



# FOOD SECURITY ASSESSMENT

Executive summary



# SYRIA

OCTOBER 2015

Data collected May – June 2015



**World Food  
Programme**

wfp.org

**This report is the product of unprecedented, extensive and wide-ranging research and consultation. It offers a picture of the state of food security in Syria. It assesses the causes of food insecurity and highlights the major issues that expose conflict-affected Syrians to further risk, revealing the vulnerabilities and identifying areas where targeted assistance may be required.**

The picture is highly fluid and rapidly changing. It is of a country and its people caught in complex conflicts, assailed not just by the trauma of physical insecurity but by its many by-products, including displacement and hunger. The canvass is populated by images of women, men and children far from home and kin and unable to return; their faces lined with worry, their bodies leaner and more fragile than they once were; their dinner tables now frugal and sometimes empty from the necessity of circumstance; and the contents of their pockets translating into ever less, and less nutritious, food. It is a picture of people in the eye of a humanitarian storm.

**Food security refers to availability of, access to, and utilization of food. The main shocks are conflict and insecurity; displacement; difficulties in moving from place to place; depleted assets; lack of employment opportunities; rocketing inflation; and high food and fuel prices.**

## BACKGROUND

Home to one of the most ancient civilizations on Earth, Syria is dominated by arid and semi-arid desert plateau, with mountains in the west. According to United Nations estimates, the population of Syria was 22 million in 2012.<sup>1</sup> Aleppo and Damascus are the only cities with populations of over one million (2.1 million and 1.7 million respectively), while Homs, Latakia and Hama are among the country's other significant urban centres. Syria's total land area is about 185,000 sq km, of which just 1,550 sq km is water. About three-quarters of Syria's land is agricultural, of which around one-quarter is arable, 44

percent is permanent pasture, with less than 3 percent forest. In 2010, it had a little over 13,000 sq km of irrigated land. Deforestation, over-grazing and soil erosion count among the country's key environmental risks.

## KEY POINTS

- About **one in three** Syrians – 6.3 million people – are food insecure
- In addition to those already food insecure, **more than half** of all Syrians are at risk of slipping – quickly – into food insecurity. This figure would have been higher but for the assistance already provided by WFP and its partners; and other partners of Food Security Sector
- 8.7 million people will **need** a range of food assistance
- Less than **16 percent** of the population are food secure

## THE STUDY

This is a multi-dimensional study that has sought to identify the prevalence of food insecure people at national and governorate level, and to identify the underlying causes of food insecurity. It is the first country-wide food security survey that has ever been done in Syria and will provide the first baseline from which food security impacts can be monitored. It has already fed into future programming and the Humanitarian Needs Overview for 2016, along with national strategic plans. And it will enable WFP to fine-tune response options and targeting for its 2016 programme.

## METHODOLOGY

The research followed standard WFP food security methodology. The extensive survey was conducted in May and June 2015, and was possible by the facilitation of the Government of Syria. The sampling frame was developed with the Syria Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) in cooperation with the Syria Planning and International Cooperation Commission.

<sup>1</sup><http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Syrian%20Arab%20Republic>



Within the framework of the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2139, 2165 and 2191, the survey interviewed over 19,000 households across the country, including some of the more challenging governorates and sub-districts. At the Damascus level, data were collected with the CBS enumerators and, in parallel, cross-border NGO partners helped with data collection in areas not under government control. The sample design was representative at national, governorate, district, and urban and rural levels. It was not possible to conduct the survey in Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates, because they were not accessible.

The report uses the consolidated approach for reporting indicators (CARI) of food security, combining a suite of food security indicators into a summary indicator. This allows the extent of food insecurity in a given population to be analysed. Indicators include the food consumption score (dietary diversity, frequency and nutrient density), adequacy of households' current food consumption, and households' economic vulnerability and asset depletion. These then combine to offer an overall picture of the prevalence of food insecurity in Syria.

## KEY FINDINGS

The food security situation in Syria has now reached worrying proportions, not only in terms of its scale but also of its severity.

These headline figures give cause for serious concern, the more so given a fluid security situation that has the potential to rapidly tip those currently just on the right side of food security into insecurity. The level of food assistance already provided by Food Security Sector partners – to a monthly average of 5.9 million people in 2015 in addition to agriculture-based livelihood support to over 800,000 people by August – has helped to stabilize vulnerable people at the current food security level. Without that assistance, the overall picture is likely to have been very much worse. Without it, many more people will slip into food insecurity.

**A disturbing number of people teeter precariously on the brink of severe food insecurity**

**More than 45 percent of people in Al Hasakeh, Aleppo and Quneitra governorates are food insecure**

**One in three people go to bed hungry between three and ten times a month**

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) give rise to the greatest concern, because they are the most vulnerable and the most food insecure. More than 40 percent of IDPs and returnees are food insecure. That compares to about 30 percent of host communities. Current assistance prioritizes assistance to IDPs, although host communities are increasingly seen to adopt detrimental coping strategies.

One out of three households reported that they have gone to bed hungry between three and 10 times per month, because there was not enough food to eat.

It is a diverse picture at the governorate level. In all governorates, the overwhelming majority of people are either already food insecure or at risk of becoming food insecure. The high concentration of critical sub-districts reflects a bleak picture of the food security situation in Syria. Further analysis of food insecurity prevalence at sub district levels show a high concentration of subdistricts with critical needs. At present, 164 sub districts have more than 20 percent of food insecure people. Within the 164 critical sub districts, there are 20 sub-districts with more than 80 percent prevalence of food insecure people. Most sub-districts are within the 20-40 percent prevalence range.

**20 of 164 critical sub-districts have more than 80% prevalence of food insecure people**

The prevalence of food insecurity is higher in rural than in urban areas. This is in line with expectations, in part because people in urban areas typically have more markets and potential income opportunities than in rural areas. However, IDPs are mostly concentrated in urban areas and the difference between urban and rural prevalence is lower than would be expected in more normal situations, which further demonstrates the impact of IDP populations.

By sex of the head of household, there is a higher rate of severe food insecurity and vulnerability among female headed households than male.

**There is a higher rate of severe food insecurity among Female-headed households**

Food insecure households and those that depend on casual labour depend substantially on the generosity of friends and relations and have higher rates of food insecurity, while food secure households are more likely to have regular incomes.

Most Syrians were found to be using food-related coping strategies.<sup>2</sup> More than 60 percent of Syrians use livelihood coping strategies.<sup>3</sup> Some of those strategies have long-term, harmful effects that reduce the possibility of climbing out of food insecurity.

At the time of the survey, more than half of all surveyed households across the country had gone into debt to pay for their food needs: the first step in a vicious circle. Rising food prices lead many people to buy food on credit. As their debt increases, so they become more vulnerable to food insecurity.

A typical food insecure household has significant food consumption gaps with extreme loss of livelihood assets.

**The humanitarian storm that already exists is a threshold to a major humanitarian catastrophe that has extensive onward implications both within and beyond Syria's boundaries**

In rural areas, more than 35.7 percent of Syrians are food insecure. Urban areas are also of concern, with 30.6 percent of the population food insecure.

The study's results showed sharp variations in food security among governorates. More than 45 percent of people are food insecure in Al Hasakeh, Aleppo and Quneitra governorates. In terms of absolute numbers of people, Al Hasakeh, Aleppo and Rural Damascus have the greatest concentrations of food insecure populations.



<sup>2</sup>An indicator used to compare the hardship faced by a country's households by measuring the frequency and severity of the food consumption behaviours they engage in when faced with shortages of food.

<sup>3</sup>This indicator is derived from a series of questions regarding the household's experience with livelihood stress and asset depletion during the 30 days prior to survey. Responses are used to understand the stress and insecurity faced by households and describes their capacity to regarding future productivity.

## WHAT NEXT

The survey's findings correspond to those of the FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment of May 2015; and with WFP's own expectations. In addition to the huge number of already food insecure people, marginally food secure households are at actual risk of slipping into food insecurity, and require sustainable and sustained, continuous assistance – as well as emergency support – to protect their lives and livelihoods. The situation is worst in Aleppo, Rural Damascus, Al Hasakeh, Hama and Dara governorates, where more than 40 percent of people are food insecure.

Above the figures for marginal food security stands the real and severe threat that these people will slip into food insecurity if the highly unstable environment of conflict, unemployment and rising prices deteriorates further.

Until now, significant levels of food assistance have helped to keep those people out of food insecurity. But the humanitarian storm that already exists is a threshold to a major humanitarian catastrophe that has extensive onward implications both within and beyond Syria's boundaries.

The food security situation already has millions of people in its uncompromising grip and shows no signs of immediate improvement. Continued joint action is required to address these urgent humanitarian needs and protect vulnerable households from the prospect of a downward spiralling food insecurity situation.





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