

LEBANON'S CHILD SURVIVAL CRISIS: TIME TO ACT



A family residing in Beirut receive an education kit and a multi-purpose cash assistance card from Save the Children.

SAVE THE CHILDREN BRIEFING

JULY 2021

HUNGER IN LEBANON

In July, 2021, Save the Children undertook a Household Economy Analysis in Greater Beirut and has found that ***over the last year, the survival deficit for Lebanese families has increased by 550%***. This means that families from all wealth groups have been driven into deep poverty, are unable to buy basic food items, survival goods, and other services, affecting all aspects of children's lives. ***Urgent action is needed to ensure the provision of transparently distributed emergency financial assistance to the most vulnerable families of all nationalities in Lebanon.***

One year ago, in July 2020, Save the Children found that half a million children in Beirut were facing food insecurity. The Household Economy Analysis report at the time, recommended that in order to ensure the survival of poor and vulnerable Lebanese households in urban greater Beirut during the economic crisis, an emergency monthly cash transfer of approximately 893,249 LBP per household would be required to prevent negative coping mechanisms, including child labour, based on the survival deficit.¹

One year later, the household survival deficit has increased alarmingly. Lebanese households² in all wealth groups are not only facing an inability to afford basic food items, but also an inability to pay for other survival goods and services such as electricity and medicine.

- **Very poor families face survival deficits of 5.5 million LBP/month; poor families face survival deficits of 5.2 million LBP/month; and middle-income families face survival deficits of 4.1 million LBP/month.**³ At the official bank rate of 1,500LBP to the USD, this is equivalent to being \$3,650, \$3,464, and \$2,715 short of the money needed to buy basic survival goods, including food, every month.
- This is a dramatic and alarming increase in the gap Lebanese families now face to meet minimum survival needs.⁴
- The Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyr) 2020, has indicated that nationally 9 out of 10 Syrian refugee families are now living in poverty, and remain the nationality experiencing the most extreme impoverishment.⁵



With an economy that has contracted more rapidly than any economy in the modern era, a currency that has lost over 90% of its value, and collapsing services, household resilience is completely eroded, and families now have no way to cope with the rapidity and intensity of the economic deterioration.

“Our children are craving food, it’s as simple and tragic as that...”

“My children lost weight significantly and the entire situation has affected not only their health but also mental state. My 13-year-old doesn’t leave the house anymore. I would beg him to go outside and play with other children and he’d start to cry, saying he doesn’t have money to play with them. As a mother and their sole provider/caregiver my heart shatters. I’m trying to save up every penny so we don’t starve, but at the same time I’m denying my son the chance to enjoy his childhood. My 16-year-old is constantly angry and upset. He keeps everything in because I know he doesn’t want me to see him hurt. They’ve changed so much over the past year, they’re growing up much faster than their age and this scares me for later on in the future.”

Mother of two, receiving multi-purpose cash assistance from Save the Children in Lebanon

BACKGROUND

In June 2021, the Lebanese lira reached an exchange rate of 18,000 to the USD, losing over 90% of its value. In a country that is dependent on imports for over 85% of food, this has caused prices to rise and has seen a 31% decrease in food imports.⁶ **The Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket has increased 340% since the beginning of the economic crisis in October 2019** – making essential food and non-food items like lentils, cooking oil, diapers, sanitary pads and other products, and fuel unaffordable for around 47% of Lebanese,⁷ and almost 90% of Syrian refugees.⁸



By June, the Lebanese Government had dramatically cut its import subsidies for fuel, medicine, and food, further driving these essentials out of the affordable range for most families. They have not followed a coherent plan, and it is being implemented in a highly chaotic, unpredictable and opaque manner. This has impact, not only on the price of and access to these essential goods (particularly fuel and wheat flour), but also on the **mental health and anxiety of the population, including children**. With the removal of state subsidies on wheat flour, the cost of bread has increased 117% compared with June 2020. Compared with December 2020, gasoline, diesel, and cooking gas have all increased significantly; 86%, 106%, and 53%, respectively.⁹ Electricity blackouts, including of generators, is widespread across the country, sometimes reaching 24 hours/day in Beirut. Fuel shortages and long lines to purchase gas are a daily reality, and basic medications like paracetamol are increasingly difficult to find.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR CHILDREN NOW

As evidenced by multiple recent reports, the ongoing economic crisis is having a serious impact on children's survival, development, protection and wellbeing. A recent UNICEF study conducted through a rapid national phone survey found that **“over 30% of families had at least one child who skipped a meal or went to bed hungry in March 2021,** and 77% of households said they did not have enough food or enough money to buy food. For Syrian households, the figure was a staggering 99%. In addition, one in five households did not have enough drinking water.”¹⁰ The same UNICEF report highlights the multidimensional effect on children, including that **30% of children are not receiving the primary health care they need, one in ten children has been sent to work, and 15% of families stopped their children's education.** Children with disabilities are often at even higher risk of food insecurity.¹¹

According to the Real Time Monitoring (RTM) report,¹² **cases of child labour significantly increased in the first quarter of 2021 compared to previous quarter and are becoming the most prominent child protection risk,** followed by violence against children and violent disciplinary behaviours. **The impact of the economic crisis overwhelmingly indicates that families are now regularly reducing the frequency and size of children's meals, withdrawing children from education,¹³ and engaging children in harmful work.**¹⁴

The dire economic situation, combined with pandemic-related lockdowns, has increased tensions and anxiety within many households. This has resulted in **greater risks of domestic violence, physical and emotional abuse to which women and girls are particularly vulnerable, and an increase in neglect, and family separation** by placing children in institutions to try and better ensure they get sufficient food and schooling.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR CHILDREN IN THE FUTURE

Negative coping mechanisms such as child labour and child marriage are already on the rise, and this is expected to continue as the economic crisis continues to worsen. IRC and LPC confirmed in March 2021 the link between the increase in child labour as a negative coping mechanism of food insecurity, and concerns over deteriorating nutrition practices since October 2019.¹⁵ Child Labour (including work on the street) is among the key issues increasingly affecting vulnerable Lebanese children, who according to partners, were less engaged in child labour than Syrian and Palestinian children in the past.

The inability to provide food is one of the main triggers for parents to send their children to work and the primary use of children's income is for food. Working children who are food-insecure are more likely to experience delays in growth in height and weight, and experience chronic malnutrition, acute malnutrition, and anaemia. They are also at higher risk of injury - 55% of them suffer from wounds - and diseases such as asthma, tuberculosis and silicosis, mental health issues, and eventually also of mortality. Urgent action is required to prevent child malnutrition in Lebanon. In Beirut, where there is no independent access to food production, this is even more acute.

Food insecurity also leads to children dropping out of school or not enrolling at all since they are likely to be the main breadwinner of the family. More girls face the risk of being deprived of the opportunity to attend school during the crisis. This is both due to loss of income within families and harmful coping strategies that favour boys' education over girls. Increases in child marriage are also expected.¹⁶ In a recent Save the Children study, Lebanese and Syrian **adolescents in Lebanon reported that economic hardship was a driver of child marriage in their communities** and that COVID-19 and other crises had worsened families' financial situations, and would further influence child marriage decisions.¹⁷ While there is limited updated data on child marriage rates in Lebanon, we expect this to be on the increase as the economic crisis continues to worsen.

“They will agree [to the marriage] because by doing so, they will get rid of a member of the family (one less mouth to feed) and she will support them in improving their living conditions.” *Syrian refugee girl, 13-15-years-old, Lebanon*

While the economic crisis continues to escalate, the crisis of child malnutrition and its consequences for children in the future, are foreseen and preventable.

THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW, TO PREVENT MORE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FROM SUFFERING

Protecting children from the impact of poverty is one of the most economically and socially sound investments that Lebanon can make to support the development and economic stability of the country. Save the Children is providing families with Child Wellbeing Assistance to ensure families not only meet the survival needs of their children, but can also afford other basic services to ensure the wellbeing of their children. This cash-plus programming combines counselling for families and caregivers to ensure that choices are made in the best interest of the child, to support their wellbeing, and to prevent harmful coping strategies like child labour.

Save the Children, with other Nutrition actors UNICEF and Action Against Hunger, is leading a rapid assessment to understand the impact the crisis is now having on child malnutrition¹⁸ – an area in which until now little data is available. **Transparently distributed emergency financial assistance must be provided to the most vulnerable families of all nationalities in Lebanon.** Cash remains families' most preferred method of assistance, according sector-

RECOMMENDATIONS:

We are calling for:

- Donors to prioritize funding for transparently distributed emergency financial assistance to the most vulnerable families of all nationalities in Lebanon
- The international community must recognise that the multiple crises impacting communities across Lebanon – especially children - has resulted in a humanitarian crisis and must ensure the appropriate humanitarian architecture is in place, under the leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator, to coordinate an effective and accountable response to increasing needs
- The Government of Lebanon to approve and urgently implement a cash-based national social safety net program which is evidence-based to cover mini-mum basic needs and help offset the loss of income due to the current economic crisis
- The Government of Lebanon to ring-fence existing budget in social welfare which targets children, in particular health care, education, and social allowances. Accessible and quality health care for newborns, adolescents, and pregnant and lactating women must be further prioritized, alongside equitable access to remote learning and a safe return to school
- Humanitarian actors to act urgently to prevent increases in hunger and malnutrition in children by prioritizing the scale up of cash assistance to families of all nationalities, supported by donors
- Humanitarian actors to ensure cash assistance is complemented by activities focused on children's survival, development, wellbeing, and protection, with a view to supporting longer term Government led social safety nets.

References:

- ¹ An overview of the global HEA methodology can be found here <https://www.heacod.org/en-gb/Pages/WhatIsHEA.aspx>; for more detail on the methodology and the findings of the baseline study, see SCI Lebanon April 2020 “Urban Greater Beirut Household Economy Analysis of Low Income Neighborhoods” <https://lebanon.savethechildren.net/sites/lebanon.savethechildren.net/files/library/HEA-Full%20Report.pdf>; for the July 2020 analysis see: <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/half-million-children-beirut-struggle-survive>
- ² The HEA conducted in Greater Beirut focused on Lebanese households, acknowledging the huge data gap on this group in comparison to refugees, who are also increasingly vulnerable but where more data is available e.g. through VaSyR.
- ³ At the official bank exchange rate to USD these values are \$3,650, \$3,464, and \$2,715, respectively. This is the amount that families would need to have in the bank to afford basic goods on a monthly basis. At the official informal rate (*sayrafa*) which is available to many humanitarian organizations, these values are \$456, \$433, and \$340, respectively. This is the amount required for humanitarian agencies to make monthly cash transfer disbursements to cover survival deficits.
- ⁴ In July 2020 the average deficit across all wealth groups was \$595 USD/month at the official rate (1500 LBP:USD), or as \$229 USD/month at the “Lebanese Dollar” rate for fresh money (3900 LBP:USD)
- ⁵ UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, *Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon—VaSyR*, February 2021. Accessed at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/vasyr-2020-vulnerability-assessment-syrian-refugees-lebanon>
- ⁶ Rate of increase from December 2019 – December 2020; WFP, *National FSSWG—Food Security and Markets Situation Analysis*, June 2021. Accessed at: https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/lcrp_fsswg_meeting_wfp_ram_presentation_8_june_2021.pdf
- ⁷ WFP and World Bank, *Lebanon Vulnerability and Food Security Assessment*, March-April 2021. Accessed at: <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000129566/download/>
- ⁸ UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, *Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon—VaSyR*, 2020. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/VASyR%202020.pdf>
- ⁹ WFP price monitoring presented in Basic Assistance Working Group 24 June 2021.
- ¹⁰ UNICEF, *Escalating crisis puts children at risk as the majority of families cannot afford to meet the basic needs of their children*, July 2021. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/lebanon-escalating-crisis-puts-children-risk-majority-families-cannot-afford-meet>
- ¹¹ UN DESA, *Realising the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with Persons with Disabilities*; 2019. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/11/poverty-hunger-disability-brief2019.pdf>
- ¹² Child Protection Working Group, *Real-Time Monitoring*, January-March 2021; the Real Time Monitoring Report is an Inter-Agency Child Protection monitoring system, led by UNICEF and monitors key child protection indicators and issues faced by children and families.
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¹³ Save the Children, *Lebanon Education in Crisis: Raising the Alarm*, April 2021. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/lebanon-education-crisis-raising-alarm>

¹⁴ IRC and LPC, *Working children in crisis hit Lebanon: Exploring the linkage between food insecurity and child labour*, February 2021. Available at: <https://www.rescue.org/report/working-children-crisis-hit-lebanon-exploring-linkage-between-food-insecurity-and-child-labor>

¹⁵ IRC and LPC, *Working children in crisis hit Lebanon: Exploring the linkage between food insecurity and child labour*, February 2021. Available at: <https://www.rescue.org/report/working-children-crisis-hit-lebanon-exploring-linkage-between-food-insecurity-and-child-labor>

¹⁶ UN Women, *Women on the Verge of an Economic Breakdown: Addressing the differential impacts of the economic crisis on women in Lebanon*, September 2020. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/10/report-women-on-the-verge-of-an-economic-breakdown-in-lebanon>; Yassine. H, *Domestic Violence Has Soared By Nearly 97% In Lebanon*, Lebanon News, Lebanon, February 2021. Available at: <https://www.the961.com/domestic-violence-abuse-soars-lebanon/> [accessed 8, July 2021].

¹⁷ Save the Children, *Married by Exception, Child Marriage Policies in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2021. Available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/19384/pdf/married_by_exception.pdf

¹⁸ Save the Children, together with UNICEF and ACF, leads the Nutrition Assessment Task Force of the Nutrition Working Group. Other member of the Working Group include WFP, IOCC, AUB, IMC, MSF, Lactica, Mercy-USA, Makhzoumi, WHO, and MAP.

¹⁹ According to SCI PDM reports for cash to families and to small businesses (unpublished), and CAMEALEON monitoring of MPCA, cash is still the preferred modality. Top areas of cash expenditure are consistently food, rent, and health across all MPCA programs, and they are demonstrated to have significant longer-term impact: CAMEALEON June 2020 “Impact assessment of multi-purpose cash assistance for Syrian refugees in



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