



# **THE WAGES OF WAR**

**Learning from how Syrians have adapted their livelihoods through seven years of conflict**

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Authors' affiliations:

Kimberly Howe, Tufts University

Roxani Krystalli, Tufts University

Vaidehi Krishnan, Mercy Corps

Jon Kurtz, Mercy Corps

Reimar Macaranas, Causal Design

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# Executive summary

The scale of death and suffering in Syria is monumental. What began as a peaceful protest in 2011 has spiraled into a humanitarian crisis unprecedented for our modern times: The war has killed as many as 400,000 Syrians and displaced 11 million more. Humanitarian needs remain enormous as the conflict wages on. The U.N. estimates that 8 in 10 people in Syria—including 6 million children—require humanitarian assistance. The crisis has set Syria’s development back nearly four decades.<sup>1</sup> Despite these immense challenges, Mercy Corps’ work in Syria has found that some households are managing the devastating impacts of war better than others. We undertook this research to understand why.

## The importance of data from inside the conflict

While existing research has shown how people rebuild their lives and livelihoods after war, little is known about how people cope and adapt *in the midst of a conflict*. This study builds on an emerging body of evidence that examines the strategies conflict-affected Syrians employ to protect and adapt their lives and livelihoods and how they feed, clothe and shelter their families. The stakes for development organizations are high: Research in crisis settings has shown that when humanitarian actors fail to understand a population’s existing coping strategies, they may inadvertently undermine them.<sup>2</sup> Identifying and strengthening the conditions that enable Syrians to improve their household welfare can help us meet them with more responsive humanitarian assistance that strengthens the markets they access and the social connections they depend on. The findings and recommendations are based on original survey and qualitative research in North, Northeast, and South-Central Syria, and they build on the voice of the Syrian people.

While this research is crucial to understanding how best to meet Syrians where they are, it is imperative above everything else that Syria’s people be able to live in peace again. The men, women and children of Syria will not be able to build stable lives until they no longer have to worry about dodging bombs and bullets. Peace in Syria is essential and must be achieved as soon as possible.



1 Statistics via “Syria,” Humanitarian Response, accessed January 31, 2018, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/syria>.

2 Daniel G. Maxwell and Nisar Majid, *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011-12* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

## Key findings

### How has the crisis affected Syria's people, and how are they adapting?

- › Nine out of 10 Syrians live with moderate to severe fear—fear for themselves and their families and the fear of not being able to provide for their families.
- › Two-thirds of Syrian households have lost one or more of their main income sources since the start of the conflict.
- › Three out of every four households received humanitarian support in the past year. Despite this, two-thirds of households do not have secure access to food.
- › Despite the widespread impact of the conflict, one-third (34%) of Syrians are finding ways to adapt their lives and livelihoods. Such adaptation is most present in South-Central Syria.
- › Households that have started new livelihood sources are better off than “non-adapters.” They have better food security and higher expenditures (a proxy for income), despite similar circumstances before and during the conflict.

### What enables Syrians to adapt their livelihoods and improve their welfare?



**Functioning markets.** Markets are largely functioning in even the most conflict-affected communities in Syria. Access to functioning markets is one of the strongest predictors of better household welfare and livelihood adaptation. Stable bread prices, proximity to markets and greater market activity are all positively linked to better household food security and psychosocial well-being.



**Access to loans and capital.** Syrian households that can borrow money, as well as those who have received remittances in the past six months, have significantly better food security and are more likely to have started a new income-generation activity. Syrians report that loans—primarily from friends, relatives, and local businesses—are most often used as startup capital to initiate new economic activities.



**Social networks.** Social capital is critical to income-generation opportunities—the vast majority of Syrians state that they found new jobs through friends and family. Additionally, households that have more robust interactions with people outside their communities have significantly better food security, higher expenditures and better housing conditions.



**Women and youth income earners.** Syrian women and youth income earners overwhelmingly report a positive bump in self-esteem and increased self-reliance. These households also do better on a range of welfare outcomes. However, these changes in household labor come with an opportunity cost: Many youth have abandoned their education, and women's overall burdens have increased. Additionally, men frequently cite the negative psychosocial effects of movement restrictions and their inability to find gainful employment to provide for their families.



**Humanitarian assistance.** A uniform theme across all respondents in all regions was a clearly stated preference for cash assistance, followed by livelihood-related programs and in-demand skills training. There was a recurrent emphasis on the dignity and flexibility of cash and livelihoods to increase people's self-reliance.

## Key recommendations

Livelihood adaptation is not an aberration but rather a regular pattern in the lives of Syrians. In a complex and protracted crisis like Syria's, the aid sector's definition of "lifesaving" must evolve to include "livelihood saving." This central tenet drives our recommendations for NGOs, donors and policymakers:

1. **Support the delivery of unconditional cash assistance.** Cash transfer programs must be intentionally designed to stabilize Syrian households, allow them to self-prioritize their household needs, and give them much-needed capital to invest in livelihoods. Cash assistance should also extend to market actors—including agriculture and livestock producers—to strengthen marketplace supplies and increase the availability of locally produced food to benefit the wider community.
2. **Ensure that humanitarian aid strengthens social networks.** Dividing communities into "eligible" and "ineligible" for aid based on socioeconomic vulnerability can be particularly divisive between aid recipients and their friends and neighbors whom they depend on in times of crisis but who may not be "eligible" for aid. Aid actors should match the right type of aid—food, cash and livelihood support—to a larger segment of the community based on households' pre-existing skills and capacities and should not solely base it on their vulnerability. The elderly may need food or cash support, but their able-bodied friends and neighbors may be better placed to utilize humanitarian assistance, such as livestock, to generate an income, and market actors that supply key inputs may be best served with cash and business expansion support. A more differentiated approach to targeting humanitarian support can help improve communities' economic self-reliance, spread the benefit of aid, and maintain crucial reciprocity and sharing within communities.
3. **Engage women and youth in meaningful economic opportunities, but don't ignore men.** Women and youth have the potential to be positive change-makers in their communities. They need targeted programs that provide meaningful economic opportunities and additional support to mitigate the cost of a missed education or the lack of a support system. That said, don't forget about men. Men are differently and differentially impacted by the Syrian conflict. We must engage vulnerable men in economic opportunities, as well as in a dialogue toward shared domestic and financial responsibilities alongside women. In the longer term, this approach has the potential for positive change.
4. **Remove funding barriers that parse human needs into emergency, early recovery and development phases.** This study shows that many Syrians want to recover from the crisis and rebuild their lives and livelihoods as soon as possible. In a protracted conflict like Syria's, humanitarian actors must combine pots of money reserved for "emergency," "recovery" and "development" with the goal of livelihood recovery. For example, we can jump-start livelihood recovery for Syrians by combining "emergency" funds for the provision of cash to meet households' needs, "early recovery" funding that supports income generation, and "development" aid that helps strengthen markets.



## Introduction and overview

### Rationale for study

As the conflict in Syria continues in its seventh year, the need for empirical information about the needs of those who remain in Syria is paramount.

Across the globe, research sheds light on rebuilding lives and livelihoods after war, but little is known about coping and adaptation *in the midst of a conflict*. Much of the literature on these issues focuses on transitions from humanitarian response to development activities, or it examines experiences primarily in development contexts.<sup>3</sup> However, as research by Mercy Corps and other organizations has shown, understanding how individuals, households and communities cope *during* crises is essential for humanitarian actors to better support those positive or enabling factors.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, research in active, protracted crisis settings has shown that when humanitarian actors fail to understand populations' existing coping strategies, they may inadvertently undermine them.<sup>5</sup> The present study thus builds on the literature of self-protection, which is founded on the recognition that individuals survive in crises not only because of interventions by external actors (such as the humanitarian system) but also because of their own coping strategies, many of which are developed and adapted during the crisis itself.<sup>6</sup> As Bellamy and Williams note:

- 3 Katrina Brown, *Resilience, Development and Global Change* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015); Christopher B. Barrett and Mark A. Constan, "Toward a Theory of Resilience for International Development Applications," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 40 (2014): 14625-14630; Cecile de Milliano et. al, "Resilience: The Holy Grail or Yet Another Hype?" in *The Humanitarian Challenge*, eds. Pat Gibbons and Hans-Joachim (Basel, Switzerland: Springer, 2015), 17-30.
- 4 Allison Shean and Sahar Alnouri, *Rethinking Resilience: Prioritizing Gender Integration to Enhance Household and Community Resilience to Food Insecurity in the Sahel* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2015); Timothy R. Frankenberger et al., "Current Approaches to Resilience Programming among Nongovernmental Organizations" (paper, IFPRI 2020 Conference, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, May 17-19, 2014), <http://ebrary.ifpri.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15738coll2/id/128167>.
- 5 Maxwell and Majid, *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011-12* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 6 Frédéric Mégret, "Beyond the 'Salvation' Paradigm: Responsibility to Protect (Others) vs the Power of Protecting Oneself," *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 6 (2009): 575-95; Erin Baines and Emily Paddon "This Is How We Survived': Civilian Agency and Humanitarian Protection," *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 3 (2012): 231-47; Betsy Jose and Peace A. Medie, "Understanding Why and How Civilians Resort to Self-Protection in Armed Conflict," *International Studies Review* 17, no. 4, (2015): 515-35.

External actors often overlook the fact that populations in danger usually take (often quite effective) measures to protect themselves. External actors are seldom present in large numbers in the eye of an emergency when most of the killing and displacement is actually underway. Typically, international assistance arrives after the peak of the violence. In the inevitable gap between a crisis erupting and outside help arriving (if it does at all), civilians have to make provision for their own protection by escaping violence, protecting their property, and reducing threats.<sup>7</sup>

This study is designed to fill information gaps presented above by soliciting the experiences and perspectives of Syrians. The complexity of the conflict and its ongoing nature calls into question the architecture of the humanitarian system and its ability to respond. The lines between phases of “emergency,” “recovery” and “development” are blurred within and between communities in Syria.<sup>8</sup> The context calls for a breaking down of agencies’ individual mandates, a system that parses human needs into sectors or clusters, and a redefining of humanitarian aid from a narrow “lifesaving” lens to a broader and more sustainable goal that includes “livelihood saving.” With this in mind, we aim to gather information that is both holistic and generated from the experiences of Syrians in their own voice.

## Research questions

With the support of academic researchers, Mercy Corps designed this study to understand why some Syrians are able to adapt their livelihoods during conflict better than others, despite facing similar circumstances. We documented and analyzed their adaptive processes by looking at individual capacities, community characteristics and other determinants such as age, gender and social group. The intent is to provide empirical information to humanitarian organizations and policymakers about how best to structure humanitarian aid to support coping and livelihood adaptation amid ongoing conflict. Based on a scoping study and past research,<sup>9</sup> we conceived of the research questions below:

- › What factors, if reinforced, hold the greatest potential to strengthen Syrian households’ abilities to adapt their lives and livelihoods to better cope with the crisis?
- › How have livelihoods and household welfare been affected?
- › Have people adapted their livelihoods?
- › Do livelihood adaptations support household welfare?
- › What enabling factors facilitate effective livelihood adaptation?

7 Alex J. Bellamy and Paul D. Williams, “The West and Contemporary Peace Operations,” *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 1 (2009): 39-57.

8 Joanna Macrae et al., “Conflict, the Continuum and Chronic Emergencies: A Critical Analysis of the Scope for Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development Planning in Sudan,” *Disasters* 21, no. 3 (1997): 223-43; Ian Smillie, *Relief and Development: The Struggle for Synergy* (Providence, RI: Thomas J. Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, 1998); Tony Lloyd-Jones et al., *Mind the Gap! Post-Disaster Reconstruction and the Transition from Humanitarian Relief* (London: RICS, 2006). This is consistent with research in other contexts that confirms that while the phases of “emergency,” “stabilization” and “transition” are often framed as discrete and separate, the lines between them are blurrier and messier in practice.

9 Abdikadir Mohamud and Jon Kurtz, *What Really Matters for Resilience?* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2013), <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/what-really-matters-resilience>; Shean and Alnouri, *Rethinking Resilience*; Kim Wilson and Roxanne Krystalli, *The Financial Journeys of Refugees* (Medford, MA: The Henry J. Leir Institute for Human Security at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, 2017), <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/~media/Fletcher/Microsites/Human%20Security/Financial%20Journeys%20of%20Refugees.pdf>; Maxwell and Majid, *Famine in Somalia*.

## Definitions of key concepts

We examined the *enabling factors* that may affect livelihood adaptation and household welfare, such as:

- › **Market functionality**, including the distance to marketplaces and the cost to access, gender barriers to access, the stability of the prices of food and other staples, and market robustness (the change in the number of businesses over time);
- › **Access to cash and capital**, including access to remittances; the ability to store/save and borrow money, including the availability of savings and loans options; and the role of humanitarian aid;
- › **Social capital and networks**,<sup>10</sup> including social and economic interaction; help-seeking between neighbors, families and outside communities; and access to information; and
- › **Livelihood dynamics**, including the number of income earners in a household, their gender and age, and their adaptation to income-generation activities since the start of the conflict in 2011.

We measured household welfare as a set of outcomes indicated by:

- › **Food security**, as a measure of both household hunger and negative coping related to securing sufficient food;<sup>11</sup>
- › **Daily and monthly expenditures** (as a proxy for income) on basic needs (fuel, food and water) and human capital (education, health and economic activities such as investments in livelihoods);
- › **Psychosocial well-being**, which captures fear and distress related to various conflict dynamics, including safety, displacement and economic security;<sup>12</sup> and
- › **Quality of housing**, which assesses type of housing, condition (level of damage), materials and number of families sharing living space.

Many other factors are likely to affect household coping, adaptation and welfare during a conflict. To isolate the impact of the hypothesized factors, our analysis controlled for households with similar levels of pre-conflict wealth and education, as well as similar levels of (current) conflict experience<sup>13</sup> and socio-demographic characteristics.<sup>14</sup>

A careful review of prior research and a scoping study with humanitarian practitioners within Syria and with other experts suggested that the selected factors and parameters play an important role in the coping and welfare of conflict-affected populations in Syria.<sup>15</sup> The factors selected reflect researchers' and practitioners' growing awareness of the need to examine factors not only at the individual level but also with an eye toward structural and systemic factors that affect coping and adaptation.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the above categories are inclusive of community attributes, including provision and coverage of basic services, and female and youth participation in education and local government.

To explore the questions above, we investigated how a set of hypothesized "enabling factors" (such as market functionality, access to loans and remittances, etc.) influence a household's ability to cope and adapt and ultimately how they impact household welfare.

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10 Sanjay Gurung and Allison Shean, *Social Capital and Good Governance: A Governance in Action Research Brief* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2017) 2, <https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Social-Capital-Good-Governance-Mercy-Corps-2017.pdf>. Mercy Corps defines social capital as "the networks and resources available to people through their relationships with others."

11 The survey included the Household Hunger Scale and the Comparative (Reduced) Coping Strategies Index to measure food security.

12 The survey included the Human Security Index to measure psychosocial well-being.

13 Including length of displacement, incidents of physical harm and property damage, and the level of insecurity in the environment.

14 The Poverty Probability Index (PPI) was administered retrospectively to estimate household assets and characteristics that make households more likely to be living in poverty prior to the conflict. Additional controls included gender and education level of household head, household size and community fixed effects.

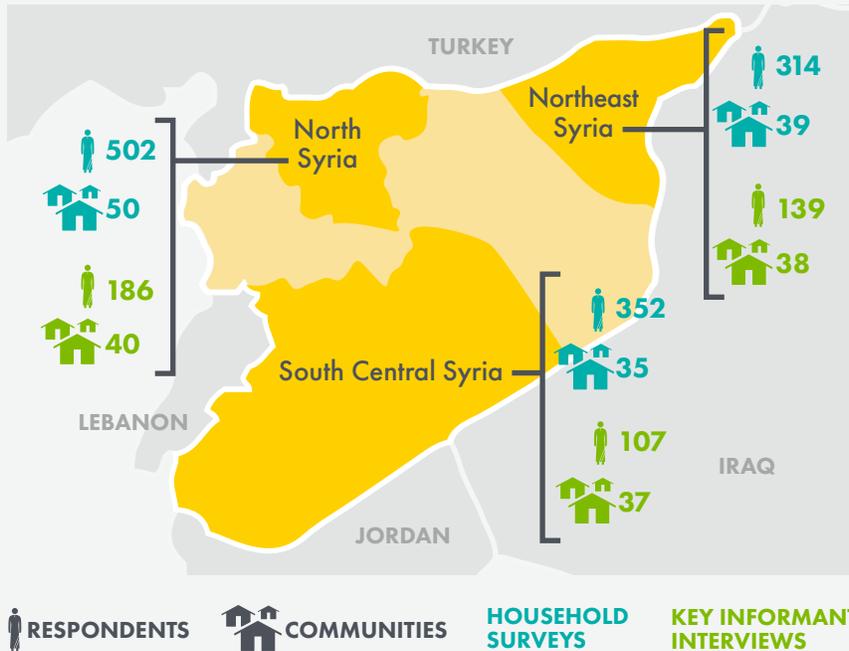
15 Mohamud and Kurtz, *What Really Matters*; Shean and Alnouri, *Rethinking Resilience*; Wilson and Krystalli, *The Financial Journeys*.

16 Marc Welsh, "Resilience and Responsibility: Governing Uncertainty in a Complex World," *The Geographical Journal* 180, no. 1 (2013): 15-26; Mohamud and Kurtz, *What Really Matters*.

## Methods

A complete description of methodology, including limitations and potential biases is included as an Annex. The research team employed quantitative and qualitative methods in three regions in Syria—referred to in this report as North Syria, South-Central Syria and Northeast Syria.<sup>17</sup>

### Study Locations and Sample Sizes



A stratified sample allowed us to include both urban and rural communities that had been exposed to varying levels of conflict in the 12 months prior to the study. Quantitative methods included surveys with members of randomly selected households (n=1168 in 124 communities) and purposively chosen community key informants (n=350 in 115 communities).<sup>18</sup> Econometric models were specified to explore statistical relationships between coping strategies, livelihood adaptation and household welfare. Qualitative methods included semi-structured

interviews with members of households and community key informants to better understand the process of livelihood adaptation. We purposively selected respondents who had started a new income-generation activity since the start of the conflict—thus limiting the qualitative sample to livelihood adapters. Interviews were conducted with male and female youth<sup>19</sup> and adults in 10 communities across the three regions (n=46), as well as male and female community key informants who work in local governance, business, humanitarian action, or in the medical or education sectors (n=36). Interviews were inductively coded and analyzed by theme. The community selection process for the study was meant to broadly represent accessible locales in North Syria, South-Central Syria (including besieged and “hard-to-reach” areas) and Northeast Syria, allowing for generalizability of findings to those regions.

It is paramount to remember that while these relationships reflect logical and likely associations given the research and qualitative data collected, the study design cannot establish direct causality. As a result, the study cannot completely rule out the possibility of reverse causality—for example, where the outcomes of interest, such as household welfare, are leading to greater adaptation.

In terms of reporting the qualitative interviews in this study, the authors have preserved within the direct quotes cited the terms that respondents used to describe the conflict and the key actors involved in it.

<sup>17</sup> To ensure confidentiality, this report does not include the names of communities where the study took place.

<sup>18</sup> The quantitative survey was administered from March 2017 to June 2017. The qualitative interviews were completed between June 2017 and August 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Mercy Corps broadly categorizes “youth” as people in the 15-24 age group. However, for the purpose of this study, we extend the age category of youth to 18-30, since we factored in that someone age 30 today would have been 23 at the start of the conflict.



## Context: A brief overview of the Syria crisis

The Syrian conflict, which began with peaceful protests in March 2011, shows limited signs of abatement. The scale of death, suffering and destruction in Syria is unprecedented for our modern time. The death toll of the conflict is primarily civilian. All parties to the conflict have flagrantly violated international humanitarian law, and hundreds of thousands of Syrians have been killed or injured. To date, 6.1 million people have been internally displaced, and over 5.4 million have fled Syria.<sup>20</sup> Despite several attempts at internationally brokered political settlements and peace agreements, as well as United Nations Security Council resolutions to protect civilians and facilitate humanitarian access, little has been effective at alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people at the time of writing. While the conflict wages on, humanitarian needs remain enormous—13.1 million people remain in need of humanitarian assistance, 5.6 million of whom are in acute need. According to the U.N., 2.9 million people are in hard-to-reach areas, 417,566 of whom are in besieged areas.<sup>21</sup> The humanitarian access necessary to meet the needs of Syrians continues to be greatly curtailed and obstructed across the whole country by all parties to the conflict. As with any conflict, ongoing military operations pose significant security risks and access constraints to the humanitarian response. Additionally, most NGOs do not have access to the entire country. In most cases, either NGOs are officially registered through the government of Syria and operating primarily in government-controlled areas, or they are operating across Syria's borders in opposition-controlled areas, through local partners. This complex operating environment means that humanitarian actors struggle to ensure aid is delivered in the most efficient and effective manner to those in need.

<sup>20</sup> "Syria Emergency," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, updated December 7, 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>.

<sup>21</sup> "Syrian Arab Republic: Overview of Hard-to-Reach and Besieged Locations (as of 19 December 2017) [EN/AR]," ReliefWeb, December 19, 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/map/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-overview-hard-reach-and-besieged-locations-19-december>.



## Findings

### Effects of the crisis on the lives and livelihoods of Syrians

This section summarizes the varied effects of violence on individuals and communities of study in Syria. These findings highlight the ways in which ongoing violence continues to shape the lives, livelihoods, relationships, vulnerabilities and coping strategies of the respondents who participated in this study. These provide essential information on the backdrop and magnitude of the crisis against which study respondents employ the coping strategies discussed in subsequent sections.

**In the year prior to the study, people inside Syria experienced an average of two conflict incidents per week—incidents severe enough to cause property destruction, injuries and death.**

Architects of the conflict have relentlessly targeted civilians through air and ground attacks, physical and sexual assault, restriction of basic necessities and use of siege tactics. Study participants confirm the continuation of the conflict, stating that conflict events occur with regular frequency in all study locations. Violent incidents—those severe enough to cause property destruction, injuries and death—have occurred twice a week on average across the region during the past year. South-Central Syria—which contains the majority of hard-to-reach and besieged areas in the country—continues to sustain the highest volume of conflict events, with an average of three violent incidents per week. Each community surveyed in South-Central Syria has seen an average of 65 civilians killed, 25 homes destroyed, and more than five community structures—such as schools, clinics, town halls and mosques—razed in the past year. This contrasts with communities in Northeast Syria, which report substantially lower rates of incidence for all conflict events. Such chronic exposure and direct experiences of violence necessarily impact individuals, households, families, social networks and communities.

**Most Syrians live with moderate to severe levels of fear and psychological distress related to the conflict.**

Among those Syrians sampled, 92% fear for their families in their daily life. Seventy percent fear for themselves, and 93% report that their families fear for the safety of the head of the household. Eighty-nine percent are worried about their future and that of their family. Seventy-nine percent fear losing their home or becoming displaced. Eighty-seven percent fear not being able to provide for their families, and a similar proportion (86%) worry about losing their source of income. Female-headed households consistently experience higher levels of fear than male-headed households.

**Internally displaced Syrians have moved 3.7 times on average. Households that are currently displaced show an elevated degree of vulnerability.**

Half of Syria’s prewar population have been forced to leave their homes, and nearly a quarter of those who fled (5.4 million) have become refugees across borders. Of those that remain, nearly 40%, or 6.1 million people, are internally displaced.<sup>22</sup> Reflecting these national trends, internal displacement is a common feature of households in all three regions, with nearly half of the sample (45%) currently displaced. Respondents’ reported rates of displacement were highest in North Syria (60%) and South-Central Syria (53%), with a smaller proportion in Northeast Syria (28%). Almost half of the sample (48%) have returned to their homes after being displaced, and more than a third (36%) have been displaced for more than one year since 2011. Displacement is thus not a one-time event but a recurrent phenomenon whereby the same household is obliged to move multiple times—a pattern that exacerbates vulnerabilities for this population along a number of dimensions.

**›** *Now even brothers cannot see each other...We do not even know who is still alive due to checkpoints and separation.*

—Male youth, North Syria, on the greatest impact of the conflict to date

Syrians who have experienced more conflict events—such as displacement, physical harm, property damage or a deterioration of security—are statistically more likely to have poorer food security, lower housing quality and a greater intention to migrate outside of Syria. Compared with nondisplaced households, displaced households have significantly higher rates of household hunger, poorer housing conditions, lower levels of psychosocial well-being and lower expenditures. Displaced households generally must leave behind immovable assets. They also have more difficulty accessing cash and face loss or erosion of social capital. Those households that face subsequent displacement

**Negative Impacts of the Syrian Conflict In Numbers**

**CONFLICT**

 The average Syrian experienced **2 incidents** of property destruction, injuries and death per week

**IN THE PAST YEAR, ON AVERAGE, COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH-CENTRAL SYRIA EXPERIENCED**

 **65** civilians killed  
 **25** homes destroyed  
 **5** community structures razed

**DISPLACEMENT**

 The average displaced Syrian has moved **3.7 times**

**PSYCHOSOCIAL**

 **92%** **FEAR** for their family, every day

 **89%** **WORRY** about their family's future

 **87%** **FEAR** not being able to provide for their family

 **79%** **FEAR** losing their home or being displaced

**LOSS OF LIVELIHOOD**

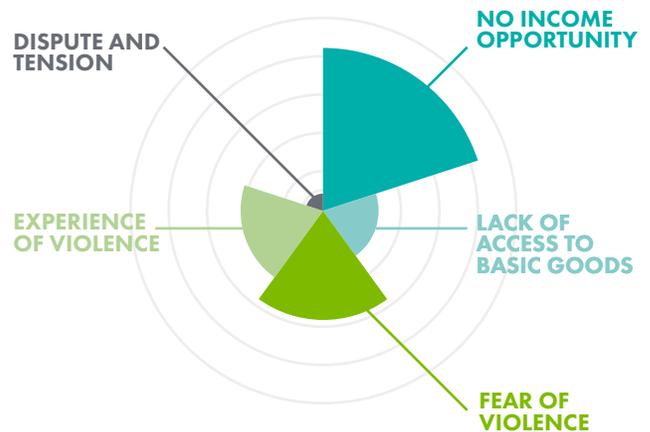
 **2 in 3** Syrian households lost one or more main source of income since the start of the conflict

<sup>22</sup> "Syria Regional Refugee Response," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed January 29, 2018, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>; "Syrian Arab Republic," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Syria Crisis: Regional Overview, accessed January 29, 2018, <http://www.unocha.org/syria>.

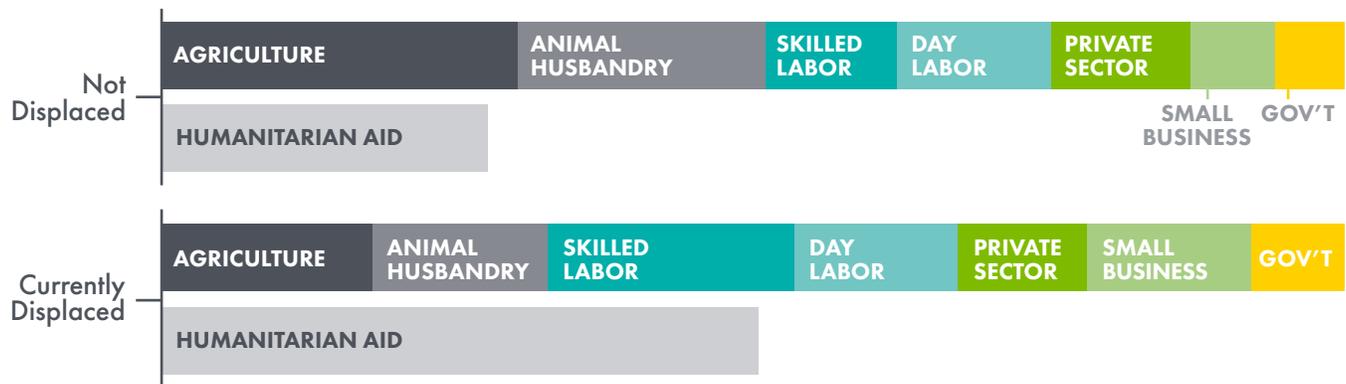
may also lose gains they have made in their previous location, including economic opportunities and social connections, which may contribute to their increased vulnerability. Displaced people in this study often described a large increase in transportation- and housing-related expenses in their new location.

Household composition has also changed. Since the start of the conflict, Syrians in all three regions of the study have been sharing homes with one additional family on average. Family separation, due to internal displacement and migration outside Syria alike, is also responsible for the changing composition of households.

### Push Factors for Moving out of a Community



### Main Income Sources by Displacement Status



**Security and income generation are both primary push and pull factors for movement within the country, as well as for intentions to migrate outside Syria.**

The experience of violence (35%) or fear of violence (23%) were the most common reasons households cited for migrating into a new community. The most frequently reported reason for migrating out of a community was the inability to earn an income in that location (32%).

Despite the large number of refugees that have left Syria to date, the majority of those who have remained prefer to stay in Syria (78%), even if they have the opportunity to migrate to a different country. About 20% of the sample said that they intend to move from their current home in the next year, but they did not specify if this would be within Syria or outside. The reasons named by those intending to move were unanimously related to security (100%) and secondarily to economic security, mirroring the main drivers for internal displacement within Syria. The reasons cited also tie into the findings above that 87% fear not being able to provide for their families and that a similar proportion (86%) worry about losing their source of income.

**Two in three Syrian households have lost one or more of their main income sources since the start of the conflict.**

Given that the targets of violence are largely civilians, it is not surprising that livelihoods have been dramatically affected. Almost two-thirds (64%) of households lost one or more of their main income sources since the start of the conflict.

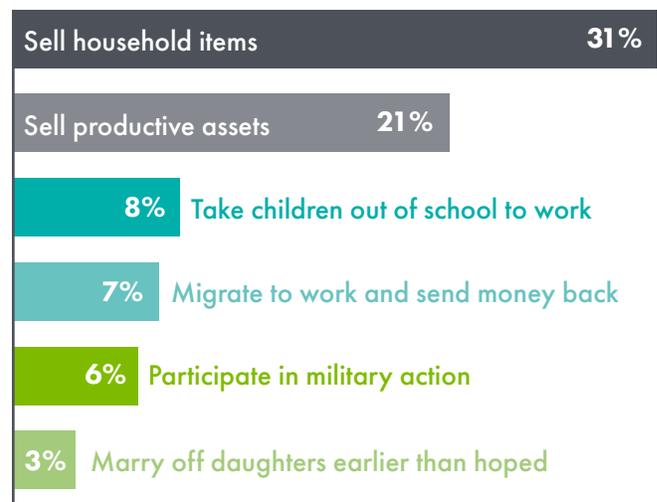
The most common income sources before 2011 included agriculture, skilled labor and government employment. Currently, income sources are similar, although there has been a decline in government employment and an increase in reliance on humanitarian aid and charity to support household needs. There are sizable differences between the income sources of displaced and nondisplaced populations. Households that are not displaced rely on agriculture and animal husbandry at double the rate of displaced populations. This steep difference between the types of livelihoods between nondisplaced and displaced households may be explained by the fact that one prerequisite for agriculture and animal husbandry is access to immovable resources such as land, water, (animal) shelters, etc.—resources that are not available to displaced households.

Displaced households rely more on humanitarian aid and charity as a source of income (i.e., to help them meet their basic household needs) than do nondisplaced households. Once again, this may be reflective of humanitarian actors' higher prioritization of aid for internally displaced households.<sup>23</sup>

**More than three-quarters of households (77%) received humanitarian support from an NGO or governance body in the past year. Yet food security remains tenuous, with nearly two in three households not having secure access to food.<sup>24</sup>**

Households in North Syria and South-Central Syria reported receiving aid at a rate higher (85%) than that of Northeast Syria (72%). Despite the large percentage of residents that receive aid, only a small minority (14%) was confident that they could depend on aid in the future. Food was the primary type of assistance (86%), followed by nonfood items (NFIs) (37%). A much smaller percentage reported that they received vouchers (10%) or cash support (6%). Despite this, food security remains tenuous for two-thirds of households (62%).

**Reported Negative Coping Strategies to Meet Food Needs**



About half (49%) of respondents described not having food in the house at least once in the past month because of a lack of resources to access food, and 22% had at least one member of their household go to bed hungry because of a lack of food. When respondents were asked about how Syrians coped with these shortfalls in access to food, the most commonly cited behaviors were selling household items, such as electronics or furniture (31%), and productive assets, such as ploughs, water pumps or livestock (21%). A smaller proportion of respondents described pulling children from school so they could work (8%), sending family members away for work (7%), engaging in military action (6%)<sup>25</sup> or marrying daughters earlier than anticipated (3%). An analysis of these negative coping strategies used by male and female heads of household finds few differences between genders.

**»** *Those who have not experienced it cannot even fathom what we went through. We were forced to eat the fodder of the animals. We had to transform it into something somewhat consumable ... although some got food poisoning. ... We did not have anything else to eat and we had to feed our children.*

—Businessman, South-Central Syria

23 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2017 *Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Plan: January-December 2017* (2017) 14. The 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan thus prioritizes the increased provision of multisectoral assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the communities hosting them.

24 The survey included the Household Hunger Scale and the Comparative (Reduced) Coping Strategies Index to measure food security.

25 This question was asked only in South-Central Syria, where staff and partners felt comfortable enough to solicit honest responses.

## What enables Syrians to adapt their livelihoods and improve their welfare?

The research examined (1) the effects of enabling factors, such as functioning markets, access to cash and capital, and social networks on household welfare, and (2) if/how these enabling factors support livelihood adaptation and, by extension, household welfare.

This research finds that *no single enabling factor* leads to improvements across all dimensions of welfare. Individual welfare is linked to *multiple* enabling factors, such as markets, access to cash and capital, social networks and so on, reminding us of the heterogeneous nature of vulnerability and the multidimensionality of relationships in a complex and rapidly changing environment. The research also finds that despite the scale and magnitude of the crisis noted above, a sizable minority of Syrians are able to adapt their livelihoods in an active conflict, which in turn leads to improved household welfare. In this section we examine the enabling factors that support household welfare for the entire population, with a specific focus on livelihood adaptation.



### Understanding the magnitude and importance of livelihood adaptation

In this study, we define “adapters” as households that report starting a new income-generation activity since the start of the conflict in 2011. To highlight why livelihood “adapters” are the centerpiece of this study, we begin by answering some of our key research questions in this and subsequent sections.

- › **Have people adapted their livelihoods?** Yes. More than one-third (34%) of the population has started a new income-generating activity *after* the start of the conflict. These adapters—although a minority of the Syrian population—still make up more than a third of the sample, suggesting that adaptation is not an aberration but rather a regularly occurring process that merits better understanding.
- › **Do livelihood adaptations support household welfare?** Yes. We find that households that started a new livelihood since 2011 have significantly better outcomes on a number of measures. Additionally, Syrians who have adapted their livelihoods rely on humanitarian aid at lower rates than

non-adapters. Given the magnitude and scale of negative effects of the conflict, this necessitates a deeper understanding of the conditions and factors that have supported households in their process of livelihood adaptation.<sup>26</sup> To date, there have been few studies conducted on this phenomenon in active conflict zones and none of this scale in Syria.

› **Were people with better welfare outcomes now simply better off prior to the conflict?**

No. While this study finds that adapters are, in fact, better off than households that did not begin a new livelihood activity since the start of the conflict, adapters were *not* better off pre-conflict compared with the rest of the population. Learning from this subgroup has crucial implications for practitioners seeking to support adaptive strategies in an active conflict setting.

**The role of pre-conflict assets and endowments:** To understand whether people with better welfare outcomes now were simply better off prior to the conflict and if/how enabling factors supported them in maintaining greater food security and other basic needs, we looked at the relationship between household welfare and education, pre-conflict expenditures, and income. We assumed that higher levels of education, expenditures and income would signal greater financial stability and being “better off” in the pre-conflict period.

**Being better off prior to the conflict, in terms of wealth and education, does not predict Syrians’ welfare seven years into the crisis.**

We find that education levels are somewhat associated with better welfare. That is, households with a higher education level have significantly better food security, in terms of household hunger, and higher psychosocial well-being scores. At the same time, as education levels increase, there is not a significant increase in expenditures, which suggests that education in itself does not lead to increased revenues or consumption. In terms of pre-conflict incomes and expenditures, we find that people with higher pre-conflict incomes and expenditures *do* have better food security and housing conditions and higher expenditures. However, in terms of magnitude, these differences are exceedingly small,<sup>27</sup> suggesting that pre-conflict assets do not make a large difference to household welfare during conflict.

During interviews, adapters noted that the more educated or specialized someone’s skill was in the past, the less likely he or she would be to adapt and change to a different field of work. Many lamented that their education or past training was in a sector different from the one in which they now work. That said, when either respondents or their family members had some familiarity or past experience with an activity (particularly involving manual labor), they cited this as an advantage. A few respondents said that the less specialized someone’s skills were, the more easily he or she could adapt in this new context.

› *Degree holders can’t really work as laborers. Employees at a school, educators, can’t do freelance laboring. Some can, others can’t. ... It’s not reasonable for someone who was a schoolteacher to sell goods like fuel on the street, or to work as a construction worker—he can’t. They were hugely affected.*

—Male key informant, North Syria

Among the adapters, although some did report sale of pre-conflict assets as a livelihood adaptation strategy, not many reported owning major assets. Asset holders sold or rented these assets when possible to finance a change to their income-generation portfolio. A businessman in South-Central Syria noted, “Some people sell the land

26 Coleen Vogel et al., “Linking Vulnerability, Adaptation, and Resilience Science to Practice: Pathways, Players, and Partnerships,” *Global Environmental Change* 17, no. 3-4 (2007): 349-364, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2007.05.002>; Hugo Slim and Andrew Bonwick, *Protection: An ALNAP Guide for Humanitarian Agencies* (Oxford: Oxfam, 2006).

27 Less than 1% for each point increase on the PPI scale, average score is 54.

even though the land is important to us and it is a disadvantage to sell it. But people sell land, and especially land that is located on the front line because they cannot access it. They sell it cheaply and start a small project or buy a car to live.” Household members who were able to hold on to land assets without sale or rental over the course of the conflict noted at the time of the interviews that the asset had depreciated to having “symbolic value” and not supporting a household’s livelihood.

Consistent with existing research on the links between pre-conflict assets, liquidity and financing of forced migration,<sup>28</sup> some respondents noted they sold assets (such as cars and furniture) during earlier stages of the conflict—at times the selling was linked to their need to finance their own displacement. Those with moveable assets seemed better able to manage economically than those with immovable assets, such as land or buildings.

This was particularly key for displaced populations, many of whom were forced to leave their immovable assets behind. Linked to the finding around multiple displacements in Syria, this lack or loss of immovable assets may also explain why displacement further exacerbates vulnerability for this subgroup of the population.

» *There are no assets to be sold—it’s not suitable to sell. What will you sell? The factory? The house was damaged. The factory was damaged and plundered. The machinery was stolen—what will you sell? The stone? Who will buy stone?*

—Adult man, North Syria

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### **More than one-third of Syrians have adapted their livelihoods during the conflict, most commonly in South-Central Syria.**

Adapters exist across the country and make up a sizable proportion of households in Northeast Syria, South-Central Syria and North Syria. As described above, across 124 communities *more than one-third of Syrian households* (34%, or n=411) have succeeded in starting a new income-generation activity since the conflict began. In terms of regional differences, it is South-Central Syria—which has the largest concentration of hard-to-reach and besieged areas in the sample—that has the highest rate of livelihood adaptation (42%), compared with 36% in North Syria and 28% in Northeast Syria, but these differences are not statistically significant.

We find that households that started a new livelihood since 2011 have significantly better food security in terms of household hunger (30% better) than do non-adapters. They also have higher expenditures on food (13%) and daily needs (18%) as well as higher total monthly expenditures (12%). When we look at human capital expenditures such as education and livelihoods, we find that adapters spend more on business and education than do the rest of the sample, and they also spend less on health, although these differences are not statistically significant. Adapters are 21% less likely to be in the lowest spending quintile of the sample (i.e., they are less likely to be in the poorest quintile of the study sample).

In terms of conflict experiences, households that have adapted their livelihoods are displaced *at rates similar* to those of the rest of the sample, with nearly half of livelihood adapters currently displaced (48%). Those who have started a new income-generation activity have experienced sizably lower rates of conflict-related property destruction or personal harm in the past year than non-adapters (average number of incidents = 1 for new income starters, and 5 for non-adapters).

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28 Wilson and Krystalli, *The Financial Journeys*.

**Adapters rely on income sources that differ from those that non-adapters rely on; adapters’ reliance on humanitarian aid is significantly lower than that of non-adapters**

Households that have started a new livelihood activity rely on income sources that are different from those of the rest of the sample. Livelihood adapters rely more on small business, trade, skilled labor and the private sector, while those who have not adapted rely more on agriculture and animal husbandry. Additionally, among Syrians who have adapted their livelihoods, the rate of reliance on humanitarian aid as an income source is significantly lower than that of non-adapters.<sup>29</sup>

**Main Income Sources by Livelihood Adaptation Status**



It is notable here that before the conflict, agriculture and livestock were both heavily reliant on government-provided subsidies and, as a result, have been affected by the crisis. There are several constraints in markets that support these livelihoods, including the high cost of inputs and restrictions on supply of key inputs (seed, tools, feed, fodder) as well as fuel. This has led to a systemic erosion of these livelihoods and distress sales of productive assets, such as livestock, as a coping strategy to meet household food needs.

At the same time, the crisis created or expanded some economic sectors. Demand for certain professions is higher than it was before the conflict. For example, people are increasingly relying on cell phones for news (and cell phone applications, such as WhatsApp, as sources of communication [see also “Social networks”]), and employment at cell phone repair shops was cited as a stable occupation and as a sector that potentially grew during the conflict. Relatedly, the lack of stable electricity (particularly in North Syria and South-Central Syria) reportedly gave rise to employment at businesses focused on alternative energy resources. These businesses include generator repair shops, kerosene lamp repair shops, battery shops and factories, and solar panel installation and repair operations. Furthermore, across all regions, people previously employed in retail face challenges, as do craftspeople—particularly those involved in furniture shops, carpentry and tailoring—as these fields are considered a luxury and, since the crisis, are no longer in demand. Finally, certain professions are reported to be in even higher demand during the conflict than they had been before, in part because of the outmigration of skilled professionals. These include translators, educators and medical personnel at all levels (ranging from doctors to nurses and paramedics). Concerns around brain drain, particularly due to the outmigration of doctors, are frequently mentioned in South-Central Syria. There are regional differences in the types of employment and income-generation opportunities available inside Syria. The primary reported employment changes are as follows:

<sup>29</sup> Adapters are 12% less likely than non-adapters to report aid as an income source.

## In North Syria

- › Syrians are moving away from factory work, large industry, agriculture and salary-based public-sector positions and toward jobs in the humanitarian sector, small business, small-scale service provision (e.g., electricians, carpenters) and teaching.
- › Several community key informants said that humanitarian organizations have become the largest local employer, particularly for educated people.
- › Several respondents who were university students said they were recruited to work in education or health sectors, even if it was not their primary field of study.

## In Northeast Syria

- › *Burners*<sup>30</sup> have become a source of employment during the conflict because of the closure of fuel pipelines near Homs, resulting in the collection of crude oil from the ground in this region.
- › Jobs with the Kurdish self-administration remain a key strategy for income generation among Northeast Syrians.

## In South-Central Syria:

- › The siege was cited as a key motivator of livelihood change, in part because it affected service provision (electricity, water) and the availability of raw materials for factories, many of which had to close when they could no longer restock supplies.
- › There is a reported increase in involvement with the civil defense.
- › People also reported having to abandon or curtail agriculture-related activities due to difficulty in accessing land and agricultural resources (seeds, fertilizers, etc.), as well as no longer owning land.

## Understanding the role of enabling factors in household welfare and livelihood adaptation

In this section, we focus on the enabling factors that support household welfare for the entire sample of this study, as well as the ways in which adapters interact with these enabling factors to adapt their livelihoods. Key factors examined include (a) the role of markets; (b) access to cash and capital in the form of financial services and behavior; (c) the role of social capital, social networks, and access to information and technology; and (d) the role of women and youth income earners.

### Enabling Factors for Livelihood Adaptation



30 Interview respondents in Northeast Syria referred to this occupation as *burners*. Mercy Corps' Syria field experts explained that this term refers to the occupation/process through which crude oil from the ground is collected in tanks and heated (burning/burners). As the oil is heated, different types of gases are released at different temperatures, and these are collected and used both locally and in all Kurdish-controlled areas.

## Summary of Factors that Support Household Welfare

Factors	Category of Household Welfare			
	Food Security	Housing	Expenditures (Income)	Psychosocial Wellbeing
Functioning markets		●	●	●
Stable food prices	●			●
Access to loans and remittances	●		●	●
More income earners	●	●	●	
Youth income earners	●		●	
Strong social connections	●		●	
Access to news and technology	●	●	●	

### The role of markets



Access to functioning markets is one of the strongest predictors of better household welfare and livelihood adaptation in Syria. Stability of bread prices, proximity to markets, and greater market activity are all positively linked to household food security, psychosocial well-being, and housing conditions.

### Markets are largely functioning and accessible in even the most conflict-affected communities in Syria.

On average across all communities surveyed, the study found that marketplaces<sup>31</sup> were functioning (key food, fuel and other livelihood inputs are available) and located within one kilometer of most households. Essential food items were reportedly available in the month prior to data collection, including rice, wheat, bread and oil (more than 86% of the time). Agricultural tools were the least available items in markets (54%), whereas other livelihood items such as agricultural and livestock inputs and housing and construction materials were more available (73% to 75%). Fuel was available in 88% of communities, and clothing and footwear was available in 86%.

Several aspects of markets were linked to better welfare, highlighting the importance of markets during active conflict. In areas where bread prices were more stable, Syrians showed significantly higher levels of psychosocial well-being, and household hunger was 30% lower.<sup>32</sup> Stability of fuel prices also led to better psychosocial outcomes. People who lived closer to marketplaces spent 14% more on food on average and 8% more on their total monthly expenses.

31 In this study, “market” or “marketplace” (used interchangeably) refers to the physical location where economic activity, such as buying and selling, occurs. Mercy Corps describes marketplaces as follows: “People live, work, eat and shop within marketplaces that they travel to, work and shop in. Marketplaces exist within a web of economic systems that support and regulate businesses and services.”

32 Bread prices were measured, as bread is considered the main staple in Syria, and the Syrian government subsidized bread prior to the conflict.

## **Where markets are robust, evidenced by a net increase in the number and variety of businesses, Syrians are more likely to have higher expenditures; psychosocial well-being is also better.**

To understand different aspects of market functionality, we measured the number of specific operational businesses prior to the conflict and at the time of data collection through respondent recall. Across all communities, there was a net increase in the number of food shops (+1.89) and financial service providers<sup>33</sup> (+1). There was a small increase in agricultural input shops (+<1), and a slight decrease in the number of bakeries, clothing shops, household equipment shops and livestock input shops. There is evidence that the magnitude of market changes is more dramatic in specific communities where market functionality is strongly linked to internal displacement and population movement patterns signaling markets' responsiveness to an increase or decrease in demand. For example, smaller communities that received a large influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have witnessed a substantial increase in shops. One community in North Syria that received a large influx of IDPs saw an increase of 16 food stores and more than seven shops that provide skilled labor services (such as plumbing, electricity repair and tailoring).

In communities with more market robustness—where there was a net increase in various shops and businesses since the start of the conflict—households are significantly more likely to have higher-quality housing. They are also more likely to have higher daily and monthly expenditures and to spend more on human capital, which includes health, education or business-related expenses. Psychosocial well-being is also better in these locations.

## **Livelihood adaptation is more common among people who live closer to marketplaces and spend less to access them.**

Market accessibility is also an important factor for livelihood adaptation. Compared with non-adapters, households that started a new income-generation activity since the start of the conflict are more likely to live closer to marketplaces and spend less on fuel and transportation to access them. While many respondents said that marketplaces were physically located in their community, not everyone goes to the marketplace. In Northeast Syria in particular, young men avoid marketplaces because they are known locations for the authorities to forcibly conscript them. In communities with security risks (bombing/shelling/kidnapping/theft), female youth and adult women are less likely than males to go to the market. In areas that are more conservative (historically, and since 2011), females are also less likely to access the marketplace. In contrast, in areas where females are accessing markets (for both male- and female-headed households), food security is significantly lower, as measured by negative coping strategies. It is likely that women's access to markets in certain areas is linked to the inability of a male in the household to do so—notably—the lack of, or absence of men; men's fear of conscription; disabilities; security-related factors such as checkpoints, detention, etc.; and the loss of a male breadwinner. These factors would signal that these women and/or female-headed households are more vulnerable to start with and have lower levels of welfare. (See also *"The role of gender and age in income generation."*)

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33 The survey defined financial service providers to include both formal providers and informal providers such as hawala (informal money transfer agents), microfinance institutions, and Islamic and non-Islamic banks.

## Prices of goods have skyrocketed, up to tenfold over pre-conflict prices, alongside decreases of as much as one-third in Syrians' spending power.

Supply, demand and availability of goods have shifted as a direct result of the conflict. In North and Northeast Syria, respondents report that while the same types of goods are available as before, the quantity and quality have decreased. In terms of supply, there has been a major shift from Syrian-made products to imports. In North and Northeast Syria, most imports are reportedly from Turkey, Iraq and farther afield (China and Ukraine). The switch to imports is a direct result of pricing and availability. Respondents in North and Northeast Syria say that the Syrian government limits the export of products from areas under its control and attaches prohibitive taxes to them. In North and Northeast Syria, it is easier to procure goods from Turkey than from Aleppo because of transportation costs, including "taxes" levied at checkpoints, and risk of seizure. Vendors now rely more on buying their goods through the internet or social media outlets than they do on going directly to source markets within Syria to procure them. In both Northeast and South-Central Syria, vendors said that with distance buying, products are easily misrepresented and quality is compromised. Local production of Syrian-made goods has essentially ceased in North and Northeast Syria because of the conflict. The reasons reported for this cessation include a halt in manufacturing due to bombings and related damage, flight of capital, lack of labor, and reports that agriculture has slowed because of high input prices and insecurity. The quality of imports is considered very low. While consumers prefer higher-quality Syrian-made products, their lack of purchasing power forces them to procure lower-quality imports.

**>** *People are affected the most by the roads here. ... Businessmen used to be able to go to Aleppo and buy merchandise and return—even the merchandise was reasonably priced. ... Now, however, the road is brokered. ... Goods pass through four or five people before reaching their destination. Each one of these people benefits from the transportation.*

—Businessman, Northeast Syria

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In all areas, prices of goods have skyrocketed and increases over pre-conflict prices are regularly reported to be tenfold. High transport expenses related to fuel availability and cost and any "taxes" paid at checkpoints result in price increases, all of which are passed on to the consumer. Additionally, because of the general devaluation and exchange rate fluctuation of the Syrian pound (SYP),<sup>34</sup> trade is primarily conducted in USD. This has led to a huge decrease in the spending power of Syrian households that earn in SYP. For example, salaried respondents in Northeast Syria said that their spending capacity is one-third of what it was prior to the conflict, even though they work in the same positions for the same number of hours. Many of these households have added an income-generation activity on top of their full-time civil service job to make up the difference.

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34 1 USD = 474 SYP. Average exchange rates as of November 2017. "Syria," REACH Resource Centre, 27 November 2014, accessed January 1, 2018, <http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/countries/syria>.

## Access to cash and capital—the role of loans and remittances



Syrian households that are able to borrow money and receive remittances have significantly better food security and are more likely to have started a new income generation activity since the start of the conflict.

### The use of formal financial services has shrunk since the start of the conflict; Syrians rely more on informal providers for remittances and loans.

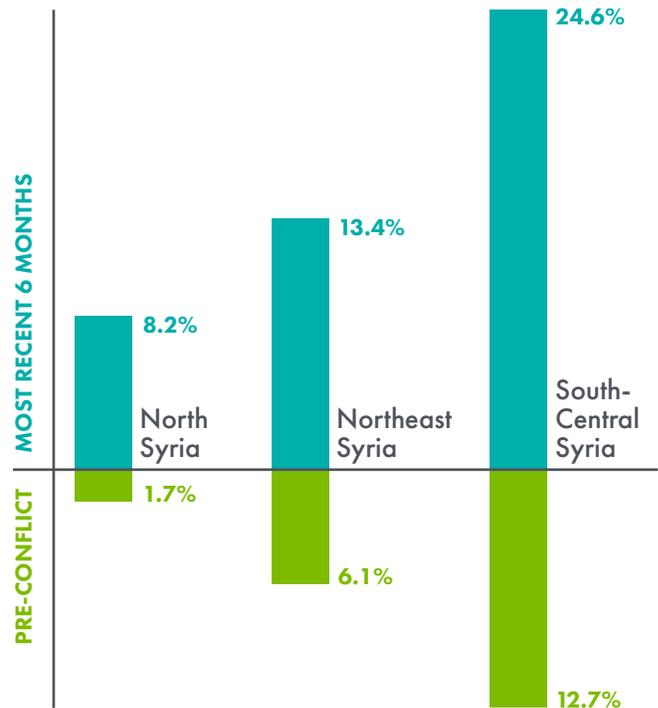
Syria's financial sector has contracted since the start of the conflict.<sup>35</sup> The latest formal financial inclusion figures (2013) found that 13% of adults had borrowed from a financial institution and 5% had saved with a financial institution<sup>36</sup> (such institutions included microfinance institutions, private banks and public banks). Additionally, a large part of the population relied on informal cooperatives, community savings groups and moneylenders.<sup>37</sup> Consistent with this existing data, the study finds that the use of varied financial services has shrunk and reliance on pre-conflict savings vehicles and loan providers has decreased since 2011. The largest decreases are in the formal banking sector for both saving and borrowing as well as in savings cooperatives. Eighty-seven percent of communities report relying on hawalas to receive remittances.<sup>38</sup>

The reported rate of receiving remittances has increased substantially from pre-conflict levels but remains relatively low. Across the sample, 17% of respondents reported receiving remittances in the past six months, compared with 6% in the pre-conflict period. There are some regional variations, however. Twenty-five percent of respondents in South-Central Syria reported receiving remittances, as opposed to 13% in the period prior to the conflict. Rates of remittances were lower in the other two regions, with 13% of the sample receiving remittances in Northeast Syria (6% prior to the conflict), and 8% in North Syria (2% prior to the conflict).

### Households that report receiving remittances in the past six months have significantly better food security.

In terms of the relationship between remittances and welfare, households that reported having received remittances in the past six months had significantly better food security in terms of fewer negative coping strategies (23%) and

Rates of Remittances Pre and Post Conflict, by Region



35 Joude Badra, "The Syrian Financial Sector," Carnegie Middle East Centre, 7 January 2015, accessed January 26, 2018, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/01/07/syrian-financial-sector-pub-57651>. Three years of conflict and a weakening economy have put a halt to the sector's growth story and have had a large impact on banking operations throughout the country.

36 World Bank, *The Little Data Book on Financial Development 2015/2016* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2015), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/22553/9781464805547.pdf>.

37 Arab Credit Reporting Initiative, *Green Book: An Assessment of the Status of the National Credit Reporting System in Syria*, May 2010, <http://www.amf.org.ae/sites/default/files/Files/ACRI%20-%20Green%20Book%20-%20Syria%20Final%20-%20Edited.pdf>. In 2008, informal moneylenders provided 73% of all credit to lower-income Syrians.

38 The "hawala" refers to an informal system that can facilitate money transfers. For more on its use by conflict-affected populations, including Syrians, see Wilson and Krystalli, *The Financial Journeys*.

lower levels of household hunger (27%) than households that did not receive remittances. Households that receive remittances are also more likely to have higher expenditures on food (13%) and daily needs (18%) and higher total monthly household expenditures (12%). In addition, households that receive remittances have increased levels of social connectivity with people outside of their community. It is likely that this greater connectivity may be driving the ability of these households to receive remittances.

**›** *Capital, first and foremost. People with capital are able to start a small business and to cope with and adapt to the situation better. Things aren't as they used to be. For example, people with savings or gold ... or friends outside the country who send remittances help these people renew their living in a much safer location.*

—Key informant, North Syria, on factors that affect adaptation during conflict

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### **Livelihood adaptation is significantly more likely among households that have recently received remittances.**

Households that adapted their livelihoods were significantly more likely than non-adapters to have received remittances in the past six months. Both groups, however, received remittances at similar frequencies (between one and six times a year).<sup>39</sup> Livelihood adapters and non-adapters reported spending the bulk of their remittances on food and transportation. However, adapters reported spending remittances on food at rates higher than those of non-adapters, who reported spending most of their remittances on transportation. Remittances from outside Syria were framed as helping both as startup capital to (re)open a small business and as a semi-reliable lifeline that could supplement other smaller livelihood sources within Syria. Respondents stated that this ability to send remittances back to Syria is a key motivation for family members to out-migrate—even if it came at the cost of family separation.

Notably, however, key informants reported remittances as a component of livelihood portfolios more frequently than household members themselves reported them. During one-on-one interviews, most respondents reported not having received remittances at all. Those who did receive remittances from Europe or the Gulf reported them to be irregular and a very small component of livelihood portfolios, particularly when the family member who has out-migrated has many dependents to support inside and outside Syria.

### **Households that were able to borrow money in the past six months had better food security; friends and social networks were the primary source of loans.**

In terms of the connection between financial behavior and welfare, people who live in communities with access to credit have better food security and significantly lower household hunger, and they engage less in negative coping strategies. As noted earlier, this study found that across all communities there was a net increase in the number of financial service providers<sup>40</sup> (+1). Households that were able to borrow money in the past six months had better food security, both in terms of lower household hunger and fewer negative coping strategies. Households that had savings and were physically unable to access them in the past six months had lower psychosocial well-being scores (5% lower) than those that were able to access their savings or that did not need to rely on their savings.<sup>41</sup>

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39 Most non-adapters and adapters who reported having received remittances received them between one and six times per year (56% of non-adapters, 57% of adapters).

Between a quarter and a third of each group reported receiving remittances less than once a year (29% of non-adapters and 28% of adapters).

40 The survey defined financial service providers to include a range of formal and informal mechanisms such as hawala, microfinance institutions, and Islamic and non-Islamic financial institutions.

41 The survey asked respondents if they had set money or gold aside for emergencies in the past six months (92% said they had not). However, we do not know what percentage of the sample had pre-conflict savings.

Syrians in the sample report that they are borrowing, or are attempting to borrow without success. Households that were able to obtain loans scored 35% better on the Household Hunger Scale<sup>42</sup> and 20% better on the negative coping measure. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the sample reported that they had borrowed money in the past six months. The most frequent sources of loans were family, friends or someone in the neighborhood (63%), one's employer (11%), or a local moneylender (10%). However, nearly one-third (29%) who attempted to borrow money were unable to. Despite being able to locate a provider,<sup>43</sup> borrowers often found that the lender lacked sufficient liquidity to provide loans (40%). The second most cited reason for being unable to borrow was the lender's refusal to provide credit (30%). There do not appear to be sizable differences by region in terms of borrowing options.

Respondent interviews shed more light on the sources of loans as well as the primary reasons to seek loans. Loans were reported to be primarily informal, through family or social networks. Respondents also stated that formal mechanisms to borrow from private or public banks were *not* an option as banks currently operated only in areas under government control. As a male key informant reported in North Syria, *"Banks closed down. They didn't close down—they are still operational in regime-held areas. But in our areas, there are no banks in my area. ... No one can go up to a bank and ask for a loan."* Notably, even before 2011, the reach and use of formal banking services within Syria was extremely sparse.<sup>44</sup> Several microfinance institutions, such as the First Microfinance Institution of Syria, continue to operate inside Syria, though after 2011 these are largely restricted to government-controlled areas.<sup>45</sup>

### **Businesses in Syria continue to provide loans for livelihoods, although with many constraints.**

In each region, an intentional subsample of our key informants was made up of businesspeople who provide loans or invest in various businesses. These respondents noted that the primary reason people requested credit was to access capital to start or restart a livelihood activity. Businesspeople in our sample provided financing for small shops, agriculture or animal husbandry, which they viewed as more secure economic sectors to invest in. Businesses that rely heavily on fuel and machinery are deemed less stable because of the inability to procure replacement parts for machines, the high cost of fuel, and fuel shortages (particularly in South-Central Syria).

Businesses reported that they continue to provide loans toward livelihoods and income-generating activities. Key shifts in the way they lend post-2011 include a reduction in the amount of money they lend, and changes regarding whom they are willing to lend to and terms of repayment. In all three regions, investors said that they now provide loans only to people they know well who have a proven track record of repayment or a positive reputation, hold assets and have business experience. Trust was regularly mentioned as the most important determinant in deciding whether to provide someone with a loan, a commodity that has become increasingly important since the start of the conflict.

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42 The Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance Project (FANTA) defines the Household Hunger Scale (HHS) as a simple indicator to measure household hunger in food-insecure areas. The HHS is different from other household food insecurity indicators in that it has been specifically developed and validated for cross-cultural use. "Household Hunger Scale (HHS): Indicator Definition and Measurement Guide," Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project (FANTA), accessed January 31, 2018, <https://www.fan-taproject.org/monitoring-and-evaluation/household-hunger-scale-hhs>.

43 The survey defined "providers" or "lenders" as family, friends and neighbors as well as informal and formal private moneylenders, and possible loan sources as local money-lenders, friends and family, shopkeepers, formal banks, Islamic banks, hawala and "other."

44 Badra, "The Syrian Financial Sector," As of 2010, Syria had a large underbanked population with a population-per-branch ratio of 41,600-to-1.

45 The First Microfinance Institution of Syria is a commercially registered private joint stock company owned by the Aga Khan Agency for Microfinance (70%); international investors; the International Finance Corporation (IFC), European Investment Bank (EIB) and Kreditanstalt Für Wiederaufbau (KfW: The German Development Bank); and several Syrian individual investors. "Syria," Mix Market, accessed January 2018, <https://www.themix.org/mixmarket/countries-regions/syria>.

Some investors also mentioned a formalization of the process vis-à-vis a requirement for a guarantor or a contract—which had not been relied on previously, when transactions were largely based on trust. These shifts in informal lending practices are meant to provide the investor with a buffer against potential defaults, which have increased since the start of the conflict. Defaults were described as a function of several conflict-related factors, including volatile exchange rates and currency inflation, problems with transport of goods for sale, inability to procure necessary inputs, destruction related to bombing, and inaccessibility due to battles and front lines. There is also a reported increase in the cost of funds. Before 2011, only 4% of formal lending was through formal Islamic banks,<sup>46</sup> however, it was common for informal lenders to adhere to Sharia-compliant principles. Businesspeople noted an increase of informal lenders charging interest on loans than following the pre-conflict profit-sharing model.

› *Nowadays, most of the people who ask for money want to open a new business. For example, if someone wanted to open a diesel trade, I would give him 1 million Syrian liras as capital, which he should pay me back once he started selling. Another person would be the one who opens a trading store of the livelihood products, and the same thing applies. I would lend out money for businesses that supply something with high demand. I would only lend it if I can guarantee it back or plus a bit more.*

—Businessman, South-Central Syria

## Social networks—the role of social capital, and access to information and technology

 **Households that have more robust interactions with people outside their communities have significantly better food security, higher expenditures and better housing conditions.**

Mercy Corps defines social capital as the networks and resources available to people through their relationships with others.<sup>47</sup> These relationships were found to be critical for successful coping and livelihood adaptations of Syrians during the conflict—particularly in besieged areas.

### Deteriorating security prompts a higher reliance on social capital.

The study finds that Syrians regularly engage with various dimensions of their social networks. In the month prior to data collection, more than half (57%) attended social functions, such as weddings and funerals, with members of another community or religion. More than half of the sample (53%) also reported interacting with people outside their community on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. However, economic connections, such as trade or borrowing/lending money with those outside the community, were sizably less frequent (15%). In terms of recent help-seeking, respondents most often relied on assistance from their own extended families (35%). Help-seeking from neighbors (25%) and those outside the extended family (21%) was similarly common. As security deteriorates, the likelihood of interacting with others socially and economically significantly increases—signalling a reliance on social capital during conflict.

### Households that interact with people outside their communities have significantly better welfare.

In terms of the relationship between social capital and welfare, households that interact with people outside their communities at least once a week have significantly better food security in terms of household hunger (10%). They also have saved and borrowed more in the past six months and have higher levels of expenditure on food (6%) and daily needs (8%) and higher total monthly expenses (7%). They have significantly better housing conditions and are less likely to share their home with additional families. In addition, households that have more social

<sup>46</sup> Arab Credit Reporting Initiative, Green Book. Islamic banks constituted only 4% of the total assets of the banking sector in 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Gurung and Shean, *Social Capital and Good Governance*.

interactions (such as attending weddings or funerals) outside the community are more likely to have borrowed money in the past six months. They also have higher expenditures in terms of food (23%) and daily needs (20%) and higher total monthly expenses (19%). At the same time, people who rely on help from neighbors, people in their own tribe, extended family or those outside their extended family have significantly worse food security. This finding is likely illuminating a proportional relationship between economic distress and seeking help—the more economic distress a household faces, the more it reaches out for help.

### **Some communities, particularly in besieged areas, report an increase in social cohesion as a result of the conflict.**

Some respondents noted that communities have become closer during the conflict. In the words of a respondent in North Syria, “*There is so much more love between us.*” In practice, this cohesion has involved regular systems of checking in on family, friends and neighbors (including newly arrived IDPs) and, when possible, sharing food and supplies with each other, offering shelter to neighbors, lending money, and helping to hire friends and neighbors. Respondents in besieged areas consistently cited increased social cohesion and solidarity since the start of the conflict (See also “*Spotlight: Living under siege in Syria*”).

These changes have also led to strengthened bonds within families. This was particularly evident in responses that related to where people seek and find support, as well as whom they admire, which overwhelmingly referred to either elder family members (fathers and mothers), family members coping alone against hardship (e.g., separated mothers), or family members offering remittances and other forms of livelihood support (e.g., siblings in other countries). At the same time, respondents noted that one of their biggest sources of regret is not being able to help their families during this time, which was manifested in an inability to offer children financial support, or shame about having to ask married offspring for financial support.

### **Displacement has fractured important social ties and support for IDPs.**

There was a large variation in the strengthening of family bonds. As one woman respondent in North Syria illustrated: “*The only thing that has changed is the increase in bonding. Cohesion, compassion, empathy ... they all increased after 2011. Throughout the conflict, we never abandoned each other, we were a single unit, we even managed to become an ideal family. ... Meanwhile, other families completely disintegrated.*” Variation is partly attributed to displacement, which fractured communities’ social bonds. An adult man displaced to South-Central Syria stated the following about the relationship between displacement and the strength of social capital and networks:

**›** *The issue of displacement also affected me so much. When you are displaced from one area to another you lose value. The smallest man in the area you just moved to ... can insult you. ... “Leave the house.” “Go out!” They don’t appreciate your social situation or your educational situation—or whatever your situation was before the revolution. I was a respected man before the revolution. I’ve been through so many embarrassing situations after becoming displaced. Leaving my home and moving to another area affected me deeply. No one knows who I am—anyone can insult me, regardless of their own situation.*

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Given the importance of social capital in coping and household welfare, this fracturing and/or loss of social bonds in displaced populations may also explain their increased vulnerability. Other factors said to affect social capital include family separation, insecurity (which created fear of movement and of gatherings), and economic restrictions on social time, both in terms of the activities and in terms of the lack of time for socializing due to increased livelihood-generating responsibilities. According to one respondent, this was particularly noticeable during Ramadan, when people were unable to have the big celebrations, with food and community gatherings, that they did prior to the conflict.

## **Prolonged economic hardships have frayed reciprocity in communities.**

Crucially, not everyone agrees that social relations have improved and social networks have strengthened. In some cases, respondents reported that while previously the willingness to help those in need (be it sharing food or other resources) was higher, now, due to the prolonged economic hardship, households are forced to look out for their own survival. Other respondents reported increased envy and social distancing, as well as more opportunism and a reframing of relationships that is based on whether one can benefit from the other. This was heard more often in Northeast Syria than in other areas. Others described divisions occurring in their home communities over their allegiances to the Syrian government or the opposition. Respondents—particularly women and girls—also lamented that while they are still committed to helping friends and neighbors and volunteering, they have been less able to do so during the conflict because of increased household responsibilities and/or new commitments to income-generating activities.

## **Households with more access to news and technology have better food security and housing conditions, as well as higher expenditures (proxy for income).**

Technology plays a key role in maintaining social networks and influencing household welfare. Sixty percent of respondents reported that they use mobile phones as a source of communication at least a few times a week, and nearly half (49%) use the internet. A sizable proportion of Syrians do not use or have access to the internet (43%) or mobile phones (30%), highlighting an interesting split in the population between those who have regular access and those who have none. In terms of information sources, Syrians reported that they most often rely on television (63%), followed by social media (33%), at least several times per week. Twelve percent rely on radio, 6% rely on the internet and 1% rely on newspapers.

Households with more access to news and technology have better food security in terms of household hunger and fewer negative coping strategies, on average save significantly more and spend more on food, daily essentials and total monthly expenses. They also have better housing conditions.<sup>48</sup>

## **Social capital is critical to livelihood adaptation—adapters found information about economic opportunities in person or via social media applications such as WhatsApp.**

To find and exchange information about potential economic opportunities, adapters actively sought out their social networks in person or through social media applications. Livelihood adapters are 20% more likely than the rest of the population to use mobile phones. Conversations with family and friend networks were essential in securing new income-generating activities. These conversations included (a) friends recommending a type of work or particular position to respondents; (b) friends and family providing moral support and encouraging young men to work because their families need them to; (c) friends and family encouraging outmigration, particularly for male heads of household, when livelihoods are insecure; (d) friends and family recommending people for jobs or, in rare instances, hiring them themselves; and (e) friends and family lending and borrowing money among themselves, as discussed elsewhere. Importantly, these consultations with social networks took place not only in person but also over social media. Respondents across the regions noted the importance of WhatsApp and other social networks for social connectedness and for exchanging information about potential work opportunities.

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48 Some of these relationships may be capturing the possibility that people with more access to technology and information are generally better off. Our estimates account for this by adjusting for pre-conflict PPI scores, which decreases the likelihood that we are simply observing a difference in initial endowments. However, there still may be dimensions of prior wealth and well-being not captured by the PPI that may be driving this association.

## SPOTLIGHT: LIVING UNDER SIEGE IN SYRIA

Besieged areas embody some of the grimmest aspects of the Syrian conflict. Without the ability to move, Syrians in besieged areas cannot easily escape aerial bombardments, ground offensives and chemical attacks that claim human life and destroy homes, infrastructure and public space. But it is not just the inability of civilians to leave besieged areas in search of security that is problematic; it is equally—if not more—dire that they are sealed off from the outside world. Lifesaving medicines, agricultural and livestock inputs, and other basic supplies are blocked from entry, fundamentally and intentionally disrupting lives and livelihoods of those under siege. Humanitarian assistance rarely reaches the 400,000-540,000 civilians that live under siege in 11 communities in Syria.<sup>49</sup>

Interviews were conducted with a variety of inhabitants of two besieged communities in South-Central Syria. Communities studied were predominantly agricultural and livestock-production areas before the conflict. Respondents report that because of the besiegement, necessary inputs have been prevented from entering the area. Fuel and gasoline are banned, as are seeds, compost, fertilizer and fodder. Generator and engine parts are also prohibited, essentially closing those sectors of livelihood generation most suited to the area. But livelihood inputs are not the only things banned—so are basic needs: grains for flour or bread, drinking water, medicine, and fuel for heating and cooking. Electricity is limited to solar power, making the refrigeration of food and medicine impossible. As one businessman said, *“The prices [for distress sales] have reached an all-time low; the items that once cost 1 million Syrian pounds are currently sold at SYP 100,000. People need that money to buy food. Some even sold their homes in exchange for two barrels of gasoline. Others sold their car for a couple of hundred pounds of wheat. It is difficult to imagine.”*

Distress is high, but also present is the capacity to creatively adapt to a nearly impossible situation, whether related to survival, protection or livelihood.

As in other parts of Syria, people in these besieged communities have dealt with shortages of food by reducing food intake or engaging in distress sales of assets to buy food and fuel. They have also learned how to make fuel from plastics and created new electrical devices that run on 12 volts of electricity instead of 220. Vendors have shifted the way they sell products to match the low purchasing power of residents. Pharmacies sell medication by the pill rather than the box; bakers will split packages of bread to sell by the slice.

Unsurprisingly, siege areas have been hit by severe inflation and price fluctuation. Prices are a consequence of a complex formula dependent on a variety of variables such as the tightness of the siege, the number of roads closures, the access to tunnels and the number of checkpoints—as well as who controls them on any given day. The devaluation of the SYP and limited supplies create problems for all of Syria, but besieged areas struggle with a further dimension: the fact that prices outside are generally one-third of those inside. Nonetheless, residents understand the minute workings of prices, supply, demand and exchange rates and adjust their behavior accordingly.

*People here have adapted to the circumstances of the siege—and any other siege. Creativity is born out of necessity. Each person takes advantage of their skills and qualifications to come up with a source of living.*

—Adult male, South-Central Syria

49 Estimates of populations under siege vary. See the following sources: “Syria,” Humanitarian Response, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/syria>; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (OCHA), “Syria: Humanitarian Aid Reaches 40,000 People in Besieged Eastern Ghouta,” OCHA, October 31, 2017, accessed November 1, 2017, <https://www.unocha.org/story/syria-humanitarian-aid-reaches-40000-people-besieged-eastern-ghouta>.

## SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED

While black markets exist across the country, a shadow market has developed that is specific to besieged communities. Residents describe the presence of “merchants of war,” the few vendors that have been approved by the Syrian government to bring goods across siege lines. These vendors have become exceedingly wealthy through various forms of exploitation. They place additional taxes on all goods that pass into the community, and they have the power and resources to take advantage of residents who must engage in distress sales. These vendors are also referred to as “monopolizers” because they manipulate markets by stockpiling the supply of needed goods to artificially increase prices. As one businessman stated, “The only people that benefit from this [situation] are the merchants and the regime. The locals are struggling. The merchants of war bought cows from the farmers for as little as SYP 100,000 instead of 2 million Syrian pounds. But the farmers had no other options than to sell their cows before they died.”

Despite these hardships, interviews in besieged areas illuminated dimensions of adaptation that were not seen in other regions. Innovation, persistence and creativity were often described as the means of ensuring survival in besieged areas. But equally so are solidarity and social cohesion. The shared experience of being under siege—and the mutual help that a chronic crisis engenders—was consistently named as a source of strength that buffered some of the most brutal aspects of the siege.

What encourages you to stay strong and what encourages self-preservation is mostly friends.

—Adult male, South-Central Syria

People have shown their true colors. ... As a result of bombings, you are forced to enter homes—homes of people you could’ve been fighting with a year earlier—but this person has a basement. He opens his house to you. ... Imagine that you are entering the house of a person you haven’t talked to in a year. ... When you enter his house, you find 20-30, even 40, people in his basement, which is equal to 10-12 families taking shelter in a single building. ... Despite everything—and all the difficulties—you feel happy and proud of people coming together.

—Male youth, South-Central Syria



## The role of gender and age in income generation



Among households that have adapted their livelihoods, more Syrian women and youth are earning incomes outside the household than before the conflict. Families with women and youth income earners do better than the rest of the population along a range of welfare outcomes and are more likely to adapt their livelihoods in the face of the conflict.

Households with more income earners have significantly better housing conditions and higher expenditures on daily needs, food and monthly expenses. In addition, households with *at least one youth income earner* have significantly better food security<sup>50</sup> and higher expenditures on daily needs, food and total monthly expenses.

In terms of income earners, the percentage of youth currently earning income is on average more than double (26%) what it was prior to the conflict. The gender of “youth” was not disaggregated in the survey instrument. Based on respondent interviews,<sup>51</sup> we can infer that “youth” most likely refers to male youth. Youth currently generate income primarily through animal husbandry / livestock-related livelihoods (52% of communities), farming activities (49%) or day labor in agriculture (33%). The other most frequently cited livelihood activities include skilled labor, such as working as a plumber, tailor or electrician (29%); working in a small business (28%); and working in the private sector (26%). The characteristic that most differentiates the youth income group from the other segments of the sample is the magnitude of their experience of physical harm or property destruction. Households with youth earners have on average experienced 11 such incidents in the past year, compared with an average of one incident per year for the rest of the sample.

My strength increased. ... I became more self-dependent. ... I no longer felt that I should be scared just because I am a girl—on the contrary. I relied more on myself and I believe I am worth 10 guys! Not just one!

—Female youth, Northeast Syria

**Syrians who live in communities with greater female and youth participation in community structures and decisions are more likely to adapt their livelihoods; households with female income earners in these communities have higher food security.**

The study finds that having female income earners within a household is not associated with systematic improvements in welfare indicators. Households with female income earners<sup>52</sup> tend to have higher levels of food insecurity than do other households. As seen in other crisis situations,<sup>53</sup> we find that female-headed households have lower levels of food security in terms of both household hunger and negative coping.



50 In terms of scores on the Reduced Coping Strategy Index or negative coping strategy scale.

51 Within the surveys and interviews, the word “youth” was translated into Arabic as “al shabab,” which in Arabic refers to male youth. While enumerators were specifically instructed to also ask about female youth, the default response was about male youth. Corrective measures to balance this are also noted in the “Additional Limitations” section of the Annex.

52 Note that we distinguish between female-headed households and households with female income earners.

53 Debdulal Mallick and Mohammad Rafi, “Are Female-Headed Households More Food Insecure? Evidence from Bangladesh,” *World Development* 38, no. 4 (2010): 593-605, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2009.11.004>; Bolarin Titus and Grace Adetokunbo, “An Analysis of Food Security Situation among Nigerian Urban Households: Evidence from Lagos State, Nigeria,” *Journal of Central European Agriculture* 8, no. 3 (2007): 397-406.

They have significantly lower levels of psychosocial well-being and lower expenditures on food, daily needs and total monthly expenses than male-headed households.

Overall, community inclusivity, as measured by the participation of women and youth in formal structures, does not have a statistical relationship to welfare outcomes for the general population. However, when households with female income earners<sup>54</sup> are in communities that are more inclusive in terms of female and youth participation in civil society and politics, their household food security is significantly higher. While we cannot establish directionality, this relationship suggests that there are potential added benefits for female income earners in communities that are more inclusive.<sup>55</sup> Notably, quantitative findings show that households (not just those with female income earners) that adapted their livelihoods are also more likely to live in communities where there is more female (and youth) representation at the community level.

Changes in household roles and responsibilities affect not only income generation and livelihoods but also dynamics within the home. In general, when fathers and/or husbands were alive and present at the same site as their female family members, they were cited as heads of household. When these male family members migrated, became separated from their families, died during the conflict, or became too ill or elderly to find employment, younger men in the household faced increased responsibilities. Young male respondents described shifting from a peripheral family role to that of head of household, even if the former head of household was still present. As one young man in North Syria noted: *“Like I said, in the beginning, ... I felt like a secondary family member. I had no burdens, no responsibilities, and not even consultations—since there were older family members. ... Currently, however, I am sort of the main decision-maker, and they consult me.”*

When younger men were absent or joined armed groups, their responsibilities fell to women in the household. For the women who identified themselves as heads of households, this was the first opportunity to take on this more central role. Though male heads of household (husbands and fathers) were most commonly identified as the decision-makers, both men and women reported consulting the entire family before deciding whether to migrate outside Syria.

In terms of household decision-making, the quantitative data show that in households that consist of married individuals, decision-making is most often shared between husband and wife.<sup>56</sup> These shared decisions involve buying goods at the market, allocating and budgeting for daily household expenses, making decisions about a child’s education, and visiting relatives. The one exception to joint decision-making is related to major household purchases, of which the husband is most often in charge. In terms of gender and making purchases from the market, 42% of women do not purchase goods from the market, compared with 11% of men. While there are few regional variations for men, women are *less likely* to go to the market in North Syria and *more likely* to go to the market in South-Central Syria (31% of women in South-Central Syria do not purchase goods in the market, compared with 62% in North Syria).

### **Men and their household members consistently cite the negative psychosocial effects of not being able to find work and provide for their families.**

Respondents in all regions highlighted the changing gender dynamics in households, the labor force and the community due to the absence of men. This absence was attributed to factors that include men and boys joining armed groups and the outmigration of male household members who could become potential income earners

54 Note that this refers to any female income earner in the household, not necessarily exclusively to female-headed households.

55 This finding is consistent with research in other contexts on the impacts of women’s participation on the community, including but not limited to livelihood outcomes. See the following: Ayse Yonder, Sengul Akcar, and Prema Gopalan, *Women’s Participation in Disaster Relief and Recovery* (New York: Population Council, 2005); Claudia Radel, “Gendered Livelihoods and the Politics of Socio-environmental Identity: Women’s Participation in Conservation Projects in Calakmul, Mexico,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 19, no. 1 (2012): 61-82.

56 Note that these findings relate to the full sample, not only to adapters.

abroad and support the remaining family members in Syria. Fears of conscription and the corresponding restrictions on men's and boys' movement in their effort to avoid checkpoints were also cited as reasons why men and boys retreated from income-generation activities or public roles in certain communities. In some communities, particularly in Northeast Syria, this absence of men and boys from the labor force and certain public roles was so pronounced that respondents spoke of it as a generational issue. In the words of a male key informant in South-Central Syria, "Sadly, if the migration situation continues, we will become similar to the Emerald Planet in 'Spacetoon'—Syria will become a country only for women. No males would be left in the country."

Overall the consensus among respondents was that livelihood adaptation would be harder for women (and female-headed households or households facing separation) than for men, though the psychosocial effects of unemployment on men were consistently cited. Men (and men's family members) reported being depressed when searching for work and feeling as though they were failing to meet their obligations and their social relationships also suffered, with friends and family visiting less frequently and not supporting the unemployed male family member.

### **Male attitudes toward women's economic engagement varies from acceptance to resentment.**

Eighty-five percent of all communities reported that women are working outside the home, a rate that is nearly identical to reported pre-conflict rates. However, this rate is higher among livelihood adapters. These households are more likely to have at least one female income earner. Interviews with adapters also confirmed that across all regions, the proportion of women and girls in income-generating activities outside the household has increased since the start of the conflict.<sup>57</sup> The various forms of this engagement included women assembling a variety of part-time roles (primarily in shops), working as nurses or educators, or working with humanitarian providers. In many cases, informal or part-time engagement with the types of work noted above had existed before the conflict, but the conflict necessitated that women engage in this work more regularly for a salary (as opposed to working as a volunteer).

**》** *They say that women are half the society; I say that they are all of it. She is the one that got affected the most by the war. She is the mother and the helper. When her husband gets arrested, she is the one who steps up. When her husband can't roam around the areas that belong to the regime, she is the one who puts herself in harm's way. When her husband or children get injured by the shrapnel, she is the one who provides. At the same time, she has a lot of responsibilities, for the luxuries (like fuel) that we used to have before the conflict are no longer found, so she has to work with wood and coal to cook for her family. She goes and searches for alternatives; there used to be clothing factories, but now she has to sew the clothes by herself.*

—Male key informant, South-Central Syria

Attitudes toward women's work varied widely among respondents and across regions. To illustrate, some male respondents welcomed this development and expressed support for women's increased public roles, while others framed women's increased participation in the labor force as a necessity due to the realities of the conflict. As a Local Council member in South-Central Syria said, "At the beginning there was some prejudice toward women. But the financial circumstances forced them to accept the current situation."

The framing of women's labor as necessary was particularly pronounced in areas in which men reportedly joined armed groups or out-migrated. As a male key informant in South-Central Syria reported, "After 2011, many women had to help men or their husbands, especially with the income of the family. The reason is the scarcity

<sup>57</sup> The quantitative survey asked community key informants if women work outside the home in their community (yes/no). The qualitative interview schedule asks more detailed questions about the degree of female and youth participation in the workforce.

of job opportunities for males because men have problems with movement due to the conditions imposed by the siege. So the burdens of women increased, and they have to help men with income.”

Views on employment were highly gendered as well, and there was variation among respondents regarding whether these changes were due to the conflict or whether these attitudes predated the war. According to some respondents, there was an expectation that widows and female-headed households would be worse off because they lacked a male family member who could generate income. Others noted that where men were able-bodied, they should work to fulfill their responsibilities toward their household. According to most male respondents, women would not be able to do a man’s job, either because of social expectations or because of perceptions that women would be physically unable or would lack the qualifications to carry them out. As a male youth in North Syria stated, “A woman cannot do this type of work. It would be difficult for her. Her work options are limited; either she works at home with knitting wool or she just does simple tasks around the house. She can also work as a nurse. A woman’s work options are limited here. The work I do is difficult for a woman to do because it requires climbing a wall, assembling and dismantling things. It is complicated for a woman to do.”

By contrast, an adult man in South-Central Syria reported the following changes in attitudes toward women’s work in his community:

**›** *I don’t think anything would have been different [if I were a woman]. There are many women who are working as nurses or as volunteers in the field of nursing. They have trained, they gained experience from doctors, and they are working as nurses. Our community is conservative, so women work with women, men with men. As a community we are not against women working. Yes, it is true that we are in a conservative community, but with the revolution, such actions are necessary and there is no problem with it. Yes, under normal conditions men prefer to work and be the main income earner. These conditions which forced me to work and change to these different types of jobs is the same for women and is also forcing them to do the same [adapt] and work.*

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### **Women’s economic engagement does not automatically equate to acceptance of women in leadership roles; Northeast Syria was an exception.**

Women’s participation in the labor force did not necessarily mean that they were seen as leaders, even when they acted in leadership roles. When asked about women’s leadership, respondents who engaged with the question referenced the creation of Local Council positions focusing on women’s affairs (particularly in South-Central Syria). These discussions focused narrowly on the concept of women leading on women’s issues and limiting their public interactions to those with other women, as opposed to being beyond the remit of gender-specific issues and more broadly involved in decision-making and leadership in the communities.

Northeast Syria was reportedly an exception to the above attitudes toward women’s leadership. As a male youth in Northeast Syria illustrated, “Women’s leadership is real, not just in theory. In the past, women were involved in government and were members of the People’s Assembly, but I would say it was only for visibility—there was no real contribution. But now in this period, the role of women has become much more distinctive, especially in this region.” Another respondent in Northeast Syria said, “With regards to this particular area, there was no role for women in ruling before the crisis. She was just as a normal person, employed in a governmental institution, but we never saw a woman working as a judge. While now, she is participating in ruling on legal matters through the joint presidency.”

It is also worth noting dissenting views toward women’s increased public roles. Some respondents expressed that women and girls cannot fill the same roles as men and boys in the community in terms of either the leadership roles or the income-generating functions. Others noted that some restrictions on women’s and girls’ physical movements have actually increased during the conflict. Despite these conflicting perspectives, and as noted previously, the added benefits for female income earners in more inclusive communities, as well as the higher likelihood of adapters to live in these communities, highlight the importance of female and youth inclusivity at the community level and its positive effects on livelihood adaptation at the household level.

### **Women and youth income earners report a positive bump in self-esteem, self-reliance and positive views of society.**

Female respondents overwhelmingly welcomed the opportunity for increased involvement outside the household but also noted that their household caregiving responsibilities had not decreased—and had, in some cases, increased—during the conflict, thus exacerbating their daily burdens. In some cases, the increase in this burden was not perceived to be accompanied by any change in women’s social status. A female key informant in North Syria illustrated:

*› The role of young women has not changed much now compared to before 2011. Their roles and tasks [household responsibilities] are the same as before and now there are increased burdens on them. For example, the loss of parents and responsibilities of the family are forcing them to work in agriculture, or paid work. Even before 2011, poor families would send their young girls to work and earn a living. Both before and now, young women taking on work responsibilities means they have to abandon their education and therefore have no future except to marry and be just the nanny for her children in her husband’s house.*

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That said, among women and girls themselves, their increased public roles were broadly framed as positive and credited with opening paths for professional involvement and personal fulfillment that may have been less accessible to them before the conflict. Women also reported that this opportunity to engage in economic opportunities and contribute toward their household’s needs had led to a positive bump in their self-esteem and increased their self-reliance.



*› Before all of this I used to say, “I wish I were a boy!” I used to say this all the time ... because guys have more options in life. ... Women in our society have limited options, whereas guys can do any work without having to face the judgmental views of the community—unlike women. Now, however, there is no difference between men and women. Thank God I am a woman! If I were a man, I’d probably be either serving in the army or have migrated outside the country. [Now] I became very optimistic about life, and I became a productive person, and I bring a sum of money home every month. ... This feeling is very beautiful, and especially after graduation.*

—Female youth, Northeast Syria

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## The role of humanitarian assistance

In this study, the quantitative survey focused primarily on the type, frequency, modality and reliability of aid. As previously noted among study participants, food aid, at 86%, was the most commonly reported form of humanitarian assistance, followed by NFIs (37%), and a much smaller percentage of participants reporting vouchers (10%) and cash (6%). During interviews with households that had adapted their livelihoods, questions focused more on the type of aid they had received; their preferences for the response type, modality and frequency of delivery; and the reasons for their preferences. To better situate the importance of interview respondents' preferences discussed in the subsequent section, we first examine the predominant approaches of humanitarian aid in Syria.

### Predominant approaches to humanitarian aid in Syria

Now in its seventh year, humanitarian response continues to respond to the basic needs of Syrians, with the highest proportion of funding spent on food, health and NFIs/shelter. Between 2012 and 2017, of the approximate USD 7 billion funded for Syria, a majority was spent to address food needs for Syrians (USD 2.9 billion, 41%), followed by health (USD 648 million, 9%) and NFIs/shelter (604 million, 9%).<sup>58</sup> Interventions in early recovery and livelihoods for the same period were a little less than 2% of the total spend (~USD 174 million). This trend continues in 2018.<sup>59</sup> Beyond the response type, there is also a question on the choice of modality for humanitarian interventions. Of the monthly food assistance that reached 6.8 million people in 2016, 96% of this food was provided in kind and 2% as cash and vouchers. This also applied to interventions within agricultural and livelihood support, where the primary choice of modality was in-kind support.<sup>60</sup> Prior studies inside Syria have found markets to be resilient, functioning and able to absorb

58 Calculated based on Financial Tracking System (FTS) "funded" column by cluster/sector per year from 2012 to 2017, accessed January 22, 2018, <https://fts.unocha.org>.

59 "2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic," Humanitarian Response, 21 November 2017, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/whole-of-syria/document/2018-humanitarian-needs-overview-syrian-arab-republic-21-nov-2017>. Of the USD 3.5 billion ask for Syria, food (at 39%) and shelter/NFIs and health (at 15% each) are among the priority response funding asks, while early recovery and livelihoods at USD 16 million constitutes 5% of the total.

60 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2016 *Syrian Arab Republic Humanitarian Response Plan*, 13. Of the 2.7 million people supported with

any increases in demand that cash provision might generate, and they note Syrian households' preference for cash.<sup>61</sup> Yet, a perceived lack of market functionality, the "fungibility" of cash and related risks of aid diversion,<sup>62, 63</sup> and liability concerns are often cited as reasons for the predominant use of in-kind modalities.

That said, there has been considerable donor push toward the use of cash and ongoing collaborations to feasibly track cash movement within Syria to address compliance requirements. Further, there has been a more recent (since 2016) recognition on the importance of supporting Syrian livelihoods within the Humanitarian Response Plan. A few NGOs are also taking more progressive approaches, such as a focusing on skills training and economic opportunities for women and youth, providing support to wheat farmers and wheat value chains, and supporting livestock production and input suppliers, including operations within besieged and hard-to-reach areas. But these initiatives remain a small proportion of the total humanitarian response for Syria. Our analysis of Syrians' preferences spotlight why this should change.

## Syrian preferences for humanitarian aid

### Study participants prefer livelihood and job training, and cash to other types of humanitarian assistance.

Most adapters who participated in the interviews reported receiving some form of humanitarian assistance, though its modality, frequency and provider varied. The most commonly reported humanitarian assistance was food aid. (This also ties into the survey finding that 86% of respondents reported receiving food aid). Agricultural assistance, in the form of fertilizers, grains and seeds, was reportedly delivered in a few areas of North and Northeast Syria, but the lack of reliable access to agricultural resources (particularly access to water) hindered its potential impacts. Less commonly, respondents in each region reported receiving hygiene kits, support for heating or general housing costs, blankets, and medical support.

*Everyone would prefer to have a job rather than to be offered food. We eventually run out of the food a few weeks after receiving it. In general, I would say a person has some level of pride and would rather have a job. Everyone would prefer having a job to receiving this type of aid. I believe that creating jobs is more suitable for us given our current situation.*

—Female youth, South-Central Syria

As discussed below, although cash was by far the most preferred modality of assistance, very few respondents reported having received it at the time of the study. In terms of future preferences, respondents in all regions clearly stated their preference for cash assistance. For some respondents, this would replace food aid and other in-kind distributions; for others, cash assistance ought to supplement other forms of aid packages.

The flexibility to spend cash on what they determine to be their needs and the dignity of being able to make these

agriculture and livelihood activities, 47% received in-kind support, 50% received training and services and only 3% received cash.

61 Shannon Doocy, Hannah Tappis, and Emily Lyles, *Cash-Based Response Feasibility Assessment in Northern Syria* (Silver Spring, MD: Global Communities, 2016), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Cash%2520Based%2520Response%2520Syria%25202016.pdf>. Cash assistance was acceptable to the greatest number of household survey respondents (94.2%), followed by in-kind assistance (91.0%) and vouchers (79.4%). Cash assistance was preferred most often for all sectors except education, for which there was a stronger preference for in-kind assistance.

62 Doocy, Tappis and Lyles. Given the widespread use of hawala networks for money transfer, the operational security risks associated with cash-based assistance in Syria are no greater than those associated with alternative forms of assistance. In fact, expanding cash-based assistance modalities may reduce risks associated with in-kind assistance.

63 Deborah Cummins and Sarah Moharram, "Fitting Aid to Context, Community Experiences of Aid Delivery in Northern Syria" (working paper, IIED, 2017). However, as also noted by Edwina Thompson, these security and logistical issues are not limited to cash transfers; it is equally possible for other forms of aid to end up with ineligible beneficiaries and possibly also with armed groups. Edwina Thompson, *Technical Assessment: Humanitarian Use of Hawala in Syria* (London: Beechwood International, 2015), <http://www.cashlearning.org/downloads/beechnwood-technical-assessment-syria-31-july-15.pdf>.

determinations for themselves were respondents' key reasons for their cash preference. Some respondents also reported selling portions of their in-kind aid packages in exchange for cash.

### **Household members emphasized the need to support men with livelihood programs.**

Beyond cash, respondents suggested a need for livelihood-related programs and in-demand skills training. This echoes their emphasis on the importance of income-generation strategies during the conflict. Once again, the theme of dignity and of being able to provide for oneself rather than rely on external assistance was recurrent in the narratives about the preference for livelihood training. Household members, including young women, also mentioned the need to focus livelihood programs on young men as some respondents felt that men had more difficulties finding work. A female youth in South-Central Syria echoed this sentiment: *"In terms of projects, I would want there to be more job opportunities for men. I went through a phase in which I had to work for more than 16 hours a day. As a young woman, I do not think it is normal for me to work for 16 hours per day when there are men who are unemployed. I find it contradictory. I was asked to work for 16 hours straight and was offered to work even more, but the problem is that we do not have enough time. Men have more trouble finding a job than women."* As noted in the section on gender and age, this view also ties into men's inability to find work and the ensuing negative psychosocial effects that they note.

Interview respondents also suggested improvements on both the types of aid and the process through which it is delivered. Since humanitarian principles of accountability and "do no harm" hinge on soliciting feedback from target communities, the perspectives of Syrians are included below.

### **Lack of transparency around aid eligibility can become a source of social tension.**

Respondents highlighted the importance of providing transparency regarding the eligibility for assistance and the criteria by which organizations make these determinations. For example, some respondents believed that eligibility for assistance is calculated based on a household's pre-conflict status, which may have shifted dramatically during the conflict. With reference to humanitarian organizations' selection criteria, an adult woman in South-Central Syria noted, *"At the moment, they look at the families' situation before the crisis and provide assistance only to those they consider as eligible. In my opinion, they should disregard the situation of the people prior to the crisis and examine their situation nowadays. Due to the current circumstances, you can no longer classify people here as rich or poor. They should examine their current living conditions and provide assistance accordingly."*

Regardless of whether these impressions are correct, they highlight the need to clearly communicate to target communities the criteria and/or standards that affect their access to assistance. When this does not occur, particularly when there is inconsistent coverage of households within the same community, the distribution of assistance can become a source of social tension in itself. Such tension was reported in Northeast Syria. As one adult male in the region said, *"They [humanitarian organizations] told us that they are working with very specific criteria. Unfortunately, there is no compliance with these criteria because the criteria that they are using is not clear at all. For example, they said that they would support the poor families—while all the families are poor families. An organization supported with the rehabilitation of the damaged houses. ... They have only supported about 5%, not more! Which causes us many problems. Either support everyone or do not support anyone."*

As noted in the section on social capital, households' reliance on their friends, neighbors and community to productively cope within Syria has direct implications on their food security, ability to find feasible economic opportunities, and welfare. In this context, humanitarian aid must ensure that the distribution of aid does not undermine existing social networks that households rely on. Coordination and cooperation across different aid

actors with varied funding goals and mandates can help widen the reach and spread the benefit of aid among a larger subsection of the affected population.

### **Respondents noted the need to consider community norms in the composition of food packages and to develop alternative delivery methods.**

In terms of potential improvements to food aid, participants suggested that the composition of food packages does not reflect community norms and is another instance of recipients not being able to exercise full agency over their lives and culinary or social customs. An adult male household member in South-Central Syria said, *“I beseech all the organizations and all those who are hearing me now, cash—monetary assistance—would be the best type of assistance. ... Allocate based on the citizens’ needs. I am one of the people who is outspoken about this issue. They say that tea dissolves the iron in your system. We’ve been born drinking tea with food generation after generation. Who are you to tell me that tea dissolved iron? Give me tea in these food packages.”*

As this quote illustrates, recipients’ dignity rises to the forefront in the provision of all humanitarian aid. Humanitarian aid actors must do more to respect community norms and choices. Decisions about any restrictions in food aid or vouchers must be clearly explained to communities and made in consensus with communities. Where cash transfers are provided, humanitarian actors should strive to understand why households choose to make certain purchases (such as tea, sugar, *halawa* and so on). This may also help unpack any deeper market failures, such as the unavailability of cooking fuel or fresh foods (and hence the need for high-energy foods) or the lack of purchasing power. And finally, aid actors that strive to improve the nutritional behavior of target populations can address the dignity and choice of recipients by providing clear communication alongside consistent messaging to communities about the nutritional effects of specific food groups and the reasons behind placing specific restrictions within food baskets or vouchers.

Further, most respondents (particularly, but not exclusively, female respondents and those in North Syria) recommended delivering assistance to homes, where possible, so that recipients can avoid crowded spaces, which might become targets for bombing. They also cited livelihood concerns about having to interrupt their income-generating activities to be available to pick up assistance at points of distribution. Given the importance of mitigating protection concerns for target populations, this is crucial feedback for humanitarians to consider.

### **Respondents highlighted the importance of aid predictability and working through local partners that have contextual knowledge.**

Respondents identified a variety of current providers of humanitarian assistance, including a mix of international organizations and their local partners in the respective communities. They also proposed a variety of improvements to the current process. First, respondents in all regions consistently cited the need for reliable distribution of aid over time, and most of them prefer receiving aid once a month, and most have reported not receiving aid consistently at the time of the study. As noted previously, only 14% of the study participants reported feeling confident that they could depend on aid in the future. Second,



respondents reiterated the importance of ensuring that Local Councils (particularly in South-Central and North Syria) remain engaged in the process of delivering assistance because they are, with a few exceptions, perceived to be in touch with communities' needs in ways that the organizations themselves may not be. International organizations in particular are reported to at times be out of touch with these needs, a view reflected in the following words of a community key informant in Northeast Syria:

*First, I want to thank all the organizations that are working in [redacted governorate]. But most projects that they work in don't address the needs of the society. They [humanitarian organizations] come with preconceived projects, and they implement these whether or not it has a chance to succeed. They don't consider this factor [success of the project] as important. For example, one international humanitarian organization implemented an agriculture project in a specific area in [redacted governorate], and I think each beneficiary [farmer] was to receive 300 USD. The project was approved [by the self-administration], but after the approval, they found that the area had a problem of water and they had not taken this into consideration when they developed the project. So this is the problem. If they want to execute any project, it must fulfill society's needs. They must design projects with the existing local organizations in the area because they have much better understanding of the needs and problems of the community.*

The quote above suggests the need for organizations to engage with local partners who work effectively at all levels and can share context knowledge, including their understanding of the underlying constraints on resources and the enabling environment for different livelihoods. Conversely, international NGOs can offer tools and resources for understanding local market systems and frameworks, or models for designing market-based interventions.





## The opportunity costs of adaptation in a conflict

Syrians' ability to adapt their lives and livelihoods to the dire circumstances of the conflict has significant linkages with improved household welfare. It is, however, important to note that while the conflict has given rise to some opportunities, adaptation was not without risks and challenges. Youth who have become new income earners may have done so at the cost of abandoning their education. For some women and girls, the increase in economic engagement opportunities has resulted in an increased perception of self-worth, but it has also come with the increased burden of shouldering domestic and caregiving responsibilities alongside income generation. Men and their family members report the negative psychosocial effects of not being able to find employment to support their families and feelings of inadequacy from failing to meet their societal obligations. Among Syrians, the primacy of livelihoods and the need to secure any job one can find was a recurrent theme. As one respondent in Northeast Syria noted: *"If I am to be honest, I believe factors such as security, being passionate toward my job, having an interest in it ... are secondary. ... Ninety percent of the factors have to do with financial benefit because of the current situation. ... Can this salary sustain him? Can he perform his duties and responsibilities?"*

Humanitarian actors seeking to support Syrians with meaningful income-generating opportunities should take adequate measures to ensure that interventions help mitigate the negative consequences of this adaptation.

### **Respondents express concern that outmigration will lead to brain drain in Syria.**

People migrated out of Syria in search of economic opportunities and/or to avoid conscription or joining armed groups (particularly among male youth). The need to secure a livelihood in ways that were no longer possible in Syria recurrently appeared across regions in the interviews. The choice to migrate in search of a better livelihood varied greatly with gender and age, with young men being a key demographic that embraced outmigration. Decisions on whether to pursue outmigration were not easily made. It often involved complicated cost-benefit calculations weighing security and the stability of not uprooting oneself from one's social network against the gain of a potentially more secure livelihood. Finally, it is worth noting that many respondents highlighted the possible

risks outmigration held for finances, social networks and security alike. A male key informant in South-Central Syria said, *“Migration is a painful issue. It used to be called The Silk Road. Now it is called The Death Road. ... For people who want to migrate from [city redacted], we have to go through regime-held areas if we wanted to reach Lebanon, or we have to go through ISIS, or the Jordanian borders—and you have to pay a bribe in order to enter.”* Respondents in all regions expressed concern that outmigration will lead to brain drain in Syria and to a dearth of skilled professionals, particularly doctors and educators, in the generation to come.

### **Families are obliged to rely on early marriage of their daughters to cope.**

Some respondents lamented that they encouraged their daughters to marry at a young age as both a protection strategy (“to screen the girl from view”) and a livelihood strategy (to have fewer household members to support, to merge with another family and their potential livelihood sources) for the family. This was often negotiated between the husband and wife, though some mothers reported later regretting the decision. An adult woman in North Syria described these tensions as follows: *“My daughter is 13 years old and her dad got her married. She left school at grade seven; she doesn’t meet the expectations of a woman. She’s not fit to marry. She left the school and got married. I told him [my husband], ‘Poor thing. She’s all I have, and she isn’t lacking anything.’ He said, ‘No, it’s okay. Let her get married and raise a family and children.’ This was the biggest mistake I made in my life that I let her get married. Now she is 19 and she has two kids. The biggest mistake this community makes is that a girl gets married at a young age. Right now, a girl lives her life more than she did before. My daughter never had a childhood, and even her husband doesn’t let her go outside even to her neighbors’, just her house, her kids and her husband. Now they can hardly buy a house.”*

### **Mobility is integral to livelihood adaptation but comes at the risk of severe insecurity.**

The ability or inability to move was described as integrally connected to livelihood adaptation. This refers to local mobility, such as the ability to get safely to work or school or to plant and harvest one’s lands. Checkpoints regularly affect movement—particularly that of young men, who fear arrest or conscription. There are both gendered and geospatial differences associated with mobility and insecurity. For example, respondents in Northeast Syria reported the most concerns about conscription of young men. The local administration seeks all men under the age of 42 for mandatory service. Men are stopped not only at checkpoints in communities but also between communities, and they are sought out in public spaces such as markets, restaurants and cafés. The movement of young men in Northeast Syria is significantly curtailed, disrupting their ability to access education and engage in income generation, and this situation was identified as a main factor for outmigration to Turkey and Iraq. The situation is different in North and South-Central Syria, where checkpoints still pose considerable risk for young men, but forced conscription is less uniform and male youth have become major contributors to household income. People in these regions said that their allegiances (real or perceived—of themselves or their families) may offend the group in charge, leading to arrest or detention. People must negotiate multiple checkpoints manned by different groups, necessitating real-time information that is often diffused through social media outlets. These gendered challenges in movement affected women’s and girls’ contributions to income generation, as discussed throughout this report. As a male Local Council member in South-Central Syria stated, *“After 2011, many women had to help men or their husbands especially with the income of the family. The reason is the scarcity of job opportunities for males because men have problems with movement due to the conditions imposed by the siege. So the burdens of women increased, and they have to help men with income.”*

Respondents say that girls and women pass through checkpoints mostly unscathed, although there are some reports of women being arrested in South-Central Syria. Girls and women also fear the inspection process and avoid checkpoints when possible. Finally, concerns regarding traveling at night affect all genders, though women and girls expressed more frequent worry about having to travel to livelihood activities that are farther away or having to travel at night.



## Conclusion and recommendations

Livelihood adaptation is not an aberration. Rather, it is a regularly occurring feature in the lives of Syrians. More than one-third of Syrians have started a new income-generating activity *after* the start of the conflict and are able to provide for themselves and their families. At the same time, three in four households report receiving humanitarian aid, yet two in three households are food insecure. Yes, 13.5 million<sup>64</sup> Syrians do need humanitarian assistance. But seven years into the crisis and with no end in sight, the aid sector's definition of "lifesaving" must evolve to include "livelihood saving." We must support strategies that help conflict-affected Syrians generate incomes and provide for themselves rather than rely on external assistance. This central tenet drives our recommendations for NGOs, donors and policymakers:

### Recommendations for NGOs, donors and policy makers:

1. **Support the delivery of unconditional and unrestricted cash assistance:** Cash transfer programs should be intentionally designed to stabilize Syrian households, allow them to self-prioritize their household needs, and give them much-needed capital to invest in livelihoods. Cash transfers in tranches to help Syrians stabilize, followed by a lump sum of cash,<sup>65</sup> can help households invest in productive assets and begin to recover their livelihoods. Where necessary address internal compliance and procurement barriers, and build the capacity of field teams to increase the use of cash in appropriate contexts.

<sup>64</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates.

<sup>65</sup> Mercy Corps and Causal Design, *Beyond Meeting Immediate Needs: The Impact of Electronic Cash Transfer Approaches on Disaster Recovery and Financial Inclusion*, (Portland, OR: May 2015), 4, [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/TabangKO%20Impact%20Evaluation%20Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/TabangKO%20Impact%20Evaluation%20Report_Final.pdf). Single sum transfers, when compared with three payments of the same amount, resulted in increased ownership of small productive assets. John Farrington, *Cash Transfers: Lump Sums: Project Briefing No 28*, (London: Overseas Development Institute, November 2009), 1, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/4614.pdf>. Lump sums were found to perform better in post-emergency situations than in development contexts, especially where beneficiaries were familiar with the assets that had to be replaced (fishing boats, livestock, etc.) and markets continued to function.

2. **Strengthen local markets and small-scale producers’ capacity to support food self-sufficiency:** Based on an understanding of local market constraints, provide cash and business development support for agriculture and livestock producers and small-scale market actors. This can strengthen the supply of key inputs in the marketplace, increase the availability of locally produced foods and potentially reduce price to benefit the wider community. While this approach is applicable anywhere in Syria it is particularly important to apply it within hard-to-reach and/or besieged areas so that they can better absorb food-related shocks if access constraints or siege occur.
  
3. **Support business recovery, livelihood opportunities and skills training in key economic sectors:** Identify key sectors that are in demand or those that have the potential to grow and absorb a skilled workforce. Prioritize support to existing businesses in these sectors through cash, business development and market linkages. Support the development of new businesses in these sectors only if/where they can provide additional benefits to the end consumer and help diversify the market. For employment-focused programs, target skills development in those sectors where there is unmet demand for workers. For example, the lack of stable electricity in many parts of Syria has given rise to a demand for alternative energy sources. Humanitarian actors can potentially support existing or new businesses in this sector, as well as support households with skills training to engage in this sector.
  
4. **Ensure that humanitarian aid strengthens social networks:** Dividing communities into “eligible” and “ineligible” for aid based on socioeconomic vulnerability can be particularly divisive between recipients and their social network—friends and neighbors whom they depend on in times of crisis but who may not be “eligible” for aid. Aid actors should match the right type of aid—food, cash and livelihood support—to a larger segment of the community based on households’ pre-existing skills and capacities and should not solely base it on their vulnerability. The elderly may need food or cash support, but their able-bodied friends and neighbors may be better placed to utilize humanitarian assistance, such as livestock, to generate an income, and market actors that supply key inputs may be best served with cash and business expansion support. A more differentiated approach to targeting humanitarian support can help improve communities’ economic self-reliance, spread the benefit of aid, and maintain crucial reciprocity and sharing within communities.
  
5. **Design targeted livelihood programs for women and youth, but don’t ignore men:** Women and youth have the potential to be positive change-makers in their community. Syrian women and youth need targeted programs that provide meaningful economic opportunities and additional support to mitigate the opportunity costs of a missed education for youth or a lack of support system for women. That said, these interventions should not come at the expense of livelihood support for men. Men are differently and differentially impacted by the Syrian conflict. Engage vulnerable men in value-added economic opportunities and market-facing roles that women may be constrained from taking on in the short term. This can open pathways to engaging men,



women and youth in shared financial and domestic responsibilities and potentially make a positive impact in the longer term.

6. **Engage women and youth in community rebuilding, and engage with male community leaders to create more buy-in for these roles:**

The nexus between the economic engagement of youth and women and increased self-worth, self-reliance and positive views of society is a linchpin for longer-term meaningful change within communities. Engage women and youth in increased public roles, community dialogue and community rebuilding initiatives as well as in economic opportunities. That said, pushing the boundary of community acceptance of women's economic and leadership roles should be cautiously approached. Given the cultural norms that predate the conflict, engage male community leaders to address concerns and to create more buy-in within the community for these new roles. In the interim, innovative approaches such as "women only" market days that connect women producers to women consumers can be culturally acceptable and safely achieve income-generation goals.



7. **Support technology-based skills development:** Study findings around adapters' use of social media and links to improved household welfare present multiple opportunities to leverage technology within Syria. As appropriate, engage the global Syrian diaspora in providing technology-based (remote) skills and training as well as referrals to their networks within Syria for income-generating opportunities. Technology-based training can be supplemental to face-to-face training and may be particularly useful in besieged and hard-to-reach areas where humanitarian access is sporadic. This will ensure that the knowledge transfer is applicable and context-specific and that it helps bridge the knowledge gaps for the generation of young Syrians who continue to live through the impact of the conflict.

8. **Remove funding barriers that parse human needs into emergency, early recovery and development phases:** This study shows that many Syrians want to recover from the crisis and rebuild their lives and livelihoods as soon as possible. In a protracted conflict like Syria's, humanitarian actors must combine pots of money reserved for "emergency," "recovery" and "development" with the goal of livelihood recovery. For example, we can jump-start a livelihood recovery process for Syrians by combining "emergency" funds for the provision of cash to meet households' needs, "early recovery" funding that supports income generation, and "development" aid that helps strengthen markets.

9. **Support learning based on market-driven approaches:** Adopting new strategies that support local markets alongside support to households will require investments in capacity building and learning. Build knowledge and skills for implementing teams to leverage both humanitarian and market systems approaches. Invest in monitoring and learning from new, tested approaches. As much as possible, donors should fund studies that look at the system-wide impact of interventions to understand effects beyond those involving direct beneficiaries and after the end of program activities.



## Annex: Research Methods

### Quantitative methods

#### Research sites

The study considered three geographic regions in Syria, referred to as (1) North Syria (NS), (2) Northeast Syria (NES) and (3) South-Central Syria (SCS). The sample was limited to areas accessible to organizations operating in a complex, ongoing crisis. Within each region, communities were sorted based on level of accessibility, population density (urban versus rural) and recent levels of conflict in terms of shelling, bombing and other forms of violence.<sup>66</sup> Proportional stratified sampling was conducted based on assessed levels of violence and regional subdistricts to mirror the distribution of conflict and geographical areas for each of the regions. The community selection process for the study was meant to broadly represent North Syria, South-Central Syria (including besieged and hard-to-reach areas) and Northeast Syria, allowing for generalizability of findings to those regions. The sampling excluded areas that were designated solely as camps. Community attributes were determined by field teams, which have extensive knowledge of each community. Enumerators were largely drawn from the communities in which they worked.

#### Household survey

Given the volatile context, the sampling strategy for household-level interviews included a randomization plan that involved dividing each community into geographical quadrants and interviewing a set number of nonadjacent households in each. Enumerators were instructed to alternate between three interviews and two interviews per quadrant; however, given the complexity of the conflict, discretion was given to enumerators. Enumerators were instructed to ensure that households that were interviewed were from a broad range of socioeconomic strata and that at least 30% of households were headed by a female. With a few exceptions

<sup>66</sup> Mercy Corps staff assisted in determining recent conflict levels for communities.

due to access issues, 10 household interviews were conducted in each community. While this selection style and sample size does not guarantee complete representation of each community, it does potentially capture important dimensions of geographic, socioeconomic and gender variation. Purposively oversampling female households ensures that observations are available to conduct analysis on them as a group. Because this method of stratification is exogenous, or not inherently linked to the outcomes that the analysis is focused on, the regression analysis should remain unaffected by the nonrandom sampling method. Descriptive statistics, however, might be affected by this imbalance in observations. Normally, analysis could weight the findings to better match the actual proportion of the imbalanced distribution; however, the research team was unable to determine the current distribution of household head by gender in Syria. For the household survey, 1168 respondents were interviewed across 124 different communities.

## Community key informant survey

Field teams selected key informants based on informants' knowledge of community dynamics. Key informants worked in local governance, business, humanitarian action, or the medical or education sectors. In total, 350 community key informants were surveyed across 115 different communities.

## Pilot

It should be noted that one additional area had been included in the initial sample of the household survey (n=10 communities). This region served as a pilot area to field-test the survey instrument. These responses were included in the wider analysis but were kept separate from regional estimates due to the distinct nature of the subregion.



## Instruments

The household survey included questions about basic demographics, household composition, conflict experiences, market access, livelihoods, humanitarian assistance, savings and debt, social capital and networks, food security (as measured by the Household Hunger Scale and the Coping Strategies Index), spending behavior, local governance, psychosocial well-being (as measured by the Human Security Index), and intent to migrate. Many questions were specified to gather pre-conflict information based on respondent recall as well as current information.

The community key informant survey included questions about the following community attributes: population characteristics, education, committees, markets, changes in businesses, female and youth participation in leadership, savings and loans options, rates of violence, humanitarian assistance, and access to food and basic services. As with the household survey, many questions were specified to gather pre-conflict information as well as current information.

Instruments are available upon request.

## Sample characteristics<sup>67</sup>

### HOUSEHOLD SURVEY

Region	Pilot	NES	NS	SCS	Total
Respondents	100	314	402	352	1168
Communities	10	39	40	35	124

### COMMUNITY KEY INFORMANT SURVEY

Region	Pilot	NES	NS	SCS	Total
Respondents	---	117	161	72	350
Communities	---	38	40	37	115

## Primary variables included in the analysis

### Household welfare outcomes

- › Reduced Coping Strategies Index (Food Security)
- › Household Hunger Scale
- › Housing Conditions
- › Psychosocial Well-Being (Human Security Index)
- › Levels of Savings and Borrowing
- › Expenditures (Daily Basic Needs, Monthly, and Human Capital)

### Enabling factors for adaptation

- › Functional Markets
- › Financial Services
- › Livelihood Strategies
- › Social Networks/Capital
- › Humanitarian Aid

### Control Variables

- › Community
- › PPI Score Pre-2011 (Poverty Score Card)
- › Gender of Household Head
- › Household Size
- › Conflict Score

## Limitations

The cross-sectional data collected for this study was analyzed using several regression models. Models were specified to control for demographic characteristics, pre-conflict assets and endowments, and conflict experiences to compare outcomes between households in similar contexts but with different levels of enabling factors.

While the research attempted to create a sample as representative as possible by including a range of conflict-exposed, besieged and other hard-to-reach areas, access to the most extreme conflict zones was restricted. As a result, some estimates may be biased as they exclude areas likely to be statistically different from the wider Syrian population.

It should be noted that with any cross-sectional study, the direction of causation between independent and dependent variables cannot be established. However, previous research as well as qualitative data can be used to understand the likely or logical direction of such relationships. In this light, claims around causation pertaining to the reported results and associations in this research are tempered.

<sup>67</sup> For the quantitative data collection, the gender of the respondent was not recorded systematically for Household Surveys, and was not asked of community key informants.

# Qualitative methods

## Community selection

The qualitative component of the study followed the quantitative data collection. Thus, a preliminary analysis of community survey responses guided the selection of communities for qualitative engagement. Prior research suggests a range of factors may support livelihood adaptation. These factors include female and youth communal participation, strong governance structures, and access to markets. As such, communities were selected to include variation across these elements as well as across level of conflict, accessibility and population density.

## Sample

For the qualitative household sample, participants were identified because they had started a new livelihood activity since the start of the conflict. In each community, four household interviews were conducted (two adults and two youth split by gender) as well as four community key informant interviews. Depending on availability, the following representatives were targeted: Local Council members, businesspeople, moneylenders, humanitarian workers, community leaders, teachers and medical professionals. Ten communities were selected for inclusion in the study (three in North Syria, three in Northeast Syria and four in South-Central Syria). The final sample included 46 household interviews and 36 key informant interviews (n=82).

## Instrument

The household interview schedule contained questions regarding pre-conflict activities and livelihoods, current livelihoods, livelihood adaptation stories, humanitarian assistance, movement, local governance, social networks, and access to information and technology. Questions were also asked about changes to the role of youth and women within communities.

Interview schedules were created for four different key informant types (female community leaders, service providers, Local Council members and businesspeople). Each instrument included specific questions about the informant's profession as well as the local context, and question topics included livelihoods, humanitarian needs, governance, and the changing roles of youth and women since the start of the conflict. Instruments are available upon request.

## Confidentiality

Participants were invited orally to join the study through an informed consent process that broadly adheres to principles outlined by Social, Behavioral and Educational Research Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of educational and medical institutions in the U.S. While interviews were recorded and transcribed, identifying information was not a part of any record. To protect the confidentiality of civilians and communities in the sample, no community names are shared in this report.

# Sample characteristics

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW

Region	NES		NS		SCS		Total Gender		Total Sample
Communities	3		3		4		---		<b>10</b>
Gender	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	---
HH Respondents	6	9	7	6	7	11	20	26	<b>46</b>
Community KI Respondents	1	6	5	7	4	13	10	26	<b>36</b>
									<b>82</b>

## Analysis

Interviews were recorded with permission, transcribed and translated into English. Transcripts were inductively coded by theme using Dedoose software and analyzed for trends. In terms of reporting the interviews in this study, the authors have preserved within the quotes cited the terms that respondents used to describe the conflict and key actors involved in it. Otherwise, the authors have used terminology that is consistent with Mercy Corps’ practice in the region.

## Limitations

The qualitative sample is restricted to people who have adapted their livelihood by beginning a new activity since the start of the conflict. Given this purposive sample, results will pertain only to this specific subgroup of civilians and do not allow for a comparison of conditions between those who were able to adapt and those who were not. (The quantitative methods were designed to allow for such comparisons.)

In addition to the biases outlined above, a few additional limitations merit explanation. First, research teams confronted problems with access in Northeast Syria. After the start of the project, the local administration decided to rescind permission, as it was trying to reduce the frequency of data collection for all NGO actors and streamline the process to prevent beneficiary survey fatigue. As a result, we were unable to reach our sample targets for Northeast Syria. Second, due to the ongoing conflict and severe travel restrictions from one region to another, we used local enumerators from the communities in each region to conduct the surveys since their level of acceptance and trust with community members and leaders was better suited. This meant that not all interviewers went through a common training process, and there were some inconsistencies in the quality of interviews between communities. Lastly, there were significant limitations in our ability to access female youth and women. In several locations, enumerators explained that conservative elements of the community disallowed such interviews. Secondly but relatedly, many interviewers translated the word “youth” to mean “male youth.” Thus, the questions that solicited perceptions about the role of male and female youth were unintentionally condensed to the experience of male youth. As an attempt to correct for this deficit, a senior staff member of Mercy Corps conducted secondary interviews with Syrians about the role of female youth and women in target regions.

## CONTACT

ARNAUD QUEMIN  
Country Director | Syria  
aquemin@mercycorps.org

JON KURTZ  
Senior Director | Research and Learning  
jkurtz@mercycorps.org

VAIDEHI KRISHNAN  
Researcher | Research and Learning  
vkrishnan@mercycorps.org

All photos: Mercy Corps Staff

### About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action —helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



45 SW Ankeny Street  
Portland, Oregon 97204  
888.842.0842  
[mercycorps.org](http://mercycorps.org)