



Cross-border aid mechanism to Northwest Syria in limbo, threatening to worsen already dire humanitarian conditions

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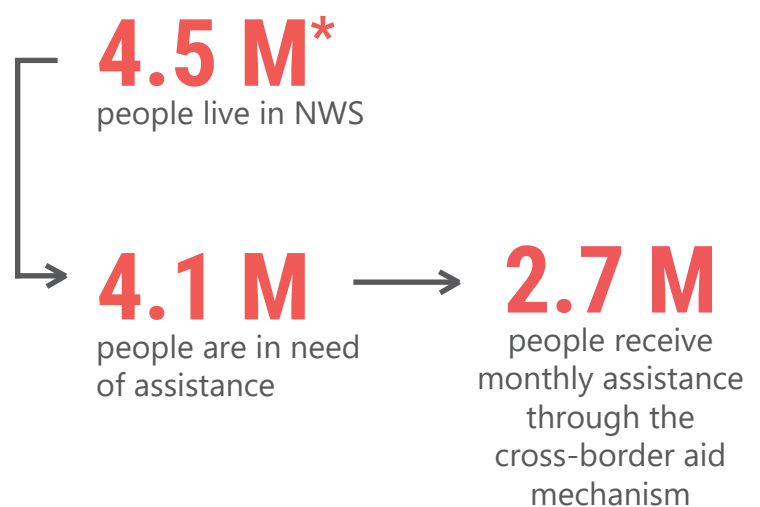
KEY MESSAGES

- Northwest Syria (NWS) is currently facing unprecedented humanitarian needs and a deteriorating economic situation. The end of the cross-border mechanism for UN aid threatens access to food, medical care, vaccines, clean water, shelter and protection services for 2.7 million people on a monthly basis, a gap that non-UN funded contracted organisations will struggle to fill. This will likely further **erode purchasing power and drive the adoption of negative coping strategies by people in need.**
- The withdrawal of UN cross-border humanitarian assistance will increase the need to scale up cash assistance to meet the needs of those previously receiving in-kind aid. However, **markets will likely struggle to meet the scale of increased demand** from a rapid shift to cash programming and local procurement for humanitarian programming. Such a shift would require **complementary programming to support livelihoods, businesses, supply chains, and local production.**
- The UN cross-border response supports certain sectors that **can not be served by local production** and local aid actors will likely **struggle to import goods commercially at such a scale** to meet needs. This is likely to most heavily impact health services and the provision of life-saving medicines that cannot be procured locally.

CURRENT SITUATION

On Tuesday 11 July, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) failed to renew an extension of the cross-border aid mechanism that granted the United Nations permission to deliver aid to Northwest Syria (NWS) through the Bab al-Hawa crossing from neighbouring Türkiye. Since 2014, this cross-border mechanism has enabled UN agencies to provide vital humanitarian assistance to millions of people in need across the opposition-controlled region.

Without the renewed resolution, the UN will only be able to bring physical aid into NWS through 'cross-line' deliveries through Government of Syria (GoS) areas. UN representatives have repeatedly stressed [cross-line aid is no substitute](#) for the scale at which cross-border aid is delivered. As such, removal of the cross-border aid channel threatens access to food, medical care, vaccines, clean water, shelter and protection services for [2.7 million people on a monthly basis](#) leaving the population more vulnerable to shocks.



*Figures according to [OCHA North-West Syria: Situation Report](#), 28 April 2023

**Photo credit: OCHA, Ahmed Abdul Nafi

Non-renewal of cross-border aid delivery coincides with deteriorating humanitarian and economic crises

The UNSC decision comes at a time when humanitarian needs in NWS are at an all-time high, only five months after two devastating earthquakes caused massive displacement and the widespread destruction of housing and critical infrastructure.

Economic conditions in NWS have rapidly deteriorated in recent years due to several factors including the global pandemic and rising food and energy costs related to the conflict in Ukraine. The Turkish Lira, which is the most used currency in NWS for trade and payment of salaries, has sharply depreciated against the US dollar in the past two years. As such, households' savings and wages are worth less as the price of key commodities continues to rise. [Monitored basic commodities](#) required for a household to survive at minimum for a month have increased in price by 120% in the past 12 months.

Such price inflation directly impacts peoples' ability to access basic food items. According to REACH Humanitarian Situation Overview of Syria (HSOS) June 2023 data, key informants (KIs) in 83% of assessed locations reported that households could not afford essential food

items despite the presence of functional markets that were physically accessible to communities. A significant reduction in the supply of food aid as a result of the UNSC decision will likely lead to further price increases, particularly if goods need to be commercially imported, compounding already acute levels of food insecurity in the region.

Due to the worsening economic situation, access to livelihood opportunities remains extremely limited and depreciating incomes generally do not cover the cost of living, making humanitarian assistance critical to meet immediate needs. REACH HSOS data indicates that insufficient income has most commonly resulted in households [taking on debt and buying essential items on credit](#).

[REACH post-earthquake market assessments](#) showed that this coping strategy was stretched in the aftermath of the disaster. In the absence of UN-led humanitarian assistance, more households could be forced to adopt more severe negative coping strategies such as withdrawing children from school to work, engaging in high-risk work, and early marriages.

A rapid scale-up of cash would require complementary programming to support market systems

There has been a steady [scale-up of cash programming in NWS](#) over recent years, which provides a solution to some of the logistical challenges associated with in-kind aid delivery and offers people greater independence to make decisions about how to prioritise spending to meet their needs. One alternative to a withdrawal of UN cross-border humanitarian assistance could be a large scale-up of cash assistance to meet the needs of those previously receiving in-kind aid. However, considering existing funding gaps for cash-programming and expected price increases, organisations delivering cash assistance would not have the capacity to fill the gap left by decreased in-kind aid in the immediate term.

Markets and vendors in NWS have demonstrated remarkable resilience over the years despite ongoing conflict and additional market shocks. Even so, this resilience should not be assumed; a [REACH](#)

[post-earthquake rapid market assessment](#) indicated vendors had depleted capacity to maintain operations as a result of the ongoing financial crisis and reported challenges in maintaining sufficient capital and accessing credit to secure adequate stock. In addition, in the case of a major scale-up of cash programming the capacity of financial service providers in NWS should be assessed, given existing challenges in the absence of a formal banking system around [limited liquidity and issues around accountability](#).

Increased demand and heightened risk of insufficient market regulations to, for example, ensure quality control for certain goods, means that any upscale of cash assistance would require complementary market systems programming that supports livelihoods, businesses, supply chains, and local production.

Local procurement capacity would be stretched to match the scale of the UN-led response

The end of the cross-border aid operation would require non-government organisations (NGOs) to either commercially import or procure goods and materials locally. While local procurement over imports can be preferable for the local economy, this is contingent on the existence of price and demand guarantees for local producers and incentives for improved quality. It is also highly dependent on there being sufficient production capacity.

Infrastructure in NWS has been devastated by over a decade of conflict and the [February 2023 earthquakes](#), while at the same time there has been limited investment in rehabilitation, leaving local [production capacity limited](#). Reliance on local production for humanitarian procurement is also more vulnerable to production shocks, a key concern in the context of ongoing conflict and insecurity.

REACH Supply Chain Assessments in 2022 broadly indicated individual vendors had the capacity to meet increased demand from NGOs shifting to local procurement as well as increased consumer demand from scaled-up cash assistance. However, given the scale, there is no clear evidence to suggest that collectively vendors and market systems could meet the demands

of such a shift in the absence of targeted support. There are also concerns about the [quality of certain locally produced items](#) available in markets.

In addition, local procurement is not possible for some goods that the UN is responsible for distributing as they are not produced locally or cannot be imported commercially. Medicines for example are not produced locally and chlorine is a [prohibited item for commercial trade](#) into NWS and can only be imported for humanitarian purposes. This has critical implications for the cholera response. Between April and May 2023 alone, the UN and partners targeted [782,000 beneficiaries](#) through cross-border humanitarian deliveries to support health services in NWS.

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).