

"How are we expected to survive this?"

The impact of Syria's economic crisis on families



Introduction

The Syria crisis now enters its 12th year. Syrians country wide still face multiple crises as instability hangs over the conflict-affected population. Syrians are experiencing one of the worst economic fallouts since the start of the conflict. The severe economic deterioration ripping through the country has meant the nightmare is far from over for vulnerable populations. After struggling with a deadly conflict for over a decade, Syrians now contend with unprecedented rises in costs of living and difficulty coping. The effects of conflict, Covid-19 and sanctions among other factors, have led to economic decline across the country. Syrians are also now feeling the ripple effects of the Ukraine crisis with food and fuel prices soaring due to disrupted imports, a situation that will worsen fragile food insecurity country wide.

The deep, drastic drop in Syria's standard of living has caused a nationwide shift in the way Syrians are living their lives. Millions of vulnerable families up and down the country have to make hard choices as part of this brutal fight for survival. A major rise in prices of goods and services across governorates has crushed people's livelihoods and stripped them of viable options. Vulnerable Syrian families now face impossible decisions of buying medicine for their sick relatives or putting food on the table, sending their children to school or work in order to meet basic living costs. Talk to people anywhere in Syria and they will say life has never been this unaffordable and coping has never been this difficult, as one woman from the north expressed in an interview "How are we expected to survive this?". The crisis has brought about a raft of inescapable measures that became daily routine; going to bed hungry, queuing up for hours to get hold of a bag of bread, and burning toxic plastic to stay warm.

Child playing around dry water tunnels in North East Syria.
Photo: Tareq Mnadili/ NRC



The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) has interviewed hundreds of Syrian families who are internally displaced and returnees to understand the impact of the economic crisis on their lives in recent months. Beyond the statistics, it's crucial to show what it means to live through this economic crisis across the country. The testimonies shared by Syrians from the north to the south through the centre of Syria paint a picture of struggle but also clarity on solutions needed. Our findings show that the majority of Syrians interviewed had to ration food, while over a quarter had to give up required medication because of unaffordable costs. A harsh winter season has found people burning old clothes and plastic bags to stay warm as fuel prices jumped further.

Syrians want and can emerge from more than a decade of this endless suffering but need unwavering support from the international donor community and long-lasting solutions. Vulnerable Syrians are calling for long-term solutions and sustainable aid that will support them to become self-reliant and lead a life of dignity.

As poverty continues to sweep across the country, decision-makers, donors and governments with influence over the crisis must not turn their attention away from Syria. Maintaining humanitarian assistance and increasing early recovery and resilience efforts in the country will help Syrians to cope with current and future challenges. With other crises rapidly unfolding in the world, Syria is at risk of falling down the priority list when it comes to international aid funding and diplomatic efforts. Governments gathering in Brussels for the upcoming international pledging conference on Syria must remain committed to those in need country wide. Support for Syria's most vulnerable at this critical time should be scaled up, not down.

Methodology

NRC conducted interviews with 120 families across seven governorates of Syria from January to March 2022. Our findings also include surveys conducted with 406 households in November 2021 across the majority of governorates in Syria. This analysis is further informed by NRC's programmatic experiences and insights across all of Syria as well as secondary information by other agencies. While the data sample is not representative of the population at large, it provides an indicative snapshot of the impact of economic deterioration and growing needs for a wide cross section of vulnerable Syrians living inside the country. Our respondents include Syrian families who are internally displaced and are returnees. Some names have been changed to protect individual identities.

Economic Deterioration

The economic situation in Syria is getting worse by the day. Syrians have told NRC that they have “gone from war to hell”. After dealing with a decade of conflict, they are now battling severe economic deterioration. The combined effects of the conflict, corruption, internationally-imposed sanctions, the impact of Lebanon’s financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed more Syrians into poverty and left them in need of humanitarian assistance in greater numbers. Rising inflation, currency depreciation and national debt alongside severe cumulative losses in gross domestic product have led to economic hardship felt by families country wide.

This situation has severely eroded people’s purchasing power and caused loss of income and livelihoods, increasing the number of people living below the poverty line. According to the 2022 Humanitarian Needs Overview of Syria, there are an estimated 14.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in 2022, a jump of 1.2 million compared to 2021.¹ The average household is now spending more than it earns, with numerous stories of people accumulating huge amounts of debt. Only 10 percent of households are reported to have an income exceeding the minimum expenditure basket in Syria.²

A displacement camp in northern Syria



“My child used to have the best marks in his class, but I had to take him out of school so he supports me.

What other options do we have?”

A father of four in Daraa

The crisis has driven up the cost of basic commodities such as food, water and fuel, making them increasingly unaffordable. The economic decline has resulted in a sharp deterioration in living conditions for Syria’s internally displaced population of 6.9 million, returnees and host communities alike. A lack of access to basic services, inability to meet basic needs and general insecurity have seen a rise in people moving back into displacement camps and worsened living conditions. Displaced Syrians are also moving into destroyed villages and houses as they cannot afford rent in areas of displacement and are on the move in search for availability of income-generating opportunities.³ NRC analysis forecasted that economic decline would lead to further displacement.⁴ While economic deterioration is now a driver of internal displacement and population movements, the economic crisis is also felt country wide across governorates with over 90% of people living in poverty.⁵ There is an increase in those living in financial hardship which now extends beyond even the displaced population. The middle class, which once made up 60% of Syrian society before the conflict, now stands at approximately 10-15%, a drop that has significantly damaged job creation and what is left of the country’s surviving industries.⁶ Some of Syria’s most renowned industrial zones have also been severely destroyed as a result of the decade-long conflict. For example, in Aleppo which is regarded as Syria’s industrial hub, 70% of infrastructure has been destroyed in the conflict.⁷ Basic services and infrastructure⁸ have also been destroyed as a result of the conflict, resulting in a lack of functioning water, healthcare, electricity and education services.⁹

There are many other numbers that remind us that Syria remains a complex humanitarian crisis and demonstrate that needs are on the rise. For example, over half of the population, or 12.4 million people, are food insecure, meaning they can’t be sure if they have anything to eat for the next meal, let alone anything healthy or nutritious.¹⁰ Behind the statistics and numbers are families who lack the basic necessities needed to get by. A better understanding is needed of what this economic crisis has meant in people’s daily lives.

“I CAN’T COPE WITH THE COSTS”

Rana from the north of Syria earns the equivalent of \$10 USD from a full week of babysitting. The money can hardly cover two meals. The rest of every day needs has to be covered in one of two ways; borrowing or rationing.

Rana’s three children, whom she now raises on her own, are ‘growing up hungry and with no future to look forward to.’ The last to stay in school is about to drop out as tuition fees soar.

She says, “We have to ration food when it comes to what and how much we are eating. We have replaced olive oil and rice with cheaper substitutions. Sometimes we have to cancel our power generator subscription because I cannot find the money- I would rather buy milk and diapers for the baby.

“I have one child left in school but I know I might have to take him out soon. I can’t cope with the costs; the stationary and outfits- that’s a lot of expenses given what we make.

“I have experience sewing and I always thought owning a machine could help sort out a lot of my problems. It is a simple thing but could go a long way towards helping my family.”

Struggling to Cope

The perspectives of Syrians demonstrate the extent to which they have to worry about everyday needs. One father said:

“At night, I stay awake thinking how I can provide bread for my family in the morning.”

Our research shows that even with available jobs, basic needs like food, fuel and medicine cannot be secured by Syrian families. They still find themselves increasingly in need of securing basic necessities. Families in Syria have seen their purchasing power severely diminished. A survey run by NRC across the majority of governorates in November 2021 shows that an average family of five in urban areas or six in rural regions needs a minimum of 515,000 SYP (\$206 USD at the official rate at the time of writing) to spend on core essentials: food, clothes, rent, transport, utilities, bills, education, and health-related expenditures. Almost nine out of ten families surveyed with a constant wage cannot cover core costs. The national minimum monthly wage is 93,000 SYP, while the cost of a typical food basket – the minimum nutritional requirements needed- for a family of five, jumped by 24% in just one month, from 231,004 SYP in February to 286,757 in March 2022.¹¹ This puts basic food further out of reach for millions. The Northwest of Syria has also been impacted by currency devaluation.¹² The Turkish lira which was adopted as an alternative to the Syrian pound in 2020, has devalued to its lowest level against the dollar, at 14.634 TRY per USD as of April 2022. The devaluation is felt by communities witnessing additional increases in the prices of basic commodities, including food, water and fuel.

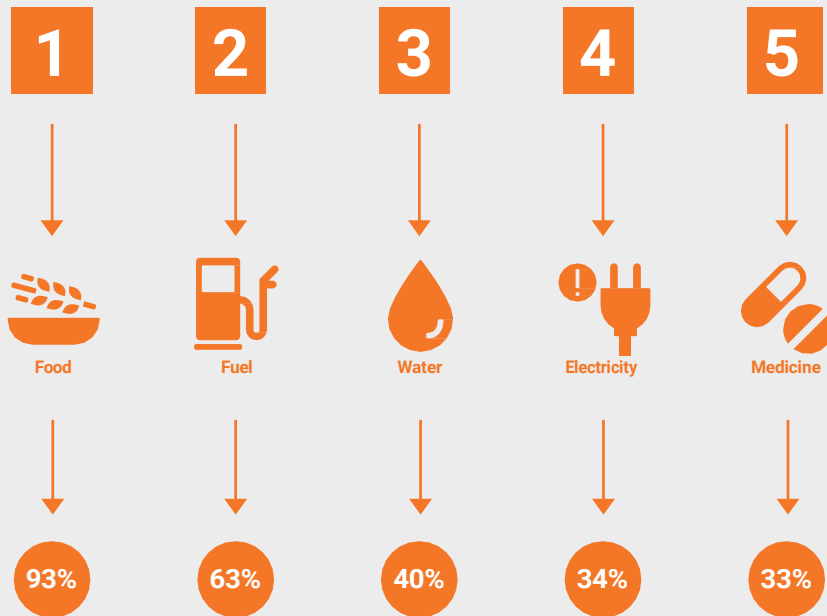
None of those interviewed by NRC, who provided information on their income, earned the minimum amount needed for survival (\$206). This is also evidenced in recent data compiled in the UN Humanitarian Needs Overview on Syria which shows an income insufficiency across the country.¹³ According to NRC’s interviews in 2022, food represents the most urgent need for people in Syria, with 93% saying they don’t have enough to eat. Fuel for heating and cooking comes second (63%), followed by clean water (40%). A mother of six in Rural Damascus said:

“The living conditions are very hard, like nothing we have seen. 2,000 SYP used to buy the main essentials, now it doesn’t get anything. 50,000 SYP, if you can find it, won’t cover you for one day.”

“We make 175,000 SYP and managing our needs with this income is very hard. We had to let some of our children drop out of school and stopped purchasing meat and cooking oil.” *A female respondent in Aleppo*



TOP 5 NEEDS FOR SYRIANS INTERVIEWED IN 2022



Lack of access to fresh food such as fruit and vegetables was a clear pattern that emerged from those surveyed. The majority of people rely on a single type such as starchy food or legume, an apparent imbalanced intake that could be contributing to lack of good nutrition. This is consistent with reported spikes in the price of vegetables and meat across Syrian markets.¹⁴

Looking at these top needs, there is also a clear absence of sufficient energy services, which seems to have added extra associated expenses for families. A number of people interviewed said they would rather have less power cuts than more meals. This is partly because of the expensive alternative energy and heating sources available.

Market inflation and dwindling incomes have forced families in Syria to devise new ways of surviving.

“Staying warm became harder the past two years. My child has asthma but we have to burn plastic. We cannot afford diesel.”

A mother in the north of Syria



A displaced Syrian mother burning olive branches to warm up her tent in northern Syria.

NRC's interviews present further evidence of how families are resorting to negative coping strategies in order to survive:

Eating less food;

Selling fuel aid to buy food;

Buying critical medicine only every other month;

Making less frequent trips to the doctor;

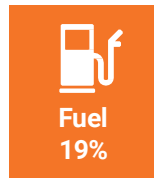
Limiting social interactions to cut back on hospitality costs;

Selling furniture to buy fuel for heating;

Burning plastic bags, old clothes and shoes to stay warm or take a bath.



RATIONED ITEMS



In some cases, NRC has found that households have to send their children to work, reduce the quantity and quality of food consumed, skip urgent healthcare assistance, and burn plastic bags to stay warm- a set of measures taken simultaneously.

Several families interviewed by NRC also said they now depend on food donated by relatives or neighbours. A father in the north of Syria said he only buys cheap vegetables that are about to go rotten because he can't afford fresh food.

A mother of children living with disabilities in Hama expressed to NRC her frustration with the limited food supplies, ***“We only make a quarter of what we need. So, we have limited the food types we consume; no more meat, eggs, dairy products, or fruits. It has affected my children’s mental health. My son is 10 years old and he doesn’t know what fruits taste like.”***

“I am running away from the reality we live in, as it doesn't fit the dreams I have,” she said.

WHAT SYRIANS ARE SAYING ABOUT FOOD

“As long as we have bread, we can live”

“Our neighbours share their meals with us”

“Soaring prices are suffocating us”

“When I have absolutely nothing to eat, I go to my parents' house. I tell them ‘My daughter and I are hungry’. We eat and go back home.”

“A lot of days my children go to bed without dinner”

For healthcare, people who cannot afford expensive medicine are resorting to painkillers or cheap medicine. Others have postponed critical but unaffordable surgeries indefinitely. A father in Daraa had to sell his house items in order to buy medicine for his son. Another female respondent said she had to divorce her husband because she can't afford to pay for his healthcare. Such cases put into real-life perspective the number of Syrians in need of health assistance which stands at 12.2 million.¹⁵ This is a huge number further exacerbated by the fact that more than half of the country's health facilities have been damaged or destroyed, with a chronic shortage in qualified personnel.¹⁶

The impact on children has been particularly adverse amid the economic crisis. Among those interviewed, 50 parents said they had to take their children out of school so they can help provide an income. In many instances, the child was the sole breadwinner in the family. In a separate survey by NRC in November 2021, 64% of respondents said that students were engaged in some form of day labour during the holidays- a sign that children are at risk of dropping out should their families need additional income. The annual cost of sending a child to school per year was put at 600,000 SYP (\$240 USD). One of the parents in Aleppo told NRC, ***“In order for our children to continue their education we had to sell our house.”***

“I CAN NEVER FIND THE ANSWER”

Fadwa is still searching for a job in Rural Damascus. She hopes to find something suitable; perhaps do babysitting.

Fadwa and her family’s money almost entirely goes to medication. Her 30-year-old son was diagnosed with several mental conditions, and her husband has diabetes and blood pressures that need to be closely monitored and controlled. Fadwa herself has a serious health condition but does not have the money to afford her much needed surgery.

Fadwa says, “I cannot find 1 million SYP to do the procedure, instead, I take medication to stop the bleeding, but it has many side effects like fluid retention, obesity and depression. From 1.00 to 5.00 o'clock I spend my time looking at the sky and trying to think how to get the money. I never find the answer.

“We are renting an apartment in an unfinished building. The landlord is hinting that he wants to increase the rent to 75,000 SYP per month.

“We wish we can have the majority of things and food we used to have. For a week, I have been dreaming of eating zaatar but I cannot afford it, we prioritise my son’s medication over anything.”

For Syria’s internally displaced population, coping strategies such as skipping meals, purchasing less expensive food items and children working are more prominent. The limited livelihood opportunities in camps make displaced families dependent on humanitarian assistance, which itself is shrinking. Recently the World Food Programme had to reduce the quantity of assistance in the north of Syria due to funding cuts and increased prices for food items.¹⁷

Effects of the Ukraine Crisis

The multiple crises Syrians are experiencing every day will be exacerbated by the Ukraine conflict. The Ukraine crisis has sent shockwaves through the global food supply system, limiting access to basic food items in the Middle East and North Africa, a region heavily dependent on flour- and wheat-based diet.¹⁸ Syria is reliant on wheat imports to provide families with their vital bread supplies. The country reportedly had to import more than 1.5 million tonnes of wheat a year, with the majority coming from Russia.¹⁹ Bread prices have already gone up in northern Syria, while cooking oil, another vital commodity supplied by Russia and Ukraine, has seen dramatic increase or has entirely vanished from the market in other parts of the country.

As a result, affordability and availability of wheat and fuel are becoming the biggest worries for the average Syrian family. Parents interviewed by NRC ahead of the Ramadan season spoke about shocking increases in market prices. A mother in Rural Damascus mentioned that the cost of a single small meal for her and her five children now costs 7,500 pounds which she cannot afford. This amounts to approximately 7.5% of the monthly minimum average wage. She was surprised to see cooking oil now cost 50% more than what it did the last time she went to buy a bottle.

North of the country, subsidies were lifted on bread, leading to the weight of a bread bundle to be reduced by 100 grams. This has resulted in people getting less bread for the same price. Drought in the north of the country in 2021 has already damaged wheat production and affected productivity of agricultural areas across Syria.²⁰ A father told NRC that his family needs five bags of bread a day, at a total cost of \$1.7 USD. These experiences echo recent price hikes reported across the country.²¹

Agricultural land in northern Syria.
Photo: Tareq Mnadili/NRC



The disruption to wheat imports are expected to worsen an already severe food insecurity situation across the country. With 12.4 million currently food insecure in Syria, hunger may increase given the level of vulnerabilities and multiple crises hitting families.



A man making bread before Iftar in Ramadan, Damascus, Syria.

Photo: Tareq Mnadili/ NRC

A male labourer in the north of Syria is already seeing the effects of the Ukraine crisis, *“Being a daily labourer means it’s never stable. As soon as the war in Ukraine started, we noticed the change in prices. The first cash assistance payment we received [before the war] helped us to a great extent with food and water expenses. But as soon as the Ukraine war kicked off, the second payment had almost no value in the market. We weren’t able to afford half as much.”*

“Cooking oil, flour, and diesel have all increased. Oil prices jumped and pushed the cost of food and transport up. It’s all very expensive now. The price of a gas canister rose in just one month and eggs have tripled. We need five bags of bread every day but now subsidies have been lifted.

We can barely secure the minimum, just one type of food at a time.”

A male labourer in the north of Syria

Solutions

Solutions to Syria's humanitarian and economic crises should be grounded in the perspectives of affected Syrians. Families interviewed by NRC realise that there is no single solution to the complex crisis that the country is experiencing. When families were asked by NRC what solutions are relevant to them, the answers provided insights into the commonalities across different households and governorates.

Overall, job creation came on top of the long-term solutions, proposed by almost three-quarters (73%) of the respondents. Another 60% want to see cash assistance provided to the most vulnerable, while just over a quarter suggested more food aid to offset soaring food prices.

“All we need is to be able to make an income that can help us live in dignity.” A female respondent from Aleppo.

Syrians interviewed said having a stable job can achieve a dignified life for their families. Most respondents believe employment-based income will help them regain control of their priorities, such as securing an education for their children. Some mentioned they would like to start a business, such opening a small grocery shop. Others, particularly those residing in farming communities suggested more support to the agricultural sector. Several female respondents suggested livelihoods-generating trainings so they can learn a new vocation.

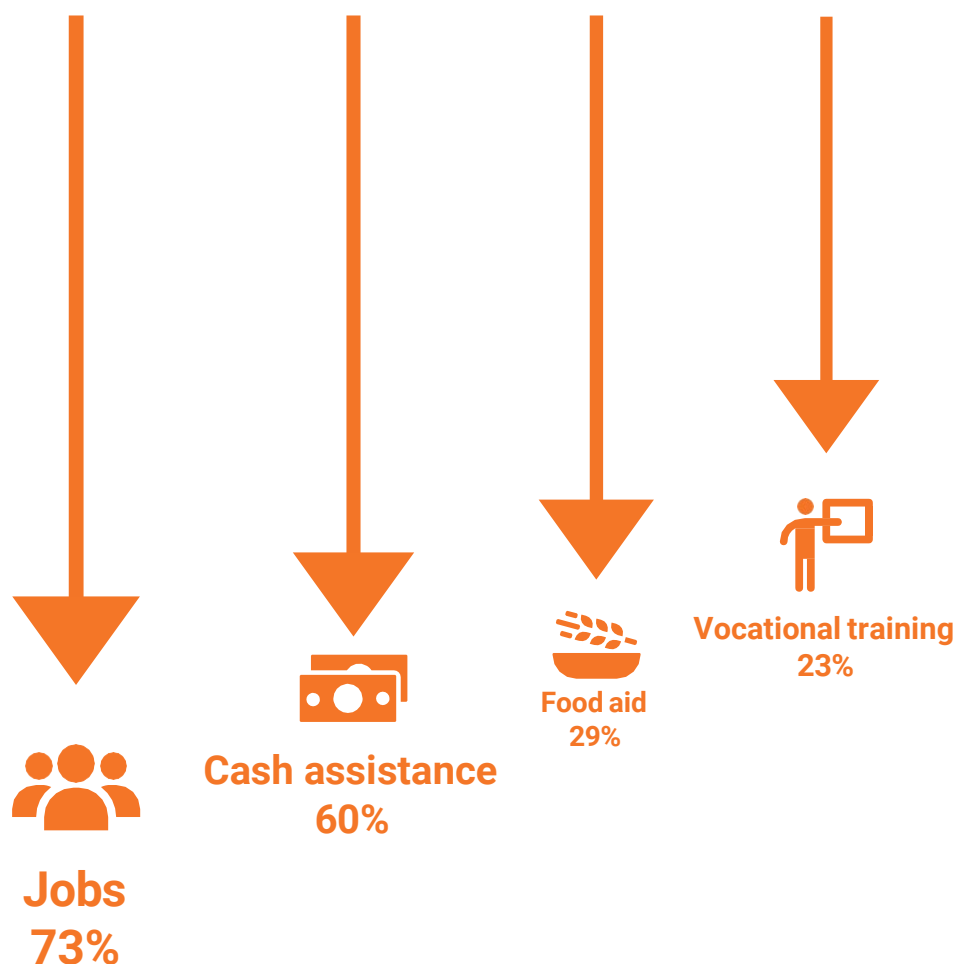
Vocational training in Aleppo.
Photo: Tareq Mnadili/ NRC



“A solution to the current economic crisis can be through job opportunities and projects for youths. Some- times, I see young people working in low-skilled and tough jobs, I think they deserve a chance to access better opportunities.”

NRC’s response across Syria includes the delivery of vocational training, skills building and employment opportunities for youth and adults. Through our programmes we have also supported, and continue to assist, those most vulnerable and in need of cash assistance to cover immediate basic needs as well as focus on longer-term programmes to enhance local food systems, income generation and provide business grants.

SOLUTIONS





Najlaa from rural Damascus never gave up on a better life, even after the passing of her husband which left her to raise five children on her own.

At 36, Najlaa is getting on with life. She has taken every job that has come her way while always keeping an eye on the next opportunity, the latest of which came in the shape of a sewing course with NRC.

She says, “Before the crisis, each household had a sewing machine but not any longer. This [course] has created a job for me. I placed some advertisements and locals started approaching me with clothes repair



orders. Some people come to fix their torn clothes, others to remake a shirt so they can give it to their child. I can also do curtains, cushions and mattresses. I have gained a

good reputation in the community.

Najlaa started working with a nearby clothes factory and is already planning to grow her small clothes repair business. “When my husband passed away, I was left alone to take care of the children. They motivate me to keep going. I encourage all mothers like me with children or those women with no breadwinner to enroll in these courses. It’s a wonderful opportunity.”

The longer current conditions exist and worsen, the likelihood of further displacement, protracted instability, worsened negative coping strategies and intergenerational poverty occurring across Syria. Furthermore, prospects to durable solutions and recovery will be reduced by the day.

Continued and sustainable funding and diplomatic support to Syria can prevent another decade of hardship for vulnerable Syrians. Solutions and responses that promote self-reliance, resilience and recovery have been supported by humanitarian and other response actors. There is a growing call by humanitarian actors for sustainable, long-term aid responses in Syria that help Syrians rebuild their lives and livelihoods country wide. More international donor support is needed for sustainable aid that prioritises vocational training, job creation and broader livelihoods programmes across all of Syria. Humanitarian actors should also be able to respond to the needs in more sustainable ways such as creating transitional shelters instead of distributing tents, rehabilitating water networks instead of distributing water.

International aid over the past decade has made vital investments, but these investments are at risk of being reversed if aid is drastically reduced. Access to services is also vital and all actors must work collectively to ensure equitable access to services, benefits and schemes to support vulnerable Syrians who are and have been displaced. Finally, solutions must remain conflict sensitive, non-discriminatory and informed by the views of those affected by responses.

Families walk through the market in Damascus, Syria.
Photo: Tareq Mnadili/ NRC



Recommendations

- In the lead up to the 6th Brussels Pledging Conference on Syria, Donors should ensure all pillars of the Syria humanitarian response plan are adequately funded and not further reduced from 2021 pledges and amounts. Donors should maintain existing humanitarian assistance levels particularly for emergency responses including cash-based assistance.
- Donors should ensure funding is increased for early recovery and rehabilitation particularly in regards to the restoration of public services and promotion of livelihoods assistance and increasing early recovery programming in water, health, agriculture and education sectors. Donors should commit to market-based programming approaches to support the recovery of market systems. More Donor support is needed for flexible, predictable, and multi-year funding.
- Governments imposing sanctions on Syria should ensure that sanctions do not hinder humanitarian responses across Syria and do not undermine the population's access to energy, health and education sectors. Humanitarian exemptions should continue to be in place and expanded to ensure timely humanitarian assistance.
- The Government of Syria should ensure equitable access to public subsidies, assistance, basic services and markets.
- Donor governments, the Government of Syria and non-state actors should increase dialogue to ensure principled humanitarian access, equitable access to services and efficient use of funding and resources throughout Syria.
- Donor governments, the Government of Syria and non-state actors should ensure durable solutions are prioritised through policy planning, programming and based on the intentions and preferences of displaced Syrians.
- All actors should support all possible modalities to access Syrians in need regardless of location.
- Response and humanitarian actors should integrate livelihoods support, resilience programming and activities that promote self-reliance as part of their responses.
- Solutions, policies and approaches to address the country's economic crisis should be informed by the views and preferences of affected Syrians.

End Notes

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