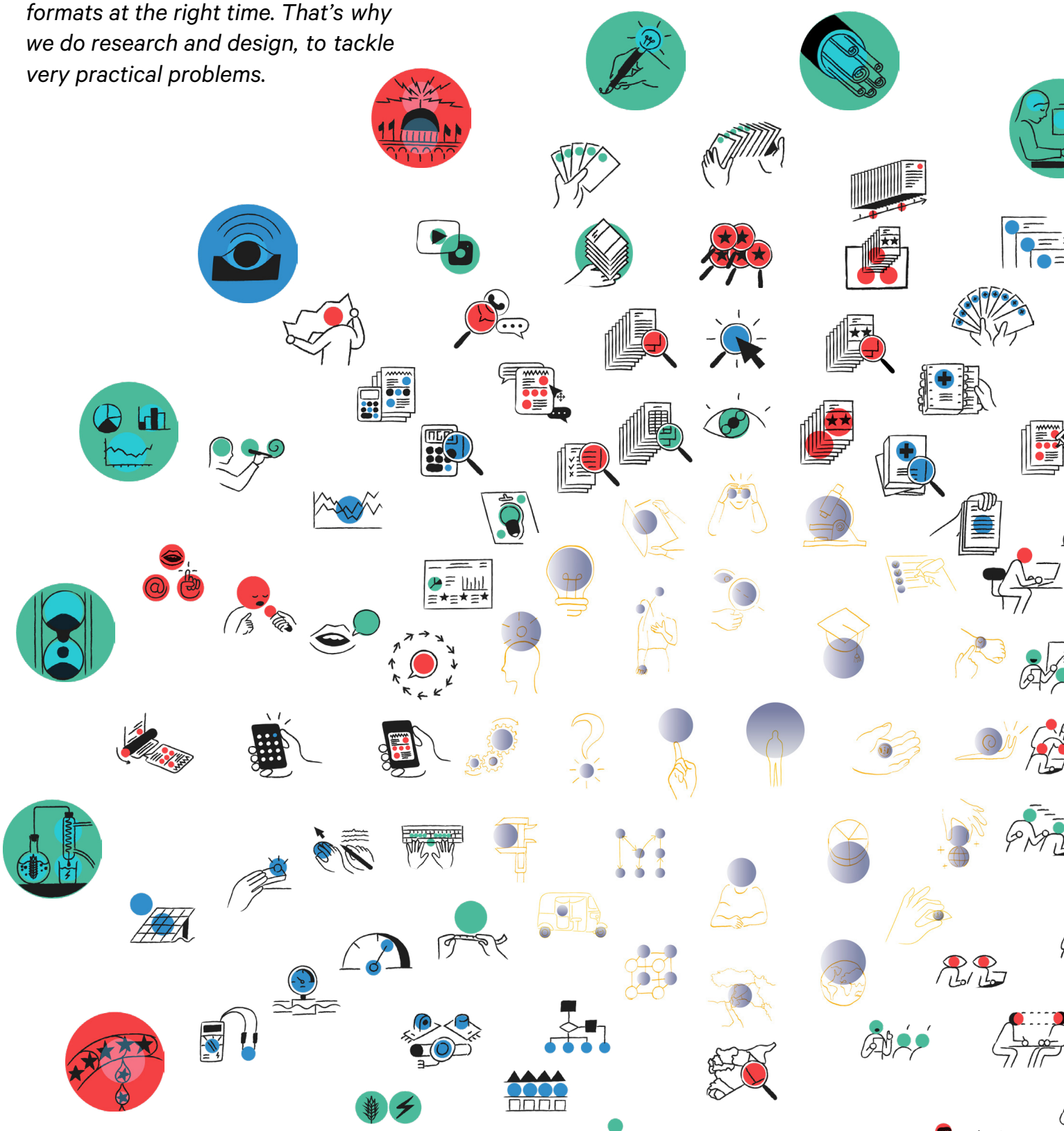
SYNAPS INSIDE OUT

synaps

Discover surprising aspects of our work. To be helpful, sound knowledge must reach the right people in the right formats at the right time. That's why we do research and design, to tackle very practical problems.



Sample and browse our approach



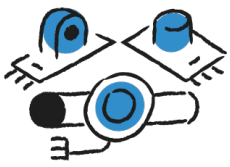
Knowledge

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Synaps **Knowledge**

We conduct extensive fieldwork among communities grappling with social problems, to define solutions on their terms.

Fieldwork
Documentation
Publishing

The fabric of a nation

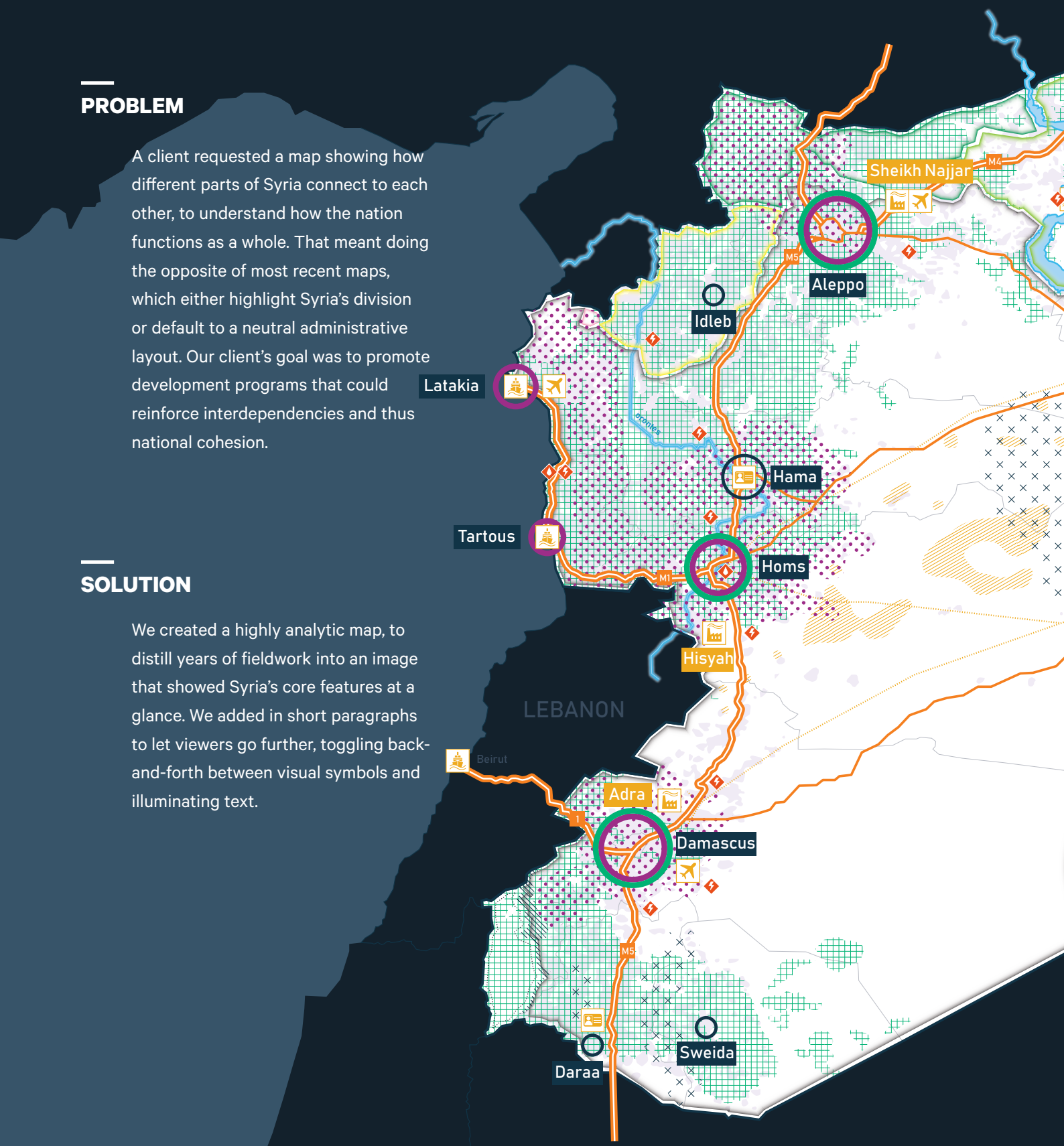
How to map what makes a country?

PROBLEM

A client requested a map showing how different parts of Syria connect to each other, to understand how the nation functions as a whole. That meant doing the opposite of most recent maps, which either highlight Syria's division or default to a neutral administrative layout. Our client's goal was to promote development programs that could reinforce interdependencies and thus national cohesion.

SOLUTION

We created a highly analytic map, to distill years of fieldwork into an image that showed Syria's core features at a glance. We added in short paragraphs to let viewers go further, toggling back-and-forth between visual symbols and illuminating text.



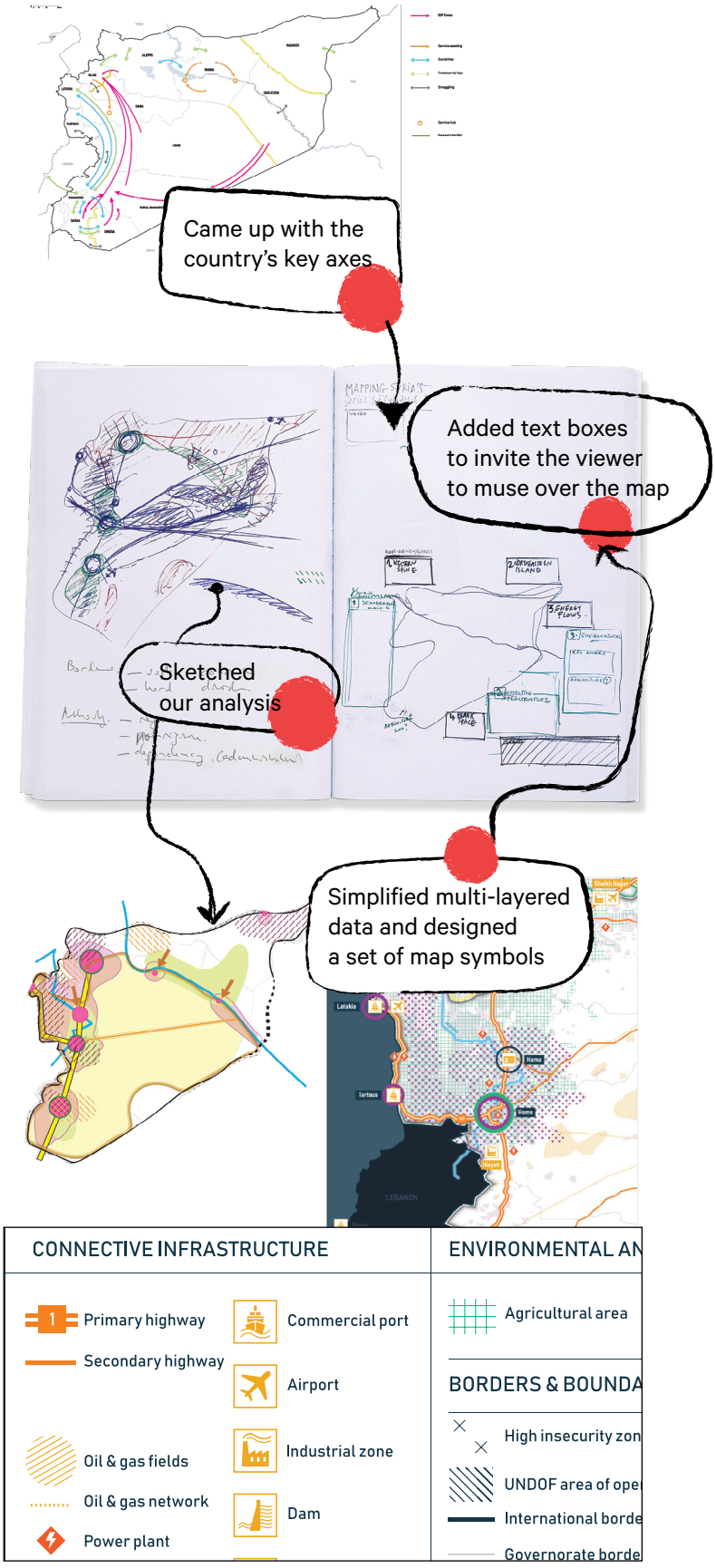
PROCESS AND RESULTS

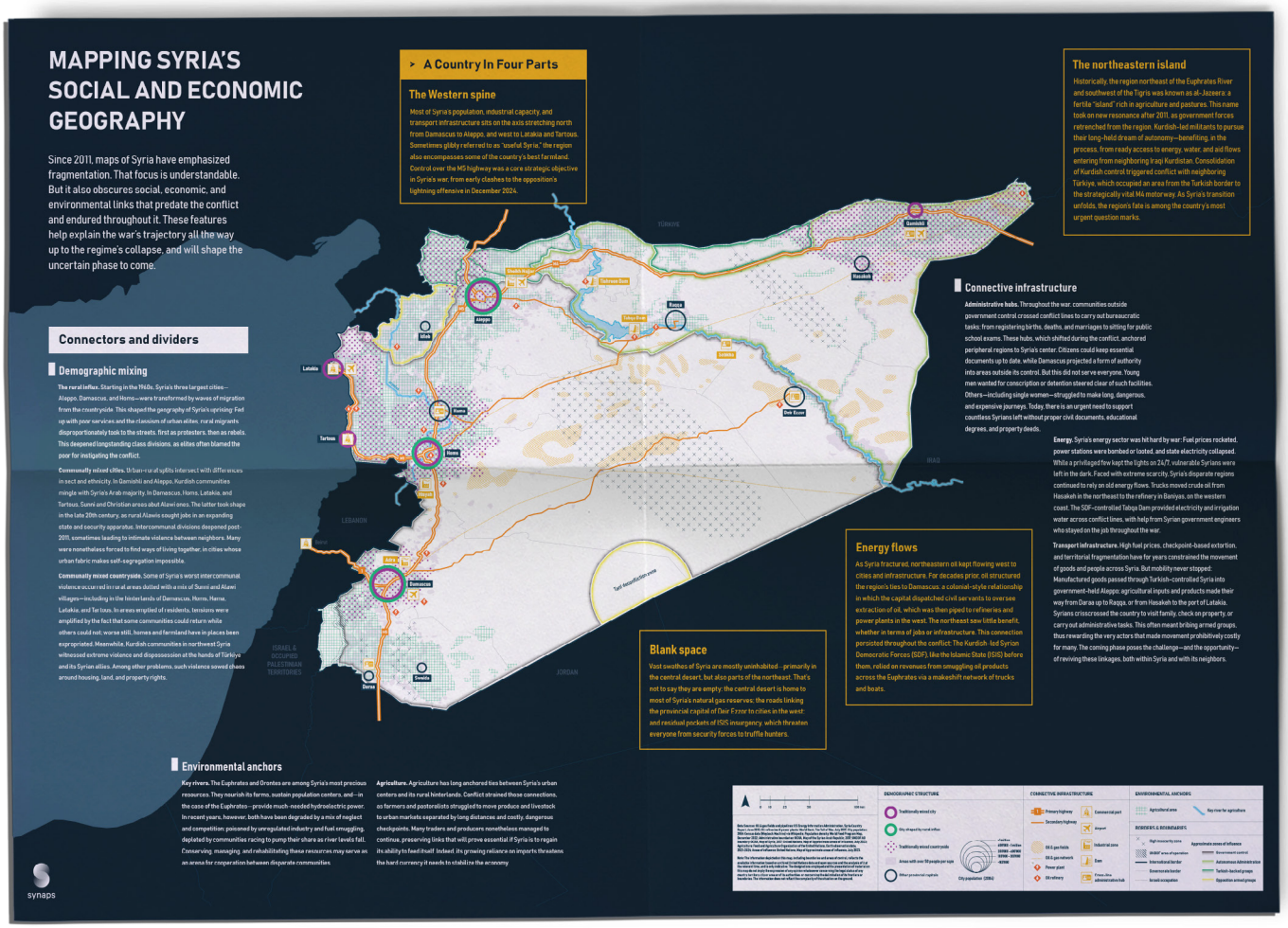
1. Our first challenge was **too much information**: thousands of interviews conducted over six years, in addition to many public datasets. Making decisions required a more conceptual approach: What are the axes that structure Syria? What are the social, economic, infrastructural features that offer the most insight, when mapped visually? So, we started with hand drawn sketches.

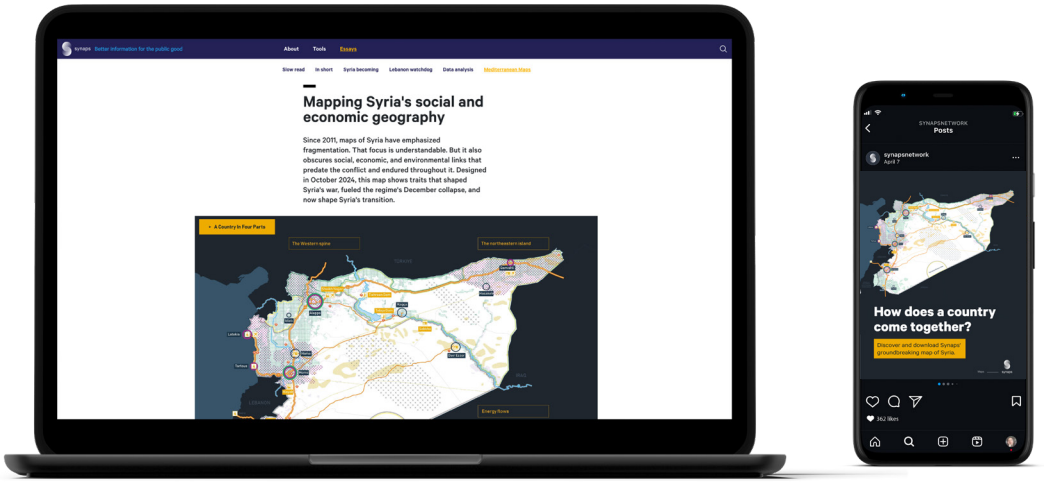
2. The **data itself posed problems**. Datasets are scattered, uneven in quality, and rarely up-to-date. They can be hard to find and need much cleaning. Some important features, such as displacement flows or physical insecurity, can't be mapped with precision. Others, like water bodies or roads, required qualitative curation: Rivers and lakes, for example, are not all equally important, although they carry the exact same value in the dataset.

3. A rich, multilayered map demands a **sophisticated visual language**, to ensure that all features are as visible and explicit as possible. We created contrast between precise geographic data and more approximate, qualitative features. We abandoned our initial instinct of visualizing porous borders open to smuggling, because it added more confusion than clarity. We organized the legend into categories, to help viewers navigate the layers of analysis.

4. We wanted this poster-sized map to invite reflection, to **trigger the viewers' own thought process**. We opted, therefore, to include small boxes of written analysis, which we placed close to what they describe. This enables viewers to toggle back and forth between visual information and text providing analytic depth. The map also had to be beautiful, to make its way onto the walls of UN agencies, aid organizations, and embassies, which it did.







TAKEAWAY

We were surprised at how relevant this map remained despite extreme political turmoil. Although it was designed in the months that preceded the collapse of Syria's regime, it has continued to explain the country's trajectory ever since. This is a strong reminder of the need to think in terms of structures, which persist even as regimes come and go.

Build, operate, transfer

How to navigate a political minefield

PROBLEM

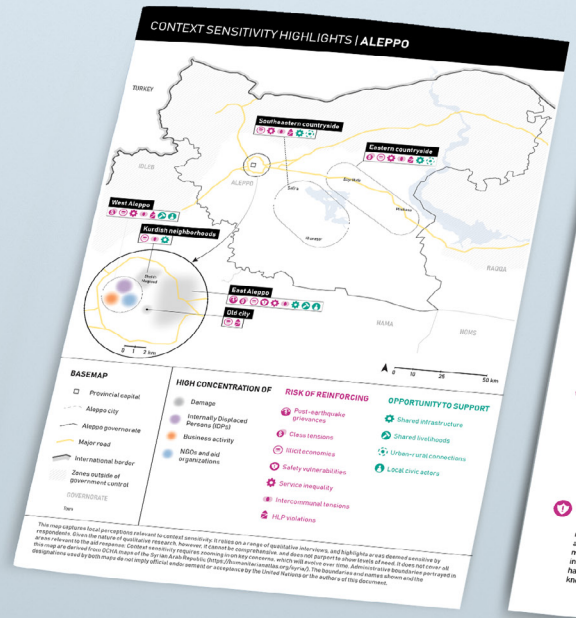
A large aid agency asked Synaps to design a tool that would help their teams navigate political sensitivities across diverse local contexts.

This posed several challenges: How to produce a tool concise enough for an agency already struggling to act upon its own troves of analysis and program data? How to include enough detail for international staff with rapid turnover and low institutional memory? And how to produce documents explicit enough to illuminate thorny political topics, without creating risks or anxiety for national staff in a repressive environment?

SOLUTION

We designed a methodology to produce very short, visual guides that would be easy to update and hard to ignore. That meant ensuring this methodology would be fully transferred to the aid agency and become part of its internal processes, rather than depend on an external consultant like Synaps.



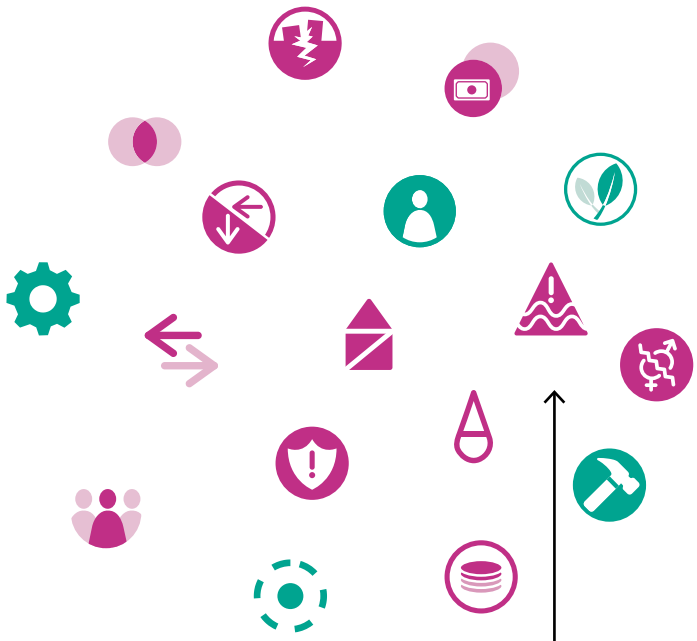


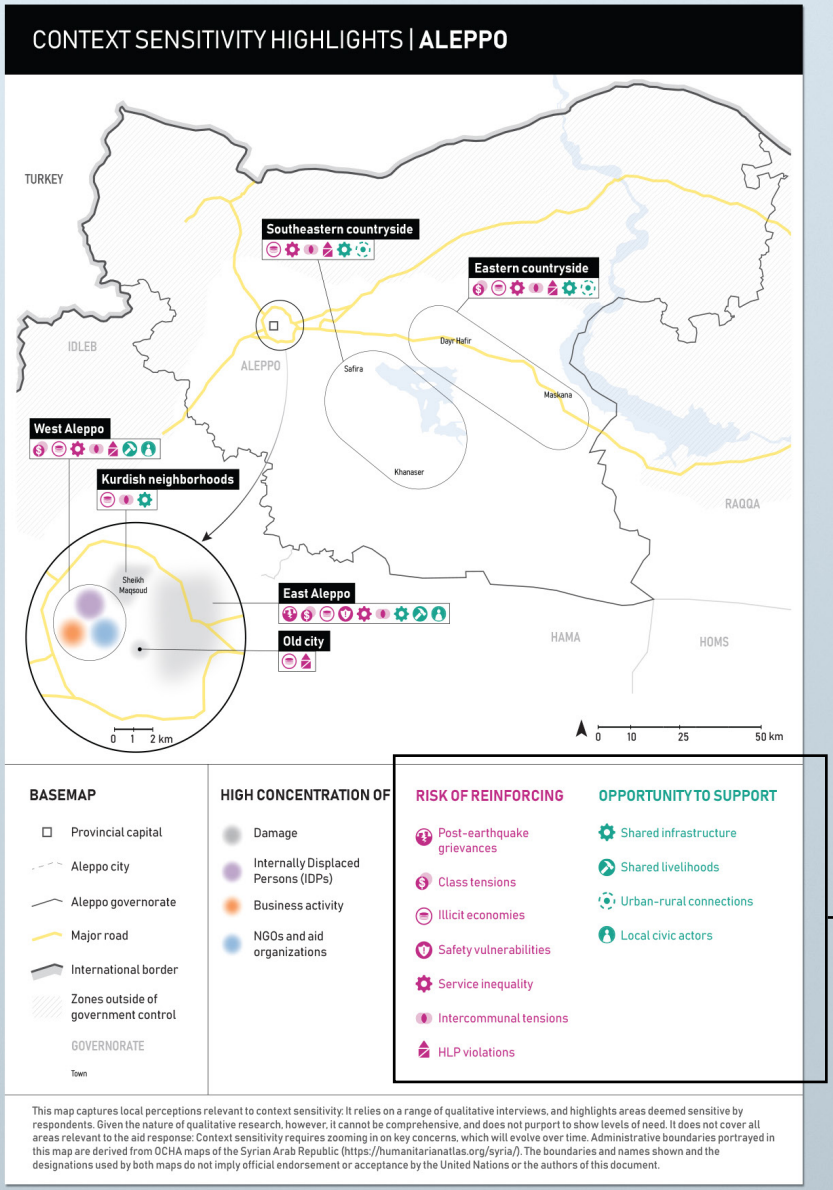


PROCESS AND RESULTS

1. For each governorate across Syria, we analyzed our own years of fieldwork to **highlight the risks and opportunities** most relevant to aid programs. With this brief in hand, we worked with a cartographer to map them out visually, using a matrix we could apply to different contexts.

2. As we made progress, we systematized our thinking to **ensure a coherent rollout** across the country. We defined a set of topics our partner should pay utmost attention to. We illustrated these topics with an icon system and a map legend that could help readers grasp local idiosyncrasies at a glance.





3. We codified this system into a **style guide that detailed every step** of our methodology, so our partner could readily adopt it. We included linguistic guidance on touchy subjects, because to be effective political analysis must be accurate and sensitive itself.

4. Once we had a first batch of profiles, we trained our partner's staff on **how to update them independently**, in step with evolving dynamics on the ground. Training exercises brought together a mix of local and international staff. They showed participants that it was possible, with the right methodology, to reach a consensus on the trickiest topics.

5. Having built and operated this methodology, we transferred it to our partner, with an offer to help if needed. We were later approached by another large aid agency which saw how this methodology could **apply to other needs**, such as spatial planning.

A six-step process

Group discussion

- Brainstorm
- Insertions
- Deletions
- Wrap up



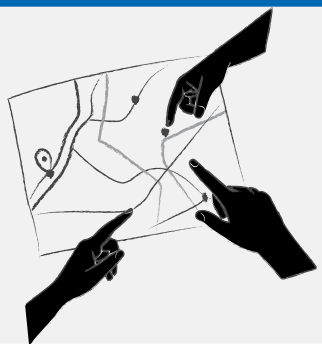
Finalization

- Line editing
- Production and proofing



Brainstorm - 30mn

- Unusual incidents? Emerging trends?
- Who, what, where, when... and why?
- Dynamics most relevant to work?
- New risks, new opportunities?
- Priorities that should change?



Insertions - 45mn

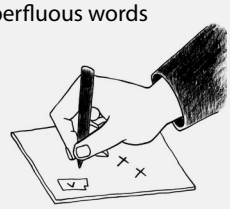
- Nuance
- New trends
- New measures



" Illicit economies. HTS tightly controls the most strategic sectors in Idleb's economy, including fuel, telecoms, construction, and cross-line trade with areas controlled by Türkiye and the Syrian government. This poses **rising** compliance challenges, given **new** American and European sanctions against the group. **Early recovery interventions thus require more rigorous due diligence, particularly when they entail infrastructure rehabilitation or trade in strategic goods.** "

Deletions - 15mn

- Obsolete info
- Excessive detail
- Superfluous words



" Collective conservation. Environmental degradation threatens Idleb residents of all backgrounds, and may thus provide fertile ground for cooperation. The Orontes and the ~~farmland that surrounds it could be~~ a good place to start: The river itself suffers extreme pollution. ~~The earthquake damaged farms: Cracking open the earth, flooding fields, and killing trees~~. Rehabilitation and protection of these resources could bring together ~~a cross-section of~~ host communities and IDPs. "

Wrap-up - 30mn

- Lessons for ongoing programs
- Areas to pay more attention to
- Greatest risks to avoid



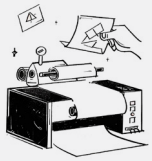
Line editing

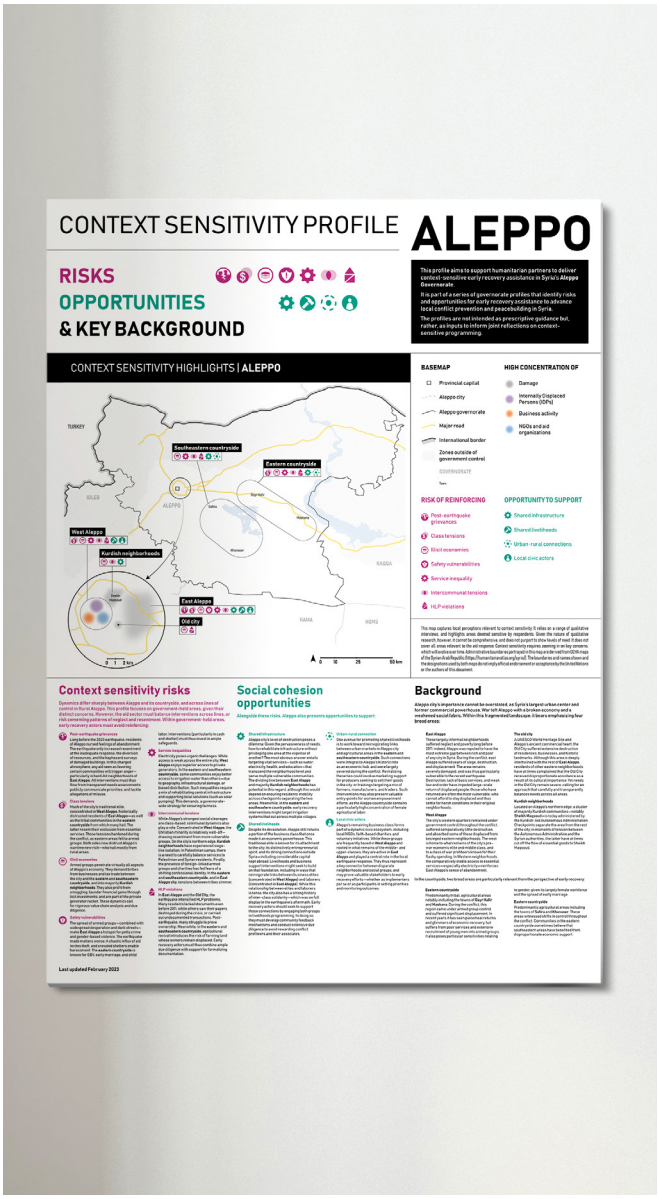
- Incorporate all changes
- Share with participants
- Make final edits
- Add disagreements to minutes

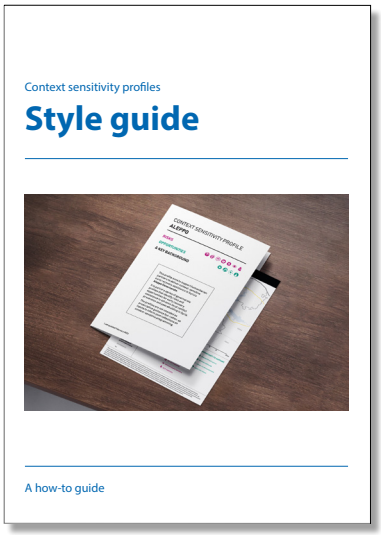


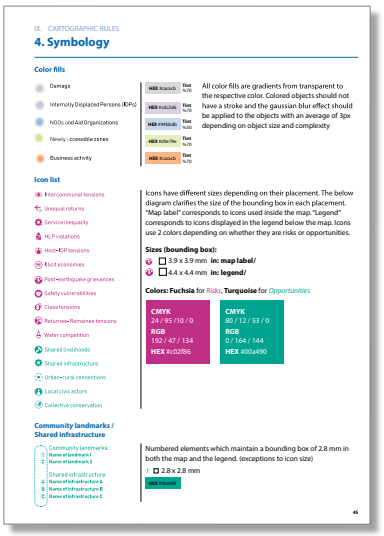
Production and proofing

- Proof-read the text with an editor
- Prepare the layout with a designer
- Ready to print and share!



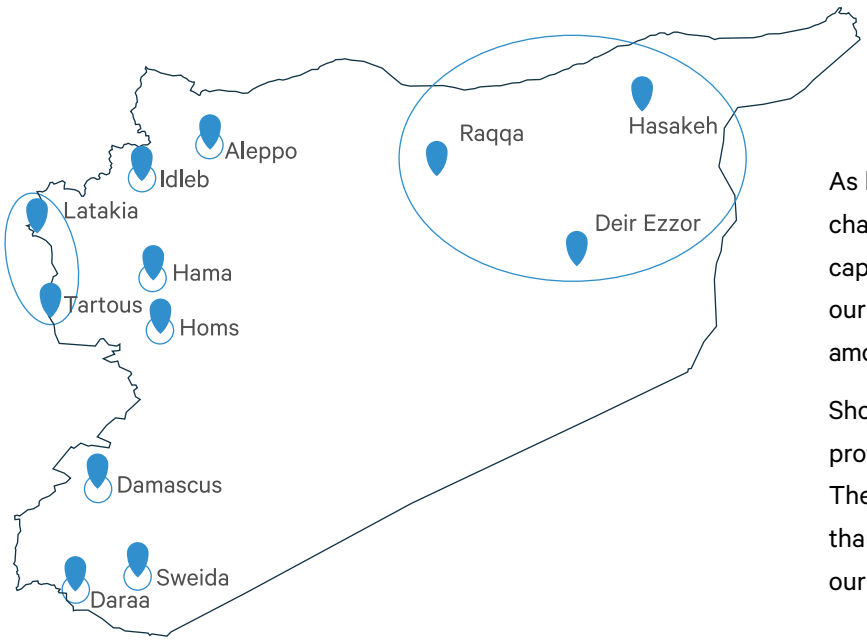








We created **9 profiles**
covering **13 governorates.**



TAKEAWAY

As knowledge producers, one of our biggest challenges is an audience's absorption capacity: Indeed, decision-makers who seek our help are typically overwhelmed by the amount of information they already must absorb.

Short, carefully designed products like these profiles provide a sense of relief and efficiency. They take more time and resources to produce than the long, text-heavy reports that pervade our industry—but the investment pays off.

Dignity in distress

How to respectfully picture poverty

PROBLEM

An aid agency was struggling to convey the depth of poverty in postwar Syria. How to depict growing misery while preserving the dignity and agency of those who suffer from it?

Aid organizations too often neglect this question: As they compete over funds, many advertise their work through demeaning portraits of impoverished children and women—a practice so common as to birth the term poverty porn.

SOLUTION

We made the case for a radically different approach. Rather than portray vulnerable people themselves, we would immerse the audience in their lived environment.

By photographing ordinary objects, textures, and ambiances, we could make declining living conditions real and relatable. Of course, this meant involving communities all the more, to define what they wanted to share with the world and how.



PROCESS AND RESULTS

1. As always, we started with fieldwork. This is **particularly tricky when dealing with vulnerable people**, who often have little control over their own time. They may have several jobs, work long and erratic hours, and devote inordinate energy to basic tasks like procuring food. They may be wary of researchers and ashamed of their environment. They reasonably doubt the value of communication campaigns, which change nothing to their immediate needs. Fieldwork therefore requires researchers who combine experience, access, agility, patience, and respect.

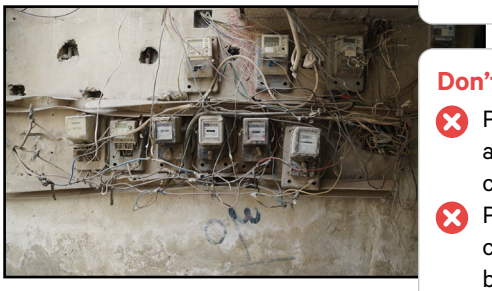
2. We used a first round of fieldwork to **test our thinking with an initial set of photographs** that could guide the process as we rolled it out on a bigger scale.

3. We wrote a detailed **photographic brief** to inform the work of eight local photographers who would operate in different parts of the country.

4. We invested extensive effort to think through **the project's ethics**. Engagement with vulnerable groups poses distinct ethical risks. Subjects themselves are less likely to report unethical behavior. Boilerplate measures, such as asking people to sign a consent form, miss the point: Indeed, researchers and photographers must budget significantly more time to hear out their subject's stories, concerns, questions, preferences, and suggestions, and to collect their feedback on photographs taken in their presence.

PHOTOGRAPHY BRIEF





Do-s

- The topic is important, namely how even lighting can be a challenge.

Don't-s

- Photo 1 lacks context and doesn't pose a clear enough problem.
- Photo 2 speaks to complex solutions but is not obvious enough either.





Do-s

- The dish could be a good character.
- Photo 2 adds meaning, by showing the small amounts purchased.

Don't-s

- The photos are too zoomed in and lack context.
- Photo 1 doesn't pose a problem (which it may do if the dish is isolated on a table).



TAKEAWAY

There is a huge need for imagery that does more than reinforce stereotypes. This of course applies to poverty, but also to much more. We struggle to find stock photos that capture the subtlety of most topics we work on, such as migration journeys, the economic roles of women, or environmental diversity in places like the Arab world.

In a context of information overload, there remains a remarkable paucity of sensitive imagery—although one well-considered picture can say so much more than many words.

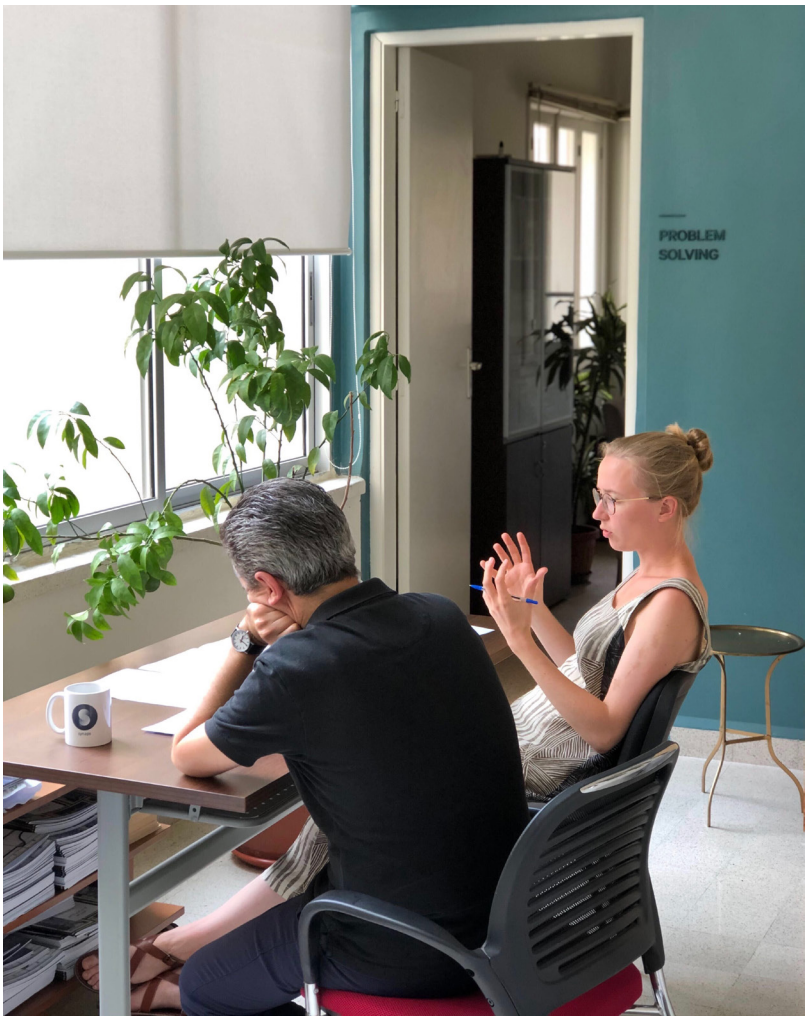
Your brain trust

How to think outside your team's box

PROBLEM

Large organizations struggle to tap grassroots knowledge, even when they recognize the need for it. Several aid agencies asked us to become their brain trust: an external source of insight deeply attuned to their work.

The idea is as appealing as it is difficult to pull off. There's plenty of smart people around: How do you get the right ones channeling the right information into the right channels?



SOLUTION

On each occasion, we built and trained a team of researchers to fill our partner's knowledge gaps.

We recruited people deeply embedded in the topics and communities at stake. We trained them to collect the kind of textured, human-centered data that most aid sector assessments miss. And we then converted those findings back into formats to suit our clients' own processes.



PROCESS AND RESULTS

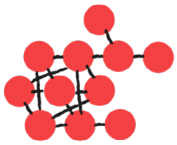
1. Our first step was to hire **the right people**, by giving priority to attitude and agility over formal credentials: people rooted in their societies, hungry to go further, stubbornly insistent on making their research useful to the communities where we work..

2. Because our hires are rarely experienced researchers, we **invest massively in on-the-job training**. New hires receive hands-on support as they master the basics of documentary research and fieldwork: For instance, newbies team up with veteran staff to conduct joint interviews and write transcripts. As questions arise, they tap the body of pedagogical material we developed.

3. By contrast with a growing reliance on desk research, remote work, and automated synthesis, what sets our approach apart is **deeply immersive fieldwork**. Our researchers don't just study or visit an area: They sleep and socialize there, build local partnerships, create space for unexpected encounters. We train our staff to capture the intangible aspects of such work in photos and observations.

4. We then **analyze the fieldwork in a collaborative and iterative approach**. The best analysis in a collective form of intelligence: Staff read each other's notes, pose probing questions to colleagues, and chime in with suggestions of their own.

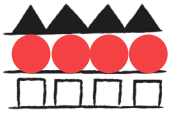
5. Finally, we **convert findings into outcomes tailored to the client's needs**. This means spending enough time with them to understand what those needs are. We then distill months of research into tight formats, which we augment through practical recommendations, topical briefings, and quick reactions to questions as they arise.



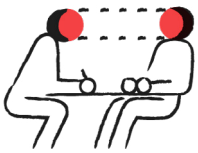
Hire people rooted in their communities



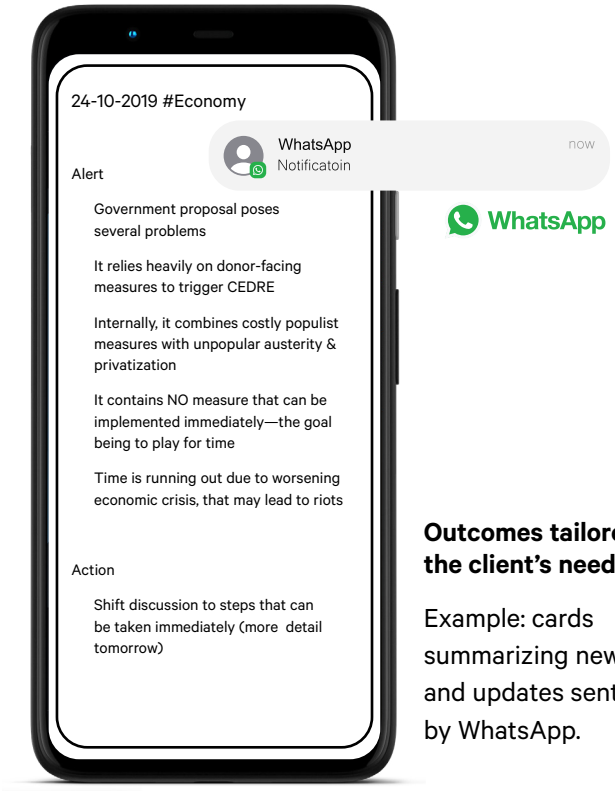
Train a team of researchers



Collect textured data

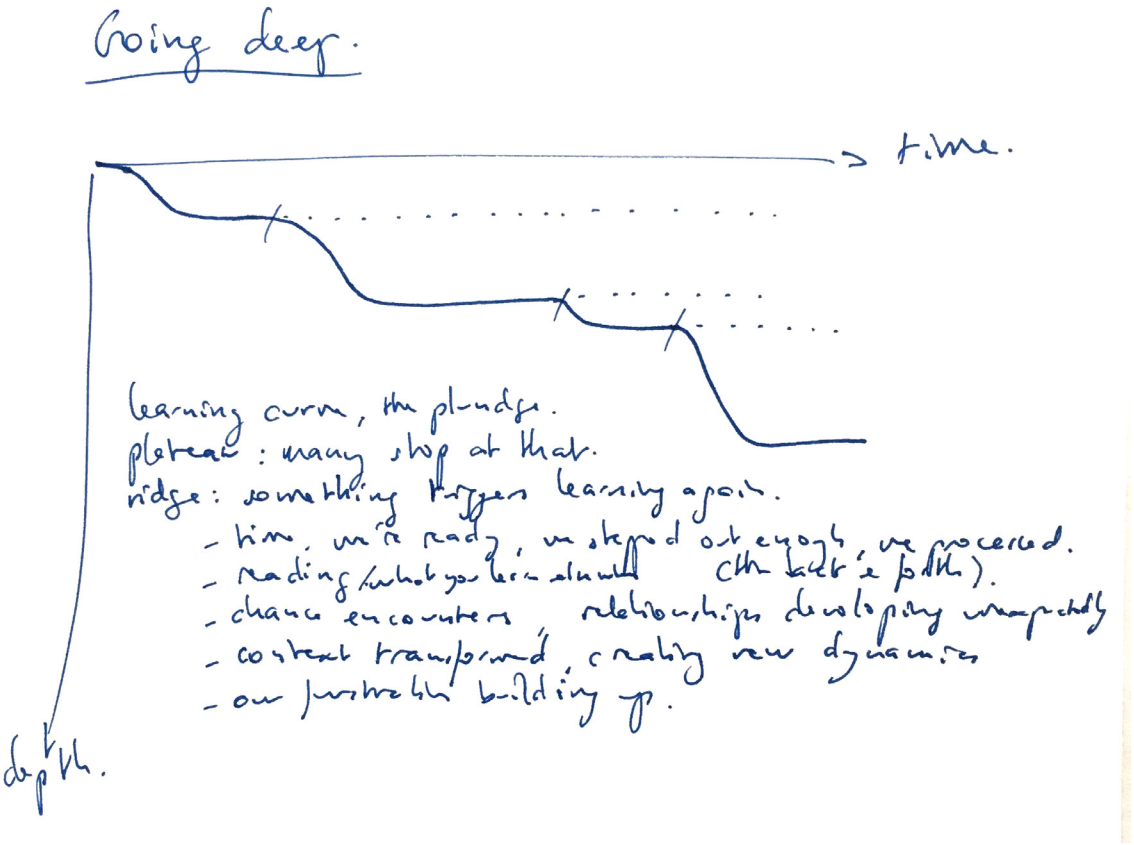


Team up with veteran staff



Outcomes tailored to the client's needs

Example: cards summarizing news and updates sent by WhatsApp.



TAKEAWAY

A well-designed brain trust is extremely efficient—if you know how to use it. Uptake often depends on bold, conscientious individuals who push their institutions to both invest in and act upon deep research.

This, too, became part of our role: We had to understand the obstacles and politics such champions faced, and tailor our work to support them.

A child's world

How to assess an educational intervention from the children's perspective

PROBLEM

We were pulled in to evaluate a small project designed to promote tolerance among children. It was set among a mixed population of refugees and low-income host communities, and aimed to produce lessons that could be applied on a bigger scale elsewhere.

In other words, we had to measure changes that are difficult to detect or define, among a population that poses acute ethical and methodological challenges.



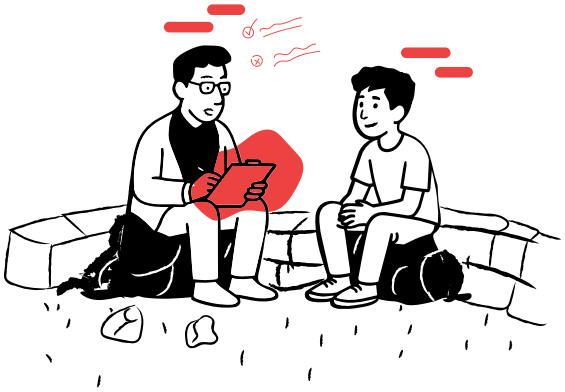


SOLUTION

We took the time to embed ourselves in the project, to build rapport with the children and educators, observe ongoing activities, and design tailored evaluation tools.

PROCESS AND RESULTS

1. Children don't necessarily understand questions the way adults do. They have a shorter attention span, and are often eager to please adults with "the right answer." They can be distrustful, shy, and bottled up, especially on complex and sensitive topics. They are vulnerable in many ways; for example, a simple survey may stir up painful emotions or reinforce a sense of failure. So our first step was to assign a local researcher with **experience working with children.**

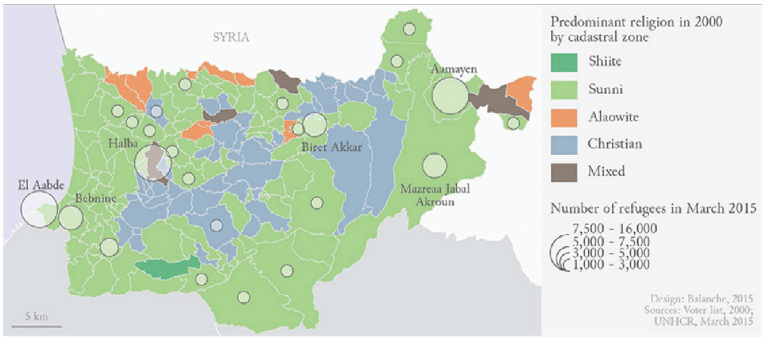


2. In addition, we **studied best practices in this field**, such as how to formulate questions without inviting predetermined answers.

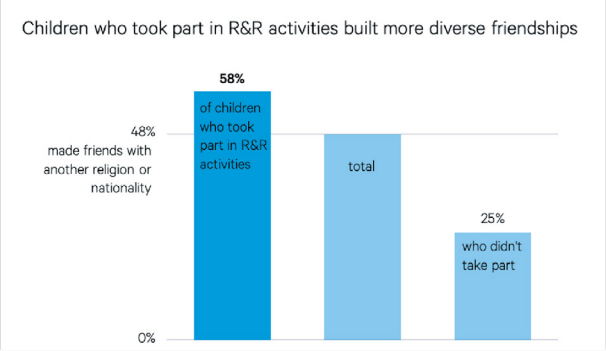
3. To secure hard data, we carefully built a **survey tailored to children** of varying ages. It had to be short, yet include confidence-building questions at the start. Key questions had to be posed twice, with different formulations, to double check the children's understanding. We also involved educators to provide support in administering the survey. We checked that children were at ease throughout the survey, to ensure that they had plentiful opportunities to opt out.

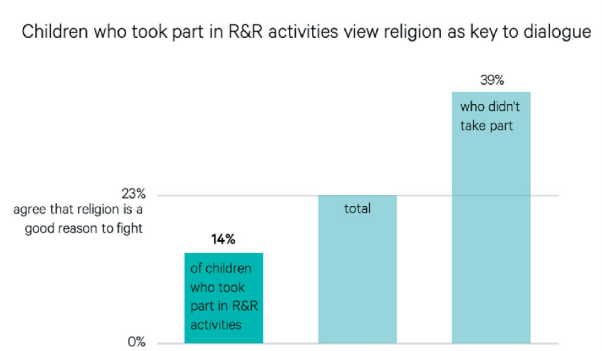


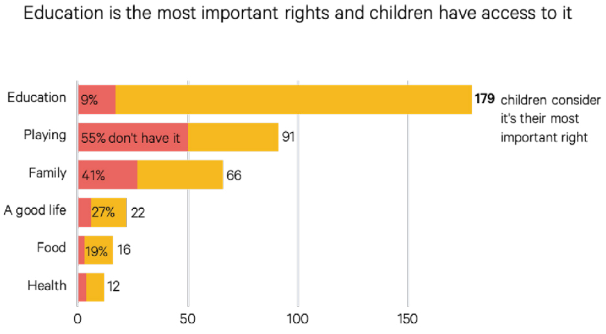
4. The results gave us a **solid base to conduct focus groups**. By then, we knew what we wanted to verify, challenge, or expand upon. These group discussions also enabled us to analyze how the children interacted with each other and with the educators.



5. Our biggest challenge, as often, was just how busy our partners were, making it difficult for them to respond to our requests for feedback, documentation, or introductions. That's where our embedded approach paid off: Our time in the field gave us direct access to most of the information we needed, **reducing the amount of work** required by our partner.



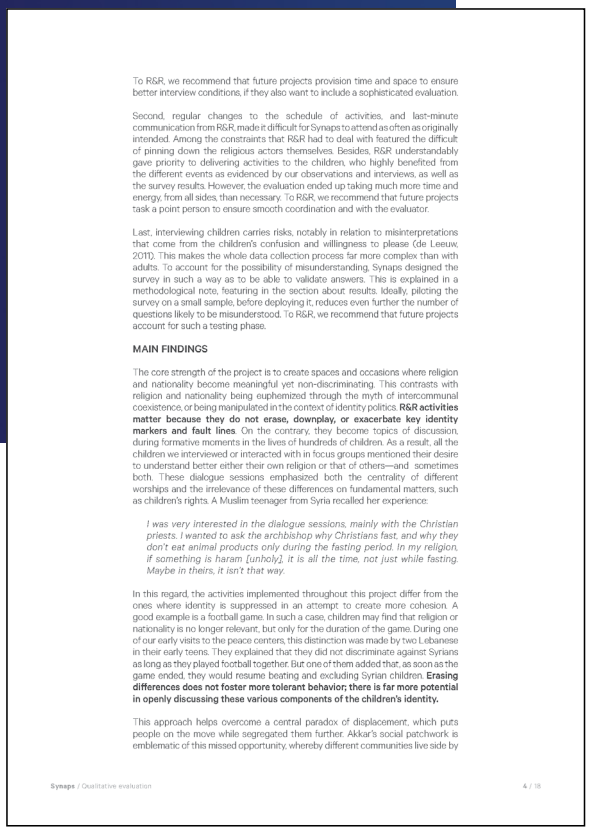




QUALITATIVE EVALUATION

For an interreligious youth network in Akkar

15 February 2023



To R&R, we recommend that future projects provision time and space to ensure better interview conditions, if they also want to include a sophisticated evaluation.

Second, regular changes to the schedule of activities, and last-minute communication from R&R, made it difficult for Synaps to attend as often as originally intended. Among the constraints that R&R had to deal with featured the difficult of pinning down the religious actors themselves. Besides, R&R understandably gave priority to delivering activities to the children, who highly benefited from the different events as evidenced by our observations and interviews, as well as the survey results. However, the evaluation ended up taking much more time and energy, from all sides, than necessary. To R&R, we recommend that future projects task a point person to ensure smooth coordination and with the evaluator.

Last, interviewing children carries risks, notably in relation to misinterpretations that come from the children's confusion and willingness to please (de Leeuw, 2011). This makes the whole data collection process far more complex than with adults. To account for the possibility of misunderstanding, Synaps designed the survey in such a way as to be able to validate answers. This is explained in a methodological note, featuring in the section about results. Ideally, piloting the survey on a small sample, before deploying it, reduces even further the number of questions likely to be misunderstood. To R&R, we recommend that future projects account for such a testing phase.

MAIN FINDINGS

The core strength of the project is to create spaces and occasions where religion and nationality become meaningful yet non-discriminating. This contrasts with religion and nationality being euphemized through the myth of intercommunal coexistence, or being manipulated in the context of identity politics. **R&R activities matter because they do not erase, downplay, or exacerbate key identity markers and fault lines.** On the contrary, they become topics of discussion, during formative moments in the lives of hundreds of children. As a result, all the children we interviewed or interacted with in focus groups mentioned their desire to understand better either their own religion or that of others—and sometimes both. These dialogue sessions emphasized both the centrality of different worships and the irrelevance of these differences on fundamental matters, such as children's rights. A Muslim teenager from Syria recalled her experience:

> *I was very interested in the dialogue sessions, mainly with the Christian priests. I wanted to ask the archbishop why Christians fast, and why they don't eat animal products only during the fasting period. In my religion, if something is haram [unholy], it is all the time, not just while fasting. Maybe in theirs, it isn't that way.*

In this regard, the activities implemented throughout this project differ from the ones where identity is suppressed in an attempt to create more cohesion. A good example is a football game. In such a case, children may find that religion or nationality is no longer relevant, but only for the duration of the game. During one of our early visits to the peace centers, this distinction was made by two Lebanese in their early teens. They explained that they did not discriminate against Syrians as long as they played football together. But one of them added that, as soon as the game ended, they would resume beating and excluding Syrian children. **Erasing differences does not foster more tolerant behavior; there is far more potential in openly discussing these various components of the children's identity.**

This approach helps overcome a central paradox of displacement, which puts people on the move while segregated them further. Akkar's social patchwork is emblematic of this missed opportunity, whereby different communities live side by

TAKEAWAY

To us, this was a case of monitoring, evaluation, and learning at its best. Recognizing the distinctive challenge at hand, we designed an immersive, qualitative, tailored approach, to understand the children's experience rather than project our own world onto them.

The invisible hand

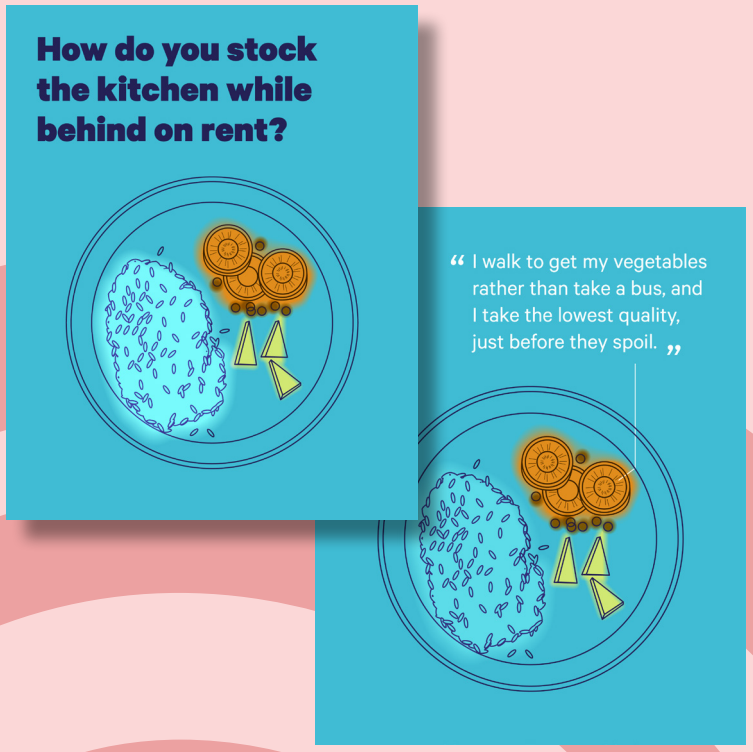
How to reveal the unseen labor that powers our economies

PROBLEM

Our economies are built on labor we both exploit and hide from sight.

We depend upon such workers in ways that are intimate and existential. We rely on refugees, migrant workers, and unpaid female labor to build and maintain our homes, grow and cook our food, raise our kids, and tend to our sick and elderly.

Our failure to acknowledge their role and uphold their rights is a defining problem on all sides of the Mediterranean, and beyond.



SOLUTION

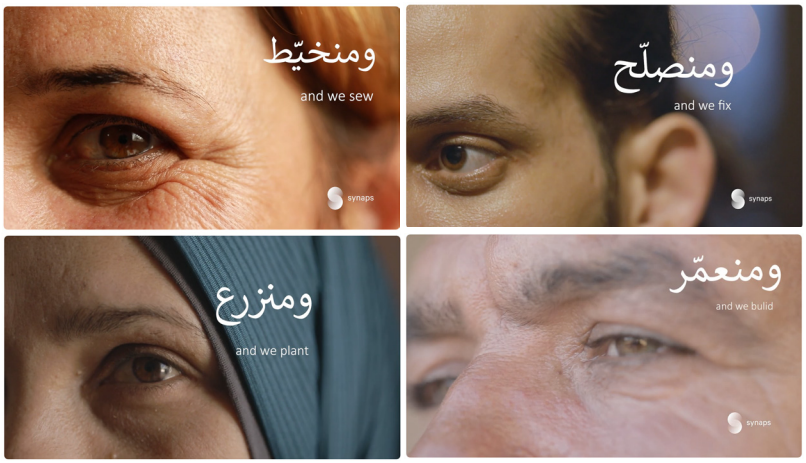
Given the breadth and complexity of the topic, we opted for an experimental and incremental approach.

We want to make our dependency on invisible labor more obvious, relatable, and acknowledged, through creative research, grassroots partnerships, and visual design.



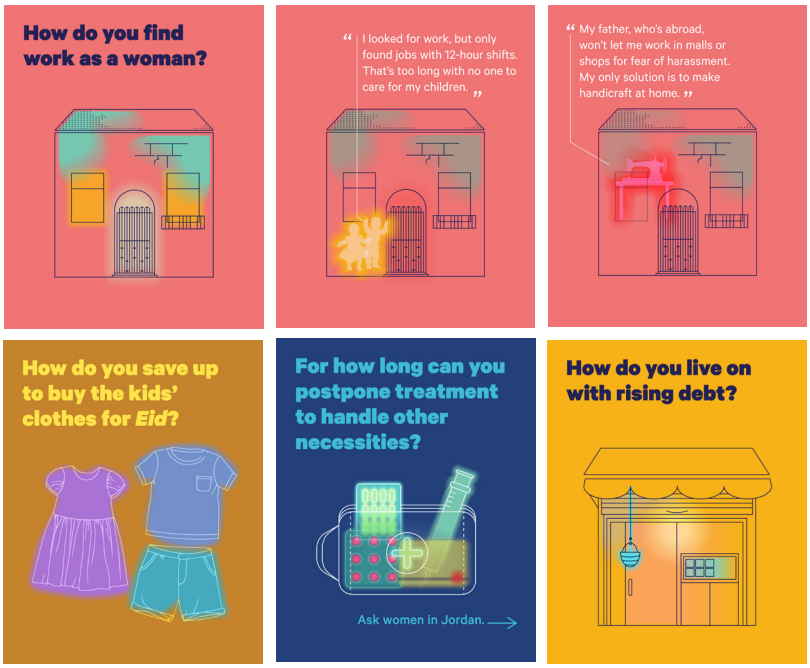
PROCESS AND RESULTS

1. We believe that research is at its **richest when it involves the communities being studied**. We collaborated with Syrian refugees, young Jordanian women, and migrant domestic workers to study and shed light on real problems they face. Such groups are often hard to reach and under intense time pressure, which can make it tricky to schedule interviews. Official statistics almost never acknowledge them, which means the only way to work is through lots of time spent together on the ground.



Video portraits of refugee workers, Lebanon

2. Building relationships is all about defining an approach that **feeds into the work of our partners**. We provided advice to delivery workers in Lebanon as they went on strike over appalling conditions, and amplified their position on social media. We created tools for migrant community leaders to use in their awareness sessions with fellow migrant workers. We trained Jordanian women advocates on communication techniques. Each of these helped us understand the communities we work in, and test creative ways to act in solidarity with them.

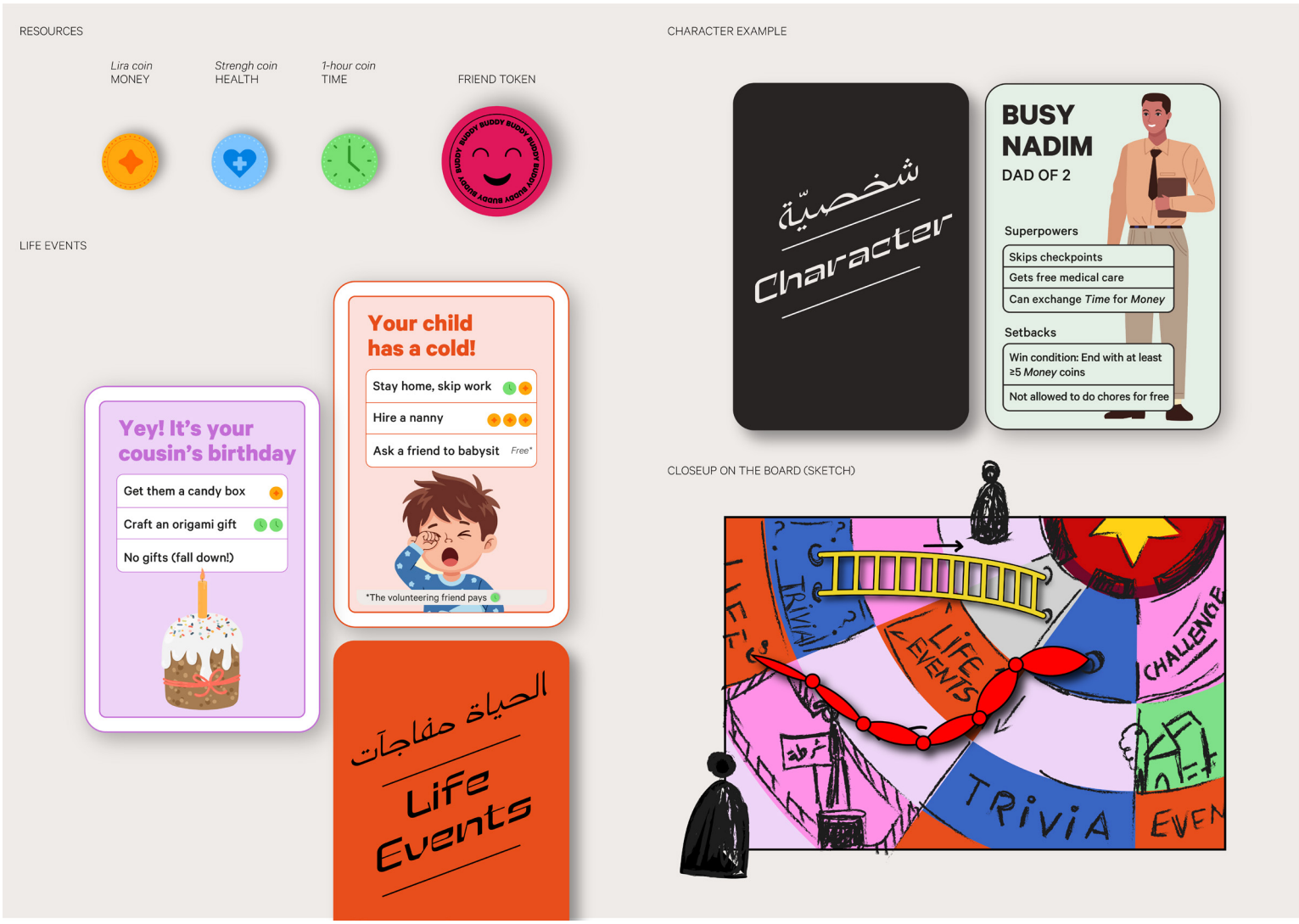


Infographics on women's invisible economy, Jordan

3. In parallel, we adopt an experimental approach to the research's outcomes. We aim for **creative products tailored to the case at hand**. In Lebanon, we could film video portraits of refugee workers who build, grow, manufacture, and repair for the rest of society. In Malta, we helped produce a podcast that could give a voice to migrant sex workers while protecting their identity. In Jordan, we produced a series of infographics to shed light on women's ubiquitous yet invisible struggles in household budgeting, meal planning, and caregiving.



Podcast with stories of migrant sex workers, Malta



4. We're also planning to create **awareness tools that can reach broader audiences**. Notably, we sketched out a game on gendered economic roles, which players can only win by developing collaborative strategies to overcome their societal conditioning.

5. In the long run, we want our experimentation to feed into more academic frameworks, which **shape how we conceive economics and economic policy**. We are now part of the International Association for Feminist Economists, an important avenue for formalizing our results.

TAKEAWAY

This line of work invites us to see exploitation not as an exception but as a core feature of modern economic systems, which doesn't affect marginalized groups and outsiders only.

Our tendency to erase and scapegoat the most vulnerable is central to the toxic politics on the rise globally. And everywhere, swathes of the middle class are being pushed into the economic shadows—pointing to the need and potential for crosscutting alliances.



Synaps **Academy**

We create tools, notably software, to make information easier to use and process, focusing on visual design.

Data science
Design
Application

Life in their shoes

How to unleash the agency of migrant domestic workers

PROBLEM

Synaps was approached by migrant domestic workers who double up as activists and organizers within their community, in Jordan. They wanted tools that could help them in their work as community leaders, for instance to support the awareness sessions they hold with other migrant domestic workers.

In Jordan and beyond, the latter are as essential to society as they are invisible. Their contributions are hidden, and so are their needs, suffering, strategies, and solidarity. This invisibility in turn isolates them from one another, limiting their ability to draw ideas form others' experience and act more collectively.

SOLUTION

We opted to train these leaders on a research and design technique called "personas". These are imaginary yet realistic characters that help make human experiences more visible, practical, and relatable.

Here, the personas have several applications: They serve to identify core problems and resources within the community; as icebreakers in group discussions among migrant domestic workers; and as communication tools when speaking to outsiders, such as NGOs.



PROCESS AND RESULTS

1. We **compiled real-life stories** of migrant domestic workers facing problems and coming up with solutions of their own. In addition to desk research and fieldwork, we drew on the first-hand experience of the community leaders who approached us.

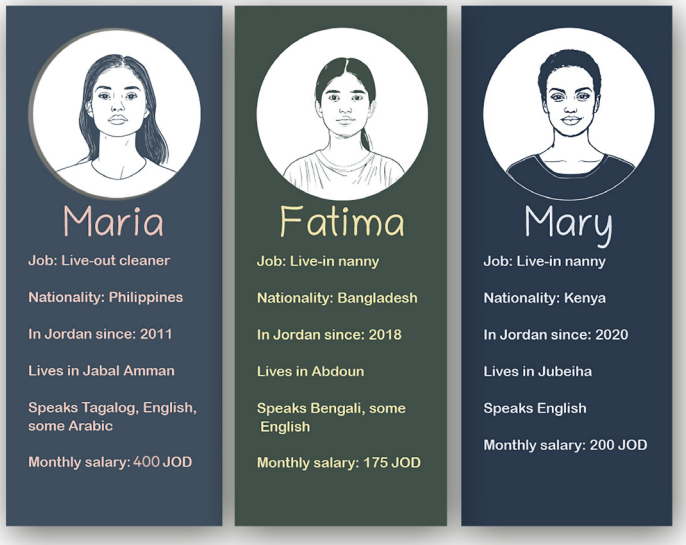
2. We then had to **ask ourselves tricky questions**. Indeed, migrant domestic workers are exposed to extreme abuse, but also reclaim forms of agency, creativity, and solidarity. How to show what they face without making them passive victims? How to show their agency without diminishing their abuse? How to convey a diversity of experiences, when the most vulnerable among domestic workers are also the most invisible of all? Only by working jointly with the community leaders could we answer such questions adequately.

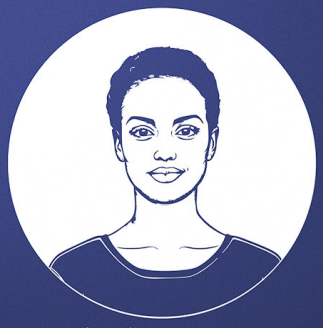
3. The next challenge consisted in **condensing rich information into very few words**, in easily accessible language, for non-native English speakers. Here again, we also sought help from community leaders to avoid critical mistakes on granular details—like the salary, neighborhood, and arrival date of workers from different nationalities.

4. An unexpected difficulty arose when **coming up with images to make the profiles feel relatable**. Stock photos and AI-generated images mostly reinforced the orientalization, victimization, and sexualization of Global South women, forcing us to create images of our own.

5. Finally, we **tested the profiles** to make sure they fulfill their promise. When the community leaders piloted them in workshops for their peers, they sparked discussions with migrant domestic workers who were gratified to see their own experience reflected back at them, and to see echoes of their journeys in profiles from other communities.







Mary

Job: Live-in nanny

Nationality: Kenya

In Jordan since: 2020

Lives in Jubeiha

Speaks English

Monthly salary: 200 JOD

I'm trying to get treatment for my stomach pain.

I've been sick for months, and it's getting worse—I can't sleep. When I told my madame, she gave me Panadol. When I went to the public hospital, they told me to take Panadol. I want to go to a private clinic, but my insurance won't cover it.

I struggle to

Convince my employer that I'm really sick and urgently need professional treatment.

Avoid a scenario where my employer gets annoyed and puts me on a plane back to Kenya.

Save enough money to pay for a private consultation.

Find the right clinic to go to.

I'm working to

Explain to my employer why it's in their interest for me to be in good health.

Identify doctors that other workers have gone to.

Learn if there are any NGOs that help migrant workers get treatment.

Find people who can lend me money in case the pain becomes an emergency.

I would love to have

A clinic that provides good, affordable care to people like me.



Fatima

Job: Live-in nanny

Nationality: Bangladesh

In Jordan since: 2018

Lives in Abdoun

Speaks Bengali, some English

Monthly salary: 175 JOD

I'm trying to negotiate a release from my employer.

I've been with the family for six years. They treat me okay, but still pay me the minimum wage and don't always give me the day off I am owed. I have a friend who says she can get me a better job in the salon where she works, but I need a release.

I struggle to

Communicate with my madame when she gets angry.

Get help from my recruitment agency, which says I should be happy with minimum wage.

Get help from my embassy, which is not responsive.

Get tips from other workers and NGOs, as my English is weak.

I'm working to

Improve my English by listening closely to conversations and TV.

Build trust with my employer, by being reliable and kind to her kids.

Start with small requests, like going out with friends on Fridays.

I would love to have

A WhatsApp group where people share tips on negotiating with employers.



TAKEAWAY

Migrant domestic workers suffer from appearing publicly either as passive victims (in human rights reports) or as troublesome aliens (in local media). In reality, they are actively engaged in overcoming the difficulties and abuse they encounter.

Making their own strategies more visible, to others and to themselves, is the first step to building more ambitious solutions based on their experiences.

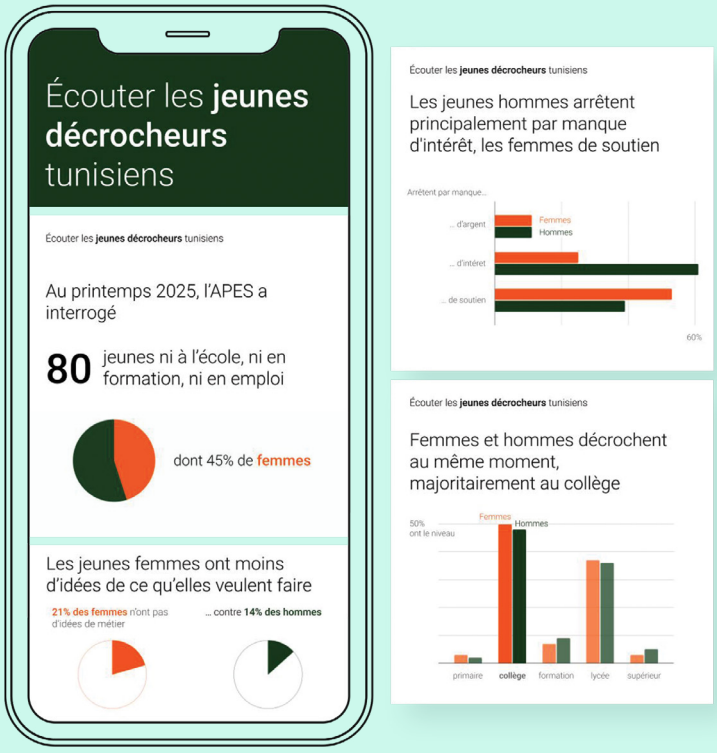
Learning that lasts

How to build local research capacity to tackle difficult topics

PROBLEM

A Tunisian cooking school and training center, which teaches hard skills to local women, migrant workers, and unemployed youth, struggled to set its own agenda, caught as it was in projects funded by outsiders.
It ambitioned to establish a small research unit to foreground its staff's expertise and give voice to its trainees.

Synaps agreed to help, because informal economies are both increasingly important and poorly understood. To fix this, we need those who have the best access to the social groups concerned to also develop their capacity to carry out homegrown research.



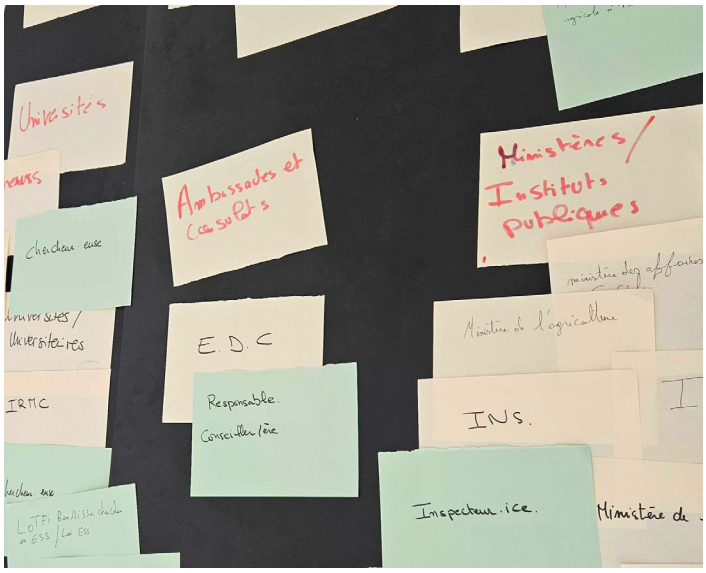
SOLUTION

We built an autonomous research unit which we equiped with long-term educational tools.



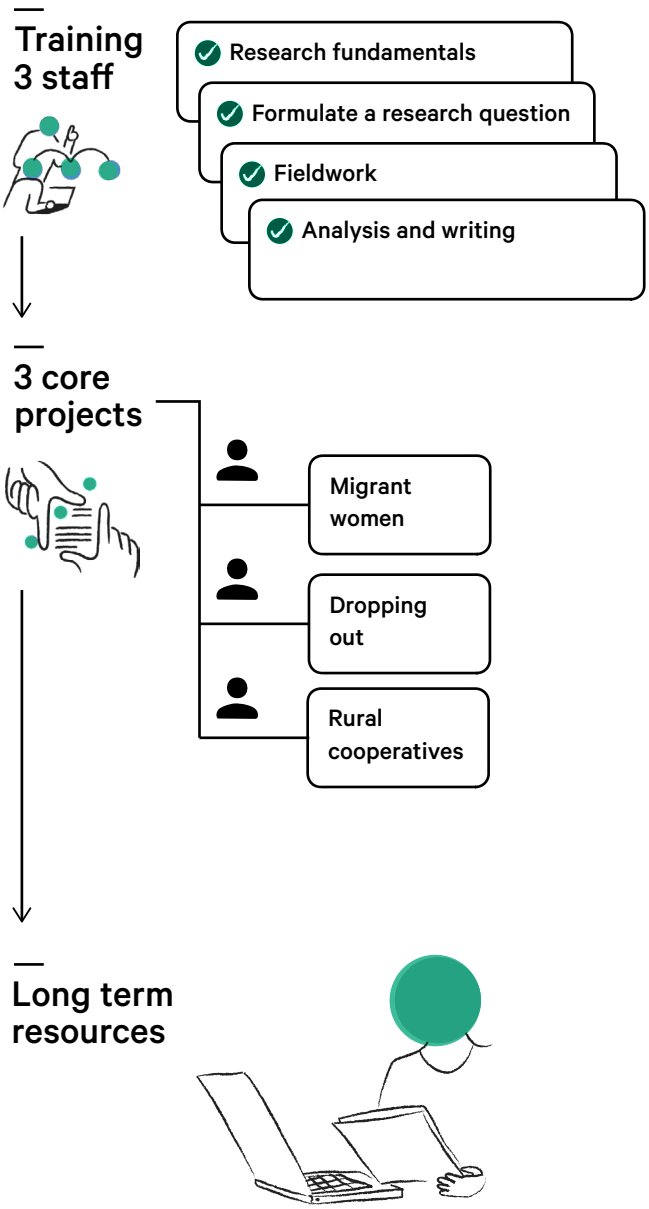
PROCESS AND RESULTS

1. Drawing on years of experience, Synaps started off with in-person workshops to **train three staff members of the NGO in essential methods,** such as how to formulate a research question, how to approach desk research, and how to conduct fieldwork. The participants each developed their own project relevant to the NGO's core work: one worked on female-led rural cooperatives, another on small-scale businesses built by migrants, and the third on the reasons why so many young Tunisians are neither employed nor looking for a job.



2. With Synaps' assistance, the three budding researchers left the office to gain **first-hand fieldwork experience**, carrying out interviews and participant observation. They also completed literature reviews and spoke with university staff and other local experts. We also helped the NGO's director trial a survey with the people they train on-site, generating data for analysis which would also enrich the organization's day-to-day work.

3. Despite the best ambitions, things didn't go as smoothly as planned, which is itself a predictable part of the research cycle. **A challenging political environment** meant that migrant workers and NGOs were under intense scrutiny. Other priorities took over—not least the NGO's main work, on which it depends to survive. The initiative could easily have fizzled out.





4. So Synaps built resources to support the staff at a distance, notably **a Moodle course that covered the fundamentals of research** with exercises to progress with their learning. These resources meant that even if the individual staff were unable to continue, the initiative could be extended to other colleagues. They would also be available to peer organizations, allowing others to learn how to do research autonomously.

5. We also had to accept that the initiative would not be a quick payoff but a slow-burn success. The survey led to a series of social media posts. One of the researchers wrote a policy paper on migrant women. As part of a new hire, the NGO sought out research skills and used the Moodle for onboarding. A research unit was coming together, not overnight, but more tentatively, through **a series of incremental changes and real contributions** to knowledge.

TAKEAWAY

Vulnerable social groups reflect crucial problems within our societies, yet they are also voiceless by definition. The people best placed to do research on such essential topics are those whose work is already embedded within these communities. But training is a big investment, likely to be disrupted by political obstacles, competing priorities, or staff moving on.

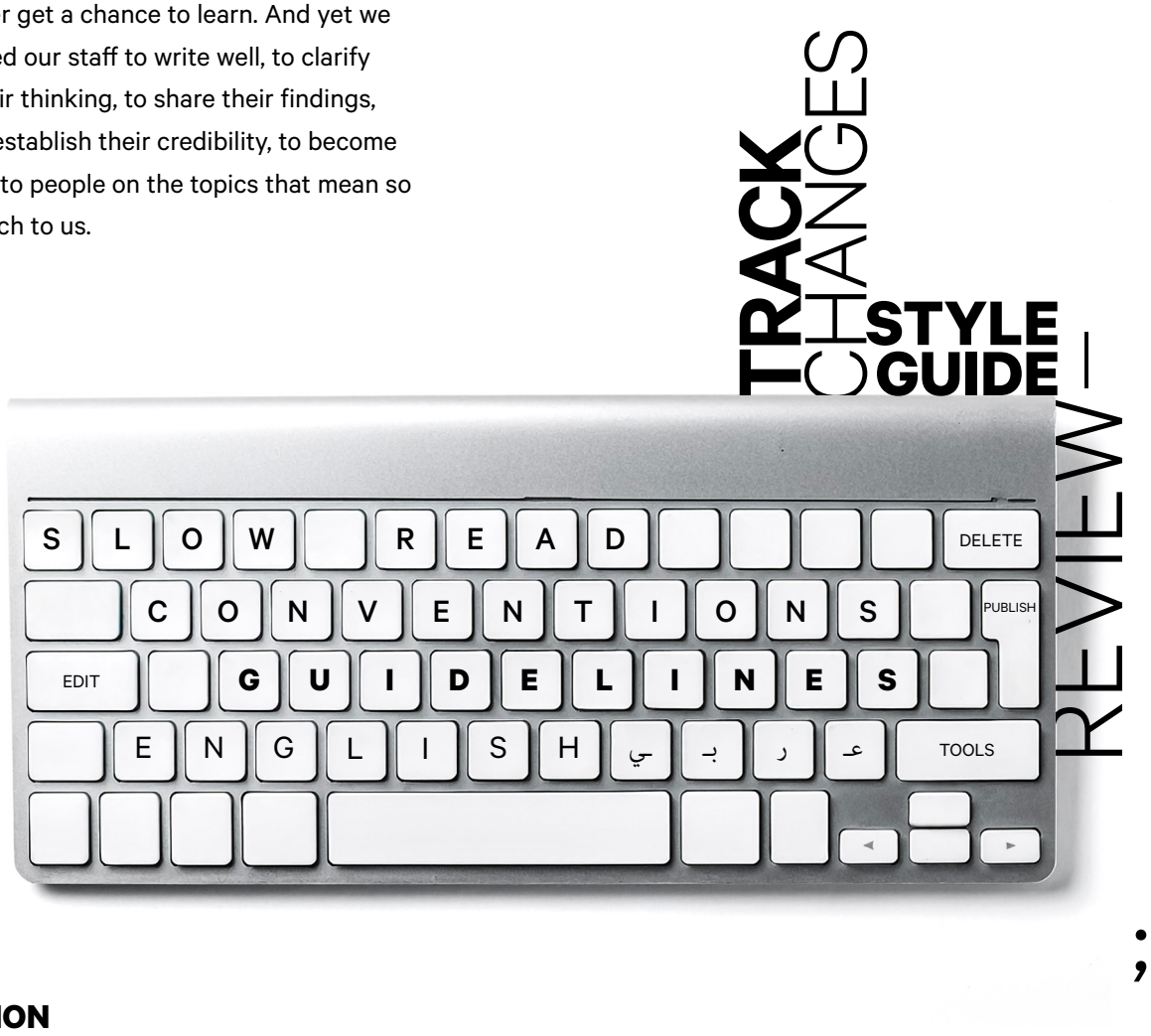
To make it worthwhile, training must be an opportunity to develop enduring and shareable resources. Rather than empowering two or three individuals, we support an ecosystem that creates and values good information.

Writing on the wall

How to help writers develop a strong voice

PROBLEM

Synaps hires fascinating people who are nonetheless very hard to read. Our colleagues come from a variety of backgrounds, and most aren't native English speakers. Even when they are, they rarely write well, a skill few people ever get a chance to learn. And yet we need our staff to write well, to clarify their thinking, to share their findings, to establish their credibility, to become go-to people on the topics that mean so much to us.

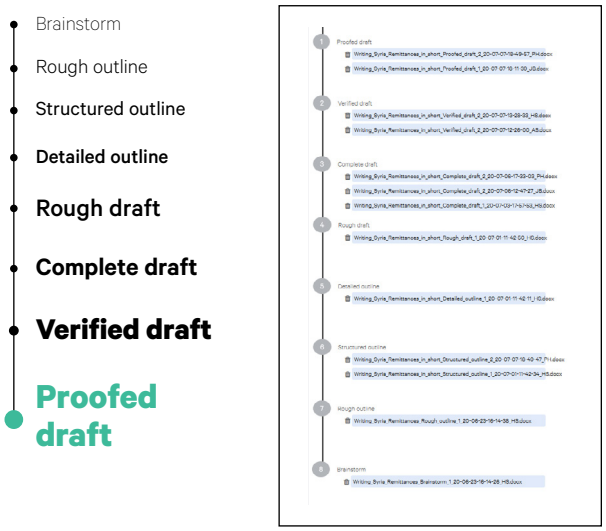


SOLUTION

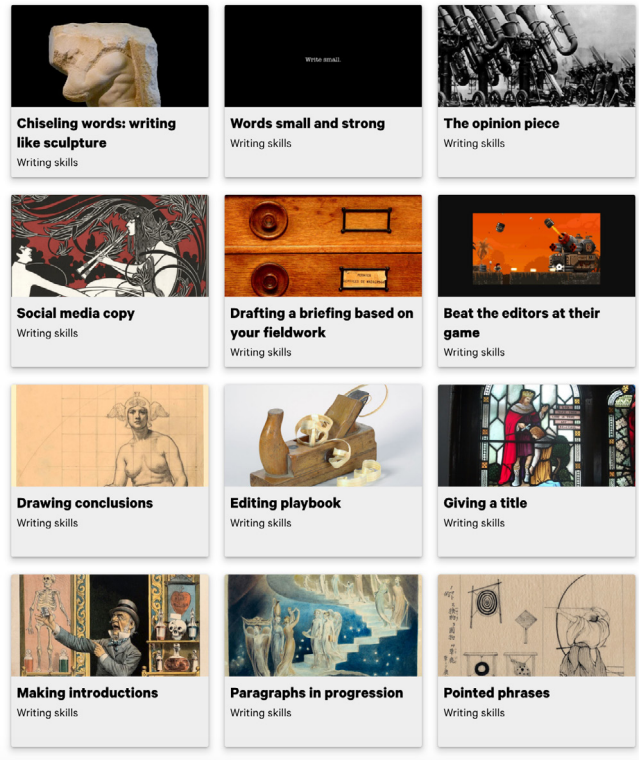
We set up a publishing journey broken up into stages, with guidelines and learning tools all along the way.

PROCESS AND RESULTS

1. We defined the **stages required to produce strong writing**. First, you need solid content. Then comes structure, structure, and more structure. Style is what happens last, when you start fixing and removing everything that gets in the way of a smooth read. A text improves incrementally, as it moves through each stage; we created a versioning system to make sure we track that progression.

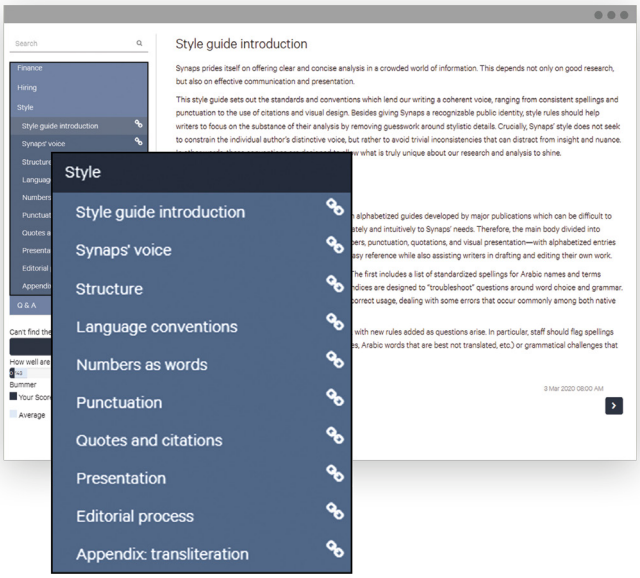


2. We also **isolated every subskill involved** in strong writing. What's a great sentence? How do they assemble into a paragraph? How will these form a story or an argument? Where to start and how to end? For each subskill, we produced a memo explaining the rationale, with examples, to help writers overcome their weak points.



3. We designed **creative publication formats** which would enable authors to reach their target audience while practicing their skills. One of these was the "Slow read", a particularly smooth and satisfying way of unpacking a complex topic.

4. We built a style guide to **ensure consistency and professionalism** across various publications. We made sure this style guide was easy to navigate and search, to check which rules apply. Such conventions take away the guesswork for writers and editors, but more importantly gives our readers the best chance of focusing on what we have to say.



5. We applied the same logic to Arabic, and noticed along the way **all sorts of interesting problems** in both languages. For instance, female voices tended to become invisible in our essays, because of formulations that did not specify gender ("One business owner told us..."). Technical terms in Arabic were often missing entirely. In this way, the style guide became a dynamic document that evolved with our thinking.



TAKEAWAY

Great writing comes with practice, various forms of editing, and seeking inspiration in other writers. The main obstacle is ego, and the expectations, insecurities, and inhibitions that come along with it.

The solution to that is to write within a clear framework, which solves the blank page syndrome and helps authors focus on what makes them stand out.



When the future frightens

How to efficiently plan for uncertainty

PROBLEM

Synaps has regularly been hired to do the impossible: divine the future!

Operating in highly unstable environments, our partners came to us when they needed to make informed projections in order to prepare for what would come next.





SOLUTION

We developed a technique to increase an organization's resilience to unexpected shocks and severe crises, without taking the risk of gambling on exact outcomes.

Such "scenario role-playing" consists in writing stories that force players to consider realistic problems that are likely to arise. This creates an alertness which is key to handling whatever indeed happens next.

PROCESS AND RESULTS

1. We formulate three scenarios, although we don't follow the usual logic of studying a worst case, a best case, and a middle ground. Instead, we aim to **outline three different, plausible, tricky threats** an organization is vulnerable to. This variety fosters preparedness and agility. Working on more than three scenarios would come at the expense of focus and prioritization.

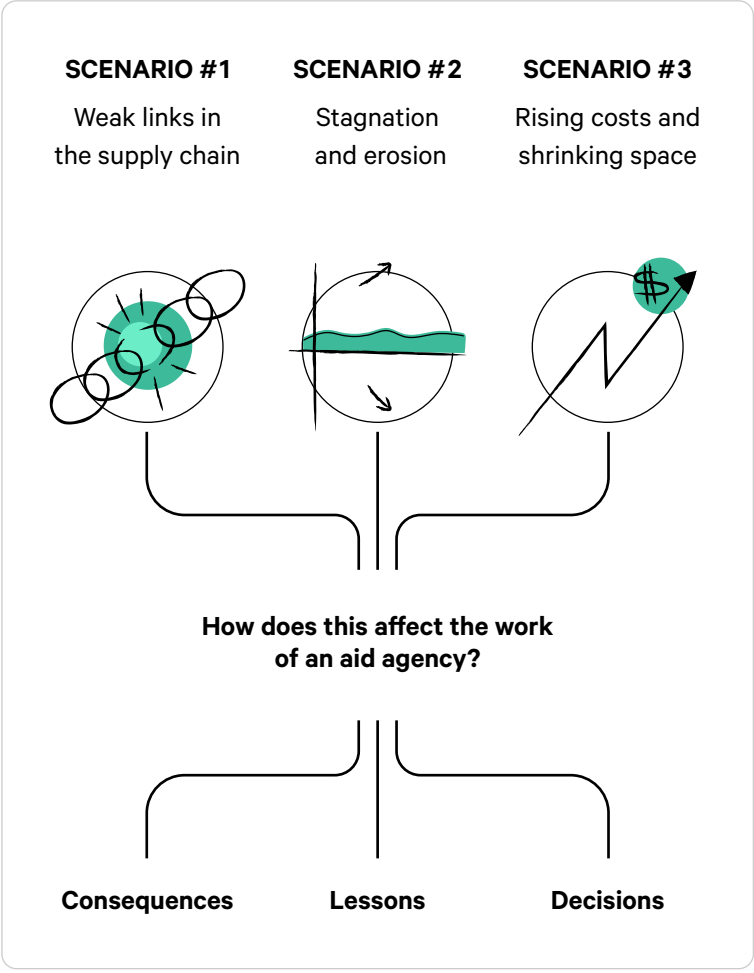
2. To build these scenarios, we must **know both the client and its operating environment**. We start with free-wheeling discussions about what the organization worries about, what limitations it faces, what surrounding trends could affect its future. From there, we agree on three possible futures that each pose a distinct, pressing challenge.

3. Then we role-play each scenario separately. Synaps facilitates sessions in which the organization's team will **imagine themselves immersed in these futures**. They will grapple with what happened to them and why, make decisions on correcting the course, face the consequences of those decisions, and learn lessons from them. Synaps prepares for these sessions by writing detailed scenarios complete with plot twists, to engage and at times destabilize participants. In one case, we built playful Lego scenes to symbolize an organization's predicament and spur the discussion.

4. Based on that exercise, Synaps helps our client **define actions that can be taken now** to prepare for such futures. These typically include patching up existing gaps revealed by the role-playing, which generates a sense of clarity, purpose, and urgency. It also builds an organization's team spirit and fosters consensus around new measures and strategic directions.

5. This method is one we **use ourselves in moments of instability**, when we're unsure of our own future: say, while trying to anticipate the course of a war affecting our staff. It can be quick too, once staff are accustomed to role-playing.





WRITING A SCENARIO: METHODOLOGY AND TRAINING MATERIAL

DRAFT



- Concerns
- Dynamics
- 3 future situations

PLAY



- Lead up
- Fall out
- Lessons

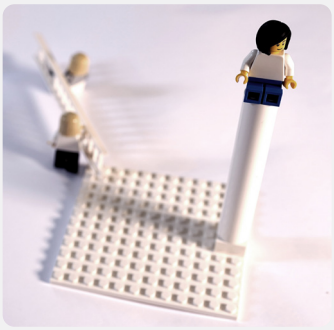
- Threats
- Effects
- Likelihood
- Mitigation
- Gaps
- Tools

LIFE IN LIMBO

The greatest threat to Lebanon is sadly simple: Nothing happens.

Everything drags on, while the outside world loses interest. Startup funding dries up, as does much of development aid, in a country where the cost of everything continues to rise.

Competition hardens around what resources are available, making seasoned business decisions all the more imperative to your success.



NOW IMAGINE WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE..

- What are the specific **threats** in your case?
- How exactly would those threats **affect** you?
- How **likely** are those threats?
- What have you done in **preparation**?
- Where are the more worrying **gaps**?
- What additional **tools** could you use?

WHAT TOOLS DO WE OFTEN OVERLOOK?

We usually scramble to “diversify”, at the expense of:

1. Financial **forecasting** and planning
2. Preventive **cost-cutting**
3. Optimal use of **existing** assets
4. Financial management **credentials**
5. Priority **investments**
6. Clarity of **purpose** and communication



TAKEAWAY

In moments of looming crisis, organizations tend to either stay in denial or improvise a scramble for survival. What they need, rather, is a structured, constructive, and efficient way to discuss internal shortcomings and external threats. This not only leads to more awareness and better options but to greater staff cohesion, which is essential to pulling through any crisis.

Fast track newbies

How to onboard recruits efficiently

PROBLEM

Synaps faces the same problem as most organizations: Hiring new staff almost always adds to a manager's workload before lightening it. Newcomers need time to adjust to our culture, expand their skillset, and take ownership over workflows.

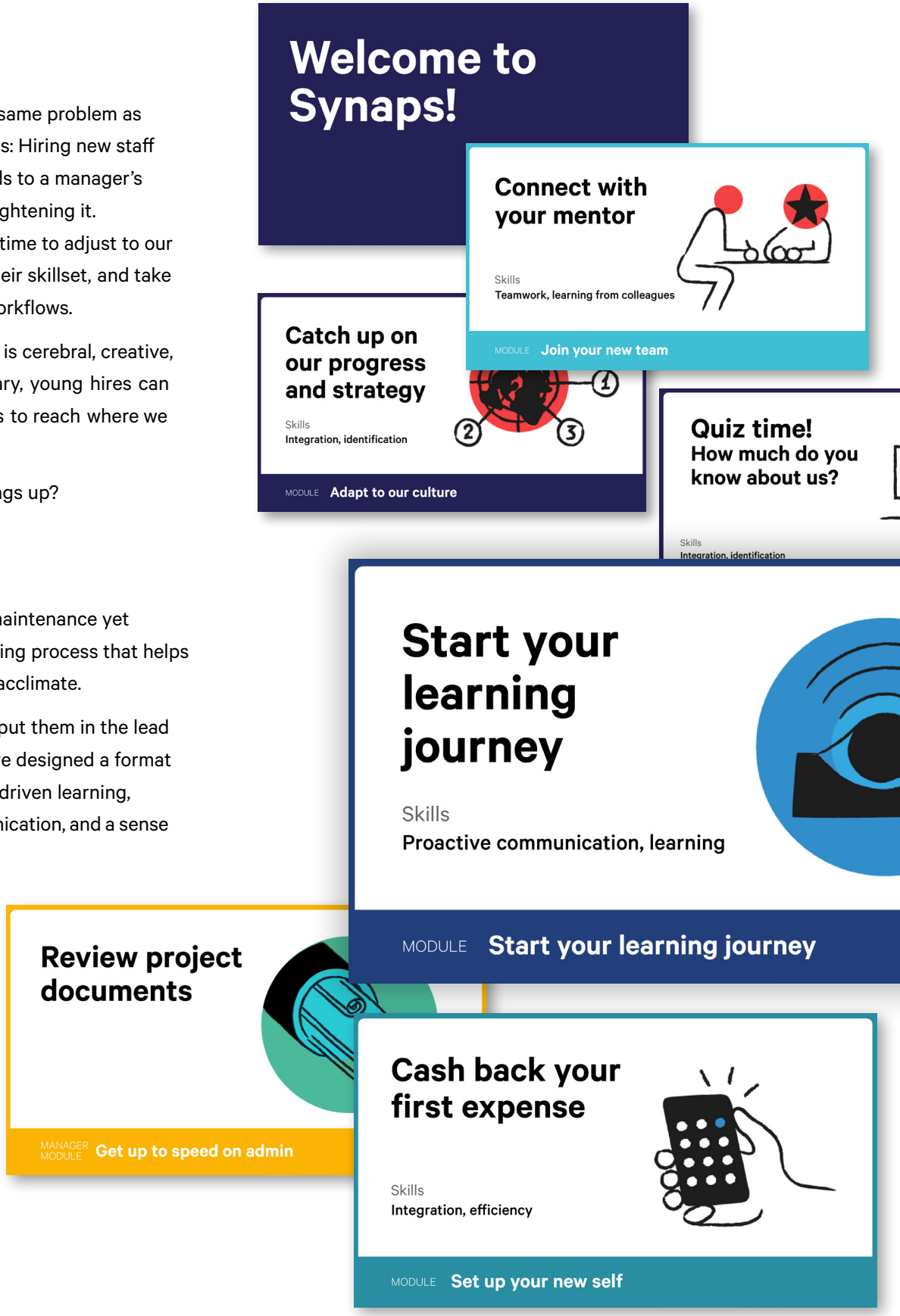
Because our work is cerebral, creative, and interdisciplinary, young hires can take many months to reach where we need them to be.

How to speed things up?

SOLUTION

We set up a low-maintenance yet intensive onboarding process that helps new staff quickly acclimate.

To save time and put them in the lead from the get go, we designed a format that requires self-driven learning, proactive communication, and a sense of initiative.



PROCESS AND RESULTS

1. We commissioned an external consultant to review our past practices, interview staff on their onboarding experience, and workshop our needs. We needed a **fresh pair of eyes** to see beyond our ingrained habits, after years of hiring.

2. We listed the goals we wanted newbies to reach through their onboarding. From there, we created a **checklist of tasks to accomplish** in the process. Each task corresponds to skills they must learn or lock in.

3. We developed a **mixed approach** in which recruits would read background material, interview colleagues, partner with an informal mentor in our buddy system, and answer quizzes to absorb key material.

4. Initially, we turned this vision into two static documents: a deck of slides for recruits and a manual for managers. This proved uninspiring, so we went back and designed something more **engaging and self-driven**.

5. We opted for an **extremely visual, interactive, day-by-day flow** within our task management software. Here, recruits could manage their own onboarding process autonomously, and learn to use our project management tools in the process.
This system is also extremely easy for managers to replicate and tailor to new roles.

FROM STATIC DOCUMENTS...

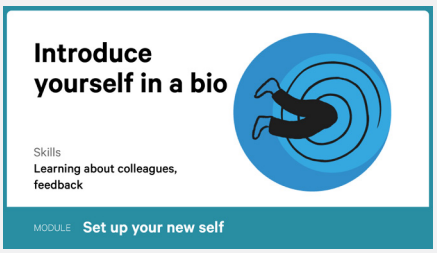
Synaps Onboarding Timeline for Managers

Timeline for: Insert Name of Team Member		
Assigned Buddy: Insert Name of Team Member		
Started on: Insert Date		
Task	**Module**	**Module Type**
Week 1		
Sign your contract and code of conduct	Adapt to our culture	Common module
Sort out platforms, passwords, and notifications	Set up your new self	Common module
Get your professional equipment	Set up your new self	Common module
Get your professional email	Set up your new self	Common module
Draft your biography	Set up your new self	Common module
Request and read our latest biannual report and strategy	Adapt to our culture	Common module
Take our policy quiz	Adapt to our culture	Common module
Request and review all project documents	Get up to speed on admin	Manager module
Connect with your mentor in our buddy system	Join your new team	Common module
Ensure that your team's daily tasks are well documented in Asana	Set the right management routine	Manager module
Fill your self-appraisal form	Start your learning journey	Common module
Week 2		
Request and review our style guides	Adapt to our culture	Common module
Take our communication quizz	Adapt to our culture	Common module
Request and review our financial manual	Get up to speed on admin	Manager module
Seek guidance to professionalize your social media	Join your new team	Common module
Organize your first project meeting	Set the right management routine	Manager module
Provide first feedback on weekly objectives	Set the right management routine	Manager module
Professionalize your portrait	Set up your new self	Common module
Refine your job description	Set up your new self	Common module
Join our bookclub	Start your learning journey	Common module
Schedule an entrance interview with your manager	Start your learning journey	Common module

TO INTERACTIVE TASKS

WEEK 1



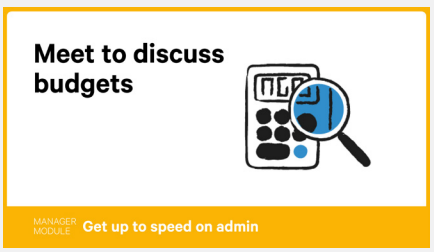


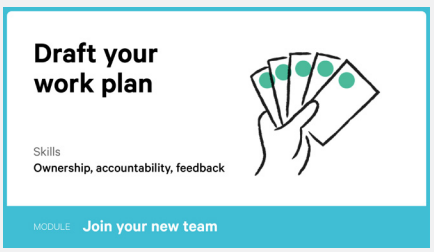
WEEK 2



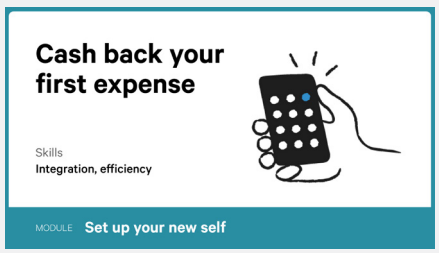


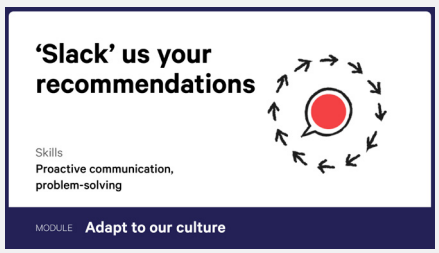
WEEK 3

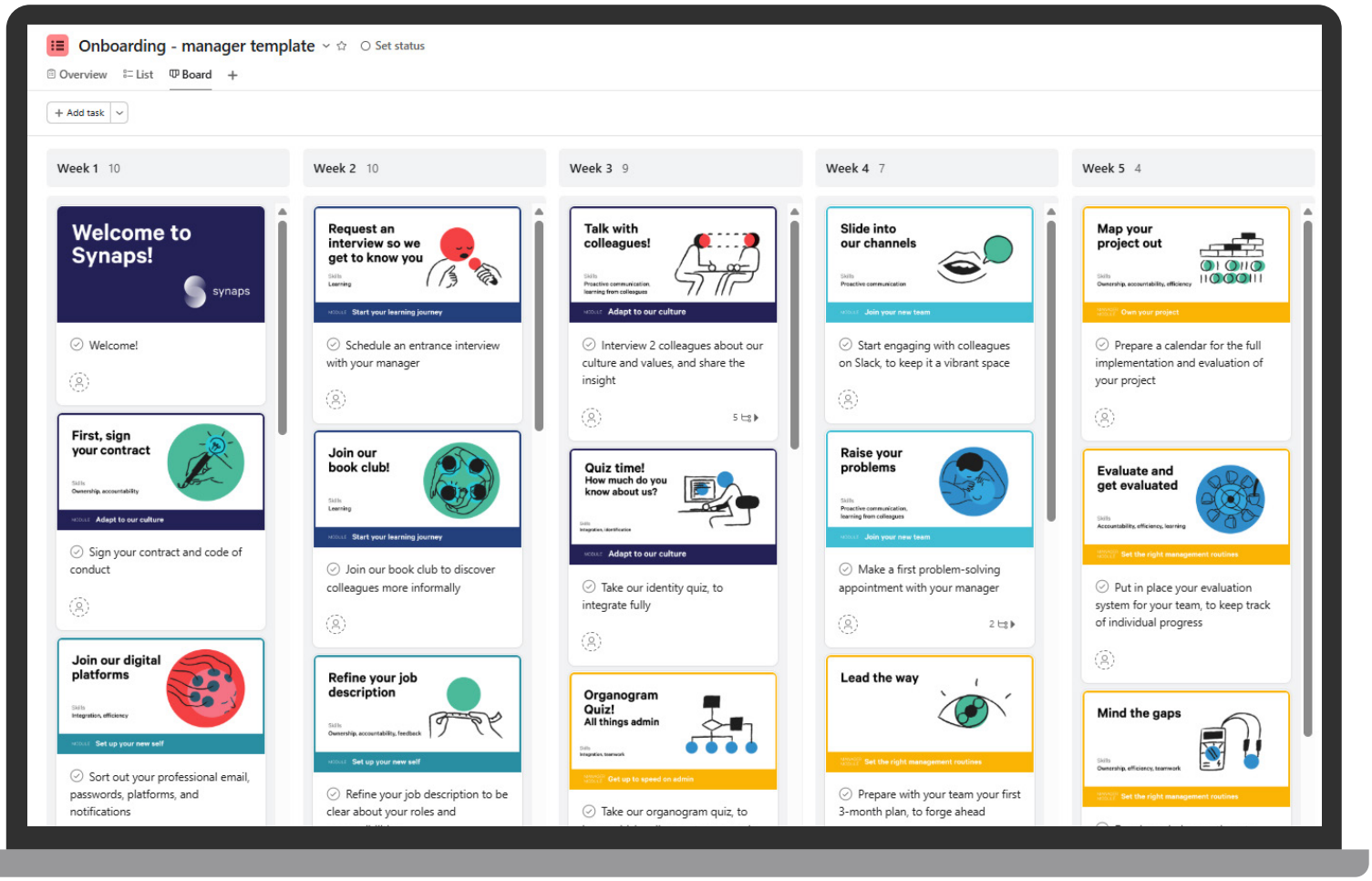


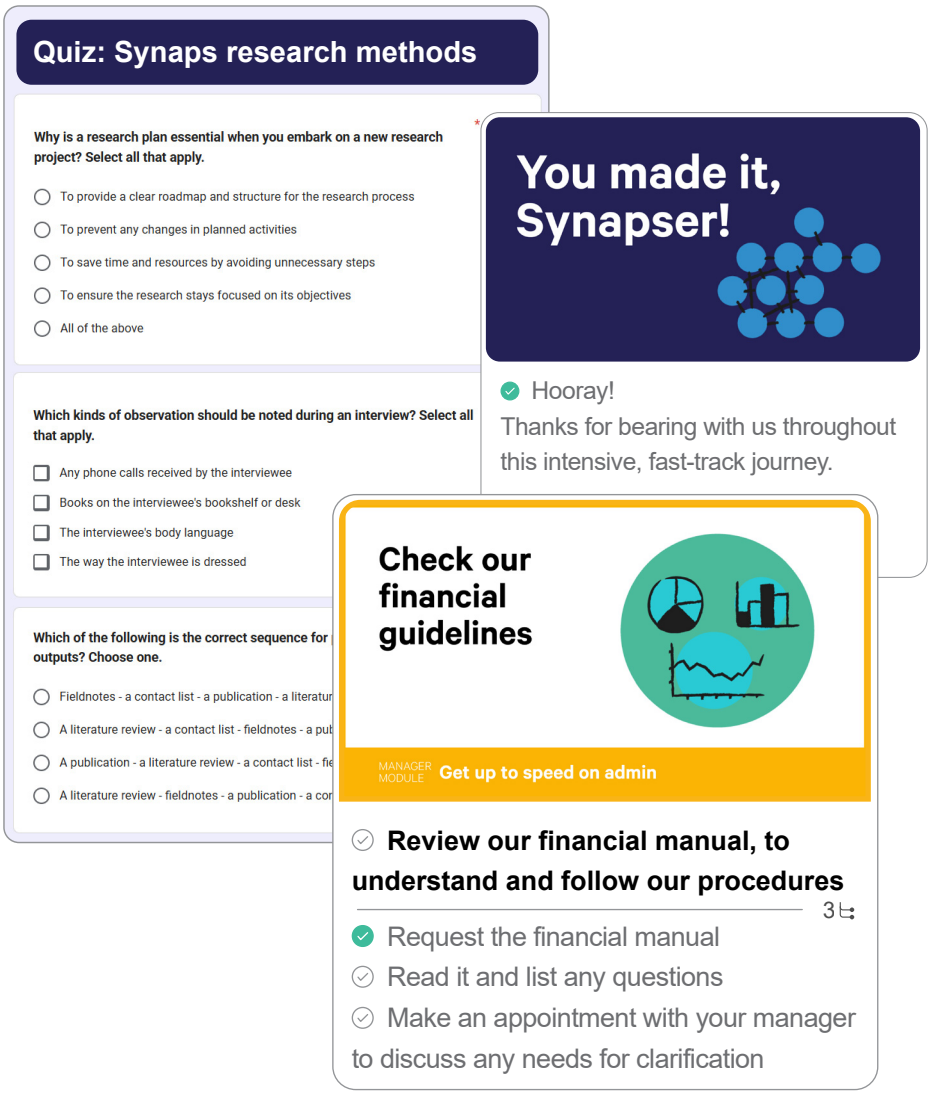


WEEK 4









TAKEAWAY

We've been happily surprised with how quickly new staff catch on to our culture, which is central to everything we do. Yet no onboarding system is perfect.

Here, the process is so efficient that new hires can complete the flow with virtually no intervention from their manager, and this can also feel isolating. We've learned that autonomy is a win if it serves to create more space for meaningful interactions, to build the right relationships from the start.

Survival for managers

How to plan for, cope with, and quickly recover from crises

PROBLEM

A philanthropic donor asked us to help their network of 15 partners adapt to an increasingly volatile environment in Lebanon, which climaxed with a full-on war. All organizations were deeply vulnerable, but showed widely varying needs and levels of engagement with this process.

Adverse internal dynamics added to the difficulty: exhaustion, denial, and inertia all tend to intensify in times of crisis, and prevent leaders from making much needed changes.



SOLUTION

We tailored our interventions to combine three components: one-on-one mentorship for interested organizations, a group training on contingency planning, and tools which the donor could reuse in support of its future partnerships.

PROCESS AND RESULTS

1. We sent all partners a survey inviting them to **pause and reflect systematically** on common problems in crisis management. This helped to both kickstart discussions and establish Synaps' credibility in this field.

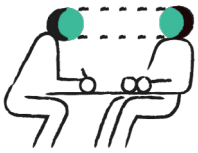
2. Surveys informed very open conversations with the directors of these organizations. In each case, we identified **highly specific vulnerabilities**: a difficult leadership transition, a hazy identity and business model, a risk of burnout, poor data management, lack of essential first aid training, and so forth. Five organizations signed up for follow-up mentoring to help them plug gaps.

3. For the remaining ten organizations, we designed and delivered a more general training on **fundamental contingency planning tools**. To make this engaging, we walked participants through three likely scenarios posing acute problems they could relate to. For each scenario, we provided strategies they could adapt to their needs.

4. We provided the donor with extensive analysis of the problems facing their partners, as well as recommendations on how to provide support. Having reviewed the donor's own crisis management procedures, we proposed three **new processes to integrate** into their partnerships: a methodology to analyze their partners' specific gaps; a risk register to help prioritize needs in changing environments; and a crisis communication protocol to structure interactions with organizations under stress.



Survey to kickstart discussions with directors



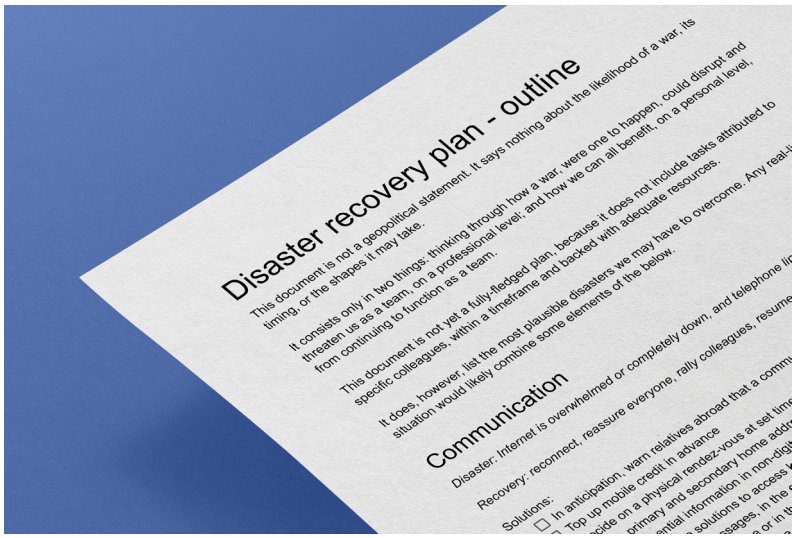
Follow-up mentoring for 5 organizations



Training on fundamental contingency planning tools for 10 organizations



Final recommendations: a methodology, a risk register, and a crisis communication protocol



5. Synaps could assist other organizations because, as a small team operating in unstable contexts, we are familiar with most of their problems. And, indeed, we had to prepare ourselves for war. To do so, we used **the "disaster recovery" model**: We listed the worst that could realistically happen and then planned how to handle each situation. This is an unexpectedly comforting exercise, showing teammates how much control they retain even in a worst case scenario.



TAKEAWAY

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to managing uncertainty, which hinges as much on dealing with emotions as applying experience and techniques. The right tools can help, but they must be carefully adapted to those using them.

This is why much of our approach rested on listening, suggesting, and using mixed methodologies. To help these organizations be more agile, we had to be very attentive and flexible ourselves.

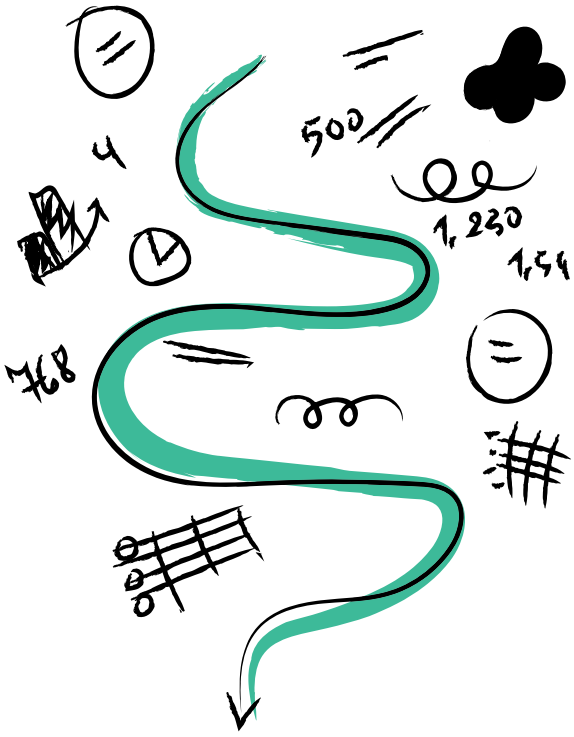
In it together

How to improve with little money and no time

PROBLEM

Every small civic organization has core weaknesses to fix, yet few have the bandwidth to fix them. We often hear from peers that they have mountains of data but no way to analyze it; that they're good at what they do but fail to communicate it; that they would need more resources but have no capacity to raise and manage funds.

These outfits know what their problem is. But how to find the time, energy, and resources to fix it?





SOLUTION

When an organization's needs overlap with our own areas of expertise, we've honed a three-step system to transfer competence.

First, we study how the organization functions, to ensure we build on existing processes and resources rather than design something ideal that will never get real. Second, we craft the solution our partner lacks time to implement: We research best practices, write a policy, test and tweak software solutions, or create just the right training module. Third, we stick around to pilot and troubleshoot these solutions in the early stages.

PROCESS AND RESULTS

1. We start by **getting to know our partner thoroughly**. We read all relevant documentation and sit for targeted interviews with key personnel. Because we work with peers in environments we know well, we manage to move quickly through this phase without demanding too much of our partner.

2. The production phase identifies the **right solution for the most acutely felt needs**. We've helped small organizations redesign their websites, make their administrative processes more professional, sharpen their publishing skills, analyze and visualize their data… We do much of the work in the background to spare our partner. We always make our upgrades very practical, because these are problems we faced too.

3. We keep the heavy lifting for ourselves, but then invest in **transferring ownership to our partner**. We train them on the methods we used, so that any end product both reaches high standards and becomes their own.

4. We leave behind **tools our partner can use**: a set of templates, a training course, or terms of reference if they need more technical expertise.

5. Finally, we view all such projects as beneficial to Synaps: It's often easier to solve problems when they're not your own. This clues us on how to make our internal processes ever stronger. That's a key test of success: **A good solution is one worth our own time**.

EXAMPLES

PUBLICATION STRATEGY

for the Institute of Finance

معهد باسل فليحان المالي والاقتصادي
Institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan

- Editorial politics
- Objectives
- Action plan

CRITICAL REVIEW

of the Impact platform

IMPACT

- Reviewing the website
- Reviewing the data
- User experience
- Best practices in data visualization

COMMUNICATION EVALUATION

for Creative Space Beirut

CSB

- Why, how, what
- Fortes, aspirations, emergencies
- Revenue streams
- Marketing assets

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

for LDPC

- Challenges and opportunities
- Toolbox and messaging
- Partners

STRATEGY TEMPLATE

for NoPhotoZone - 2023

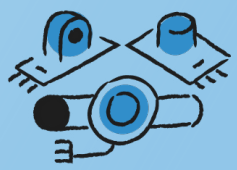
Nophotozone

- Tools and examples

TAKEAWAY

In some cases, we extend pro bono support to civic peers whom we trust and will learn from in the process. More often, though, we seek ways of structuring such partnerships as a paid service: Even a nominal cost makes partners more demanding, more responsive, and more determined to use the outcomes.

At the same time, small organizations rarely are in a position to pay the full costs of our time—so we implicitly subsidize our support by doing much more than we invoice.



Synaps **Labs**

We host training programs. We hire young professionals locally, train them on the job, and transfer key skills to peer organizations.

Fellowships
Residencies
Courses

Money well managed goes twice as far

How to help small organizations do better financially

PROBLEM

Although money makes the world go round, few people understand how to manage it. Surprisingly few CEOs, founders, directors, and senior managers have real financial skills. In our own NGO sector, where accounting is absurdly complicated, the problem is at its worst.

SOLUTION

We decided to create Fine Ants, the financial management system we and our peers need: one that's reassuring, pedagogic, professional, with most of the hard work automated in the background. That's how we embarked on our most ambitious software development project yet.

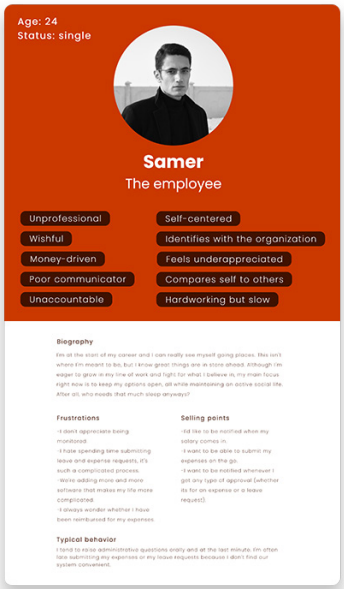


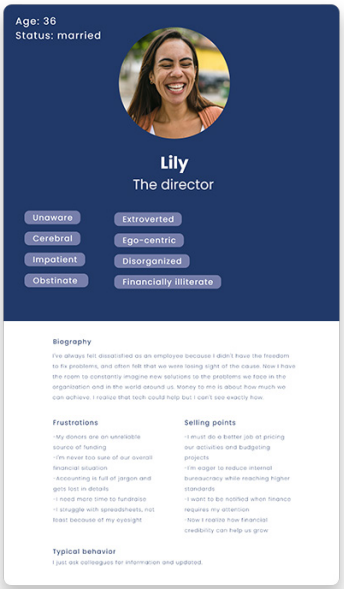
PROCESS AND RESULTS

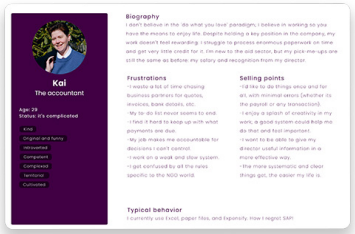
1. We knew from the start we'd had to reach high standards for this software project to be publicly available. Instead of outlining a simple set of requirements and making adjustments on the go, **we followed best practices:** researching the market, writing a detailed product brief, and creating "user personas" to anticipate the human behaviors our software would contend with.

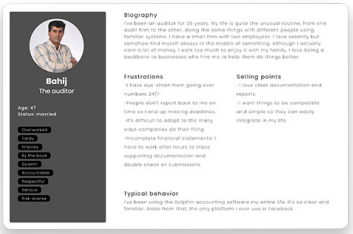
2. For our programmers to do their bit, our vision of the end product had to be **as clear, comprehensive, and visual as possible**. So we worked on "user stories" to map how users navigate the application step by step. We hired a specialized designer to develop a prototype of the user interface. Another designer worked in parallel on the app's visual identity, which we based on the metaphor of "fine ants" toiling in the background.

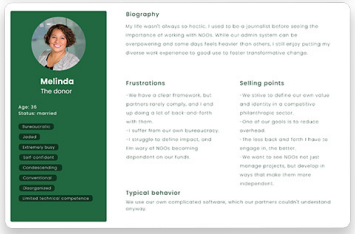
USER PERSONAS

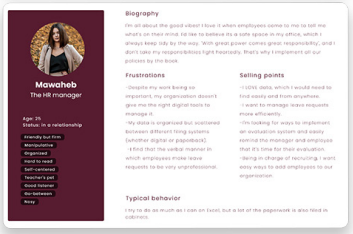




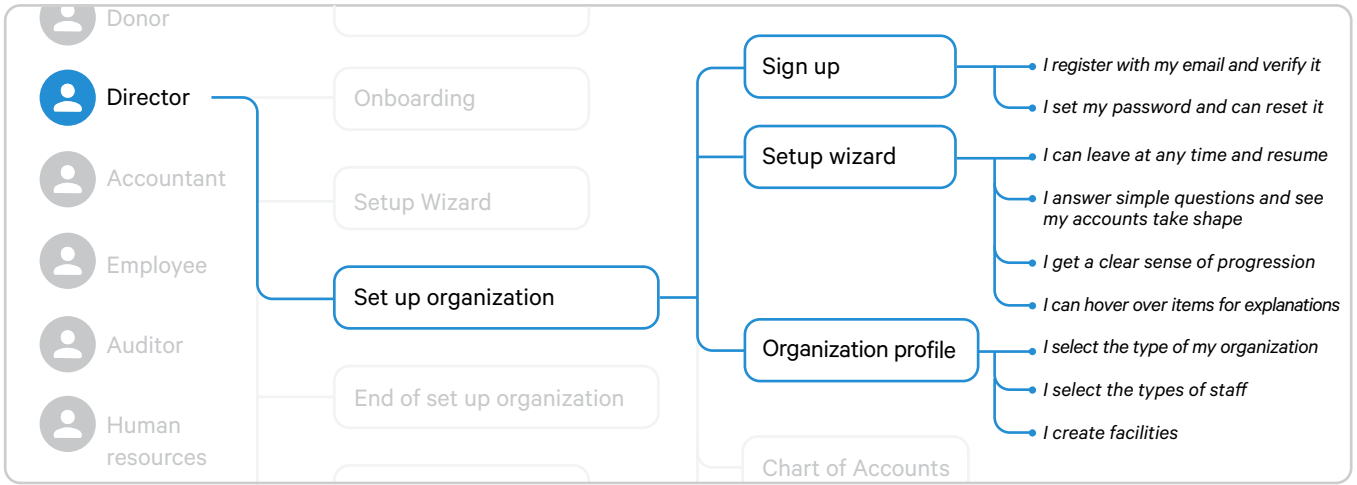




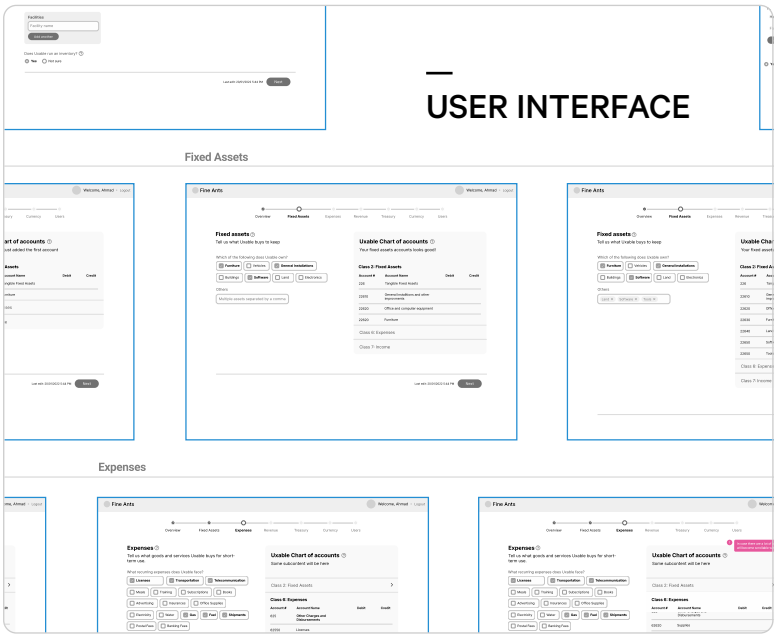


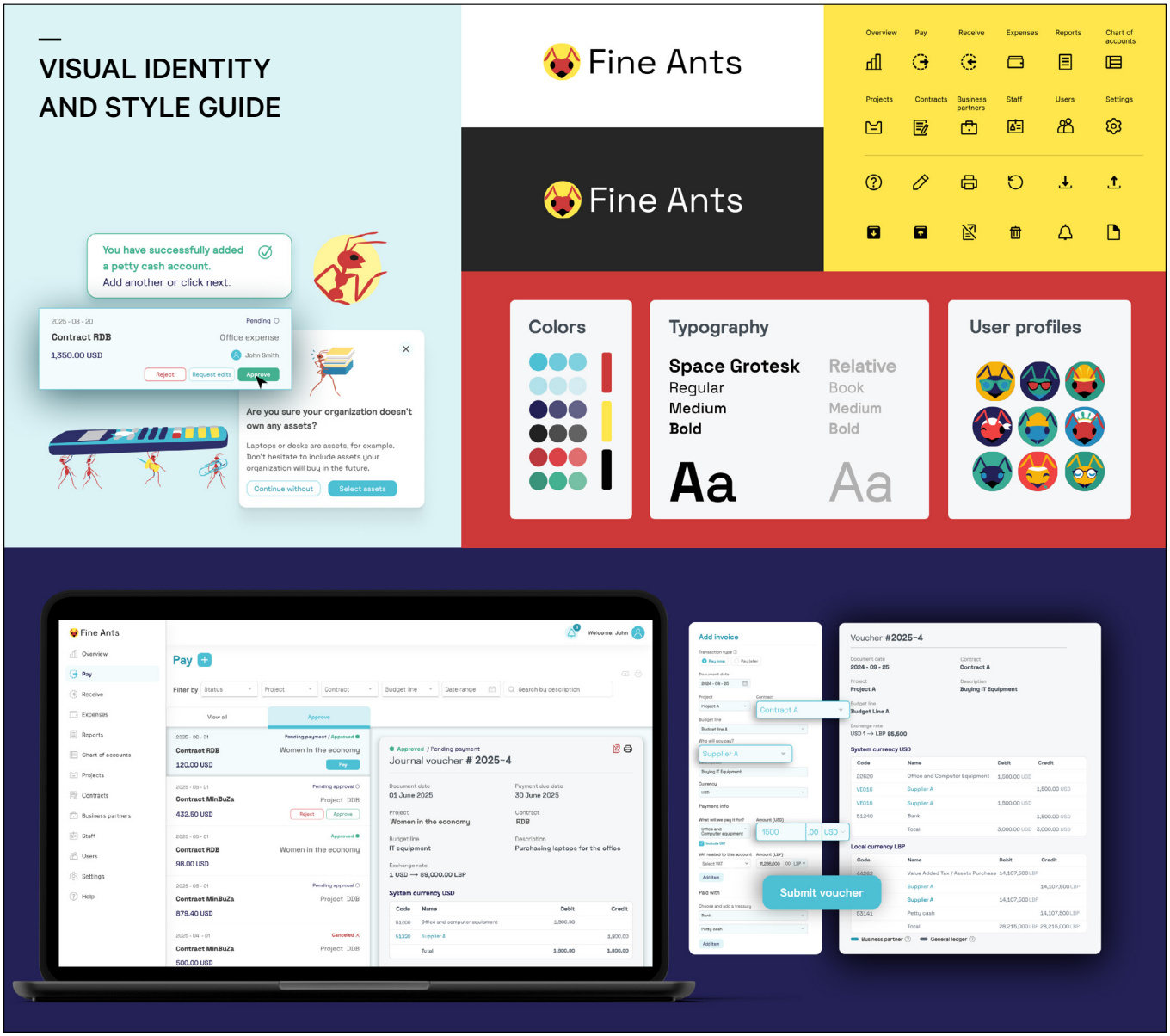


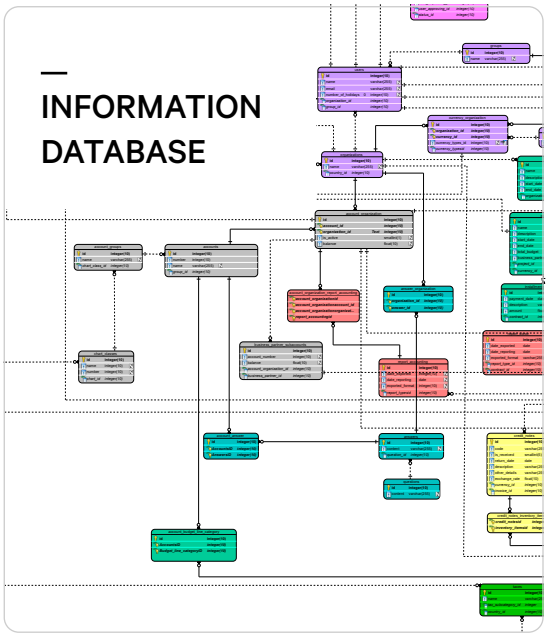
USER STORIES



3. From there, we thought we were good—and **jumped into the technical side**. We agreed on how the app would be hosted, on the coding involved, on the overall budget. Programmers started to code, in what they call “sprints”, delivering one functionality at a time. Results looked good enough to let this process follow its course.







4. But weeks later, when we came round to testing the app, more and more problems surfaced. We'd missed a vital part of the process: Developers indeed need **excruciatingly detailed feedback at every step.** Each little feature must be tested and corrected before we move on, because even small mistakes propagate and affect the software as a whole.

5. Going forward, we put in place **essential communication tools**: regular planning meetings, guidance on the smallest details of every sprint, an open channel to answer quick questions, and a style guide to reference all decisions in one place. On this basis, we restarted cycles of coding, with growing momentum and immense satisfaction.

SCOPE OF WORK

Design
- Terms of reference
- Management setup
- Visual design
- Interface prototype
- Architecture

Development
- Tests
- Documentation
- Coding
- Debugging

Deployment
- Audits
- Manuals
- Licensing
- Configuration
- Monitoring plan
- Incident response plan
- Maintenance plan

TAKEAWAY

Contrary to expectations, successful software development doesn't rest on coding and tech. It's far more dependent on planning, design, management, and good communication, and therefore involves many skills other than programming. Hiring the best techies won't bring it anywhere closer to completion; only the right process will.

Data on demand

How to make public data truly public

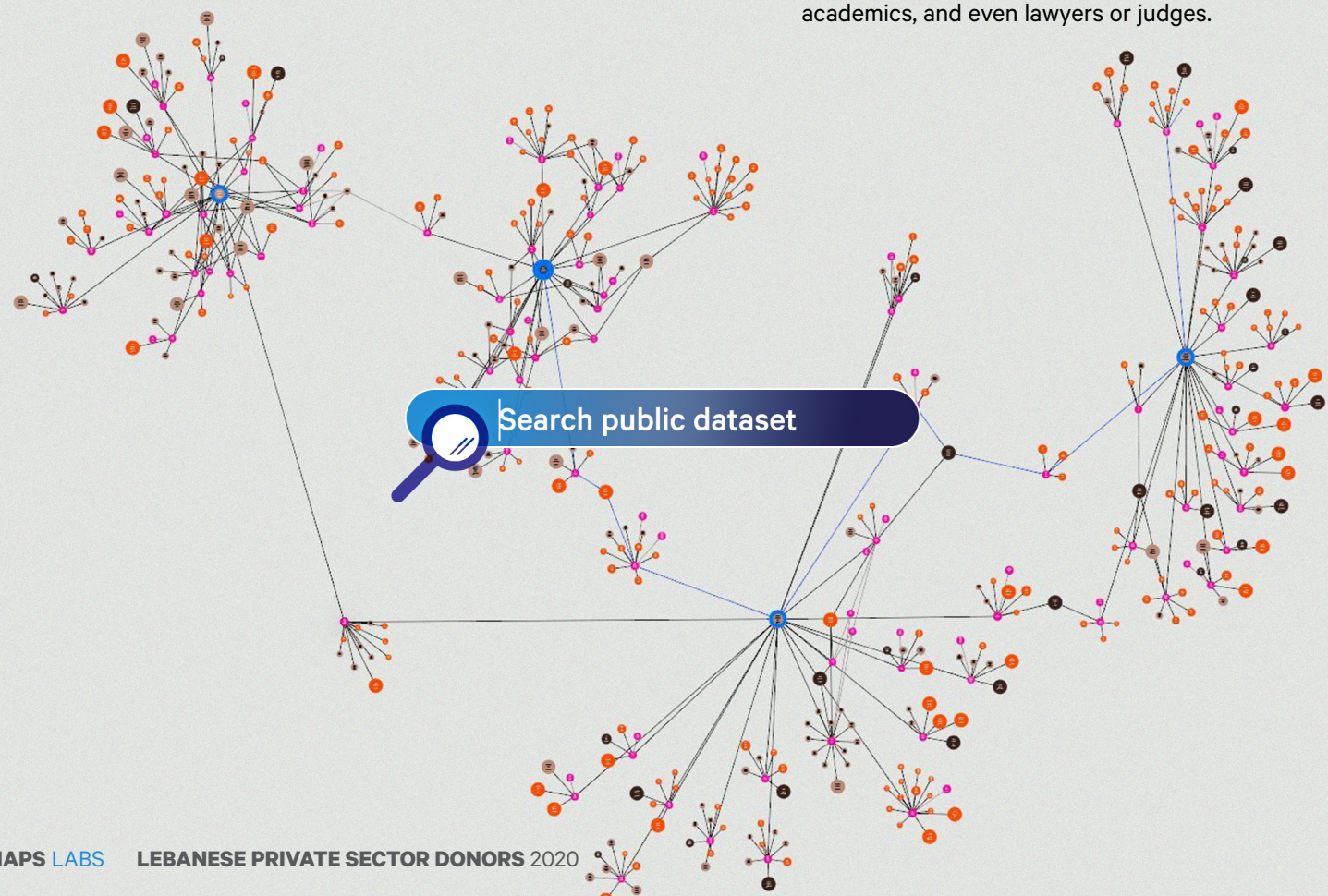
PROBLEM

Amid Lebanon's financial collapse and political upheaval, Lebanese tech activists contacted Synaps with a paradoxical request: to help them make a vast public dataset accessible to the public.

Indeed, Lebanon's national corporate registry contained a wealth of information about the cronyism that plagued the country. The data was out there, but the state published it in ways that made it extremely hard to navigate, visualize, and analyze.

SOLUTION

We proposed a digital platform that would make it almost playful to "follow the money." This tool had to be versatile, to support both casual browsing by the public and more systematic research by journalists, academics, and even lawyers or judges.



PROCESS AND RESULTS

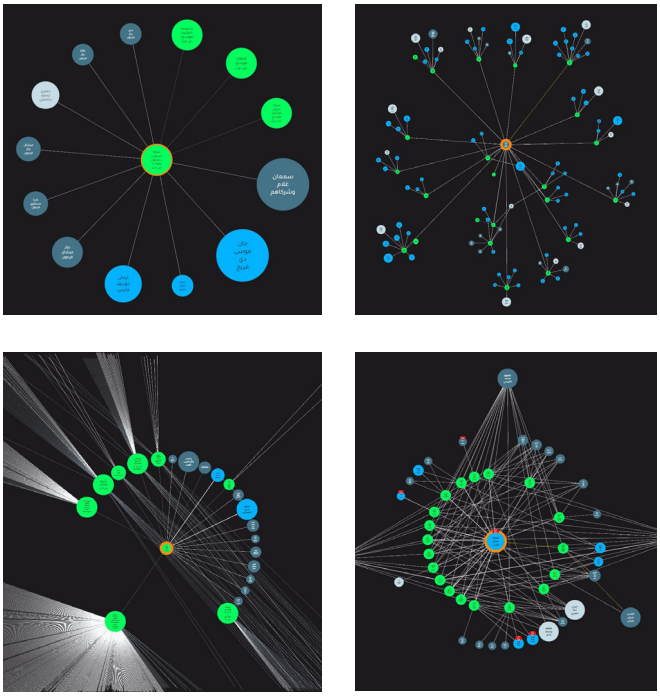
1. We focused on **visualizing networks**: showing how each person or business entity connected to a constellation of others. This required an interactive visual environment where users could see multiple relationships at once, while organizing them to show relevant connections.

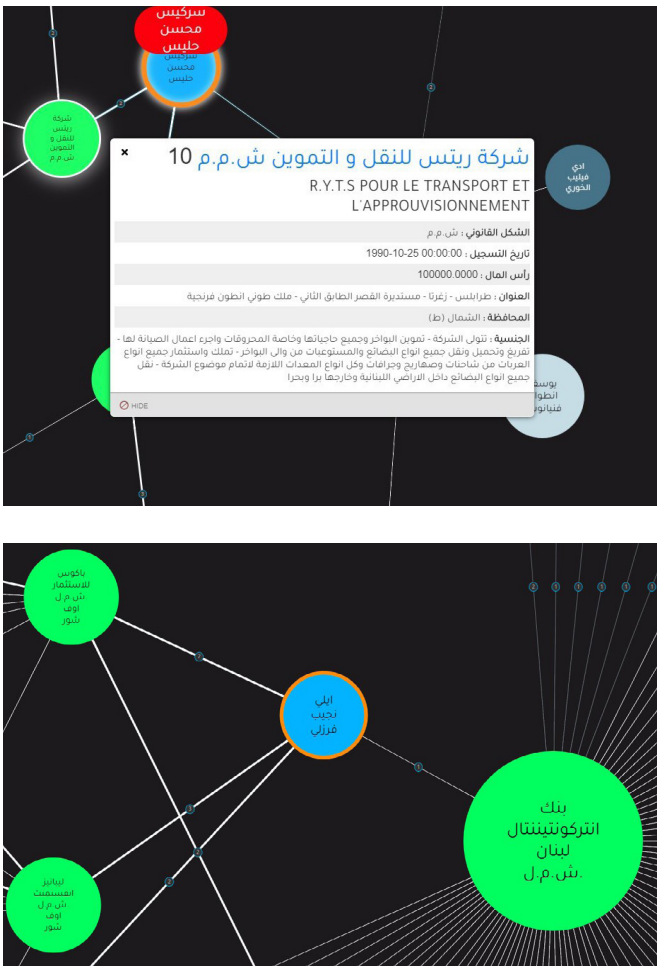
2. We introduced **tools that would serve different audiences**. On one hand, we wanted users to be able to easily share their findings over social media, to increase the platform's visibility and public uptake. On the other, we believed the platform should deliver more elaborate information to researchers: say, timelines showing how often senior officials had created new businesses upon their appointment.

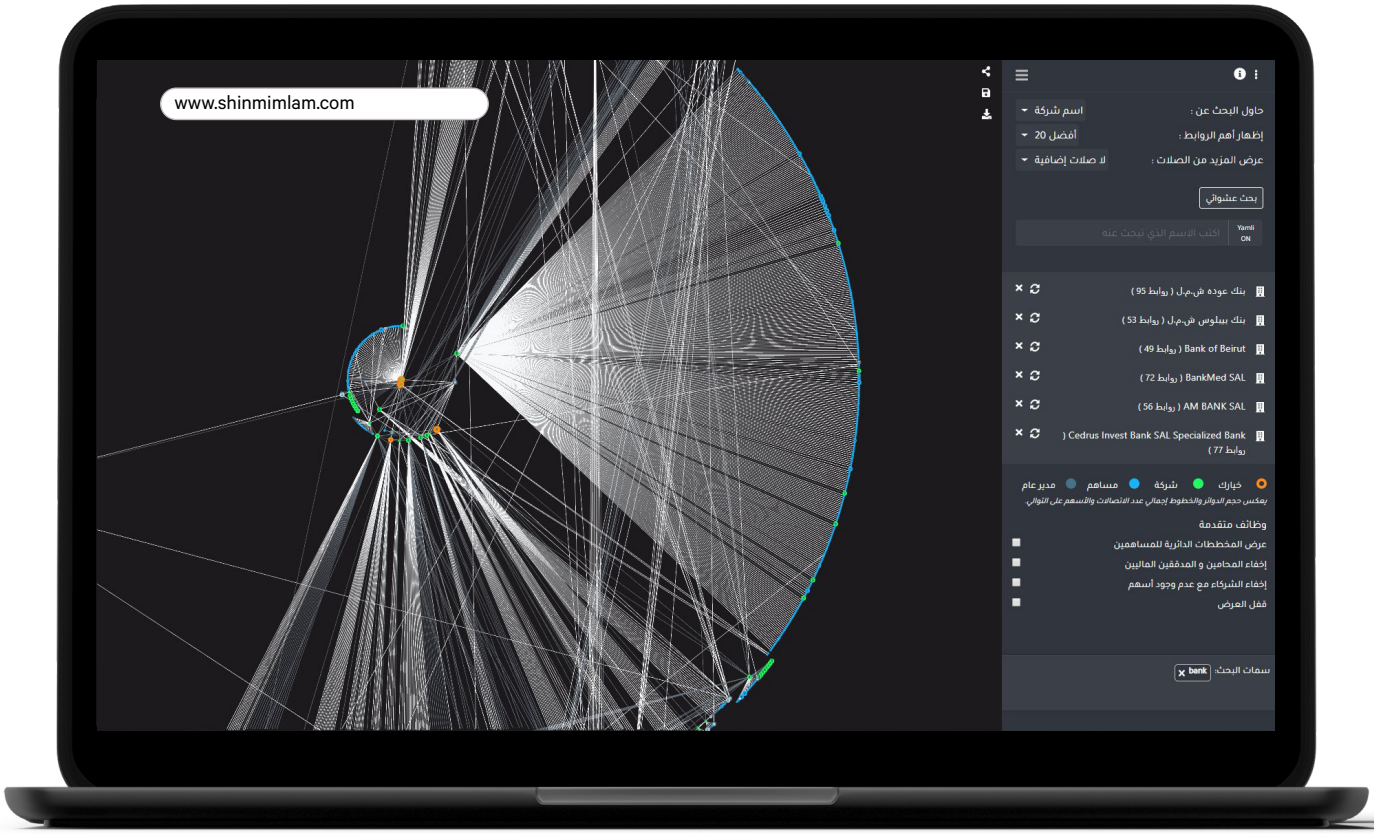
3. After the platform's launch, we faced **unexpectedly slow uptake** on the part of the Lebanese public—presumably for fear of reprisals. We took it upon ourselves to publish a first major piece of analysis based on the data, including powerful graphs. This essay reached tens of thousands of readers and quickly drove intense public interest in the platform itself.

4. Journalists, activists, and other users started posting findings of their own, creating a **snowball effect**. Over 12 months, the platform went on to tally over a million visits.

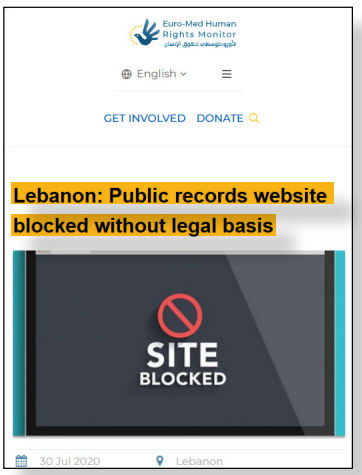
5. The platform ultimately became the object of a tug-of-war between the Lebanese government, which worked to suppress it, and Lebanese civil society defending free speech. As such, it stirred a **healthy debate around data privacy and public accountability**.



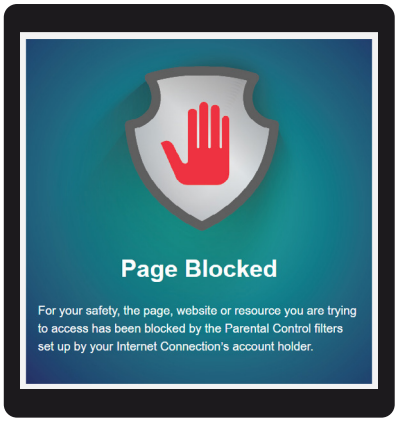












TAKEAWAY

Publishing data doesn't in itself make it useful. Data must also be easy to access, navigate, filter, search, visualize, and export. Only then does it meet minimal standards of transparency.

Lebanon is a good example of a government that successfully obfuscates the data it is legally obliged to release. But it is no exception. Many other governments, not to mention tech corporations worldwide, excel at muddying the data they owe their citizens and consumers, when it only takes small tweaks to make it truly public.

First aid you can’t miss

How to remember life-saving training

PROBLEM

We commissioned the Lebanese Red Cross to give our staff first aid training... and promptly forgot most of it. This highlighted a common problem: Being “trained” is only as good as your ability to act upon the information later on, under pressure.

Indeed, first aid involves a lot of information that is both high-stakes and difficult to memorize. Reminders only go so far: Manuals get misplaced and apps are fiddly.
So, what if your brain freezes in the midst of an emergency?

SOLUTION

To solve this problem within our office, we worked with an architect to create an unmissable manual: Fixed into the wall at eye level, it tells you which life-saving card to pull in any given crisis.



PROCESS AND RESULTS

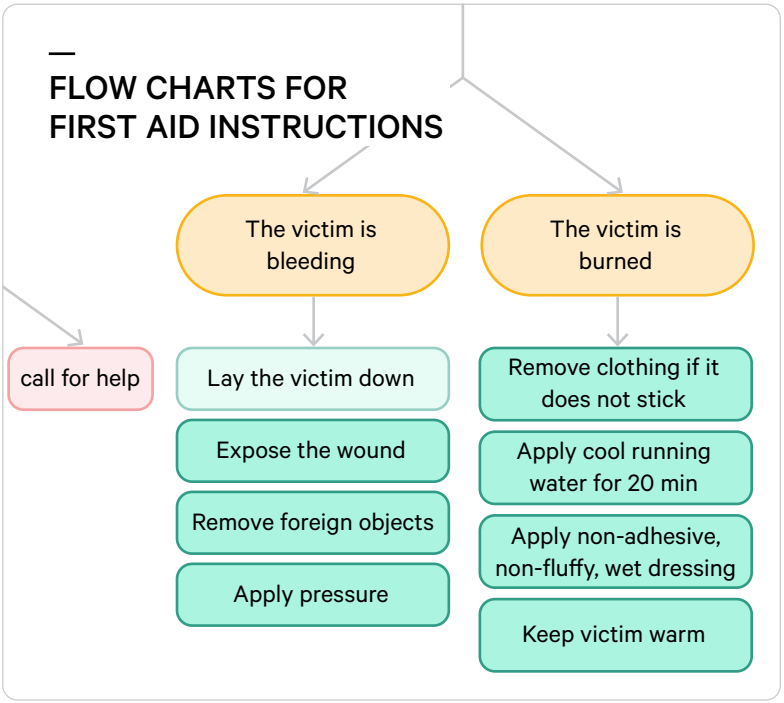
1. We studied publicly available first aid training material, which presents **various problems**. It is surprisingly scarce, because first aid is mostly taught through paid courses. Illustrations are poor and proprietary. Text is usually hard to navigate, certainly at a glance and in a crisis.

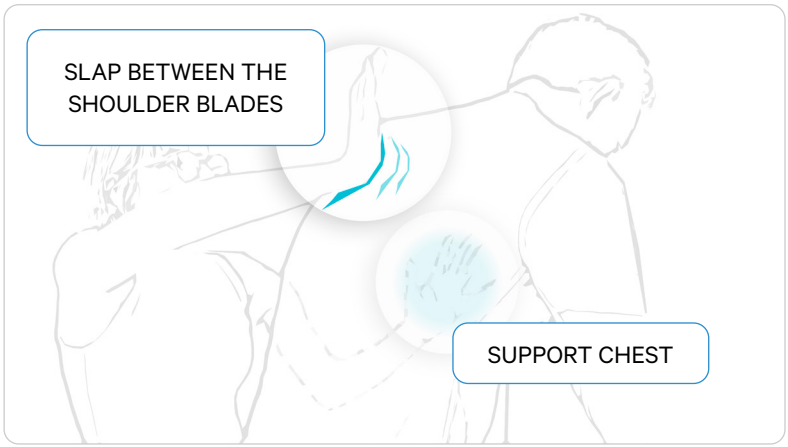
2. We narrowed our focus to the **dangerous situations most relevant to the office space**. These aren't as far-fetched as they may seem: We've had colleagues with epilepsy and panic attacks, we've faced a fire in our building, and we've had windows shatter inward when the Beirut port exploded.

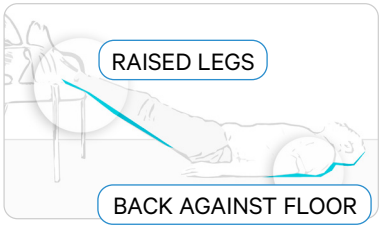
3. We decided to produce illustrations ourselves, to **capture exactly what we were trying to learn**. Simulating each case helped us refine the accompanying text, which had to be edited down to a very short, very explicit sequence of steps.

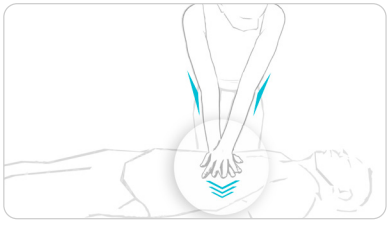
4. We designed a robust yet elegant manual made out of plexiglass. It holds a set of removable cards, each covering one type of crisis. Our belief is that, in an emergency, you need **just the right amount of information**. Here you can take it with you to have it by your side next to the victim.

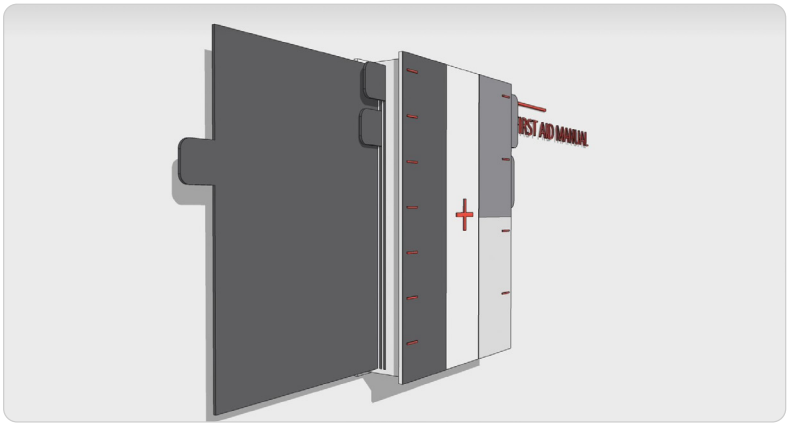
5. We created a simple, intuitive decision tree to help **pull the correct card within seconds**. This can also serve to stage regular rehearsals, which is an essential aspect of first aid training.

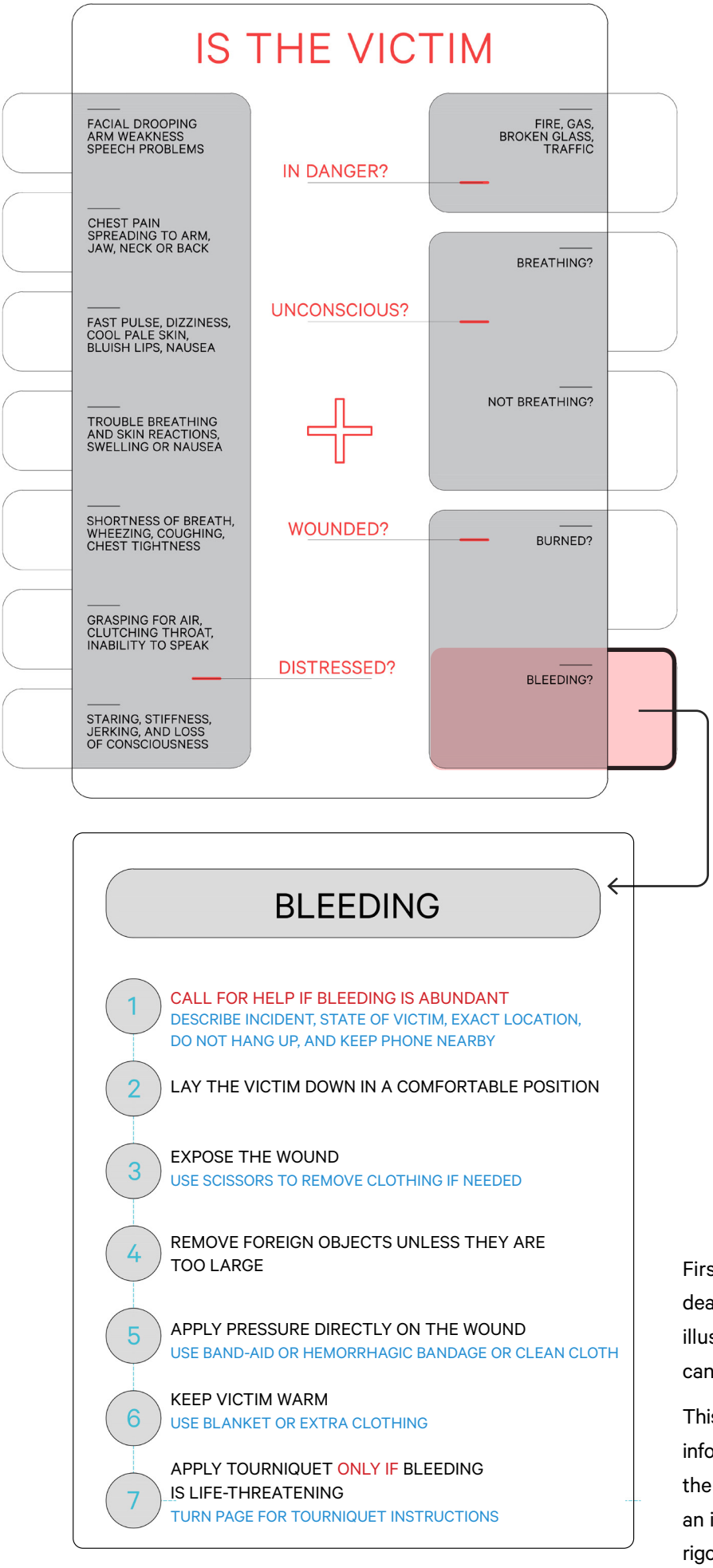


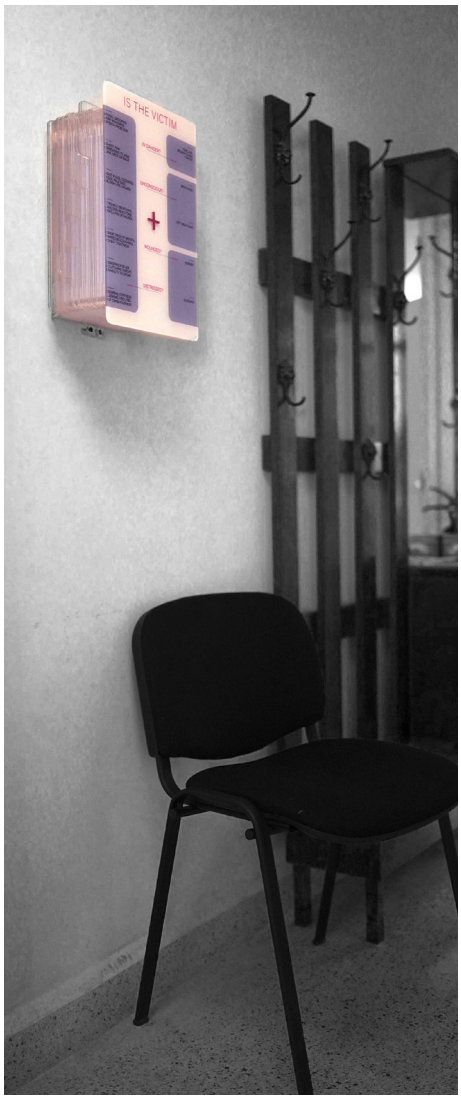








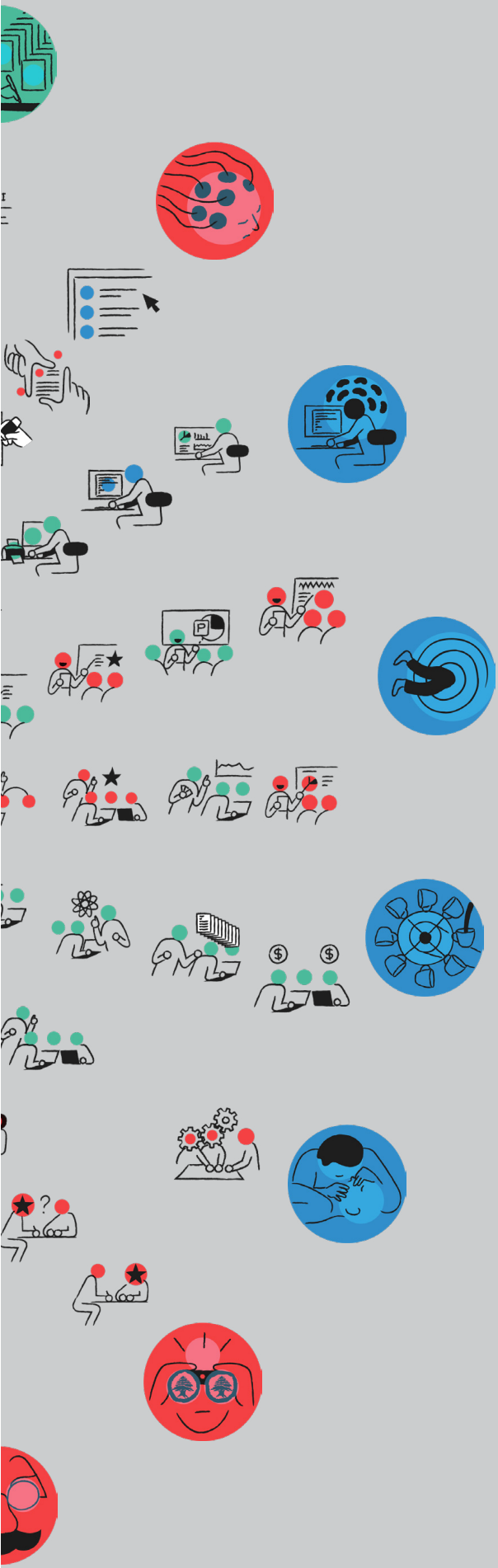




TAKEAWAY

First aid is a perfect example of life-and-death communication. Every word counts, illustrations are indispensable, and clutter can actually kill.

This makes for a perfect exercise in information design: forcing us to write to the point, integrate text with visuals, create an instinctive information hierarchy, and rigorously define the most pertinent format.



synaps

Better information
for the public good

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