

Basic food prices fall in Madaya as humanitarian assistance reaches households

Key points:



Food consumption improves in hard-to-reach areas of Al-Hasakeh, likely thanks to more functional food supply routes and better access to food assistance.



More households are buying food on credit and selling assets in order to obtain food.



Households are contending with high food prices, lack of income-generating opportunities and continual power cuts.



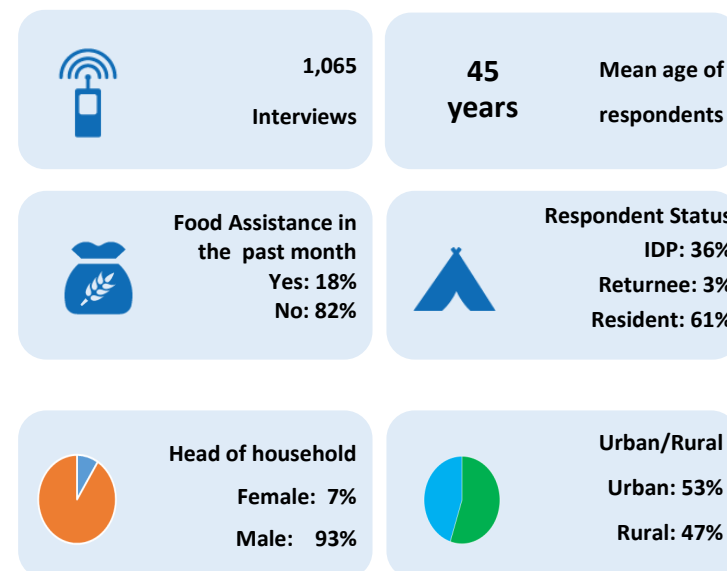
Situation Update

The overall security situation across Syria has deteriorated drastically following the conclusion of peace talks in Astana on 15 March and the Geneva peace talks on 24 March, neither of which yielded significant outcomes. A major assault was launched in north-eastern Damascus and Hama governorate on 23 March. An estimated 50,000 people have been displaced from Ar Raqqa governorate and Manbij in north-eastern Aleppo governorate; 40,000 people, mainly women and children, have been displaced from areas northwest of Hama city; 10,000 people have been displaced from areas northeast of Damascus (Qaboun, Barzeh and West Harasta); and 17,000 others were displaced within besieged eastern Ghouta (northeast of Damascus) in the last week of March.

Under the March Convoy plan, the UN request to reach Qaboun was denied and the inter-agency convoy scheduled to be dispatched to eastern Ghouta on 28 February 2017 was unable to proceed due to insecurity in the mission area. The last UN humanitarian delivery to reach eastern Ghouta was on 29 October 2016. On 21 March, formal and informal access routes were cut off to eastern Ghouta, causing sharp price hikes and further limiting people's access to basic commodities. An estimated 300,000 people are inside eastern Ghouta.

On 14 March, two humanitarian relief assistance convoys reached Madaya and Az-Zabadani in rural Damascus and Kafraya and Foah in Idlib. The food assistance to these locations included in-kind food, ready-to-eat rations and child food supplement Plumpy Sup. Likewise, on 24 March in-kind food and the supplements Plumpy Doz and Plumpy Sup were delivered to Wadi Barada.

Fig. 1. Sample Household characteristics





Food security improves in hard-to-reach areas of Al-Hasakeh

Data collected in March shows that the mean food consumption score (FCS) for households in hard-to-reach parts of Al-Hasakeh increased from 49.9 in February to 54.5 in March – reaching levels seen in accessible areas. This can be attributed to the enhanced functionality of supply routes, better availability of food in markets and lower food prices. These improvements, together with food airlifts to Al-Hasakeh and seasonal factors, have had a positive impact on food accessibility. By contrast, the lowest mean FCS was observed for households in hard-to-reach areas of Damascus, Homs and Hama, and in Aleppo city (Figure 2). In rural Damascus, most hard-to-reach areas are relying heavily on food assistance provided by inter-agency convoys, which have been infrequent during the past six months and have been unable to reach all hard-to-reach locations. Other factors that may have affected the FCS include the curtailment of livelihood activities and the absence of agricultural production because of restricted access to land in most locations.

Looking at food consumption groups, the highest prevalence of inadequate (poor or borderline) food consumption was once again reported from Homs and Hama, where 11 percent of households reported having poor food consumption and more than a third reported borderline food consumption. The percentage of households with poor food consumption fell significantly in Aleppo city from 12 percent in February to 2 percent in March (Figure 3), most likely thanks to improved humanitarian assistance.

Key informants from besieged areas reported that dietary diversity continues to be very poor and that households are mainly dependent on external food assistance as their main source of food. As airdrops resumed in Deir-ez-Zor city, better access to food assistance was reported.

In Madaya and Az-Zabadani, widespread violence and fighting continues to hamper humanitarian access. Together with scarce food supply and severely disrupted market functionality, this is exacerbating vulnerability to food insecurity for the majority of the poor besieged population. Despite these limitations, an improvement in humanitarian access was reported by key informants in besieged Madaya and Az-Zabadani in March, leading to better availability of basic foods. Even so, household diets continue to be poorly diversified and mainly based on pulses. According to key informants, cases of kwashiorkor, kidney failure, calcium and respiratory deficiency, and other diseases have been reported in these areas.

Figure 2: Mean FCS by aggregated district, December 2016 to March 2017

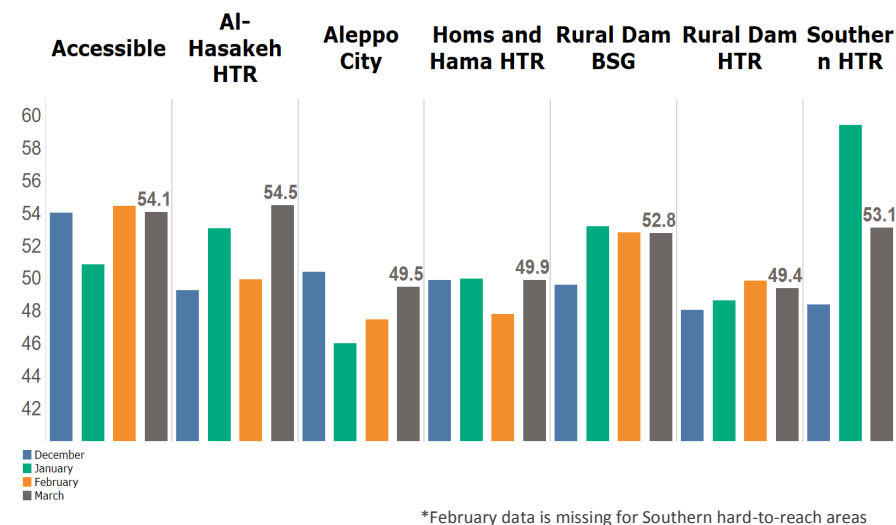
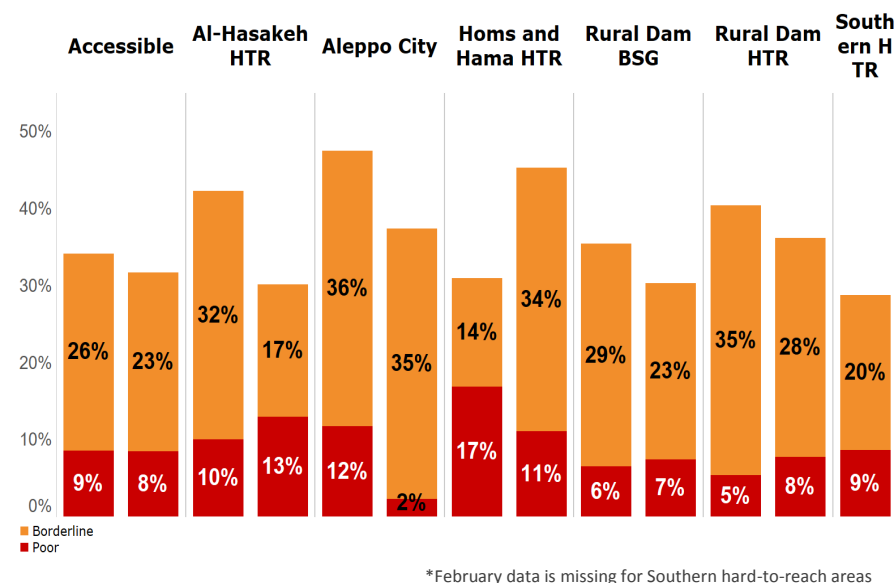


Figure 3: Inadequate food consumption by aggregated districts, February — March 2017



The prevalence of poor and borderline food consumption among IDPs fell from 49 percent in February to 38 percent in March (Figure 4). This relative improvement is mainly driven by better food consumption among IDP households in Aleppo city and accessible areas thanks to improved access to humanitarian assistance and comparatively cheaper food prices. Households who reported receiving food assistance in the 30 days preceding the survey had lower levels of poor food consumption than those who had received assistance within the preceding five or more weeks (Figure 5).

As shown in Figure 6, in March the prevalence of borderline food consumption in urban areas was half that of the previous round. Households in urban areas have other sources of income and access to services, unlike those in rural areas who rely largely on agricultural production. During March and according to the crop calendar, agricultural production was limited to some types of vegetables and citrus fruits, which is insufficient to meet all food needs or to generate adequate income. As most of the displaced are concentrated in urban areas, the difference between urban and rural prevalence of inadequate consumption is less than what it would be normally.

Figure 5: Inadequate food consumption by food assistance received, March 2017

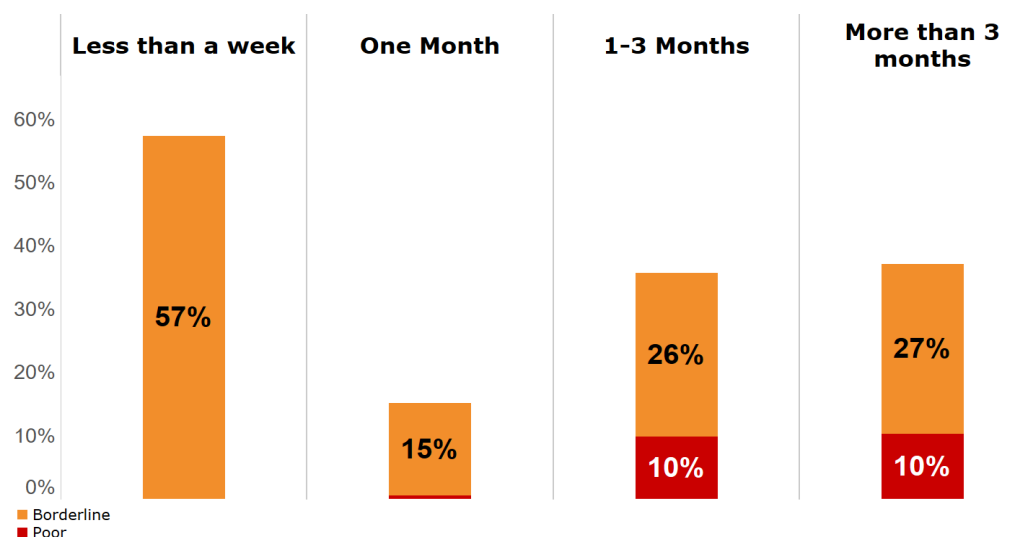


Figure 4: Inadequate food consumption among IDP and resident households, February — March 2017

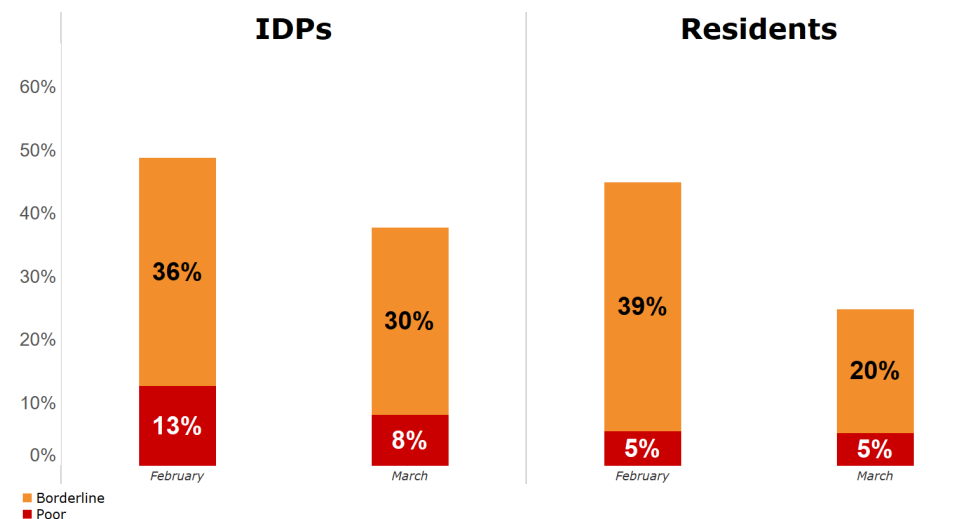
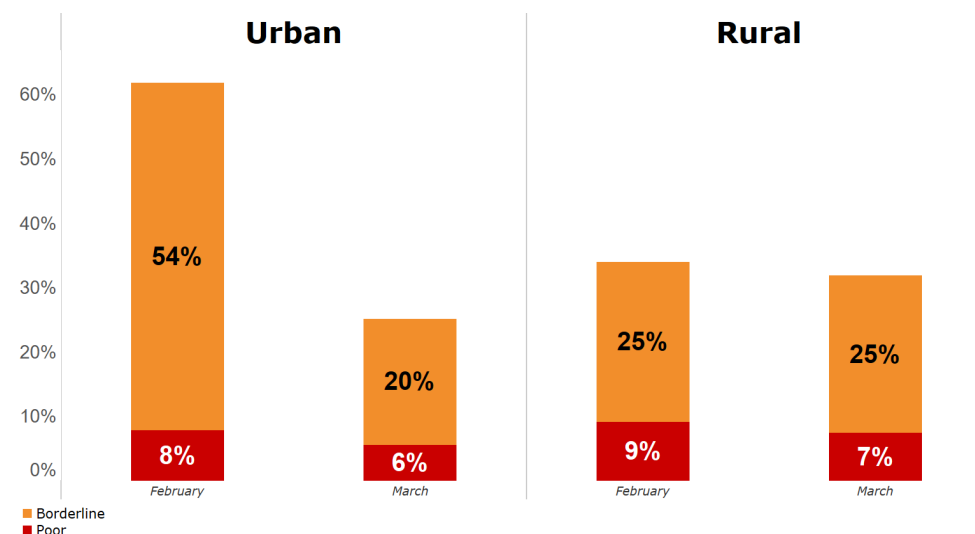


Figure 6: Inadequate food consumption among urban and rural households, February — March 2017





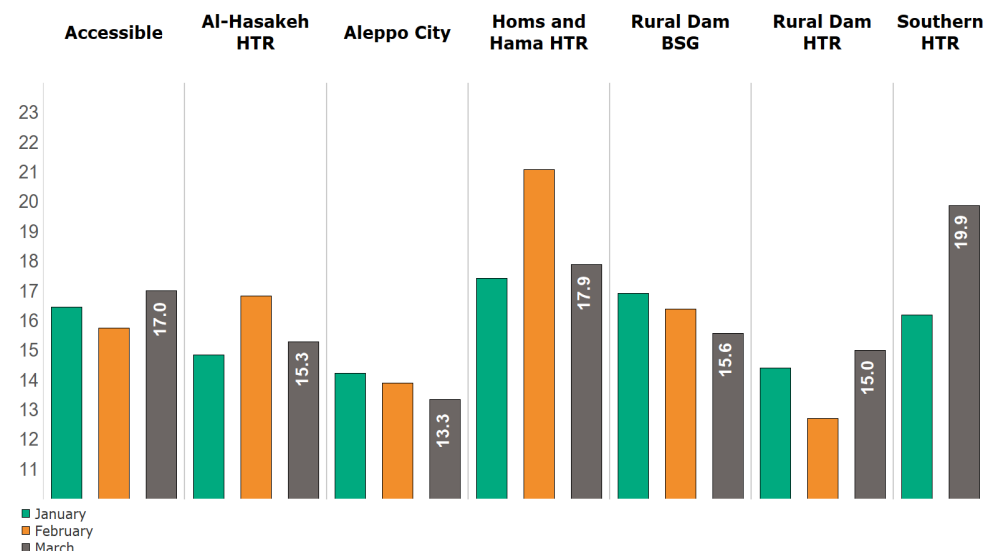
Households in Deir-ez-Zor, Madaya and Az-Zabadani have exhausted their coping strategies

In March, households in Southern hard-to-reach areas reported the highest mean reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI) (19.9), followed by households in Homs and Hama (17.9) (Figure 7).

The widespread practice of irreversible or extreme coping strategies continues to be reported by key informants in all besieged locations. Access to food has become increasingly problematic as the conflict persists: opportunities for paid work diminish and food becomes less affordable, leading to the adoption of coping strategies that include accumulating debt, buying on credit and selling assets. In Deir-ez-Zor, Madaya and Az-Zabadani, most households have exhausted these coping strategies and they do not have access to savings. As they have already sold their assets, they are relying exclusively on external food assistance to meet their basic food needs.

As Figure 8 shows, the use of food-based negative coping strategies remained the highest among displaced households during March. However, the mean rCSI for residents deteriorated from 13.6 in February to 16.9 in March. In March, a higher proportion of resident households were borrowing food, limiting the portion sizes at meal times and reducing the number of meals eaten a day. When looking at livelihood coping strategies, the percentage of resident household buying food on credit increased by 10 percent and the percentage of IDP households selling their assets rose from 4 percent to 9 percent (Figure 9).

Figure 7: Mean rCSI, January — March 2017



*February data is missing for Southern hard-to-reach areas

Figure 8: Use of food-based coping strategies by IDP and resident households, January—March 2017

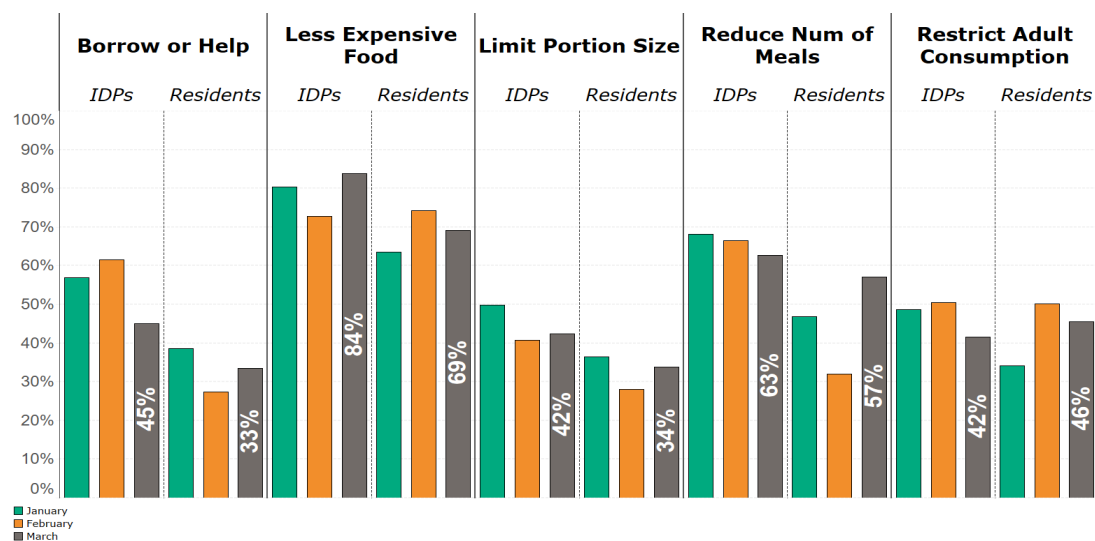
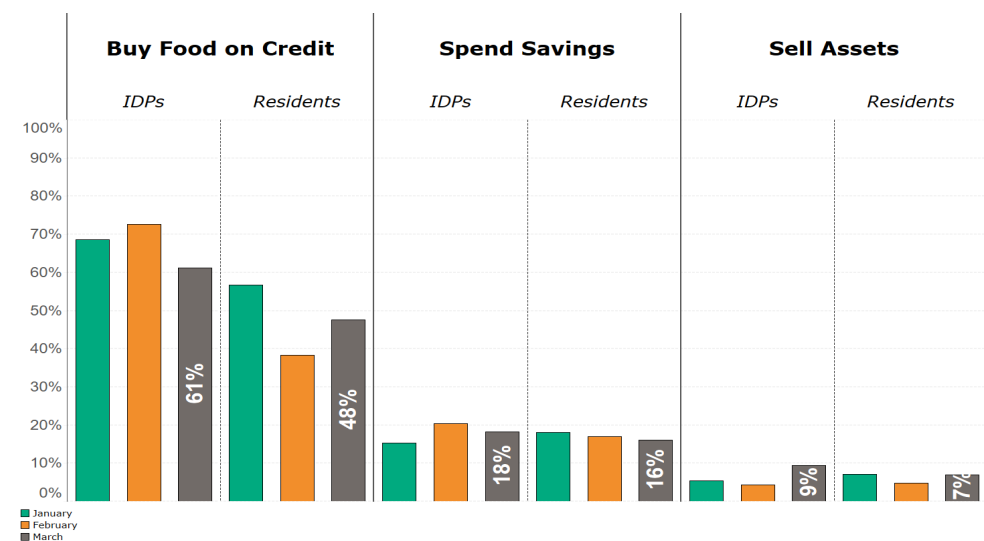


Figure 9: Use of livelihood coping strategies by IDP and resident households, January - March 2017





Decreased access to food assistance

Buying food continues to be the most common source of food for surveyed households (78 percent). Overall, 12 percent of households reported gifts and assistance as their primary source of food. The proportion of households reporting labour as their main source rose from 5 percent in February to 7 percent in March.

More than a third of surveyed households in Aleppo city and in Southern hard-to-reach areas reported gifts and assistance as their primary source of food; 61 percent of those in Aleppo city and 48 percent of those in Southern hard-to-reach areas had received food assistance. In March, the UN and partners successfully delivered multi-sectoral assistance through inter-agency operations, reaching over 200,000 people in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Five inter-agency convoys have been deployed.



Humanitarian access to Madaya and Az-Zabadani brings food prices down

In March, relatively better food availability and lower food prices were reported in Madaya and Az-Zabadani compared to February. This coincides with improved humanitarian access to the towns of Foah, Kefraya, Madaya and Az-Zabadani, which has eased pressure on markets.

As shown in Figure 11, rice was being sold in Madaya at SYP850/kg, 35 percent lower than in February and 86 percent lower than six months ago. However, market functionality remains poor and prices are still considered to be unaffordable for poor households in besieged areas, who are struggling to survive with limited or no income sources.

Moreover, fresh nutritious food is scarcely available and key informants report that only poor quality staples can be found in markets. Therefore, household access to vegetables, fruits, proteins and dairy products is extremely low. The current price of rice in Deir-ez-Zor city is SYP775/kg, which is 35 percent less than last month. It is 3 percent higher than in September but still 81 percent below pre-airdrop levels (April 2016).

In Madaya, the cost of the food basket fell to SYP 187,700, 9 percent less than in February and 65 percent less than six months ago. Likewise, in Deir-ez-Zor city in March the food basket cost was SYP 87,725, a decrease of 24 percent compared with last month but still 35 percent higher than in September.

Figure 10: Food assistance as main food source, March

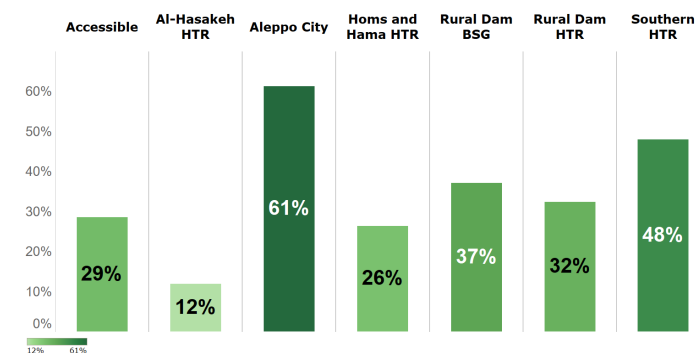


Figure 11: Retail price of rice (SYP/kg) in Deir-ez-Zor city and Madaya, March 2016 — March 2017

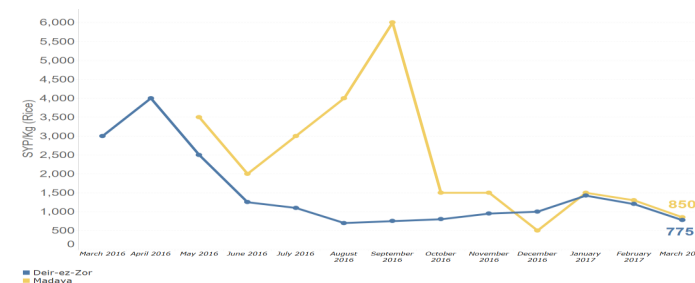
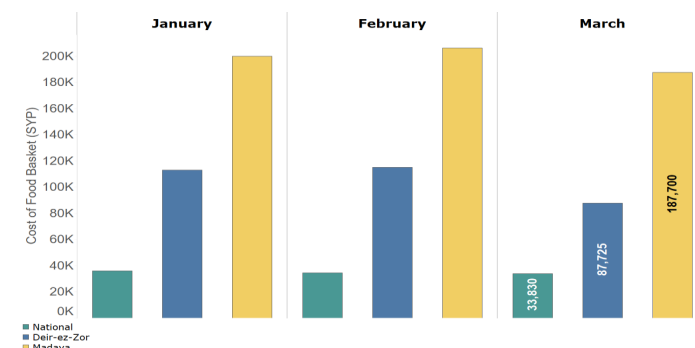
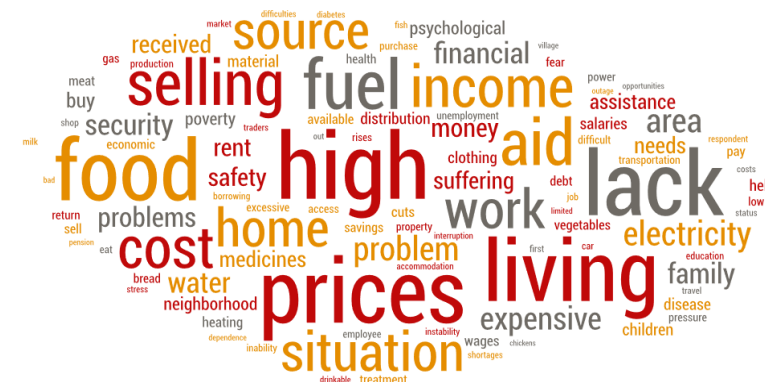


Figure 12: Cost of standard food basket in Deir-ez-Zor city and Madaya vs. National Average (Jan—Mar2017)

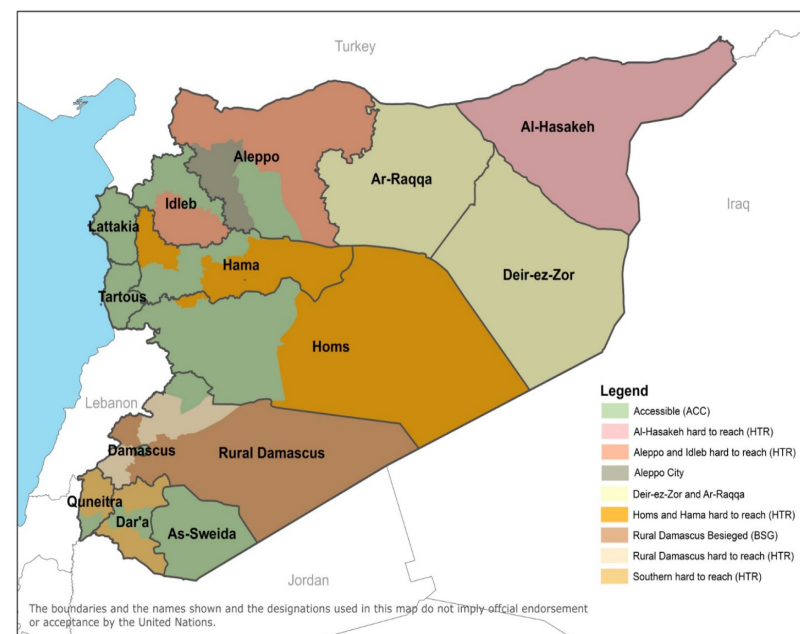




In general, respondents expressed their concern and cited problems arising from high prices, particularly for food and fuel. The lack of medicines and medical and health assistance was also mentioned, especially by families with chronically ill members. Electricity and water cuts continue to have a huge impact on daily life, and households are forced to rely on generators that are unaffordable for most families. As a result of deteriorating living conditions and the impossibility of finding a job, families are reportedly selling their belongings and assets. The most urgent concerns for IDPs were the high cost of rent and the lack of continuous income: many families said that they have to share housing and have had to move to cheaper accommodation. Female respondents are particularly worried about insecurity and the lack of safety and protection.



This mVAM bulletin is based on data collected via telephone interviews in March from both key informants and households. The telephone numbers called were generated using random-digit dialling, yielding 1,065 completed surveys. The questionnaire contained questions on demographics, income sources, food assistance, household food consumption, coping strategies and primary food sources. A final open-ended question gave respondents the chance to share additional information about the food situation in their communities. The data was weighted by the number of mobile phones owned by the household. Information collected through mobile phone interviews may be biased towards younger, somewhat better off households who live in urban areas and have better access to electricity and phone-charging services. To obtain a more granular analysis of food security, districts have been combined into nine strata: accessible areas, hard-to-reach Al-Hasakeh, hard-to-reach Aleppo and Idlib, Aleppo city, Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor, hard-to-reach Homs and Hama, besieged Rural Damascus, hard-to-reach Rural Damascus, and hard-to-reach Southern. This sampling frame groups together areas with similar geography and access status, allowing for a large enough sample size to make statistically significant comparisons.



Arif Husain arif.husain@wfp.org
Jean-Martin Bauer jean-martin.bauer@wfp.org

Toolkit: <http://resources.vam.wfp.org/mVAM>



vam
food security analysis