



World Food Programme



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Daad, a 44-year-old Syrian refugee and widow benefiting from WFP and UNHCR's cash assistance, balances the roles of mother, caregiver, and provider for her family in Bar Elias, amidst health challenges and financial hurdles. Credit: WFP / Gabrielle Menezes

JOINT CASH ASSISTANCE OPERATION FOR BASIC NEEDS - 2023

This report offers a comprehensive insight into UNHCR and WFP joint cash assistance programme for basic needs for Syrian refugees in Lebanon in 2023. It encompasses the expansion of the coverage of refugee households based on a joint targeting approach and available resources, the ability of refugees to meet their most pressing needs, such as food, shelter, health, and education, improved cash redemption experience despite the continuous economic and financial crisis in Lebanon, and a significant reduction in assisted families at the end of the year.

I. Context Overview and Background to Cash Assistance

Lebanon remains the country hosting the largest number of refugees per capita, with 1.5 million Syrian refugees and more than 11,000 refugees of other nationalities. The socio-economic downturn, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut blast, and the impact of the Gaza situation, have all contributed over the years to a situation where nine out of ten Syrian refugees are in need of humanitarian assistance. High needs continued to be reported in 2023, where 90 percent of refugee families were not able to make ends meet. As a result, 89 percent of families resorted to harmful coping strategies such as reducing expenditure on food, health, and education, affecting their long-term ability to cover their basic needs and their ability to overcome challenges in the future.

In 2023, reports reconfirmed the dire situation of refugees exacerbated by persistent multiple crises and the conflict along Lebanon's southern borders since October 2023. The average reported income of refugee households (LBP 7,890,000 equivalent to US\$ 84)¹ falls substantially short of the latest value of the full Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB, US\$ 388 in December 2023).²

Against this backdrop, since 2018, the joint cash programming between WFP and UNHCR has provided monthly cash assistance to vulnerable Syrian refugees in Lebanon for food and other essential needs.

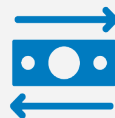


0.4M food insecure
(27 percent)
IPC analysis, October 2023

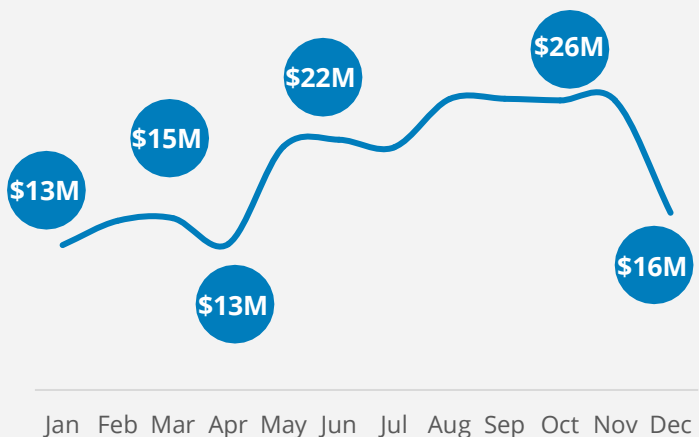
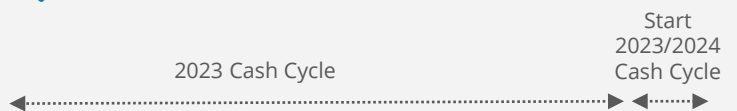


9 out of 10 Syrian refugees
in need of humanitarian
assistance
VASyR 2023

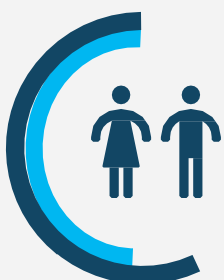
CASH DISBURSEMENT



US\$ 243 million
disbursed in 2023



ASSISTED HOUSEHOLDS



270,000
267,000

■ Planned
■ Actual

¹ Preliminary Findings of the 2023 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR)

² WFP Market Monitoring – January 2023

In 2023, cash for basic needs (food and non-food) was provided through three different types, all of which used the same implementation modalities and transfer values:³ UNHCR and WFP's joint Multipurpose Cash Assistance, WFP's Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance and UNHCR's Multipurpose Cash Assistance (Table 1).

In addition, WFP's food e-cards redeemable at contracted shops helped refugees cover their food needs. UNHCR also implemented other cash programmes to assist refugees, including protection cash, cash for shelter, and the 2022-2023 winter cash assistance programme.

WFP and UNHCR supported a total of 266,600 households in 2023. The total cumulative cash assistance disbursed in 2023 through the joint programme reached US\$ 243 million.

Table 1: Assisted Households in 2023

Objective	Type	Redemption Points	Assisted Households
Cash for Basic Needs (Food and Non-Food)	UNHCR and WFP's joint Multipurpose Cash Assistance	ATM, MTO, Shopping cart	61,200
	WFP's Multipurpose Cash Assistance	ATM, MTO	53,500
	UNHCR's Multipurpose Cash Assistance	ATM, MTO, Shopping cart	64,600 ⁴
Cash for Food Needs	WFP Food e-card	Shopping cart	87,300

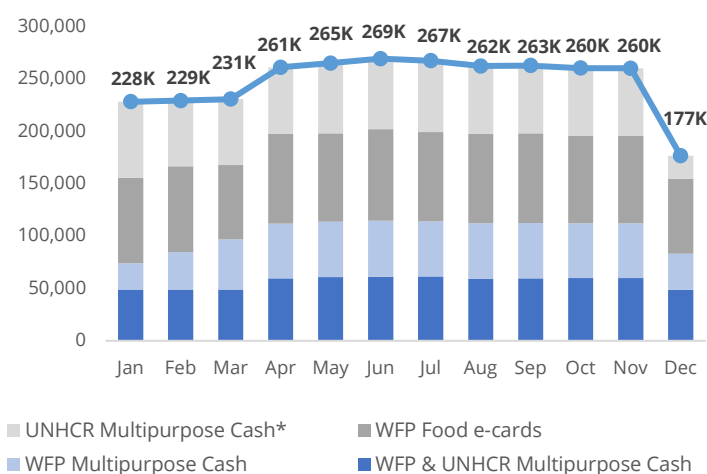
The cash assistance is transferred and redeemed through the LOUISE Common Card (Lebanon One Unified Inter-Organisation System for E-Transfers), which allows UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP to channel cash assistance to vulnerable Syrian refugee families in a coordinated manner through a shared platform for cash transfers. LOUISE ensures the delivery of most of the cash-based assistance for refugees in Lebanon and allows for coordinated and coherent support of families assisted by the LOUISE agencies. Assisted families collect the Common Card and related PIN at the partner-managed sites, where their identities are verified through biometrics (Iris scan). LOUISE agencies maintain a robust system of financial controls, verification, and monitoring to ensure that assistance reaches the intended beneficiaries, minimizing the risk of fraud.

In addition to the initial inclusion of 228,300 families for assistance starting January 2023, 15,500 families were re-included or promoted to a bigger assistance package by UNHCR and WFP as part of the Grievance Redress Mechanism (refer to paragraph 3) and an expansion of the WFP's Multipurpose Cash programme in February 2023. In March 2023, 11,700 families were upgraded from receiving Food e-Card to Cash for Basic Needs.

In April 2023, WFP and UNHCR expanded their programme to an additional 42,600 households while upgrading 17,600 families previously receiving smaller amounts covering only non-food needs to a bigger assistance package, addressing both food and non-food needs. Starting in August 2023, UNHCR provided higher transfer values to the families receiving assistance through its multipurpose cash programme, aligning the coverage of WFP's and UNHCR's cash assistance between the different types to the degree possible. In light of funding shortfalls and following a thorough retargeting exercise, WFP and UNHCR had to reduce the number of assisted Syrian refugees by 30 percent from December 2023 onwards, reaching only 176,700 refugee households.

This reduction of assistance and discontinuation of some families from assistance came at a time when many refugee families were facing additional needs due to the evolving humanitarian crisis in southern Lebanon. To temporarily support these families, WFP and UNHCR expanded the coverage of assistance in December 2023 to some of the non-assisted refugees in the most affected districts in southern Lebanon. This was made possible through the reallocation of WFP and UNHCR budgets, also ensuring maintained assistance for refugee families that were discontinued from assistance for an additional month. Overall, WFP and UNHCR reached an additional 16,000 households (77,600 individuals) affected by the conflict with a one-off cash transfer to help them cover their food and other basic needs.

Figure 1: Assisted Households by Type – 2023



*UNHCR Multipurpose Cash expanded in August to cover both food and non-food needs.



³ In August 2023, UNHCR was able to increase assistance for multi-purpose cash recipients, who previously only received the non-food component to also receive the food component (and thereby the same transfer values as the other two arrangements).

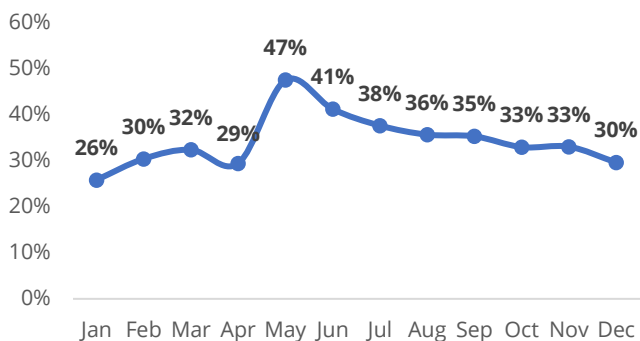
⁴ 72,600 households were reached with UNHCR's multipurpose cash assistance for non-food needs, before the assistance package was expanded to include food needs in August 2023.

The surge in inflation and currency depreciation, among other economic hardships, exerts a detrimental effect on Syrian refugee households' purchasing power and their capacity to meet basic needs. In response to the swift depreciation of the Lebanese Pound, WFP and UNHCR increased the transfer value of the monthly cash assistance for refugees twice during the first half of 2023.

The first adjustment was implemented in February and then in March 2023, before re-introducing the dual currency redemption in May 2023, which enabled assisted families to redeem their assistance in both Lebanese Pounds (LBP) and US Dollars. The transfer values were initially set at US\$ 20 per person for food (to a maximum of 5 individuals) and US\$ 25 per household for other basic needs. However, based on the different scenarios considered for the 2023/2024 cash cycle, WFP and UNHCR had to reduce the maximum transfer value for a family of five in December 2023, from US\$125 to US\$115 for cash for basic needs (food and non-food) and from US\$100 to US\$75 for cash for food needs.

While persistent inflation continues to erode the purchasing power of households, the decrease in cash assistance in late 2023 further deteriorated the family's ability to meet survival food and other basic needs. The percentage of the full Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB) covered with the cash assistance received by Syrian refugees decreased by 17 points between May and December 2023 to reach 30 percent.⁵

Figure 2: Monthly Transfer Value Coverage of Full SMEB - 2023



Moreover, the enduring economic and political turmoil, exacerbated by clashes along Lebanon's southern borders, increased poverty levels and raised resource competition and anti-refugee sentiments. Limited income options compelled refugees into debt, exposing them to exploitation and eviction threats. The compounding economic tensions and conflict escalation increased protection risks, especially for vulnerable groups like women-headed households, children, and young girls susceptible to exploitation and abuse, including early marriage.

The Decentralized Evaluation Report of the UNHCR and WFP joint cash assistance to vulnerable Syrian refugees in Lebanon⁶ issued in July 2023 exhibited the positive impact of UNHCR's and WFP's joint programme on the living conditions of assisted households during the multiple economic and political crises since 2019 and the importance of sustaining this joint assistance to mitigate the catastrophic potential effects of similar crises on Syrian households. The evaluation also offered several recommendations which have been duly considered by UNHCR and WFP as outlined in UNHCR and WFP's Management Response Report.⁷

II. Targeting and Selection Process

The selection of assisted families enrolled in the WFP and UNHCR joint cash programme follows a comprehensive targeting procedure that occurs annually. WFP and UNHCR conduct a joint targeting exercise for the joint cash transfer activities relying on findings from the annual Vulnerability Assessment for Syrian Refugees (VASyR) and the UNHCR database to build an econometric formula scoring the socio-economic vulnerability of refugee families. Scores are used to identify those eligible for cash assistance.

Aiming to maximize assistance impact, reduce food insecurity, and enhance livelihoods, WFP and UNHCR have been continuously enhancing their targeting system. In the 2022-2023 targeting cycle, WFP and UNHCR adjusted the econometric formula that usually uses observable characteristics of a family as a proxy for their level of expenditure (Proxy-Means test (PMT)), to also consider non-monetary dimensions of vulnerability based on the multidimensional deprivation index (MDDI), ensuring fair distribution of assistance across Lebanon. Recipients of cash for basic needs were selected bottom-up based on vulnerability scores, prioritizing the most vulnerable families until funding limits were reached.

Complementing the PMT approach, additional recipients of cash for basic needs were identified using categorical targeting. This profile-based selection prioritized households that had limited abilities to generate income due to protection needs, which could include families with several disabled members or children with specific needs, and elderly people at risk. Additionally, WFP Food e-cards were allocated using a location-based selection approach, prioritizing severely vulnerable households living in areas with a high presence of WFP retailers, if they were not already selected for cash for basic needs (food and non-food).

The annual retargeting exercise holds significant importance as it enables WFP and UNHCR to allocate their limited resources strategically. Building on the recommendations of the Decentralized Evaluation of the Joint Action and with the aim to enhance future targeting strategies, WFP and UNHCR are reviewing targeting modalities in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and alignment with Accountability to Affected Population (AAP) frameworks.

III. Accountability to Affected Population

UNHCR and WFP prioritize accountability to affected populations (AAP) by enabling assisted people to influence activity design and report issues and concerns related to assistance. AAP is applied through three key areas: information provision, consultations, and complaints and feedback mechanisms.

In 2023, key programmatic notifications were conveyed to WFP and UNHCR's jointly assisted families via SMS, including aspects such as eligibility for assistance, discontinuation from assistance, the right and ways to appeal and raise grievances, and notification of payment upload.

⁵ WFP Market Monitor – January 2024.

⁶ Evaluation of UNHCR/WFP's Joint Action For Multipurpose Cash Assistance under ECHO (2019-2021).

⁷ Management Response from WFP and UNHCR Country Offices to the recommendations of the decentralized evaluation of the UNHCR/WFP Joint Action for Multipurpose Cash Assistance in Lebanon (2019-2021) in Lebanon.

Complementary channels for communication included “in-person” discussions with refugees to exchange information. A network of around 600 outreach volunteers, over 2,200 members of community groups, and 26 information desks at UNHCR-supported community centers systematically shared information on services and new policies, raised awareness on key topics, and highlighted community concerns. This feedback informs humanitarian programmes and activities. Closed Facebook groups and WhatsApp trees further supported information sharing.

WFP and UNHCR also ensured that helpdesks at distribution and validation sites responded to refugees’ questions and received feedback and complaints. Information desks at UNHCR reception centres also answered queries on WFP and UNHCR programmes and provided accurate and consistent information.

Focus Group Discussions were regularly held to consult the community and receive feedback, complement monitoring findings, and provide clarity on specific issues. UNHCR further conducted field monitoring, home visits, and registration on a daily basis, which provided direct feedback from refugees on UNHCR’s programming interventions.

Dedicated call centres were one of several means for refugees to contact UNHCR and WFP regarding inquiries, challenges with card usage, or grievances. Operators in both call centres were equipped with counselling lines to respond to most claims and queries without the need to escalate to another agency.



1.4M
Calls received
in 2023

Furthermore, the call centres were able to collect the concerns on behalf of the other agency and share them through established referral pathways. Sensitive protection cases were swiftly referred by trained operators, to specialized partner organizations, in line with a service map for interagency referrals comprising about 95 organizations.

In 2023, the two call centers answered 1.4 million calls received from Syrian refugees. Peaks in calls were observed during major redemption events like the re-introduction of the dual currency redemption in May 2023 and the re-targeting cycle.

Figure 3: Type of Received Calls by UNHCR - 2023

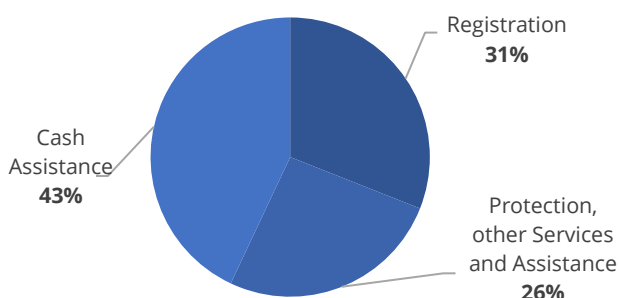
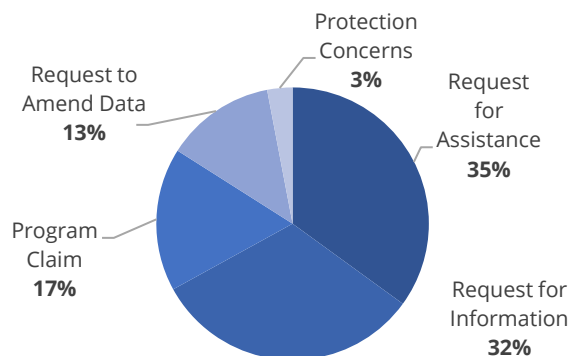


Figure 4: Type of Received Calls by WFP - 2023



Other channels included UNHCR’s dedicated email inbox, which received 33,712 emails from refugees in 2023 related to cash assistance. Various frontline staff and community structures were also briefed on UNHCR and WFP’s cash and food assistance programmes and equipped to address community inquiries and refer individuals to the formal complaint, feedback, and response mechanisms.

In a proactive move to give refugees space to express their need for assistance and mitigate targeting errors, a Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM) was introduced in 2018. This mechanism serves as a platform for collecting and addressing appeals related to instances of exclusion that may arise during the beneficiary targeting phase. In 2023, WFP and UNHCR focused on developing more comprehensive and inclusive eligibility criteria as part of the initial selection by applying the categorical targeting layer. However, the GRM remains a complementary mechanism to identify families not captured at that stage and in need of assistance. In 2023, 5 percent of the assisted families (13,500 families) were selected through the GRM. In 2024, WFP and UNHCR aim to collaborate with the WFP-UNHCR Joint Programme Excellence and Targeting Hub to improve community engagement in the targeting process.

IV. Enhanced Redemption Experience

During the first quarter of 2023, WFP and UNHCR faced several challenges to maintain safe and dignified delivery of cash assistance to refugees in local currency. Following the increase in transfer values in the Lebanese Pound in February and March 2023, and the continuous depreciation of the local currency, many redemption points faced liquidity challenges and would quickly run out of cash. For instance, families of five or more required nearly 12 million LBP, while the highest banknote denomination was only 100,000 LBP. This resulted in crowding, increased waiting times, and increased costs for assisted refugees to redeem assistance which in turn led to more visibility, tensions, and harassment at redemption points.

Transfer value increases in February and March were not enough to offset the additional inflation caused by record-high currency depreciation and price increases in local currency between January and April 2023.⁸ As a result, transfer values only covered 41 and 22 percent of food and non-food needs in April 2023.



⁸ Following record-high currency depreciation and inflation between January and April 2023, a relatively stable exchange rate on the informal market observed since April has not positively impacted prices at this point. The cost of essential goods monitored by WFP increased by an additional 10% between March and April as retail prices are still adjusting to past fluctuations in the exchange rate.

Following a thorough protection assessment and risk analysis, and in consultation with donors, partners, and the Government, UNHCR and WFP resumed disbursements of assistance to refugee families in dual currency (LBP and USD) in May 2023.

Feedback gathered from assisted families, communities, partners, and local authorities confirmed that the reintroduction of dual currency disbursement provided safer, more efficient, and more dignified access to assistance for assisted families with additional positive benefits for communities and Lebanese businesses.

With the availability of USD banknotes at both ATMs and Money Transfer Operators (MTOs), assisted families reported reduced transportation expenses to redeem their assistance as they only needed one trip to the ATM or MTO. Between April and May 2023, people reporting visiting multiple ATMs to redeem assistance dropped from 36 to 17 percent.

Table 2: ATM Redemption Experience Key Indicators

KEY FIGURES	APRIL '23	MAY '23	JUNE '23
TECHNICAL ISSUES AT ATMS	18%	3.4%	1.6%
ATMS OUT OF CASH	12%	1.5%	1%
CROWDS AT ATMS (10+ PEOPLE)	48%	15%	15%
WAITING TIME TO SUCCESSFULLY REDEEM	41 MIN	12 MIN	13 MIN

As a result of less crowding, the percentage of assisted families reporting protection issues at redemption points dropped from 12 percent in February to 2 percent in May 2023.

The increased transfer values for food provided assisted families with greater purchasing power, the ability to access a greater variety of food, and to pay for other essential needs. The overall satisfaction of households increased across all modalities following the reintroduction of dual currency redemption in May 2023. However, the persistent inflation in food prices has limited the families' ability to meet their food and other basic needs, such as rent and health expenses.

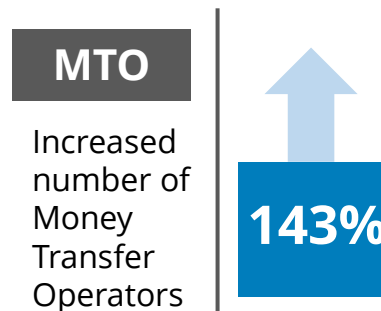
Despite the improved security measures and conducive environment for cash withdrawals facilitated by the dual currency redemption, assisted women showed a lower level of confidence than assisted men when using some ATMs due to the challenges in reading proficiency and unfamiliarity with ATM operations. Additionally, women conveyed apprehensions about withdrawing substantial amounts of cash and expressed a preference for having a companion present to ensure their safety during the process. To boost user confidence, UNHCR and WFP developed an ATM simulator to help the assisted people practice the redemption process at ATMs and in MTOs.

Looking at the impact of dual currency disbursement on WFP contracted retailers, over 90 percent of surveyed retailers reported improvements in maintaining a sufficient stock of products and experiencing increased ease of doing business with the bank and suppliers.

The UNHCR Post Distribution and Outcome Monitoring (PDOM) conducted in August 2023 showed that 63 percent of assisted households were satisfied or very satisfied about dual currency disbursement, 72 percent agreed that dual currency disbursement preserved the purchasing power of assistance, 67 percent agreed it improved their ability to meet their basic needs while 77 percent agreed it reduced difficulties in redeeming assistance.

Recognizing access challenges to redemption points faced by assisted refugees at some checkpoints and in line with identified gaps that require refugee families to travel long distances to redeem their assistance, UNHCR, WFP, and the LOUISE financial service provider continued to expand the network of redemption points. In 2023, WFP and UNHCR managed to maintain the number of ATMs available to assisted families at 179, and to increase the number of MTOs to 102 compared to 42 MTOs in 2022.

WFP and UNHCR conducted regular assessments and monitoring of validation and redemption points throughout the year, playing a pivotal role in informing decisions to enhance safe and dignified access to assistance.



V. Impact on Refugees Lives

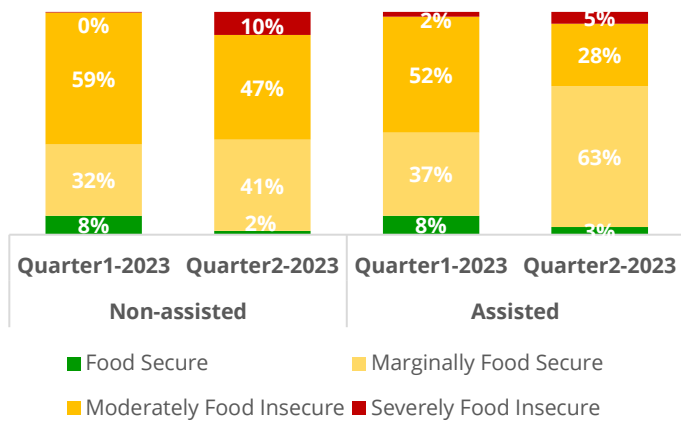
In 2023, WFP conducted Basic Needs Outcome Monitoring (BNOM) to assess the living conditions, food security situation, and economic capacity of assisted Syrian families on a quarterly basis.

The BNOM results highlighted a significant decline in the reliance of assisted families on severe livelihood coping strategies from 79 percent in Q1 2023 to 61 percent in Q2 2023, reaching 30 percent by Q4. Assisted families resorted to less intense stress coping strategies such as borrowing cash or selling their assets to buy food.

Driven by the increase in the transfer values of assistance in May 2023, 67 percent of the surveyed assisted Syrian families reported an improved ability to access a wider range of higher-quality food such as oil, pulses, meat, fish, and dairy during the second quarter of 2023, compared to 40 percent reported during the first quarter.

Similar high percentages were registered in Q3 and Q4 of 2023. The proportion of assisted households with poor food consumption decreased by 8 points, reaching 6 percent in Q2 and 4 percent in both Q3 and Q4.

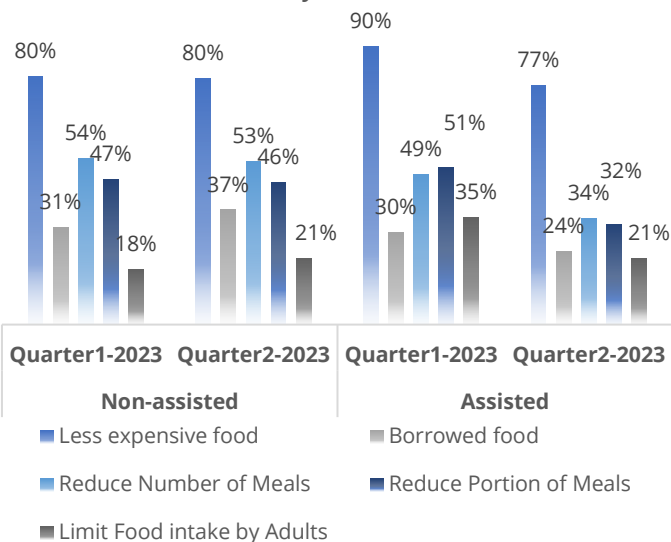
Figure 5: Food Security Pre & Post-Dual Currency



Additionally, the number of assisted families reporting reliance on food-related coping strategies, such as purchasing less expensive food, reducing meal portions, and limiting adult food intake, decreased from 78 percent in Q1 2023 to 65 percent in Q2 and Q3 and then 63 percent in Q4. The proportion of non-assisted families adopting food-related coping strategies increased from 77 percent in Q2 of 2023 to 81 percent by Q3 of 2023 dropping slightly to 75 percent in Q4 2023, remaining higher than the one reported by assisted households.

Following the reintroduction of dual currency redemption, the ability of assisted families to afford their minimum survival expenditures has improved. Between Q1 2023 and Q2 2023, the number of surveyed assisted families that have the economic capacity to cover their basic survival needs, including food and non-food, increased from 49 percent to 54 percent whereas the number of non-assisted surveyed families possessing the minimum survival needs decreased from 78 percent to 70 percent during the same period.

Figure 6: Food Consumption Coping Strategies Pre & Post-Dual Currency



The UNHCR Post-Distribution Outcome Monitoring (PDOM) conducted in November 2023 showed that the percentage of assisted households in need of health care and able to access it has almost remained the same between February (69 percent) and November 2023 (71 percent). The percentage of households who were living under eviction notices decreased during the year from 8 percent in February to 5 percent in November. Households' ability to access hygiene items slightly increased from 66 percent at the beginning of the year to 68 percent in November. The results also showed that the percentage of assisted households resorting to emergency coping strategies was reduced by half and reached 13 percent by the end of the year.

VI. 2024 Outlook

Despite the positive impact of dual currency disbursement on the living conditions of assisted households, the persistent inflation in food and other essential needs prices continues to erode the purchasing power of Syrian refugees and their capacity to meet basic needs, while the transfer value of the joint programme remained far below the recommended value to cover survival needs.

Moreover, inadequate funding continues to hamper the continuity of the UNHCR and WFP cash programme supporting vulnerable refugees, which has already translated into a reduced number of assisted families and reduced transfer values since December 2023. To maintain the gains made and help refugee families cope with the current situation, it is crucial to sustain assistance to vulnerable Syrian households and increase the coverage and transfer value to meet recommended standards thereby preventing refugees' regression into higher food insecurity and socio-economic vulnerability levels.

WFP and UNHCR call upon all partners to make every effort possible to mitigate harmful anti-refugee rhetoric, prevent escalation of social tensions, and promote social stability while ensuring equitable access to resources without discrimination among communities.

In parallel, WFP and UNHCR continue to implement the needed programmatic adjustments to further improve the operational efficiency of cash redemption. These efforts aim to reduce tensions and crowding at redemption points ultimately mitigating associated protection risks.

BENEFICIARY STORIES

WFP and UNHCR joint cash assistance provides greater choice and agency, serving as a vital pillar of support that holds social, psychological, and cultural significance for refugee families living in difficult times.



Credit: WFP / Giulio Oraglia

Roukati, a 40-year-old Syrian refugee, relies on WFP cash assistance to cover her family's expenses, including medication for her sick husband suffering from a physical ailment that rendered him unable to work and care for her son with brain damage.

She uses the cash she receives via her Multi-Purpose Cash (MPC) card. "It is good to have unrestricted cash because now we can compare prices in different shops and find the cheapest items. This helps us a lot."

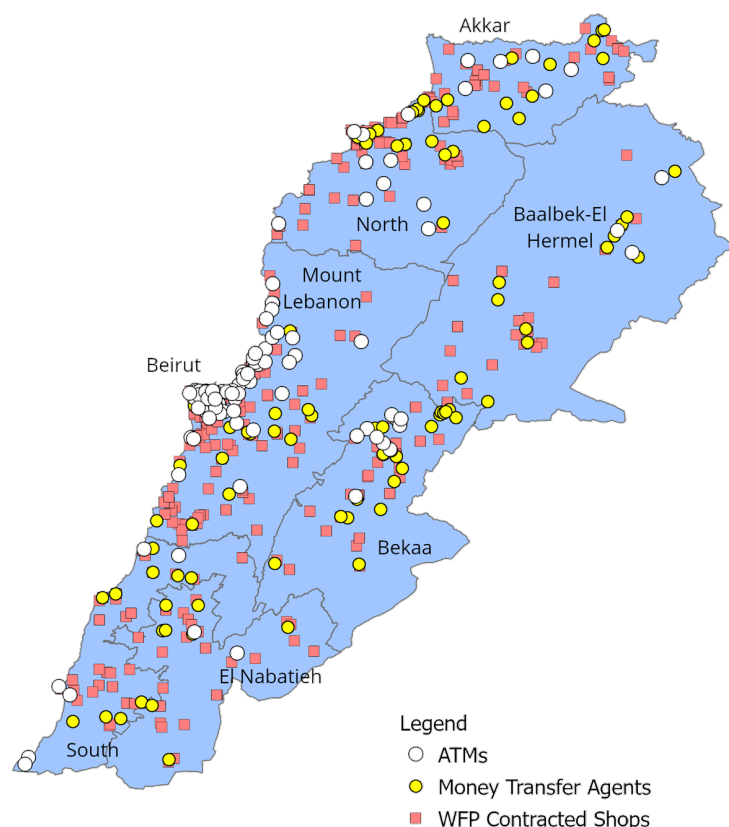


Credit: UNHCR Lebanon

Abdul Motalleb and Amina fled Syria with their children and found refuge in Lebanon. They enrolled their children in school, but the economic crisis made it difficult to afford rent, food, and medicine. UNHCR's cash assistance program is a lifeline for the family.

"We only buy the necessary food items with a long shelf-life and we limit power consumption to lower utility bills. Without the assistance, we wouldn't be able to pay rent, and we'd have to move from one place to another," Abdul Motalleb said.

CASH REDEMPTION POINTS



179 ATMs



102
Money Transfer Operators



400+
Contracted Shops

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