

A young girl with long dark hair, wearing a pink sleeveless dress with a full, ruffled skirt and a black ribbon trim at the hem, stands in a field of dry grass and weeds. She is looking back over her right shoulder towards the camera. The background shows a line of buildings and utility poles under a bright, hazy sunset sky. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong backlight effect on the girl and the scene.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR) analyses a representative sample of Syrian refugee families in Lebanon to provide a multi-sectoral update of the situation of this population. Conducted annually, 2020 marks the eighth year of this assessment. The contents of this report, jointly issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP), show that the economic downturn, steep inflation, COVID-19 and finally the Beirut blast have pushed vulnerable communities in Lebanon - including Syrian refugees - to the brink, with thousands of families sinking further into poverty and vulnerability.

One of the most concerning indicators of the impact of the compounded crises Syrian refugees have been facing in Lebanon is the sharp increase in the share of households living under the extreme poverty line, reaching a staggering 89 percent in 2020, up from 55 percent only a year before. They now live on less than LBP 308,728 per person per month – this is less than half the minimum wage in Lebanon.

## METHODOLOGY

Between the 19th of August and the 17th of September, survey teams visited 4,563 randomly selected Syrian refugee households, covering all districts across Lebanon. The household questionnaire was designed based on the questionnaire of the previous year to ensure comparability and was carried out through face-to-face interviews at refugees' homes. The analysis plan was developed by following the sectors' guidance and global indicators.



## KEY FINDINGS

### Civil and legal documentation remains a challenge

Lack of legal residency remains a key protection issue affecting the lives of refugees and their ability to access services, hindering their movement and exposing them to exploitation and possible arrest and prosecution. The rate of legal residency among the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon has continued to decline in 2020. Only 20% of individuals (above 15 years old) reported having legal residency, compared to 22% in 2019 and 27% in 2018. Rates among youth and women remained lower than middle-aged, men counterparts. Rejection by the General Security Office (GSO), including based on the request to obtain a Lebanese sponsor, even for those that are exempted, was the highest reported barrier to regularizing their stay. Individuals who cannot benefit from the legal residency fee exemption extensively reported their inability to cover the associated costs and/or to secure a sponsor, due to the brutal economic turndown.

The positive outcomes noted in the level of birth registration in 2019 did not continue through 2020, most likely because of the COVID-19 related lockdowns and their impact on awareness raising and legal counselling activities, as well as on the closure of institutions, and because of the increased inability of the population to cover the costs associated with the procedures. In 2020, 28% of births were registered at the Foreigners' Registry, compared to 30% in 2019. Though all births (99%) since 2011 had, at the minimum, a birth certificate from a hospital or midwife, still, the majority of births remained unregistered with the proper authorities and if left unregistered, can have serious negative effects such as limited access to key services both in Lebanon and later on in the country of origin in case of return.

### Competition for jobs, curfews and safety

Like in 2019, a small minority of refugees rated their relations with the host community as negative (4%), while most refugee families rated this relationship as positive or very positive (54%), noting continued instances of inter-community support in the context of the worsening socio-economic crisis affecting both populations. When examining reported issues that were perceived to drive tensions among refugees and the host community, competition for jobs continued to come up most frequently (40%), noting that the share of households citing cultural differences steeply increased (to 20% from 8% in 2019). Before curfews started to be imposed in relation to Covid-19, 21%, or 1 in 5 refugee households consulted, reported that there was a curfew being imposed in the area where they live (an increase from 14% in 2019). The vast majority of these curfews were imposed by municipalities, noting a substantial increase in the share of households that reported curfews in Bekaa, El Nabatieh and North Lebanon. These curfews were seen as discriminatory, as they were imposed specifically on refugees, being the source of security concern; thus, they limited freedom of movement and heightened the risk of arrest for individuals in that area. The percentage of families that reported community violence or disputes doubled to 6%, from 3% in 2019, noting that incidents of sexual and gender-

based violence, or other problems affecting women more specifically, are likely to be underreported as most of the respondents were men and interviews did not take place in a confidential setting.

### Reported need to access primary and hospital care has declined

Despite the increasingly difficult accessibility situation in the country due to the multi-faceted crisis, refugees reported having increased access to needed care both at primary and hospital care levels. Like previous years, cost was the most cited reason for not accessing care even though in 2020 cost of transportation and cost of drugs gained importance compared to doctors' fees. More refugees relied on pharmacies for primary health care needs in 2020 than in 2019 and fewer went to primary health care outlets.

At the same time, it was reported that the need for both primary and hospital care has declined. This might be explained by seasonal variations of incidence of certain diseases and the fact that in 2020 VASyR was conducted during a different time period compared to 2019. Other possible reasons might be related to the ongoing crisis and financial hardship in which households are not prioritizing health needs and do not consider preventive or primary health care as a necessity. COVID-19 situation and restrictive preventive measures implemented at different levels might also have impacted health seeking behaviour and the perceived need for healthcare.

The proportion of home-based deliveries remained unchanged during 2020.

### Refugees continue to live in conditions below humanitarian standards

Refugees continue to live in conditions below humanitarian standards with over half (58%) of Syrian refugee families living in overcrowded shelters, shelters below humanitarian standards and/or shelters in danger of collapse. Forty-three percent of Syrian refugee households were living in shelters that were below humanitarian standards or in dangerous conditions. Almost one-third of households continued to live in overcrowded conditions of less than 4.5m<sup>2</sup>/person. The distribution of Syrian refugee households across the main shelter types remained mostly stable with the majority (67%) living in residential structures, 21% in non-permanent shelters and 12% in non-residential structures. Female headed households (27%) were more frequently living in tents than male headed households (19%) and FHH (15%) were more often hosted for free than MHH (8%).

### Share of households with poor food consumption has quadrupled compared to 2019

In 2020, almost half of the Syrian refugees had unacceptable food consumption. The share of households with poor consumption level has quadrupled compared to 2019 (19.5% in 2020 vs. 5% in 2019) and that of households with borderline consumption level increased by 1.5 times compared to 2019 (30% in 2020 vs. 20% in 2019).

The number of meals consumed by adults in 2020 was 1.9 meals per day, down from 2.2 meals in 2019; and that consumed by children was 2.5 meals, down from 2.8 in 2019. Dietary diversity has declined. In terms of Household Weekly Diet Diversity (HWDD), the share of households consuming 9 or more food groups per week has significantly decreased by 30% between 2019 and 2020. In terms of Household Daily Average Diet Diversity (HDADD), 21% of households had poor dietary diversity (consuming less than 4.5 food groups on a daily basis), up by 13% compared to 2019.

Proteins sourced from meat/fish/eggs were the least consumed food group while cereals/tubers were the most consumed food group followed by oil/fat/butter. Furthermore, there has been a substantial decline in the intake of key nutrients. The share of households who have never consumed Vitamin A increased from 3.6% to 15.3%, and those who have never consumed protein increased from 1.6% to 10%. Men-headed households were consuming a more diverse diet per day than women-headed households.

#### **Ninety-six percent of households were adopting livelihood-based coping strategies**

In terms of food-related coping strategies, 65% of households have reduced the portion size of meals (up by 6% in 2019) and 65% have reduced the number of meals eaten per day (up by 5% compared to 2019). Additionally, 43% of households borrowed food or relied on help from friends or family (up by 4% in 2019).

Ninety-six percent of Syrian refugee households were adopting livelihood-based coping strategies. Around half of households living below the SMEB were adopting more crisis coping strategies than other S/MEB categories. Moreover, 38% of households were adopting stress coping strategies in 2020, up from 30% in 2019.

#### **Half of the households are now food insecure**

Forty-nine percent of Syrian refugee households were food insecure, up by 20% compared to 2019. Additionally, food insecurity increased in all governorates in Lebanon with the highest levels reported in the North (70%) and South (67%) ones. Female-headed households (FHH) were more food insecure than male-headed households (MHH) (55% vs. 48%). FHHs (55%) were slightly more food insecure than MHHs (48%); A far higher proportion of FHHs (68%) than MHHs (13%) were using coping strategies categorized as "crisis level or emergency level". 7% of all households reported restricting the food consumption of female members of the household specifically.

#### **Increase in breastfeeding rates**

Exclusive breastfeeding, among children under 6 months showed an increase of 12 percentage points among children under 6 months. Likewise, the Minimum Acceptable Frequency for children between 6 and 23 months of age increased by 16 percentage points.

#### **Nine out of 10 households are now living in extreme poverty**

Eighty-nine percent of Syrian refugee households were below the SMEB, a significant increase of 34% compared to 2019, and the highest level compared to the previous years. The Beirut governorate witnessed 48% increase in the share of households under the SMEB level, while the highest levels of households under the SMEB level were reported in Bekaa (96%) and Baalbek-El Hermel (94%).

Ninety-two percent of overall households were in debt, with the average debt per household being LBP 1,835,838, up by 10% compared to 2019. The top reason cited for borrowing money was to purchase food, at 93%, up by 18% compared to 2019. The main source of borrowing continued to be friends in Lebanon.

Fifty-four percent of households have food share expenditures of less than 50%, down from 64% in 2019. The per capita monthly expenditure increased by around 27% compared to 2019 reflecting inflation of prices of commodities, but not necessarily an increase in the volume of expenditures. "Bread and pasta" continued to be the most purchased food items at 25%.

#### **Higher unemployment**

Thirty-nine percent was the overall unemployment rate in 2020, up by 8% compared to 2019. From a gender lens, the employment to population ratio varied considerably, with it being 46% among men and 8% only among women. Additionally, one out of four men were unemployed and 86% of women were outside the labour force. At a governorate level, Bekaa and Baalbek-El Hermel reported the highest unemployment rates (61% and 52% respectively).

There was a 7% decrease in the share of Syrian refugee households who had working members in the past 7 days prior to the survey (52% in 2020 vs. 59% in 2019). Contextualizing the results in terms of gender, women-headed households reported double the percentage decrease of men-headed households.

Lack of jobs in the area where they lived was the main reported reason of unemployment within Syrian refugee households.

The level of engagement in the agriculture sector almost doubled between 2019 and 2020, while construction dropped from being the top sector in 2019 to the second place in 2020. This could be explained by the COVID-19 lockdown, the financial crisis that affected imported materials for construction, and the increase in the local agricultural production.

WFP assistance in the form of e-cards was reported as the main household source of income (21%), followed by informal debt (17%) and ATM cards used in ATM machines from UN or humanitarian organizations (15% - up from 7% in 2019). When asked about the top three sources of income, informal debt ranked first at 73%, up by 9% compared to 2019.

The amount of LBP 97,600 was the average per capita weekly income down from LBP 105,000 in 2019. Severely food insecure households had the lowest income per capita in comparison to other food security groups.

**More children are engaged in child labour**

Children between the ages of 5 and 17 years who are engaged in child labour almost doubled since 2019, reaching 4.4% in 2020. As in previous years, boys are at times higher risk than girls, 7% and 2% respectively. Out of children who were engaged in child labour, 71% were engaged in economic activities and 1% in household chores. For children between the ages of 1 and 14, there was an 8 percentage points decrease in those who have experienced one form of violent discipline. Twenty-four percent of adolescent girls (15 to 19 years of age) were reported to be married at the time of the survey, similar to last year. However, there were governorate differences between 2019 and 2020. Last year, the North recorded the highest rate, whereas this year the highest rate was reported in Beirut.

**Households continue to rely on bottled drinking water**

Similar to previous years, access to improved drinking water was at 87% with mineral bottled water being the most prominent improved drinking water source. However, bottled mineral water dropped by 5 percentage points since 2019, reaching 37%. The VASyR 2020 found an 8 percentage points increase in the water source being readily available on premises. The majority (91%) of household members had access to improved sanitation facilities. The estimates of water and sanitation varied greatly between governorates and residential types.

**Most students did not attend school, not even remotely**

The pre-primary and primary enrolment rates remained the same at 16%, whereas the secondary rates increased by 7 percentage points reaching 29%. When asked if children attended school after the closure due to COVID-19, the results showed that most students did not attend school, not even remotely due to lack of internet.

The top three reasons for children between 3 and 17 years of age not being enrolled in school remained the same as in previous years: child not in age for school (36%), cost of education materials (20%) and cost of transportation to school (15%). Since the child not attending due to age was predominately among children 3 to 5 years of age, attending non-formal education programme and not enrolled due to work emerged as the third most reported reasons for children 6 to 14 and 15 to 17, respectively. Noteworthy, among children 6 to 14 years of age, the rates of the cost of education materials tripled and the cost of transportation doubled from last year, with the same rate of children not enrolled in school. Gender parity indices showed no significant differences between boys and girls.

Eleven percent of youth (aged 15 to 24 years) were enrolled in school, similar to last year. The main reasons were due to marriage (29% - mostly girls), to work (22% - mostly boys), and to the cost of educational materials (17%). The rate of youth who were not in education, employment, or training was at 67%, higher among girls.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The next VASyR activities should undergo a detailed review of all indicators to ensure that the impact of COVID 19 and economic crisis on vulnerabilities can be analysed exhaustively. This also includes a continuation of partners' coordination on the ground, including with the Government of Lebanon, to assess and further grasp the impact of the crisis on Syrian households.

- Challenges with obtaining legal residency should be addressed through an expansion of the fee waiver in line with the recommendations in the Brussels I and II Conference partnership papers. Expanding the fee waiver for legal residency to all categories of refugees is critical for refugee protection. This would in particular allow the increase of refugees' freedom of movement and access to documentation as well as to critical services and to justice.

- In light of the growing number of curfews specifically imposed on refugees, and the ensuing risk of arrest and their impact on the refugees' ability to provide for their families, it is critically important for the London and Brussels commitments "to preserve dignified stay of refugees, while enforcing the application of national laws in a non-discriminatory manner" to be applied broadly. Efforts should also be made to address socio-economic pressures and tensions, especially at the local level. These include livelihood and social stability initiatives that benefit both the Lebanese communities and the refugees, as well as advocacy around dignified work.

- A deeper understanding about household perception of need for care is crucial to interpret the contradicting finding of reported increased access to care in the face of increased economic vulnerability. Households deprioritizing preventive health care and early symptoms might lead to increased morbidity and mortality despite reports of increased access to care.

- Given that cost is once again cited as being the most important barrier for accessing care, the need for financial assistance to the most vulnerable groups is needed. This includes the subsidization of direct services and supplies costs but also the indirect costs such as transportation.

- Further inquiry and qualitative analysis are needed to determine the reasons why some women continue to opt for delivering at home.

- Preparedness and response to emergencies, mainly addressing refugees living in non-permanent shelters, should be ensured to enhance lifesaving interventions.

- Current yearly mobility rate of 15%, and eviction and eviction threats manifested due to increased socio-economic vulnerability and civil unrest should be addressed through an integrated and multi-sectoral response, with focus on shelter/WASH/protection/social stability assistance being required to meet the increasing needs of the refugee population.

- Given the drastic increase in the share of households that were food insecure and in order to prevent hidden hunger or appearance of malnutrition, it is recommended to expand horizontally and vertically food and non-food assistance coverage for the households in need. Moreover, a more frequent monitoring of food security indicators and setting thresholds to trigger appropriate mitigation measures at national or subnational levels, including emergency responses, need to be further strengthened. Monitoring activities should also help to better understand access to adequate and nutritious diets and healthcare services and to target and implement assistance programs.

- Most households require financial resources to urgently meet their basic needs, including food and non-food needs, and to access increasingly unaffordable services, including education and healthcare. As households are already implementing negative coping mechanisms and facing drastic income reductions, it is recommended that partners design and implement large scale cash-based programs, based on in-depth multi-faceted analyses of transfer modalities, market monitoring and security aspects. The programs should also ensure that female-headed households, which are more vulnerable than male-headed ones, are proactively consulted in the future program designing to respond to the findings.

- With almost all families now living below the SMEB and in poverty, maintenance and scale-up of regular multi-purpose cash assistance through the basic assistance sector is highlighted as a priority in the overall response.

- The food security and agriculture sector should continue to coordinate partners providing food assistance to Syrian refugees and recommend the adoption of a common targeting strategy and standards for assistance in order to minimize duplications at a time when needs are increasing and financial resources remain limited. The participation of Syrian refugees in casual work through agriculture programs, one of the main sectors of employment for Syrians, should be advocated as a source of income and skills building. Advocacy towards the donors' community to continue to fund and increase resources for food assistance in Lebanon should persist.

- Across all sectors, strengthening the referrals system should be maintained to ensure ad hoc support through different modalities to vulnerable refugees. Conflict sensitivity should also remain a focus in the designing of assistance interventions, regardless of the modality.

- The increase in child labour warrants prioritization by the humanitarian sector. A tailored multi-sectoral and integrated response and a deeper understanding behind the increase is required to be able to address the issue at the root causes. The aforementioned should have a gender lens, given the difference between girls and boys. The response needs to have short-term and long-term results, and to consider prevention interventions and risk mitigation measures. The need to address these issues is of great importance vis-à-vis the deteriorating socio-economic and COVID-19 pandemic situation in Lebanon.

- The continuous child marriage rates between 2019 and 2020 show the need for a holistic integrated multi sectorial approach at the macro and micro levels. The lack of a national policy and laws on child marriage put more responsibility on the humanitarian sector to work with the communities and caregivers in shifting attitudes and behaviours of child marriage. Moreover, with the severity of the economic crisis and COVID-19, child marriage is less likely to decrease in the upcoming year.

- Violent disciplinary measures remain high in Lebanon despite the recent efforts made to ensure that every child is protected from any form of violence. Community and caregivers focused activities are needed to tackle the root causes of violent disciplinary measures. In 2020, UNICEF- Lebanon published a formative study entitled "Understanding the root causes of violence against children and women in Lebanon" that aimed to unravel the complex reasons accompanying violence against children and women using a Social Behavioural Model<sup>1</sup>.

- The water and sanitation sector should maintain the accessibility of Syrian refugees to improved drinking water sources and improved sanitation facilities. The results show that the rates differ between shelter types and across governorates; thus, the sector should put a special focus on governorate and shelter types, especially non-permanent ones. Despite the importance of having an improved water source, the quality of water is an important indicator and the water sector should work towards testing the water quality Syrian refugees are getting.

- The education response should focus on the retention of students in schools and on completion. Given the unpredictable situation of COVID-19 in Lebanon and its impact on learning modalities, a qualitative study can be of benefit in unpacking the challenges and identifying opportunities for an effective distance learning modality, especially when the results showed that children were not able to adhere to distance learning due to lack of internet. That said, there should be an assessment on learning loss for children who were automatically promoted to the next school grade despite challenges in attending the previous year.

- As the situation in Lebanon is deteriorating, Syrian refugee children are at higher risk of dropping out of school. Thus, there should be a better predictor of dropouts. UNHCR-funded liaison volunteers stationed in second shifts schools can work with school administrations to identify children at risk of dropping out, through NGO partners. This approach can be complemented by the MEHE sharing with sector partners, attendance data and school opening days at a geographical level as proxy to learning and risk to dropout.

- Given that learning modalities might need to change, the MEHE and the education sector should work on a distance learning strategy with learning milestones and indicators for each grade. The learning strategy can be customized to a compressed year with a technological approach, for example, internet or paper-based. Moreover, this should cover promoting violence-free environments, at school and home. Since more children are spending time at home, there should be a focus on caregivers as well. Last but not least, education interventions should be systematically linked to child protection systems and livelihood opportunities for youth, with a gender lens.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/reports/understanding-root-causes-violence-against-children-and-women-lebanon>