Economic Deprivation in Northwest Syria

April 2024 | Syria

CONTEXT & RATIONALE

Thirteen years into the conflict in Syria, the crisis is complex and multi-dimensional. In 2023, Idleb and Aleppo governorates saw 5,300 conflict events with a notable escalation of airstrikes and shelling in October 2023.[1–3] This comes on top of over a decade of hostilities that have caused substantial human losses, physical damage to housing and infrastructure, and left 3.4 million people displaced in Northwest Syria (NWS) alone.[4,5] The Syrian economy has suffered heavily under these conditions.[4] The impacts were compounded in February 2023 by earthquakes that, in NWS, cost the lives of around 4,500 people and left a quarter of a million homeless, with even more affected in Türkiye.[6] Between the human losses and extensive damage to infrastructure, the earthquakes deepened the economic crisis and, by extension, adversely affected the livelihoods of the 5 million people living in the area.[7] Today, poverty is one of the leading causes of humanitarian needs across sectors in NWS.[8]

The aim of this situation overview is to provide insights into the economic situation of households in NWS, highlighting the drivers of the crisis and its impacts on various sectors. Throughout the report, differences between Greater Idleb and Northern Aleppo will be noted to illustrate the particular situations of households in these distinct areas of influence. The Ras Al Ain and Tel Abiad (RAATA) area, which is situated in the north of Hasakeh governorate, is excluded here. This is due to the lack of data on the humanitarian situation in this area. Its exclusion is not indicative of a difference in needs. Section two uses the most recently available data to quantify the economic situation of households and look at the differences between vulnerable groups. The third considers drivers of the crisis, focusing on the earthquakes, conflict, currency depreciation, and reductions in humanitarian funding. The fourth looks at the impacts on access to essential services, going through each of the humanitarian sectors. **The final section provides a conclusion and discussion of the findings.**

KEY MESSAGES

- Access to stable employment that pays living wages is lacking in NWS. Instead, many households rely on daily, casual, or temporary labour, which provides little employment security. Incomes from these types of employment are insufficient to meet households' basic needs.
- Displaced persons in camps face lower access to livelihoods, and correspondingly have higher rates of economic deprivation. Outside of camps, displaced persons have better access to employment and appear to be significantly better able to meet their needs than in-camp IDPs. However, out-of-camp IDPs are often obliged to rent their shelters, with rents taking up a large portion of their incomes, leaving them less able to meet their needs than host community populations who tend to own their shelters.
- Female-headed households have worse access to employment, resulting in lower incomes and a lower ability to meet their needs.
- NWS' economy has been adversely affected by the high levels of damage and displacement caused by the 2023 earthquakes; by the cumulative effects of 13 years of conflict; by rapid currency depreciation, which has driven up the prices of essential goods and services; and by humanitarian funding cuts, which have reduced essential support to people in need.
- The impacts of the economic crisis are visible across sectors, including on reduced food security, reduced access to water, barriers to accessing necessary healthcare, risk of evictions due to inability to pay rents, lack of access to winter items, and inability to send children to school.

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1. METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

This situation overview is based on available secondary data, humanitarian reporting, and academic literature.

Household-level data were taken from the 2023 Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) in Northern Syria.[8] Data were collected between 3 September and 7 October 2023. In NWS, over 2,700 households were interviewed, including host populations, displaced persons outside of camps, and displaced persons in camps. For an overview of the findings from this data, please see REACH's brief or refer to the 2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview.

The household-level data are complemented by the Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS).[9] This is a monthly data collection which interviews key informants (KIs) in around 670 host communities in Greater Idleb and Northern Aleppo, conducted by REACH and partners. Please note that this assessment does not include displacement camps. Further, due to the reliance on KIs and the non-random sample of communities, HSOS data are indicative of the situation in host communities, but do not represent the situation of all households in all communities. The datasets and monthly factsheets can be found here, and a dashboard showing changes over time is here.

Data on prices of essential food and non-food items are taken from the Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI).[10] The JMMI is a monthly assessment of prices in key markets across Greater Idleb and Northern Aleppo, relying on vendors to report prices of items they are selling. This is conducted by REACH in collaboration with the Cash Working Group. Please note that the sample of interviewed vendors is not random, so JMMI data is indicative of prices, but some discrepancies with actual prices may exist. The datasets and monthly factsheets can be found here, and the dashboard showing geographic differences in prices and changes over time is here.

There are various limitations to the findings presented in this report. First, the situation of households in RAATA areas is not discussed in this report. Second, little to no information on the households' perceptions of their economic situation and their views on different types of assistance is available. Third, limited representative data are available, outside of the MSNA. Other sources tend to rely on KIs or anecdotal evidence, which have a substantially higher risk of bias and inaccuracy. For instance, KIs may overstate needs if they believe this will help their communities access assistance, or they may not be aware of problems which are private and not often spoken about between households. Fourth, due to a lack of comparable data between 2022 and 2023, no absolute statements about changes in the humanitarian situation can be made. Fifth, there is a lack of information on economic systems, including the types of industry present, local production, levels of imports, and such. Finally, the impacts of the current global economic situation[11] on NWS are omitted.

2. Current State of the Household Economy

2.1 Employment

Data suggest high levels of underemployment, income insecurity, and working poverty in NWS.

Public data on the employment situation of individuals is lacking. Information on hours of employment, wages per hour, and job security by sector could help response actors to understand which types of livelihoods to support in order to improve income levels and security.

Looking at the available data, most adult men in NWS work at least some of the time. In the summer of 2022, less than 6% of men between the ages of 18 and 64 had no employment,[1] compared to considerably higher rates in neighbouring countries - 10% in Lebanon, 13% in Iraq, and 18% in Jordan.[2] Household-level data from September 2023 similarly suggest that the majority of households with adult men had at least one working household member.[3]

However, employment conditions are highly variable. Considering only whether or not individuals did any paid work may hide problems such as underemployment – short working hours or unproductive labour – as well as income insecurity and working poverty.[4] Available data do suggest the presence of these issues:

1. Almost three quarters of households that had an employed member reported that they could not meet their basic needs in September 2023.[3] This suggests that hourly wages were low or hours of employment were insufficient, resulting in insufficient income despite employment. This is indicative of underemployment and working poverty.
2. Of the households who had employed members and yet reported being unable to meet their needs, half reported unemployment or loss of employment of a household member as a reason. This indicates job insecurity or underemployment.[8]
3. Key informants (KIs) in 94% of assessed communities reported in February 2024 that there was a lack of employment opportunities, in general or specifically for jobs that matched people's skills.[5] In the absence of strong support systems, households may be forced to accept any job in order to secure their survival.[4,6] In a context of few employment opportunities, it is all the more likely that households will accept low-paying work that does not utilise their skills.
4. Over 40% of households only had daily, casual, or temporary work, with no permanent employment nor their own business in September 2023.[3] This type of

work lacks employment security and income security, possibly contributing to higher levels of stress, worse health outcomes, and lower incomes.[7,8] Households who only reported unstable employment also reported significantly lower incomes than those who only reported stable employment.[3]

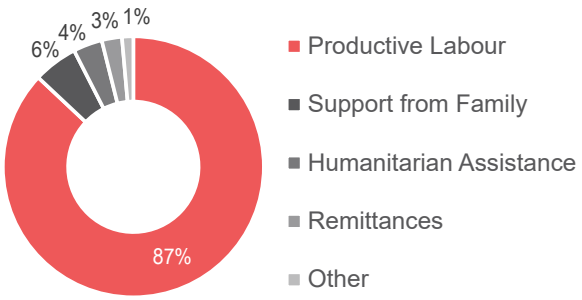
In terms of employment sectors, the economy of Northwest Syria has changed substantially since pre-conflict times. NWS has seen an influx of internally displaced people, which has caused rapid increases in population numbers.[9,10] At the same time, the economy shifted towards trade with Türkiye, leading to the creation of new business hubs.[9,11] By 2022, wholesale trade was one of the main sectors of employment.[1] Agriculture was similarly common,[1] and KIs have consistently reported agriculture as one of the primary sources of livelihoods in almost all communities.[5] NWS is especially well known for its olive oil production, with olives being an important cash crop,[9] while wheat and barley are widely cultivated as staple food crops.[12] However, agricultural production has suffered greatly during the conflict (see section 3.2 Conflict). Looking at urban areas, data from late 2021 in Idleb and Dana cities suggest high rates of employment in construction and manufacturing. Construction in particular has relied heavily on daily labour,[13,14] thus likely providing lower levels of income security. This sector is likely to have become more important over the past year due to the widespread destruction of housing and infrastructure caused by the 6 February earthquakes (see section 3.1 Earthquakes).[15]

2.2 Household Poverty

Incomes, and correspondingly households' abilities to meet their needs, were low across NWS and particularly in Greater Idleb. This prompted reliance on severe coping strategies.

Incomes across NWS were extremely low, with the vast majority of households having had less than USD 2.15 per person per day in September 2023.[a,16] This income came primarily from productive labour activities (see figure 1), with another 5% from friends and family within Syria, and 4% from humanitarian assistance.[3]

Figure 1: Proportion of Incomes by Source
as per household data from September 2023[16]



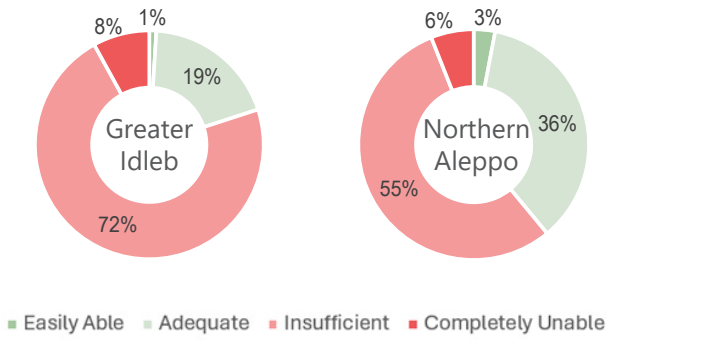
[a] Official rates of absolute poverty are calculated in 2017 purchasing power parity terms. Purchasing power is not equalised in these calculations, and hence no claim is made regarding the rate of absolute poverty.

Total incomes were significantly lower in Greater Idleb than in Northern Aleppo.[3] The difference was partially due to the higher rates of stable employment in Northern Aleppo, and correspondingly higher earning from stable sources. 53% of households in Northern Aleppo had a household member with a permanent job or own business, compared to 37% in Greater Idleb.[3] At the same time, wages for unskilled daily labour as reported by KIs were around 40% higher in Northern Aleppo,[5] suggesting overall higher wage rates. This is despite prices for essential items being similar in both areas,[17] implying that purchasing power is lower in Greater Idleb.

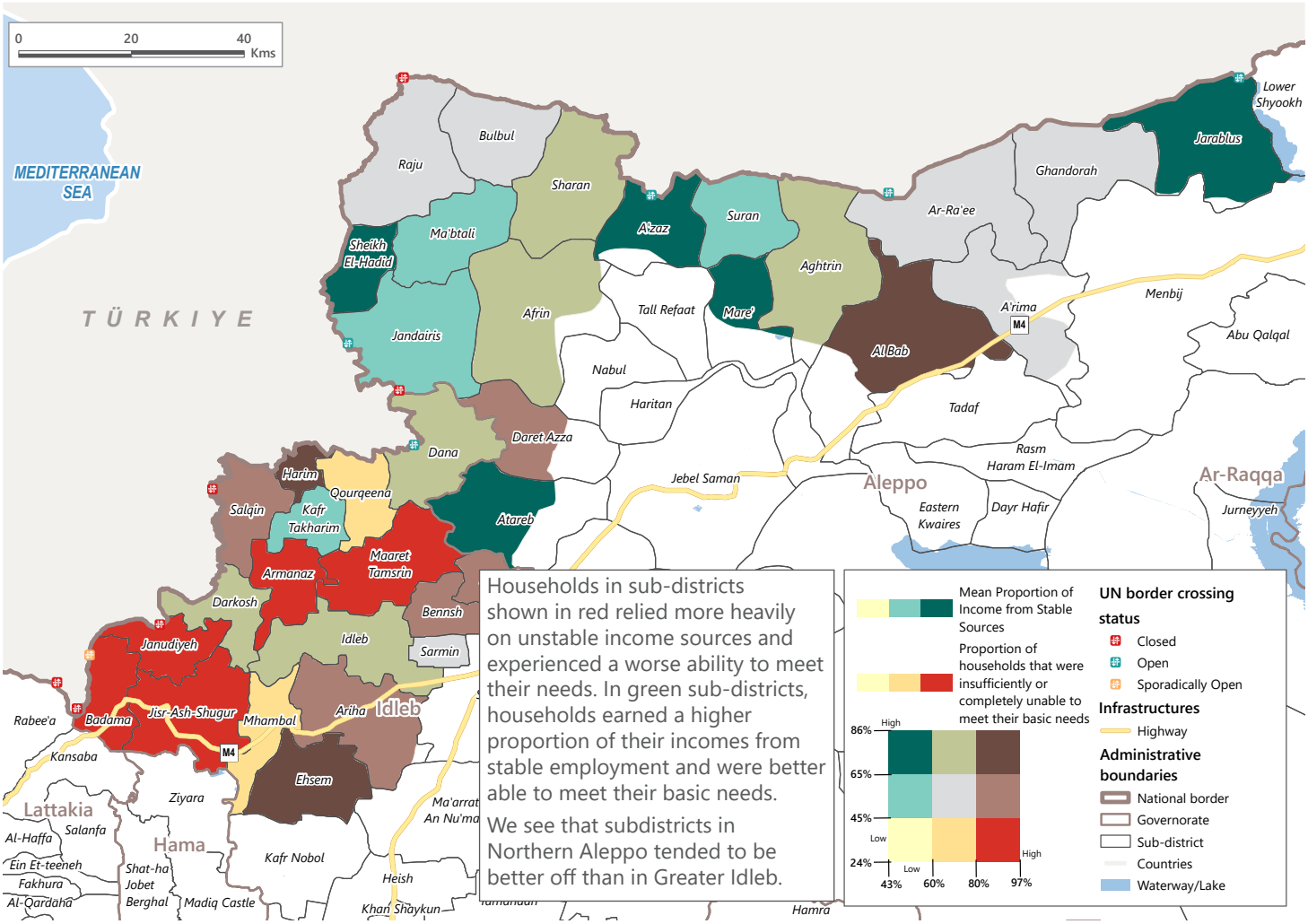
Understanding the structural difference between these areas is complex. Relevant factors include, first, the larger proportion of IDPs in Greater Idleb being in-camps.[18] Second, populations in Greater Idleb were more likely to report having received humanitarian assistance, but were also more than twice as likely to report assistance being insufficient.[3] Third, Northern Aleppo is closely connected to the Turkish economy and service infrastructure,[10] which may make a difference to the local business environment. Lastly, while both areas have experienced severe and damaging conflict, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) registered over ten times as many instances of explosions and remote violence in Greater Idleb (2,500) as Northern Aleppo (230) and over two and half times as many conflict incidents overall (3,300 versus 1,200),[19] speaking to high levels of insecurity in Greater Idleb. An in-depth analysis looking at how these factors and others shape economic conditions across the regions as well as the lived experiences of affected populations would be necessary to understand the causes of different economic outcomes.

Corresponding to low levels of income, most households in NWS reported being unable to meet their basic needs. This was particularly concerning in Greater Idleb, (see figure 2), where 80% of households reported not being sufficiently able to meet their basic needs, compared to 61% in Northern Aleppo in September 2023.[3] There was a significant correlation between households' access to stable employment and their reported ability to meet their basic needs; map 1 shows this correlation. Several subdistricts in Greater Idleb had a low proportion of income from stable employment (suggesting higher levels of income insecurity), combined with a lower ability to meet their basic needs (shown in red).

Figure 2: Proportion of Households by Reported Ability to Meet Their Basic Needs
as per household data from September 2023[16]



Map 1: Proportion of Household Incomes from Stable Sources and Reported Ability to Meet Basic Needs
as per household data from September 2023[16]



Given the high levels of poverty, households employed negative coping strategies to meet their basic needs. Most commonly, this entailed borrowing money.[3] Anecdotal evidence from the field suggests that much of this borrowing happens informally, for instance borrowing from family, friends, and local stores. Formal financial services in NWS are limited. KIs in 45% of assessed communities in Greater Idleb and 25% in Northern Aleppo reported that the inability to access financial resources such as grants and loans was limiting households' abilities to meet their needs in February 2024.[5] Note, however, that impact evaluations conducted in contexts of low-income countries and countries in conflict find mixed impacts of access to microfinance, with the benefits of loans at times being outweighed by the negative impacts of debt.[20–22]

The second most common coping strategy was reducing non-food expenditures. Section 4 highlights the impact of poverty on access to essential goods and services. In brief, the impacts of this coping strategy are reflected across humanitarian sectors, with unaffordability being one of the primary causes of humanitarian needs.

The Livelihoods Coping Strategies Index (LCSI) captures the severity of negative coping strategies that households employ to meet their basic needs. Severity is categorised as none, stress, crisis, or emergency. Eighteen percent of households reported using emergency coping strategies in September 2023, which primarily consisted of engaging in socially degrading, high risk, or exploitive jobs as well as informal migration to find work. Child work was also reported by 9% of households; note however that this may not accurately capture the prevalence of child labour, particularly if households do not consider childrens' work to be a negative coping strategy, if they do not include domestic work, or conversely, if children work few hours. See section 4.5 for a discussion of child labour. Differences between Greater Idleb and Northern Aleppo were statistically significant but not large, with more households in Greater Idleb reporting using any coping strategies (95% compared to 85%).[3]

Please note that while these data suggest a weaker livelihoods situation in Greater Idleb than in Northern Aleppo, households in Northern Aleppo remain highly vulnerable, with high levels of poverty and a limited ability to meet their basic needs. Further, there may be geographic differences within these areas, or population groups with higher levels of needs. It cannot be concluded that all households in Northern Aleppo are better off or have less need for humanitarian assistance.

2.3 Vulnerable Groups

The following looks at how displacement status and the gender of the head of household affect the households' economic status. Please note that this is not an exhaustive discussion of vulnerabilities. For instance, disability, absence of adults, psychological trauma, and others may contribute to a household's economic vulnerability.

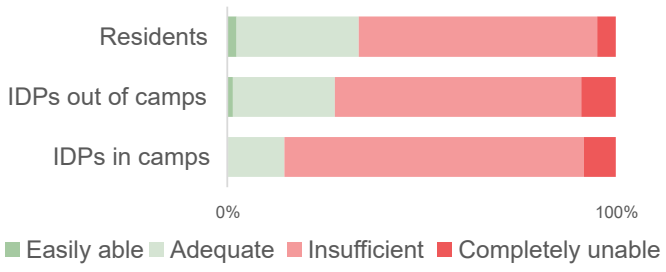
Internal Displacement

Displaced persons in camps showed clear signs of economic vulnerability, with lower rates of stable employment, lower incomes, a worse ability to meet their basic needs, and use of more severe coping strategies.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) here are understood to be those who were forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence in 2011 or later, often due to armed conflict or situations of generalized violence, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border. In Northwest Syria, an estimated 3.4 million out of 5 million people are displaced. Of these, 1.9 million reside in camps, that is displacement sites officially recognised the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) cluster.[18] IDPs tend to have substantially worse access to livelihoods for several reasons. First, in the process of displacement, they often lose any assets they owned, limiting opportunities for entrepreneurship. Second, they may have fewer connections in their new location, such that finding employment is difficult.[23] Third, lack of access to land and shelter can force IDPs to settle in areas with few income opportunities and little fertile land.[24]

Across NWS, households in IDP sites were less likely than host community households and out-of-camp IDPs to have a household member in stable employment, had lower incomes, were less likely to report being able to meet their needs, and used more severe coping strategies in September 2023.[3] An extensive assessment in Mawaham Rahma IDP camp in the Armanaz sub-district in Idleb provides a case study of these issues. Each of the 540 households in the camp were interviewed in mid-2023, and 80% stated that their priority concern in the camp was improvement of livelihoods opportunities. Participants in the community-based planning workshops identified

Figure 3: Ability to Meet Their Basic Needs by Population Group
as per household data from September 2023[16]



the general lack of income opportunities and the lack of professional and vocational skills amongst residents as the root causes, in addition to a lack of start-up capital and productive agricultural land. In the absence of adequate income, households employed severe coping strategies. This included making children under the age of 15 work (20%), marrying off a child under 18 (2.4%), and engaging in socially degrading, exploitative, or dangerous income activities (8%).[25] The weak livelihoods situation appears to have been worse for in-camp IDPs in Greater Idleb than those in Northern Aleppo.[3]

Out-of-camp IDPs - those residing within the boundaries of host communities and outside of CCCM-listed displacement sites - in NWS reported a lower ability to meet their basic needs in September 2023 than host community populations and a greater ability than in-camp IDPs (see figure 3). However, they were no less likely than host community populations to have members in stable employment and reported similar levels of income. The major difference was in the shelter situation of out-of-camp IDPs, and hence in their expenditures – 74% rented their accommodation, compared to only 11% of host communities. Correspondingly, a higher proportion of their incomes went towards rental payments. This left out-of-camp IDPs depending on more severe livelihoods coping strategies.[3]

These results differ from research conducted in 2017/18, which found that displaced persons outside of camps faced loss of immovable assets, such as land, as well as loss of economic opportunities and social connections when they left their place of residence. They relied more heavily than host populations on aid as a source of income, had lower expenditures, higher levels of household hunger, and lower levels of psychosocial well-being.[26] It also differs from findings from other contexts, which emphasise the lack of access to economic opportunities of displaced persons, which often persists over time.[23,27]

Further research would be required to understand the specific conditions of out-of-camp IDPs and how they might achieve economic inclusion. NWS is an interesting case study due to the extremely high level of displacement, with the majority of the population being IDPs.[18] This influx of IDPs has transformed NWS, its economy, and its labour markets. The economic focus shifted from agriculture to include trade, particularly with Türkiye, opening up new forms of employment.[9] While uncertain, it may be that this major upheaval levelled the playing field between host populations and IDPs. At the same time, a multitude of factors may influence an individual IDPs' ability to find stable employment. For instance, social networks are heavily emphasised in the literature.[23,27] If IDPs have family ties to the community they reside in, they may be able to access their networks to find employment. Skills and experience may also facilitate economic integration. For instance, a 2017 study conducted in Syria found that translators, educators, medical personnel, and other skilled professionals were in higher demand than even before the conflict.[26]

Female-Headed Households

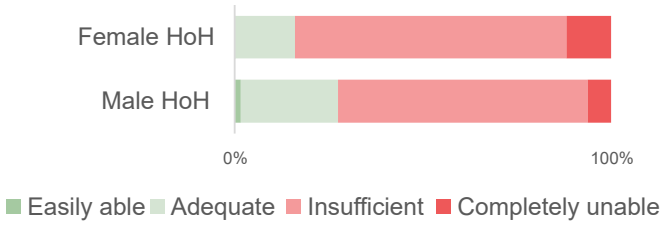
Loss of working-aged male household members has increased the number of female-headed households; these households were less likely to be formally employed, leading to increased economic vulnerability.

Prior to the Syrian conflict, it was estimated that less than 5% of households were female-headed.[28] By 2023, around 15% of households in NWS were female-headed, a threefold increase.[3] This is partly due to the disproportionately high number of male casualties over the course of the conflict. Fatality estimates vary widely; the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated that 75% out of 160,000 civilian fatalities were men, in addition to 340,000 non-civilian deaths.[29] This vulnerability of men within conflict contexts is often overlooked – as one author writes,

"Even if a man does not have weapons and is not engaged in fighting, he is assumed, at the very least, to be willing or able to fight. [...] His demographic characteristics trump his ability to define himself as a civilian by his actions and beliefs." [30]

Hence, though this section focuses on the *economic* vulnerabilities of female-headed households, this does not suggest a lower vulnerability of men.

Figure 4: Ability to Meet Their Basic Needs by Gender of Head of Household
as per household data from September 2023[16]



Female-headed households (FHH) were significantly less likely to have members in stable employment. This is most plausibly linked to the lower number of able-bodied working-aged men in their households.[3] In Syria, female labour force participation is generally low.[31,32] In 2022, only 12% of working-aged women in Greater Idleb and 10% in Northern Aleppo were employed.[1] This is despite years of conflict having led to increased female labour force participation in order to cope with households' economic vulnerability and the absence or disability of male breadwinners.[33,34] The women who did work, were more likely to work informally.[3,34] Corresponding to the lower rates of stable employment, FHH reported lower incomes per person and a lower ability to meet their basic needs (see figure 4).[3]

2.4 Productive Infrastructure

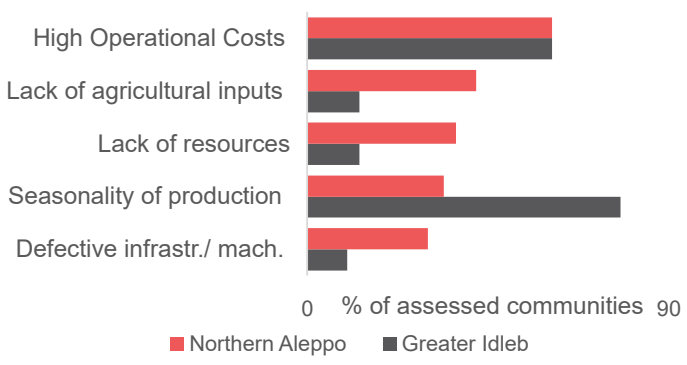
Destruction of agricultural infrastructure has constrained agricultural livelihoods. Damage to or destruction of roads has limited trade and access to employment opportunities. Damage to electricity networks has increased reliance on solar and has reduced overall electricity access.

Infrastructure can have large-scale benefits for economic development.[6,35,36] Returns to roads investments in post-conflict contexts have been shown to exceed investment costs several times over.[6] Electricity is central to business development and industry. It also enables the use of electrical appliances within the household, freeing up labour and improving health outcomes.[6,35,36] Irrigation systems increase agricultural productivity, and so particularly benefit rural populations.[6,37]

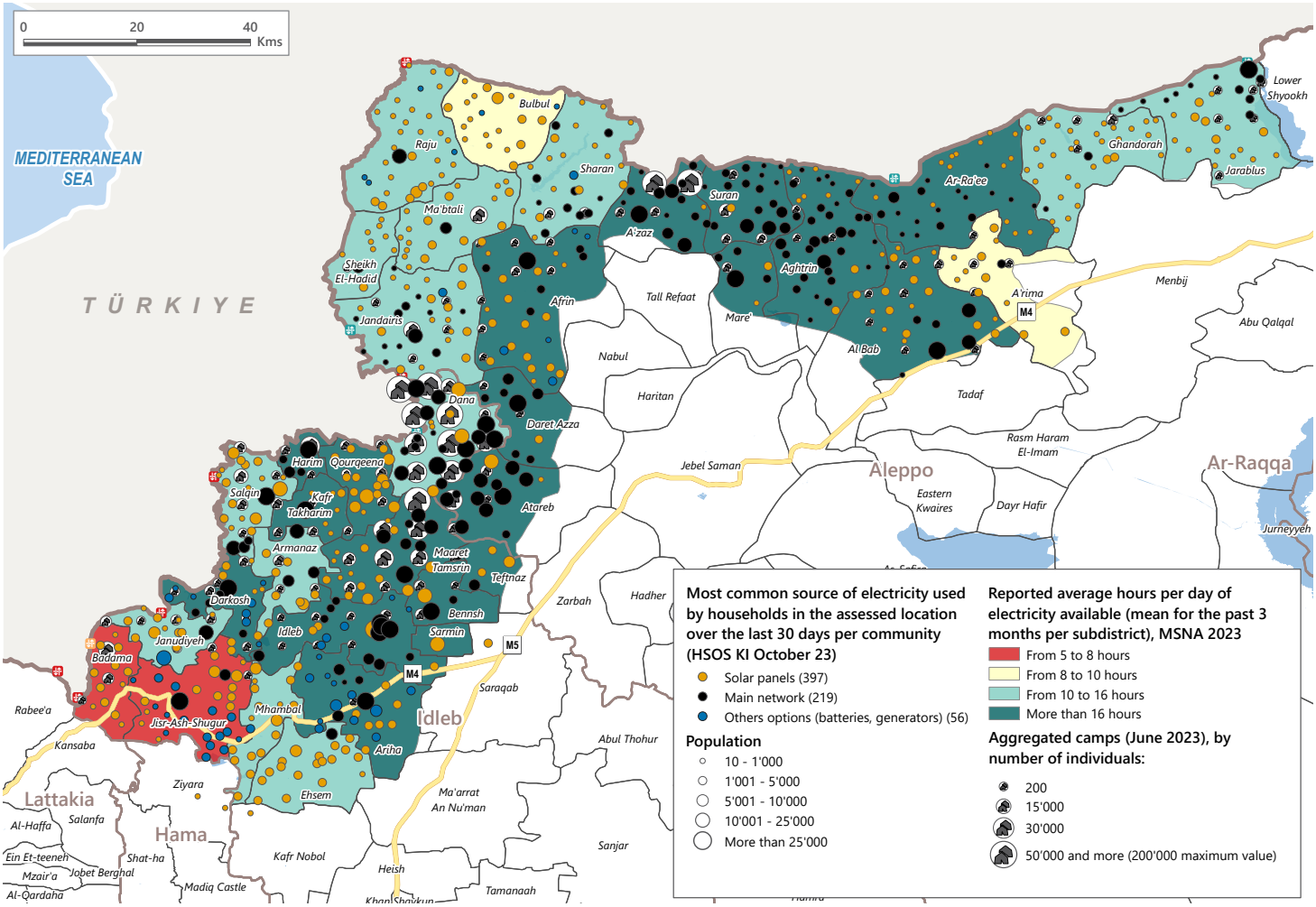
Infrastructure in Syria has suffered severe conflict damage.[33,37,38] Assessments conducted by the World Bank in select cities found that agricultural infrastructure suffered the highest cost of damage.[33] Six years into the conflict, the FAO costed damage to agricultural infrastructure at well over 600 million USD in Idleb and Aleppo governorates.[38] At the same time, access to irrigation is becoming ever more important to mitigate impacts of variable rainfall.[39] Correspondingly, when asked about barriers to agricultural livelihoods, KIs in a quarter of assessed communities reported a lack of water, and another quarter reported that infrastructure was damaged or outdated - both primarily in Northern Aleppo (see figure 5).[5] With its importance to livelihoods and food security,[1,40] addressing barriers to agricultural production may considerably benefit affected populations.

Repair to roads both within and between communities was the most reported infrastructure need, noted by KIs in 94% of assessed communities in February 2024.[5] Roads have major economic impacts at a regional scale, determining the ability to transport goods and the costs thereof, and at the households level, facilitating or hindering access to economic opportunities and services.[6] The February 2023 earthquakes caused further damages, increasing the time and cost of traveling and transporting goods and limiting access to some affected areas.[41]

Figure 5: Barriers to Agricultural Livelihoods
as per KIs in assessed communities in February 2024[5]

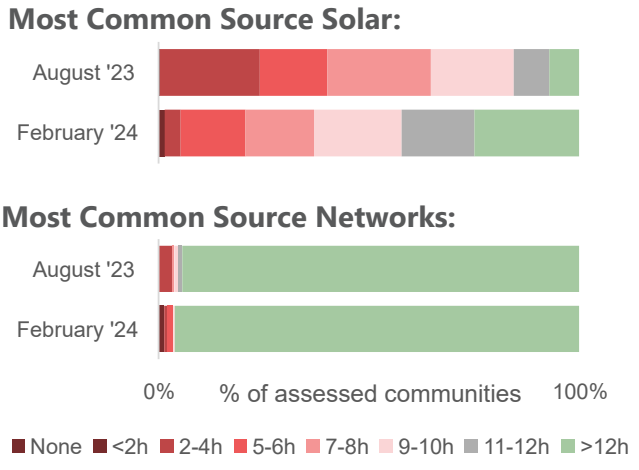


Map 2: Primary Source of Electricity by Community, and Average Hours of Electricity Access per Subdistrict
source of electricity taken from KI data from October 2023,[5] hours of access from household data from September 2023[16]



Solar was the primary source of electricity for over half of households in September 2023.[3] Given the high levels of solar radiation in Syria, this has the potential to provide cost-effective energy.[42,43] However, as solar power systems only generate energy during sunshine hours, electricity supply is unreliable without adequate storage systems.[44] The median households that relied primarily on solar had nine hours of electricity per day.[3] This data was collected during the summer months, when solar power systems are substantially more productive (see figure 6).[5] By contrast, households who relied on the main network reported a median of 24 hours of electricity per day.[3] Looking at KI data, larger communities were much more likely to have access to networks. Possibly due to the larger communities in the area, KIs in Greater Idleb were also more likely to report access to electricity networks than were KIs in Northern Aleppo (see map 2).[5] Though electricity networks were functional, high costs of networks may yet limit households' access to sufficient electricity.[45]

Figure 6: Average Hours of Electricity Access by Primary Source of Electricity in the Community
as per KIs in assessed communities[5]



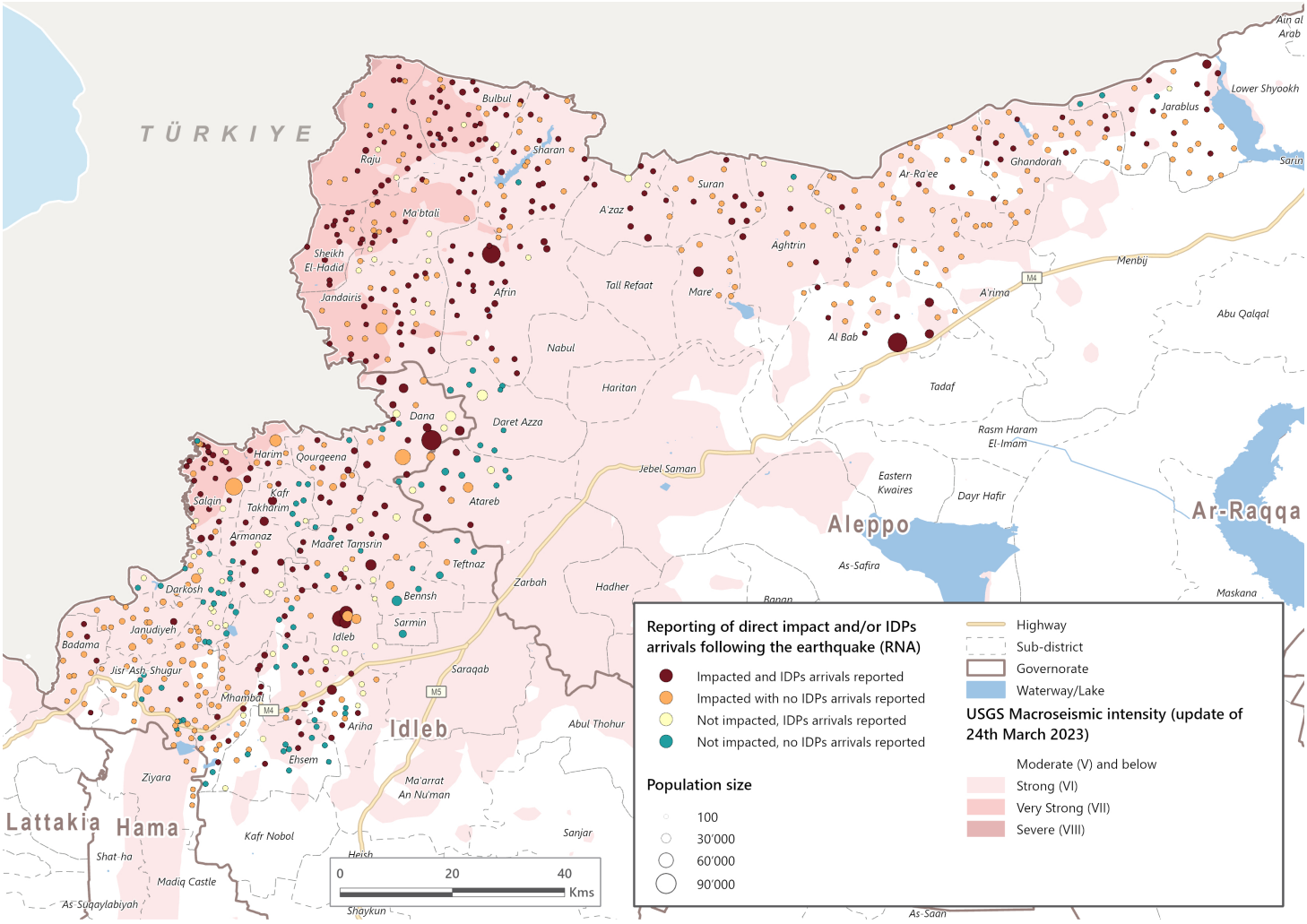
3. Key Drivers of the Economic Crisis

3.1 Earthquakes

In addition to their devastating human impacts, the February 2023 earthquakes caused extensive damage to productive infrastructure, temporary losses in employment, and high levels of further displacement.

A magnitude MW 7.8 earthquake struck southern Türkiye, close to the Syrian border, on 6 February 2023.[1] It was followed by a MW 7.5 earthquake several hours later (see map 3). The loss of life and damage caused by these earthquakes was devastating. Within NWS, 4,500 people are estimated to have died,[3,4] a quarter of a million people are estimated to have lost their homes,[5] and direct physical damages in the whole of Syria were costed at USD

Map 3: Earthquake Shake Intensity and Reported Community-level Impacts
as per key informants in February 2023[2]



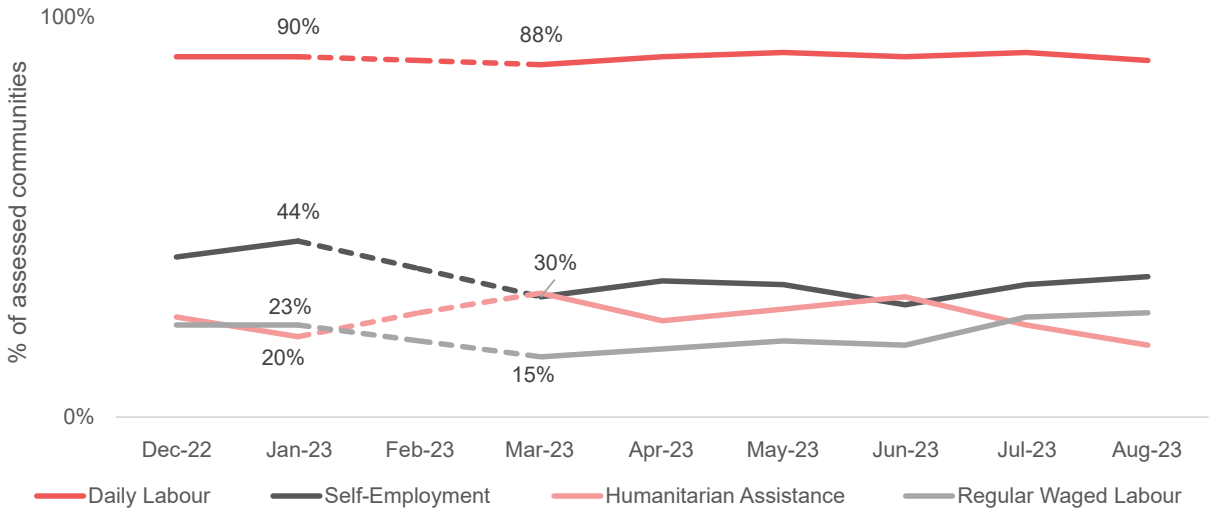
5.2 billion.[3] The direct economic impacts discussed here are only one part of the damage; other impacts, such as psychological trauma to adults and children[6] are no less important, and may themselves affect the households' socio-economic situation through their ability to work.[7,8] These impacts are outside of the scope of this report.

A rapid damage analysis conducted by the World Bank in the immediate aftermath of the disaster indicated that agriculture and food systems experienced the greatest losses in financial terms. This refers in particular to losses in food trade as a result of increased reliance on humanitarian food assistance.[9] Emergency food support increased sixfold in the aftermath of the earthquake from 0.2 million beneficiaries in January 2023 to 1.2 million in March 2023 in NWS.[10] KIs in assessed communities in Greater Idleb were also somewhat more likely to report food assistance as one of the primary sources of food in the months following the earthquakes; data for Northern Aleppo are not available.[11] Declines in food production were expected to be more moderate in comparison,[9] and assessed farmers rarely reported negative impacts of the earthquakes on their harvests in 2023.[12,13] Additionally, markets were found to be functional in the aftermath of the earthquakes,[14] which led to an immediate scale-up of cash assistance.[15] The emphasis on cash may have benefitted the local economy.

Housing, transport, and the environment (including rubble clearance) experienced the highest levels of damage. According to World Bank estimates, around 5% of the total housing stock was partially damaged or destroyed by the earthquakes,[9] and the shelter cluster estimated that a quarter of a million people lost their homes.[5] Then, 11% of primary and secondary roads in earthquake-affected areas were estimated to be damaged. Together with obstruction of roads through debris, this was projected to cause substantial productivity losses due to increased travel times and costs and reduced access to livelihoods[9] (see section 1.4 Productive Infrastructure).

The International Labour Organisation anticipated that the earthquakes would have caused temporary unemployment particularly in the formal sector due to loss of productive assets, but also increases in informal employment, especially in construction.[16] Data on employment and incomes are not collected at a high frequency in NWS, so that accurate estimates of the impacts are not possible. Available data come to mixed conclusions. In April 2023, two-thirds of households in earthquake-affected areas reported a reduction in employment opportunities and 82% reported a decline in incomes.[17] An indicative study from August 2023 found a 14% increase in unemployment in Idleb governorate, with smaller losses in Aleppo governorate, and projected corresponding increases in abject poverty

Figure 7: Select Primary Sources for Meeting Basic Needs
as per KIs in assessed communities[9]



rates.[4] Conversely, in the September 2023, only 1.5% of households who could not meet their basic needs reported direct earthquake losses as a contributing factor, and 0.3% reported indirect impacts.[18] In October 2023, households in four districts in NWS found that incomes of low- and middle-income households had remained stable over the year prior to data collection. Anecdotal evidence suggests that increased employment in the construction sector may have benefitted lower-income households and hence contributed to stable incomes.[19]

Though uncertain, these findings indicate a partial economic recovery may have occured several months after the earthquakes. This is supported by monthly key informant data on the primary means of meeting basic needs in Greater Idleb (see figure 7). The data indicate a reduction in dependence on self-employment and regular wage employment in March 2023, returning to normal levels in the summer months.[11]

Finally, the earthquakes caused further displacement. Few estimates are available, with most citing an indicative finding of 100,000 displaced persons from early March 2023.[20] In September 2023, 2.4% of households across NWS were estimated to have arrived in their location after the earthquakes – equivalent to 3% of individuals. This provides an estimate of 150,000 individuals who arrived between February and September 2023 (95% confidence interval is 65,000 to 340,000, assuming accurate population data).[b] Across the whole of Syria, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimated that displacement of one person caused an average economic loss of USD 830 in 2020, primarily due to their loss of livelihoods and the high costs of sheltering them.[21] As such, earthquake displacement, particularly where displacement persisted over time, may have contributed to substantial economic losses.

[b] In order to estimate the confidence intervals, stratified sampling could not be taken into account as some strata only had one assessed primary sampling unit (community). Ordinarily, not accounting for stratification will yield wide confidence intervals, indicating more conservative estimates. Population data is based on key informant estimates. Confidence intervals do not take into account errors in key informant estimates.

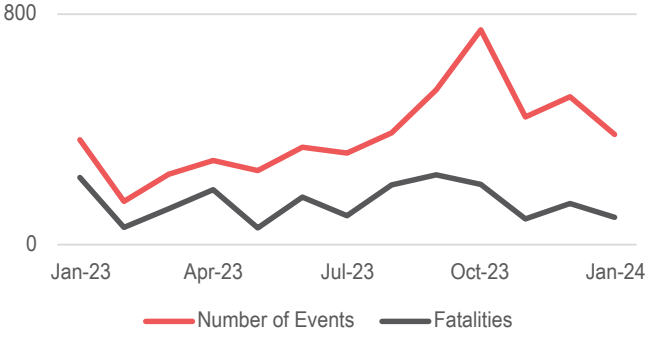
3.2 Conflict

Conflict damages productive infrastructure, causes loss of human capital, and breaks up economic networks, entailing substantial economic costs.

Conflict activity in Syria has reduced over the past years, but conflict is far from over. Between February 2023 and February 2024, ACLED registered 4,600 instances of explosions or remote violence, battles, and violence against civilians in Aleppo and Idleb governorates, amounting to 1,700 fatalities (see map 4; figure 8). October 2023 saw a notable escalation of explosions and remote violence[22] due to an escalation of hostilities between conflict actors.[23]

These types of escalations have immediate repercussions for livelihoods, in addition to the human impacts. During a rapid assessment in Greater Idleb on 10 and 11 October 2023, KIs in a third of communities reported that access to livelihoods had significantly decreased, and half that it had slightly decreased. The main reasons were the reduction in demand for daily labour (reported by KIs in 66% of assessed communities) and lack of access to workplaces due to insecurity (62%).[24] This additionally highlights the vulnerability of households relying on incomes from daily labour to sudden disruptions.

Figure 8: Instances of Explosions or Remote Violence, Battles, and Violence Against Civilians in Aleppo and Idleb Governorates and Associated Fatalities[19]



Persistent conflict over the past 13 years has had cumulative and long-term impacts on the economy. It has caused damage to physical capital, such as infrastructure and productive assets. Social and economic networks have broken up due to forced displacement and loss of life, and human capital has been lost.[25]

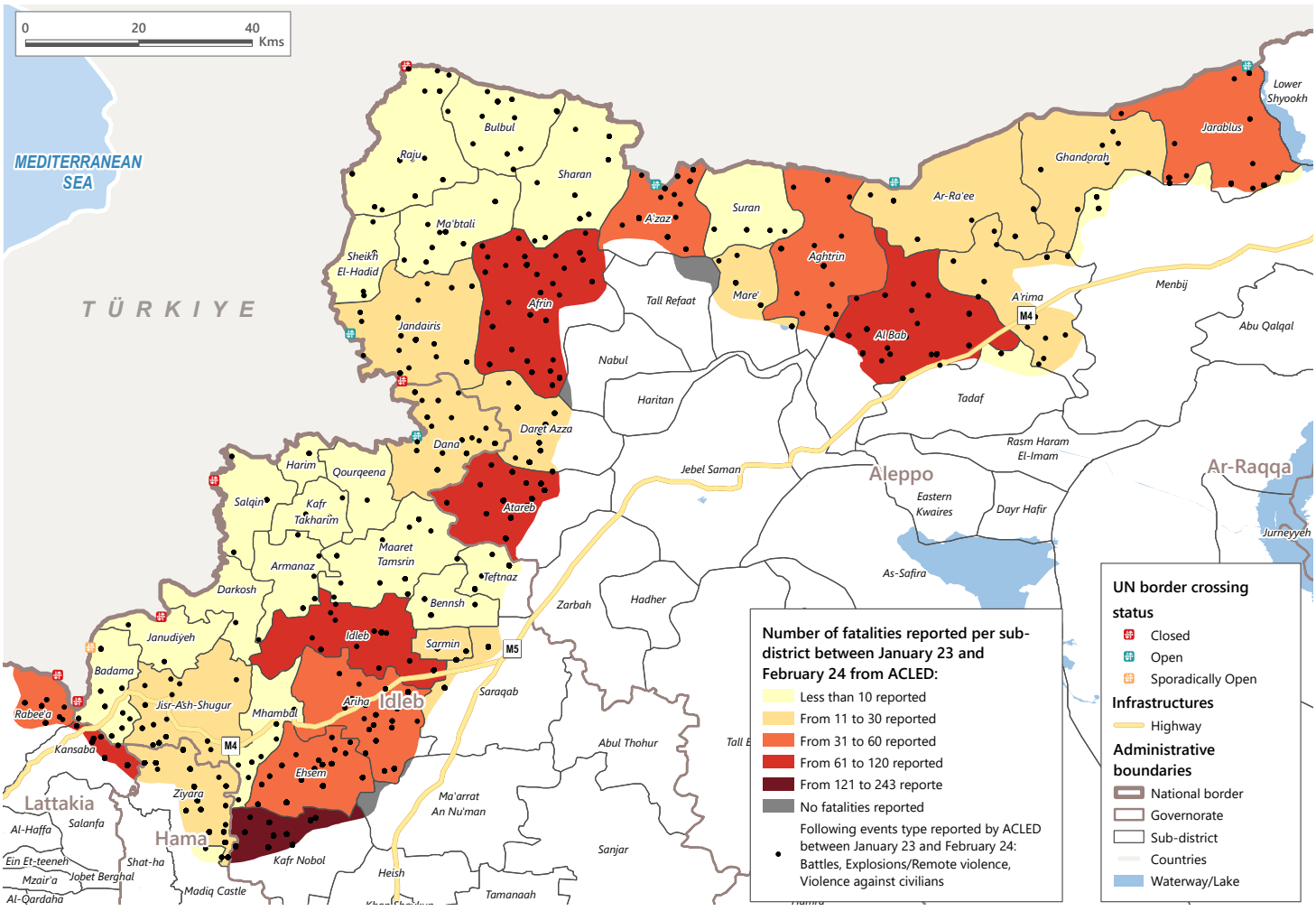
However, there is some disagreement over the extent to which the economy has continued to function. The World Bank found that national real Gross Domestic Product (GDP)[c] halved between 2010 and 2019 and was almost 40% lower than the predicted real GDP absent conflict.[26] By contrast, a 2023 study estimated that the national real GDP per capita[d] rapidly declined in the first two years of conflict, but began to recover in 2013 and exceeded pre-war levels by 2020.[27] The researchers explained this through the relatively low reliance of the Syrian economy on capital-intensive industries, which are more susceptible to conflict impacts, and high levels of humanitarian assistance. This may have counteracted the large drop in exports and investments.[27] However, high levels of reliance on humanitarian assistance, particularly emergency assistance, is unsustainable. The World Bank additionally used night light to estimate GDP. This is a well-established methodology with a relatively high accuracy. These estimates indicate a strong decline in GDP, though far less severe than using national statistical data. Night light has the additional benefit of allowing for spatial analysis; it shows that by 2021, Idleb governorate had experienced the most severe reductions in real GDP, estimated at over 60%.[26]

The corresponding impacts on households have been extensive.

- Impacts on agricultural livelihoods included direct and indirect attacks on agricultural land, causing destruction of annual and perennial crops, extensive damage to infrastructure,[28,29] disruptions to agricultural value chains,[25] and reduced access to land due to insecurity and contamination with unexploded ordnances.[29,30]
- Physical access to work has been impacted. In September 2023, 5% of households reported that the presence of explosive ordnances (including shelling, airstrikes, mines, and others) limited their access to livelihoods;[18] note that this was in the month prior to the October 2023 conflict escalation.
- Displaced persons lost access to their livelihoods and any assets they were not able to carry with them, especially land and property.[31]
- In some households, the primary breadwinners died or became unable to work. At times, this has left women, who face higher levels of economic exclusion, as the sole income earners while often taking on unpaid caregiving roles.[17,31,32]

These dynamics are summarised by a 2017 assessment in Syria that found that households who experienced more conflict events, including physical harm, property damage, displacement, and insecurity, were significantly worse-off. This included poorer food security, lower housing quality,

Map 4: Conflict Fatalities by Subdistrict in NWS[19]



[c] Data used comes from the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics.
[d] Data used comes from the Penn World Tables 10.0, which primarily used UN National Accounts Main Aggregates Database for nominal GDP estimates, which relied on the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics estimates for 2010-2021.

and greater intention to emigrate. Displaced households additionally had lower expenditures and lower levels of psychosocial well-being compared to host populations. At the same time, many households had shown remarkable adaptability, with over a third having found new income opportunities since the start of the conflict.[31]

3.3 Currency Depreciations

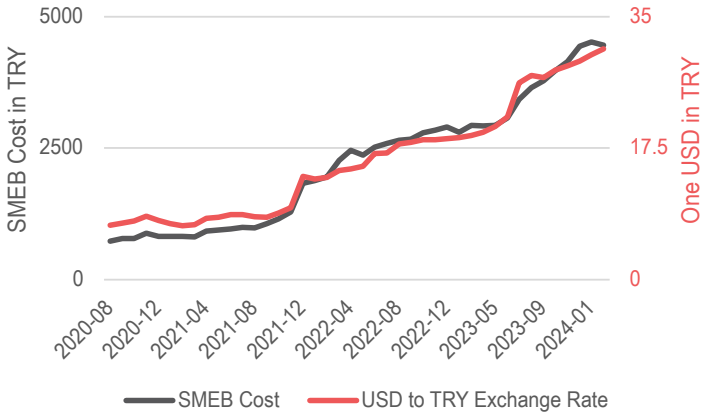
The Turkish Lira has continued to lose value, leading to an increase in consumer prices in NWS. Limited available data tentatively suggest that wages for low-income households have increased with price inflation, keeping purchasing power stable.

NWS primarily uses the Turkish Lira (TRY), and, to a lesser extent, the US Dollar (USD).[18,33] The TRY has depreciated considerably over the past years, particularly since late 2021.[34] Turkish monetary policy changed in mid-2023, with some expectations that the currency would stabilise as a consequence. This has not yet materialised, with depreciation rates remaining high.[35] With NWS' reliance on the Turkish lira, the area has experienced rapid price inflation. Consider figure 9, which maps the cost of the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB) – roughly the cost of basic goods a household of 6 people would require to survive for one month – and the USD-to-TRY exchange rates between August 2020 and February 2024. It suggests an immediate and approximately 1-to-1 impact of exchange rates on prices (Pearson's correlation coefficient is 0.99)[e]. This is particularly visible in December 2021, when the TRY lost 30% of its value against the USD, and again in July 2023, which saw a 17% depreciation.[36]

When incomes do not increase at a similar pace as inflation, household purchasing power decreases. Interestingly, key informant estimates of unskilled daily labour wages in their communities increased somewhat more quickly than SMEB prices. Specifically, SMEB prices were estimated to have increased by 52% between March 2023 and February 2024 in NWS, while average wage estimates increased by 76%.[11,36] These findings do not necessarily reflect the situation of incomes in general. Unskilled daily labour wages may form a sort of subsistence wage,[37] which is the minimum wage needed for survival. Subsistence wages would need to increase to reflect the higher costs of goods essential for survival, which may explain the increases in unskilled daily labour wages. Alternatively, if the February 2023 earthquakes increased demand for unskilled labour, for instance in construction and debris removal, this may have caused an increase in wage rates for those employment groups. A household-level data collection in a few sub-districts of NWS in October 2023 did find differential developments by income groups. Households with lower or medium incomes reported stable incomes between October 2022 and October 2023, while those with relatively higher incomes reported reductions.[19] However, note that in September 2023, three quarters of households were insufficiently able to meet their basic needs, with virtually all of them having reported high prices of food and essential goods as a reason.[18] Hence, stable wages do not seem to correspond with wage sufficiency.

Figure 9: Cost of SMEB Compared to USD to TRY Exchange Rates

as per vendor KIs in assessed markets[33]



3.4 Reductions in Humanitarian Funding

Humanitarian funding has substantially decreased, with uncertain impacts on local markets.

Reductions in humanitarian funding for Syria garnered international attention in December 2023 when the World Food Programme (WFP) announced an end to its general food assistance programme.[38–41] WFP programmes went from covering 5.6 million people across the whole of Syria in January 2023,[42] to 3.5 million in December 2023,[43] down to 0.1 million in January 2024.[44] The target number of beneficiaries for 2024 is 0.8 million per month.[45] While the WFP was the focus of attention, large funding gaps exist across all sectors.[46] At the end of 2023, the 2023 humanitarian response plan was only 39% funded; the largest gaps relative to needs were for camp coordination and camp management, education, and nutrition, and the largest gap in absolute terms were for food security and livelihoods (USD 1.2 b).[47]

UN OCHA reported consequences of underfunding across sectors in NWS, including suspension of nutrition interventions despite increasing signs of malnutrition, suspension or closure of 54 education facilities in the last quarter of 2023 despite there not having been enough schools, and less than half of households who required winterisation assistance receiving any support.[46]

It is difficult to quantify the impacts of funding cuts on livelihoods, as exemplified by the decrease in food assistance. As households buy the majority of the food they consume,[11,33] they are strongly affected by market dynamics. Academic literature broadly suggests that the provision of imported food assistance decreases market prices. However, this depends on the type and targeting of food assistance, and the extent to which local markets are integrated into regional or global markets. For instance, if aid recipients were to buy less food in the market or if they were to sell assistance items, then prices would usually go down. Conversely, if markets are well-integrated, then the cheaper food might be exported at a profit rather than being sold locally, keeping prices stable. This suggests that, following a reduction in food assistance, market prices may either increase or remain stable. [48–50]

[e] Pearson's correlation coefficient is a common statistical measure of the correlation between two variables. A coefficient of 0.99 indicates an almost perfect correlation.

Assuming prices do rise, this would increase the revenues of local producers during the harvest season. Even so, there may be barriers to individuals taking up agricultural work if access to agricultural land, equipment, and inputs is restricted or prohibitively expensive. This may limit expansion of local production, compensated either through imports or else leading to reduced availability of food in the markets. Furthermore, price increases are detrimental to low-income consumers who are less able to afford the increased cost of living.[48–50]

Looking at data from NWS prior to the WFP reductions, households who received food assistance spent significantly less on food than households that did not, even after controlling for differences in incomes.[18] A loss in access to food assistance might then cause affected households to increase food expenditures,[f] increasing market demand and thus putting an upward pressure on prices. However, markets did not show signs of price increases in January or February 2024.[36] While this is somewhat surprising, it highlights the complexity of aid impacts on local markets. Further analysis would be needed to understand how vendors and supply chains responded to the drop in aid, and how affected populations' consumption and spending patterns may have adjusted.

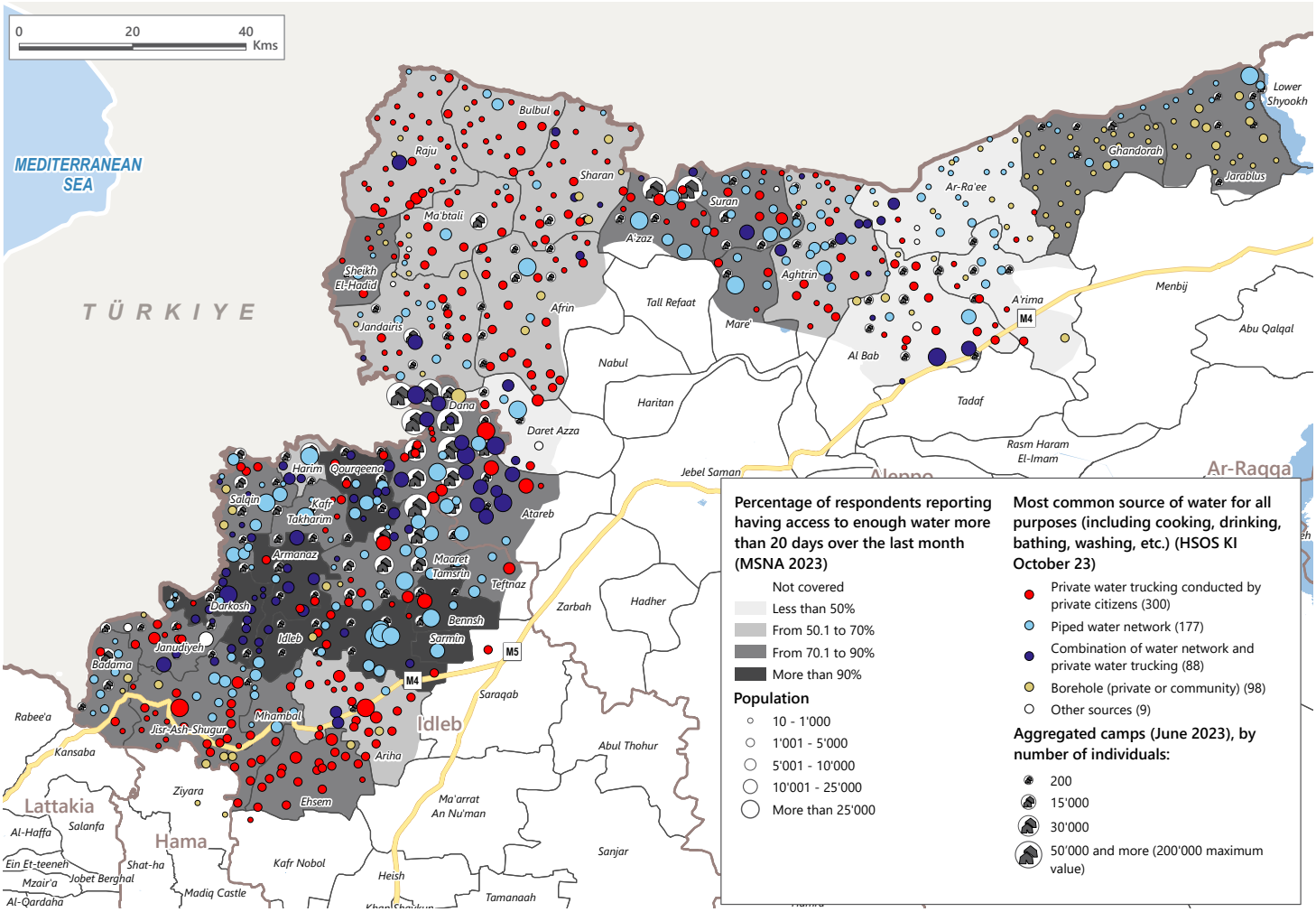
4. Socio-Economic Barriers Impacting Access to Essential Goods and Services

4.1 Food Security and Nutrition

Poverty is a major barrier to food security; food insecurity in turn can increase the likelihood of poverty by worsening nutrition and health outcomes.

As of 2023, a total of 280,000 people in NWS were estimated to be severely food insecure and 1.3 million were moderately food insecure, a substantial increase over previous years.[1] Amidst increasing food insecurity and various health concerns, rates of malnutrition have been increasing.[2] The largest barrier to food security appears to be financial, as essential food items were generally available in markets[3,4] and most households in NWS reportedly purchased the food they consumed.[5] Of the financial barriers to food security, the high cost of food is likely the greatest. Food constituted the largest proportion of household expenditures – a third of households reported that more than half of their expenditures went towards food in September 2023,[6] indicating food insecurity.[7] Similarly, a separate assessment of out-of-camp populations in late 2023 found that the primary

Map 5: Primary Source of Water by Community, and Water Sufficiency by Subdistrict
source of water taken from KI data from October 2023,[2] water sufficiency from household data from September 2023[13]



[f] Higher food expenditures would have a knock-on effect on households' abilities to meet other basic needs, given the particularly low income levels currently observed.

barriers to households accessing food were high prices and a lack of money to purchase food. Additionally, in three-quarters of communities in Greater Idleb and two-thirds in Northern Aleppo, KIs reported that access to markets is limited by the high cost of transportation or the absence thereof.[3] These findings have been consistent over time, suggesting that the weak livelihoods situation is the primary barrier to food security within Syria.[8]

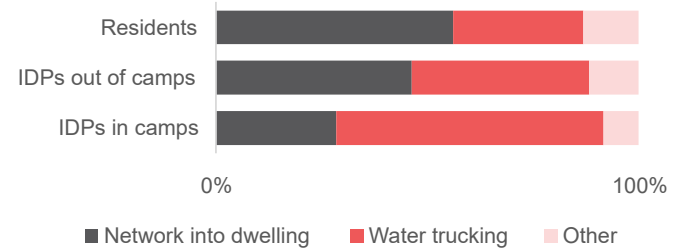
The relationship between poverty, food security, and nutrition goes in both directions. Poorer households are less able to afford food, which impacts their food security.[5,6] By relying on less or lower-quality foods, in addition to worse sanitation and higher levels of health risks, individuals in poverty are more likely to become malnourished. Malnutrition as early as in utero (during pregnancy) and in the first year of life can have lasting consequences, including higher risk of mortality, higher risk of disease, and reduced capacity to learn and work – increasing their risk of poverty. Without intervention, this can have impacts across generations, as parents who were malnourished as children are more likely to be poor and less likely to be able to afford adequate food and health for their own children.[9,10]

4.2 Water Access

Many households were unable to afford sufficient quantities of water, especially those who relied on water trucking.

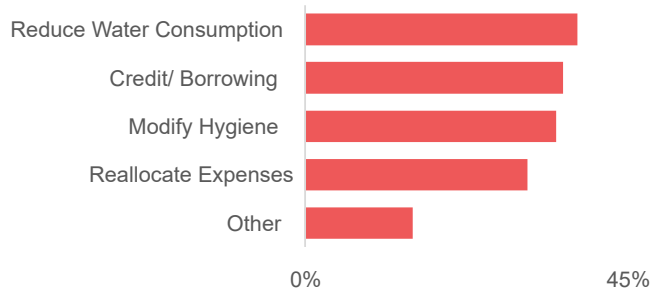
As of September 2023, water was primarily provided through trucking and piped networks in NWS. This was clearly split by population group (see figure 10), with around two thirds of in-camp populations relying primarily on trucked water and almost 60% of host community populations relying on piped networks. Comparing to households that relied exclusively on networks, those that relied on trucking reported higher water expenditures and lower rates of water sufficiency (see map 5).[11] Given that access to trucked water depends foremost on the households' ability to pay the trucker, water insufficiency can be understood as an economic issue in NWS. This is supported by key informants, who most commonly noted the high cost of water trucking as a barrier to accessing sufficient water in assessed communities.[3] In response to high costs, around a third of households who did not have sufficient water every day reported borrowing money or water or using credit, and around a third reported spending less on other essential goods and services (see figure 11).[6]

Figure 10: Primary Source of Water By Population Group
as per households in September 2023[13]



Research on the link between water availability and health focuses primarily on the impacts of water quality, with fewer studies looking at the impacts of water shortages. Existing literature suggests that by compromising hygiene practices, households may be more vulnerable to disease. Once drinking water consumption is reduced, the effects of dehydration are severe and may be lasting. Overall, insecure water access is associated with high levels of psychological distress and with worse health outcomes.[12,13] Negative health outcomes in turn limit economic productivity (see section 3.3 Access to Healthcare).

Figure 11: Strategies to Adjust to the Lack of Water
as per households who did not have sufficient water in September 2023[13]



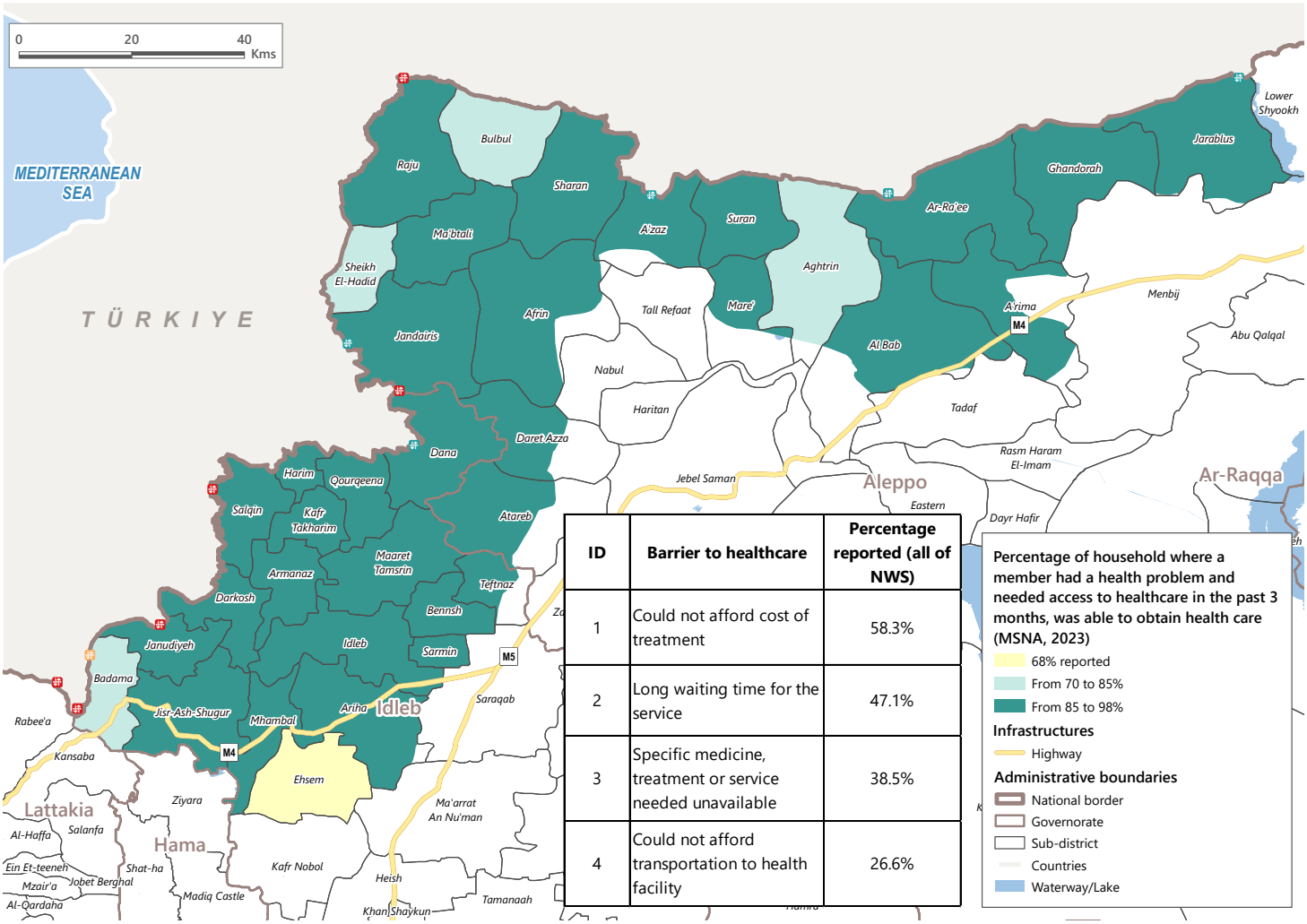
4.3 Access to Healthcare

The primary barrier to healthcare for households in NWS was affordability. The relationship between poverty and health goes in two directions, with poverty limiting access to care, and ill-health increasing the risk of poverty.

Most individuals in NWS who needed healthcare were able to access some level of care in mid-2023 (see map 6),[6] although not all health services were accessible.[5] Of the households in which at least one member could not access the care they needed, the most common barrier was unaffordability of treatment in September 2023 (58%). Households in Northern Aleppo also commonly experienced unaffordability of transport (38%) and of consultations (35%), which were somewhat less common in Greater Idleb. Even for households that were able to access care, 44% reported an inability to afford treatment.[6] This is despite widespread reliance on public health services[5,6] and the relatively high levels of health assistance in NWS.[14]

While households' economic conditions impacted their access to healthcare, ill health and access to care conversely impact the households' economic situation. There is extensive literature on these dynamics, which shows clearly that out-of-pocket health spendings are associated with increased rates of poverty and use of negative coping strategies, from borrowing money and selling assets to taking children out of school and reducing food expenditures.[15–18] Having an ill household member is associated with fewer household members working, reduced hours of labour, and lower incomes.[17] September 2023 data from NWS indicates that, on average, 5% of total household expenditures went towards health, ranging from 0% to well over 20%. While there is no

Map 6: Proportion of Individuals Who Required Health Care and Accessed It, and Barriers to Accessing Care For Individuals Who Required Care But Were Unable to Access It
as per households in September 2023[4]



ID	Barrier to healthcare	Percentage reported (all of NWS)
1	Could not afford cost of treatment	58.3%
2	Long waiting time for the service	47.1%
3	Specific medicine, treatment or service needed unavailable	38.5%
4	Could not afford transportation to health facility	26.6%

Percentage of household where a member had a health problem and needed access to healthcare in the past 3 months, was able to obtain health care (MSNA, 2023)
- 68% reported
- From 70 to 85%
- From 85 to 98%

Infrastructures
- Highway

Administrative boundaries
- National border
- Governorate
- Sub-district
- Countries
- Waterway/Lake

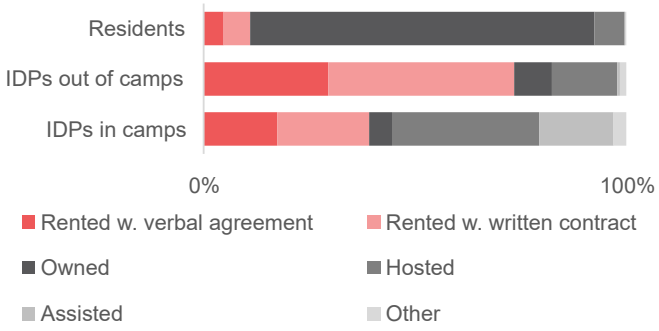
agreed-upon standard for healthcare expenditures,[17] households with higher health expenditures per person reported a significantly lower ability to meet their basic needs. Conversely, higher incomes per household member were significantly correlated with higher health expenditures per capita, possibly due to economically worse-off households not being able to access the same level of healthcare, or only being able to access lower-cost care.[6] These findings require further research to validate and contextualise them.

4.4 Shelter and Winterisation

Most out-of-camp IDPs rented their shelters, but inability to pay their rents left many at risk of eviction. Winterisation items were widely unaffordable, with inadequate access to heating posing health risks especially in-camps.

Out-of-camp IDPs were the only population group who commonly paid rent for their shelters in September 2023 (see figure 12). By contrast, over 80% of host community populations owned their accommodation. Of the out-of-camp IDPs that rented, 13% reported that they faced eviction due to their inability to pay.[6] A year earlier, an assessment similarly found that 10% of IDPs who rented

Figure 12: Shelter Occupancy Arrangements by Population Group
as per households in September 2023[13]



were unable to pay their rents. Two-thirds of those also reported high rental prices as a barrier to finding accommodation and a quarter reported high deposits.[19] This suggests that the weak socio-economic situation of households is a threat to their access to adequate housing and tenure security. Several indicators suggest that households in Northern Aleppo struggled more with these issues, paying around twice as much on rents and a significantly higher proportion of their incomes in September 2023,[6] and in September 2022 reporting higher rates of inability to pay and difficulties in finding

accommodation due to high prices.[19] There is also mixed and inconclusive evidence that the earthquakes may have worsened rental conditions due to the widespread damage to housing, as well as population movement towards less-damaged communities, increasing demand and thus prices in those areas.[3,20–22]

In-camp IDPs at times had to rent the land they settled.[6,19,23] This was over eight times as common in Greater Idleb in September 2023, at 48% compared to 6% in Northern Aleppo. The reason for this large difference between Northern Aleppo and Greater Idleb is not clear. Rents for in-camp populations were significantly lower, at around a fifth of what out-of-camp populations were paying.[6] Anecdotal evidence suggests that IDPs are able to shelter free of cost on public land, but may decide to settle on private land closer to urban areas to secure their access to basic goods and services.[23] Given the particular economic vulnerability of in-camp populations (see section 1.3 Vulnerable Groups), obligations to pay rent may further limit their ability to afford their basic needs.

Northwest Syria can become dangerously cold in the winter, including sub-zero temperatures and snowstorms.[24–26] Yet, households struggle to access winterisation items each year. A 2022 data collection estimated that around 10% of household expenditures went towards fuel for heating and cooking, despite total expenditures already being lower than the minimum needed to meet basic needs.[27] Simply put, households likely had to compromise their access to essential goods and services in order to afford heating. In September 2023, three-quarters of households reported not having heating fuel and being unable to afford it, and half reported this for winter clothing and winter heaters.[6] This is particularly dangerous for populations living in tents, which provide minimal protection from the cold. KI data indicated that in-camp IDPs primarily relied on firewood for heating.[28] In the absence of modern stoves and good ventilation, burning firewood indoors is both inefficient and poses high risks to human health.[29,30] Even more concerningly, anecdotal evidence suggests that households light open fires or burn trash to stay warm, causing fire hazards and health risks due to toxic fumes.[24,31,32] This again links poverty to adverse health outcomes.

4.5 Education and Child Labour

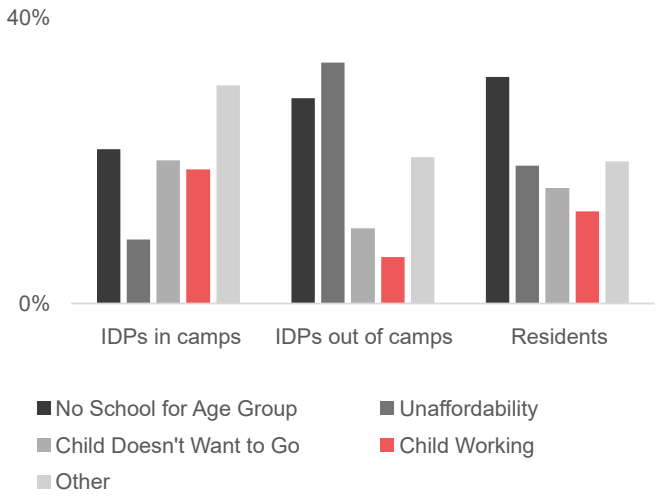
Children, especially boys and in-camp IDP children, are often unable to attend school due to the cost of education or due to child labour. Reduced education is expected to increase poverty in the long run.

Less than two thirds of school-aged children were enrolled and regularly attending formal school in September 2023, with somewhat fewer attending in Greater Idleb (60%) than in Northern Aleppo (67%). When asked about the primary reason why their child was not attending, respondents most commonly noted the lack of schools for the child's age group, followed by the unaffordability of education, children not wanting to attend, and having to work to support the family (see figure 12).[6] This aligns with other research that found lack of transportation and high costs of schooling to be the primary external barriers to education, while having to work was the primary barrier within the household.[33]

In total, 5% of school-aged children were reportedly unable to attend school *primarily* due to having to work.[6] Work that interferes with children's education is considered child labour and is targeted by the International Labour Organization for abolition.[34] Child labour disproportionately affected boys, with 8% of boys being out of school *primarily* due to work compared to 3% of girls.[6,33] Additionally, children of in-camp IDPs were significantly less likely to be regularly attending school, and child labour was significantly more often reported as the primary reason than was the case with out-of-camp populations.[6]

The connection between poor livelihoods and child labour is mutually reinforcing. Households that are less well-off are less able to afford education and more likely to rely on child labour as an additional source of income. At the same time, children who work are more likely to leave school early or perform worse, and more likely to suffer from ill-health as adults, hence earning lower incomes. High levels of unskilled child labour may also depress wages for unskilled adults, leading to a cycle in which low wages increase reliance on child labour, and child labour in turn leads to lower wages.[35] A contributing factor to these dynamics may be the reported increases in cost of education. This is a result of privatisation of education in light of funding deficits for public schools,[36] and is likely to be made worse by the closure of humanitarian-led education facilities due to funding losses.[37] Finally, with the lack of skilled employment opportunities, returns to education are lower and households may have fewer incentives to invest in higher education.[38]

Figure 12: Reasons for School-Aged Children Not Attending School
as per households in September 2023[13]



5. Summary and Conclusions

Access to livelihoods for households in Northwest Syria was limited to unstable and low-income employment. While most households had a household member who worked at least some of the time, in many cases this was daily, casual, or temporary labour. These forms of unstable employment provide no guarantee of steady employment and no insurance in crisis situations. Even while working, most households had extremely low incomes and were partially or completely unable to meet their basic needs. This particularly affected households in Greater Idleb, who saw lower rates of stable employment, lower incomes, a lower ability to meet their basic needs, and relied on more severe coping strategies. Even though the situation in Northern Aleppo appeared to be less severe, poverty remained widespread and detrimental.

Displacement levels in NWS are persistently high, with the population split almost evenly between host communities, out-of-camp internally displaced people (IDPs), and in-camp IDPs. Of those, in-camp IDPs showed the highest levels of economic vulnerability. This includes low rates of employment and low incomes, dependence on humanitarian assistance, and a lack of ability to meet their basic needs. In most other contexts, out-of-camp IDPs also show weak economic integration as they leave behind their work, productive assets, and networks when they become displaced. These dynamics are not as apparent in NWS, where out-of-camp IDPs had similar levels of stable employment and incomes to host communities. However, they spend substantial amounts of their incomes on rent, which may explain why they reported a lower ability to meet their meets compared to host communities.

Conflict dynamics are highly gendered. While the vast majority of casualties are men, the families they leave behind often face economic exclusion. Female-headed households had fewer working-aged men, fewer working adults, lower incomes, and a lower ability to meet their basic needs. This strongly suggests that female-headed household were systematically worse-off than male-headed households.

In 2023 and early 2024, some of the key drivers of the economic crisis included the February 2023 earthquakes, conflict, currency depreciation, and humanitarian funding cuts. The earthquakes caused widespread damage to productive infrastructure, notably transport networks. It also caused high levels of displacement, with corresponding economic repercussions. At the same time, evidence of labour market impacts was mixed. By contrast, conflict has had both immediate impacts on labour markets by limiting physical access to workplaces, and long-term impacts through destruction of infrastructure and break-ups of economic and social networks. Currency depreciation – referring in NWS to the Turkish Lira – has led to rapid price inflation over the past years. Any households whose incomes have not kept pace are likely to have faced rapid declines in purchasing power. However, evidence on wage inflation is missing, and so no clear statement can be made regarding the impact of currency depreciation on livelihoods. Lastly, humanitarian funding cuts have important but complex implications for local markets. With a lack of detailed information on how markets function and how both vendors and households respond, it is not clear how prices and availability of goods will develop.

With the current economic situation, households are facing a lack of access to essential goods and services.

- Food is the largest expenditure for households. Without sufficient incomes, households had to compromise on other basic needs to ensure they had enough food.
- Households who relied on water from truckers faced high prices, leading them to reduce water usage despite the health impacts this may have.
- Access to healthcare is limited by unaffordability, with households who have to spend substantially on care being more likely to be pushed into poverty while illness makes them less able to earn incomes.
- Out-of-camp IDPs, especially in Northern Aleppo, faced high rents which they were unable to afford, with many facing evictions as a result.
- Households were unable to afford winter heating, which is particularly concerning for IDPs in tents and, anecdotally, may be forcing them to rely on unsafe heating sources.
- Children were often unable to go to school because households could not afford it or because they needed to work to support their families. Child labour often reduces individuals' earnings later in life, risking locking populations into poverty.

Poverty in NWS is indisputably a driver of humanitarian needs. As long as conflict and other issues are ongoing, there is little hope that the economy will recover on a large scale. However, even in fragile and conflict-affected countries, the literature shows clearly that livelihoods programmes can work and may be more effective in meeting recurring needs.[1,2] What exactly works varies according to the aims of the programme and the context in which it is implemented. The following therefore does not provide recommendations on which programmes should be implemented. Rather, it aims to show that there is a scope for effective humanitarian action that can help to relieve suffering caused by economic destitution.

Cash and capital interventions for businesses and individuals have had consistent positive impacts in conflict contexts.[1,3] Cash and small business grants significantly increase levels of self-employment. While self-employment is often insufficient as the only source of income, it can help to reduce underemployment and stabilise incomes while increasing savings and assets.[1] There is, however, some evidence that the magnitude of impacts depends on the size of the grant.[4] Cost of business assessments[5,6] may help to identify appropriate transfer values. Provision of agricultural inputs in Syria has also been effective in securing employment, increasing food availability in markets, and improving households' food security.[3,7]

By contrast, impacts of microcredit were more mixed as households participating in microcredit programmes in low-income and conflict contexts were often unable to repay their loans.[1,2,8,9]

Technical and vocational trainings have been shown to be effective in increasing employment and incomes if they are appropriately designed.[9–11] This includes greater benefits to programmes with a gender focus, such as those aiming to confront gendered social norms or remove barriers to women's labour market participation.[10] Some evidence indicates that women generally benefit more strongly from trainings than men.[1] Trainings that targeted youth specifically were also found to be effective,[11] although youths' perceptions of such programmes were more often negative than positive.[12] Importantly, programmes tend to only succeed if they take into account skills demands in the market,[2,9] and were often expensive relative to their impacts.[1]

Solutions to alleviate poverty can come from the expertise of local organisations, the affected population, and the emerging literature on the impacts of employment programmes. The benefits extend far beyond economic indicators. For example, reducing poverty may improve access to food and water, improving households' health. In case of illness, improving earnings may increase households' ability to access healthcare. Children may be able to return to school. Displaced persons may be less at risk of evictions once they are able to secure their rents. As discussed above, these benefits matter not only for today, but for generations to come.

ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, Acted and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).

ABOUT THE EARLY RECOVERY AND LIVELIHOODS CLUSTER (NWS)

The Early Recovery and Livelihoods (ERL) Cluster for North-West Syria (NWS) aims at increasing access to livelihoods and job opportunities for people, improving equitable access to basic services, and strengthening social cohesion within communities. The ERL cluster is a humanitarian cluster hosted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) under the inter-cluster coordination system for cross-border operations, ensuring the coordination of response interventions of 90 partner organizations.

6. ENDNOTES

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