

# Sustainable urbanization for sustaining peace

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**UN-Habitat's contribution, experiences  
and added value in addressing and  
preventing urban crises in the Arab  
region**

# Preamble

This paper sets out how working towards sustainable urbanization is crucial for the sustaining peace agenda. It builds on the ongoing reforms of the peace, security and development pillars of the United Nations and it illustrates how UN-Habitat's expertise and experiences add value to the humanitarian-development-peace actions of the UN in the region.

Addressing and preventing urban crises in the Arab region is of particular importance and urgency. 2021 finds the Arab region under the crossfire caused by an economic crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and particularly felt in conflict-affected countries such as Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. The region is home to 405 million people - half of them are 25 or younger - and it has the highest population growth rate in the world. Nearly 60 percent of people live in

urban centres and over a quarter of urban dwellers – about 82 million people - live in slums. Unemployment rates among Arab youth are the highest in the world, turning this large social segment into a source of concern and potential instability. The region carries the largest burden of displaced populations globally. 50 million people are in need humanitarian assistance, including over 15 million forcibly displaced (UNHCR2019), and displacement has an increasingly urban face. In 2018, 61 percent of the refugee population lived in urban centres, a trend that is mirrored in the Arab region.

The paper describes the importance of sustainable urbanization in two interrelated areas of impact: (1) urban crisis response and recovery, and (2) sustainable urbanization as an enabler of peace and stability.

## BOX 1

### UN-Habitat's approach to urban crises' response and recovery

**Multi-level and inclusive governance:** UN-Habitat promotes dialogue and coordination between different government levels, and it has a long tradition and reach experience in working closely and collaborating with local authorities.

**Coordination with humanitarian, development, and peace actors:** due the complexity of operating in urban areas, UN-Habitat adopted integrated and coordinated urban crisis response and recovery approaches that include and build on the comparative advantages of humanitarian, development and peace actors – from data collection and analysis, to joint prioritization of recommendations, to leveraging investments and implementation.

**Area-based approach:** co-ordination and co-operation between different sectors is crucial for effective and comprehensive solutions to urban crises, where needs are complex and inter-related. UN-Habitat applies an area-based approach to the gathering and analyzing urban data, which is shared with national and international partners and enables evidence-based and better coordinated cross-sectoral responses.

**Participatory processes:** The inclusion of all relevant urban stakeholders in decision-making is crucial to ensure that proposed solutions are suitable, jointly owned and sustainable. UN-Habitat has extensive experience in promoting participatory processes in urban crises response and recovery that include local and national authorities, academia, private sector, and a broad range of civil society partners (representatives of people in vulnerable situations, displaced people, women's and youth association, religious leaders, etc.).

**Strong partnerships:** As part of the UN systems, UN-Habitat builds upon strong partnerships with other UN agencies, development partners, NGOs, civil society, academia and private sector actors.

# 1. Urban crisis response and recovery in the Arab states

UN-Habitat's experience in responding to urban crises in the region dates back to the seventies. UN-Habitat's mandate to work in conflict and crises-affected contexts has been strengthened further in the current strategic plan which features four Domains of Change – 'Urban crisis preparedness and response' being one of them. To support this portfolio, over the years, UN-Habitat has developed specific tools and guidance documents on urban crisis response and recovery – including on land, housing, spatial data collection, urban and territorial planning, access to services, recovery and reconstruction. UN-Habitat has field operations in eighteen countries and the vast majority of its USD450 million portfolio is being implemented in crisis affected countries. The key areas of work that UN-Habitat is undertaking to support humanitarian response and urban crisis response and recovery in the region are described below.

## 1.1 Urban profiling

Through urban profiles, UN-Habitat seeks to provide up to date, holistic documentation and analysis of the impact of conflict in selected cities, synthesising information and insight from existing sources and supplementing it by data

collected through field assessments undertaken by UN-Habitat teams on the ground. The profiles provide pre-crisis baselines and current situation data accompanied by a descriptive analysis that helps understanding the impact of the crisis. Urban profiles do not provide comprehensive data on specific topics, but rather a comprehensive overview of the key sectors of interest. This allows a broader range of stakeholders to relate to the information provided and include their diagnosis of the situation. It also provides a basis for local discussions on actions to be taken in the crisis response. The methodology used for the developing the urban profiles is based on the UN-Habitat's expertise in urban analysis in crises-affected contexts and its community participation approaches. All profiles have been developed in close association with the concerned governorates, and municipalities and other legitimate partners. In the last years, UN-Habitat published over hundred and forty urban profiles, neighbourhood profiles and recovery plans for urban areas in Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Yemen and Iraq. The most recently completed are the profiles of Basra and Sinjar in Iraq and Dara'a, Aleppo and Deir-ez-Zor in Syria. The profiles of Mareb, in Yemen, and Derna, in Libya, are currently being completed.

### BOX 2

#### Urban Profile of Deir-ez-Zor, Syria

Deir-ez-Zor is the largest city in eastern Syria. Its urban areas suffered a disastrous toll from the war. After nine years of crisis, over half of the city's population were displaced leaving 13 of its 17 neighbourhoods completely abandoned. Throughout the Syrian crisis, much of the city's infrastructure has been damaged, degraded and, in some cases, destroyed. 33% of pre-crisis residential areas are damaged. There is currently one functioning hospital, operating at limited capacity, in the city. Only a quarter of schools remain operational, while the remaining seventy 70 facilities are currently not functioning, and a critical deficit in capacity exists in terms of both education staffing and supplies. Public services and facilities across every sector were also affected. All the eight bridges of the city were damaged, dividing neighbourhoods on the North-East side of the river and ceasing transportation and trade to cities further North. Connection to the national power grid was disrupted, disabling the city's electricity supply and causing an almost complete blackout between 2015 and 2018. Municipal services and administrative capacity were also severely impacted. Many primary government functions were either transferred or discounted due to damage and insecurity (e.g. courts and notary services, officiating of property transactions, and other licenses and official documentation).

The urban profile included rapid damage field assessment in the file with cooperation of the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment, the City Council and Engineers Syndicate. This was converted into a 'functionality index' that describes the functionality of urban services in each neighborhood, feeding into a prioritization of urban needs on the neighborhood level and a list of suggested interventions. A key component of the profile is an analysis of the effects of the dilapidated state of the sewerage system on the population and the environment, and the required interventions to mitigate these. The plan was validated by Mukhtars and approved by the city council.

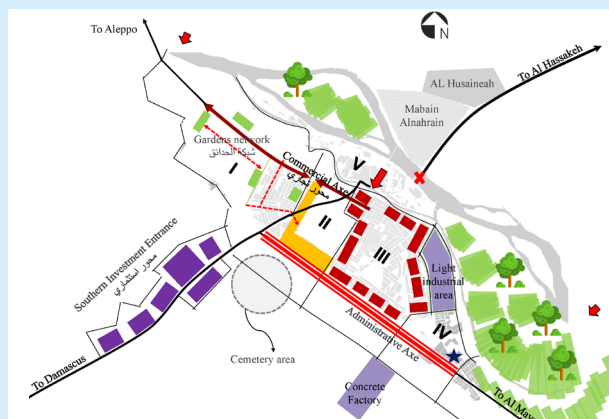


Figure 1: Der Ez Zour City Priorities. Photo: © UN-Habitat

## 1.2 Digital portals and spatial data platforms

Collecting, sharing and updating urban data information is extremely important to understand and respond to crises in urban areas. Digital portals and spatial data platforms are important to track and monitor how the situation evolves after the publication of the urban profiles and they constitute a useful tool for planning and coordinating the interventions in the neighbourhoods or at the city scale. They serve as project coordination platforms, collecting data on all recovery and reconstruction activities of international actors and are publicly accessible and available. UN-Habitat has developed urban data platforms in five countries in the Arab states.

In Iraq, UN-Habitat and the Ministry of Planning are jointly supporting a recovery, reconstruction and resilience (RRR) platform for coordination and analysis. The platform provides multiple layers of data that can support the different phases of the crisis' response. Data is available to the public, although the access to sensitive data is restricted. Establishing and maintaining such a tool requires sustained support and multilateral commitment. UN-Habitat also developed detailed neighbourhood data portals for selected locations in Lebanon and Yemen and a data platform of infrastructure facilities in Libya.

### BOX 3

#### The digital urban portal for Libyan cities

Since 2011, Libya has witnessed protracted political unrest affecting people's lives and the national socio-economic development. Cities face severe challenges related to shortage of houses and basic services, degradation of living environment, unregulated urban sprawl, lack of land tenure security, and other challenges that constitute both short-term priorities and long-term development objectives. With the support of the EU, UN-Habitat worked with UNFPA to produce urban profiles of Benghazi, Sirte, Sebha, Kufra, Ubari and Janzour. The information collected was made available on online open digital portals, on the basis of the requests from the municipalities which needed reliable, geospatial data to guide decision making, develop evidence-based projects and programmes, and monitor the implementation of the ongoing interventions. The Libya portal was developed on the successful model of Iraq portal.

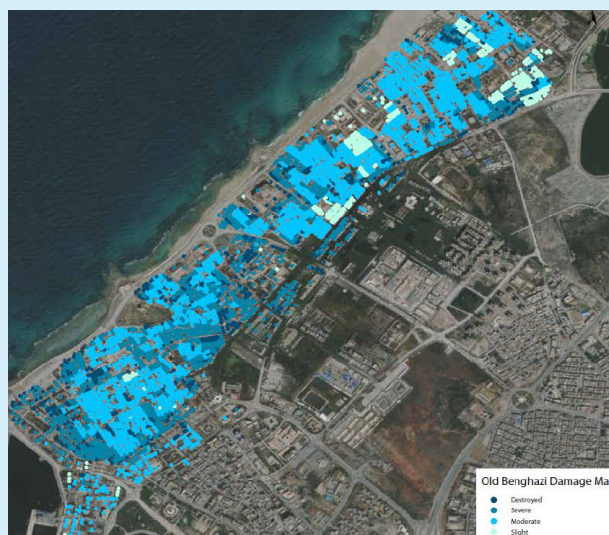


Figure 2: City of Benghazi Damage Map, Libya. Photo: © UN-Habitat

## 1.3 Housing, Land and Property rights

The Arab region is home to 50 million people who need humanitarian assistance, including nearly 14 million forcibly displaced (OCHA June 2020). Housing, land and property (HLP) rights violations are very common among conflict affected and displaced people, and they are also one of the main root causes of conflicts. Housing, land and property rights are necessary preconditions to physical safety and protection from extreme weather and other health hazards. They are an important enabler of other human rights – such as dignified life, education and employment – and are a foundation on which families can rebuild their life after conflicts, therefore a key component of resilience and reconstruction. For women, the protection of HLP rights' is particularly important, as it reduces their vulnerability, rebalances the power within the households and the communities, increases their autonomy and self-determination, their participation in decision-making and their engagement in the peace processes. There can be no social reconciliation and sustainable peace without ensuring

that people and communities can regain access to the land and houses from which they were forcibly evicted and where they can rebuild their lives. It is an essential element for the renewal of the social contract between the institutions and the people, which is particularly crucial for sustaining peace and recovery in crisis-affected contexts.

Restoring HLP rights of returning refugees and IDPs, solving HLP disputes while starting the reconstruction process, protecting the HLP rights in areas of displacement, supporting the reconstruction of property registration systems and the reform of land-related legislative and institutional frameworks are some of the key areas of work in which UN-Habitat has demonstrated capacity and comparative advantages in the UN system and the international development and humanitarian community. UN-Habitat is engaged in HLP related inter-agency coordination structures and interventions in several countries in the region, including Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Libya, Sudan and Lebanon.



## Paving the way for return, peace and stabilization by securing housing, land and property rights and rehabilitating the houses of the Yazidi minority in Iraq

After decades of discrimination and the last wave of displacement caused by ISIL in 2014, displaced Yazidis started to return to their homes in the Sinjar district, in Northern Iraq. Some 146 villages were destroyed, many Yazidis were killed or enslaved, and an estimated 250,000 fled from their homes. The Yazidis were the second-largest group of internally displaced persons in Iraq. Unoccupied Yazidi settlements were systematically demolished or seized. Nearly all private properties were damaged or destroyed, some 6,000 houses in all. The city of Sinjar was liberated in November 2015 and work to rebuild began. UN-Habitat worked with local and national governments to assist the Yazidi community by a set of integrated interventions: the housing, land and property rights of the households were assessed, registered, verified and families were given certificates of occupancy which would allow to be secure in their houses and qualify for housing reconstruction support; houses were rehabilitated and local and national authorities were trained on urban management and planning.

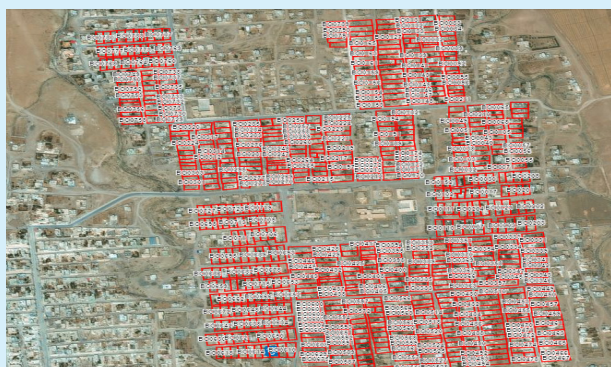


Figure 3: Mapping of Yazidis' HLP claims through the Social Tenure Domain Model in Sinjar, Iraq. Photo: © UN-Habitat



Figure 4: Participatory enumeration of HLP claims in Sinjar, Iraq. Photo: © UN-Habitat



Figure 5: Sample of occupancy certificate. Photo: © UN-Habitat

The participatory approaches used helped restore trust in the communities, encouraging more people to return. As of mid-2020, 21 villages were covered by the intervention. Over 7,200 certificates of occupancy were issued, more than 1,500 houses were rehabilitated and over 47,500 people directly benefitted from the intervention. Recently, UN-Habitat finalized a study accompanied by a legal decree which was submitted to Prime Ministers' Office. The legal decree is currently being reviewed by the Legal Office of the Prime Minister and it is in process of endorsement. UN-Habitat is supporting and facilitating the process to endorse the Legal Decree to recognize HLP rights for the Yazidis. Following this, UN-Habitat is aiming to present registered land claims as one caseload to be upgraded from Occupancy Certificates into the official "Tapoo" land title.



Figure 6: Jeanine A. Plasschaert, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq, handing over an occupancy certificate in Iraq. Photo: © UN-Habitat



Figure 7: Housing rehabilitation in Sinjar, Iraq (before). Photo: © UN-Habitat



Figure 8: Housing rehabilitation in Sinjar, Iraq (after). Photo: © UN-Habitat

## 1.4 Housing rehabilitation and basic services provision

UN-Habitat has always put housing and basic services provision at the centre of its attention, including in crisis response and recovery. Affordable housing is one of the key development challenges faced by countries in the region, both at times of peace and when emerging from crises. UN-Habitat deploys a set of tools and expertise to address housing challenges, including housing

assessments, policy reform, financing mechanisms, etc. In crisis response contexts, large housing interventions in the region include damage assessments, housing rehabilitation, provision of housing and land tenure security, informal settlements upgrading and shelter coordination and response. Basic services provision accompanies housing interventions.

### BOX 5

#### Housing rehabilitation and basic services provision in Yemen

The ongoing conflict in Yemen caused devastation. Over 22 million people are in need of assistance and 2 million are internally displaced. Al Hudaydah, a major port town, has been at the centre of the fighting, 47,000 families have been displaced and found shelter in old schools or disused government buildings where the lack of sanitation facilities and clean water threatens to lead to renewed cholera outbreaks.

UN-Habitat assisted over 12,300 people, rehabilitated 148 housing units and built 63 public toilets in the Al Khawkha and Al Tuhayta settlements. In addition over 6,600 people were educated on COVID-19 and 3,000 received hygiene kits. The project mitigated the impact of conflict on the internally displaced and vulnerable communities in Al-Hudaydah Governorate, with a focus on women, children, elderly, and disabled persons. It provided job opportunities for community members who are the main bread winners of their families by engaging them in the repair and rehabilitation works of their homes.



Figure 9: Housing and basic services rehabilitation in AlHudaydah-Yemen (before).  
Photo: © UN-Habitat



Figure 10: Housing and basic services rehabilitation in AlHudaydah-Yemen (after).  
Photo: © UN-Habitat

## 1.5 Urban recovery framework and recovery plans

As crises become increasingly protracted and urban, there is a need for mainstreaming an urban recovery approach within humanitarian operations. Most post-crisis recovery frameworks do not have an explicit urban component. However urban information systems are increasingly becoming a prerequisite for engaging in crisis contexts and urban area-based approaches play an important role in operationalizing humanitarian operations. An urban recovery framework helps situating the recovery interventions within the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. It enables

joint programming for addressing interconnected problems in urban areas and it provides better chances to jointly achieve resilient urban recovery at scale. An urban recovery framework for the region was developed in coordination with key partners. It consists of seven pillars: housing, economy, infrastructure and services, governance, civil society, environment and cultural heritage. UN-Habitat has developed and is collaborating with other UN and non-UN agencies in the implemented recovery plans in Iraq, Syria and Libya.

### The Urban Recovery Framework

The Urban Recovery Framework (URF) is as an enabling institutional and policy framework that enables programming to support resilient urban recovery at scale and the renewal of the social contract. The URF concept has been developed by UN-Habitat and its partners in the MENA region building on the Agency's extensive experience in responding to humanitarian and development needs in urban contexts.

The URF is underpinned by the following guiding principles: Addressing the root causes of tension and vulnerabilities; Building back better (& greener); Geographic and social equity in programming; Local government and community empowerment; Emphasis on labour-intensive recovery programming; and Enhancing the role of the private sector. The Urban Recovery Framework has three main parts:

1. Multi-Sector Diagnostic and Analysis:

- Identifying current and anticipating future needs;
- Mapping current capacities across systems, central and decentralised government, stakeholders and actors;
- Mapping of ongoing activities and gaps in response;
- Policy environment & existing urban or sectoral plans.

2. Identifying Absorptive, Adaptive, and Transformative Priorities:

- Absorptive, responding to immediate needs;
- Adaptive, medium-term response and recovery, including efforts to build-back-better;
- Transformative, longer-term response, including disruptive and "bounce forward" measures.

3. Implementation at URF priorities at City and Neighbourhood/Community levels:

- Mobilising for integrated City Planning;
- Municipal Action Plans and Community Contracting.

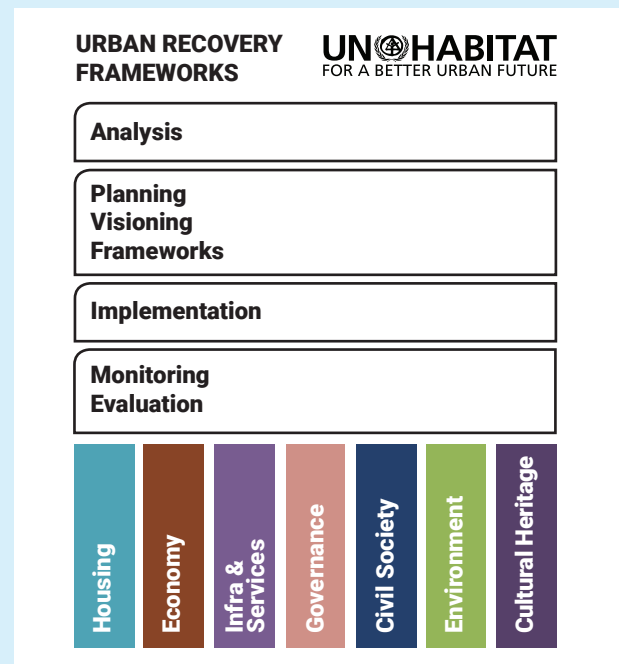


Figure 11: Urban Recovery Framework. Photo: © UN-Habitat

### 1.6 Spatial Planning for resilience in conflict-affected, refugee and displacement contexts

UN-Habitat has been working on the spatial planning components of interventions aiming at the settlement of displaced populations and successfully implemented planned city extensions for accommodating and including the displaced, the majority of which are women and children. This led to increased access to adequate housing, basic and social services and improved living conditions to people in crisis contexts. The shift from encampment in remote areas to hosting displaced populations within urban areas - e.g. by planned densification where applicable or with planned city extensions - will reduce the establishment of settlements that are unsustainable on the long term and the risk of conflict over land and resources as often happens between displaced and host communities, while ensuring the continuation of education, access to health and basic services. UN-Habitat also intervenes in crisis-affected contexts to prevent the unregulated urban sprawl of under-serviced and unregulated informal settlements, which would lead to degraded urban environment and unsustainable urbanisation patterns, and to build back better, after the destruction caused by war.

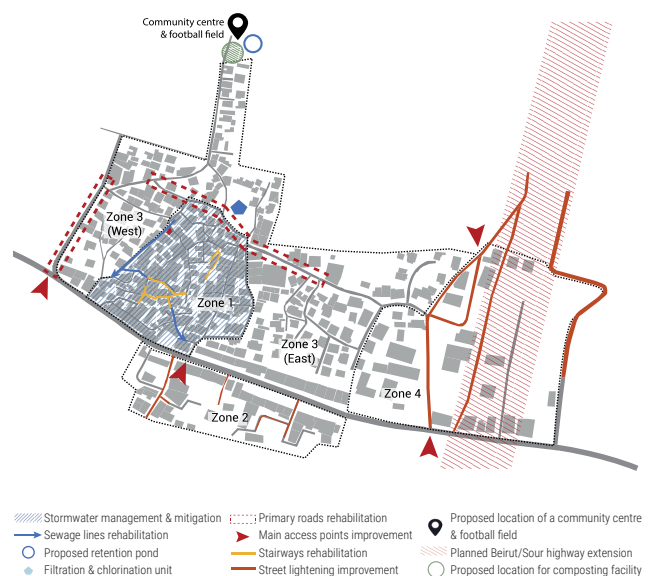


Figure 12: Main upgrading strategies for Maachouk, Tyre-Lebanon (2017).

Photo: © UN-Habitat



### Building resilience through spatial planning interventions in Palestine

Over the years, UN-Habitat supported participatory spatial planning for Palestinian communities in occupied East Jerusalem and Area C. This work contributed freezing evictions and displacement process to the benefit of 55,000 Palestinians and entailed the development of 56 multi-layered plans with communities, such as Imneizil (Hebron), Wadi Nis (Bethlehem), Jiftlik (Jericho), Umm Lahem (Jerusalem), enhancing a sense of resilience and community cohesion. UN-Habitat also supported spatial planning processes in the Gaza Strip to build-back-better after conflict. The spatial planning interventions included the establishment of de facto planning committees in Area C - such as Barta' area (Jenin) - to follow-up with planning-related issues and the guarantee that Palestinians are represented in plan-making processes. Further, UN-Habitat provided shelter for more than 700 people, particularly to vulnerable and disadvantaged women in Hebron and Gaza, supported the design, implementation and management of 19 public spaces and placemaking interventions, such as Al Aqaba (Tubas), Haris and Bruqin (Salfit), Izbet Tabib (Qalqiliya) as demonstration of effects on the ground.

At a broader scale, UN-Habitat supports the preparation and adoption of the National Urban Policy and the improvement of the urban-rural linkages in six city regions (Qalqiliya, Tubas, Jericho and Northern Jordan Valley, Ramallah and Al-Bireh, Hebron, and Jerusalem, hosting together 1.9 million Palestinians). The combined results of such interventions strengthen local democratic processes, reduce the fragmentation of local government processes and foster an improved national-local collaboration, crucial for state-building and better resilience.



Figure 13: Rehabilitated Public Space in Palestine. Photo: © UN-Habitat

### 1.7 Empower and rebuild communities

Broken communities, social tension and distrust among community members hinders reconciliation and significantly slows down recovery. Empowering communities to rebuild trust amongst its members plays a central role in many of UN-Habitat's interventions in crisis affected contexts. Research suggests that villages exposed to a community driven reconstruction program exhibit higher subsequent levels of social cooperation. UN-Habitat works closely with communities in a variety of crises response

processes, including neighborhood recovery action planning, neighborhood profiling, local capacity building interventions in support of neighborhood infrastructure upgrading programmes, etc. One of the most effective and direct ways to empower communities is the 'community contracting' approach being implemented in Syria. This is a mechanism that enables direct beneficiaries to become the direct implementing partners of recovery and development projects within their neighborhoods.

### Abjad Centre in Tabbeneh, Tripoli, Lebanon

Once a war shelter, the building that houses the Abjad Centre is now the first community centre in Tabbeneh, Tripoli that provides psychosocial support, life skills workshops and vocational trainings and promotes self-expression through art,

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