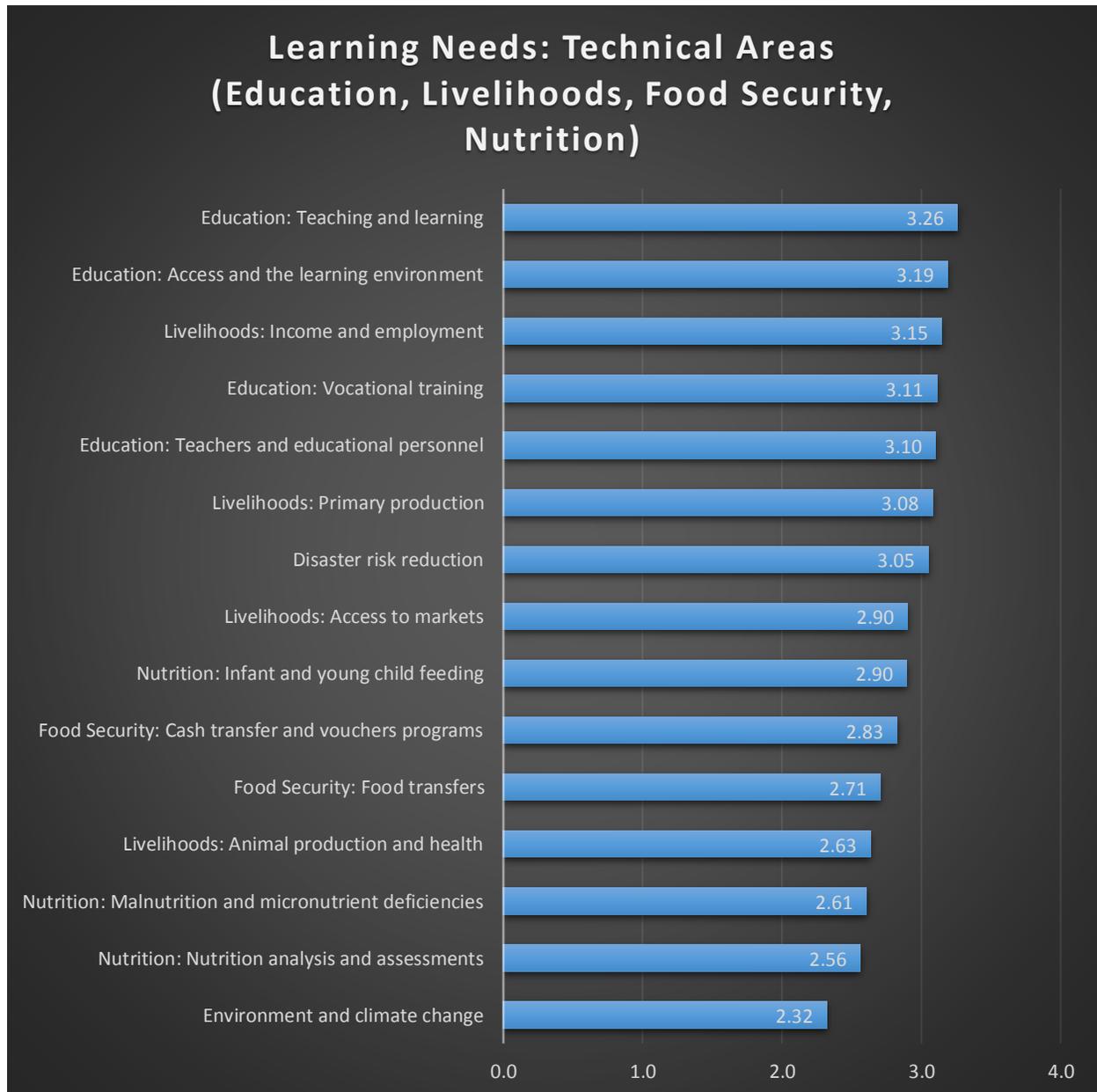
1. **Safety and Security** (3.29)
2. **Monitoring and evaluation projects: understanding the long-term impact** (3.26)
3. **Education: teaching and learning** (3.26)
4. **Protection of internally displaced people** (3.23)
5. **Protection of children** (3.23)

**Technical Areas Part 1 (Shelter, Protection, Safety and Security):** Safety and security was considered the most important among shelter and protection topics followed by protecting internally displaced people and children.



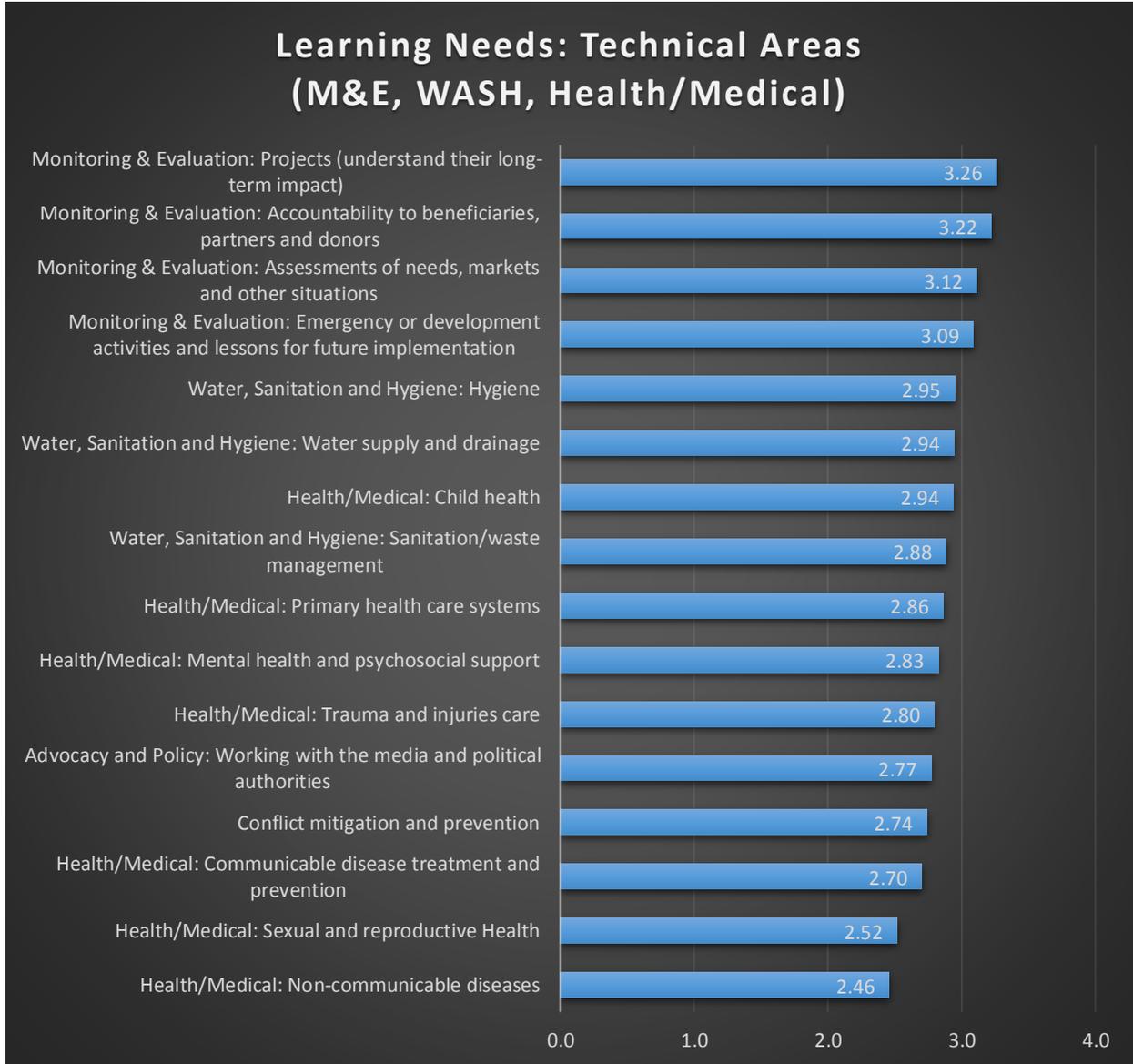
**Technical Areas Part 2 (Education, Livelihoods, Food Security and Nutrition):**

Education in the areas of teaching, learning and accessing schools was consistently considered the most important in this section followed by livelihoods: income and employment.



**Technical Areas Part 3 (Monitoring and Evaluation WASH and Health):**

All topics related to monitoring and evaluation were considered the most important by respondents over health and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) topics. With WASH, the Hygiene topic was also considered important in this section.



# Learning Needs: Key Findings

Priority learning topics and knowledge needs were very similar among participants from the online survey, and from participants from the key informant interviews and focus group discussions when asked the question “**What are the top learning and capacity development needs for teams and partners operating inside Syria?**”. In general, participants believed technical topics were less of a learning priority compared to topics such as humanitarian standards, project management and operations, management and personal development.

## Priority Learning Topics Overall

These 20 topics (not in order of importance) were mentioned the most frequently by participants during key informant interviews and focus group discussions and rated as highly important in the online survey:

- Leading and managing teams, local staff, volunteers and implementation partners
- Safeguarding children from harm, abuse or mistreatment
- Working successfully with others (teamwork, sharing information, networking)
- Accountability to crisis-affected people (keeping affected people as the focus of response)
- Communicating effectively (writing, speaking languages, presenting, negotiating)
- Complying with the safety and security procedures in a conflict setting and minimizing risks
- Using IT systems and desktop applications (Microsoft Office Excel, Word, PowerPoint)
- Maintaining successful partnerships and relationships with beneficiaries, partners and donors
- Managing yourself and teams in a stressful/changing environment
- Awareness of gender, diversity, age and disability issues in a humanitarian situation
- Humanitarian principles and how to apply them in a conflict setting
- Humanitarian or development project cycle management (managing key components and challenges)
- Developing project concept notes and project proposals
- Managing the implementation of emergency or development activities
- Producing reports and documenting activities for beneficiaries, partners and donors
- Training of Trainers (TOT) (cascading training programs to reach more people; and conducting training needs analysis and tailoring training programs to the Syrian context)
- Case management (performance support tools and follow-up)
- Conducting effective needs assessments especially collecting qualitative and quantitative data
- General English language courses and customized courses on the terminology used in the non-profit sector
- Procurement management

In addition to the list of topics above, participants during the key information and focus group also mentioned other topics including:

- **Organizational management:** setting up and managing Civil Society Organizations (CSOs); governance and strategic planning; and establishing guidelines for organizational structures, policies and procedures.
- **Security:** personal safety and security as well as IT / data security programs.
- **Health and medical topics:** (mainly taken from FGD with health actors in Jordan): psychosocial support (PSS) content in Arabic and contextualized for Syria; clinic protocols and treatment guidelines in Arabic; how to deal with medications used in the field following standard

protocols; storage conditions of medicines; infection control and treatment; educational materials for midwives; and in-depth technical surgeon training.

- **Data management and archiving:** best practices in managing, sharing and storing data
- **Data visualization:** techniques to communicate information more clearly and efficiently
- **Microfinance resources in Arabic:** principles and best practices of microfinance

The top five topics, in order of importance, among online survey participants were:

1. **Management and Personal Development:** Leading and managing teams, local staff, volunteers and implementation partners (3.58)
2. **Humanitarian Standards:** Safeguarding children from harm, abuse or mistreatment (3.53)
3. **Management and Personal Development:** Working successfully with others (teamwork, sharing information, networking) (3.50)
4. **Humanitarian Standards:** Accountability to crisis-affected people (keeping affected people as the focus of response) (3.49)
5. **Management and Personal Development:** Communicating effectively (writing, speaking languages, presenting, negotiating) (3.49)

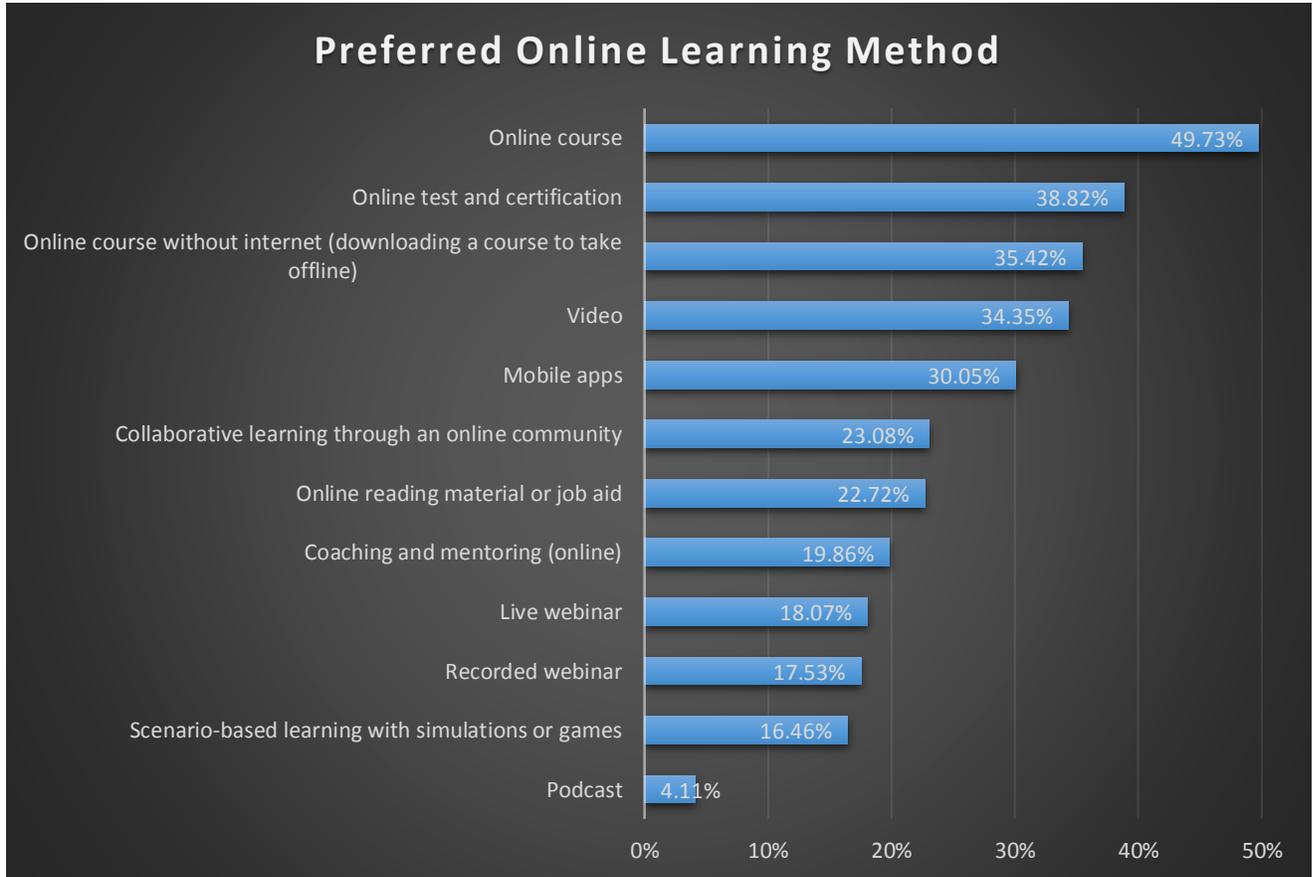
The following observations were drawn by the assessment team from the above findings:

- Topics related to [project management and operations](#) are highly relevant and a priority for the majority of humanitarian aid workers operating inside Syria regardless of the technical field in which they are working. “Maintaining successful partnerships” was one of the top needs in this area which reflects how many local aid Syrian organizations are seeking to balance the demands of providing emergency aid to help the crisis-affected population, while maintaining effective partnerships and meeting continuous demands from beneficiaries, partners and donors. Another top need is to obtain a solid understanding of project cycle management and how to manage the challenges many organizations are facing when implementing emergency activities.
- Local organizations view all aspects of [monitoring and evaluation](#) as critical in the success of any program, especially for projects with long-term, sustainable goals that will impact the lives of the crisis-affected population.
- [Shelter and protection](#) topics ranked high among all technical topics. The importance of these topics reflect the current situation of how the five-year crisis has resulted in millions of internally displaced people (IDPs) who are dealing with serious shelter and protection issues.
- [Education](#) in the areas of teaching, learning and accessing schools ranked as a priority which corresponds to the deteriorated situation of education in many districts throughout Syria.
- [Livelihoods](#) regarding income and employment as well as [vocational training](#) also proved to be important topics especially considering that a large number of the Syrian population has lost their jobs and main sources of income. Many aid workers are now moving towards helping crisis-affected people rebuild their lives through livelihoods programming.
- [Water, Sanitation and Hygiene \(WASH\) and Health](#) were high priority learning needs due to the extreme lack of clean water and sanitation, and water shortages as well as a lack of available doctors, engineers and national qualified professionals in the health and WASH sectors inside Syria.

# Learning Preferences: Online Survey Results

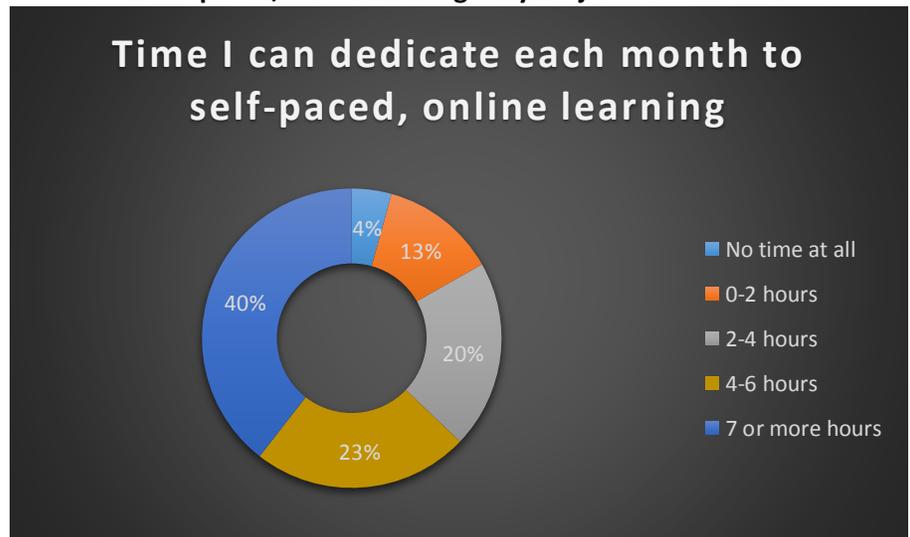
**Q: Which type of technology-based method would you prefer to use when learning? (Select all that apply).**

Survey participants were allowed to select any of the following methods and generally selected an average of three methods. The top preferred methods for learning online were online courses, tests and certifications.



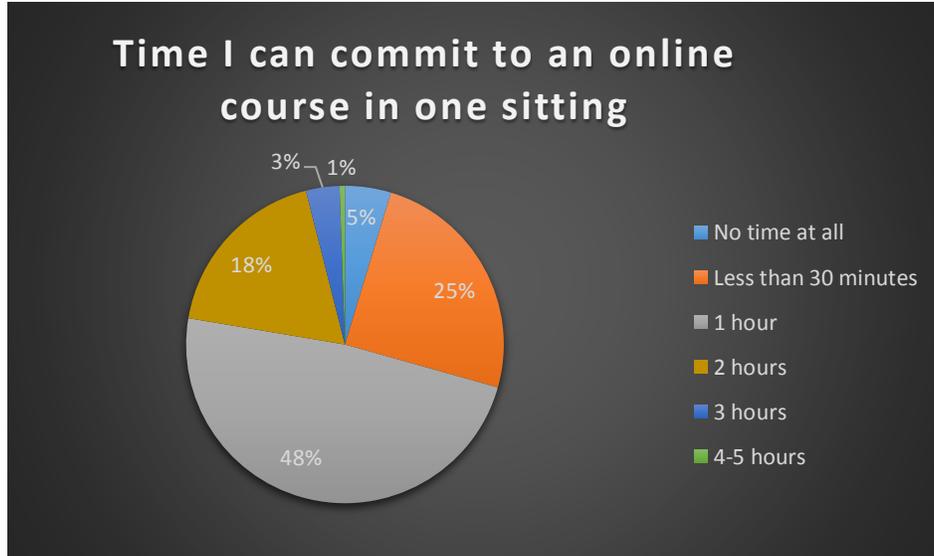
**Q: How much time can you dedicate each month to self-paced, online learning for your job?**

40% of survey participants are willing to dedicate more than seven hours a month to self-paced, online learning for their jobs, equivalent to at least one and half hours per week. On the other hand, 33% of respondents could dedicate 4 hours or less per month, equivalent to less than one hour per week.



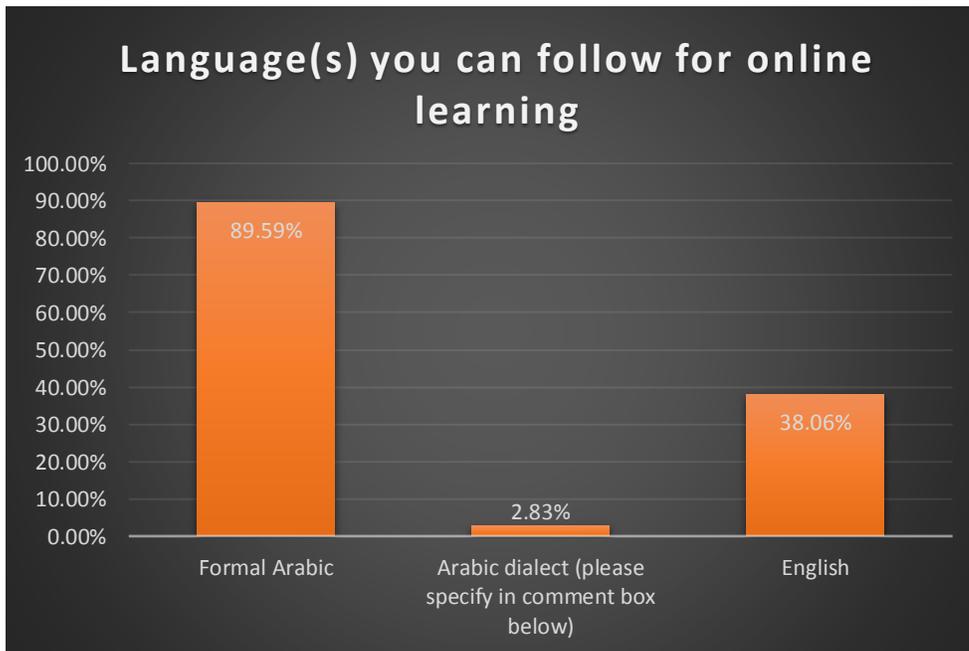
**Q: Based on your typical schedule, how much time can you commit to an online learning course in one sitting (at one time during your day)?**

In general, most participants said that they would be able to commit one hour or less to take an online course in one sitting.



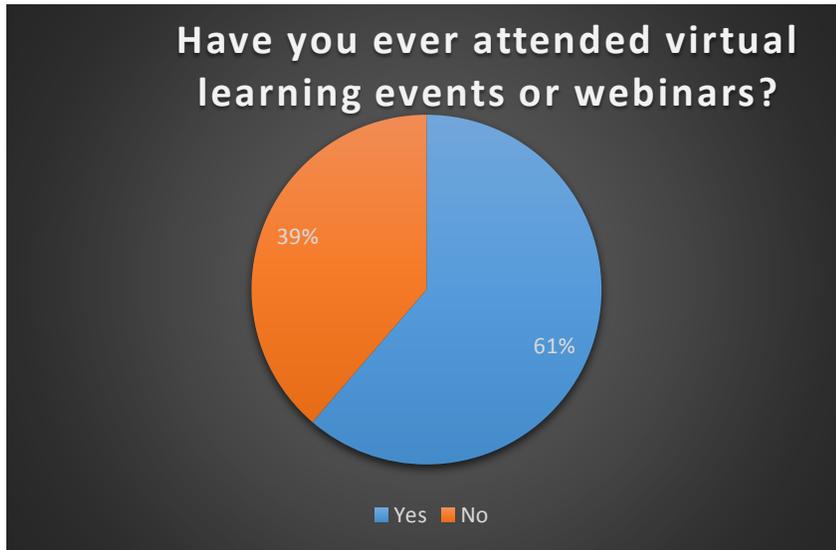
**Q: Please select in which languages you would be able to complete online learning? (Select all that apply)**

Most all respondents stated that they would be able to complete an online learning in formal standard Arabic while 38% of participants said that they would be able to follow courses in English.

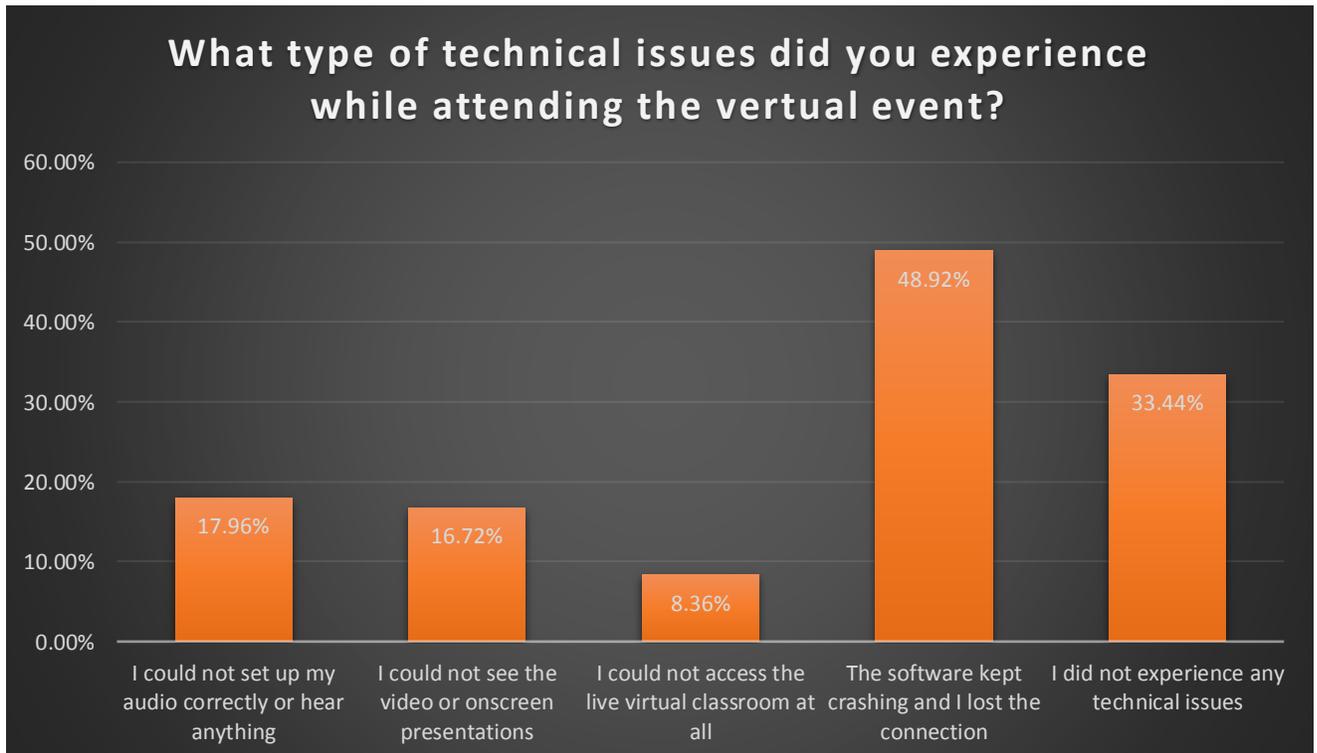


**Q: Have you ever attended virtual learning events or webinars?**

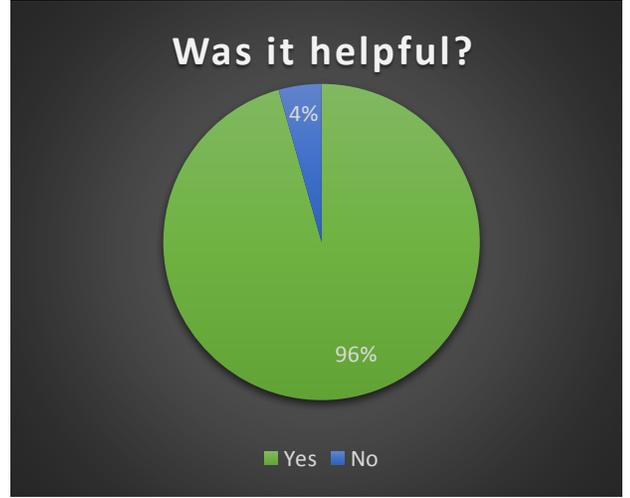
Over half of survey participants (61%) have attended virtual learning events or webinars.



**Q: Please indicate if you experienced any of the following technical issues during the virtual learning event. (Select all that apply)** 33.44% of participants who had attended a virtual learning event said that they did not have any technical issues during the event. However, the majority of participants experienced at least one or more issues such as: the software crashing and loss of connection (48.92%); the inability to set up the audio correctly or hear anything (17.96%); and the inability to see the video or onscreen presentations (16.72%). Only about 8.36% of participants said that they could not access the live virtual classroom at all.



**Q: Have you ever participated in a learning community or forum?** Nearly half of the people who submitted the online survey had previously participated in a learning community or forum and of those who did, almost all (96%) found it useful. About 94% of the total number said they would participate in an online learning community if given the opportunity.



# Learning Preferences: Key Findings

Learning preferences, especially when learning online, generally vary based on a learner's educational background, previous training experience, working environment, and personal learning style. However, overall, participants from the online survey, interviews and focus groups shared common opinions on their preferred methods to learn online which are summarized below:

1. **Online Courses** that are self-paced offer flexibility for many humanitarian aid workers who have heavy workloads and cannot take time off work to attend an onsite training. *“Women professionals cannot always attend a training because of gender issues and security concerns. Many do not feel comfortable traveling across the border alone to attend a training, so online learning is a great option for them.” – UN capacity development team member working from Jordan (KII)*
2. **Online tests and certifications** were considered important among almost all participants (both in the survey and in the focus groups) as they present an important opportunity to measure and validate their knowledge and skills which in turn can be recognized by other organizations and considered a contributory factor to getting future jobs in humanitarian work.
3. **Videos** are a popular method for learning because they are short, easy to watch and tell a story that captivates the learner's attention. They can also be used as talking points or references for group discussions. *“Being able to play and pause a video during a guided group training is a great way for participants to discuss and process what they are learning together in real time.” – Partner Capacity Development Coordinator from INGO working from Turkey (FGD)* Learners also want videos to be downloadable for when they have a slow or weak internet connection.
4. **Mobile apps** are important for learning in Syria as most people use Android smartphones to connect to the internet from anywhere, especially on the job. *“In besieged areas like rural Damascus, the electricity can be down for days or weeks at a time leaving only 2-4 hours per day of electricity. It's easier for people to access the internet and work from their phones so mobile applications are important for learners to be able to access training.” – UN Cluster Support Officer working from Turkey (FGD)*
5. **Online learning communities** are a great way for organizations and partners to train remote staff, ask questions and share best practices (private communities are recommended for these types of activities among internal staff). *“A time-bound learning community with a moderator is a good approach that helps create opportunities for spin-off learning groups.” – Program Manager from Syrian NGO working out of Turkey with major operations inside Syria (FGD)*
6. **Webinars** and virtual instructor-led events are helpful and engaging because they allow learners to ask questions, get feedback, make comments and interact with other participants throughout the learning process. However, given internet and time constraints, webinar video recordings can be a good alternative for learners to watch when they have a stable internet connection. *“Webinars for health actors would be amazing to help update them on protocols. For example, surgeons already know how to do their job, but they still need to have updates on guidelines, standards and protocols to ensure the quality of health services.” – Health Staff from Jordanian non-profit organization (FGD)*

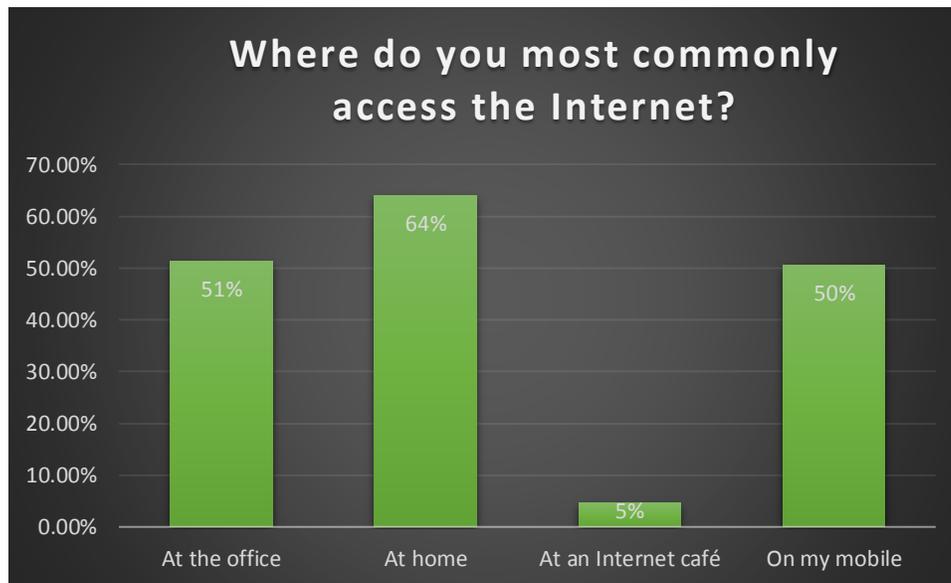
In addition to the type of preferred online learning methods, participants from interviews and focus group discussions gave detailed feedback on elements of the learning design and content that could enhance their learning experience, making it more meaningful and retainable.

- **Learners want to see a trainer** during their learning experience. Most learners in Syria before the crisis were used to taking classroom training and workshops with an instructor present. Incorporating the instructor-led classroom environment by showing a recording or image of a trainer in an online course or video could help learners feel more guided and have a point of reference during their learning experience.
- **Learning through contextualized examples, case studies and storytelling** helps learners better relate to, retain, and apply what they are learning. *“Scenarios need to relate to the Syrian context – using a different type of emergency situation in Africa, for example, would not be very relevant to learners in Syria.” – Partnership Advisor from INGO working in Jordan (KII)*
- **Using images, illustrations and infographics** are more helpful in explaining new concepts than text. *“...especially when you don’t have a lot of time to read at work” - M&E Officer from Syrian NGO leading a team of 25 M&E field staff inside Syria (FGD)*
- **Use simple, clear and correct language** that has been written and checked by a professional translator and editor. Course developers don’t always use Arabic native speakers to translate courses from another language into Arabic, so the quality tends to be poor and a lot of the meaning gets lost in translation. Many participants from the interviews and focus groups also preferred learning in Arabic compared to English and said that it would be helpful to include a transcript for audio and video materials when possible. They suggested leaving technical terms in English instead of translating them into Arabic so learners, especially field staff, will be better equipped to use and understand these terms when working with international organizations and donors. *“Having a course that shows both English and Arabic onscreen would help develop language skills.” - HR Coordinator supervising over 50 Syrian humanitarians inside Syria from INGO in Turkey (FGD)*
- **Content needs to be available offline** with downloadable options so learners can take the training offline if the internet goes down or if the connection is slow.

# Technology and Accessing the Internet: Online Survey Results

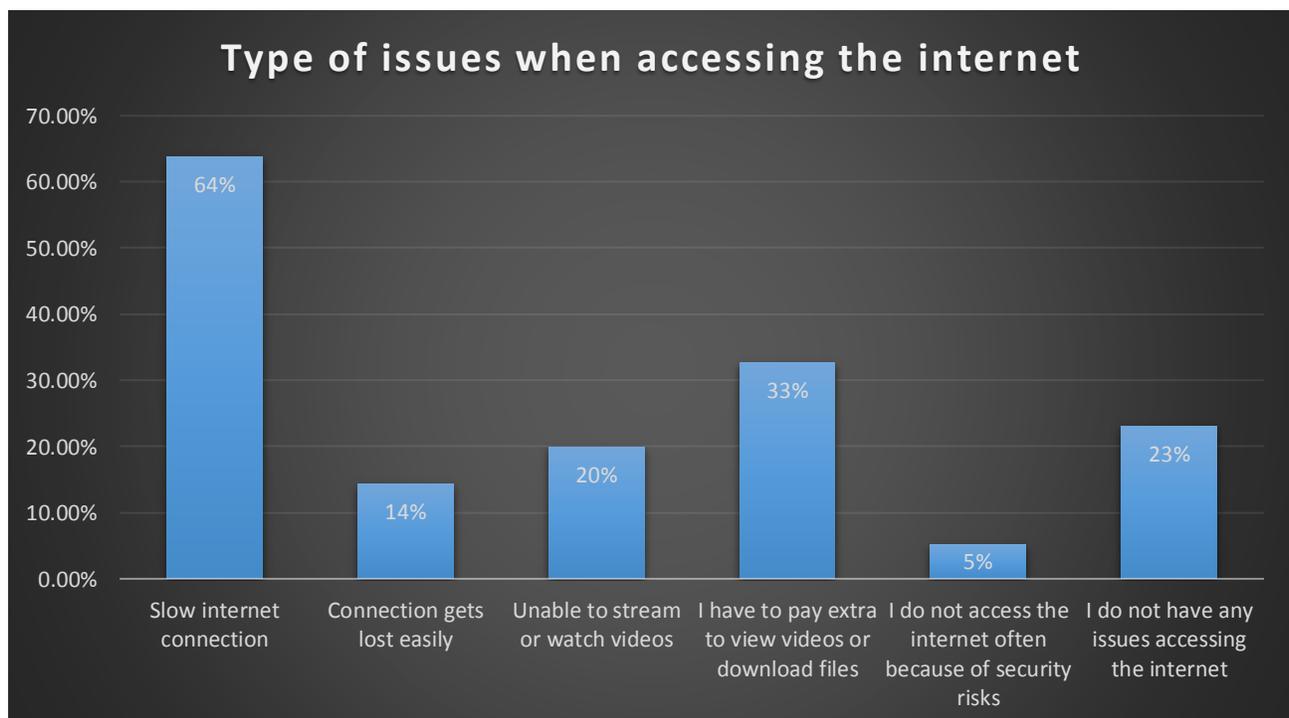
## Q: Where do you most commonly access the internet? (Select all that apply)

Findings show that participants often access the internet from anywhere; home, work or on the go.



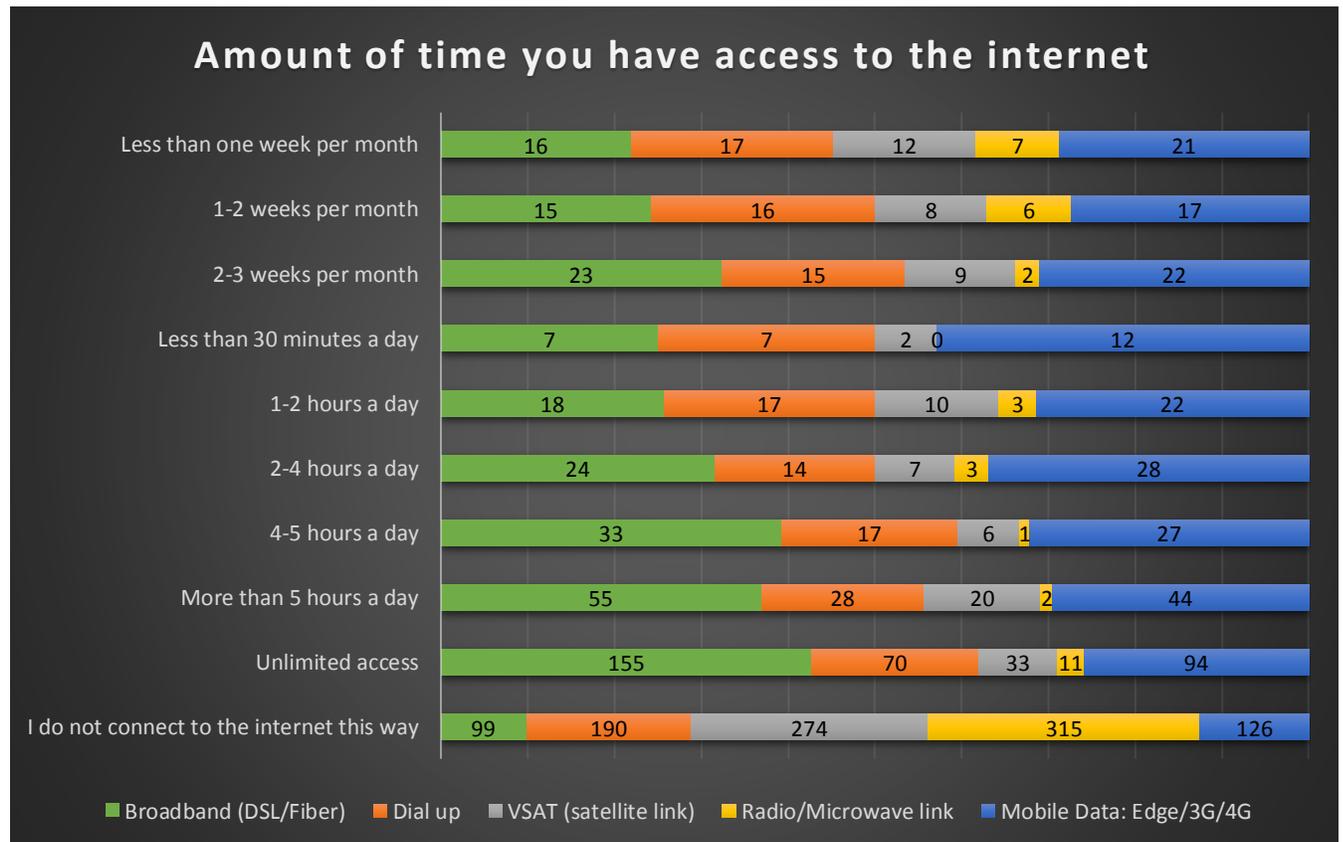
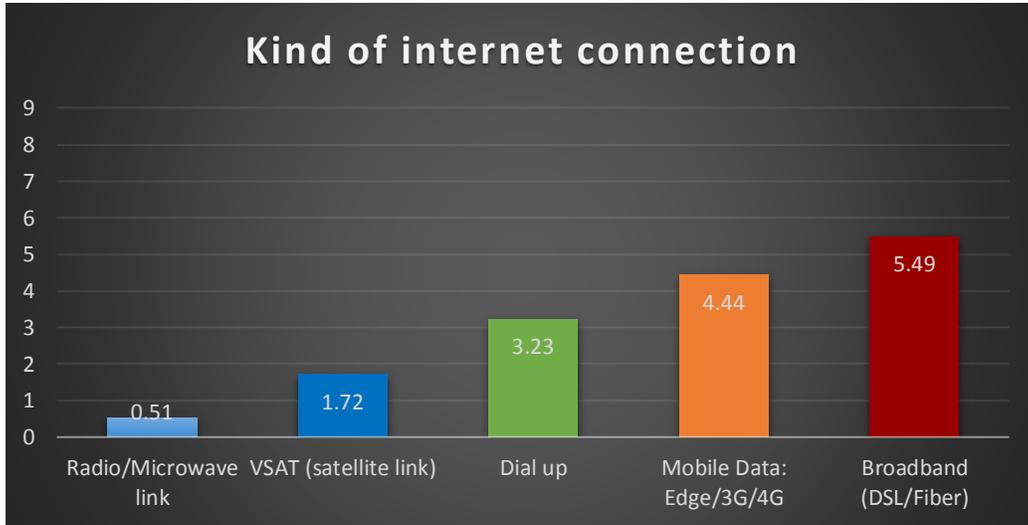
## Q: What type of issues do you experience when accessing the internet? (Select all that apply)

About 23% of the survey participants stated that they do not experience any issues accessing the internet. However, the majority of participants experience one or more issues with the internet such as: a slow internet connection (64%); paying extra to view videos or download files (33%); and the inability to stream or watch videos (20%). Only 5% of the total number of participants said they do not access the internet often because of security risks.

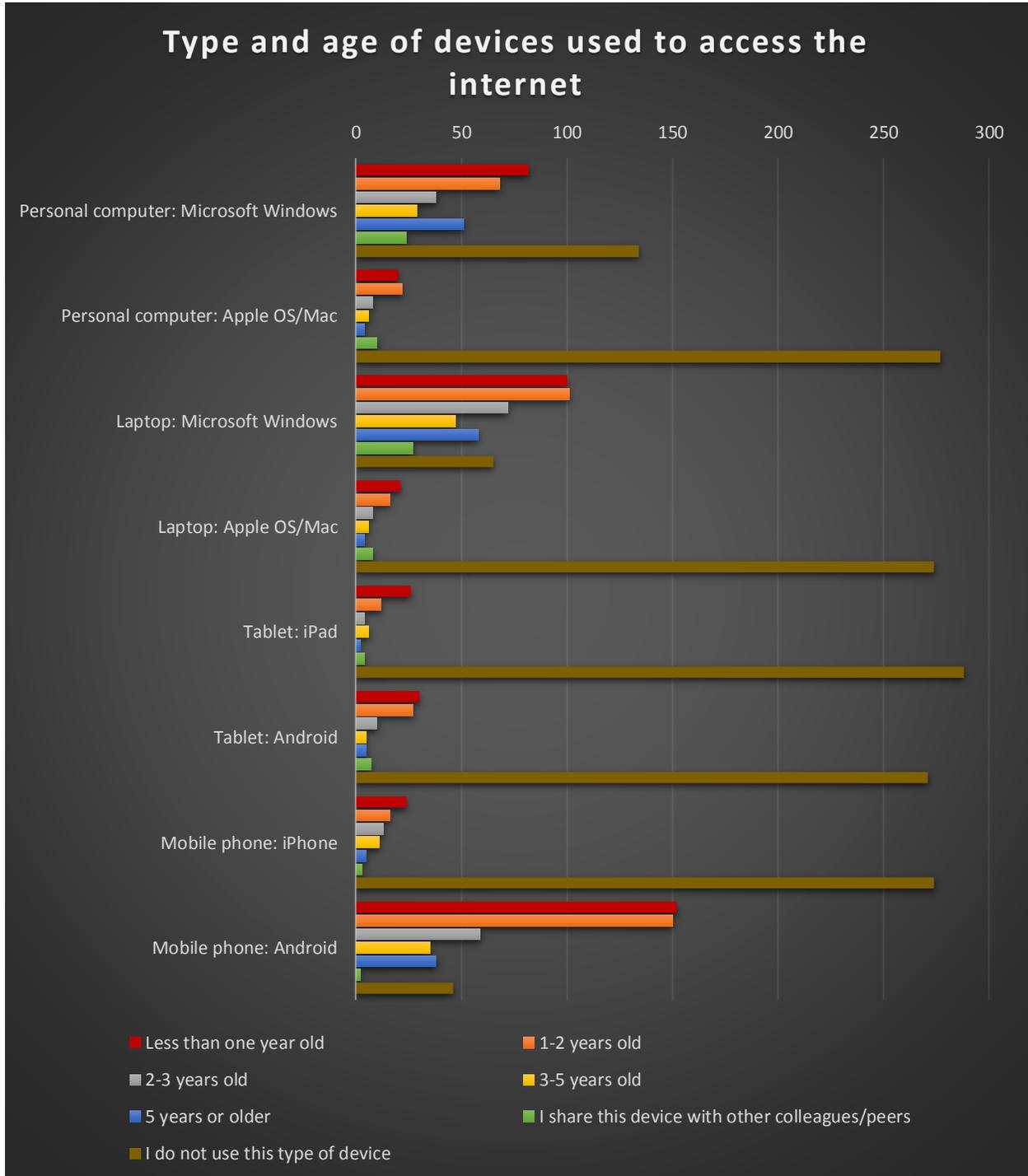


**Q: Please indicate the kind of internet connection you usually have and how much time you have access to the internet.**

The majority of participants use broadband DSL or Fiber and access the internet for an average of 1-2 hours a day. People also access the internet on their mobiles for an average of 30 minutes or less a day.

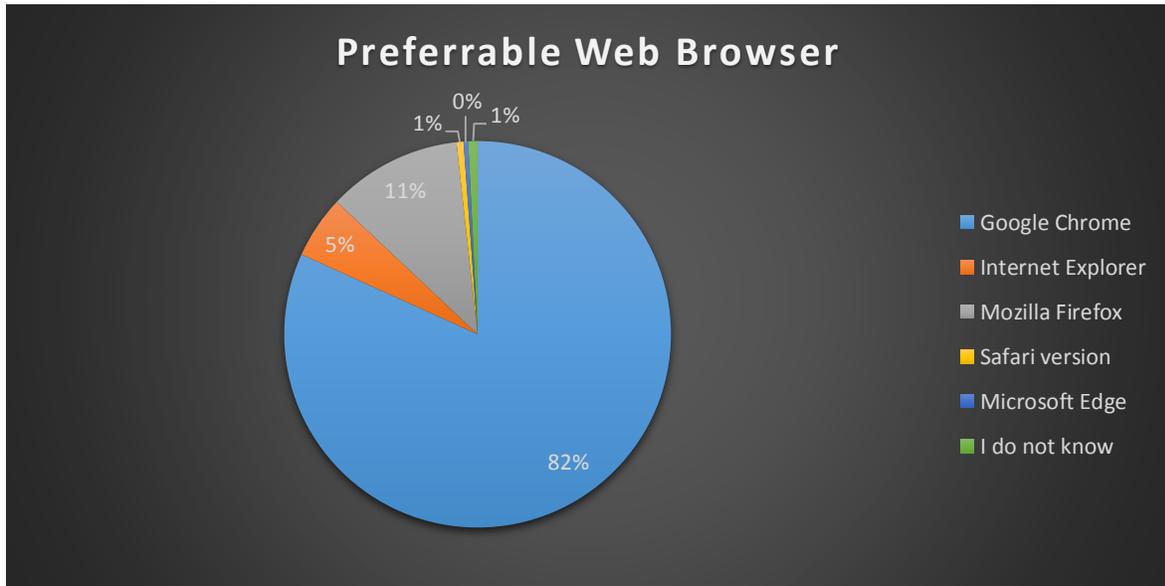


**Q: Please indicate the types of devices you use to access the internet and the age of the device.**  
 The majority of participants use android phones that are less than 2-years old. Laptops using Microsoft Windows that are less than 2-years old ranked second amongst popular devices used throughout Syria.



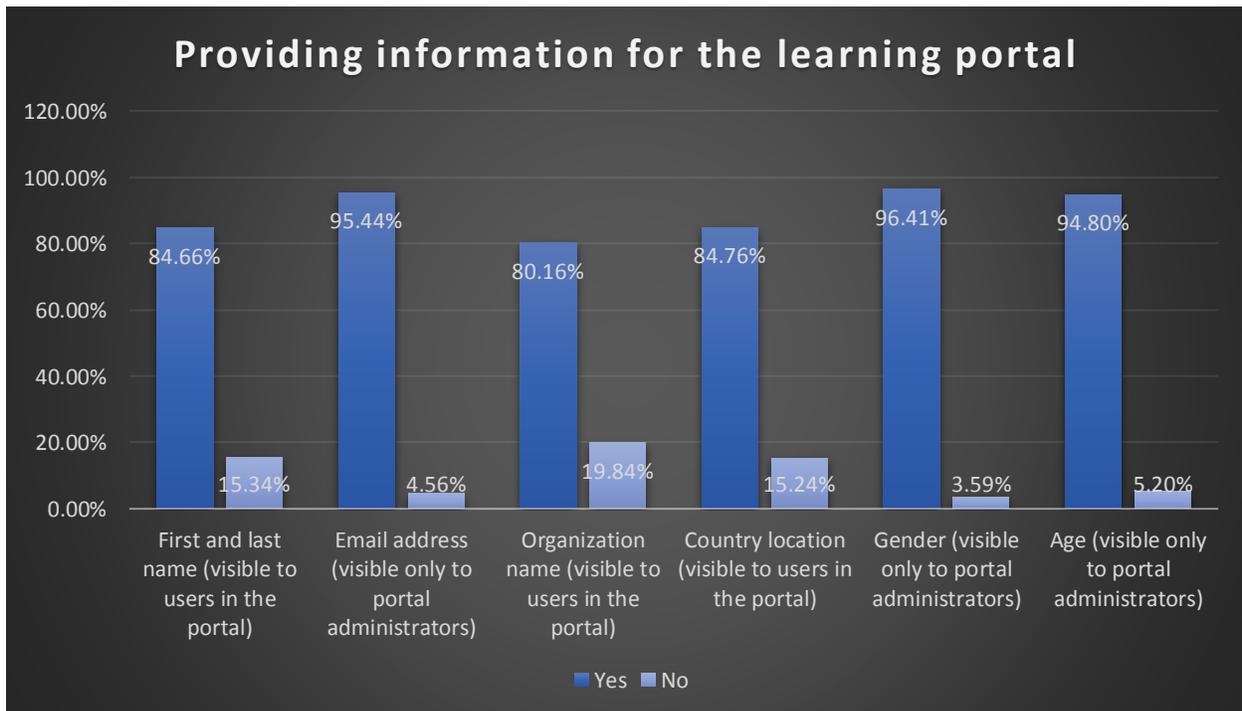
**Q: Which web browser do you prefer?**

Google Chrome was universally the preferred web browser, at 81% followed by Mozilla Firefox at 11%.



**Q: Which of the following information would you be willing to provide when signing up for the learning portal?**

Most participants said they would not have a problem providing their personal information when creating their user account on a learning portal like DisasterReady.org.



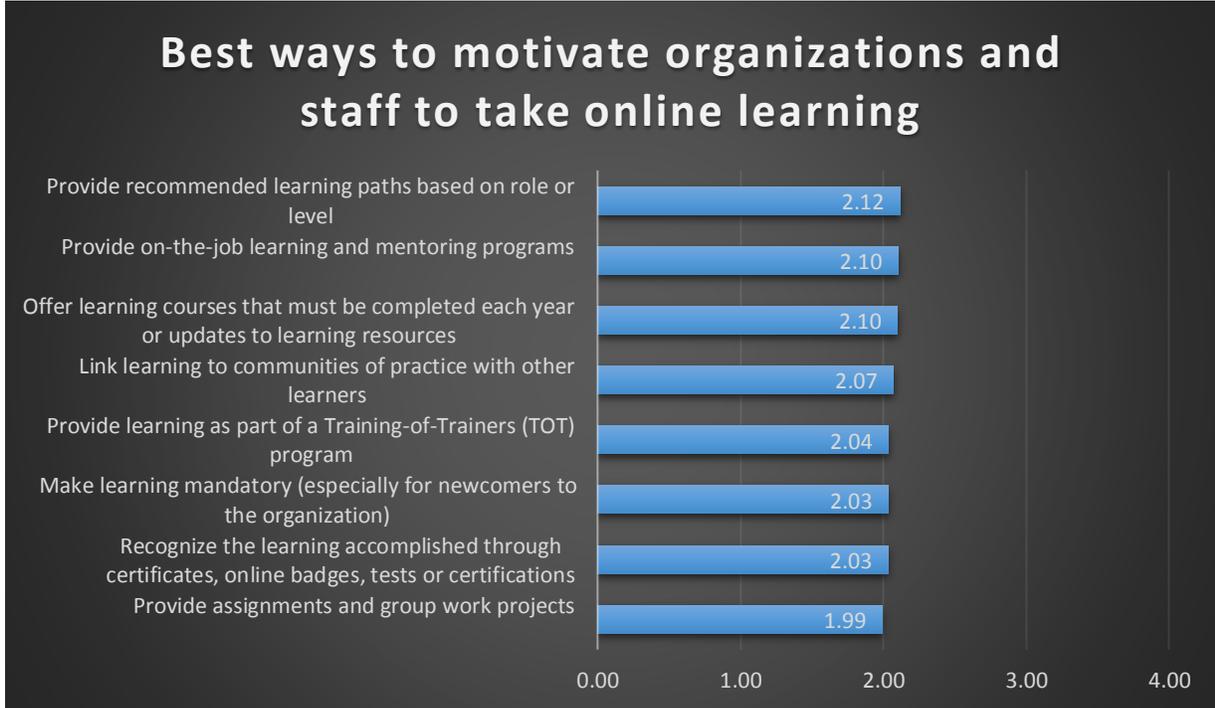
# Technology and Accessing the Internet: Key Findings

Findings from the key informant interviews, focus group discussions and the online survey showed that the stability and quality of the internet and electricity infrastructure varies greatly by location. Internet connectivity and electricity are very unstable in the majority of Syrian districts outside of the regime's control and especially in southern Syria. Most people in these areas resort to alternative ways of getting electricity like private or shared power generators operating on fuel or solar power, and mainly rely on cellular networks from neighboring countries or satellite devices to access the internet. When participants during interviews and focus group discussions were asked the question **“What types of challenges do you and your teams have in accessing online learning inside Syria?”** additional feedback included:

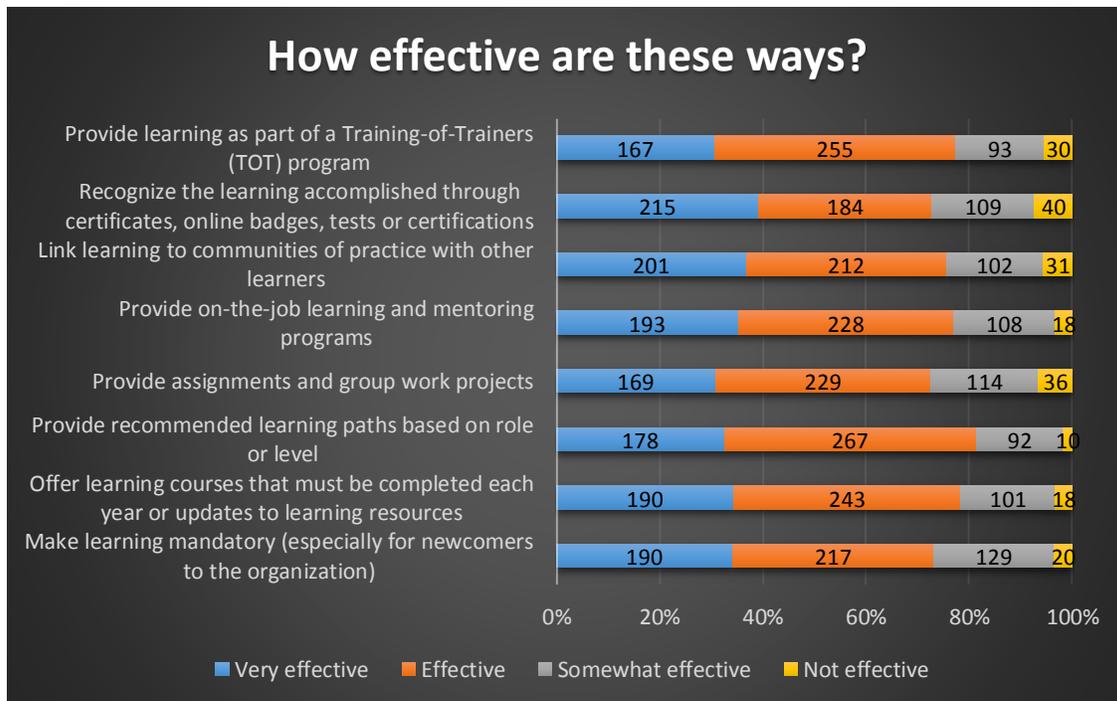
- When the electricity is down in certain areas of Syria for days or weeks at a time, many people communicate by phone or WhatsApp (free messenger app for smartphones to send messages, images, audio or video) instead of email or other IT systems.
- A slow internet connection makes it difficult to take online courses and stream videos. *“It’s important that content offers low bandwidth, offline/downloadable options and or light content (PowerPoint presentations and materials)”– Syrian NGO Program Manager working from inside Syria (FGD)*
- Data security is generally perceived to be better in northern Syria than in southern Syria.
- Many people access the internet using a mini 3G router on their mobile phones which gives a poor connection.
- Some organizations use videoconferencing software like Skype or WebEx to hold virtual meetings and trainings with colleagues in different locations. However, many field offices cannot use WebEx because of limited bandwidth or added costs to use it.
- Powerful internet routers are widespread especially in northern Syria so that a large percentage of people can readily use the internet at home.
- Traveling with laptops can be risky because laptops made with U.S. parts are banned in the country. *“If you are found with a laptop, it will not only be confiscated, but you could risk being detained up to 9 months” – Staff from INGO in Jordan (KII)*
- Most participants said they did not have a problem providing their personal information (name, email, location, organization name) when creating an account on a learning portal like DisasterReady.org. Those that did have concerns providing this kind of information given the risk in some conflict areas, often use pseudonyms just as they do when using social media. *“If a pseudonym is used to register in DisasterReady.org, the person could contact the helpdesk administrator in the future to change their name so it appears correctly on his/her course completion certificates.” – IT consultant building IT infrastructure for Syria operations working for a Syrian NGO out of Turkey (FGD)*

# Motivation for Learning: Online Survey Results

**Q: Please indicate how effective the following ways are in motivating you and staff in your organization to build skills through online learning?** Recommended learning paths (a sequence of learning activities that drives learners to reach proficiency in a topic in the shortest possible time) based on job role or level was the number one motivating factor for participants. Other key motivating factors were on-the-job training and mentoring programs, and mandatory and compliance training that need to be completed each year.



Recognized learning through certificates, online badges, tests and certifications were selected most as “Very Effective”; recommended learning paths based on job role or level were selected most as “Effective”.



# Motivation for Learning: Key Findings

A major challenge of any online learning initiative is finding effective ways to motivate learners to take courses and build their skills and to keep them engaged throughout the learning process. Using interesting and effective ways to motivate humanitarian aid workers operating inside Syria to learn and understanding their needs will play a vital role in designing the ISHA online learning program and ensuring its success. During the interviews and focus group discussions, participants were shown a demo of the DisasterReady learning portal and then asked a series of questions such as “**What would be the most effective way to inform and encourage users to sign-up?**” and “**What would motivate learners to use the portal and take online training?**” in which they shared the following suggestions:

- **Experts know best:** Use subject matter experts who are familiar with the Syrian context to design content and address aid workers’ needs.
- **One size does not fit all:** Design content using the most appropriate method and mix different methods of training. Offer the core content as an online course or video followed by an instructor-led group exercise or discussion.
- **Take it to the next level:** Assess each learner's level and divide training into different levels. Give learners a way to measure their performance and apply what they have learned.
- **Continuous learning:** On and off trainings have limited impact. Continual learning and using follow up exercises in a timed interval are more effective.
- **Group Scoring:** Use group scores instead of individual scores during learning similar to scoring in gaming. People like to see how they rank amongst their peers.
- **Use social media:** Use different social media channels like Facebook and Twitter to promote learning, explain its value and link it to program quality and effective humanitarian response.
- **The secret to success:** Show success stories and testimonials of people who took online courses and benefited from them. Most participants stated that word of mouth was the most common way to inform others about training opportunities, so recorded success stories can be an effective way to reach a wide audience and recommend training using a personal touch.
- **INGO approved:** Get international non-profit organizations, donor agencies and/or the UN to endorse the training and link it to recruitment, job promotion, or receiving financial bonuses and benefits.
- **Getting credit:** Accredit training programs by recognized universities or institutions, and increasing learners' chances of getting scholarships at local or international universities.
- **Planning ahead:** Explain how training helps learners not only in their current job of providing aid in the crisis, but also for post-conflict jobs.
- **Sharing knowledge:** Give Syrian non-profit organizations an online community or tools to interact and exchange their learning experiences.
- **Real-life examples:** Use contextualized case studies, images and stories that learners can identify with and build on.
- **Accountability:** Coordinate with Syrian NGOs and their international partners to introduce and reinforce training initiatives to their staff, and hold learners, managers and human resources accountable for monitoring, validating and following up on the impact and results it is having. *“Giving HR and managers access to learners’ transcripts and reports could help make a difference”*  
*INGO HR Director supervising all HR and Syria staff training programs working from Turkey (FGD)*

- **More learning hubs and resources:** Set up equipped training centers inside Syria where learners can take online courses and provide supplementary activities and assignments to enhance the learning process. *“Capacity teams should ask donors to fund projects that would provide satellite internet devices inside Syria so learners can build their capacity through online learning.” – UN staff member working in Jordan (FGD)*

# Conclusion and Recommendations

The assessment results and feedback provided by over 751 participants from Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Syria through the online survey, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions show how hundreds of humanitarian aid workers inside Syria are in need of capacity building and skill development. Many assessment participants had an average of one to two years' experience in humanitarian work, which indicates that there is a need for many to strengthen their knowledge and skills in sector-related areas. Providing learning tools and resources for Syrian humanitarians is not only important for helping aid workers better perform their jobs now, but is also a future career investment, considering humanitarian development work will be needed for years post-crisis.

Many participants from interviews and focus group discussions emphasized the lack of available face-to-face training in Syria which is expensive to organize and complicated to deliver given it is risky (or illegal) to bring trainers into the country or bring staff across the border to receive training in neighboring countries. The assessment findings reinforce that online learning could be a practical way to effectively reach the many Syrian aid workers who are working in the difficult, complex crisis situation and who are in need of training. However, it is essential that online content is meaningful, relevant, and contextualized to their needs, while taking into consideration the limitations of internet access and the availability of devices. Input from this assessment will inform the design and format of the ISHA online learning program. The ISHA online learning program will be available on the DisasterReady.org learning portal which will serve the wider community of humanitarian aid workers, field staff, and volunteers working in Syria.

Recommendations for an online learning program for humanitarian aid workers and organizations providing aid inside Syria are outlined below:

- Although numerous learning resources and information related to humanitarian aid exist, assessment KII and FGD participants continuously emphasized the importance of accessing learning that is relevant to the situation in Syria and that can be applied to their working environment. **Recommendation:** [Contextualize content](#) by using images, Syrian accents, and case studies that learners can relate to in their everyday lives and work in Syria.
- While most respondents of the online survey stated that they are able to take online courses in formal standard Arabic over English, many participants from the interviews and focus group discussions said that they would be able to follow courses in English and would like to see both options. **Recommendation:** [Offer content in both English and Arabic](#).
- Participants suggested that learning should not only focus on emergency response for the immediate crisis situation but also address topics that could be relevant to the prospects of long-term development. **Recommendation:** [Broaden learning scope to incorporate the various concepts of resilience programming](#) and its potential impact on humanitarian action and local communities in Syria.
- Online courses, tests and certifications represented the top three preferred methods for learning online. In addition, participants from interviews and focus group discussions suggested offering leveled learning options based on the learner's role, experience, and knowledge so they can validate their achievement as they progress from beginner to advanced levels. **Recommendation:** [Incorporate the measurement of knowledge and skills](#) through assessments in self-paced online courses, online tests, and certifications that can be validated by a trainer, peer, manager, subject

matter expert or even a partner organization. Online tests and certifications can help learners stay on track and validate that they have successfully obtained the required knowledge and skills.

- Most assessment participants had participated in some type of learning community, forum, or chat group and found it useful for their job, and there is strong interest in using social tools for collaborative learning among peers. **Recommendation:** [Complement self-paced online courses with collaborative learning approaches](#) such as group activities, coaching, follow up assignments, and instructor-led discussions through webinars and or online communities that will allow learners to apply and validate what they've learned, ask questions, receive feedback, interact with others and feel supported throughout the learning process.
- Many aid workers are willing to dedicate an average of at least one to two hours per week for learning. However, considering the heavy workloads and the unreliable availability and stability of electricity and internet in Syria, most people need shorter online courses that can be taken in less than an hour in one sitting. **Recommendation:** [Offer small chunks of learning](#) that can be taken in minutes up to one hour and are easy for learners to access from anywhere, especially on the job.
- Many participants working inside Syria experience a slow, weak, or unstable internet connection which can make it difficult to take online courses and stream videos. **Recommendation:** [Create light content that offers low bandwidth options](#) for different modalities such as online learning, and mobile devices (especially Android) and is available to download so learners can take it offline when the internet connection is slow or not available.
- The majority of assessment participants are using social media sites (like Facebook) for their organizations' websites and to network with others in the sector. However, social channels have little information or emphasis around capacity building initiatives for Syrian humanitarians. **Recommendation:** [Promote learning through social media](#) and reach out to local Syrian non-profit organizations and international partners to raise awareness about the access availability and value of learning resources for aid workers.
- Humanitarian aid workers operating in high pressure, stressful emergency situations often struggle to find the time, a convenient place with a stable internet connection and the focus to learn online, on their own. Keeping them motivated and engaged in online learning can be quite challenging, and if their initial experience taking an online course is not positive, chances are that they will not be interested in trying out other online courses. **Recommendation:** [Provide relevant training that offers real incentives and valuable opportunities](#). A big incentive for Syrian humanitarians would be to have their learning endorsed and recognized by larger prestigious international aid organizations, donor agencies, and/or the United Nations expanding opportunities for employment and professional advancement. Another key incentive is accredited training that is recognized by universities or institutions that will provide credit toward a university degree or enhance their chances of receiving scholarships at local or international universities.