



Security Council

Distr.: General
15 December 2021

Original: English

United Nations humanitarian operations in the Syrian Arab Republic

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [2585 \(2021\)](#), in which the Council requested the Secretary-General to provide a substantive report, with particular focus on transparency in operations and progress on cross-line access in meeting humanitarian needs. The Council also called upon humanitarian agencies to support efforts and initiatives to broaden humanitarian activities, including early recovery projects. The report complements the inputs for the report of the Secretary-General on the Syrian Arab Republic, which is provided on a regular basis every 60 days, as also requested in resolution [2585 \(2021\)](#).

2. The information contained in the present report is based on available data from the United Nations system, compiled from humanitarian agencies, partners and other relevant sources. Information was gathered both in writing and through meetings held during visits to Damascus, Gaziantep and Amman.

II. Transparency in United Nations humanitarian operations in the Syrian Arab Republic

3. The Syrian Arab Republic is one of the most complex humanitarian operations in the world. Given the array of potential access and delivery constraints in the different areas of operation, systems have been put in place to ensure transparency in operations, both from within the country and across the border, providing United Nations entities and partners with a clear view of all aspects of needs and the response. Through independent needs assessments, due diligence, monitoring and risk management systems, at both the system-wide and the individual organization levels, the United Nations is able to understand challenges and mitigate them in a way that safeguards humanitarian principles and ensures accountability for humanitarian action.

4. Humanitarian actors across the humanitarian response for the Syrian Arab Republic have enhanced their standard due diligence practices and have committed to following a baseline of monitoring standards across all humanitarian programming and across all response modalities, in line with or exceeding international standards. System-wide guidance has been developed to guide partners, while in-depth



engagement on humanitarian operations is carried out with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, other relevant Member States, humanitarian partners, affected people and other stakeholders.

Assessments of humanitarian need

5. Independent needs assessments are the first step in ensuring transparency in the humanitarian response. Without a full understanding of humanitarian needs, it is impossible to understand the impact of delivery. Humanitarian operations for the Syrian Arab Republic benefit from sector-specific response data at the community level and disaggregated sector-specific needs data at the subdistrict level. The data on humanitarian needs, collected independently by the United Nations, ensure overall accountability for affected populations by putting beneficiary needs and concerns at the centre.

6. The humanitarian needs overview is based on a multisectoral needs assessment, as well as sector-specific assessments. In 2021, the multisectoral needs assessment was conducted by 475 enumerators and reached 33,171 households across all 267 subdistricts in the Syrian Arab Republic, with a 95 per cent confidence level and a 10 per cent margin of error. There were also sector-specific assessments conducted at the household and community levels in the water, sanitation and hygiene, protection, early recovery and livelihoods and food security sectors, in addition to other needs assessments. The scope and depth of the data collected provide a solid evidence base for a more effective and accountable humanitarian response.

7. In addition to these assessments, sectors include further assessments in their planning. For example, the health sector manages a Health Resources and Services Availability Monitoring System, which allows for the collection and analysis of information on the availability of health resources and services in the Syrian Arab Republic and the functionality of health facilities. The World Food Programme (WFP) is conducting a nationwide vulnerability needs review to better understand the depth of food insecurity at the household level. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) conducts a crop and food supply assessment to ascertain production levels and the impact on food supply and food security. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) undertakes systematic data collection to better understand the needs of children and communities across the 14 governorates through baseline and post-distribution monitoring surveys. It also conducts real-time monitoring for its programmes, including for children outside of schools, national examination and coronavirus disease (COVID-19) risk communication and community engagement. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) conducts regular geographical needs assessments to better identify who is in need, disaggregated by different categories of people (e.g. all affected persons, pregnant women, internally displaced persons and persons with disabilities), different types of needs (e.g. reproductive health, gender-based violence services and protection) and the severity of their needs. This helps to pinpoint the type of assistance that they require and ensures prioritized, focused response planning.

Transparency in Damascus-based operations

8. To ensure that aid reaches people in need in a transparent and principled manner, humanitarian actors operating inside the Syrian Arab Republic have reinforced standards of due diligence and monitoring procedures. The approach begins with a global framework of mandatory indicators, tools and guidance documents, as well as tailored monitoring and evaluation strategies outlining specific commitments and methods for the Syrian context. For example, UNFPA is implementing its global last-mile assurance approach, whereby it has developed standard operating procedures and monitoring tools amended to the Syrian context to ensure that medical goods and

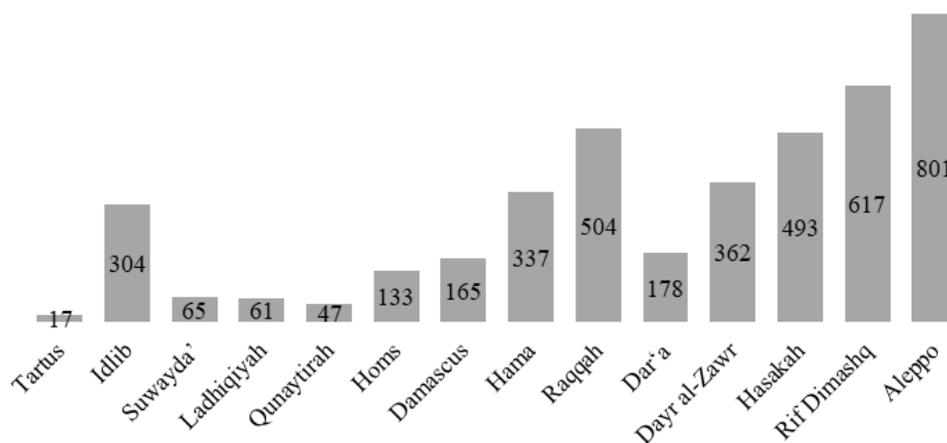
supplies, dignity kits and other commodities reach their intended destination, while bolstering the overall tracking system and minimizing stock-outs of essential medication. Resilience interventions by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), including those focusing on the restoration of basic service functionality in conflict-affected locations, are underpinned by a systematic risk management modality during project design and implementation to safeguard against environmental and social risks throughout all phases.

9. Project implementation is monitored both directly by the United Nations and through third-party monitors. For example, WFP directly monitors about 30 per cent of its projects through 37 field monitors placed in all field offices, who conduct distribution and post-distribution monitoring activities. The remaining 70 per cent are regularly monitored through third-party monitors. WFP increased direct monitoring by its field monitors from an average of 381 visits per quarter in 2019 to an average of 913 visits per quarter in 2021 – an increase of 139 per cent. The World Health Organization (WHO) has 30 focal points in all governorates, who conducted 206 monitoring site visits during the period from July to October 2021 to follow up on and monitor the implementation of projects supported by WHO. Since the beginning of the year, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has conducted over 560 monitoring missions to projects and partners across the country. The frequency of such missions is contingent on the receipt of approvals, COVID-19 precautionary measures and security considerations in the areas to be visited. While there remain access challenges for United Nations staff inside the Syrian Arab Republic, direct management of projects occurs regularly.

10. Third-party monitors complement the regular United Nations visits, with monitors conducting regular on-site visits to oversee project implementation, monitoring, reporting and evaluation. They scale up monitoring activities implemented by limited numbers of United Nations staff, as well as opening access in areas that the United Nations has more difficulty reaching. A total of 4,084 third-party monitoring missions took place in all governorates between July and November 2021 (see figure), an average of around 30 missions per day.

Figure

Number of third-party monitoring missions, 1 July to 15 November 2021



11. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) currently deploys 37 third-party field monitors from its field offices across all governorates, in addition to its core programme and monitoring and evaluation staff and personnel. Field monitors conduct regular field visits to project sites, monitoring the selection of beneficiaries

and the progress of activities. Third-party monitors contracted by WHO use specifically identified criteria to measure performance on the basis of economy, effectiveness, efficiency, ethics and equity. Since October 2021, six non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been visited, with a beneficiary survey, focus group discussion and individual interviews undertaken and an observation checklist completed. UNICEF addresses feedback from communities through field staff, facilitators and third-party monitors equipped with the capacity and tools to assess needs and collect feedback. Where in-person monitoring cannot take place, UNHCR has in place robust systems that ensure regular communication and reporting with partners and beneficiaries to assess project implementation. It has set up a database to monitor the monthly progress of all activities being implemented. The database allows for real-time analysis at the subdistrict level of programme deliverables by UNHCR and its partners and strengthens its evidence-based planning and reporting. An integral part of the standard partnership agreements are risk-based project monitoring plans, which are developed jointly by UNHCR and its partners.

12. A high degree of due diligence in humanitarian programming in the Syrian Arab Republic is contractually obliged through strict agreements between donors and partners and between partnering organizations, as with any humanitarian programming. Such procedures help to ensure accountability to and for all stakeholders. Donors often conduct capacity assessments of prospective financial partners to determine whether the partner has a sufficient level of capacity in terms of institutional, managerial, financial and technical expertise. Projects are regularly audited by independent auditors to prevent corruption.

13. Many humanitarian organizations have developed robust control mechanisms to ensure compliance with due diligence measures as well as protect staff, partners and beneficiaries. Examples include monitoring various stages of project implementation, as well as procurement processes, utilizing multiple sources.

14. In addition to the monitoring described above, feedback mechanisms have been developed to help agencies to better understand whether deliveries are meeting household needs and improve accountability to affected people. WFP manages a dedicated helpline through a call centre staffed by WFP employees. In 2021, it received and processed an average of 1,200 calls per month through its community feedback mechanism. WHO also has a dedicated telephone number for beneficiary input, which all partners are directed to post in an easily visible location for everyone receiving health services. UNICEF has a direct service line for accountability to beneficiaries and uses multiple channels with partners to receive and act on feedback from beneficiaries, including surveys, suggestion boxes and focus group discussions. UNFPA implementing partners all have suggestion and complaint boxes at their facilities for beneficiaries to provide feedback on services received. FAO employs social media to facilitate two-way communication with beneficiaries for both feedback and technical support. UNHCR has introduced a number of hotlines and other online tools, through which people of concern can seek counselling and advice and provide feedback. Since January 2021, almost 30,000 calls have been received – an average of about 2,900 a month. In addition, UNHCR is rolling out a feedback survey in community centres to evaluate the quality and efficiency of services provided, which will further support and improve the planning and delivery of assistance to those most in need. This is in addition to other, more standard accountability mechanisms put into place to receive feedback and complaints during distributions, at offices and community centres. UNDP set up a stakeholder response mechanism and a local hotline number.

15. Community feedback, coupled with monitoring data, are utilized to constantly improve the delivery of humanitarian activities. United Nations entities also conduct evaluations to assess the effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of programmes.

UNICEF is currently running two formal and independent evaluations of its country offices, while two programmatic independent evaluations were carried out on support for infant and young child feeding and explosive ordnance education programmes.

16. Despite the systems in place, there remain significant risks to the delivery of humanitarian assistance inside the Syrian Arab Republic. The United Nations continuously assesses the operating environment and regularly conducts stocktaking exercises to ensure that its assessments of risks are current. On the basis of such risks, it is able to develop mitigating approaches. For risks that cannot be prevented, it also allows for a more transparent discussion with donors and other partners. A total of 72 risk mitigation measures have been implemented, although six priority risks have been identified for which a moderate residual risk remains after the mitigating efforts are implemented. These include access impediments, efforts to influence programming by outside actors, limitations on protection programming and the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.

17. The United Nations country team in the Syrian Arab Republic has developed a risk management system, which includes each entity's individual enterprise risk management system, and a risk management working group within the country team, which is supported by a Risk Management Unit in the Office of the Resident Coordinator. The Risk Management Unit was established in June 2021 and provides analysis and coordination support to ensure that the United Nations and its partners and donors have a transparent view of risks and mitigating measures being applied. The Unit supports robust risk management, due diligence and information-sharing aimed at improving programme planning and implementation, informing decision-making, improving fiduciary accountability, doing no harm and opening dialogue regarding risk management challenges.

Transparency in cross-border operations

18. The Secretary-General detailed the steps taken by United Nations cross-border operations to monitor the delivery of aid from the border until it reaches people in need in two previous reports ([S/2018/617](#) and [S/2020/401](#)). He described the monitoring carried out at four distinct levels: (a) at the border by the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism for the Syrian Arab Republic; (b) at warehouses inside the Syrian Arab Republic; (c) at distribution points; and (d) after distribution with beneficiaries. It has been, and remains, a transparent operation in which the United Nations knows the status of aid deliveries at every step of the process, despite it being a remotely managed operation.

19. Since 2014, the humanitarian nature of the cross-border assistance has been consistently checked by the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism at the trans-shipment hub in Reyhanlı, near the Bab al-Hawa crossing point, as well as at other crossing points that had previously been authorized for use by the Security Council. When humanitarian cargo is brought to the trans-shipment hub by Turkish trucks, offloaded and then reloaded onto Syrian trucks to cross the border, the Mechanism's monitoring officers supervise the loading. After verifying the waybills and ensuring that the cargo is consistent with the assistance previously announced, they check the consignments physically, performing random checks and verifications. When loading has been completed, monitoring officers ensure that the trucks are properly closed and monitor the application of seals by customs officials.

20. Once the loading of all the trucks has been completed, they are assembled in a convoy under the oversight of the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism. The monitoring officers accompany the convoy to the border, ensuring that no manipulation of the consignments or reopening of the trucks takes place. Once the

trucks have crossed the border, the Mechanism issues a notification for the attention of the Syrian authorities, confirming the humanitarian nature of the consignment.

21. In October, the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism monitored and confirmed the humanitarian nature of 11 consignments consisting of 1,020 trucks. Some 80 per cent of the United Nations assistance that crossed during that month into the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic was food aid, while non-food items, including shelter and winterization assistance, represented 19 per cent of the total volume. The remaining aid included health supplies, such as essential medicines, medical equipment, COVID-19 vaccines and prevention material, as well as school materials. From its start in July 2014 until November 2021, 47,498 trucks with humanitarian aid have crossed into the north-west of the country under this closely monitored system. There have been no incidents of non-humanitarian items found in the consignments.

22. Deliveries of aid are confirmed upon arrival at warehouses by trusted and vetted implementing partners and by third-party monitors contracted by the United Nations. Similar to aid operations inside the Syrian Arab Republic, third-party monitors observe distribution to beneficiaries or to facilities such as schools and health centres. At distribution points, videos and time-stamped, geotagged photographs are used to confirm delivery. For example, WFP third-party monitors conduct on-site monitoring of food distribution activities, monitoring around 150 final distribution points per month. On a monthly basis they collect prices and submit, on average, around 40 price reports from markets in the north-west of the country. They also visit WFP warehouses and implement warehouse monitoring using a checklist developed by the WFP Supply Chain Unit.

23. United Nations entities have adopted individual accountability systems suited to individual operational needs. For example, the International Organization for Migration utilizes a commodity tracking system for its delivery of humanitarian assistance. Items contain unique QR codes, which are scanned upon arrival at the warehouse in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic and again upon distribution to the beneficiary. WHO tracks supplies from warehouses to health facilities and on to patients through a third-party monitoring system. Inputs for monthly supply needs, utilization rates and gaps are collected at the facility level, aiming to identify essential needs for life-saving and life-sustaining medical care.

24. Modalities for post-distribution monitoring include focus group discussions, complaint and feedback mechanisms at supported facilities and beneficiary satisfaction surveys. Many deliveries include telephone numbers on or in packaging to enable direct beneficiary feedback. So far in 2021, UNHCR protection third-party monitoring exercises have surveyed 1,040 beneficiaries of protection activities. The findings indicate that the activities were well received by communities and that no obstacles to accessing the activities were observed. Accessibility for all, including vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities and older persons, was ensured. All surveyed beneficiaries considered the services provided to be useful.

25. In addition, core relief item monitoring exercises surveyed 1,525 beneficiaries, showing that the great majority (98 per cent) were satisfied with core relief item content, the distribution process and the staff engaged in the distributions. Third-party monitors observed six warehouses managed by UNHCR implementing partners, which overall were found to be in very good condition. Shelter installation third-party monitoring exercises included 1,129 surveys as well as the monitoring of eight sites for internally displaced persons, which showed that the installation process was conducted in an orderly and safe manner. All monitored sites were deemed safe and secure. Moreover, COVID-19 safeguards were found to be in place throughout the activities.

26. Cross-border operations are subject to accountability mechanisms between donors and partners, which include verification that partners are humanitarian in nature, and to compliance with sanctions or counter-terrorism measures, external reviews and the maintenance of risk management measures. The United Nations provides training to implementing partners and local authorities on international humanitarian law and advocates principled delivery in areas where non-State armed groups operate within the Syrian Arab Republic.

27. Despite the high degree of monitoring in place, and as with any large humanitarian operation in a complex environment, risks exist in relation to cross-border humanitarian operations. Risk factors include the fact that the operation is remotely managed and that part of the area served is under the control of a local authority widely believed to have close ties with a non-State armed group that has been designated a terrorist group by the Security Council. Minimizing the risk of aid diversion and ensuring that armed groups do not benefit from any aspect of humanitarian deliveries has long been a priority for humanitarian organizations involved in the cross-border humanitarian operation.

28. While individual agencies have managed risks, there has been an effort to consolidate those efforts into a coherent approach among the United Nations and its partners over the last few years. In March 2019, the Humanitarian Liaison Group endorsed the document entitled “Strengthening risk management of humanitarian cross-border operations from Turkey into Syria to prevent interference and aid diversion”. The Group then undertook a joint risk analysis and created a joint risk framework that provided a tool that any organization could use to inform risk management measures, but will also be used to help the broader humanitarian community to analyse and manage risk as a collective. A proposal was shared with donors in November 2021 to support the creation of a risk management unit in the office of the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator, which would further consolidate efforts to jointly assess and respond to risk in cross-border operations, and the development of a risk management working group, which would support the Group and the humanitarian community more broadly.

III. Progress on United Nations cross-line operations in meeting humanitarian needs

29. There are 6.9 million people living in areas not under government control in the Syrian Arab Republic, of whom 5.6 million are in need of humanitarian assistance. People in need in areas not under government control are concentrated across northern parts of the country, with a smaller population located in the south-east, in Rukban. Humanitarian needs in areas not under government control are considered severe, owing to intense levels of hostilities in the north-west and north-east over prolonged periods and the high proportion of internally displaced people, many living in camps, informal settlements or collective centres.

Cross-line operations in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic

30. Of the estimated 2.7 million people living in areas of the north-east that are not under government control, 2.2 million need humanitarian assistance, including half a million internally displaced people. Almost 140,000 are living in camps, including the Hawl camp, which hosts some 57,588 people, the majority of whom are children. The deteriorating socioeconomic situation has led to more vulnerable people moving into camps in the hope of finding better access to services. The north-east is accessed both cross-line from within government-controlled parts of the country and cross-border from Iraq. In 2020, however, authorization for the United Nations to send aid

cross-border to the north-east through Ya‘rubiyah was not renewed. Therefore, today, only NGOs operate cross-border operations through the Fish Khabur crossing into the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as from within the north-east of the country itself.

31. The term “cross-line” in the context of the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic refers to moving from areas under government control to areas under the control of local authorities. The movement of relief items between such areas happens on a daily basis. Between 1 July and 31 October 2021, 625 trucks carrying humanitarian supplies crossed from government-controlled areas to the north-east through the Tabaqah crossing point. Such access has always been possible for most supplies, with the exception of health items, and the movement of items between areas has been happening regularly over the past 10 years.

32. In the north-east, the United Nations maintains regular and sustained humanitarian access from its Qamishli sub-offices to most parts of Raqqah and Hasakah Governorates. WFP provides food assistance to some 650,000 people on average each month with general food assistance. During the second half of 2021, UNICEF expanded operations to reach more than 983,000 people in 2021 in Hasakah, Raqqah and Dayr al-Zawr Governorates, including through the rehabilitation of water infrastructure (e.g. water stations and extensions of water pipelines). UNFPA has delivered 259 reproductive health kits in 2021 to support health services in Dayr al-Zawr, Raqqah and Hasakah Governorates, including to the Hawl, Mahmoudli and Arishah camps. FAO supported 126,000 people in Hasakah and Dayr al-Zawr Governorates with emergency agriculture input packages and animal health services. In the second half of 2021, UNHCR distributed more than 24,500 non-food items and winterization kits to some 85,000 people in the north-east. In addition, about 7,490 tents were distributed and replaced in camps there in the same period. UNHCR continues to support inter-agency efforts in the north-east, including in the camps, to address the protection and assistance concerns of affected populations in a coordinated manner.

33. WHO reports that it has provided nearly 30 per cent of the pharmaceutical needs for the area in 2021. Between July and November, it delivered 11 cross-line shipments (four road convoys and seven airlifts), carrying 196,910 kg of supplies sufficient to provide for 164,142 treatments and 18,092 trauma cases. The shipments included a range of medical items (haemodialysis sessions, chlorine tablets, cholera kits, laboratory supplies, medical equipment, medicines, trauma kits and intensive care unit beds), as well as vaccines, including COVID-19 vaccines and vaccines used for routine immunization. These supplies were provided to 120 primary health-care centres and 19 hospitals.

34. Efforts were made to increase access in order to further address needs. The size of the United Nations offices in Qamishli in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic grew, with 135 staff members, including 14 international staff members, working for nine United Nations entities at five different office locations. Access routes became more efficient, with a new access route recently approved for United Nations aid deliveries in order to transport food directly from Homs to Raqqah, without having to send it first to warehouses in Qamishli.

35. Nevertheless, access constraints remain. The United Nations humanitarian response in camps has become challenging owing to a range of factors, including prolonged approvals for project implementation, lack of access and insecurity, in particular in the Hawl camp. Access remains difficult in parts of Dayr al-Zawr Governorate, with a limited operational presence due to insecurity as well as extensive contamination by unexploded ordnance. In September, UNHCR expanded its operational presence by establishing an office in Dayr al-Zawr Governorate to ensure more direct outreach to support people of concern in the Governorate, and one

more field office was opened by an international NGO. Other areas, including Manbij and Ayn al-Arab, remain difficult to access from Damascus, owing to the lack of agreement between parties and insecurity.

36. Despite the large operation under way, needs continue to outstrip the response. This is particularly true for the health response, the area most utilized by the United Nations cross-border operation through Ya'rubiyah before its closure. The availability of medical supplies in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic remains a major challenge, due in part to the difficulties in importing supplies to the country, specifically to the north-east. For example, the central laboratory in Qamishli – the only testing facility in non-government-controlled areas of the north-east – has been unable to process COVID-19 tests since 10 November owing to a lack of RNA extraction, polymerase chain reaction testing kits and other laboratory consumables. In addition, the Shahil hospital, which provides comprehensive health-care services and COVID-19 treatment for 362,000 people living in Dayr al-Zawr, is at risk of closing owing to a lack of support. Other critical health facilities across the north-east are suffering critical gaps and operational cut-offs, including the maternity hospital in Raqqah.

37. Cross-line access continues to be restricted to the area between Ra's al-Ayn and Tall Abyad, with no United Nations cross-line aid deliveries currently being conducted to that area. The United Nations requested cross-line access to the area in 2019 and 2020 to assess the situation, but it was not possible to reach agreement among all the parties on the composition of the mission. The latest request for an inter-agency assessment mission, submitted to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic on 6 October 2021, remains pending. WHO and UNICEF requested access on 7 November to distribute COVID-19 vaccines, and their request was approved by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic on 6 December.

38. Access for technicians of the water and electricity directorates to Uluk water station, which lies in the area between Ra's al-Ayn and Tall Abyad, remains subject to local agreements between parties to the conflict. Although teams have been able to obtain access to the water station on many occasions to undertake repairs, there have also been critical periods when no access was possible, in particular when electricity provision from Darbasiyah has been cut off. Most recently, this was the case between 20 August and 10 September, when pumping stopped. Since 19 November, the water station has operated at low capacity owing to insufficient electricity supply. On 26 November, the station stopped functioning completely, directly affecting access to water for 500,000 people.

Cross-line operations in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic

39. Of the estimated 4.2 million people living in areas of the north-west that are not under government control, 3.4 million are in need of humanitarian assistance, including 2.8 million internally displaced people.

40. While access challenges exist in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, cross-border humanitarian actors are generally able to access most parts of the north-west that are not under government control and carry out sustained and unimpeded deliveries. The most significant access restrictions are in sparsely populated front-line areas in southern Idlib and western Aleppo, where an increase in hostilities has been reported in the past six months. In October and November, there were numerous incidents of shelling or other missile attacks affecting humanitarian operations, including in areas close to supply routes and close to warehouses of United Nations entities and NGOs. Despite access to most areas, humanitarian needs continue to outstrip the response in the north-west.

41. Since April 2020, the United Nations has engaged with the various parties involved to facilitate cross-line operations. From July 2021, it has been in regular contact with the various parties to identify an operational modality that is agreeable to all sides and takes into account diverging views, including on who would be involved in conducting cross-line deliveries and who would be authorized to distribute the aid. All parties indicated support in principle for cross-line operations. Five notes verbales have been sent to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic requesting access, and each received a positive response. Numerous contacts with representatives of the Government of Turkey and local authorities in Idlib have taken place as part of the access negotiations. However, obtaining all the necessary approvals and the corresponding security guarantees remained challenging in such an insecure environment, leading to some of the delays that have been experienced.

42. Following the access negotiations, two cross-line convoys were deployed. On 31 August, WFP successfully completed the first cross-line delivery of food and nutrition assistance from the government-controlled city of Aleppo, in Aleppo Governorate, to a warehouse in the city of Sarmada, in Idlib Governorate. The assistance delivered was sufficient for 43,500 people for one month. The second cross-line delivery took place on 9 and 10 December following the necessary clearances received from all parties. It provided multisectoral assistance, including food and nutrition assistance for another 43,500 people, as well as items from UNFPA, WHO and UNICEF, to the warehouse in Sarmada. The convoy was initially scheduled for 9–11 November, then rescheduled for 28–30 November, pending the receipt of security guarantees from local authorities, before being successfully completed. Less than four days' notice was provided to the local authorities to gather the security guarantees necessary for the initial convoy date.

43. The United Nations continues to engage with the parties concerned regarding further cross-line assistance to the north-west from inside the Syrian Arab Republic through inter-agency cross-line convoys. A plan has been developed for a series of regular and predictable United Nations inter-agency cross-line operations to deliver multisectoral assistance over the coming six months. The plan envisages regular deliveries of cross-line aid to the identified locations, supported by monthly cross-line convoys to stock warehouses. The plan is focused on the implementation of unaccompanied humanitarian inter-agency cross-line convoys to communities in prioritized sub-districts in Idlib and Aleppo Governorates, where 593,000 people in need reside. Prioritization is based on the objective of maximizing impact. The six-month plan was shared with all parties on 27 October.

44. On 17 November, WFP received approval from the parties concerned to move forward with its planned distribution modality for humanitarian items delivered cross-line into the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic at the end of August. Distributions through a local WFP team are expected to commence in the second half of December. Under this direct distribution model, WFP will distribute the transported commodities to beneficiaries, with full WFP ownership and oversight. The local selection, recruitment and training of the distribution team has commenced. The United Nations envisages replicating the model for future United Nations cross-line missions, where feasible, allowing assistance delivered through cross-line channels to be distributed under United Nations ownership and supervision.

45. Despite progress made in completing an initial cross-line convoy and steps made towards additional convoys and aid distribution, challenges still need to be overcome in order to achieve regular and sustained cross-line operations into the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic. Receiving the necessary and timely security guarantees from parties to the conflict remains critical to ensure the safe passage of cross-line convoys and their personnel, while shelling, air strikes, landmines and improvised explosive devices represent real security threats to humanitarian staff. A new system

for distributions was set up, because parties could not agree on the use of existing delivery mechanisms. Commitment by all parties to non-interference in humanitarian activities of the cross-line delivery at all stages is essential. Accountability to affected populations is also an important aspect that needs to be considered, in terms of both ensuring community acceptance for the deliveries and engaging to minimize the possibility of negative responses of neighbouring communities or other groups after the aid is delivered.

46. With access challenges for regular convoys, entities have also taken innovative approaches to reaching people in need cross-line from government-controlled areas. UNICEF has implemented water, sanitation and hygiene programmes in non-government-controlled areas of Idlib Governorate as well as in non-government controlled areas of western rural Aleppo. The work was carried out through partnership with the private sector. In 2021, it provided around 23,400 people in four communities (Burayj, Atarib, Babtu and Kafr Karmin) in western rural Aleppo with water trucking and reached 379,600 people through repairs to water pumps and control panels in four districts in Idlib (Idlib, Harim, Ariha and Jisr al-Shughur).

Cross-line operations in the south-east of the Syrian Arab Republic

47. In the south-east, an estimated 12,000 people remain in Rukban and surrounding areas. In the absence of regular humanitarian deliveries and owing to other factors, conditions in Rukban have steadily deteriorated since the most recent humanitarian aid convoy reached the area in September 2019. This has included an increase in food insecurity, compounded by the disruption of informal commercial supply routes to the settlements since February 2020. Measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic have also disrupted access to United Nations health-care facilities in Jordan. Protection concerns remain. As a result of the dire humanitarian conditions, spontaneous departures from Rukban have continued throughout 2021, with some people departing in need of immediate medical assistance. The United Nations and partners continue to provide assistance to people who spontaneously depart Rukban. While the Organization continues to engage on the matter and explore all options, full humanitarian access to Rukban remains elusive.

IV. Early recovery in United Nations operations

48. The resilience of the people of the Syrian Arab Republic has been severely reduced by a decade of conflict, acute socioeconomic crisis, successive water and COVID-19 crises and the winter season. Around 90 per cent of the population are now living in poverty and significant parts of the civilian infrastructure have been destroyed or are disintegrating. In 2020, the average monthly income in the country could no longer cover basic needs (see table). Despite record levels of humanitarian funding in 2020, this is one of the factors that contributed to the significant increase in the number of people in need that year (21 per cent), which only continued to grow through 2021.

Table
Gap between average monthly income and basic monthly expenses, by year¹

(Syrian pounds)

	2019	2020	2021
Average monthly income	95 997	147 724	301 377
Average monthly expenses	95 622	177 721	449 642
Income gap	–	29 997	148 265

49. Reduced resilience means that smaller shocks risk sending more people into situations of need – a trend likely to continue into 2022. Three-quarters of households have reported that they are currently not able to meet their basic needs in a sustained manner. With growing water stress and a low-yielding grain harvest in the 2021–2022 season, the chance of further food shortages is considerable. Some 60 per cent of the population is already facing food insecurity. Water, sanitation and hygiene, health and education services have been assessed as dysfunctional in almost half (131) of all Syrian subdistricts owing to the loss of technical staff and infrastructure requiring urgent repair because of damage and/or a lack of maintenance. Lack of access to health facilities remains severe; in 2021, there were 7.78 million people in 100 subdistricts where the number of doctors or functional medical facilities did not meet globally accepted minimum standards. Despite the rising needs, funding for the humanitarian response plan is lower than in 2020: by late November 2021, the response had received over \$200 million less than at the same time in 2020.

50. Early recovery activities are aimed at preventing a further increase in the number of people in need, as well as reducing immediate and protracted humanitarian needs by strengthening the self-reliance of affected populations, improving individual and community welfare and therefore reducing dependence on external assistance. Early recovery assistance enables individuals, households and communities to better manage shocks and stresses through projects seeking to ensure sustained access to crucial basic services. Early recovery activities also play a critical role in building social cohesion at a time when increasing competition over scarce resources is generating community tensions. It is also what people are requesting; beyond food aid, livelihoods and employment support and basic services such as electricity rank among the highest needs indicated by people in the Syrian Arab Republic in the latest multisectoral needs assessment.

51. UNDP support to persons with disabilities is built on the human rights-based approach in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In 2020 and 2021, it has provided more than 3,000 persons with disabilities with rehabilitation treatment, including psychosocial support as the basis for the inclusion process, and with access to employment, education and other basic services for their socioeconomic integration. It has been building the local capacity of technicians to improve the quality and sustainability of services for this vulnerable target group.

52. Early recovery activities in the humanitarian response plan are focused on five main integrated areas: (a) light repair and rehabilitation of critical civilian infrastructure; (b) removal of debris and solid waste; (c) income-generating activities and market-based interventions; (d) vocational and skills training; and (e) social cohesion and community interventions. Moreover, by adopting a conflict-sensitive approach, all early recovery activities seek to strengthen social cohesion, namely by building the capacities of communities to lead inclusive early recovery processes at

¹ Based on the findings of the 2021 multisector needs assessment.

the local level. There is a stand-alone sector for early recovery and livelihoods, but the early recovery response is multisectoral, being integrated across the sectors. This is done through the inclusion of strategic objective 3 of the humanitarian response plan, the aim of which is to “increase the resilience of affected communities by improving access to livelihood opportunities and basic services, especially among the most vulnerable households and communities”.

53. An example of an early recovery project meeting immediate life-saving needs as well as building resilience in communities is a recently completed WFP project to rehabilitate seven public bakeries in Aleppo, Dar‘a and Dayr al-Zawr Governorates, supporting the bread needs of some 1 million people. The project was part of efforts to enhance the value chain for the delivery of bread that also included the light rehabilitation of mills and the provision of flour to the bakeries. UNDP, WFP and FAO implemented a joint project to enhance the wheat-to-bread value chain in Hasakah, aiming to enhance food security for more than 23,000 people. The initiative is now being scaled up in Dar‘a. A project conducted by UNFPA in Aleppo in 2021 combined the training of midwives with the provision of clean delivery kits to help pregnant women who are unable to access health facilities during an emergency to avoid deadly infections. In 2021, the training of seven midwives has already led to support for nearly 800 safe births. Given the continued electricity shortages in the country, solar photovoltaic energy has been identified as an effective solution to ensure the sustainability of critical health services, including vaccination. In response, UNICEF has already installed 39 solar power systems for primary health-care facilities and cold chain infrastructure, with a significant scale-up planned for 2021 and beyond. Similarly, in order to advance progress on the climate and financial sustainability of water systems and sustained services to vulnerable communities, UNICEF has completed the integration of 20 wells with solar systems in 2021.

54. To date, early recovery projects have, for example, included 6,000 households in Dayr al-Zawr Governorate were able to cultivate 10,000 tons of wheat through the rehabilitation of community irrigation systems in 2020 supported by WFP and FAO. The cost of the irrigation project was less than providing general food assistance to the 6,000 households for one year. With water running, farmers have been able to cultivate summer and winter crops, reducing their immediate food needs and allowing for increased livelihoods. As part of its wider efforts to strengthen local capacity for sustainable management and the operation of water systems in the Syrian Arab Republic, UNICEF is assessing how to support the population by strengthening the water sector in order to restore and reinforce the supply chain (especially locally) for various water, sanitation and hygiene products, focusing initially on water treatment chemicals. For instance, in August 2021, two chlorine production factories supported by UNICEF began operation in Rif Dimashq and Dayr al-Zawr Governorates, producing more than three tons of chlorine daily. The chlorine produced by the Rif Dimashq factory is being used to chlorinate water from the Fijah spring in Rif Dimashq Governorate, the main water source for more than 1.8 million people in Damascus.

55. One element that has aided the delivery of early recovery projects has been the use of an area-based response to programming. Area-based early recovery programming delivers early recovery activities in an integrated manner to support resilience more sustainably in targeted communities. For example, rehabilitating a school in a rural community will have a limited impact on children’s access to education if their families’ rural livelihoods are not equally supported. Likewise, supporting rural families to increase production will have a limited impact on their livelihoods if nearby urban markets are not functional.

56. Early recovery requires structural support to be handed over to appropriate entities to manage upon completion (e.g. bakeries, hospitals and schools). Handover,

however, needs to ensure that service provision is equitable, responsive and accountable to affected populations. By decentralizing operations, the United Nations has been able to increase engagement in projects of communities and local authorities at the local level. Engagement is critical to ensure that communities have a greater say in the rehabilitation and distribution of critical services. For example, FAO has supported the creation of water user associations and farmer cooperatives to ensure the fair distribution of water resources. In eastern Aleppo, UNDP is facilitating an inclusive, multi-stakeholder planning process involving community representatives and local authorities to prioritize early recovery activities based on community needs.

57. In addition to its urban profiling work, UN-Habitat has supported the development of participatory recovery plans in numerous locations across the Syrian Arab Republic. In Aleppo, Dar'a and Dayr al-Zawr, this has been followed by the implementation of a package of multisectoral projects to address the restoration of basic service functionality, mobility, social cohesion and economic recovery. The process of recovery planning and project implementation is underpinned by various mechanisms that support community engagement, monitoring and accountability.

58. Early recovery is an important part of the humanitarian response in all parts of the country, including the north-west where the severity of needs and the large displaced population has kept much of the focus to date on meeting immediate life-saving needs. For example, through early recovery projects in the north-west in 2021, more than 319,900 people benefited from the rehabilitation of infrastructure in sites for internally displaced persons. This included road gravelling, tent levelling and rain drainage system connections. Some 62,000 people were reached by shelter rehabilitation activities, including the rehabilitation of collective centres, unfinished buildings and damaged houses. A total of 199 primary health care facilities are now functional in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, six health facilities have been rehabilitated and 404 communities have benefited from the repair and rehabilitation as well as the operation and maintenance of 270 water systems.

59. UNHCR supports self-reliance and builds resilience for the most vulnerable people through its community-based protection approach and extensive network of community centres in all 14 governorates. Early recovery initiatives include the provision of basic start-up livelihood support such as agriculture kits, livestock and small-scale business support and light repair of community facilities such as irrigation networks or marketplaces, which enable communities to have access to markets or increase production, among other things. These actions are complementary to UNHCR life-saving humanitarian activities in the protection, shelter and non-food items sectors.

60. The shift to a two-year humanitarian response plan will support the delivery of early recovery projects. By expanding the time frame by a year, projects can more sustainably address needs and be based on more participatory, community-led plans focused on the multiple factors inhibiting local resilience. Projects can also be implemented across value chains. For example, a UNFPA midwifery project included the light rehabilitation of a training facility, the provision of equipment and the training of midwives. In the city of Dayr al-Zawr, UNDP implemented a series of integrated projects, including emergency livelihoods for debris removal, the light rehabilitation of critical services and livelihoods support for local shop owners, to spur local recovery in neighbourhoods that were previously central to the city's economic activity. The various steps must occur in succession, and slightly extended timelines will allow for projects to better make such important linkages. Mine action is also important for effective early recovery projects, in particular in areas hardest hit by conflict. The rehabilitation of schools, hospitals or other civilian infrastructure damaged by conflict, as well as agricultural land in conflict areas, must be safe before

they can be renewed and used again, and the populations involved must also understand the risks.

61. Within the humanitarian response plan, in addition to projects focused solely on early recovery, there are significant projects in other sectors implementing early recovery under strategic objective 3. For example, in 2020 and 2021, WHO completed the light rehabilitation of eight primary health centres and began the rehabilitation of another six hospitals, one primary health centre and one laboratory in seven governorates across the country, all under the health sector response.

62. The United Nations has undertaken efforts to scale up early recovery activity since July 2021. The Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund is completing an allocation of approximately \$20 million for early recovery activities. The Syria Humanitarian Fund that operates from Damascus has allocated 37 per cent of the over \$42 million distributed in 2021 for early recovery objects (projects under strategic objective 3). As the 2022 humanitarian response plan is being developed, there is an expectation that the number of people in need targeted for the early recovery sector will increase.

63. On 24 November, the Office of Foreign Assets Control of the United States Department of the Treasury amended the sanctions regulations for the Syrian Arab Republic in order to expand the authorizations for NGOs to engage in certain transactions and activities. The amendment authorizes them to engage in the following additional transactions and activities in support of certain not-for-profit activities in the Syrian Arab Republic: (a) new investment in the country; (b) purchase of refined petroleum products of Syrian origin for use in the country; and (c) certain transactions with elements of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic. These are authorized only in support of the not-for-profit activities already authorized under the general licence, including humanitarian projects that meet basic human needs.

V. Observations

64. Despite a complex set of challenges, the United Nations and its partners have broad visibility on all its operations. The Organization has seen improvements in access allowing for more opportunities for monitoring, building on the robust monitoring by third-party monitors already in place. The risk management systems in place further aid the transparency of operations by providing a clear assessment of challenges, mitigating factors and residual risk.

65. Security Council resolution [2585 \(2021\)](#) extended authorization for the critical cross-border operation that provides life-saving support for 3.4 million people in need in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic. United Nations cross-border operations through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing authorized by the Council currently constitute the essential channel for the Organization to assist the north-west at the scale necessary to support humanitarian needs. The findings of the present report outline how the cross-border operation is one of the most closely monitored operations in the world, subject to multiple layers of checks to ensure a high degree of transparency. The United Nations cross-border operation also continues to innovate and improve, finding new areas in which transparency can be further enhanced, such as in expanding the systems in place for risk management. The United Nations and its partners are able to deliver assistance in a difficult operating environment. Deliveries are based on a thorough understanding of humanitarian needs, with visibility on what is being delivered and where the assistance is going. The cross-border operation remains an essential part of the humanitarian response and will continue to be as long as needs cannot be addressed at the same scope and scale through any other modality.

66. I am encouraged that clear progress has been made on cross-line operations and that all parties have confirmed their willingness to ensure the delivery and distribution of cross-line aid. In a matter of months, new approaches have been negotiated among parties to the conflict, and a system is nearly in place to deliver aid to people in need in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic in a predictable and sustained manner. More needs to be done to ensure that access translates into meeting humanitarian needs, and I call upon all parties to the conflict to ensure that these operations are able to deliver aid without delay. In that regard, I urge all parties to provide the necessary permissions and security guarantees in a timely manner. I also call upon all parties to give the process the time needed to succeed, recognizing the complexities of delivering aid across an active conflict line.

67. Even with the full implementation of the United Nations six-month plan, cross-line convoys will not be able to replicate the size and scope of the cross-border operation. They will be an important complement to the cross-border operation, offering another avenue for aid to be delivered to people in need in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic. The cross-line operation must also be integrated into the overall humanitarian response to ensure that there is not a negative impact on priority needs in other parts of the country. I recall my position that, with more access and more funding, the United Nations would be better able to meet the needs of people throughout the Syrian Arab Republic.

68. Early recovery activities, benefiting all people across the whole of the Syrian Arab Republic, are critical to the continued success of the humanitarian response in the country. Needs continue to grow, outpacing the generous support of humanitarian donors. The response needs to become more sustainable, otherwise more and more people will be unable to meet their basic needs. This can only be done by building the resilience of the Syrian people. While life-saving activities are a central part of the humanitarian response, early recovery is key to addressing rising needs.

69. After a decade of conflict, the humanitarian response in the Syrian Arab Republic continues to support millions of people in need each month without critical life-saving assistance. Despite challenges, humanitarian aid is delivered and services are provided in a principled and transparent manner throughout the country. Every opportunity must continue to be taken to address humanitarian needs, including by further increasing access and further expanding early recovery efforts. However, what people in the Syrian Arab Republic need most remains a sustainable solution to the conflict, in line with Security Council resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#).
