



**Urban residents under pressure:
Social and economic impacts of compounding crises on vulnerable
urban communities in Greater Beirut**

Urban Needs Assessment in Beirut and Mount Lebanon

July 2020



ACTED ACT FOR CHANGE
INVEST IN POTENTIAL

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

COVID-19 recovery programming in urban slum areas of Beirut and Mount Lebanon

In May 2020, ACTED conducted a rapid assessment of 188 former beneficiary households in urban slum areas of Beirut and Mount Lebanon. The purpose of the assessment was to understand the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions, and inform design of recovery interventions as the general mobilization period in Lebanon came to an end. Following the analysis of survey data, ACTED is able to make the following conclusions and recommendations:

Economic effects of general mobilization

- COVID-19 restrictions have forced nearly all respondents to stop work
- Over one-quarter of Lebanese respondents have relied on charity for their main household income in the 6 months leading up to May 2020
- The number of households relying on less than the equivalent of 200 USD per month doubled from February to April - households earned less each month, even without accounting for the rapid depreciation of the Lebanese currency
- Fewer households are able to afford rent, with 98% thinking they will not be able to afford rent for the next three months
- The majority of renters are at risk of eviction, with Syrians struggling the most

Recommendations:

- Evictions are a critical risk, and mediation and cash support to prevent evictions should be prioritized, with special attention to Syrian refugees who have lower bargaining power in community dynamics.

Food insecurity, coping mechanisms, and protection

- Women and Syrians are the most food insecure, with nearly half of each group scoring 'poor' in their Food Consumption Score.
- Households of all nationalities are engaging in negative coping mechanisms: 9 in 10 households either reduced food expenditure or consumption, with two-thirds buying food on credit or reducing other expenditure
- Syrian respondents were more likely to engage in "Emergency" coping mechanisms than Lebanese and Palestinians
- 1 in 3 respondents noticed increased household and/or community tensions – these respondents were more likely to be food insecure and at risk of eviction

Recommendations:

- Vulnerable, urban households are in urgent need of food security interventions addressing access, supply, nutrition, and diet. Syrian households and women should be prioritized in recovery programming tackling food insecurity.
- Protection-related cash transfers can help vulnerable households reduce engagement in negative coping mechanisms that put their children and household members in high risk or exploitative situations
- Programs should leverage community focal point networks established through ACTED's previous programming to engage in conflict mitigation in vulnerable communities. Awareness campaigns (through focal points, public posters/flyers) should be conducted within these neighborhoods to ensure households experiencing violence can contact available case management services in their area.

COVID-19 prevention and preparedness

- Respondents are aware of COVID-19 prevention methods, but lack the supplies needed to prevent its spread (masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer). This finding is common across all nationalities.

Recommendations:

- Any COVID-19 related response/preparedness programs should focus on ensuring households have adequate access to hygiene supplies and personal protective equipment.

Preferred types of communication and assistance

- WhatsApp is overwhelmingly the preferred communication tool
- Cash is the preferred type of assistance, although the preferred cash distribution modality varies by nationality

Recommendations:

- Cash is a preferred modality of support across all nationalities. Cash should thus be considered the primary operational modality for delivery of food security, basic assistance, and emergency support. Further assessment of markets' ability to cope with such programming is needed.
- Programs can largely rely on WhatsApp to reach beneficiaries of any nationality for communication purposes. Those households who do not have a consistent form of communication, however, will be at risk of falling through the cracks in assistance programs, thus providing these households alternate means of remote communication during demobilization to ensure continued contact in the event of a renewed lockdown is essential.

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BACKGROUND AND SCOPE OF THE ASSESSMENT

In October 2019, civil protests broke out in Lebanon in response to the announcement of several regressive taxes. The protests transformed into country-wide demonstrations condemning widespread and high-level corruption, sectarian rule, high rates of unemployment, and government mismanagement in the face of a failing economy. Already struggling economically, the protests prompted a political crisis in Lebanon, with the dissolution of the presiding government and the formation of a new one after several months of negotiations. The combination of long-existing economic woes, the political crisis, and capital controls caused rapid inflation, resulting in vast swathes of the population slipping into poverty.

The political and economic crises were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, with many already struggling to afford basic goods due to inflation and high unemployment rates. In response to the pandemic, the Government of Lebanon imposed a period of general mobilization in March 2020, forcibly closing businesses, restricting movement, and imposing curfew. Swift and early action spared Lebanon from a large outbreak as of June 2020, but resulted in a partial or total loss of income for people throughout the country.

This rapid assessment explored the socio-economic situations of vulnerable Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians who have previously benefited from ACTED's assistance and are living in dense urban slums of Beirut and Mount Lebanon. The assessment was conducted in the midst of the first general mobilization period for COVID-19 and against the backdrop of the political and financial crises ongoing in Lebanon since October 2019. It explored how these crises have affected household coping strategies and community relations as well as how well equipped they are to cope with the current crisis. It is meant to inform the design of recovery interventions from the COVID crisis as general mobilization comes to an end.

ACTED investigated the following topics as they relate to the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and its associated restrictions, as well as the preexisting political and economic crises, in vulnerable urban communities:

- Changes in economic activity, income, and sources of livelihoods
- Household food security and access to markets
- Housing situations including the ability to pay rent and the risk of eviction
- Social and community tensions, and potential protection concerns
- COVID-19 prevention knowledge and preparedness equipment
- Preferred aid modalities and means of communication

METHODOLOGY

ACTED conducted a phone-based quantitative survey of 188 former beneficiaries living in highly vulnerable urban areas of Mount Lebanon and in the Eastern and Southern suburbs of Beirut: Zaaitrye, Mar Elias, Cite sportive, Sabra, Chatila, Tarik I Jdide, Fanar, Ghobeire, Ketermaya, Jdeidet el Maten, Aadlyeh and Daouk. The majority of respondents were located in Mar Elias (24%), Tariq el Jdide (21%), Cite Sportive (21%), and Beirut (17%). Data was collected between 4 May 2020 and 15 May 2020.¹



Respondents were selected from a list of 379 former beneficiary households who received multi-purpose cash assistance during a prior ACTED project completed in 2019. The beneficiaries were selected for that project based on several vulnerability criteria related to shelter and WASH conditions, protection risks, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The list included households comprised of Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians of any gender with heads of household over the age of 18. While the initial intention was to survey a representative sample of the former beneficiaries using simple random sampling (95% confidence level, 5% margin of error), requiring a sample size of 188, the exceptionally high non-response rate required ACTED to exhaust the full list of 379 households to reach 188 respondents.² This required an adjusted methodological approach, with ACTED instead analyzing results using methods appropriate to a convenience sample. Data was collected using ODK software.

In the final sample, the proportion of female respondents (52%) was slightly higher than the proportion of male respondents (48%) (Figure 1). Of the female respondents, 39% stated that they were heads of household.³ The majority (53%, 100) of respondents were Syrians, followed by Lebanese (29%, 55), and Palestinians (18%, 33) (Figure 1). More than two-thirds (68%) of respondents were living in Beirut (Figure 1).

¹ The questionnaire is available from ACTED upon request.

² Where ACTED was able to collect reasons for non-response, the reasons included outdated and disconnected telephone numbers, survey fatigue, and respondents having moved out of the Beirut-Mount Lebanon area.

³ This figure does not account for all female-headed households among the sampled respondents, as enumerators only asked the respondent whether they themselves were the head of the household.

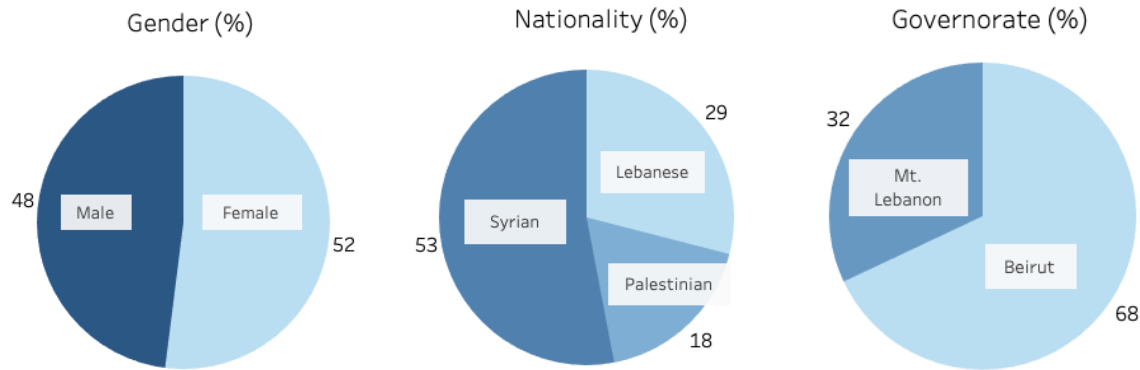


Figure 1

LIMITATIONS OF THE EXERCISE

Given the high non-response rate amongst those initially sampled and the methodological choice to use replacement in the case of non-response, the results do not form a representative sample of the list of 379 former beneficiaries.⁴

The non-response rate potentially introduces non-response bias, but without detailed information about the non-responders, ACTED is not able to determine whether there are notable differences between those who responded and those who did not. When the sample is treated as a convenience sample, however, the results reflect only the situations of the respondents to whom we spoke and non-response does not compromise the results.

Further, while the objective of the assessment was to understand the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, respondents were asked to recall details from prior to the general mobilization period for COVID-19. As is always the case with asking respondents to recall details from the past, this information is subject to recall bias.

⁴ As the sample is neither representative of the population of interest nor stratified by nationality, comparisons between nationalities and conclusions drawn in this assessment are not statistically valid and should not be extrapolated to the greater population.

RESULTS

87% STOPPED WORK DUE TO COVID-19 CONTAINMENT MEASURES, WITH A QUARTER OF LEBANESE RELYING ON CHARITY FOR THEIR MAIN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

Had to stop economic activity due to COVID-19

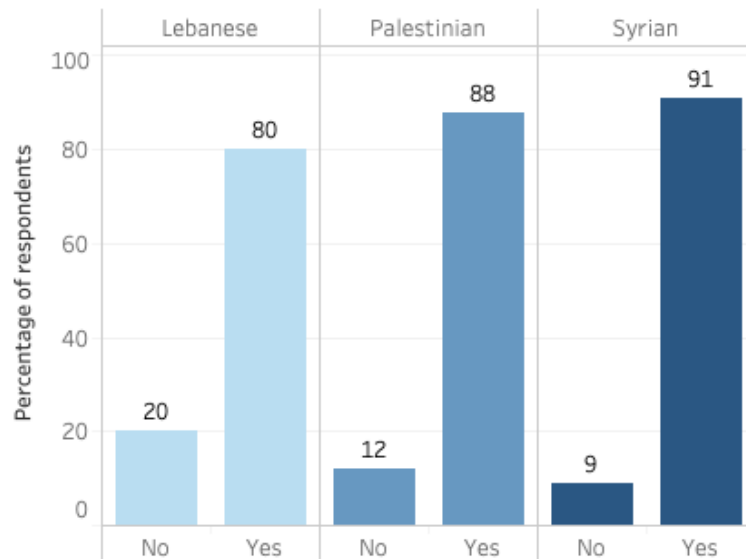


Figure 2

Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian respondents shared a variety of main sources of household livelihood during the 6 months prior to this assessment. For Lebanese households, the most common main sources of livelihood were in the service sector (24%), running their own business (24%), and relying on charity from their neighborhood or families (26%). For Syrians, the largest sector was construction (37%), followed by service sector (23%), and daily labor (17%). For Palestinians, the service sector was the most common (27%), followed by

charity (18%) and NGO/UN support (18%) (Figure 3). The majority of those whose sector was specified as “other” were daily workers in an undefined sector or sectors.

Respondents were then asked to reflect on their household’s source of livelihood for the past month (prior to the assessment), to see if it had changed versus the past 6 months, however there were no notable changes. 87% of respondents said they had to stop their economic activity due to the containment measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19, with Syrians the most affected, followed by Palestinians and Lebanese (Figure 2). While ACTED’s assessment did not investigate the reasons why economic activity was stopped, a WFP study of the impact of COVID-19 in Lebanon found that the primary reasons for disruption of work activities were that employers closed or reduced staff, individuals had concerns about leaving the house, and that there were fewer opportunities for daily labor.⁵ The vast majority of respondents had to stop work due to COVID-19, yet primary sources of livelihood did not change, indicating that respondents who had to stop work were likely unable to find – or were not looking for – alternative sources of livelihood to replace the loss of the primary source. This observation is supported by the WFP study, which found that only about 1 in 10 Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian respondents were seeking alternative income sources.

⁵ “Assessing the Impact of the Economic and Covid-19 Crises in Lebanon”, World Food Programme, June 2020.

Main source of livelihood over the past 6 months (May 2020)

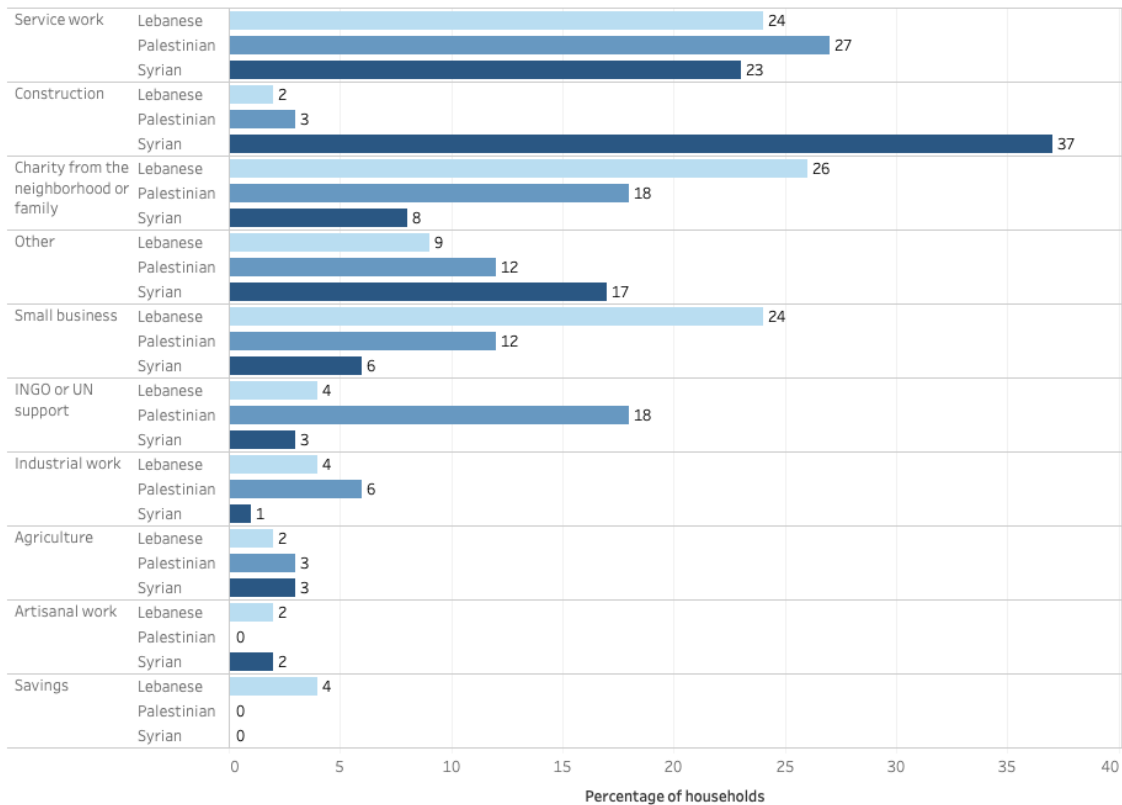


Figure 3

HOUSEHOLDS RELYING ON LESS THAN 200 USD PER MONTH JUMP FROM 44% IN FEBRUARY TO 86% BY APRIL

In order to understand the impact of COVID-19 restrictions, respondents were asked to reflect on changes to their monthly income over the previous three months.⁶ While 44% of respondents recalled having a household income of less than 200 USD in February – about 150 USD less than the minimum monthly wage in Lebanon of 675,000 LBP - by April, this figure was 86%, indicating a major increase in financial vulnerability compared to just two months prior (Figure 4). This figure does not account for the reduced purchasing power of Lebanese currency due to rapid inflation.

Those earning 300,000 LBP per month would see their salary valued at 200 USD in September 2019, about 122 USD in February 2020, and about 83 USD in April 2020.⁷ One-third of households reported no income in February, whereas two-thirds reported no income in April; median monthly income fell from 200 USD in February to 0 USD for all nationalities by April.

⁶ Respondents were asked to recall their monthly income in February, March, and April in Lebanese pounds (LBP). The dollar rates included in the narrative are calculated at the rate of 1500 LBP = 1 USD and do not account for the depreciation of Lebanese currency. February was chosen as the first month of the recall period as COVID-19 restrictions were not yet in place.

⁷ Source: LebaneseLira.org

Monthly income, February - April 2020

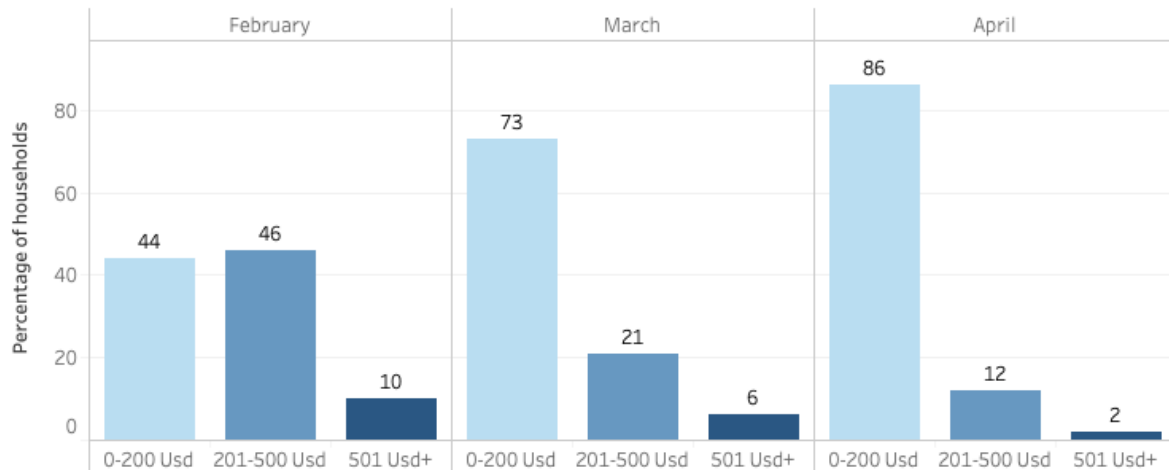


Figure 4

TWO-THIRDS OF RESPONDENTS SCORING 'POOR' OR 'BORDERLINE' IN FOOD CONSUMPTION SCORE, WITH LOWER SCORES AMONG WOMEN AND SYRIANS

To understand how the current crisis has impacted their food consumption behavior, respondents were asked how many days they ate something from a specific food group over the last seven days. This information was used to calculate their Food Consumption Score (FCS), which is considered a proxy indicator of current food security. FCS is a composite score based on dietary frequency, food frequency and relative nutrition importance of different food groups. Overall, 65% of respondents were identified as having 'poor' or 'borderline' food consumption⁸, based on their reported consumption over the previous seven days (Figure 5) – a worrying, but unsurprising finding given the skyrocketing food prices in Lebanon.⁹ Nearly half of all Syrians (48%) fell into the 'poor' food consumption category, compared to 28% of Lebanese and 33% of Palestinians. The mean FCS fell into the borderline category for all three nationalities. Women fared worse than men - just under half of female respondents scored a 'poor' FCS (48%), compared with 36% of males. Median household income in April 2020 was 0 USD for respondents in all FCS categories, suggesting that small differences in income between vulnerable households may not be a major determining factor of food security while COVID restrictions are ongoing.¹⁰

⁸ Food Consumption Scores broke down as follows: 'Poor' – 42%, 'Borderline' - 23%, and 'Good' - 35%

⁹ "Coronavirus: Wheat shortages and rising food prices spell disaster for cash-strapped Lebanon", Middle East Eye, 11 April 2020.

¹⁰ Mean household income for those with a 'poor' FCS score was 75 USD, 'borderline' was 55 USD, and 'good' was 74 USD

Individual food consumption score by nationality

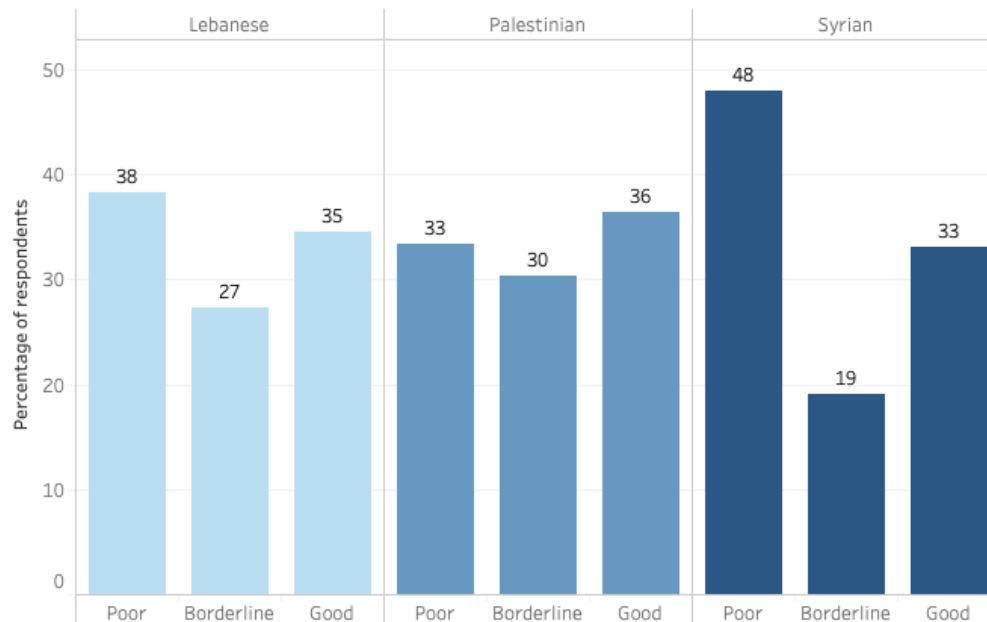


Figure 5

LIMITED ACCESS TO MARKETS AND FOOD SUPPLY AMONG FOOD INSECURE HOUSEHOLDS

ACTED probed respondents about the impact of the general mobilization period on access to markets, as well as food supply and pricing. All respondents witnessed an increase in the price of goods during the previous month.¹¹ Just under half of respondents (45%) noted they had difficulties accessing markets to buy food during the past month. Of those respondents who did face difficulties, frequently identified issues included closures of nearby markets (54%), lack of transport (46%), and movement restrictions (34%).

The majority of those with a 'poor' and 'borderline' FCS (63% and 67%, respectively), reported facing difficulties in access to markets, compared to only 10% of those with an 'acceptable' FCS. Similarly, 76% of those with a 'poor' FCS and 65% of those in the borderline category had difficulty getting the food items they needed due to lack of supply over the past month, compared to 41% of those with a 'good' FCS. In other words, the data suggests that food insecure households could not consistently physically access food, which is notable given that the data was collected in dense, urban areas. It is possible that the combination of closures of all nearby markets, in addition to lack of transport and movement restrictions, prevented individuals from venturing outside their neighborhoods to access food, and that markets in and near urban slums that were open during the mobilization period were not able to maintain supply. These findings warrant further investigation.

¹¹ This refers to all types of goods.

HOUSEHOLDS USING NEGATIVE COPING MECHANISMS TO SURVIVE, WITH 9 IN 10 HOUSEHOLDS REDUCING BOTH FOOD CONSUMPTION AND EXPENDITURE

ACTED asked respondents whether their household had engaged in 13 different negative coping mechanisms over the past 7 days.¹² Over 90% of households both reduced food consumption and food expenditure (Figure 6). About two-thirds of respondents also reduced essential non-food expenditure or bought food on credit. These findings reflect those of a similar assessment carried out by ACTED in Tripoli in March 2020, which found that respondents were already engaging in these four coping mechanisms most frequently, albeit at lower rates.

Lebanese and Syrian households engaged in negative coping mechanisms at least once in the 7 days prior to the assessment at slightly higher rates than Palestinian households in all categories with the exception of selling productive household assets. Both this assessment and the WFP study found that Syrian households were more likely to engage in ‘emergency’ level coping mechanisms including having children involved in income generation, accepting high risk or exploitative work, or asking for money from strangers (begging).¹³

Engaged in negative coping mechanisms in the last seven days

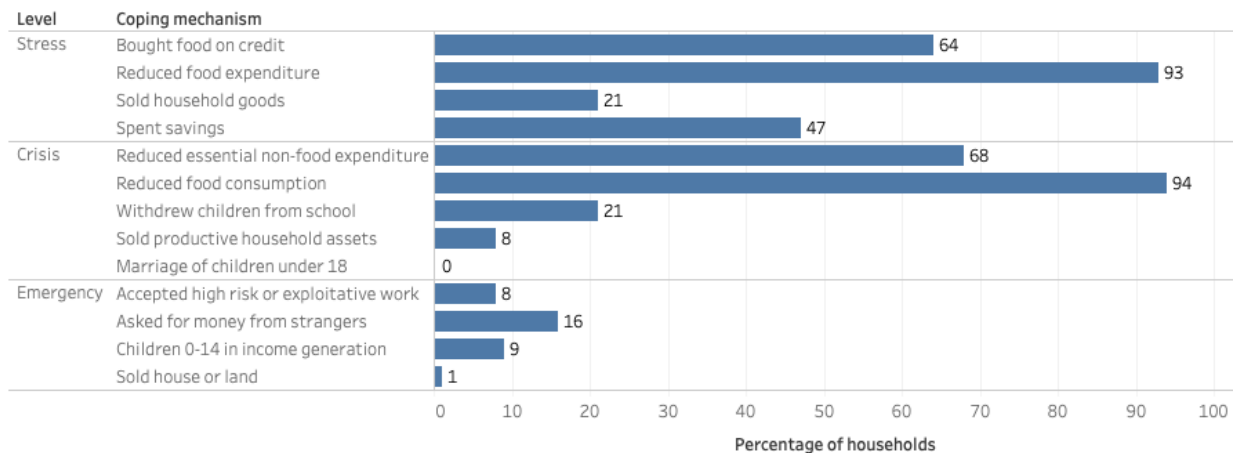


Figure 6

FEWER ABLE TO AFFORD RENT, WITH SYRIANS THE HARDEST HIT

The majority (64%) of respondents rent their home, with fewer owning their own home (25%). 10% of respondents had other housing situations, such as being hosted by another family, or living in unoccupied buildings.

There were specific differences between nationalities, with Syrians overwhelmingly renting (89%), and the majority of Palestinians owning their own home (70%). Lebanese households were split between renting (45%) and owning their own home (44%).

The majority of households across all three nationalities were unable to pay their rent from February through April (Figure 7), and doubted their ability to do so in the future. When renters were asked to think about their ability to pay rent over the next three months, respondents of all nationalities (98%) said that they were not confident they would be able to do so.

¹² Coping mechanisms are placed in three categories in order of increased severity, ‘Stress’, ‘Crisis’

¹³ “Assessing the Impact of the Economic and Covid-19 Crises in Lebanon”, World Food Programme, June 2020.

Percentage of households able to pay rent in full over the last three months (Feb - Apr 2020)

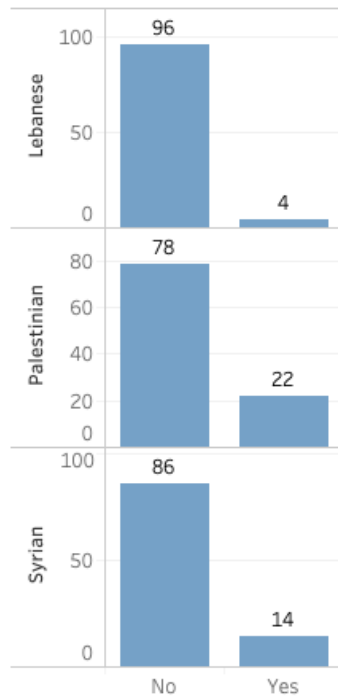


Figure 7

Of those who rent, just under half (46%) were not able to pay their rent in full in February. This figure increased to 76% in April, reflecting the severe reduction in household income from February to April. Syrians in ACTED's sample were hit the hardest. They were already struggling to pay rent in February, with only 31% able to cover rent in full. By April, only 15% of Syrians were able to meet rent, placing them at serious risk of eviction.

On the question of risk of eviction for non-homeowners (i.e., renters and those living in other forms of housing), 58% stated they were at risk of eviction, including 65% of Syrian non-homeowners, compared to 46% of Lebanese. Only 9 of the 33 Palestinian respondents do not own their own home – 3 households were at risk of eviction.

While the risk of eviction has almost certainly been exacerbated by the total loss of income for many households during the COVID-19 crisis, families in vulnerable urban areas of Lebanon have struggled to pay their rent since the beginning of civil unrest and rapid inflation beginning in October 2019, as found in a January 2020 urban needs assessment conducted by ACTED, RMF, and SHIELD.

OVER ONE-THIRD OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING INCREASED TENSIONS IN THEIR COMMUNITY

Rising tensions in the household and the community were reported by a minority of respondents. Respondents were asked to consider whether they had noticed increases in tension among households in the community and within the community itself over the previous two weeks.¹⁴

Over one-third of respondents had seen a rise in tensions at the household and community level (36% and 38%, respectively), with no notable difference between nationalities, genders, neighborhoods, or income brackets. This is in contrast to the WFP study mentioned above, which found that women were more likely to perceive tension than men.¹⁵ Those who noticed a rise in household or community tensions tended to be more vulnerable in terms of two factors: they reported being at risk of eviction at higher rates, and were more likely to be food insecure (Figure 8, 9).

¹⁴ Respondents were not asked directly about tensions in their own households, rather, household tensions in their community in order to prevent discomfort with the question. Prompts given of tensions within the household: people screaming at/insulting one another in the family, people hitting/being physically violent against their children, physical violence against women. Prompts given of tensions within the community: insults between different groups, physical violence between groups.

¹⁵ "Assessing the Impact of the Economic and Covid-19 Crises in Lebanon", World Food Programme, June 2020.

Noticed a rise in tensions in households in the community,
by FCS

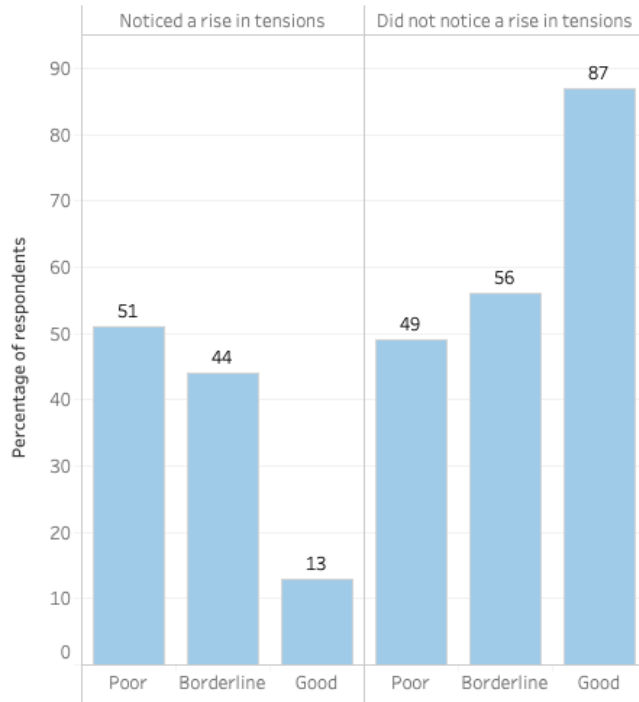


Figure 8

Noticed a rise in tensions in households in the community,
by risk of eviction

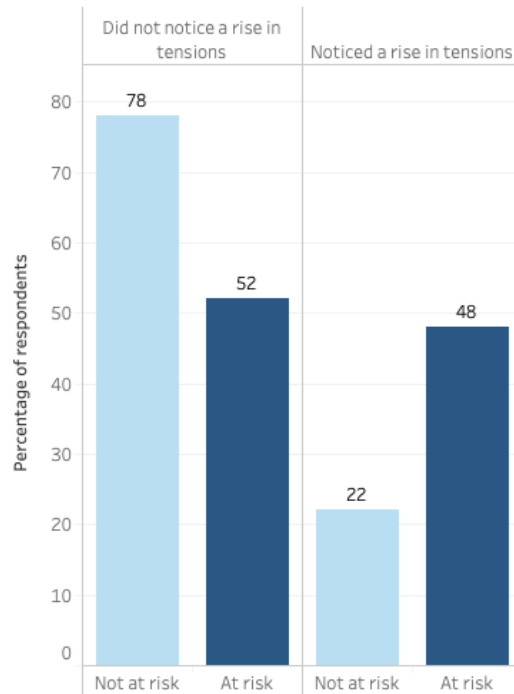


Figure 9

VAST MAJORITY KNOW A MEANS OF PREVENTION, BUT FEW HAVE THE SUPPLIES NEEDED TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF COVID-19

Respondents were asked about their knowledge of COVID-19 prevention methods and if they had access to necessary supplies to combat the spread. Nearly all respondents (94%) stated that they have access to functional handwashing facilities and handwashing soap. Only 20% of respondents, however, reported having enough personal protective supplies to prevent COVID-19 transmission in their home (Figure 10).¹⁶ This figure did not differ by gender, with only minor variations by nationality – Palestinians were slightly more likely to have enough supplies (28%).

Three-quarters (77%) of respondents were able to state at least one correct means of COVID-19 prevention (Figure 11). As with protective supplies, there was no major variation in response by gender, however, Palestinians were able to name at least one means at slightly higher rates (85%) than Lebanese (80%) and Syrians (73%). Palestinians were also the most likely to have knowledge of the means of prevention of COVID-19 (85%), with Syrians the least likely (72%). Of the 18 neighborhoods in which respondents lived, Tariq el Jdide stood out – all 40 respondents living in Tariq el Jdide were able to name at least one means of COVID-19 prevention, suggesting that there has been a recent intervention in this area.

Has enough COVID-19 protection supplies

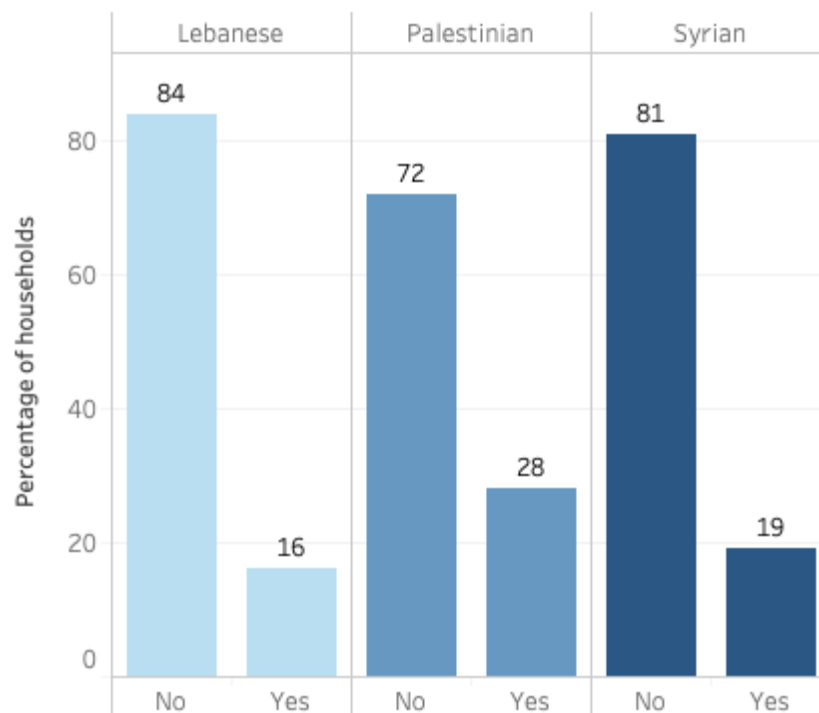


Figure 10

¹⁶ Examples of supplies provided were masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer

Knows at least one means of COVID-19 prevention

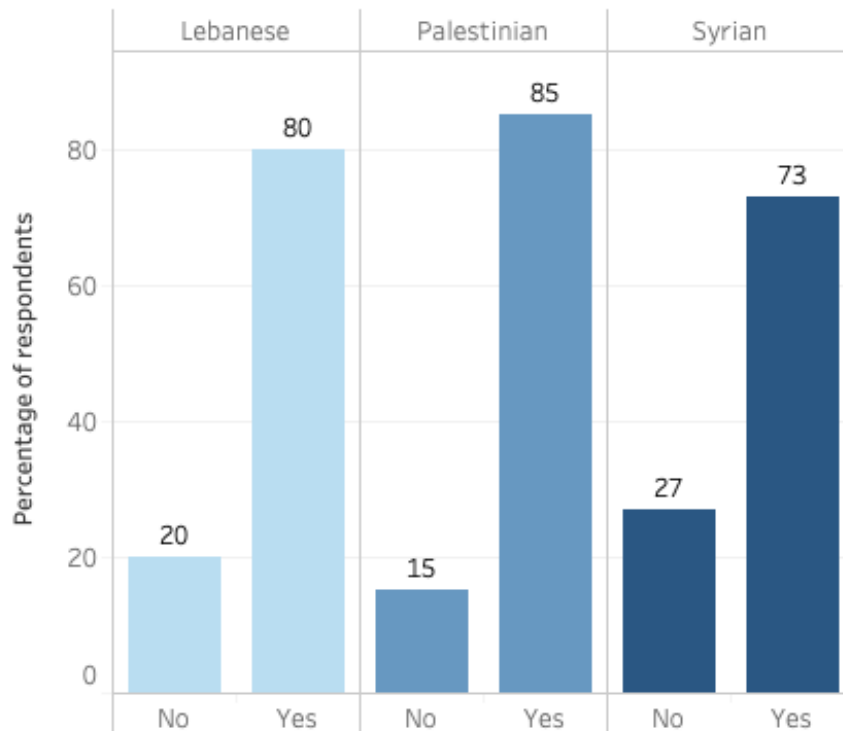


Figure 11

CASH IS THE PREFERRED TYPE OF ASSISTANCE, WITH DIFFERENCES IN PREFERRED MODALITY BY NATIONALITY

The preferred type of assistance for most respondents was cash (94%) (versus vouchers, in-kind, and other types of aid), with the preferred modality cash through ATM (41%), followed by cash distributed to their door by an organization (28%), and cash distributed at a separate site (25%). Of those who preferred cash assistance, Syrians were most likely to prefer cash from an ATM, while Lebanese and Palestinians preferred to receive cash at their house. Men who preferred cash assistance were more likely to prefer cash from an ATM than women, while women's preferences were equally split between the three modalities.

WHATSAPP IS THE PREFERRED COMMUNICATION MECHANISM

According to the survey respondents, WhatsApp was overwhelmingly the most popular type of communication, 90% of selecting this as a means of communication they commonly use, this was followed by phone calls at 46%. Neither Syrian nor Palestinian respondents reported using Facebook.

CONCLUSION

The results of this assessment reveal some of the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on already vulnerable households in Beirut and its eastern and southern suburbs. Households are generating less income, are unable to afford basic expenses including food and rent, and are relying on negative coping mechanisms to get by. While many of the households surveyed in this study were already struggling to make ends meet prior to the pandemic, households reported less income in May 2020 compared to February, suggesting that existing vulnerabilities were exacerbated by the pandemic.

The period of general mobilization in Lebanon ended in July 2020. While some households may begin to generate income once again, the fact remains that many households will still struggle: they may owe unpaid rent from months prior, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be a significant risk to the health and safety of vulnerable people, and the purchasing power of the Lebanese currency continues to decline.

Based on these results, ACTED recommends mediation and cash support for households at risk of eviction, urgent food security interventions addressing access, supply, nutrition, and diet, and ensuring that vulnerable households have access to crucial protection services and conflict mitigation programming. COVID-19 interventions should focus on provision of appropriate supplies, as households largely have knowledge on how to prevent the spread of the disease. Finally, the respondents to this survey identified cash as their preferred aid modality and WhatsApp as their preferred communication modality, information that is key to providing communities with the support that they need - in the ways that work for them.¹⁷

¹⁷ Feasibility and relevance of cash programming will need to be further researched through a market assessment.