

MORE THAN A HEALTH CRISIS:

How COVID-19 has affected people's lives in rural Aleppo



To help some of the most vulnerable families maintain hygienic behaviours during COVID-19, Oxfam distributed essential hygiene materials to over 6500 Syrians in rural Aleppo.
Photo: Islam Mardini/Oxfam

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OXFAM PRIVATE POLICY BRIEFING NOTE

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**MINISTRY OF
FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF DENMARK**
Danida



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Objectives

1. Introduce Oxfam's report on the non-health effects of COVID-19 in southern rural Aleppo
2. Share findings; lessons learnt and recommendations
3. Q&A

Objectives of the policy work

Understanding the different **policy implications** of the *short-term and medium-term* impact of COVID-19 (& the accompanying economic effect) on rural communities in Aleppo.

Areas of focus: food security and livelihoods

1. The impact of the pandemic and economic downturn on female-headed households
2. The different coping mechanism adopted by households in rural Aleppo
3. The gaps in access to services and markets in rural communities of Aleppo
4. Understanding the intervention gaps in southern rural Aleppo
5. The analysis of the overall humanitarian response in rural Aleppo since the outbreak of the pandemic

FINDINGS / LESSONS LEARNT



Female-headed households **were among the most affected** in southern rural Aleppo

“We have a month of fasting ahead of us, and we need to purchase all that we can now. I have six children and I need to feed them. I am sure in a month from now, the prices will continue to increase. **If we can barely afford them now, we will not afford them later.**”

“It takes me around one hour to reach the closest bakery and food market. I cannot walk there and therefore use transportation to be able to purchase supplies. **Public transportation is now very disrupted and expensive.**”

“Our family used to receive regular food and monetary assistance from relief organizations, and we relied on them heavily to meet our basic food needs. It has been over a month since we last received food assistance. We need it now more than ever before as **I lost my job and need to stay home to take of my children.**”

“I used to work in Aleppo city as a house helper. When the restrictions came into place, I could not travel to my workplace, and even if I managed to, the transportation costs were very high. I am a single mother of five, and all my children are school-aged children. **Since the schools closed, I have no one to take care of them, and therefore I quit my job and started working in farming. I take my kids to work with me, because I cannot leave them at home alone.**”

- (1) childcaring responsibilities
- (2) jobs: unregular / informal / unemployed
- (3) disruption of transportation
- (4) reduction of meals
- (5) pause in assistance



Ruqaya, 83, lives in rural Aleppo with her family. She and 800 other families benefits from Oxfam's cash assistance program.

Photo: Islam Mardini/Oxfam

Ruqaya, 83, also lives in rural Aleppo's Abou-Getheh village. Her suffering is no different than that of others in her community. As the situation continues to soar, she can no longer save money from selling the crops she and her family produce in order to buy seeds for the next season. **"If prices continue to rise, we will have no choice but to sell a part of our land.** I hope it won't come to that, but if it does, it's the only thing we can do," Ruqaya tells Oxfam.

¹ Name has been changed to protect identity.

COVID-19 and the public health measures had **limited impact on farming activities** in southern rural Aleppo.

“**Seeds are less worrisome than fertilizers**, as their prices are still okay. I guarantee all farmers would tell you this.”

“Farming **was minimally impacted** during these measures. Farmers often rely on harvest seasons for their income. If it is not a harvest season, there is no source of income. If prices keep increasing, we are worried we would not be able to buy more **[agricultural] inputs.**”

“In my village, there are 60 families and we all rely on farming for our income and food consumption. Lately, there has been an increase in **power cuts and shortage of fuel**, and therefore our water irrigation systems are not functioning properly. We are working on purchasing a generator for our area but securing fuel would be an issue and will impose more costs.”

- (1) increased price of inputs (fertilizers and pesticides)
- (2) power cuts and shortage of fuel
- (3) seasons of harvest



Munzer, 71, is a farmer. He and 800 other families, benefits from Oxfam's cash assistance programme in rural Aleppo, Syria.

Photo: Islam Mardini/Oxfam

“I remember the long days we spent in our homes, afraid the bombs would get us next. There was no way for us to go outside, to make a living or buy the food we needed. At the time, I felt as though my life were hanging by a thread; a feeling that remains with me to this day. **Only now it's not the bombs I fear, but a faceless virus that threatens to harm as well as starve my family of five and me.**” Munzer^[1], 71, a farmer in Abou-Getheh village, in the southern rural Aleppo.

¹ Name has been changed to protect identity.

The short-term and medium-term impact of COVID-19 and accompanying public health measures **impacted households** in rural communities the most; **easing of movement restrictions and lockdowns had a positive effect** on households' livelihoods and food access.

"We had an acquaintance that worked as a Lebanon-Syria driver. My son in Lebanon used to give him cash, to bring to us. Our acquaintance did it as a favour, with no fees charged. Now, he stopped working since the borders have closed, and **we lost our only channel to receive cash from Lebanon.**"

"The subsidized bread in bakeries we used to buy before this crisis [referring to the economic crisis following COVID-19] was very good in quality. Even those who could afford to buy bread from shops used to purchase subsidized bread because it tasted very good. Now, even if we manage to purchase subsidized bread, **the taste has changed, and the quality has been compromised.**"

"Both my sons work in the Gulf and send us money every two weeks. This was our only source of income. **My husband is disabled, and I lost my job during this crisis** [referring to the economic crisis following COVID-19]. Now, I do not know how I will be able to feed my family."

"Tomatoes and potatoes are sometimes the only two ingredients we eat for weeks. I am not being able to afford them now. If the prices do not decrease, **I do not know what I will feed my family.**"

- (1) halting of remittances
- (2) disrupted supply routes
- (3) credit-buying and low purchasing power
- (4) inflation / currency devaluation
- (5) slow replenishment of stocks
- (6) accessibility of food markets

RECOMMENDATIONS

INGOs should design interventions focusing on the increased access to **livelihoods opportunities for female-headed households in rural, remote communities**.

Humanitarian actors in Syria should consider the designing interventions in rural communities, specifically in **support of sustainable solutions**, including but not limited to:

- a. Enhancing access to basic services
- b. Adopting a bottom-up approach in programming interventions to support small-scale farmers, particularly in addressing their immediate needs such as the access to irrigation water and agricultural inputs
- c. Supporting the supply side of local markets

INGOs and UN agencies should seek to **inform the development of state social protection initiatives** in Syria, to ensure that they can most effectively support the most vulnerable in responding to shocks; while in coordination increasing cash and voucher assistance as part of the humanitarian response.

The Protection sector in Syria should collaborate with other sectors, including food security and livelihoods, for a **multisectoral response**. Gender and protection should be mainstreamed in all sector responses.



NGOs operating in Syria should collaborate and coordinate more with **local NGOs** who have access and are closer to rural communities.

The Government of Syria (GoS) should facilitate the **access** of INGOs to rural and remote communities for timely, principled humanitarian assistance.

International donors should support humanitarian actors by being more **flexible** in their funding, taking into consideration the different challenges of delivering assistance in Syria and rural areas specifically, by:

- a. Lifting bureaucratic hurdles when re-programming is required
- b. Allow for a more flexible programming, with focus on outcomes rather than outputs
- c. Allow contingency provisions for sudden shocks, and avoiding humanitarian NGOs to repurpose the scarce early recovery funding to life-saving emergency interventions
- d. Funding the wider spectrum, from emergency to early recovery



Q & A



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