

VASyR 2016 Executive Summary

The crisis in Syria is well into its sixth year, and Lebanon continues to host over one million Syrian refugees. As of August 31, 2016, US\$ 980 million had been injected into the *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2016* (LCRP) designed by the Government of Lebanon and partners, slowing a further slide into poverty for most refugees. This targeted humanitarian assistance has been critical to sustaining the refugee population and easing the strain on the host community. It is, however, less than half of the US\$ 2.48 billion requested to ensure the well-being of refugees. The situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon remains highly precarious, as shown in this year's vulnerability assessment.

The 2016 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR) surveyed a representative sample of Syrian refugee households in Lebanon to identify changes and trends in their situation. The assessment continues to provide valuable insight into refugees' living conditions, from the size of their families to the shelter they live in, to their economic vulnerability and food insecurity. Throughout this report, refugees' own viewpoints offer a crucial glimpse into the strategies they deploy to survive and their own perceptions of their situation and the assistance they receive.

Since 2013, the VASyR has been an essential process and partnership for shaping planning decisions and programme design. It is the cornerstone for support and interventions in Lebanon. As in previous years, humanitarian agencies have already incorporated VASyR findings into their programming and recommendations, including the 2017 LCRP.

The contents of this report, jointly issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP), demonstrate that economic vulnerability is, at best, as serious as last year. Over one third of refugees are moderately to severely food insecure, an increase of twelve percentage points compared to 2015. Families have exhausted their limited resources, and are having to adapt to survive on the bare minimum. Refugees continue to rely on harmful coping mechanisms to get by.

Methodology

Between May 23 and June 4, 2016, the survey team visited 4,569 Syrian refugee households randomly selected from 26 districts across Lebanon.

The population was stratified by district to allow district and governorate level analysis. The household questionnaire was designed based on the questionnaire of the previous year to ensure comparability. Qualitative information was gathered through focus group discussions conducted in each governorate.

Key Findings:

Residency

Only one in five households reported that all members held legal residency permits, a continuing decline from 28% in 2015 and 58% in 2014. In addition, the share of households in which *no* member has a residency permit grew by half, to 29%. Renewal of residency permits emerged as a key concern during focus group discussions as the number one priority for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Refugees expressed that they felt the lack of residency prevented them from moving freely in search of job opportunities, as in particular male adults fear arrest at check points. Some refugees also reported difficulties in registering their children for school without residency papers although this is not a requirement from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

Education

Syrian children face challenges in formal education. Among the surveyed children of primary school age (6 to 14 years), 48% were found to be out of school, with the highest rate of out-of-school children found in the Bekaa (70% not attending) and the lowest in the South (32% not attending). These rates are significantly higher among children of secondary school age (15 to 17 years): 84% of children of this age group are out of school.

In general, the most reported demand-related barriers were the cost of education, child labour, child marriage, the need to stay at home, cultural reasons and transportation costs. Supply-side barriers reported included: the school did not allow enrolment, there was no school in the area, there was no space in the school, there was violence at school or there were language/curriculum difficulties.

Pervasive Poverty

The injection of much-needed assistance was able to halt the sharp decline into poverty that was observed between 2014 and 2015. The share of households living below the poverty line remains, however, at an alarming 71%. More than half of refugee households have a total per capita expenditure that falls below the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB), a measure of items deemed essential for a household's survival. While this figure stabilized at a national level, not all districts fared equally, and the share of households in the SMEB category increased by more than 50% in certain districts.

In addition, households are increasingly adopting coping strategies that deplete assets, negatively affect the households' livelihoods, and very often are irreversible, such as selling household goods, productive assets, or housing or land held in Syria. Households are increasingly incurring debt in order to buy food, cover health expenses and pay for rent. The share of households borrowing money or receiving credit climbed to 90%, households have an average debt of US\$ 857, and 44% of households reported holding debt of US\$ 600 or more.

Some households were also resorting to involving children in income-generating activities. While few households (3%) reported children under the age of 15 working, the picture was markedly different for adolescents aged 15-17, of whom 18% were reported to be working. In some districts, the share of working adolescents reached roughly one third.

“The economic plight of Syrian refugees did not deteriorate as severely as last year, but we know that this is due to the oxygen of external help. The situation would be even more dire without the aid received to date. Syrian refugees in Lebanon are still caught in a debt trap, while remaining highly reliant on humanitarian assistance.”

– Mireille Girard, UNHCR Representative in Lebanon

Food Insecurity

Survey results show that 93% of the Syrian refugee population was estimated to have some degree of food insecurity, an increase of 4% compared to 2015. A closer look reveals that the share of refugee households that were moderately or severely food insecure jumped from 23% in 2015 to 36% in 2016. Almost three quarters of households employed coping strategies such as reducing essential expenditures on education and health, selling productive assets, houses or land, taking children out of school, and sending children to work. These severe strategies often have a harmful effect on households, and can be irreversible.

Limited income sources remained one of the underlying causes of food insecurity. Thirty per cent of working-age men reported a lack of employment in the month prior to the survey, and for those who did work, underemployment was widespread. Restrictions on employment coupled with low wages are additional obstacles to earning sufficient income to meet basic needs without external assistance. Analysis of food insecure households revealed that they are more likely to depend on less-sustainable income sources such as informal credits and debts, and food vouchers.

Both adults and children were eating fewer meals per day, with adult consumption down to an average of 1.8 meals per adult per day. In addition, 32% of refugees were found to have unacceptable diets, meaning that they lack variety, quantity or both, of nutritious food. This is double the percentage of refugees with unacceptable diets in 2015. While households slightly increased the consumption of micronutrient rich foods such as vitamin A rich fruit and vegetables, meat and fish, the frequency of consumption of these foods remained insufficient for a healthy diet, and overall dietary diversity declined, posing health risks for both adults and children.

A reduction of WFP assistance throughout 2015 compounded food insecurity for Syrian refugees. Severe funding shortfalls in 2015 forced WFP to reduce its voucher value and limit the assistance amount per household. Generous donor contributions made in early 2016 provided a lifeline to Syrian refugees, but the study results show that the negative outcomes on food insecurity are yet to be fully reversed. While the WFP voucher value was fully reinstated in March 2016 and capping was lifted in May 2016, access to food remained a critical issue at the time of data collection, negatively impacting dietary diversity and food consumption outcomes, and exacerbating the harmful strategies utilized to cope with food shortages.

“The [2016] VASyR highlights that food security remains precarious... refugees are living on the edge and had suffered assistance cuts last year. However, thanks to generous contributions from governments this year, WFP is able to continue to provide food security, some stability and hope to up to 700,000 refugees with monthly food assistance.”

– Dominik Heinrich, WFP Representative and Country Director in Lebanon

Persistent Vulnerability

Survey findings reveal that compared to the previous year, the situation of refugees has not deteriorated dramatically in terms of health, education, shelter, water, hygiene, solid waste and energy, thanks to the financial support of the international community and the careful programming of humanitarian operations. Unfortunately, refugees remained at a point where not all basic needs are met and households are susceptible to shocks. Forty-two per cent of households have dwellings that do not meet minimum humanitarian standards. Sixteen per cent of households reported not being able to access needed health care, with significant pockets of households without access in certain districts.

Children in particular remain vulnerable. Nearly half of primary-school age children are out of school. A lack of dietary diversity puts children in particular at risk for life-threatening illnesses including infections, measles, and those causing diarrhoea. Feeding practices for infants and young children continue to be a special cause for concern. Common illnesses were widespread, with 41% of children sick in the two weeks preceding the survey.

Seventeen per cent of the Syrian refugee households sampled were headed by women, and for nearly every indicator of vulnerability, female-headed households fared worse than their male counterparts. Female-headed households were more food insecure than male-headed households, had a worse diet, adopted severe coping strategies more often, and allocated a higher share of their expenses to buy food. Households headed by females were also poorer than households headed by males, but less indebted.

Children and Youth with Disabilities

Approximately 2% of children under 18 years and 3% of youth between the ages of 18 and 24 were reported to have disabilities (physical, sensory, mental/intellectual). We can estimate that on average, approximately 7% of the households have a child or young person with disability. School attendance rates are consistently lower for children with disabilities across all age groups. The differences are most prominent among the age groups 9-11 and 12-14. For children aged 12 and older, 9 out of 10 children with disabilities do not attend school.

Community Relations

Focus group discussions revealed that community tensions and security have been mitigated, likely as a result of international support also for host communities and efforts by local and national political leaders to diffuse such tensions. Around 60% of households cited fair relations with the local community, and less than 10% reported poor community relations. Few households (3%) reported experiencing any insecurity in the previous three months.

Recommendations:

Overall, maintenance of a robust response and tailored programming is required to keep Syrian refugees afloat. In particular, additional funding is required to halt any further deterioration of what is already a very precarious situation.

- Finding ways to address the financial barrier for refugees to renew their residency and negotiate restriction on access to employment will facilitate self-reliance for refugees. Policies, measures and programmes oriented towards allowing refugees to generate income while protecting the Lebanese labour market and mitigating potential tensions with the host community are recommended.
- Food insecurity in Lebanon remains a serious concern. Although generous donor contributions made in early 2016 allowed a return to the full voucher value provided by WFP, slowing the pace of deterioration, additional funding is required to ensure and maintain food security for all Syrian refugees in Lebanon.
- Significant variations in household profiles were found at the district level, and targeting accordingly is essential to ensuring the most efficient use of funding. Systems to identify and recognize these pockets will ensure an appropriate and fair level of assistance to vulnerable HHs, regardless of their location.
- The geographic distribution of households with specific needs revealed regional and district-level variances that could benefit from further probing to identify possible epidemiological or hygiene concerns.



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency



World Food Programme

- The extended and continued inadequacy of infant and young child feeding practices remains a concern requiring more refined programming to ensure effective behavioural change of this persistent problem.
- Improved communication to beneficiaries could address some of the fears expressed by refugees and negative coping mechanisms identified through the survey and focus groups. Some are logistical questions (e.g., why does assistance stop and when is it available?, who to contact/where to go for assistance?), while others may require larger campaigns that address behavioural change (why and how to register births, what are appropriate infant and young child feeding practices, why and how to enroll and maintain children in school).
- Inclusionary approaches at the community level should continue in order to keep community tensions at bay.

“The findings are a reminder to all of us that a significant share of Syrian households in Lebanon are doing all they can with limited means...For those who have lived through the violence in Syria and endure hardship in the host country, health care, food, emotional support and education are simply vital.” – Tanya Chapuisat, UNICEF Representative in Lebanon