

Turning data into action: Meeting humanitarian challenges amid funding shortfalls in Syria

May 2024 | Northern Syria

KEY MESSAGES

- In the face of decreasing humanitarian funding, the effective utilisation of **impartial, independent, and comprehensive evidence and analysis** at all levels of the humanitarian response is essential to ensure that aid programming is tailored to the needs of vulnerable Syrians. Data plays a crucial role in guiding **resource targeting and prioritisation**, while **ensuring accountability to affected populations**.
- As funding shortages have led to significant reductions in humanitarian assistance, notably the cessation of the World Food Programme's General Food Assistance operations, emerging data provides an important baseline to **identify the first impacts of the food aid cuts** and ensure that **life-saving assistance reaches those most in need**.
- The cuts in food assistance have impacted [over a million internally displaced persons](#) (IDPs) in sites across Northwest Syria, as well as out-of-camp IDPs and host communities across Northern Syria more broadly. Against the backdrop of a worsening economic crisis, these reductions **threaten to destabilise markets and further increase prices**. The reallocation of households' limited incomes to purchase food risks **undermining people's ability to meet other essential needs** and could **exacerbate negative coping strategies**.

RISING NEEDS, DIMINISHING LIFELINES

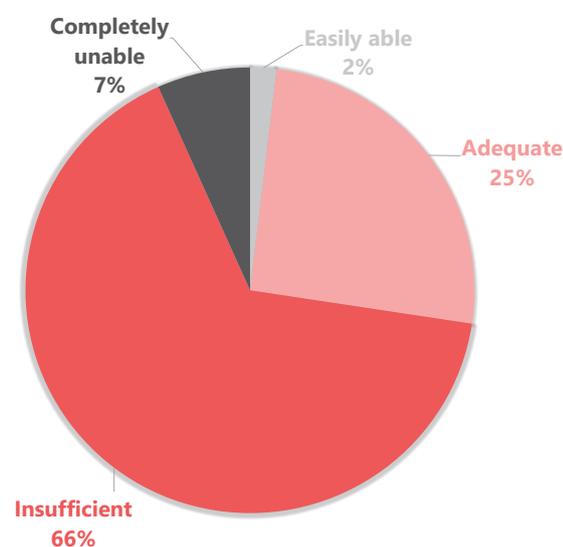
Conflict, economic decline and the deterioration of essential infrastructure and service delivery have led to a severe and complex humanitarian outlook for Northern Syria. Last year saw some of the most significant escalations of violence recorded since 2020 in both Northeast (NES) and Northwest Syria (NWS), as well as a series of devastating [earthquakes](#) in Türkiye and NWS, with aggravating effects over a deep-seated crisis.

As humanitarian funding for Northern Syria decreases, actors in the humanitarian response find it increasingly difficult to meet the needs of millions of people who are displaced, living in camps or struggling to cope with the effects of conflict and crisis in their home areas. Many communities that have so far relied on life-saving humanitarian assistance have lost, in part or completely, access to it and others remain at risk of being cut off, as funding and programming continue to shrink.

Meanwhile, the number of people requiring humanitarian aid in Syria has increased to 16.7 million from 15.3 million last year, according to the [Humanitarian Needs Overview](#) (HNO), and vulnerabilities remain high. [The Multi-Sector Needs Assessment \(MSNA\) data for 2023](#) shows that 73% of households in Northern Syria were unable to meet their essential needs at the

Populations' self-rated ability to meet basic needs in Northern Syria

based on the annual household-level [Multi-Sector Needs Assessment](#) for 2023



time of data collection. More than half of all interviewed households reported being food insecure, over 40% of them were unable to secure sufficient livelihoods, and more than a third signaled a lack of access to health services and medicines.

Forced displacement and high perceptions of threat related to hostilities are widespread in NWS, where roughly [three in four Syrians](#) are internally displaced. Almost [two million](#) of them live across more than 1,500 IDP sites, most often in damaged, overcrowded and poorly insulated tents or makeshift shelters, and are highly dependent on humanitarian assistance. Economic conditions are also at an all time low, with the [February price of the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket](#) (SMEB)¹ increasing by 59% in Turkish lira terms compared to one year earlier. Livelihoods, meanwhile, are insufficient to cover the growing cost of living. According to a household survey conducted by REACH in four sub-districts across NWS, even traditionally high-income households have experienced a sharp decline in income for over a year, with debt levels rising for [two-thirds](#) of the population.

In NES, the [repeated escalations](#) since October 2023 and the additional damage inflicted on an already weakened civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, power and water stations, fuel facilities and agricultural fields, have drastically limited people's access to basic services, worsening existing vulnerabilities. With [price inflation for basic survival food items](#) increasing by 162% from January 2023 to January 2024 in Syrian pound terms and shortages hitting critical goods such as diesel and cooking gas, households' resilience has been severely tested.

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE-BASED ASSISTANCE AS FUNDING DECREASES

As the humanitarian community implements stricter prioritisation of assistance and redefines targeting criteria to cope with diminishing budgets, decisions regarding resource allocation — specifically to population groups, sectors, and geographic areas, as well as appropriate types of aid — will increasingly rely on the effective utilisation of existing and new data and analysis. This highlights the centrality of independently collected evidence in identifying gaps and vulnerabilities across the spectrum, which underpins the needs-based approach to humanitarian response planning.

Conducting on-the-ground needs assessments and effectively using this evidence at all levels

of the humanitarian response is also essential to ensure accountability to affected populations. Humanitarian data collection in Northern Syria, in adherence to the core principles guiding the humanitarian system, aims to provide a neutral account of the needs of affected populations, grounded in local experiences and perceptions of the impacts of the crisis. REACH and other humanitarian actors collecting data in Northern Syria leverage community inputs and feedback to inform decisions on the most suitable response approaches and modalities.

As the space for humanitarian action in Northern Syria shrinks, the role of data in facilitating the planning of targeted life-saving interventions increases. By mapping the cross-sector range of needs and looking at such criteria as severity, vulnerability or self-reliance of populations, as well as external conditions, including the functionality of local markets, price fluctuations or [infrastructure capacity](#), humanitarian data and research bring a comprehensive range of answers to the current challenges facing the response in Northern Syria.

AID REDUCTIONS IN SYRIA: TRANSLATING DATA INTO IMPROVED PRIORITISATION

The funding cuts have affected a wide range of humanitarian actors in Syria, from the UN to non-governmental organisations, leading to substantive reductions in aid deliveries. The major downsizing of the World Food Program's (WFP) operations in Syria is particularly significant. In December 2023 the WFP announced the [end to its General Food Assistance \(GFA\)](#) programme from January 2024, following a gradual phasedown of aid for Syrians in recent years. The GFA, which reached [6.8 million people in Syria in 2023](#), represented the most extensive food assistance programme in the country and is now being replaced by smaller, more targeted programmes. This is despite the Food Security and Agriculture (FSA) sector identifying the [highest ever number of food insecure people](#) in Syria, 12.9 million in 2023 according to the HNO.

As the number of people relying on lifeline food assistance is reduced, humanitarian response actors are increasingly looking at measures to manage the expected negative consequences of such cuts and ensure continued flow of assistance to the most vulnerable Syrians. Emerging evidence on the impacts of the cuts will strongly influence the new targeting criteria for smaller scale food relief programmes. Moreover, integrating comprehensive cross-sector data

¹ The SMEB indicates the price for basic food and non-food items considered as the monthly minimum to support a six-person household.

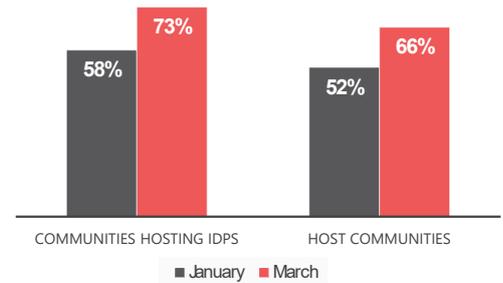
from the early stages of planning is essential to ensure an adapted and holistic response, providing emergency relief to severely food insecure households while also incorporating a longer-term focus to early recovery and resilience-building. This will increasingly reduce dependency on aid, improve social cohesion and empower individuals and communities to break the circle of vulnerability.

Recent data from REACH and other humanitarian actors provides an emerging picture of the first impacts of food aid reductions. IDPs in displacement sites in NWS, where a comprehensive food assistance approach through the GFA was previously in place, were the first ones affected by the reductions in food distributions. As of January 2024, more than **1.1 million IDPs** across more than 900 camps and informal sites in NWS were cut off from food distributions and many of them will not regain access to aid once smaller programme support is introduced. In NES, where the major cuts were implemented after February and mainly outside of camps, [REACH March data](#) already shows a drop in the percentage of food distributions reported as a main source of food in informal settlements, 31% down from 40% in January.

REACH's monthly Humanitarian Situation Overview of Syria (HSOS) also points to a decrease in the amount of food assistance received by host community (HC) households and IDPs residing in communities. In [February](#), key informants (KIs) in only 18% of the assessed communities in NWS reported food distributions among IDPs, along with a corresponding 17% among HC households. This marks a decrease from 27% and 23% respectively in [January](#). In NES, the reductions

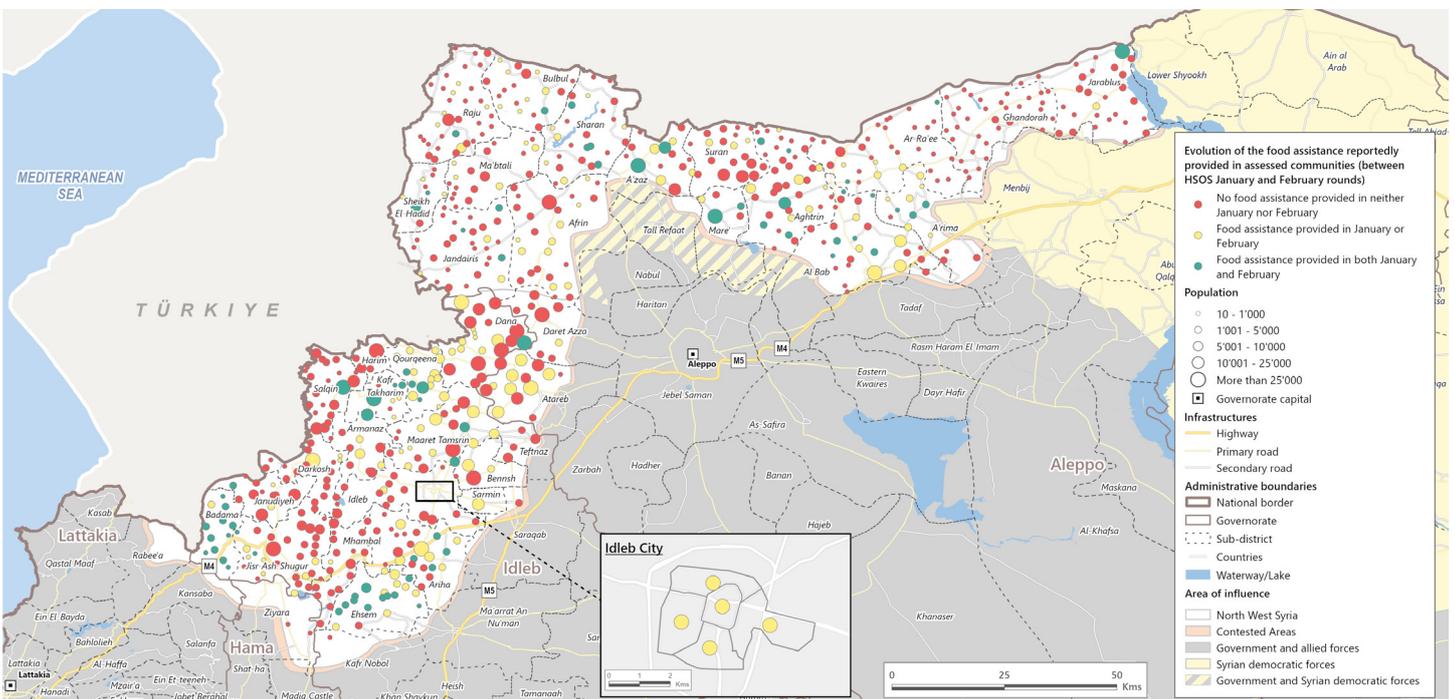
resulted in a mere 7% of communities with IDPs reportedly receiving food assistance in [February](#), down from 23% in [December](#). The value stands at 4% for HC households in NES, compared to 13% at the end of 2023. Growing food security risks are also captured in the higher percentage of food being reported as an unmet priority need in [March](#) compared to [January](#), for both IDPs and host communities in NWS.

Food reported as an **overall priority need** in March compared to January (by % of assessed communities in NWS)



In terms of market impacts, the reduced flows of in-kind food assistance will ramp up demand for food on local markets. While these markets have demonstrated remarkable resilience throughout the crisis, the worsening economic situation, marked by high inflation, currency depreciation, declining purchasing power, and scarce livelihoods opportunities, continues to threaten market functionality. As former aid recipients are forced to reprioritise expenditures to meet their basic food needs, the reductions in food assistance risk placing additional stress on markets overtime as increased demand for food commodities further accelerates price rises.

Based on the most recent Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMIMI) data, these anticipated effects are not very pronounced yet.



Evolution of food aid distributions outside of camps in NWS in January and February ([HSOS data](#))

In NWS, the value of the total SMEB increased 8.7% between [January](#) and April² (compared to 17.4% between [September](#) and [December](#)) while the SMEB food component increased 7.1% (compared to 17.1% between September and December). However, markets often take time to adjust to new supply and demand dynamics and the impact of aid cuts will likely become clearer over the coming months. In the context of affordability representing the primary access

ones, such as employing child labour and forced marriage, or engaging in socially degrading, exploitative or life-threatening work. Qualitative data from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted by REACH in April for an upcoming NWS income and expenditure assessment highlights cases of children who stopped attending school to sell goods on the street, as a means of coping with the severely restricted household incomes.

After the WFP reduced the number of food baskets, we saw increased homelessness, begging, and school dropout among children in our area. Lack of income and the loss of access to food assistance threw more families into poverty.

Key Informant, Dana sub-district, Greater Idleb

barrier to households meeting their basic needs, regular market monitoring is more important than ever to track how price and availability trends impact evolving humanitarian needs.

Faced with the current funding crisis and major assistance reductions, the [FSA sector estimates](#) that existing vulnerabilities will further worsen, threatening to plunge moderately food insecure households into severe food insecurity. This will create knock-on effects on other needs and increase the use and severity of negative coping strategies. As households lose access to food distributions and are forced to reallocate resources previously earmarked for other necessities to buy food, gaps across sectors will likely widen.

The inability to pay rent could result in more [forced evictions](#), while households also become unable to repair deteriorated shelters. Access to basic services such as healthcare and education could be hindered as a result of populations no longer affording the costs of transportation, medical treatment or school materials. Gaps in the nutrition sector risk increasing in a region with traditionally high rates of malnutrition and stunting and low access to specialised services. Spending more on food will also likely come at the expense of other essential goods, such as hygiene items, water or medicines. Possibly reflecting this, the [March](#) JMMI data for NWS shows 7.4% month-on-month decrease in the SMEB Non-Food Items (NFI) component, which primarily includes hygiene items such as soap, toothpaste, sanitary pads or washing powder.

Even before the recent aid cuts, as shown by the [MSNA](#) data, more than 90% of households in Northern Syria relied on a range of negative coping strategies, including reducing meals or prioritising feeding the most vulnerable members. The current reductions threaten to increase the use of these coping mechanisms or prompt populations to resort to more severe

Taking on debt from friends or family or purchasing essential goods from vendors on credit is common across Northern Syria. These practices serve as a vital lifeline for many households to meet their basic needs on a month-to-month basis. Aid cuts tend to weaken these informal social protection networks as credit providers are no longer able to support those in need. This also threatens social cohesion and long-term resilience, as support networks become overstretched, exacerbating tensions between community members.

TURNING DATA INTO ACTION

As the humanitarian community responds to the evolving crisis in Northern Syria, timely, quality independent evidence on the needs of affected populations becomes increasingly critical. Shrinking budgets and stricter prioritisation of assistance underscore the importance of utilising data to optimise resource allocation and ensure sustainable needs-based aid programming. Monitoring humanitarian needs and market trends and communicating this evidence to decision-makers, while mainstreaming community voices and local perspectives, are essential to support targeted relief to the most severely impacted people in Northern Syria.

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).

² The dataset referenced has not yet been published. Please consult our [Resource Centre](#) to access it once it is made available.