

SYRIA - Duma Inter Agency Assessment

Food Security Update: November 21, 2017



vam
food security analysis



Severely Malnourished Child in Duma @Hussam Saleh

KEY POINTS

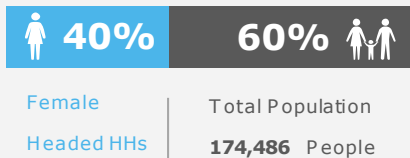
- The intensification of the siege has significantly impacted the food security situation in Duma (Eastern Ghouta). Since September 2017, cases of severe malnutrition and mortality among children have been reported including a child who took his own life due to hunger.
- The very limited food sources in the besieged area, skyrocketing food prices and weak purchasing power are eroding people's livelihoods and resilience impairing their ability to deal with future shocks. Since September, adoption of emergency livelihood and consumption coping strategies have dramatically increased. This includes consuming expired food, animal fodder and refuse, spending days without eating, begging and engaging in high risk activities to get food. Moreover, many hunger-induced fainting episodes have been reported among school children and teachers.
- Due to the scarce food stock in markets and the total block of commercial supply routes, food prices have been increasing rapidly on a daily basis. For example, by mid-November 2017 a 700 grams bundle of bread was 85 times more expensive in Eastern Ghouta than in Damascus, located just 15 kms away. In August 2017 the same bundle of bread was 24 times more expensive in Eastern Ghouta than Damascus.
- The majority of the besieged population in Eastern Ghouta is heavily dependent on food assistance. The content of the food basket was reported to be the only source of food that many female headed and destitute households survive on.
- The escalation of fighting (including aerial bombing) that started on 14 November is expected to further deteriorate the dire food security situation of the 400,000 besieged people in Eastern Ghouta. In particular a storehouse in Duma was destroyed during the fighting, spoiling enough food rations to feed 90, five member, households for a month.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- As a result of the worsening food security situation in Eastern Ghouta and the inability for the local population to access food on markets outside Eastern Ghouta, WFP is recommending that blanket general food distributions be provided till the end of the lean season (April 2018) to improve and stabilize the food security situation in the besieged area, including Duma.
- Due to lack of cooking fuel, food assistance in Eastern Ghouta is recommended to include Ready to Eat rations (RTE).
- Targeted nutritious food interventions need to be provided for those people found to be acutely malnourished in addition to school feeding programs.
- WFP is advocating for untaxed commercial trade into the besieged area of Eastern Ghouta to be resumed as soon as possible. There is also need for food agriculture inputs (seeds, livestock and agricultural tools) and technical assistance such as improved farming techniques and irrigation.

AREA PROFILE

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE



Community Priorities



FOOD SOURCES



OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES



* Icons in blue highlight key areas for humanitarian intervention

Situation update of the besieged area

Eastern Ghouta (Kafr Batna, Arbin, Duma, Al-Nashabiyeh and Harasta sub districts) is a besieged area located in the eastern part of Rural Damascus governorate. The area used to be one of the key agricultural zones surrounding Damascus city. It has been under siege since 2012 when commercial flows were blocked and civilians were unable to move in or out of the area. Since then, the only way to supply food to Eastern Ghouta was via smuggling. In the past civilians and traders managed either to pay a tax to armed groups and conflict parties in order to transport limited goods (additional SYP 300 for each kg of food) into Eastern Ghouta or used underground smuggling tunnels that link Damascus to the besieged area. The siege of Eastern Ghouta however intensified in July 2017 with a total block of food trade on most of its supply routes including the tunnels. Furthermore, in September, the crossing of al-Wafideen camp, the last remaining semi-active corridor for food supplies into Eastern Ghouta from neighbouring areas, was closed by armed forces intensifying the siege as traders and residents could not pay a prohibitive transport tax which had increased to SYP 2,000 (US \$4) per kg of food. The 400,000 residents in Eastern Ghouta are now forced to depend solely on their alarmingly depleted stocks of food and on their limited own production.

Duma is located on the western front of Eastern Ghouta. The area is home to approximately 174,500 people. It is largely an arable area with households usually engaging in agri-pastoral activities. The area has been significantly impacted by the conflict in Syria as it has been besieged since 2012.

The last time humanitarian food aid was allowed to reach Duma was back in August 2017 when Inter Agency Convoys (IACs) entered with limited supplies of 7,000 wheat flour rations. Moreover, the intensified fighting that took place on 14-15 November destroyed around 90 WFP recently distributed food rations located in a storehouse. Hereby, adding extra pressure on an already highly vulnerable community. WFP's monthly market price monitoring shows that compared to September 2017, food prices have increased sharply.

The severe shortage of food makes it impossible for highly vulnerable families, especially female-headed households, to meet their minimum daily food needs. The situation is anticipated to deteriorate further in the coming weeks when food stock is expected to be totally depleted and household coping strategies will be highly eroded as a result.

Objective of the assessment

WFP VAM undertook a rapid food security and market assessment in Duma on 12th November 2017. The assessments aimed to:

- Assess Duma's food security situation.
- Verify how the intensification of the siege is affecting Duma's general food security situation; market functionality; and also assess how people's livelihoods have been affected.
- Identify immediate priority areas for humanitarian assistance.



Devastation in Duma @Hussam Saleh



Household interview in Duma @Dima Alhumsi



Food consumption and accessibility

Key informants and interviewed households identified that due to soaring food prices, limited food availability, poor market functionality, lack of livelihood activities and weak purchasing power, food accessibility has become a daily challenge/concern for the majority of the Eastern Ghouta population. Humanitarian food assistance, household own production as well as purchasing from markets whenever available/affordable were identified by interviewed households as the main food sources in Duma. Agriculture lands in Duma are difficult to access as most of them are located in active conflict zones and sewage water was identified to be the main source of irrigation for the few crops the community manages to cultivate. This severely impacts the quality of locally produced food and causes great concern on the spread of disease among the community.

Following the complete closure of commercial supply routes to the area two months ago, the food security situation in Duma has deteriorated further. There is serious depletion of food stocks and wheat flour with heavy dependence on food assistance by the majority of the besieged population in Eastern Ghouta. Due to government restrictions WFP was only allowed to provide 4,300 food rations, enough to feed 21,500 households over a month. Food needs are much higher as the estimated population in Duma is 174,486, the majority of whom are food insecure. The content of the food basket was reported to be the only source of food that many female headed and destitute households survive on. Due to the lack of available food and the high food needs, a food basket meant to support a five member household for a month is being shared among six different households (approximately 30 people).

Due to lack of staple food commodities and severe shortfall of cooking fuel (firewood, diesel and gas) in addition to their high prices, residents have been reduced to subsist on raw vegetables such as maize corn, cabbage and cauliflower with no more than one meal per day. In many households with multiple mouths to feed, priority is given to children with adults often skipping entire days without eating. Some households are even resorting to rotation strategies whereby the children who ate yesterday would not eat today and vice-versa.

Cases of severe acute malnutrition among children were identified by the UNICEF team and key informants reported four cases of death due to lack of food across Eastern Ghouta. Bakeries are resorting to unconventional substitute foods with lower nutritional value simply to ensure they have bread to eat; a basic staple in Syrian people's diet. For example due to the lack of wheat, bakeries in Duma are baking bread made from a mix of barely taken from animal fodder and when also available, from maize flour.



Livelihood profile in the besieged area

The protracted siege, the high levels of insecurity, the total block on commercial supplies, the high prevalence of household asset depletion and the extreme shortage of fuel, has meant that livelihoods for the majority of households in Duma have been shattered. As the need for cooking fuel is high, recycling whatever available item for the production of fuel has become one of the main livelihood activities in Duma besides agriculture and to a limited degree food processing. Key informants identified very high prevalence of child and female labour as they accept very low wages due to their severe needs and limited alternative livelihood options. This is especially the case for orphans and female headed households. Job opportunities for men were reported also to be very limited. The key work related activities for men were notably to work with relief committees, press (media) and armed groups.

The recent intensification of the hostilities in Eastern Ghouta has further aggravated the speed and depth of erosion of people's livelihoods. Particularly badly affected areas were the arable lands on the outskirts of Eastern Ghouta that are either in zones on the frontline of the conflict or in areas targeted by snipers. In addition, tools and farming equipment are extremely limited as is the extreme shortage of fuel and seeds. When compounded, all these factors make it extremely difficult to cultivate even the little land available. High mortality rates among livestock as well as livestock distress sales in recent years have resulted in serious dairy herd and traction animal depletion levels.



Abu Emad: "This expired apricot paste is the only food I have for my children"



Kareem (in the middle) has end-stage renal disease in both kidneys. He told us: "My dream is to eat a chicken".



Interview with Basel @7:00 pm "what did you eat today?" Basel: "Nothing yet, I was working to get money as my father can't afford feeding all of us".

Food and livelihood based coping strategies

Since September 2017, adoption of emergency livelihood and consumption coping strategies have dramatically increased due to very limited food sources in the besieged area, skyrocketing food prices and people's very weak purchasing power. This includes consuming expired food, animal fodder and refuse, spending days without eating, begging and engaging in high risk activities to get food including teenagers and children joining armed groups as it is the sole way households can manage to feed their families. Key informants and interviewed teachers identified an increase in the number of cases of hunger-induced fainting among school children and teachers. Moreover, a case of a child who took his own life due to hunger was reported in Duma. On average households have resorted to eating one meal a day as a generally accepted coping practice. The food consumed is poor in nutrition value as it is mainly raw vegetables. Reports of meal rotations within households are high among families in Duma. For example Um Jamila, a female head of household in Duma told us that: "I am forced to divide the scarce food I have, rotating between my 13 year old daughter and my orphan grandchildren of two and three years of age. My daughter cries every time I lock her door cause she knows today is not her turn and will sleep with an empty stomach".

Markets and food prices

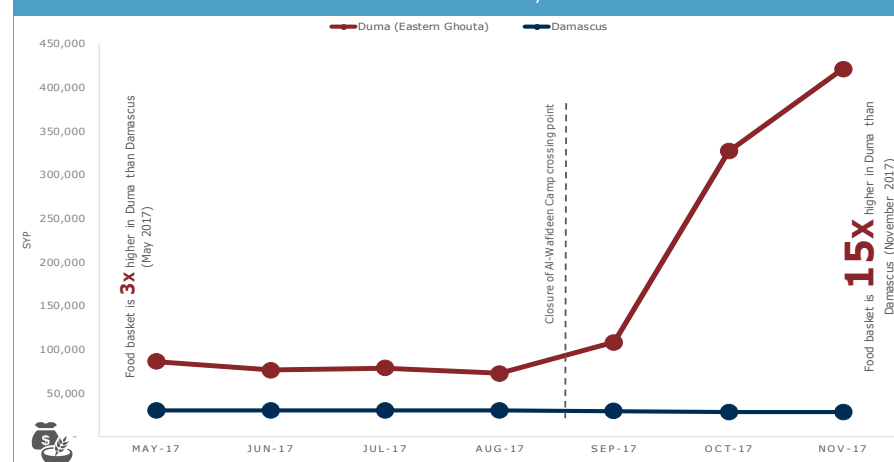
Since the closure of the al-Wafideen camp crossing, commercial flows have been totally cut and residents of Eastern Ghouta have been consuming their remaining scarce food supplies while traders were unable to replenish their stock. As a result, food prices have been rapidly increasing on a daily basis. For example a 700 grams bundle of bread currently costs 85 times more in Eastern Ghouta than in Damascus, just 15 kms away (SYP 2,000 compared to SYP 23.5 in Damascus). In comparison, in August 2017 when the al-Wafideen camp crossing was open, the bread bundle was 24 times more expensive in Eastern Ghouta than in Damascus.

Variety and supply of staple food commodities on Duma's market was observed to be severely low especially for rice, pulses, sugar and oil. The situation is expected to deteriorate further in the coming weeks since with borders remaining closed, it is estimated that stored food supplies will be totally exhausted by end November 2017.

Based on market assessment data, the cost of the standard food basket in November 2017 reached SYP 421,200 which is 29 percent higher compared to last month, and more than 485 percent higher than in August 2017 (before the al-Wafideen camp crossing was closed). This is almost 15 times higher than the Damascus average food basket price. Moreover, one kg of rice was sold at SYP 6,500, an increase of 44 percent compared to last month, 422 percent compared to August and around 1,126 percent higher compared to the national average level. Oil and sugar reached SYP 13,200/L and 12,200 kg respectively.

It was also identified by traders that there is no cooking fuel except melted plastic which costs SYP 3,500/L, representing a ten time increase compared to the national average price of diesel. The high price of fuel significantly constrains household food utilization.

Standard Food Basket Cost in Duma vs Damascus May – November 2017

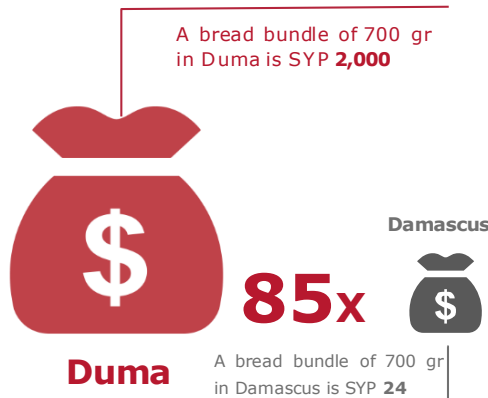


Price of Rice in Duma August – November 2017



Bakery Bread*
Duma vs Damascus – November 2017

Duma **85** times the price of Damascus



* Standard unfortified bread

Methodology

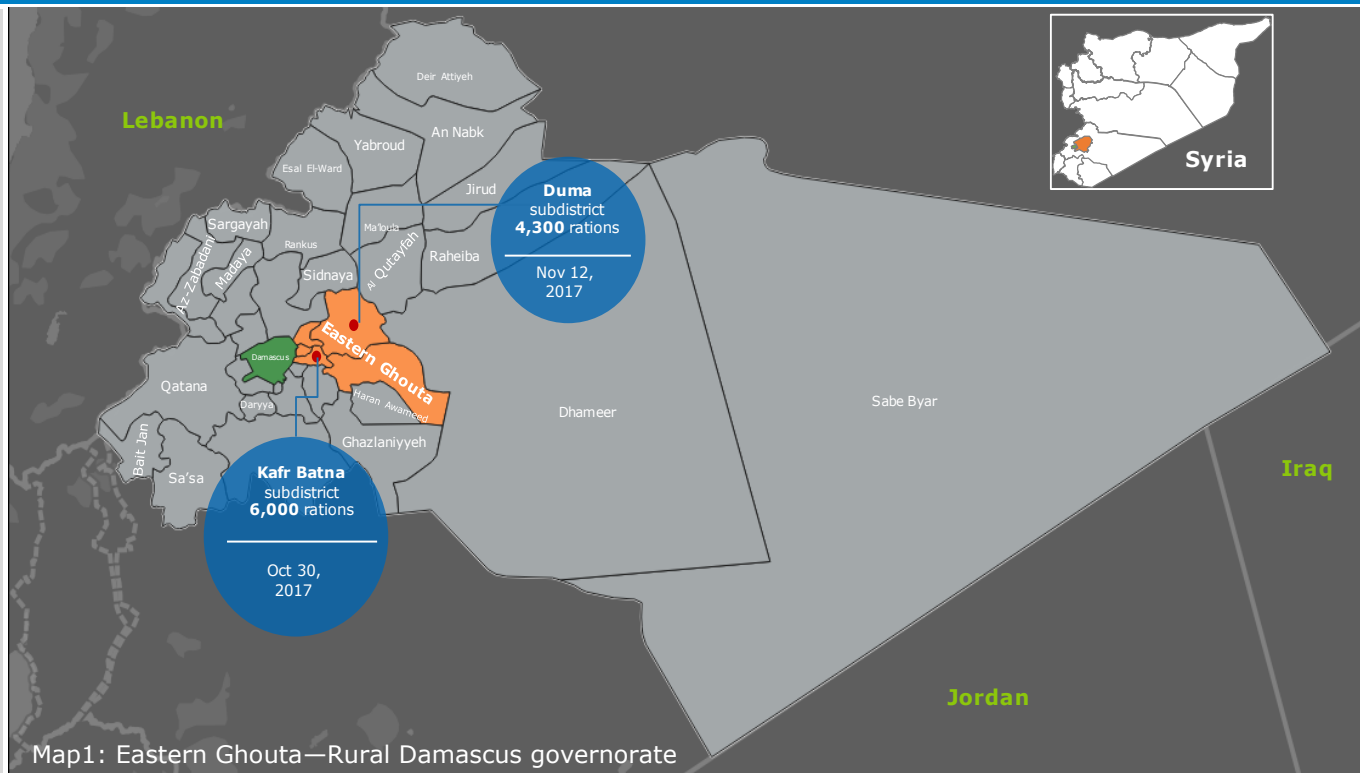
The assessment employed qualitative data collection instruments and secondary data analysis (IA convoy reports, mVAM, FSA, HNO, WFP market price monitoring). Data collection took place on November 12, 2017.

Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with the local relief committee, local council, community leaders and key informants. The interviews included a mix of males and females. A number of interviews were also conducted with traders and households. The following topics/indicators were included in the survey:

1. Food sources, consumption patterns, coping strategies, community-level priorities, shocks and livelihood/ income activities;
2. Market volumes, flows, constraints and capacity, supply routes beside food stocks and prices.
3. The general impact of the conflict on market functionality, food availability and prices of main staple commodities through secondary information and FGD;
4. Population estimation, food security profile, health, nutrition and sanitation through secondary information (FSA, HNO, mVAM).

Limitations

Due to security situation constraints, movement restrictions and time limitation, household and market interviews with a sufficient sample size were not possible. The findings are only indicative of the food security situation in the area.



Food assistance offloading in Duma warehouse @Hussam Saleh



Household visit — Eastern Ghouta @Dima Alhumsi



WFP visit to market — Duma @Dima Alhumsi



Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with local council @Hussam Saleh

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