



Midterm Report: COVID-19 Emergency Food Distribution in Syria

Project Location: Damascus, Qalamoun, and Aleppo regions, Syria

Project Timeline: September – October 2020

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Report Authors

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Total Expenditure: \$25,000

Total Participant Count: 2,250 (450 families with an average of 5 members per family)

Context/community changes

After 10 years of civil unrest, Syrians face the several intersecting crises – the economic crisis and plummeting exchange rate, and ongoing violence between various Non-State Armed Groups and intervening governments throughout Syria, especially in the Northwest and the most recent, the public health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the summer and autumn, coronavirus cases continued to rise and fall periodically, but businesses and schools and other public institutions were beginning to reopen after periods of strict lockdowns from March to June 2020. But the skyrocketing cases in the last few months, as well as other indicators such as hospital bed occupancy rate and burial statistics, indicate that a second wave of the virus has since surged. As of 23 December 2020, 10,441 cases of coronavirus had been reported by the Syrian Ministry of Health.¹ However, anecdotal reports (mostly sourced from social media) suggest a much higher infection rate than is being officially reported. In response, the Government of Syria (GoS) has kept most border crossings closed, with some exemptions for commercial and relief shipments from Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. Additionally, ad-hoc changes to lockdown measures (temporary closings of public spaces, curfews, etc.) are ongoing. In

¹ UNOCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 22," 23 December 2020.

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria_COVID-19_Humanitarian%20Update_No%2022_23Dec2020_FINAL.pdf



November, the first total closure of a school due to COVID-19 in the new academic year occurred.²

The realities of COVID-19 in Syria are concerning for FD CD beneficiaries, staff, and volunteers alike, but they do not represent the whole picture or even the main concern for most Syrians. The economic situation in Syria also continues to worsen. The highest exchange rate on record occurred on 8 June 2020, when the exchange rate reached 3200 Syrian Pounds to 1 USD. While the exchange rate has recovered somewhat in recent months, in December 2020 the average exchange rate was 2600-2900 Syrian Pounds per USD. In comparison, the informal exchange rate in December 2019 was around 900 SYP to 1 USD.³

The ongoing economic crisis in neighboring Lebanon also continues to negatively impact Syrian exchange rates, as well as Syrian importers' purchasing power. The explosion at the Port of Beirut on 4 August 2020 damaged the main point of imports for the region and thus severely limited the supply of basic necessities to Syria – namely, wheat, corn, barley, and other grains.

The sanctions placed on Syria by the European Union, United Kingdom, and the United States have also severely affected the overall economic reality for Syrian citizens (in government-controlled regions). The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, placed on Syria by former President Donald Trump in December 2019, came into effect in mid-June 2020. The measures “apply to anyone, Syrian or non-Syrian, who aids or does business with the Assad regime or with any entities it controls [such as the Government of Syria] ... Moreover, it further immiserates the Syrian people, blocks reconstruction efforts, and strangles the economy that sustains a desperate population during Syria’s growing humanitarian and public health crises.”⁴ The sanctions only contribute to the severe scarcity of staple goods throughout Syria.

The combination of the economic crises in Lebanon and Syria and other limits to imports, including damage after the Beirut port explosion, COVID-19 border closures in Syria, and sanctions from Western governments, have led to skyrocketing costs of basic necessities across the country. The World Food Programme (WFP) now reports that the price of an average food basket is SYP 99,234. This cost is the highest on record and represents a 250%

² UNICEF, “Whole of Syria Humanitarian Situation Report,” November 2020.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Whole%20of%20Syria%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20for%201-30%20November%202020.pdf>

³ UNOCHA, “Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 22,” 23 December 2020.

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria_COVID-19_Humanitarian%20Update_No%2022_23Dec2020_FINAL.pdf

⁴ Joshua Landis and Steven Simon, “The Pointless Cruelty of Trump’s New Syria Sanctions,” 17 August 2020.

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price increase over the past 12 months.⁵ The prices of other essential non-food items – including hygiene items and fuel – are rising at a similar rate. WFP also reports that the cost of subsidized bread in government-controlled areas doubled in price in November, and subsidized fuel prices increased by 120-133% across the country in October.⁶ At the same time, many families have lost their primary sources of income. An inter-agency socio-economic impact assessment of COVID-19 completed in August estimated that 200,000-300,000 jobs have been permanently lost, and 15% of small-to-medium sized businesses have reported permanent closure in 2020.⁷

Food insecurity has increased dramatically in response to rising costs of basic necessities and decreased family incomes. UNOCHA estimated in September 2020 that approximately 9.3 million people in Syria remain food insecure.⁸ Even households who still have regular incomes have felt the impact of the spiraling cost of living, and previously middle-class families can no longer afford the essentials. For example, the current average price of a WFP food basket exceeds even the highest official government monthly salary, which is currently 80,240 SYP per month.⁹ In November 2020, 46% of households in Syria reported poor or borderline food consumption, which is double the November 2019 figure.¹⁰ Across the country, families are having to make impossible decisions between paying for food, fuel, hygiene items, rent/shelter, and other basic needs. Debt is an increasing issue for Syrian households, as they simply cannot afford to live without accumulating it.

The security situation in Syria continues to be unstable as well. Open hostilities, primarily among various non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and militias, but also including government forces supported by external armies, negatively impact the daily lives of many Syrians, especially those living along the M4 and M5 highways and in proximity to the frontlines in Idlib. Between November 18 and December 20, 2020, six IEDs exploded in northwest Syria, killing at least eight civilian and injuring 55. According to OCHA, over 6.5 million people remain internally displaced in Syria (but the figure is likely closer to 8 million, considering that the first half of 2020 witnessed increased hostilities and therefore record numbers of

⁵ UNOCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 22," 23 December 2020.

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria_COVID-19_Humanitarian%20Update_No%2022_23Dec2020_FINAL.pdf

⁶ WFP VAM, "Syria Country Office Market Price Watch Bulletin," Issue 72, November 2020.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP-0000122456.pdf>

⁷ WFP, "WFP SYRIA Situation Report #11," November

2020. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP%20Syria%20Situation%20Report%2011%20-%20November%202020.pdf>

⁸ UNOCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 17," 1 September 2020.

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria_COVID-19_Humanitarian%20Update_No%2017_1Sept2020_FINAL.pdf

⁹ WFP VAM, "Syria COVID-10 Update: September prices."

¹⁰ WFP, "WFP SYRIA Situation Report #11," November 2020.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP%20Syria%20Situation%20Report%2011%20-%20November%202020.pdf>



internal displacement, estimated at almost 1.5 million).¹¹ According to the CCCM cluster, there were 29,785 displacements in November, while 242,400 displaced people were recorded to have returned to their homes or previous places of displacement.¹²

Activities Report

Changes to Activities

The original proposal for this project included funding for both food relief and livelihoods programs. However, after conducting further needs assessments and hearing feedback from beneficiaries and volunteers, we decided to focus the entirety of the funding received on providing immediate nutritional support. Food relief is a pressing need across Syria and many families told us that obtaining adequate food to feed their families was their #1 concern.

Procurement

In August, a tender was sent to several known suppliers previously known to FDCCD. FDCCD checked quality and quantities of products based on what was needed and eventually selected three vendors from whom to purchase food parcel items. During the tender process, there was some difficulty obtaining the quantities of items required and agreeing on fixed prices for the items. Due to sanctions and border closures, there are severe food shortages across Syria – even when importers have the means to purchase goods, sometimes they simply can't get them in to the country. Additionally, the volatility of the Syrian Pound made agreeing on prices somewhat more difficult. In the end, we agreed with supplier to purchase items in dollars (rather than SYP) and pay for the entire quantity at once.

After they were selected, vendors packed and distributed parcels to the three distribution sites, for distribution by local partners.

Identifying beneficiary families

FDCCD partnered with local charity organizations in each identified community to identify beneficiary families and distribute food. These local partners (LPs) are all well-established in their respective communities and have longtime strong relationships with FDCCD. The LPs also represent a variety of confessional backgrounds (Sunni, Shi'ite, Druze, and Christian).

¹¹ Rebecca Root, "Update: Internal Displacement Surges in First Half of 2020," 29 September 2020.

¹² UNOCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 23," 32 December 2020.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Recent%20Developments%20in%20Northwest%20Syria%20-%20Situation%20Report%20No.%2023%20-%20As%20of%2021%20December%202020.pdf>



In total, there were 3 distribution centers in Syria (in Dasmacus, Qalamoun, and Aleppo), which coordinated distribution to smaller local distribution sites. Each site distributed 150 food parcels each month for two months.

FDCD worked with LPs in each location to identify beneficiaries. Each LP maintains their own records of families in need, which was then filtered based on FDCD's criteria. Families were notified by local partner organizations.

Distribution

Partner organizations oversaw the distribution process. Each month, families have the choice to come to a set location to pick up their food parcel, or the local partner will coordinate to deliver their parcel to their home, depending on preference and ability.

FDCD worked closely with its partners to ensure proper COVID-19 prevention measures were observed to protect the health and well-being of volunteers and beneficiaries. Before and during distributions, FDCD emphasized to our local partners the need to be vigilant about hygiene and social distancing measures, including wearing masks and washing hands often. Field workers and volunteers were also given clear instructions about providing verbal information about COVID-19 to beneficiaries while distributing food parcels and informing beneficiaries about the leaflet and hygiene items included in each food parcel.

Volunteers who have previously participated in FDCD food distributions have received information about COVID-19, its spread and prevention, each time they volunteer with us. Volunteers took it upon themselves to share with beneficiary families the information they had learned from FDCD during March COVID relief distribution. Vulnerable Syrians have very limited access to information about COVID-19 and its prevention, and the knowledge shared by volunteers is vital.

Two distributions occurred: the first during the third week of September and the second during the third week of October. Exact distribution dates varied by location.

Outcomes and Impacts

In total, 900 food parcels were distributed to 450 families.

The contents of the food parcels were determined by recommendations from the World Food Programme for basic food parcels, based on nutritional needs and local customs. Each food parcel contained:

- Rice, flour, and bulgur
- Lentils, chickpeas, and fava beans
- Tuna and canned meat



- Tomato paste, sunflower oil, salt, and sugar
- Two hygiene items (bleach, multipurpose soap)

Long-term and indirect impacts

Stabilize food consumption and lives of families. Allow them to allocate resources to other needs, including school supplies, medicine, transportation.

These project activities indirectly impact the larger communities in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Every family who employs better hygiene practices (e.g., washing hands and surfaces regularly, following advice in the informational leaflet) improves the likelihood that the virus will not spread in their community.

The vendors from whom we purchased the food parcels and hygiene items are also positively impacted indirectly. In these small ways, we are supporting local business during the economic crisis in Syria.

Next Steps

The intersecting crises in Syria are ongoing with no easy end in sight. Food prices continue to skyrocket as the Syrian Pound devalues, and more and more people need assistance. FDCCD is committed to supporting communities across Syria and is in the process of writing a new proposal to provide further food assistance to families in Syria.