Lebanon

m-VAM Vulnerability and Food Security Assessment

September - October 2020

Table of Contents

Acknowledgment

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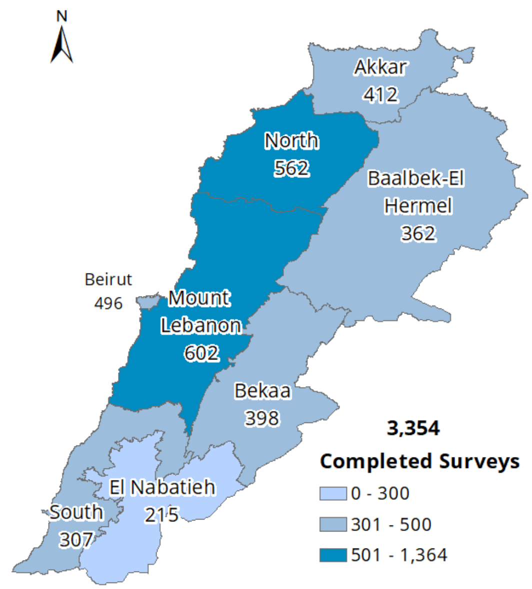
Highlights

- A slight improvement in terms of access to food and other basic needs is observed in September – October 2020 (36 percent of households faced access challenges versus 40 percent in July – August 2020). Similar improvements were registered with regard to households experiencing food shortages (49 percent versus 55 percent previously). This could be due to the increase in the value of the Lebanese Pound against the US Dollar in September – October versus the lowest ever rate registered in July 2020. This helped limit inflation during those months, as fewer households reported high prices as an access challenge.
- More households, however, reported having insufficient income as a reason for their market access challenges or for facing food shortages. This could be a possible result of more people losing their income sources.
- Fewer households stockpiled food (45 percent versus 50 percent in July and August), which could be explained by the lack of efficient resources to make stockpiling.
- 22 percent of households consumed inadequate diets (poor and borderline food consumption), up from 19 percent in July-August. In all governorates except for the South and Baalbeck- El Hermel, fewer households had an acceptable food consumption score compared to July – August.
- 85 percent of households reported consuming cheaper and less preferred food. Respondents reported eating proteins two days a week, pulses two and a half day a week, and fruits three days a week on average. In addition, 52 percent of respondents limited the portion size of meals. These results are very similar to July – August results.
- Important increases in the percentage of households unable to access healthcare services (34 percent versus 25 percent in July – August), which a lack of money reported as the main access challenge (74 percent of respondents).
- The increase in the unemployment rate (and the decrease in employment rate) compared to the respondents' work status before the lockdown continued in September- October.
- Among those who have been employed pre-lockdown, very few reported working from home (1%) or having changed jobs (4%) during the two-month period.
- The nominal wages increased by about 5 percent in August-September. More than half of the respondents subjectively assess their wages to have been reduced compared to the usual amount, possibly indicating a sense of the erosion of earnings due to the multiple shocks they have been exposed to.

Background and Methodology

Over the past 12 months, Lebanon's socio-economic, political and health situation has continued to worsen. While the ongoing political vacuum has jeopardized any possible financial assistance to the country, a highly volatile currency continues to fuel inflation. This severely hampers the ability of Lebanese households to meet essential needs. The surges in the infection rate of COVID-19, coupled with the imposed lockdown measures, further exacerbate the situation, especially for the most vulnerable.



Given the unstable situation, difficult physical access to households due to COVID 19 restrictions, and thanks to a high mobile phone and broadband penetration rate, WFP started monitoring Lebanese and refugees' food security status and access to basic needs through remote assessments (web-based and phone surveys) in 2020. Two rounds of web-based surveys took place in April/May and August/September 2020. Results from those assessments show that more and more Lebanese continue to lose their income and to resort to more crisis coping mechanisms. To obtain more regular and specific household-level information on food security, vulnerability, and livelihood situation of the Lebanese population, WFP and the World Bank agreed to implement a nationwide remote monitoring system based on phone surveys (mVAM). This report summarizes the key results of the second round of the mVAM survey conducted in September - October 2020.

This report is jointly produced by WFP Lebanon and the World Bank (WB). All the findings presented in this report are obtained from data collected between September and October 2020, and a comparison is conducted with the data previously presented in the July-August 2020 report. The data collection methodology consists of a countrywide survey covering the eight governorates of Lebanon. The survey targeted Lebanese nationals only and reached a total of 3354 households (refer to map 1), an overall sample increase of 44 percent compared to the July-August survey[1].

[1] The results are representative at the national level and governorate level (except for El Nabatieh).

1. Key Figures

Demographics

5
Members
Average household size*

42
Years
Average respondent age*

12%
of households
are female headed*

32% (31% previously)
of households
are renting home

*Indicates no change from July-August Report

Socio-Economic

38% (49% previously)
of respondents
Unemployed

22% (19% previously)
of households
consume inadequate diets

36% (40% previously)
of households
are unable to access food and other basic needs

34% (25% previously)
of households
face challenges to access healthcare

Access to Food and other Basic Needs

Slight improvements in terms of access to food and other basic needs were reported in September - October 2020. 36 percent of households across the country reported having faced challenges in the two weeks prior to the survey, down from 40 percent reported in July - August. Akkar (45 percent) and Baalbek-El **Hermel** (44 percent) remained the areas reporting the most challenges, although by a lower percentage compared to the previous round, while most areas reported improvement in term of access, except for the North, which witnessed a one percent increase in households facing challenges. Among households unable to make ends meet, a higher proportion reported insufficient income as the main reason, (56 percent, (up from 49 percent in the previous round), while another 15 percent (down from 19 percent in the previous round) stated high prices hindered their access to goods.

Figure 1: Prevalence of households facing challenges in accessing food and other basic needs, September-October 2020

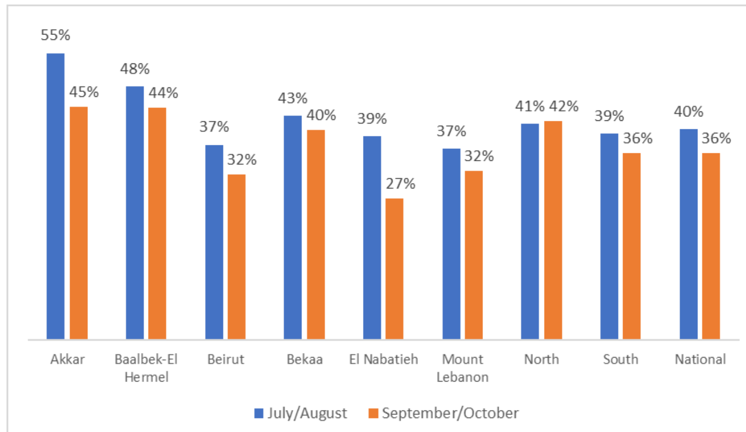
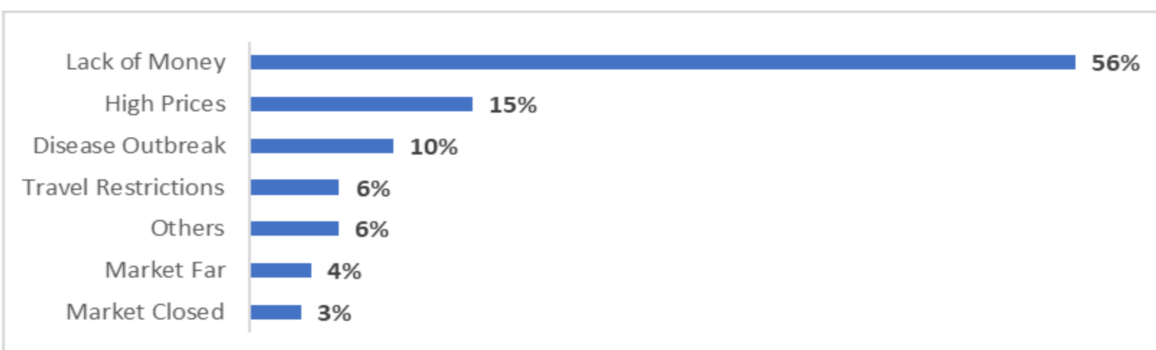


Figure 2: Main reasons why accessing food and other basic needs was challenging, September-October 2020

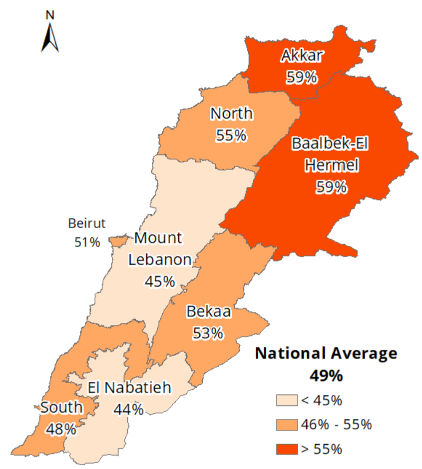


Households' capability to stockpile

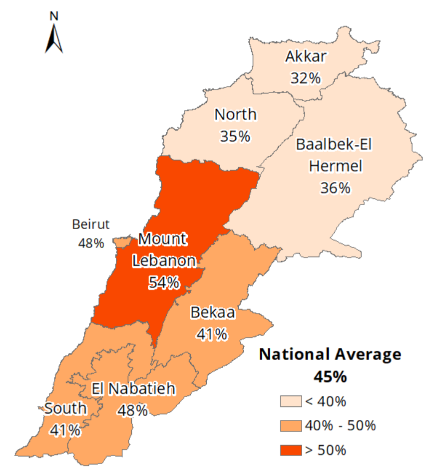
An overall decrease in the prevalence of households facing food shortages in the 14 days prior to the survey was registered between both reporting periods:

- 49 percent nationwide (down from 55 percent).
- 59 percent in Akkar and Baalbak El-Hermel, the highest shares between the regions.
- Highest improvements in El Nabatieh and Akkar (down by 14 percent and 9 percent respectively)

Map 3: Prevalence of households facing food shortage in the 14 days prior to the survey, September-October 2020



Map 4: Prevalence of households stockpiling food, September-October 2020

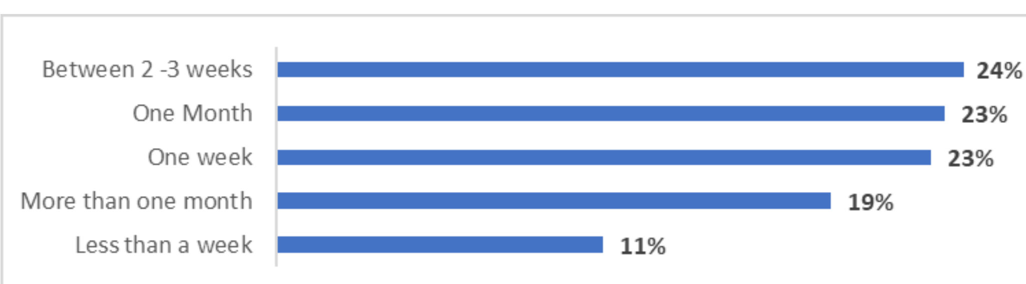


However, a decrease in food stockpiling was observed between the reporting periods:

- 45 percent nationwide (down from 50 percent).
- 54 percent in Mount Lebanon, the highest share between the regions.
- Large decreases in the South and El Nabatieh (both down 11 percent).

Regarding food stock duration, general improvements were recorded. 19 percent of households reported to have enough food stocks to cover consumption needs for more than a month; 24 percent of households reported their stocks to last for one month, and another 25 percent reported to have a maximum of two to three weeks of food stocks. Only 10 percent reported to have food stocks for less than a week (down from 14 percent in July - August 2020) (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Households food stock duration, national average, September-October 2020



Food consumption

Between September and October, 22 percent of households consumed inadequate diets (poor and borderline food consumption), up from 19 percent in July-August. All governorates except for the South and Baalbeck el Hermel witnessed a decrease in the proportion of households in the acceptable food consumption category (see figure 5). Micro-nutrient rich foods continued to be the least consumed food group, as respondents reported eating proteins two days a week, pulses two and a half day a week, and fruits three days a week on average (see figure 4). Households with at least one-member reporting employment (as cash for work) had the lowest food consumption score (54.7, down from 58.6), closely followed by households with an unemployed member (56.3, down from 57.3). No major changes were registered in the food consumption score of households with different employment status between the two reporting periods, except for households with a member working on a farm (71.8 versus 62.6 reported in July-August).

Figure 4: Total food groups consumption (number of days consumed out of last 7 days) by food consumption groups (poor, borderline and acceptable, September-October 2020

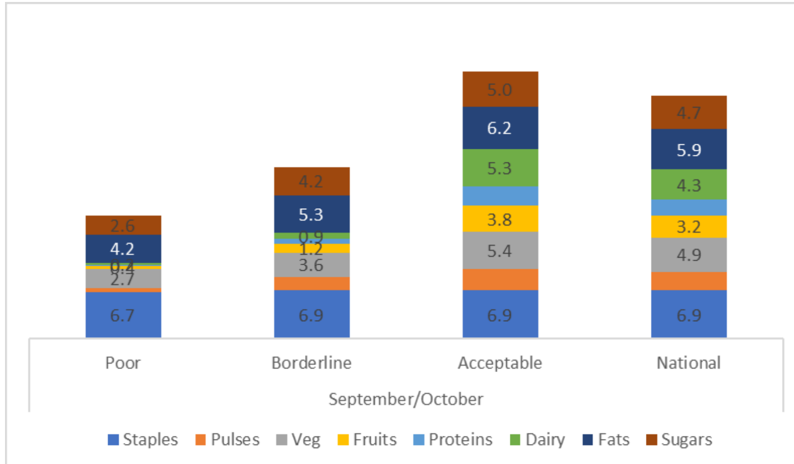
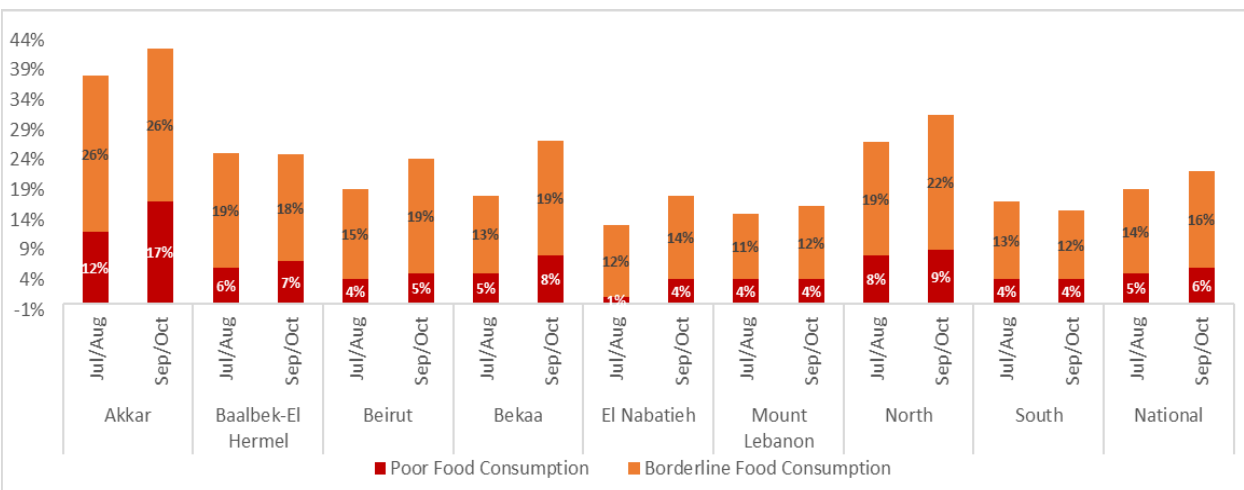
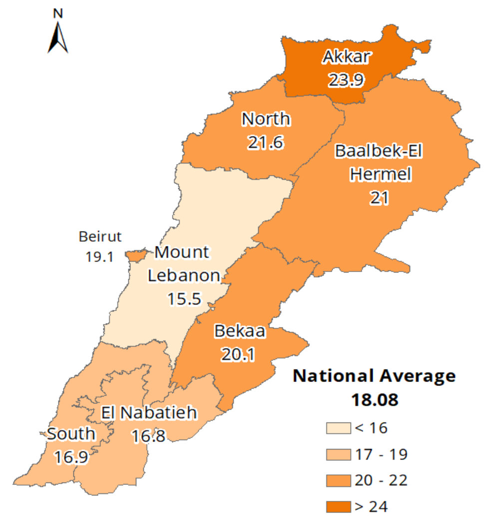


Figure 5: Prevalence of households with poor and borderline food consumption by governorate, July-October 2020



Food Consumption-based coping strategies

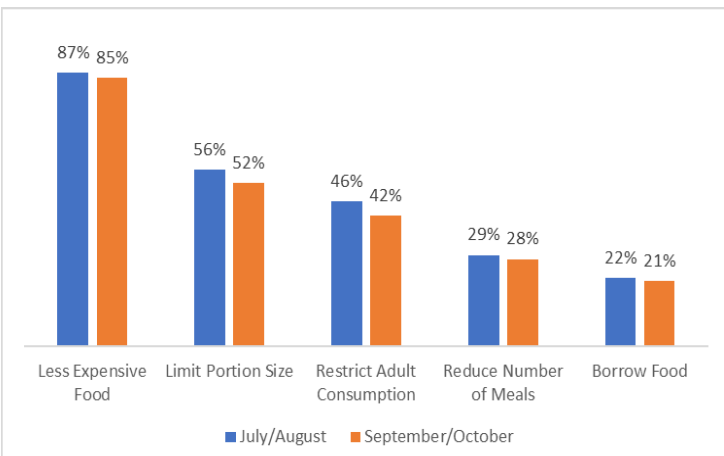
Map 5: Average rCSI by governorate, September-October 2020



Nearly no changes were observed between the first and second round, when asking respondents whether they had to resort to any consumption-based coping strategy. 86 percent of households continue to report consuming cheaper and less preferred food. In addition, 54 percent of respondents limited the portion size of meals. The most severe coping strategy among consumption based coping mechanisms - reducing the consumption of adult members in favour of children – continues to be reported by 46 percent of households (see figure 6), which indicates Lebanese families are struggling to cope.

The reduced Coping Strategy Index (rCSI)[2] continues to record its highest score in Akkar (23.9), followed by the North (21.6), and Baalbek El Hermel (21) (see Map 5). No major fluctuations were recorded when comparing September-October results to the previous ones across the governorates, except for El Nabatieh, which witnessed a considerable improvement (16.8 against 23.4 in July – August). However, all households continued to report having implemented at least one coping strategy in the week prior to the survey, which indicate that Lebanese households are struggling to ensure adequate food needs are covered while facing a multi-faceted crisis.

Figure 6: Share of households resorting to consumption-based coping strategies, national average (July-October 2020)



[2] The reduced Coping Strategy Index (rCSI) is an indicator that reveals how households manage or cope with shortfalls in food consumption. Households were asked if they apply any of the five consumption-based coping strategies when they did not have enough food or money to buy food. The index is calculated taking into account both the frequency and the severity of each strategy used. The higher the score, the higher the stress level of the household.

Access to Healthcare

The rapid spread of COVID 19 continues to put a strain on Lebanon's healthcare system. Recent Lebanese pounds withdrawal limits, along with increasing likelihood of removing subsidies on medicines, among others, have further exacerbated the situation. Important percentage increases were registered both nationally and regionally in the proportion of households facing access challenges to healthcare services. Beirut became the governorate with the highest percentage (42 percent), followed by Akkar and the North (both at 40 percent), compared with a national average of 34 percent (up from 25 percent in the previous reporting period). Nationwide, 58 percent of households included at least one-member suffering from a chronic condition (up from 56 percent), while 21 percent of households have at least one disabled member (down from 22 percent). This highlight the high proportion of Lebanese in need of healthcare or regular treatment. Lack of financial resources remained the main reason households struggle to access healthcare facilities (59 percent of households against 74 percent in July-August). In Beirut, 42 percent of respondents who reported facing challenges in accessing healthcare services indicated lack of financial resources as the main reason.

Map 6: Prevalence of households facing challenges to access healthcare facilities, September-October 2020

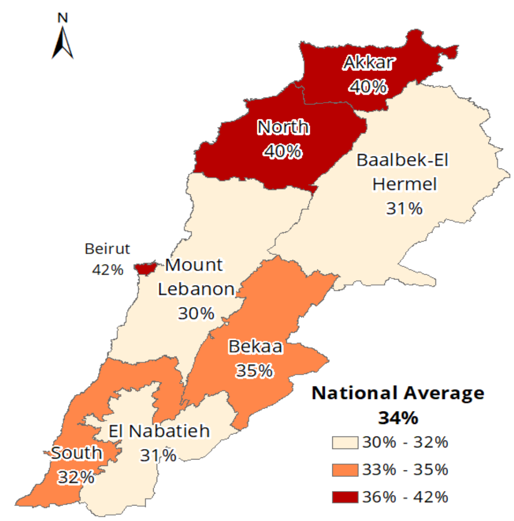
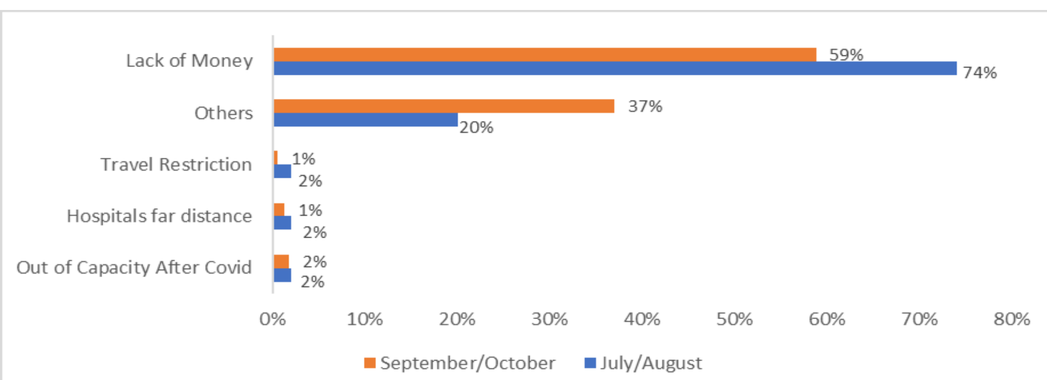


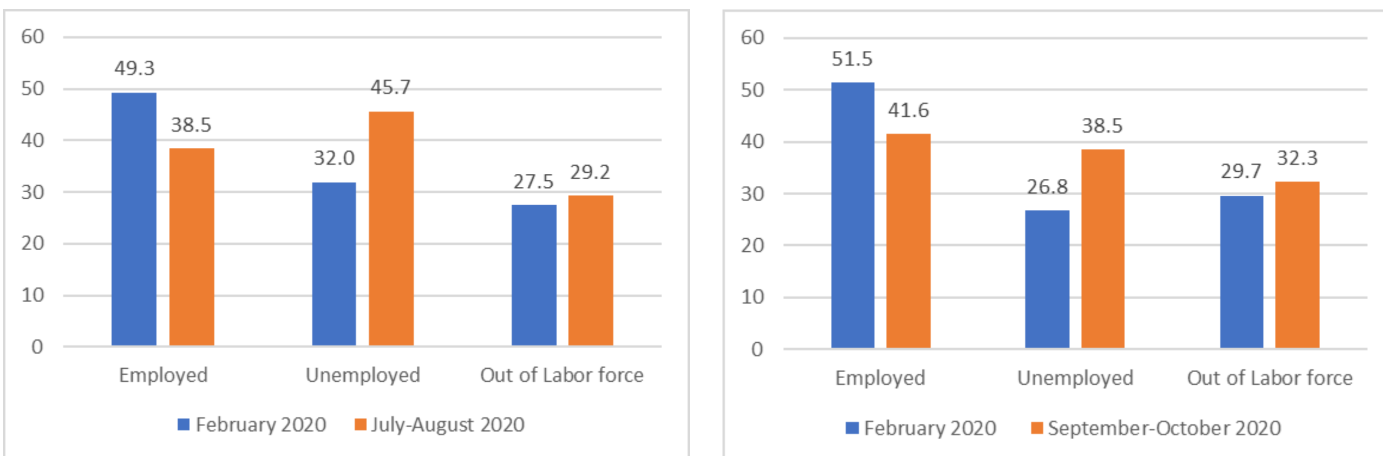
Figure 7: Main reasons why accessing healthcare facilities is challenging, July – August 2020 and September – October 2020



Employment

Information on respondents' work status in the week preceding the survey, as well as for the first half of March 2020 (before the announcement of lockdown measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic) was collected. Similar to the July-August round, there is a decrease in the employment rate and an increase in the unemployment rate in September-October compared to the pre-lockdown labor force participation status (Figure 8). That said, labor force participation showed some improvement in September-October over July-August with the unemployment rate declining by 7.2 percentage points and the rate of employment rising slightly by 3.1 percentage points, though there was an increase in the share of respondents that were out of the labor force by 3.1 percentage points.

Figure 8: Labor force Participation Status3 in the prior week and pre-lockdown for (a) July-August and (b) September-October (%)

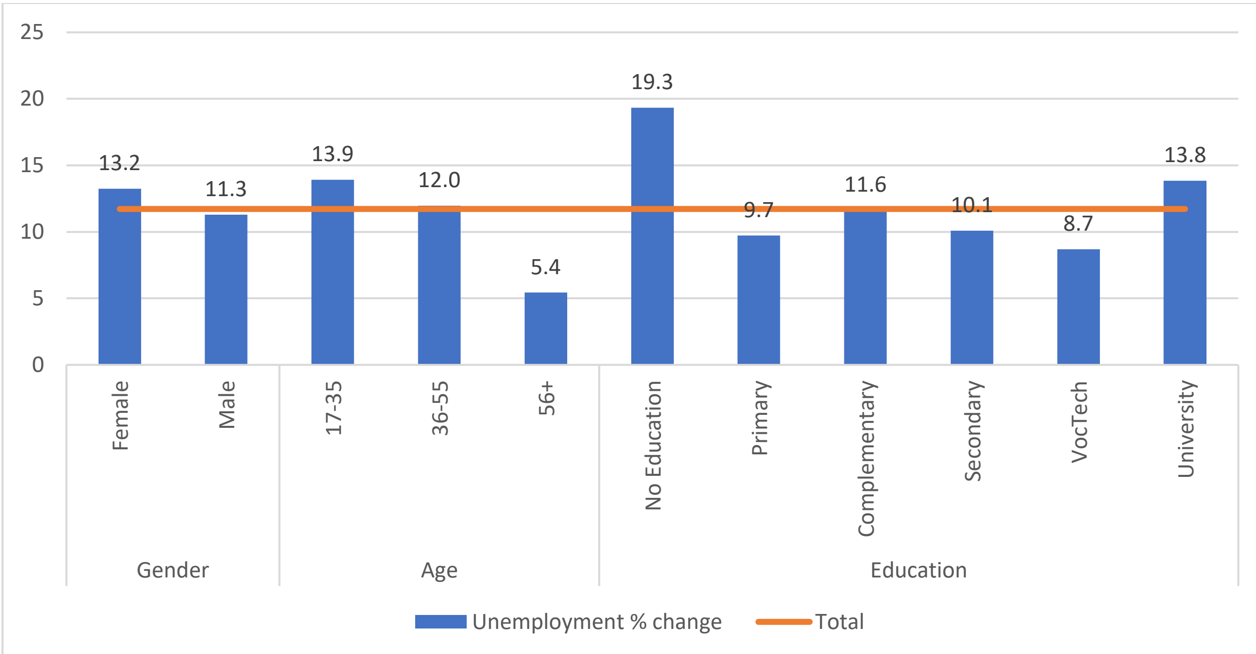


Further disaggregating the rise in unemployment rate in September-October relative to the pre-lockdown rate in March, shows that the increase is more pronounced among respondents 17-55 years old and individuals with no schooling as well as those with tertiary education (Figure 9, next page).[4]

[3] Employment is defined as the share of those working on a farm, for an employer or for oneself among all respondents. Unemployment is defined as the share of those currently not working and looking for employment among those in the labor force. Out of Labor Force is defined as the share of respondents who reported not working nor seeking employment.

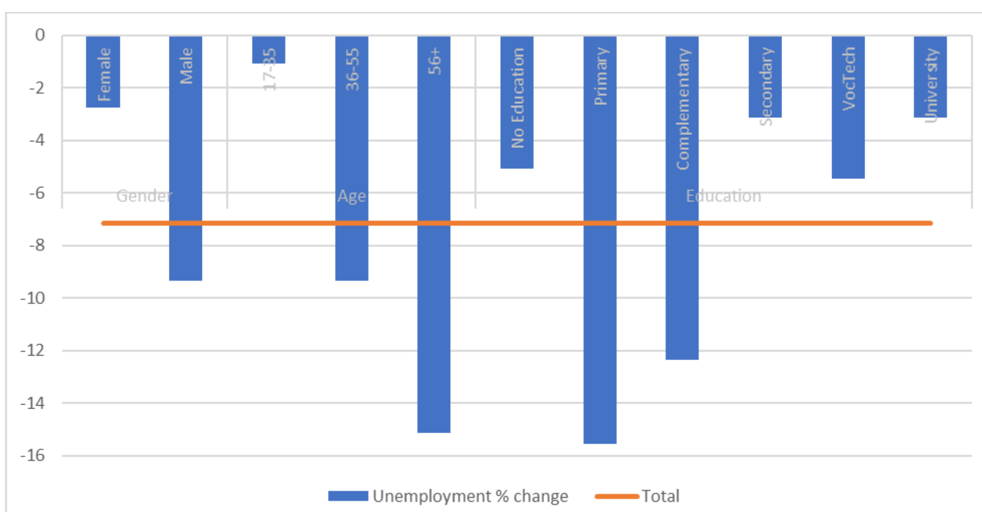
[4] We also see more pronounced increase in unemployment rates for respondents with vocational/ technical or university education in September, and separately for those with complementary education in October. Such differences may arise due to the varying composition of respondents surveyed in both months.

Figure 9. Increase in Unemployment Rate between March (pre-lockdown) and September-October, by Group; % points



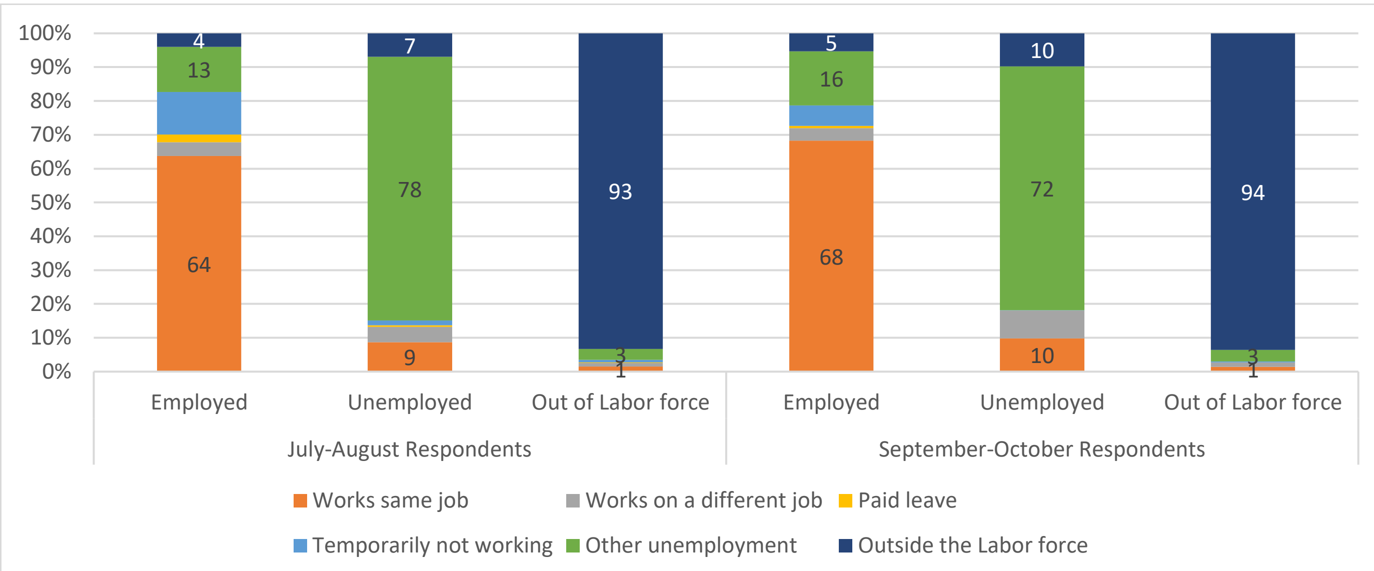
By contrast, the decrease in the unemployment rate between July-August and September-October periods is experienced by all groups under considerations (Figure 10), particularly so for the elderly (age 56 and above) and those with primary and complementary education. Falling unemployment rate across these groups are accompanied by increases in their employment rates. However, both the July-August and September-October rounds had persistently lower labor force participation rates for women, the younger generation (17-35 y.o.) and respondents with secondary schooling or below.

Figure 10. Decrease in Unemployment Rate between July-August and September-October, by Group; % points



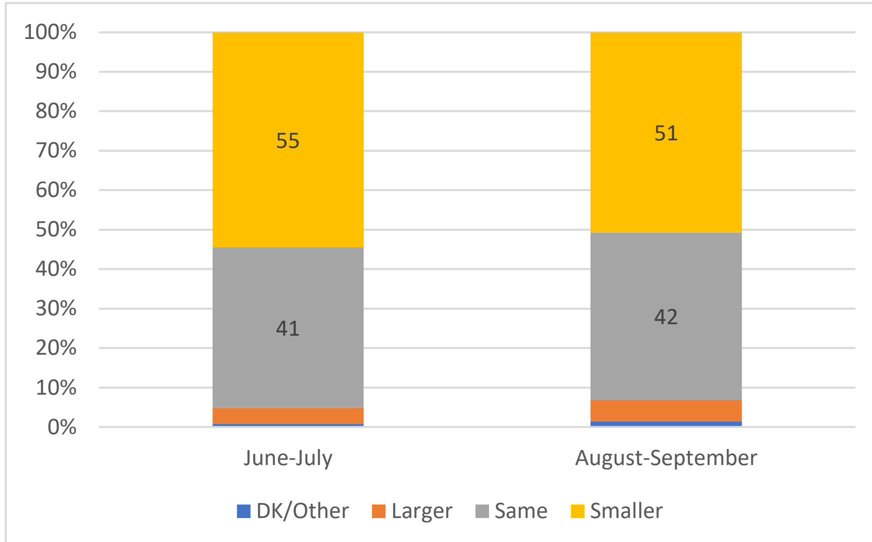
Comparing the respondents' work status in the week preceding the two survey rounds to their pre-lockdown status (see Figure 11), we find that 68 percent of the respondents that were employed in the first half of March remained employed in the same job in in September-October, and that only 4 percent reported working in a different job. At the same time, 22 percent of the respondents employed pre-lockdown reported experiencing unemployment. The majority of those who were unemployed pre-lockdown remained so, while 10 percent of them reported to have exited the labor market. Among those defined as unemployed or out-of-labor force in March, most of them maintained their status into September-October. The share of respondents retaining their early-March labor force status increased for the employed and decreased for the unemployed between the two survey periods (July-Aug and Sept-Oct).

Figure 11: Current Employment Status by Pre-Lockdown Labor Force Participation Status



Monthly Wage income

Figure 12. Changes in current wages earned compared with usual amount (subjective assessment)



Respondents employed at the time of the surveys were further asked details about the take-home income in the month preceding the survey month.[5] The median take-home income in August-September was 1,000,000 LBP (or 132 USD),[6] which represents a slight increase compared with the June-July amount of 900,000 LBP (or 130 USD). Comparing these with the pre-lockdown wages in February, we observe a nominal wage increase of 12.5 percent in June-July and of only 5.3 percent in August-September. [7] Additionally, employed respondents were asked whether the take-home amounts received in the month preceding the survey were higher, the same, or lower than their usual take-home amount; those reporting lower amounts were further asked about the approximate magnitude of the drop. More than half of the respondent's reported receiving smaller amounts, and about two-fifths obtained the same amounts; in both survey rounds, those with less than secondary education, male, or older than 41 years of age are more likely to report reductions in wage earnings compared to the usual amount.

[5] The employed respondents either reported the amount they were paid in the reference month or reported not having been paid (and in this case we consider the income as 0) or refused to answer / did not know the amount. We exclude the third category from the analysis.
[6] The USD figures are computed using the market exchange rates of 5,371 LBP/USD for June, 8,428 LBP/USD for July, 7,420 LBP/USD for August and 7,724 LBP/USD for September (see lirarate.com). Alternatively, if the local banks' exchange rate is used (3,900 LBP/USD) for the four survey months, then the median incomes are 224 USD for July-August and 256 USD for August-September.
[7] Note again that differences could be due to varying composition of respondent across the survey rounds.

Conclusions

Lebanon's situation further worsened over the past two months. Lebanese households' ability to access basic needs continues to be challenged by the series of crises facing the country. This is especially true for the most vulnerable households. A new report by the World Bank (2020) estimates that the compounding impact of macroeconomic shocks, inflation and COVID-19 could potentially raise the headcount poverty rate for the Lebanese people by as much as 55 percentage points by the end of 2020.[8]

Small improvements were noted in term of access to markets and having enough quantities of food to meet household needs between the two rounds of data collection. A possible reason might be the small appreciation of the LBP in the informal market following the Beirut blast, which helped keep inflation in check for the past two months. Fewer respondents noted high prices as a barrier to meeting their food and other basic needs. More households, however, reported a lack of money and their inability to stockpile food, a likely direct consequence of diminishing incomes.

A further deterioration of food consumption is noted, likely linked to buying patterns shifting from quality foods towards cheaper alternatives. The discontinuation of food subsidies leading to fewer affordable food options is expected to increase this shift and to further threaten food security. On a governorate level, Lebanese households residing in Akkar and Baalbek-el Hermel continued to be the most impacted by the crisis, along with those living in the North.

The increase in the unemployment rate compared to respondents' work status before the lockdown continues. Relative to the pre-lockdown period in February, there is a nominal increase in wages in August-September of about 5 percent. Almost every second respondent, however, perceived that their wages were reduced compared to the usual amount, possibly indicating a sense of the erosion of earnings due to the multiple shocks – especially inflation.

Access to healthcare and treatments has been further hampered. The rising numbers of COVID-19 infections is further affecting the healthcare sector's coping capacity, while withdrawal limits on LBP and prospects of subsidy discontinuation for medicines also raise serious concerns. Given the high proportion of households with disabled or chronically ill members, this situation requires urgent attention.

WFP and the WB will continue to collect and monitor data for timely analysis and assessment of households' vulnerability, food security and livelihood status. The two organizations are still planning to

[8] World Bank (2020). "Compounding Misfortunes: Changes in Poverty since the onset of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Jordan, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Lebanon".

collect information through face to face interviews to conduct a more comprehensive Lebanese Vulnerability Assessment (LVA) in the first half of 2021.

Recommendations

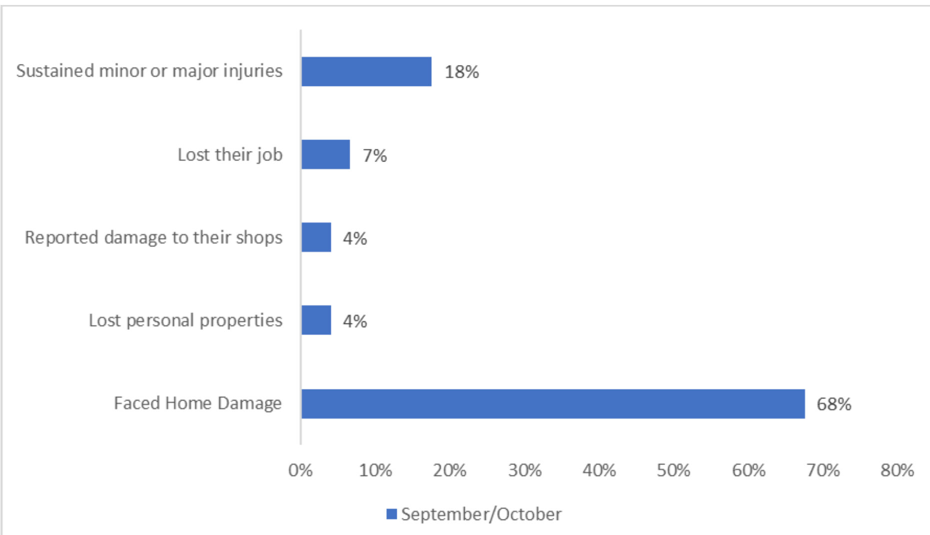
As the socio-economic crisis – characterized by the depreciation of the local currency, high prices, increase in unemployment rates, and a surge in COVID-19 cases – continues to severely affect purchasing power, food security and access to basic needs, recommendations for action need to focus on:

- Continuing to monitor indicators closely and setting thresholds to trigger appropriate mitigation measures at national or sub-national levels, including emergency responses.
- Coordinating with partners on the ground – including the Government of Lebanon - to assess and further monitor the impact of the crisis on households (including access to adequate and nutritious diets and healthcare services) and to target and implement assistance programmes.
- Results presented in this report need to be ground-truthed; therefore, it is highly recommended that a face-to-face household survey is conducted as soon as restrictions on movements allow.
- Strengthening the current social safety net system by identifying the most vulnerable segments among the Lebanese population. An update/validation of existing targeting criteria is desirable to make sure that households in need are not left behind and that responses are adapted to needs.
- Expanding the current social safety nets system to ensure that the growing number of households unable to meet their food and other basic needs are assisted.
- Most households require financial resources to urgently meet their basic needs, including food, and to access increasingly unaffordable services, including education and healthcare. As households are already implementing damaging coping mechanisms and facing income reductions, it is recommended that partners design and implement large scale cash-based programmes, based on in-depth multi-faceted analyses of transfer modalities, market monitoring and security aspects.

Annex: Snapshot on Beirut Port Blast Impact on Livelihood and Economic Situation

A new questionnaire module was added to the mVAM survey to further investigate how households have been affected by the Beirut port explosion mid-August. During the second round, out of 3354 respondents, 18 percent reported being directly affected by the blast. Of these, 77 percent were in Beirut and Mount Lebanon. Despite not being a representative sample, the below findings provide an additional snapshot of the impact of the accident on the affected population.

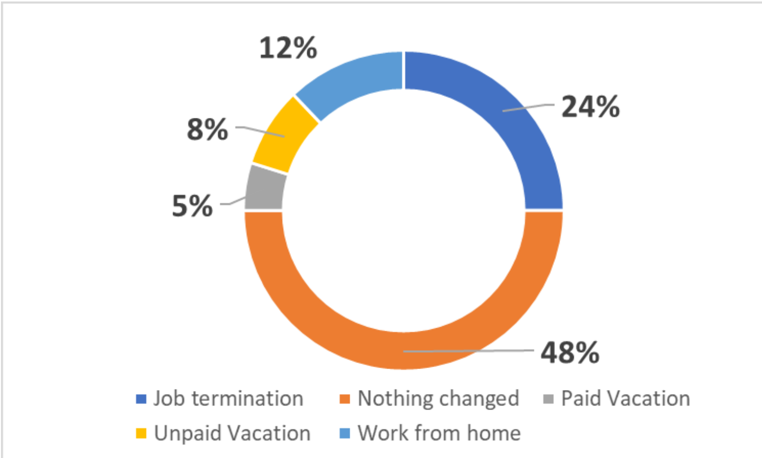
Figure 13: Out of 18% (September/October 2020) of total respondents directly affected by the blast, how were respondents affected?



Impact on Business and Income

26 percent of households in the area of the explosion reported their workplace to be damaged by the explosion. Out of those, 24 percent reported having lost their jobs temporarily or permanently (August: 37 percent). Almost half of the respondent indicate that their work modalities were not affected by the explosion (up from 29 percent in July-August).

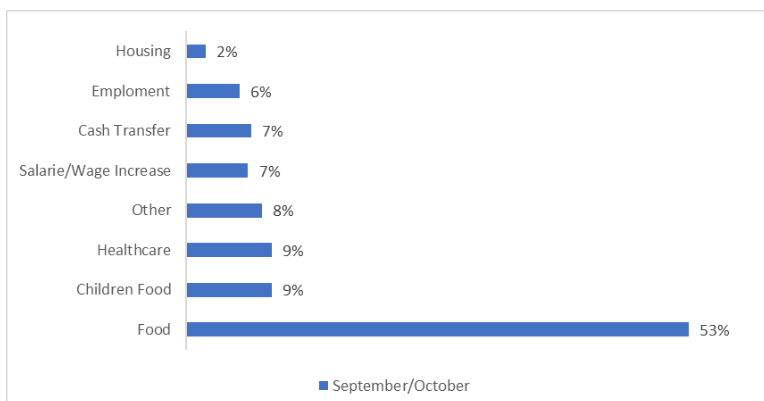
Figure 14 : Change of work modalities as a result of workplace damage in September/October 2020



Households priority needs

Households affected by the explosion in Beirut were also asked about their priority needs. The most important priority remains food (mentioned by 53 percent of the respondents) given the continued increase in prices and the overall fear that subsidies for specific food items will be removed by the government. This was followed by children food, reported at 9 percent among blas affected respondents. Among non-food needs, healthcare services the second priority (reported by 9 percent of blast-affected respondents). Respondents reporting cash transfer and salaries increase needs as priorities were 7 percent for both needs, while employment as a priority was noted by 6 percent of respondents Housing needs were noted by only 2 percent of blast affected respondents.

Figure 15 : Blast affected Household priority needs September/October 2020



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