



# Fitting aid to context: community experiences of aid delivery in northern Syria

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**Urban environments**

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## Produced by IIED's Human Settlements Group

The Human Settlements Group works to reduce poverty and improve health and housing conditions in the urban centres of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It seeks to combine this with promoting good governance and more ecologically sustainable patterns of urban development and rural-urban linkages.

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Trust Consultancy & Development is an independent consultancy, evaluation and research organisation based in Gaziantep, Turkey, specialising in needs assessment, third-party monitoring, evaluation, research and translation services in both the humanitarian and development domains.  
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## About the Urban Crises Learning Fund

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The ongoing conflict in Syria has left 13.5 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance. Several local and international organisations provide aid to northern Syria, but their chosen modalities fail to effectively meet community members' needs. While aiming to respond to immediate short-term needs, this research demonstrates that these modalities also tend to distort markets and undermine local urban economies. Current approaches to aid provision are yet to reflect economic adaptation in Syrian cities, failing to support and build on existing local resources, capacities and strengths. A shift from mainstream programming to include more contextualised market-based approaches is vital to fill this gap in aid provision.

# Contents

<b>Acronyms</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5 Impacts on local markets</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>	5.1 Market distortion and economic dependency	27
1.1 Assessing the impact of aid	7	5.2 Supporting local economies	28
1.2 Methodology	8	<b>6 Conclusion</b>	<b>31</b>
1.3 Fieldwork	9	<b>References</b>	<b>33</b>
1.4 Case-study sites	10	<b>Appendices</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>2 Wartime economy</b>	<b>11</b>	Appendix 1. Household survey	34
2.1 Economic shock	11	Appendix 2. Focus group discussions with voucher beneficiaries	38
2.2 'Dollarisation' and inflation	12	Appendix 3. Key informant interviews with contracted businesses	40
<b>3 Adjustment and adaptation</b>	<b>14</b>	Appendix 4. Key informant interviews with non-contracted businesses	42
3.1 Changing local economies	14	Appendix 5. Key informant interviews with money traders	44
3.2 Changes in public sector	15	Appendix 6. Key informant interviews with local council members	46
3.3 Changes in private sector	15	Appendix 7. Key informant interviews with NGO staff	48
3.4 Changes in employment	17	Appendix 8. Key informant interviews with other stakeholders (researchers etc)	50
3.5 Small and microbusiness	18		
3.6 Localisation	19		
3.7 Money trading	20		
3.8 Internally displaced persons	21		
<b>4 Modalities of aid provision</b>	<b>22</b>		
4.1 Meeting beneficiary needs	22		
4.2 Value for money	23		
4.3 Flexibility and cash transfers	25		

# List of box & figures

Box 1. How voucher programmes work	22
Figure 1. Map showing location of Salquin, Darkoush and Idleb governorate	10
Figure 2. Estimated sources of community income, pre-2011 and November 2016, Salquin	14
Figure 3. Estimated sources of community income, pre-2011 and November 2016, Darkoush	14
Figure 4. Primary sources of community income, pre-2011 and November 2016	14
Figure 5. Primary sources of community income (comparing Darkoush and Salquin)	15
Figure 6. Survey respondents' employment status, November 2016, Salquin	17
Figure 7. Survey respondents' employment status, November 2016, Darkoush	17
Figure 8. Household ability to meet basic needs, November 2016	21
Figure 9. Households selling assets, November 2016	21

## Acronyms

FGD	Focus group discussion
IDP	Internally displaced person
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KII	Key informant interview
LNGOs	Local non-governmental organisations
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SYP	Syrian pound
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene

## 1

## Introduction

With the Syrian conflict now in its seventh year, 13.5 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance. Data from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that in 2016, 85 per cent of Syrians lived in poverty, of which 69 per cent lived in extreme poverty with less than US\$2 per day, and 35 per cent lived in abject poverty with no access to the minimum food requirements for survival (OCHA 2017). Household incomes have been rapidly diminishing along with livelihood opportunities, while prices have been steadily increasing. As a result, many families are currently unable to meet their very basic needs (OCHA 2016). Idleb governorate, where fieldwork for this research study was conducted, has witnessed a huge influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs), with Idleb now needing constant assistance to meet the increased needs of IDPs and host communities. As of August 2016, almost 909,000 IDPs had relocated to the governorate (WoS Protection Sector 2016) increasing the number of people in need of assistance in Idleb to around 1.3 million, out of a total population of 1.78 million (OCHA 2017).

The delivery of aid to this region is complicated, and it is often difficult to gather clear data on levels of need or aid being provided, as data is managed via various aid delivery 'clusters' which are not integrated and do not provide a clear picture of needs at the governorate level. While OCHA attempts to provide a data coordination role, there is no single overarching operational strategy, with several international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) operating remotely through Turkey and Jordan to provide aid, and coordinating as best they can. At the time of research, the United Nations did not have an official presence in Idleb governorate which is under opposition control, being limited to operating in government-controlled areas.

Much of the aid is sourced from abroad, and all project decision-making is via remote management from these INGOs based in Turkey and Jordan. Some INGO aid is delivered directly by their Syrian staff; most of it is delivered through partnerships with local Syrian NGOs (LNGOs), a number of which are also registered across the border in Turkey. Because aid is provided in this piecemeal manner, with each NGO using its own procedures and approaches and with limited coordination between them, coordination is a major challenge. Syrian aid practitioners working for a variety of INGOs and LNGOs noted that it is nearly impossible to get quality information. This is exacerbated because the various aid clusters which are intended to improve coordination between different aid agencies work out of their own databases, rather than providing a single central source of information.<sup>1</sup>

On the Syrian side of the border, opposition leaders established local councils, beginning in 2012, to fill the governance 'gap' that was previously filled by the government. Modalities for selecting or electing local council members vary: in some places, they run community elections to elect their local members; in other places, local members are selected based on the more important families in the area. They generally have limited financial resources and their effectiveness is largely determined by their independence from military groups (Darwish 2016). As a governance unit, they are intended to provide a civilian alternative to the military groups, working with communities to organise large electricity generators for different neighbourhoods, solid-waste management, fresh water provision, running awareness-raising campaigns, giving security information, and providing various other services.<sup>2</sup>

Coordination between INGOs and local councils varies significantly. While INGOs will generally seek local council permission to operate in the area, some also choose to

1. Workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

2. Interview with community worker, Gaziantep, 23 February 2017.

work closely with local councils in compiling beneficiary lists and delivering aid. By contrast, others prefer to have only minimal involvement with local councils.<sup>3</sup> In addition to INGO programming preferences, the level of coordination is also dependent on the specific area, the level of influence local councils have with the community and the level of independence from military groups.

## 1.1 Assessing the impact of aid

The vast majority of aid that is provided to Idlib governorate is in the form of in-kind aid (colloquially referred to as ‘food baskets’). In January 2017, the Food Security Cluster calculated that out of an estimated total of 8.7 million people who were in need of food and livelihood assistance, 6.16 million (roughly 71 per cent) were provided with food baskets, with a further 1.89 million (roughly 22 per cent) receiving bread flour and ready-to-eat food rations. Only 61,092 (less than 1 per cent) received cash and vouchers (FSC 2017).

While there are some data gathered through INGO monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, there is very little real evidence showing the actual impact of the aid that is being delivered. Discussions around aid delivery and its impact in the northern Syria context have been generally limited to economic assessments, with limited attention given to wider impacts on communities.<sup>4</sup> During project design phase, fairly simple needs assessments are conducted prior to project delivery in order to identify beneficiaries and needs. But there is generally no real involvement of communities in project decision-making around what aid should be distributed, where, and following what modality.<sup>5</sup>

This fairly simplistic focus follows mainstream approaches to humanitarian aid delivery, where much of the literature is dominated by the question of what modality it is best delivered in: whether in-kind, vouchers (which may be conditional or unconditional) or cash transfers. They are all designed to provide short-term assistance for households that are unable to meet their basic needs – which is, of course, the focus of humanitarian aid. While there are some aid programmes operating outside these modalities, such as livelihood support or water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programmes, these are generally much smaller in scope. In this context, community-wide approaches are not prioritised.

There are various reasons that are given for this focus on short-term assistance. Most commonly, longer-term,

community-wide projects are put in the category of development work and deemed inappropriate for humanitarian aid delivery in a conflict zone. Because of the difficult context and the high level of need, humanitarian aid structures are set up for quick get-in-get-out modalities. They also work according to the humanitarian principles, which understandably and correctly emphasise that INGOs must protect their neutrality, meaning that they must be extremely careful not to become aligned with a particular military group or ‘side’.

However, in a prolonged war such as the war in Syria, the mainstream short-term focus of humanitarian aid delivery runs the risk of creating local market distortion, undermining key local strengths and contributing to local economic dependency. Research results indicate this is what is occurring with the aid that is being delivered in the cities of Darkoush and Salquin in Idlib governorate – with research respondents criticising the current lack of flexibility, and various negative externalities of aid provision. Because of these problems, trust in INGOs is very low. Many community members refused to take part in the fieldwork for this research, simply stating that they did not trust INGOs. For those who did agree to take part, when asked who the ‘winners’ from the current situation are, a number of respondents identified ‘rich’ staff of INGOs.<sup>6</sup> As one respondent explained, community members commonly allege INGO corruption, as they are aware of the aid money that is being invested in the region, but cannot see the results on the ground – so simply draw their own conclusions.<sup>7</sup>

The stark division that is often made between development and humanitarian work, and the claim to neutrality of humanitarian work, masks an important fact: all aid is delivered in context. When aid enters a community, these resources are engaged with by different local actors, for various reasons that reflect their particular context. There is no escaping this reality. Sometimes aid resources may work to bolster a community member’s position in the community. Other times, aid resources may be diverted, or misused. The process through which aid is delivered may serve to increase community members’ trust in INGOs, or, as appears to be occurring in the northern Syria context, to decrease trust. While there are of course major differences between development and humanitarian work, across both spheres of activity context is key. It is incumbent on INGOs to work as well as they can in their particular context, making the best use of available resources, and paying attention not only to short-term

3. Interview with economic recovery and development coordinator, Antakya, 27 October 2016.

4. See for example Global Communities (2016) and Doocy *et al.* (2015).

5. Workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

6. For example, FGD with men, Salquin, 30 November 2016; interview with non-contracted shop 1, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

7. For example, interview with community worker, Gaziantep, 23 February 2017.

requirements, but also considering medium- and longer-term impacts of their work.

## 1.2 Methodology

This research project was undertaken to investigate the impact of humanitarian aid on local economies and community members' livelihoods in the two Syrian cities of Darkoush and Salquin, in Idlib governorate, to identify challenges and potential opportunities for response planning going forward. It is also anticipated that many of the lessons from this research will also be applicable to response planning in other emergency contexts.

### 1.2.1 Research framework

The focus of this project was broad, with fieldwork conducted to gain a 'snapshot' of key changes that have come about in the local economies of Darkoush and Salquin since the beginning of the crisis in 2011 compared to the time of fieldwork (November 2016), and to gather community members' general insights into the impact of the aid that has been provided – from their own perspective. These results were then shared in a workshop with 19 Syrian aid practitioners working for LNGOs and INGOs delivering aid in northern Syria, to discuss research findings and related issues that have emerged in their own work, and to identify potential paths forward in response programming. The overall approach was to use mixed methods, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and conducted in the following stages:

- Desk review and mapping exercise of projects that have been implemented recently in these two cities, to identify a project for tracking during the qualitative research.
- Quantitative research (household surveys) with 204 community members in the two cities.
- Qualitative research. This included 27 key informant interviews (KIIs) with local council members, shopkeepers, money traders, researchers and NGO staff members. There were also four focus group discussions conducted with aid beneficiaries (two with men and two with women), totalling 25 participants of different age groups and educational backgrounds.
- A participatory workshop with 19 Syrian aid practitioners held in Gaziantep, Turkey, to present preliminary findings and discuss participants' experiences with aid delivery and its impact.

Research instruments are included as appendices to this working paper.

### 1.2.2 Quantitative research

The purpose of the household surveys was to understand some key economic changes that have occurred in the

two fieldwork sites, asking community members to reflect back on their lives prior to 2011 and compare this to their current situation. There were 204 survey respondents in total, with 97 people surveyed in Darkoush and 107 in Salquin. Of these respondents, 144 were men, and 60 respondents were women. Of the total 204 survey respondents, 136 were from the host community, representing 67 per cent of total respondents. Sixty-six respondents, or 32 per cent, were IDPs. Only 2 respondents were returnees who had previously left the cities, and then returned. Forty-seven per cent of respondents were between the ages of 26 and 40, 39 per cent were between 41 and 59, and the remaining percentage were in the 18–25 age bracket or 60 and above. Only one respondent was below 18 years of age.

The survey was designed on KoBo Toolbox<sup>8</sup> and data were collected through the mobile application. It was originally planned that the team would systematically interview every fifth or tenth household in different neighbourhoods. However, this sampling strategy could not be implemented because of the unstable security situation in Darkoush and the absence of adult household members during the time of visits. Instead, community members were randomly interviewed in the streets and markets. Though necessary to conduct fieldwork, this sampling approach meant that survey responses were biased more towards men than women, and towards adults rather than children.

There is no claim that this survey is representative. Rather, the purpose was to gain a 'snapshot' of key economic changes, to contextualise people's qualitative discussions on the impact of aid that has been delivered, and to help to separate key changes that have come about due to the wartime economy from changes that have come about because of aid that has been delivered. The survey was carried out prior to commencing qualitative research, allowing the research team to use survey results to inform the final development of the focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs).

### 1.2.3 Qualitative research

While the focus of the research was broad, important decisions needed to be made to provide a framework for qualitative sampling. The project team chose to track a particular project which provided conditional vouchers to community members in both cities, to use as a basic 'lens' through which to examine community members' and aid beneficiaries' priorities, needs and preferences. To facilitate more open discussions, the INGO of the tracked project and research participants themselves are anonymous.

It was decided to track a voucher programme rather than a food basket programme because vouchers are much less common, meaning that respondents would most likely have experience of both modalities. This assumption proved to be correct, with NGO staff, shopkeepers and

8. Free and opensource software for field data collection, particularly for use in humanitarian crises. See [www.kobotoolbox.org](http://www.kobotoolbox.org).



beneficiaries alike able to speak intelligently about the positives and negatives of voucher programmes versus in-kind food baskets. Because of this choice, more detailed information on the technical application of voucher programmes was gathered than for in-kind programmes. Cash transfer programmes were simply discussed as hypothetical, as they are so rare that most respondents did not have direct experience of this modality (FSC 2017).

Four FGDs were conducted with groups of beneficiaries for the tracked voucher programme, conducting two separate FGDs for men and women in Darkoush and Salquin. Local council members in both cities were extremely important in helping to identify the FGD participants. While there is potential for selection bias in this approach, as it is likely that people more connected to the local council were selected to participate in these FGDs, local council members did not stay to take part in the discussions. A total of 13 men and 12 women took part in the FGDs.

KIIs were conducted with four NGO staff members, again selected based on their involvement in implementing and/or monitoring the tracked voucher programme. In addition, a researcher was identified who was unaffiliated with the INGO, but who had experience working in both Darkoush and Salquin, and could speak to some of the key economic changes that had come about, and the impact of different aid programmes, in the two cities.

KIIs were conducted with shopkeepers, with six selected based on their participation as contracted stores in the tracked NGO voucher programme (see also Box 1 in Section 4.1). In addition, six non-contracted stores were randomly selected, to provide some comparison in responses between contracted and non-contracted stores. Chosen stores (both contracted and non-contracted) all sold basic food and other items.

Finally, KIIs were conducted with six randomly chosen local council members, and five randomly chosen money traders, to gain their perspectives on key economic changes that had occurred and the impact of different approaches to aid provision.

### 1.2.4 Aid practitioner workshop

Following the collection of fieldwork data and comparative analysis jointly conducted by the two authors, research results were presented to a group of 19 aid practitioners in a full-day workshop, to present the fieldwork findings, discuss and test the results against participants' own experiences of implementing programmes in northern Syria, and to draw together the major lessons for improving current approaches to aid delivery in the region. All of the participants were Syrian, and were selected based on their experience working directly with communities in northern Syria, either in Idlib governorate or nearby. Participants came from a mixture of LNGOs and INGOs,

including Norwegian People's Aid, Al Sham Humanitarian Foundation, Lawyers and Doctors for Human Rights, Assistance Coordination Unit, Syria Relief, Door Beyond War, GOAL, Masarrat, Arfada, Afaq Academy, and People in Need.

## 1.3 Fieldwork

### 1.3.1 Recruitment and training

Trust Consultancy & Development recruited the fieldwork team in November 2016, which included six fieldworker staff plus one in-country supervisor/trainer – an M&E project manager based in Syria working for an INGO. He has significant experience in data-collection training.

Because of difficulties in movement between Turkey and Syria, training of the fieldwork team was conducted remotely, with the first training conducted on the fieldwork instruments and research techniques by the Trust team via WebEx,<sup>9</sup> and the second training was conducted by a trainer inside Syria. The team was also provided with data collection and fieldwork ethics manuals, providing basic Do No Harm principles to working in a conflict environment.

The Trust team also had an intensive one-on-one session with the in-country supervisor/trainer, who then provided a second round of training on KIIs and FGDs to the fieldwork team.

### 1.3.2 Fieldwork challenges

It was challenging for the fieldwork team to encourage community members in Salquin to participate in the survey, because of the very low levels of community trust in NGOs – and community members associate research such as this with NGO work. It was particularly difficult to access women respondents. Because the communities are very conservative, and because there is movement restriction, it was difficult for women to take part in the research. FGDs with women were conducted in their homes, but even with this measure women made up less than 25 per cent of respondents.

There were also security challenges. Research conducted in a conflict zone is not easy, and fieldwork was planned based on a thorough security assessment and risk analysis prior to undertaking the work. While the security situation in Salquin at the time of research was relatively stable, fieldwork in Darkoush was interrupted by airstrike threats. As a result of these issues, the fieldwork team recommended the provision of two-way radios in the future so they could be warned about possible threats, allowing them to take necessary security measures. However, as civilians rarely have access to two-way radios, there is also the risk that they might be mistaken for members of armed groups if they are seen to have these devices, putting them at further risk. This risk-management strategy needs further investigation.

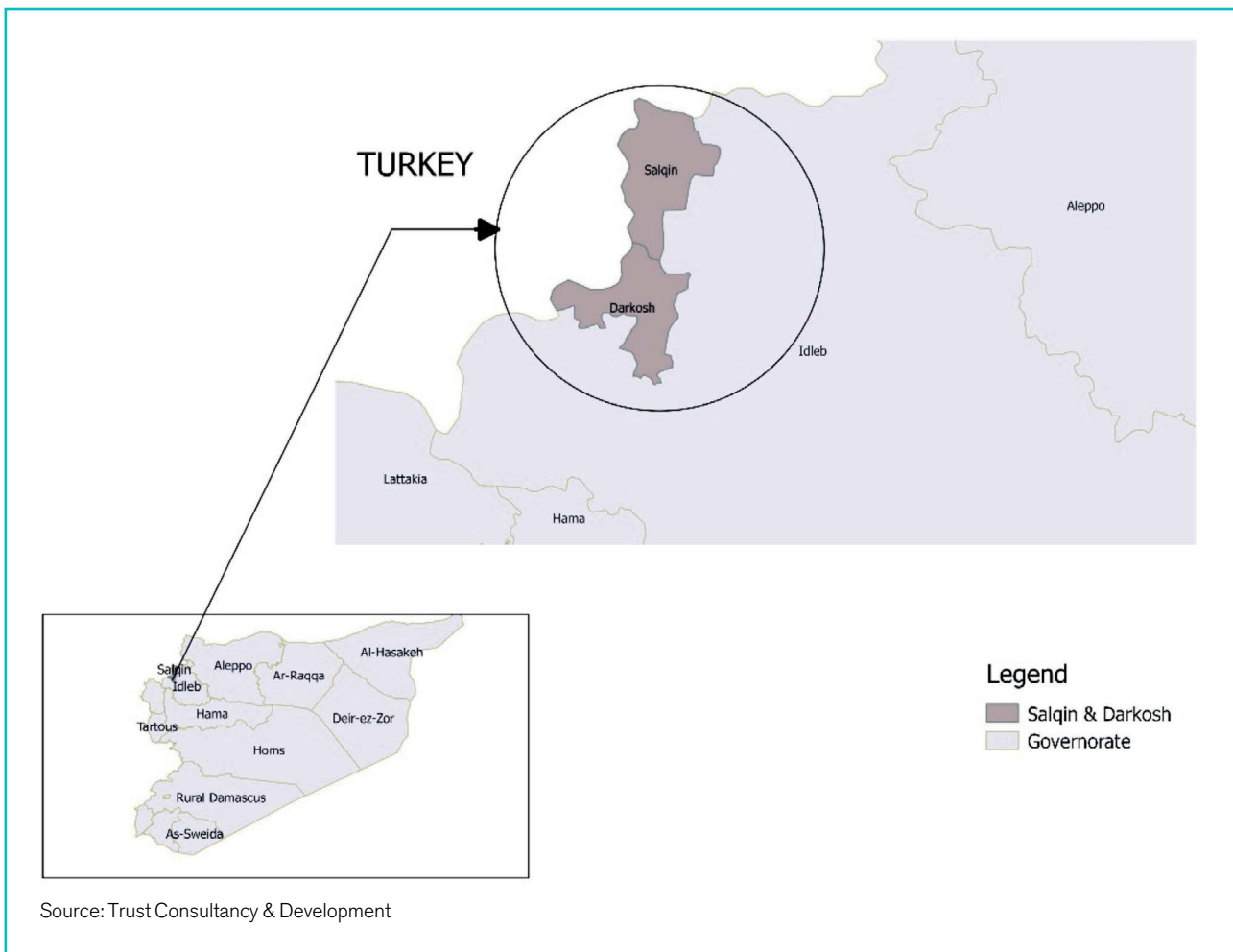
9. WebEx provides on-demand collaboration, online meeting, web-conferencing and video-conferencing applications. See [www.webex.co.uk](http://www.webex.co.uk)

## 1.4 Case-study sites

Fieldwork for this research was carried out in the two Syrian cities of Darkoush and Salquin in Idleb governorate (Figure 1). Prior to the conflict, both cities relied heavily on agriculture and tourism because of their strategic geographical location in the Orontes River valley and the abundance of cultivatable land. Trade was also very common because of the cities' proximity to the Turkish border, allowing for the exchange of goods with Turkey, including legitimate exports and illegal smuggling. Salquin is known for its thriving olive and olive oil production industry before the crisis, which has been affected in the aftermath of the conflict.

Darkoush and Salquin were home to 2,000 and 4,000 families respectively before the conflict started in 2011. In November 2012, both cities came under the control of the opposition. As violence has escalated in Aleppo and the surrounding areas, Darkoush and Salquin have absorbed many IDPs, putting an extra burden on the cities' already depleted resources. Of the total 3,500 households currently residing in Darkoush, 1,000 are IDPs.<sup>10</sup> In Salquin, the majority of households are now IDPs, with around 6,000 IDP and 5,000 host community households.<sup>11</sup> Each household in both cities consists of five to six members. Because of the increased pressure on host community and IDP households, humanitarian agencies have stepped in to provide support.

Figure 1. Map showing location of Salquin, Darkoush and Idleb governorate



10. Interview with Darkoush local council member, 11 May 2017.

11. Interview with Salquin local council member, 11 May 2017.

# 2

## Wartime economy

### 2.1 Economic shock

With the disruption that the Syrian conflict has brought, the basic shape of the local urban economies of Darkoush and Salquin has changed. Income and sources of income have changed significantly, ways of doing business have changed, and community members' capacity to buy and sell goods and services have changed. Prices for basic household necessities have risen steeply, and the value of the Syrian pound (SYP) against the US dollar (US\$) has plummeted. Public services have largely ceased functioning, factories and industrial plants have shut down, and electricity and water supplies have been cut off. Trading routes into government-controlled territory have been largely cut off, with traders instead turning to neighbouring Turkey to source necessary items. Because of these various pressures, there is now a significant gap between income and expenditure for the majority of community members in Darkoush and Salquin, with almost 70 per cent of survey respondents explaining that they are now unable to meet basic household needs such as food, rent or fuel for heating, with the majority of those explaining that while the goods are available in the local market, they simply cannot afford to buy them. This compares with only almost 6 per cent of respondents who were unable to meet basic needs prior to 2011. These factors together paint a picture of economic shock in Darkoush and Salquin.

Community members described their daily struggle to bridge the gap between income and expenditure, many of them crying as they told their stories. As one woman described her family's situation,

*We are dying from the cold but we cannot run the heater; only sometimes do we use pieces of cloth to turn it on. We are living only by Allah's mercy.*<sup>12</sup>

Because of the increasing pressure to make ends meet, community members also noted an increase in theft and other corrupt activities, and a general rising sense of fear of petty crime.<sup>13</sup>

The impact on children has been particularly devastating, with many respondents expressing their fear that this war will result in a lost generation of children. As one local council member put it, 'There are no more schools or amusement parks. Children only know war and death'.<sup>14</sup> Many children have had to leave school because of fear of bombardment, with many airstrikes targeting schools and other community infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> Young sons have needed to step up as the head of the household, following the death of their father and other older men in the family.<sup>16</sup> Many respondents expressed concerns that increasing levels of illiteracy, and insufficient parenting because parents are overworked and over-stressed, will damage their communities' prospects for long-term recovery beyond repair.<sup>17</sup>

12. FGD with women, Salquin, 29 November 2016.

13. Interview with contracted shop 2, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; FGD with men, Salquin, 30 November 2016; interview with non-contracted shop 2, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

14. Interview with contracted shop 3, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

15. Interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

16. Ibid.

17. Interview with contracted shops 1, 2 and 3, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016; interview with the manager of the relief office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

The most basic coping strategy that it appears every household has adopted to deal with their changed circumstances has been to decrease consumption. Respondents described reducing the number of meals from three times to only once a day (and these often the most basic of meals),<sup>18</sup> reducing showers from daily to once a week,<sup>19</sup> reducing fuel consumption for heating and cooking and/or using small wood fires if possible,<sup>20</sup> taking children out of school or reducing spending on education,<sup>21</sup> buying used clothes,<sup>22</sup> and various other frugalities.

However, this reduced consumption has not been sufficient to bridge the gap, driving many people to sell their assets. Just over half of survey respondents (50.5 per cent) stated that they had sold some form of assets since 2011. Nearly a quarter (24.5 per cent) stated that they sold possessions in which they had invested as a means of savings such as jewellery while 19.6 per cent sold furniture, and 11.8 per cent reported selling land and property. Commonly, assets were sold to meet immediate needs, with 57.3 per cent of those who sold them doing so to pay for food and housing, 51.5 per cent selling assets to rent a house, and 28.2 per cent selling assets to pay for health services. Only 7.8 per cent reported selling their assets to start income-generating activities. Many of these asset sales are typically referred to as 'negative coping strategies' because they reduce a family's capacity to survive and thrive in the future, particularly when it involves the sale of potentially productive assets such as land and housing. As a Syrian researcher commented regarding these day-to-day efforts for survival, 'For households, these strategies are exhausting all household savings, leading these households to migration or living in camps.'<sup>23</sup>

There are now many community members who have used up all of their capital to cover the gap between income and expenditure, and who are forced to borrow money. One woman explained that because she is sick and needs medicine, she has no option but to borrow from the money traders.<sup>24</sup> Situations such as these were described numerous times, with respondents noting the increasing levels of borrowing and debt, putting already-vulnerable households in increasingly vulnerable situations.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.2 'Dollarisation' and inflation

One of the most important factors identified by research participants that has led to this dire situation has been the 'dollarisation' of the economy and resultant inflation, with 91.7 per cent of survey respondents stating that the US dollar has had a negative impact on prices (7.4 per cent stated that they did not know if the US\$ has had an impact, and one respondent stated that the US\$ has had a positive impact). While the black market has always existed in Darkoush and Salquin, the US\$ gained in importance following the crash of the Syrian pound in 2013<sup>26</sup> and is now used for nearly all transactions in northern Syria, with people either using the US\$ as their trading currency, or pegging their SYP pricing to the US\$ by regularly adjusting prices upwards to reflect exchange rate fluctuation – sometimes adjusting multiple times in the one day.

The deteriorating value of the SYP has had a drastic impact in the cities of Darkoush and Salquin, with households no longer able to meet their most basic needs. As noted previously, 69.6 per cent or 142 survey respondents stated that they are now unable to meet basic household needs, with 93 per cent of these respondents saying that this was because of lack of affordability. Only 6.3 per cent put their problems down to lack of availability, and 11.3 per cent stated that they could not meet basic household needs because they could not access the market to buy these items. As many people explained, most salaries continue to be paid in SYP, which means they have been steadily losing value. Prior to the conflict a regular government employee earned the approximate equivalent of US\$400–700 per month. This has since dropped to the equivalent of US\$50–60 per month – a deterioration of about 80 per cent.<sup>27</sup>

The pegging of prices to the US\$ means that prices are fairly constantly on the rise. Because of the rising prices all shopkeepers interviewed for this research stated that they have had to adjust to lower demand for their goods. One estimated the drop in sales at around 50 per cent.<sup>28</sup> As one

18. FGD with women, Salquin, 29 November 2016; FGD with women, Darkoush, 30 November 2016; FGD with men, Darkoush, 30 November 2016.

19. FGD with men, Salquin, 30 November 2016.

20. Interview with contracted shop 1, Salquin, 24 November 2016; interview with money trader and jewellery store owner, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

21. Interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with the head of the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016.

22. Interview with money trader and jewellery store owner, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

23. Interview with researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016.

24. FGD with women, Salquin, 29 November 2016.

25. Interview with non-contracted shop 2, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

26. The official exchange rate of US\$ against SYP was 46.98 at the beginning of 2011 and increased by 386 per cent within four years to make the same exchange rate reach the value of 181.43 SYP for each USD.

27. Interview with manager of the service office at the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with communications focal point at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

28. Interview with contracted shop 3, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

shopkeeper explained, 'Customers come and ask about the prices, but return buying only very basic materials and in very small quantities'.<sup>29</sup> Because of the disruption to trading routes due to the war, most traders rely on the local market to sell their products, so look for ways to manage this situation. One shopkeeper simply stated that he has reduced supply to match the decreased demand.<sup>30</sup> Another explained he only buys items from wholesalers, in an attempt to keep prices down.<sup>31</sup> Yet others explained that they have reduced their profit margin from 30 per cent pre-2011 to 20 per cent post-crisis in an attempt to stimulate demand.<sup>32</sup> Various traders explained that they have no choice but to continually adjust their prices because they buy their goods from producers and wholesalers in US\$, and need to ensure that they do not suffer exchange-rate losses.<sup>33</sup> As one shopkeeper explained,

*We buy flour and we make pasta and other things from the flour. Then, when we return to the market to buy flour [again] we find the prices are much higher than before. So, the money that I allocated for flour is not enough.*<sup>34</sup>

Similar comments were made by another shopkeeper, who explained that even if they attempt to peg prices to the US\$, they can still come out at a loss:

*We sell products at a certain price but when we go to buy it again from the producer/wholesaler, we find the price is higher than the price we sold to our clients, so we have no choice but to sell at a loss.*<sup>35</sup>

It is particularly difficult to factor in exchange-rate variation because of the frequent transport delays, with one shopkeeper explaining that transportation that used to take one day prior to 2011 now typically requires five to six days.<sup>36</sup> During times of extreme exchange-rate fluctuation, many shopkeepers prefer to close their doors and wait for prices to stabilise rather than take the risk of pricing incorrectly.<sup>37</sup> However, as different shopkeepers recounted, their customers often do not understand their reasons for raising prices:

*Most people who come to the shops complain about the high prices and blame the shopkeepers, saying 'have mercy on us'.*<sup>38</sup>

Experiences such as these were recounted many times during fieldwork. If shopkeepers are effective in their pricing, the dollarisation of the economy means that the risk of inflation is ultimately passed onto their customers – ordinary community members. Many examples were given of the price rises. Community members explained that prior to 2011, the price of a bag of bread was SYP20, but that this had since risen to SYP150.<sup>39</sup> Meat that used to be priced at around SYP250 per kilogram had since risen to SYP3,500/kg.<sup>40</sup> House rental that in the past might have cost around SYP3,000 per month had risen to SYP35,000 per month.<sup>41</sup> In an economic environment where people are almost entirely reliant on trade to meet their basic needs, the impact of dollarisation has been enormous, with 91.7 per cent of survey respondents stating that the US\$ has had a negative impact on prices.

While it is clear that nearly everyone is suffering from the collapse of the SYP, a number of community members also alleged that shopkeepers take advantage of the situation, cynically noting that they never see prices going down to reflect exchange-rate variation. As one woman put it,

*Prices do not decrease when the dollar's exchange rate goes down [...] because shopkeepers will say that they purchased goods when the dollar exchange rate was high.*<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, one shopkeeper noted, 'Regarding the local markets, when the dollar value rises, the shopkeepers will raise the prices, but when the dollar value decreases, the prices remain the same as they were before'.<sup>43</sup>

Observations such as these were made numerous times by local leaders, shopkeepers and ordinary community members, and were also confirmed by participants in the aid practitioner workshop. Given their higher purchasing power, it appears to be the larger shopkeepers and other traders who are in a position to manipulate the situation to their benefit.<sup>44</sup>

29. Interview with non-contracted shop 1, Salquin, 29 November 2016.

30. Interview with contracted shop 3, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

31. Interview with non-contracted shop 1, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

32. Interview with non-contracted shop 1, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with contracted shop 1, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

33. Interview with contracted shop 1, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with contracted shop 2, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

34. Interview with non-contracted shop 1, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

35. Interview with non-contracted shop 2, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

36. Interview with contracted shop 3, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

37. Interview with contracted shops 1 and 2, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

38. Interview with contracted shop 1, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

39. Interview with the manager of the relief office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

40. FGD with men, Salquin, 30 November 2016.

41. Ibid.

42. FGD with women, Salquin, 29 November 2016.

43. Interview with contracted shop 2, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

44. Interview with non-contracted shop 3, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with the head of the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; FGD with men, Salquin, 30 November 2016; interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

# 3

## Adjustment and adaptation

### 3.1 Changing local economies

When asked to estimate changes in the major sources of income for their community, survey responses indicated a clear shift in community income since 2011. As indicated in figures 2, 3, 4 and 5, before the Syrian conflict the major sources of community income were public-sector jobs and larger businesses, with Salquin also receiving significant tourist income. However, since the crisis began this has changed dramatically, shifting mainly to self-employment, and, to a lesser extent, to the private sector.

Figure 2. Estimated sources of community income, pre-2011 and November 2016, Salquin

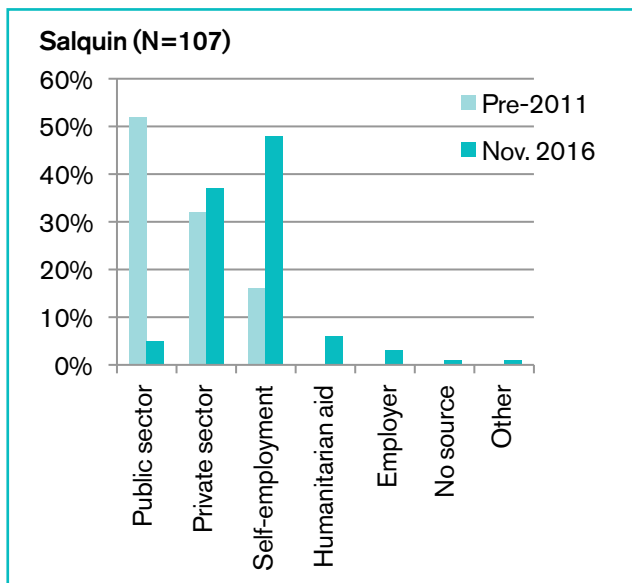


Figure 3. Estimated sources of community income, pre-2011 and November 2016, Darkoush

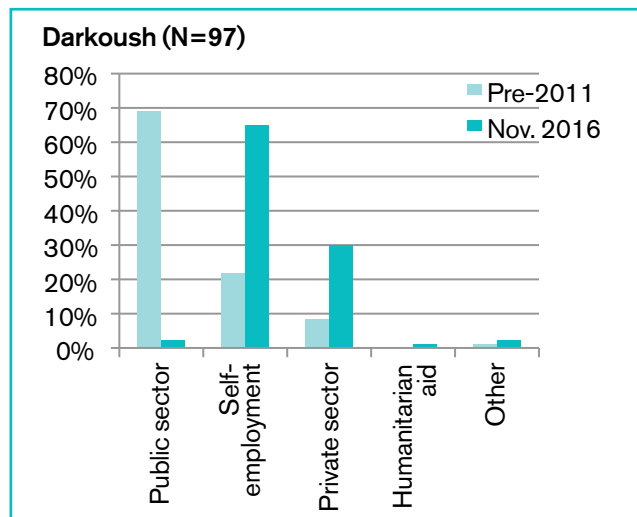


Figure 4. Primary sources of community income, pre-2011 and November 2016

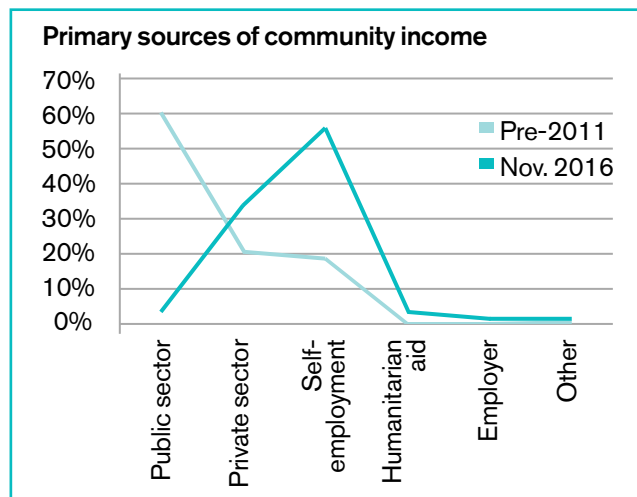
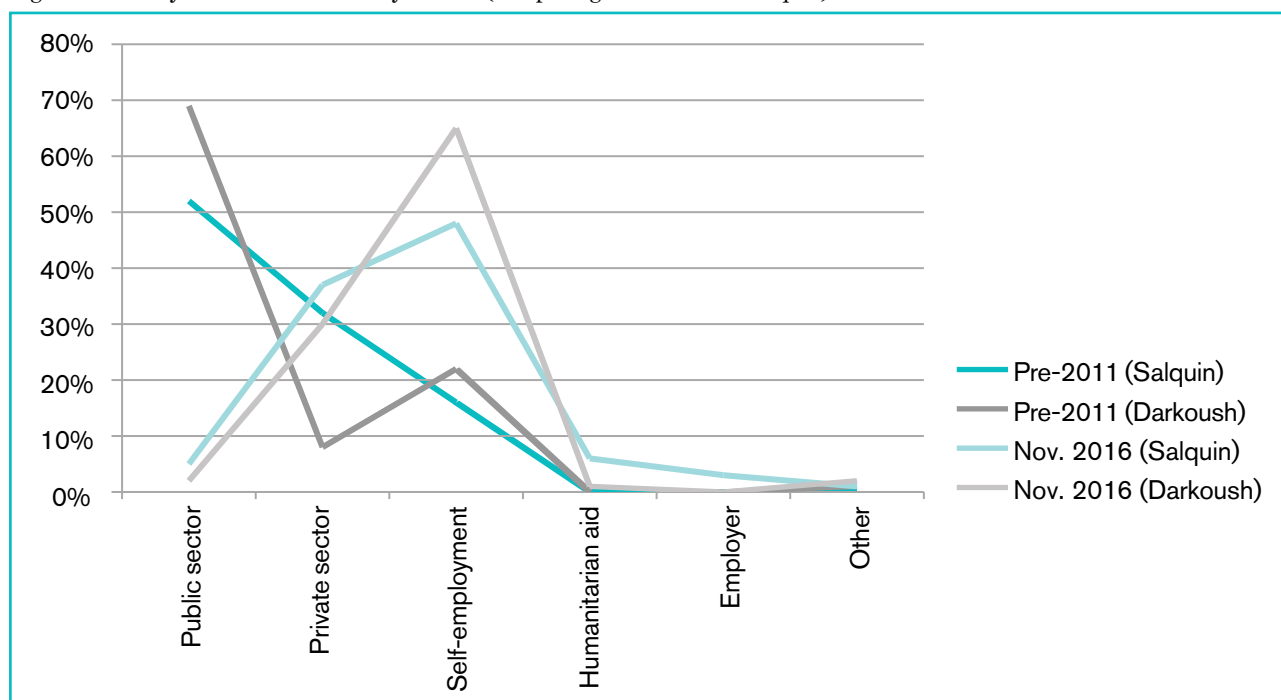


Figure 5. Primary sources of community income (comparing Darkoush and Salquin)



The impact of remittances in Darkoush and Salquin appears to be quite small, as not a single respondent out of the 204 community members surveyed mentioned remittances from the survey list of possible sources of income for their household post-2011. Nonetheless, one respondent noted he knew of families who had sent younger family members to work in other countries such as Turkey and Lebanon in order to send remittances home, and two FGD respondents noted that their families receive remittances.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.2 Changes in public sector

Unsurprisingly given Darkoush and Salquin have been under the control of the opposition since 2012, public-sector jobs funded by the Syrian government have almost completely disappeared, with 60.3 per cent of survey respondents identifying it as a source of community income prior to 2011, compared to 3.4 per cent in November 2016. Perhaps more surprising is that there is still a small number of people in Darkoush and Salquin who continue to work as public servants, travelling to government-controlled Hama to collect their salaries. This indicates that public services continue to function, albeit in a skeletal form.

Rather than a blanket discontinuation of public-service employment in Darkoush and Salquin, what appears

to have occurred is a steady diminishing of the sector. Interview and focus group respondents explained that the majority of pre-2011 public servants were dismissed in the first year of the conflict for political reasons, as the government was unsure of their political alignment.<sup>46</sup> For those who were allowed to keep their jobs, many voluntarily chose to leave as it became increasingly difficult and dangerous for them to collect their salaries when the area came under opposition control in 2012.<sup>47</sup> Many respondents described cases of people being assaulted or detained in Hama while attempting to collect their salaries, or when travelling to and from Hama between areas under opposition and government control.<sup>48</sup>

While the loss of these jobs has been mitigated to some extent with jobs from INGOs which tend to draw on similar skill sets, and who pay salaries in US\$, this only applies to those who have been lucky enough to get an INGO job – a small minority of the population.<sup>49</sup> The effective collapse of the public service sector indicates a significant loss of income across the community.

### 3.3 Changes in private sector

The private sector<sup>50</sup> has also changed significantly since 2011, with 20.6 per cent of survey respondents identifying

45. Interview with contracted shop 2, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

46. Interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016; interview with contracted shop 2, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

47. Interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016; interview with the manager of the relief office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

48. Interview with the manager of the relief office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

49. Interview with the head of the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

50. Here, the private sector is defined as businesses privately owned and run by one or more individuals rather than the government and not fully or partially owned by the respondent.

it as a source of community income prior to 2011, compared to 33.8 per cent in November 2016. This 13.2 per cent increase masks a number of important changes that have occurred in this sector, with the focus and scope of economic activity also subject to significant change.

Unsurprisingly, tourism has almost completely ceased. Given that this was one of the most important sources of income for Darkoush prior to the conflict, this has caused a massive blow to the local economy. Interestingly, however, one respondent explained that in the second half of 2016 they had seen a slight revival of internal tourism from people coming from Idleb and Aleppo.<sup>51</sup>

Larger private enterprises including factories and industrial plants have also stopped operating, having been destroyed or closed down due to bombardment or fear of bombardment, and because of difficulties in sourcing raw materials and transporting goods for sale. Smaller businesses were also hit heavily, with operators either substantially reducing their production, or stopping operations completely.<sup>52</sup> Many factory owners have since moved their capital to safer neighbouring countries such as Turkey; ironically, some are now producing these same goods in Turkey and exporting them back into Syria.<sup>53</sup> Respondents in Darkoush and Salquin explained that these changes to businesses mainly occurred in 2012 and 2013 when these two cities came under the control of the opposition, as bombardment increased and important trading routes were cut off. Many factory employees lost their jobs at this time, and needed to find other sources of income.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, the agricultural sector has effectively collapsed because farmers relied on access to diesel from government-controlled areas.<sup>55</sup> As many respondents explained, the 'crazy prices' of fuel, coupled with the difficulties and rising prices in procuring raw materials such as pesticides, machinery, spare parts and other materials has meant that most agricultural work is no longer feasible.

In addition, many farmers have abandoned their land because of the security situation, with some agricultural land being taken over to use as IDP camps.<sup>56</sup> In Darkoush, respondents explained that many people who previously worked in the agricultural sector have since left the country for Lebanon or Turkey.<sup>57</sup> In Salquin, the only sector that appears to still be operational is olive farming and the production of olive oil, which has been substantially reduced compared to pre-2011 production.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, many respondents commented on changes to the informal economy – in particular, with regard to smuggling. People explained that prior to 2011 and in the early years of the war, smuggling of goods to and from Turkey was a major source of income in Darkoush and Salquin, taking advantage of government subsidies and avoiding government levies on both sides of the border.<sup>59</sup> However, this changed in 2015 with the tightening of the Turkish border. Since then, smuggling of goods has decreased significantly as it became more difficult and dangerous to get across the border, causing a noticeable change in community members' income.<sup>60</sup> Given the higher stakes, the smuggling of goods has now been replaced by smuggling of people – with people traffickers now able to command extremely high fees for their services.<sup>61</sup> Because of these high fees, it is now no longer possible for many people to flee the country.<sup>62</sup>

New private enterprises have grown in importance as local businessmen have adapted to the wartime economy. The rental and construction market has grown significantly since 2011, mainly in response to the increased demand from IDPs relocating from other parts of the country, such as Aleppo.<sup>63</sup> There has been a proliferation of internet stores, providing essential telecommunications services.<sup>64</sup> There has also been increased trade with shops and restaurants to service IDPs, and new businesses that IDPs have established in the area.<sup>65</sup>

51. Interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

52. Interview with contracted shop 1, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

53. Workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

54. Interview with contracted shop 1, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with the manager of the relief office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

55. Interview with the manager of the relief office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016; interview with contracted shop 3, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

56. Interview with the manager of the relief office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

57. Interview with contracted shop 3, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

58. Interview with contracted shop 3, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

59. Interview with contracted shop 2, Salquin, 24 November 2016; interview with contracted shop 3, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

60. Researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016.

61. Interview with money trader and jewellery store owner 1, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

62. FGD with women, Salquin, 29 November 2016.

63. Researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016; interview with contracted shop 3, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

64. Researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016.

65. Researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016.



As one local council member in Salquin explained,

*The biggest economic change has been the city's transformation from dependence on agriculture as a basic source of income before 2011 to trade at present, and what has helped this quick growth is the arrival of IDPs and traders from Aleppo and other areas who founded companies and other shops.*<sup>66</sup>

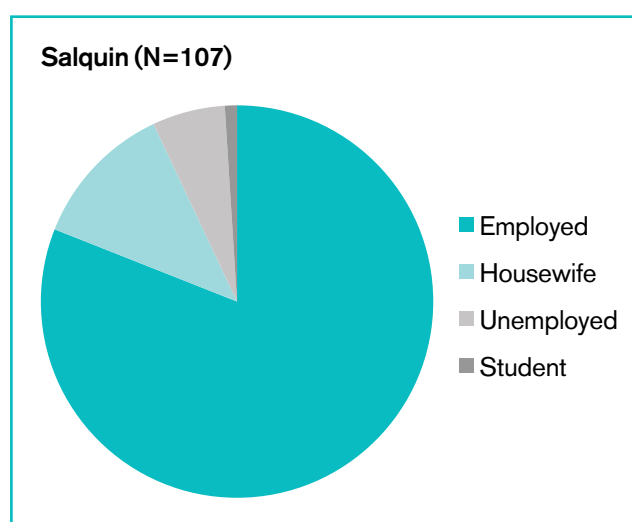
### 3.4 Changes in employment

While it is common amongst aid practitioners to note increasing levels of dependency in Syrian communities<sup>67</sup> this is not reflected in employment rates amongst community members. Employment rates amongst community members in Darkoush and Salquin are in fact quite high, with a total of 82.8 per cent of survey respondents identifying themselves as employed in November 2016, as indicated in figures 6 and 7.

Of those who did not consider themselves employed, 71.4 per cent were self-identified as housewives, 2.9 per cent (one respondent) was a student, and 25.7 per cent identified themselves as unemployed during the previous month.

However, it is worth noting that while 82.8 per cent identified themselves as employed, this does not necessarily reflect full-time employment, as many respondents explained that they and their family members must now work as day labourers. It is unclear how many respondents would be considered to be fully employed.

Figure 6. Survey respondents' employment status, November 2016, Salquin

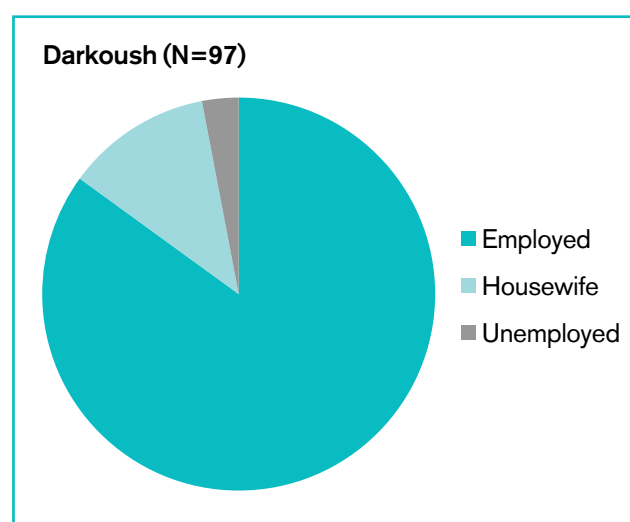


In addition, it is possible that some of those who identified themselves as not employed – housewives, students and/or the unemployed – do in fact undertake income-generating activities in the informal sector, but did not consider this 'work' and therefore failed to mention this to the research team.

This high employment rate masks many important changes that have come about since 2011, as people have adapted to their changed circumstances. There has been serious mass migration of qualified labour, as many people who had the opportunity and financial means to do so have fled to Turkey and beyond.<sup>68</sup> There has also been a significant influx of IDPs from surrounding areas, who have raised demand in the marketplace but also placed pressure on local resources and job opportunities. Professional jobs – particularly public-sector jobs – have disappeared, with professional men and women needing to take on less-desirable jobs in order to survive. Of those survey respondents who identified themselves as pre-2011 public servants, 37 per cent are now self-employed and 30 per cent are employees in a private enterprise. Many work in daily labour, petty trade, smuggling and 'black market' activities, such as selling fuel on the streets.<sup>69</sup> A small number hold coveted positions, earning US\$ working for INGOs.<sup>70</sup> To support the local economy, there are also a few NGO cash-for-work programmes, for example supporting women in making handicrafts. However, these programmes are typically very small.

As salaries are not sufficient to bridge the gap between income and expenditure, other members of the family

Figure 7. Survey respondents' employment status, November 2016, Darkoush



66. Interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

67. Workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

68. Interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

69. Researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016.

70. Interview with non-contracted shop 1, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

including women and children may also work to provide income for the family. As a respondent in Salquin recounted, *A friend of mine, a teacher, lost his job as a teacher and he, his wife and children are harvesting olives together as daily workers. They wanted to survive.*<sup>71</sup>

Survey results indicated a slight increase in employment for women from 7 per cent prior to 2011, to 10 per cent in November 2016. However, as noted previously, it was difficult to engage women as research participants. In addition, the above statistic does not reflect housewives who may also engage in some income-generating activities in the informal sector. Qualitative research results indicate that it is likely that the percentage of income-generating women is in fact higher. Prior to the conflict, women tended to work either as housewives,<sup>72</sup> or as professionals, including nurses, teachers and others.<sup>73</sup> There were also some smaller handicraft enterprises that women traditionally engaged in, such as the production of wool products, which has now disappeared due to lack of demand.<sup>74</sup> However, as a Syrian community worker explained, the situation is now so difficult for women that they tend to only take on outside work if they are able to work alongside their husbands, or if they have no other choice – such as female heads of households, who must provide for their children.<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, survey results revealed only a negligible increase in children labour, with 2.5 per cent or 5 respondents stating that children and young people contributed to their household income prior to 2011, compared to 3.4 per cent or 7 respondents in late 2016. However, it is likely that these results were shaped by the sampling technique, as only one survey respondent was below the age of 18 – meaning that child-headed households were not included. Moreover, as with women, these statistics mask other important changes that have been occurring for children. As the same community worker went on to explain, prior to 2011 it was common for children to gain some experience working for the family, or for friends of the family. However, now the situation is very dangerous for children who work outside the home:

*In general, you find only a few kids working in Syria. Not because we have high awareness, no, but because work opportunities are so rare in Syria. So, men are working*

*more than children [...] In Syria right now, it's not easy for kids to work. Before the war, if I was a father, I could send my kid to work somewhere I knew. But now, it's not secure, I would prefer to keep them at home.*<sup>76</sup>

These statistics also fail to capture children engaging in the informal economy, such as child beggars, although it is now common to see children and women begging in the streets.<sup>77</sup> For those children engaged in labour, while there are still some who are relatively protected by working in the family business,<sup>78</sup> it appears that many child labourers are now from poor families who have no other choice. Because of this, a number of respondents expressed concern about the growing educational and opportunity gap between rich and poor families, with one person explaining:

*People who are rich such as traders and NGO workers can send their children to school. But others are poor and cannot afford to send their children to school. Child labour in the case of these poor families is an issue, and their children have very difficult and severe jobs.*<sup>79</sup>

Rather than being a source of opportunity and preparing for adult life, as appears to have been the case for children and young people prior to 2011 who took after-school or holiday jobs, it appears that child labour now is an indicator of widening inequalities within the community.

### 3.5 Small and microbusiness

One of the most important dynamics that has emerged in the economies of Darkoush and Salquin has been a strong move away from the public sector and large businesses, towards operating small and microbusinesses. While, as noted previously, new businesses have emerged in response to (mainly IDP-driven) wartime demand, doing business is still extremely difficult, with most community members unable to take the risk of investing in any enterprise requiring large amounts of capital. The risks and challenges in doing business are many. In addition to bombardment and fear of bombardment, necessary infrastructure such as electricity and water has been cut off for nearly four years, with people making do with large electricity generators,<sup>80</sup> with an obvious impact on business activities that rely on access to such infrastructure. In addition, problems in transport have made it difficult to trade between different urban hubs,

71. Interview with contracted shop 1, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

72. Interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

73. Interview with community worker, Gaziantep, 23 February 2017.

74. Interview with non-contracted shop 2, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

75. Interview with community worker, Gaziantep, 23 February 2017.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. Interview with non-contracted shop 1, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

79. Interview with non-contracted shop 3, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

80. Interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016; interview with money trader and jewellery store owner, Salquin, 24 November 2016; interview with community worker, Gaziantep, 23 February 2017.

with associated problems in accessing raw materials, and driving up prices for sale. To manage these and other risks, community members are turning to small, short-term businesses involving minimal capital and quick turn-around.<sup>81</sup> The shift to small and microbusinesses can be seen clearly in survey findings, with 18.6 per cent of survey respondents identifying self-employment as a source of community income prior to 2011, compared to 55.9 per cent in November 2016.<sup>82</sup>

While communities in northern Syria are dependent on imports for larger, factory-produced items that they cannot produce themselves, there are many other items produced locally. These include soaps and detergents; yoghurt, cheese, sweets, baked goods, vegetables, olive oil and other food items; and animal feed, among others. As a Syrian community worker described, this local ingenuity also extends to the besieged areas, with community members in besieged Aleppo producing local intravenous drips and oxygen for hospital use, and even producing diesel from plastic. As he explained,

*When they have a need, they can produce. But if they can access the Turkish market they will buy it there. People have cost sensitivity, they know when to get it from Turkey or to produce in Syria.*<sup>83</sup>

The other important factor driving the emergence of small and microbusinesses has been the removal of a heavy bureaucracy and subsequent opening up of the economy, as community members no longer need a government license to operate a small business – a difficult process which in the past involved frequent nepotism.<sup>84</sup> As a Syrian aid practitioner explained, many people who wanted to open small or microbusinesses were unsuccessful in getting licensed, resulting in a thriving black market:

*In Syria before the war, the manufacturers were controlled by only a few people. We had a good economy, but the problem was we had an unfair system. At the same time, we had an unofficial industry [of small workshops] in the slums and in basements [...] In Arabic, we would call it*

*'under the stairs' or black market. The majority of people were buying from these workshops.*<sup>85</sup>

Now, communities face the exact opposite situation, as there are no licenses, taxes or other restrictions that community members must deal with if they wish to establish a business.<sup>86</sup> Many respondents positively noted that it is now much easier for people to establish small enterprises, such as selling vegetables or baked goods, pickling vegetables or establishing sewing workshops.<sup>87</sup> However, this deregulation also creates new challenges for business, as they are no longer protected by regulatory quality-control bodies, which has resulted, for example, in cases of imported contaminated diesel destroying much-needed machinery.<sup>88</sup>

### 3.6 Localisation

In addition to a move towards small and microbusinesses, economies in northern Syria have become more localised,<sup>89</sup> largely due to the problems with transport. There are problems in sourcing and transporting goods for sale between different cities, with checkpoints manned by various military groups who demand bribes before allowing goods vehicles to pass through.<sup>90</sup> This drives up the cost of transport, with one trader explaining, 'When we buy goods from Aleppo or Damascus the cost is higher, as the checkpoints ask for fees, or they take some of our goods.'<sup>91</sup> Similar experiences have also been noted in a recent technical assessment conducted in northern Syria, with researchers noting that traders must pay bribes when crossing international and cross-line checkpoints, with bribes generally calculated based on the value of the goods (Beechwood International 2015: 35).

Wherever possible, traders now minimise travel between different centres, with one shopkeeper explaining that he now requests photos of the goods for sale and makes deals based on these, rather than inspecting the goods in person.<sup>92</sup> In addition to the added cost, as another respondent explained, businesses need to be well

81. Interview with the communications focal point at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016; interview with contracted shop 2, Salquin, 24 November 2016; researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016.

82. As noted previously, this does not reflect the situation of those who have fled the war (refugees), who were mainly professionals and/or involved in large private enterprises. As such, it is likely that the shift has been much greater than indicated by these figures.

83. Interview with community worker, Gaziantep, 23 February 2017.

84. Researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016.

85. Interview with community worker, Gaziantep, 23 February 2017.

86. Interview with money trader and jewellery store owner 2, Salquin, 24 November 2016; workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

87. Interview with the head of the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with contracted shop, Salquin, 24 November 2016; interview with two money traders and jewellery store owners, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

88. Interview with a traffic police officer at the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with non-contracted shop 2, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with the head of the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

89. Workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

90. Interview with non-contracted shop 2, Salquin, 29 November 2016; interview with the manager of the relief office at the local council, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

91. Interview with contracted shop 2, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

92. Interview with contracted shop 3, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

informed and flexible in how they manage the transport of goods, because the controlling authorities in the area can vary with changing power dynamics between different groups – again, providing a strong incentive for businesses to be small, nimble, and wherever possible, localised.<sup>93</sup>

Because major roads between Syrian cities are now inaccessible and traders are mainly unable to buy from government-controlled areas (and when they can buy items, these are expensive), the people of Darkoush and Salquin are now dependent on buying many goods that they are unable to produce themselves from Turkey (with the border situated approximately 3–5km from Darkoush, and 10–12km from Salquin).<sup>94</sup> However, while businesses can import goods from neighbouring Turkey, they are unable to export their goods into Turkey because they cannot get export clearance from government regulatory bodies. Syrian aid practitioners identified this regulatory problem as an important issue undermining potential business growth in opposition-controlled areas, as prior to the crisis there was strong Turkish demand for their products.<sup>95</sup>

Many respondents commented on the increased localisation of businesses, with one shopkeeper explaining, 'It is not easy to sell products, because we now rely only on the local market to sell our goods.'<sup>96</sup> Nonetheless, it appears that the urban environments of Darkoush and Salquin are still able to absorb this pressure, as there is sufficient demand within the same general area. For smaller villages, however, it is a different story, with one community worker noting the much greater difficulties of doing business from smaller hubs, because 'If they're just in one village, the business is just too small.'<sup>97</sup> The localisation of business activity has important implications for response programming, discussed in Section 5 of this paper.

### 3.7 Money trading

A final important dynamic that has emerged is the increased importance of money trading, or *hawala*. *Hawala* has been a feature of the Syrian economy for centuries. However, this sector has become much larger in recent

years, filling the financial services void that has been left as banks ceased operations in the area. *Hawala* operates through the mutual exchange of debt between agents in and between different countries (Thompson 2008). Before the conflict, the government regulated the sector very closely.<sup>98</sup> However, since the area has been under opposition control there has been no regulation of the sector – so anyone who has the capital and wishes to do so can open a *hawala* business. The main services they provide include conducting currency exchange, and transferring funds from abroad, including salaries for NGO workers and remittances. One *hawalader* in Salquin also explained that he facilitates oil trading from Lebanon.<sup>99</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly given the current unregulated nature of the industry, *hawaladers* were generally viewed as providing a good and necessary service, allowing people to avoid the risk of theft when physically transporting money.<sup>100</sup> There were, however, complaints from some respondents, with some pointing out the large difference between selling and buying rates for currency exchange,<sup>101</sup> others alleging that *hawaladers* had made agreements with each other on pricing (essentially forming a cartel),<sup>102</sup> and yet others complaining how they suspend their services during times of extreme exchange-rate fluctuation.<sup>103</sup> Because of these complaints, there were some suggestions that an authority be established that would assist in controlling the sector.

Nonetheless, despite these complaints it appears that the *hawala* sector is functioning well. Because the practice is well established in Syrian economies, they have fairly institutionalised ways of doing business, with black-market exchange rates used by *hawaladers* openly published on the internet (Beechwood International 2015: 28). The major challenges *hawaladers* described in doing their work were dealing with security threats such as theft and murder, which they are managing through the use of security companies,<sup>104</sup> and managing communications breakdowns and exchange-rate fluctuations when transferring money.<sup>105</sup> However, in terms of the potential for cash programming, the size of the sector is still quite small, an issue which is discussed in Section 4.3 of this paper.

93. Researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016.

94. Interview with contracted shop 2, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

95. Workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

96. Interview with non-contracted shop 1, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

97. Interview with community worker, Gaziantep, 23 February 2017.

98. Interview with money trader and jewellery store owner 1, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

99. Interview with money trader and jewellery store owner 3, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

100. FGD with women, Salquin, 29 November 2016; interview with contracted shops 1 and 2, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

101. FGD with men, Salquin, 30 November 2016; interview with money trader and jewellery store owner, Salquin, 24 November 2016; FGD with men, Darkoush, 30 November 2016.

102. FGD with men, Darkoush, 30 November 2016.

103. Interview with contracted shop 2, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

104. Interview with money trader and jewellery store owners 1 and 3, Salquin, 24 November 2016.

105. Interview with money trader and jewellery store owner, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

### 3.8 Internally displaced persons

The cities of Darkoush and Salquin have now become home to thousands of IDP families fleeing the violence in neighbouring Aleppo and other parts of Idleb. IDPs now make up around 29 per cent of the population of Darkoush and 55 per cent of the population of Salquin, exhausting local resources and putting significant pressure on the local economy. Only a small segment of IDPs have been able to transfer some or all of their money and assets to Darkoush and Salquin and set up their own businesses.

The situation for IDPs is very difficult. The vast majority are unable to meet basic household needs, and many sell important assets in order to survive (figures 8 and 9). In addition, many respondents noted that discrimination and mistreatment of IDPs by members of the host community happens regularly.<sup>106</sup>

Figure 8. Household ability to meet basic needs, November 2016

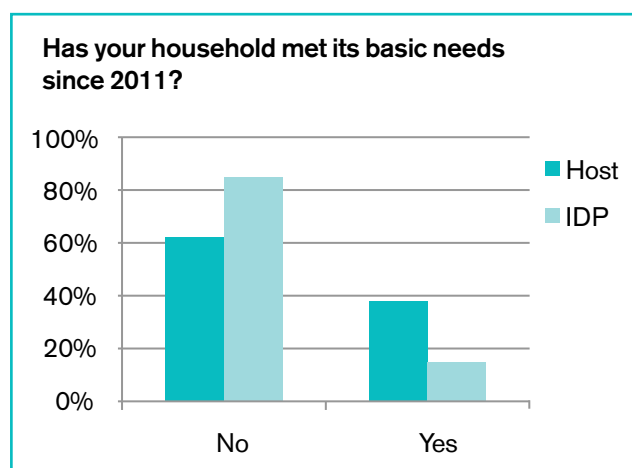
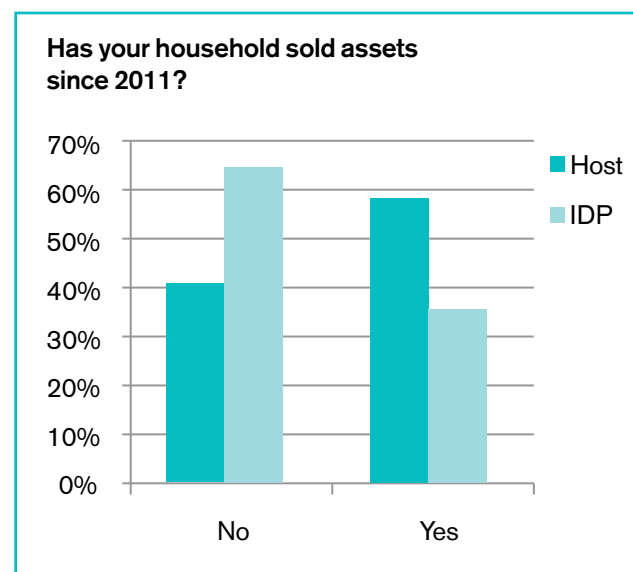


Figure 9. Households selling assets, November 2016



While some IDPs are able to afford rent (despite the higher prices set by exploitative landowners), others have nothing left and have sought shelter in recently established camps on what was previously agricultural land. Many IDP respondents spoke of the deterioration in their living conditions as they have left behind or sold their assets and have not been able to secure sufficient income, with one woman explaining,

*I am an IDP from Aleppo. My house was destroyed and my husband is dead. I have one schizophrenic child and I have no source of income.*<sup>107</sup>

To cope with this precarious situation, the majority of IDPs interviewed for this research engaged in self-employment activities, such as petty trade and daily labour, yet their income is still not enough to meet their needs.

106. Interview with the manager of the service office at the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

107. FGD with women, Salquin, 29 November 2016.

## 4

# Modalities of aid provision

## 4.1 Meeting beneficiary needs

It is in this context of economic shock and adaptation that INGOs have been providing aid to people in northern Syria. In Darkoush and Salquin, INGOs Goal and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) have been implementing aid programmes since 2012 and 2013, when the area came under the control of the opposition forces.<sup>108</sup> The focus of these programmes has been to meet the immediate short-term needs of community members who have not been able to bridge the gap between income and expenditure. This has been mainly in the form of in-kind support – that is, the delivery of basic items to community members in the form of food baskets to meet families' urgent food requirements. A recent cash feasibility assessment in northern Syria noted that in general, beneficiaries considered these food baskets as insufficient to meet their household needs, as there were problems with aid delivery and the same content is provided regardless of family size (Global Communities 2016).

In January 2017, it was estimated that approximately 71 per cent of those needing assistance received food baskets, and approximately 22 per cent received bread flour and ready-to-eat food rations. Less than 1 per cent received aid in the more flexible form of cash or vouchers (FSC 2017). This basic aid delivery has been complemented with other much smaller programmes, including some livelihood training programmes, cash-for-work programmes, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programmes, provision of solar generators for irrigation, rebuilding schools and

other infrastructure, and other efforts to support agricultural production.<sup>109</sup>

Some INGOs have introduced voucher programmes as an alternative to providing food baskets, with one such programme tracked during fieldwork for this research. As noted above, voucher programmes are much smaller, with

### BOX 1. HOW VOUCHER PROGRAMMES WORK

Voucher programmes have been in use for decades in a variety of humanitarian contexts, where they have been acknowledged for their potential to stimulate economic growth through increasing buying and selling in the local market (Idris 2016). Voucher programmes generally operate as follows: the NGO calls for tenders and shopkeepers who wish to be part of the system apply. Tenders are evaluated by the NGO team, and stores selected based on their capacity to operate according to programme rules, including rules around the pricing of goods, the diversity of goods provided, how the vouchers may be used, and various other requirements. Programme beneficiaries may then use their vouchers to buy goods from these contracted stores. If the voucher programme is conditional, the beneficiary is limited to buying only those items that are pre-approved by the NGO; if it is unconditional, the beneficiary may buy whatever he or she wishes. Once the transaction has been made, the NGO reimburses the shopkeeper for the value of the voucher, thus completing the transaction.

108. Interview with Goal, Antakya, 27 October 2016; interview with IRC, Antakya, 27 October 2016.

109. Ibid.

an estimated less than 1 per cent of households in need of support receiving vouchers or cash transfers in November 2016 (FSC 2017; see also Box 1).

By tapping into local markets if they are functional, voucher programmes seek to support local business confidence by providing guaranteed demand, thereby allowing these businesses to continue operations and possibly even to grow, spending more money in the local market. They only work if local businesses have the capacity to provide goods for sale, making them appropriate to urban contexts such as Darkoush and Salquin, where the issue is not one of availability, but rather of affordability.

The theory is that such engagement with local businesses leads to 'economic multiplier effects', in which economic activity generates even more economic activity, all to the benefit of the local economy. Such economic multiplier effects have been claimed in Jordan and Lebanon as a result of the World Food Programme's voucher programme targeting Syrian refugees, with storeowners able to expand their operations and hire more staff (Idris 2016). Similarly, an evaluation of NGO Goal's food assistance programmes in Idleb indicated that for every US\$ spent through the voucher system, there was a potential multiplier effect of US\$2–4 – presuming that traders spent their profits in Syria rather than abroad (Doocy *et al.* 2015). However, as has also been noted by these and other studies, it is generally the larger traders that benefit the most, with this growth coming about at the expense of smaller and non-contracted businesses (Idris 2016).

The majority of vouchers provided in Idleb governorate are conditional vouchers, with a recent cash feasibility assessment in northern Syria (Aleppo, Hama, Al-Hasakah and Idleb) indicating that 6 per cent of respondents received restricted food vouchers and 2.5 per cent received unconditional vouchers over the period October 2015 to January 2016 (Global Communities 2016). INGO preferences for conditional over unconditional vouchers follow mainstream practice, as many agencies prefer to control how beneficiaries use the aid, thereby allowing them to better track and integrate voucher programmes with other objectives (see for example Aker 2013). For example, in Haiti following the earthquake in 2010, conditional fresh-food vouchers were provided in an effort to also improve beneficiaries' nutritional intake (ACF International 2012).

However, such paternalistic practices fail to take into account what it is that beneficiaries want and need, undermining community members' sense of agency and dignity. In addition, keeping decision-making in the hands of the donors presumes that donors have the capacity to direct aid properly, which is not always the case. Donors can and do get it wrong. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo's city of Goma, food kits were provided to households with members suffering from HIV/AIDS and

tuberculosis when what they needed was better medical care (Levine *et al.* 2004). Similarly, in Bunia City, food kits were provided to households with malnourished children, without aid agencies properly investigating and dealing with the causes of malnourishment (*ibid.*).

In Darkoush and Salquin, the vast majority of respondents participating in this research, including NGO staff, contracted and non-contracted businesses, local leaders, and beneficiaries themselves openly criticised both food baskets and conditional vouchers because of their lack of flexibility, explaining that households have a range of needs of varying priority, and neither food baskets nor conditional vouchers are capable of meeting all of these needs. As a result, beneficiaries are forced to sell the items or vouchers they receive for a fraction of their market value, to better meet other immediate needs, such as buying medicine.<sup>110</sup> For these and other reasons, the vast majority of respondents recommended that the current system be replaced with either unconditional vouchers or cash transfers, which would allow households to buy whatever they need.

## 4.2 Value for money

It is clear that many households in Darkoush and Salquin need aid to help them bridge the gap between income and expenditure. However, it appears that preferred donor approaches of providing food baskets, and failing that, conditional vouchers, are actually more expensive to run, meaning that beneficiaries receive less value for the aid money that is being spent. It costs money to deliver aid, so the amount that is invested is never the same as the actual aid that is delivered. Staff salaries and administration expenses need to be covered, transport and security needs to be provided, and various other expenses need to be covered – all of which costs money. These costs will vary depending on the modality of aid being provided, and various contextual factors unique to where the aid is being delivered.

A study conducted in northern Syria in 2014 and 2015 indicated that food baskets are the most expensive to administer, compared to cash and unconditional vouchers. The average monthly administrative cost per voucher-recipient household, according to the study, was US\$8.19 compared to US\$42.86 per in-kind food-recipient household. These figures include activity-related costs, which amount to US\$3.14 for vouchers (which includes printing, distribution and monitoring), and US\$10.43 for in-kind aid (which includes food inspection, trucking, loading and unloading) (Doocy *et al.* 2015). The comparatively low value for money for in-kind aid matches other experiences from around the world on the cost-effectiveness of in-kind food assistance (*ibid.*). For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo it was estimated that for every US\$1 worth of food that was provided in the food kit, donors

110. FGD with men, Darkoush, 30 November 2016; FGD with men, Salquin, 30 November 2016; FGD with women, Salquin, 30 November 2016.

actually paid US\$15 to cover the lost value when aid was sold in the market, and to cover programme transport and management costs – meaning that US\$14 out of US\$15 did not, in fact, get to the intended beneficiary (Levine *et al.* 2004).

In addition to the higher administrative costs for in-kind food assistance, there are also issues with some of the aid being lost as beneficiaries re-sell the food or vouchers at less than market value. The research team came across many such situations of community members in Darkoush and Salquin selling food-basket items and vouchers in the local market. It was difficult to quantify the lost value for money of food items being re-sold – however, it appears that the typical going rate for re-selling vouchers in Darkoush and Salquin is set at around 50 per cent of the actual value – meaning that the other 50 per cent of aid value goes to those who have not been identified as beneficiaries. The practice of re-selling food-basket items and vouchers appears to have become somewhat normalised, with one beneficiary explaining,

*[Food] kits are better than vouchers because a wide sector of beneficiaries benefit from kits and when the kit is sold in the market [...] they can be sold at lower prices, because they are humanitarian assistance.*<sup>111</sup>

While there is perhaps some unintended benefit as this practice results in goods being sold at reduced prices in the market, this a short-term fix only – with serious medium- and long-term impacts on local market activity. In some situations, the trade in aid may actually result in a new form of enterprise, as was the case with traders in Salquin who regularly visited the local IDP camp to buy the vouchers, and then sell them on to contracted businesses.<sup>112</sup>

In situations such as these, it is common amongst aid providers to blame beneficiaries, alleging that if they are going to sell the aid they receive then they probably did not need it in the first place. However, community members' stories painted a different picture, with respondents explaining that they need to make hard choices in order to respond to their various different needs. As one shopkeeper explained,

*A good example of this is a woman who recently came to my shop and told me that her child is sick, and that she wanted to buy medication for him. She asked me to buy the vouchers and give her money. As I did not buy or trade in vouchers, I went with her to the pharmacy and bought the medicine for her. This is not the only case; there are*

*many beneficiaries who need cash and sell their vouchers at half price.*<sup>113</sup>

Similarly, another respondent simply explained, 'I do not like food kits because sometimes we are forced to sell them to purchase items that do not exist in the kit, like medicines.'<sup>114</sup> Comments such as these were repeated many times throughout the research.

In addition to the lost value from beneficiaries re-selling the aid they receive, there is also lost value in voucher programmes that comes from shopkeepers 'gaming' the system. It appears to be common practice for contracted shopkeepers to increase the price of the goods they sell to voucher recipients by up to 40 per cent. As one beneficiary explained, 'The negative side [of the voucher system] is that we buy goods at prices higher than usual; for example, a ghee pack that is sold elsewhere at 850 Syrian pounds is sold at 1,000 Syrian pounds for people using vouchers.'<sup>115</sup> Another respondent alleged that contracted shopkeepers push beneficiaries into purchasing lower-quality goods that are about to expire.<sup>116</sup> Yet another offered to show proof, demonstrating that prices always rise at the same time that a new round of vouchers is provided.<sup>117</sup> Many such examples were given of contracted shopkeepers misusing their position by raising their prices across both Darkoush and Salquin.

Such practices appear to be so common that in some cases they have contributed to local inflation.<sup>118</sup> The seeming prevalence of these manipulations means that shopkeepers must be closely monitored to ensure that they operate according to the voucher programme rules, raising the overall cost of administering the programme. However, voucher programmes are already complicated as there are multiple moving parts to manage. Programme staff must manage the tender and contracting process for local businesses and monitor them to ensure they operate according to programme rules. They must also manage beneficiary selection processes and monitor them to ensure vouchers are used in accordance with programme objectives. There are frequent (and in some cases, correct) issues of social jealousy to manage with those businesses that are not contracted to participate in the programme, alleging corruption and nepotism in the selection process. There are issues of on-selling of vouchers by beneficiaries. There are issues of exploitation of beneficiaries as contracted businesses misuse the monopoly they hold on the voucher trade. And there are many more issues besides.

111. FGD with men, Darkoush, 30 November 2016.

112. Interview with non-contracted shop 2, Salquin, 29 November 2016.

113. Interview with non-contracted shop 3, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

114. FGD with men, Darkoush, 30 November 2016.

115. FGD with men, Salquin, 30 November 2016.

116. Interview with a traffic police officer at the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

117. FGD with men, Salquin, 30 November 2016.

118. Researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016.



To address these issues, a number of measures were suggested in a recent cash feasibility assessment to better meet beneficiary needs, improve voucher programmes' monitoring, and decrease the likelihood of exploiting beneficiaries. Such measures included monitoring prices through the use of 'secret shoppers', introducing functioning complaints and response mechanisms that enable beneficiaries to flag important issues and provide feedback, and sharing monitoring, evaluation and beneficiary-satisfaction data across all organisations to generate lessons learnt, identify gaps, and inform future programming (Global Communities 2016).

All of these problems with voucher programming demonstrate that while vouchers are good in theory, allowing programme implementers to tap into and use the local market, the unavoidable fact is that vouchers are still a fairly artificial device – particularly when vouchers are conditional. Because of high programme requirements in managing and monitoring the use of conditional vouchers, only a limited number of businesses are contracted to provide this service, which then has the effect of limiting competition and allowing contracted businesses to exploit beneficiaries by raising prices. In addition, the practice of on-selling conditional vouchers that fail to adequately meet household needs, means that there is significant loss in value for aid money that is being invested.

For these reasons, representatives from NGOs, donors and community members alike who were interviewed for a cash feasibility assessment in northern Syria conducted in 2016 indicated that vouchers were their least preferred modality (Global Communities 2016). However, as a researcher who was interviewed for this project pointed out, there is still a strong preference amongst donors and INGOs to use conditional vouchers because, in theory at least, they allow donors to track and control how aid is spent and used – effectively sacrificing value for money for the sake of (perceived) control over aid expenditure.<sup>119</sup>

## 4.3 Flexibility and cash transfers

It is for many of the above-stated reasons that various stakeholders have been exploring the possibility of introducing cash transfers to northern Syria. There was a strong preference for cash transfer programming, compared to in-kind and voucher programmes, amongst most of the research respondents. The vast majority of participants in the aid practitioner workshop argued for cash transfers because of its greater flexibility, allowing a greater degree of autonomy and dignity for beneficiaries.<sup>120</sup> Community members including local leaders, local

businesses and aid beneficiaries generally indicated a preference for cash transfers over other modalities. Other studies also indicate a strong preference for cash transfers, with a recent cash feasibility assessment in northern Syria showing that NGO and donor representatives preferred cash mainly because of beneficiary preference (94.2 per cent of beneficiaries preferred cash) and cost effectiveness, which is perceived to be significantly higher than other modalities (Global Communities 2016).

It appears that some of the important pre-requisites for cash transfer programming are fulfilled in northern Syria – particularly in urban areas. Research results clearly indicate that local markets are functioning, but that many items are now simply too expensive because of the inflationary effect of the US dollar. While economies are localised due to problems with transport, this is less of an issue in urban areas, as population centres are large enough for traders to simply focus on the local market. In addition, it is possible that current legal and political changes in Turkey – which are making it increasingly difficult for INGOs to provide aid to northern Syria – may also affect donor decision-making around preferred modalities, as cash transfer programming provides an alternate approach to aid provision which does not require physical transfer of goods across borders.

However, a major concern around cash assistance is how to manage the security issues related to money transfer in the region, including its possible diversion to armed groups. This point was made by one of the Syrian aid practitioners participating in the workshop, who succinctly noted that 'cash is more attractive' than vouchers or food, and NGOs did not yet have the capacity to deal with the added pressure that cash transfers would put on monitoring and security arrangements, thereby 'putting programme continuity at risk'. As he went on to explain, the INGO he works for had trialled an emergency cash transfer project for IDPs, but this was discontinued due to security and logistical problems, including pressure to register certain people as beneficiaries, people 'gaming' the system through multiple listing of the same beneficiaries in different villages, and dealing with the increased risk in transferring cash to IDPs who were scattered across different villages.<sup>121</sup> Another participant further added that cash transfers had been delivered by different agencies early on in the crisis, but that the system had been mismanaged by local councils and implementing partners, with the cash ending up in the hands of ineligible beneficiaries. These experiences have discouraged donors from supporting the cash transfer modality.<sup>122</sup>

Another potential obstacle in implementing cash transfers in northern Syria is the lack of regulated banking services. Unlike some other contexts such as Sri Lanka, where

119. Researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016.

120. Workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

121. Ibid.

122. Workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

the success of cash transfer programmes was partly put down to the presence of functional banking systems (Mohiddin *et al.* 2007), financial services in northern Syria are provided through *hawaladers*. As an assessment of *hawalader* activity in the governorates of Idleb and Aleppo in 2014 noted, many of these are small retail operators, such as jewellery stores or mobile phone providers, who also happen to provide *hawala* services (Beechwood International 2015: 21–22). Donors seeking to use *hawaladers* for cash transfer programming run the risk that they will end up on the wrong side of money laundering regulations, because of difficulties in regulating the sector. In addition, there are major questions around *hawaladers'* liquidity, with a 2014 estimation putting *hawaladers'* capacity to process transactions at 200–400 per day, while the requirements of a cash transfer programme would likely increase the number of transactions to around 5,000 transfers per day (Beechwood International 2015).

However, as also noted by Beechwood International (2015), these security and logistical issues are not limited to cash transfers; it is equally possible for other forms of aid to end up with non-eligible beneficiaries, and possibly also with armed groups. While cash is certainly more attractive, in-kind aid and vouchers can and are being sold in the market. Given the benefits that cash transfer programming can bring – treating beneficiaries with respect by allowing them to meet their own priorities, while also improving

value for money in aid provided – it seems sensible that INGOs should invest in their own capacity to make this option work.

In the meantime, there are also other ways of facilitating more flexibility in aid delivery. One such possibility is to make vouchers unconditional, rather than the current preference for conditional voucher provision. This would allow beneficiaries to use their vouchers according to their own priorities and needs, buying food, medicine, and any other items that they need to help them survive. There is also the potential for introducing mixed modalities for programme beneficiaries, complementing in-kind aid provision with cash transfers, allowing small cash-transfer programming to be trialled before rolling out a major programme. There are also possible ways to deal with the issues of contracted traders 'gaming' the system. As well as improving monitoring, it is possible to increase the number of contracted stores, including smaller-scale traders, thus potentially stimulating competition between different traders to more closely approximate local business dynamics. This might also be complemented by strategies to rotate between different contracted stores, which may go some way to evening out the playing field.

However, all of these strategies are only short-term in scope, and fail to deal with the medium- and long-term impacts of aid delivery on market distortion and economic dependency, discussed in the final section of this paper.

## 5

# Impacts on local markets

## 5.1 Market distortion and economic dependency

It has been noted in other studies that food baskets in particular can have serious distortionary effects on local markets, effectively creating parallel markets that compete with local providers (Smith and Mohiddin 2015). As early as the 1970s, a research study in India noted the damaging impact of food aid in lowering prices and undercutting domestic food production (Isenman and Singer 1977). In South Sudan and northern Mali it was noted that the delivery of in-kind aid has pushed local suppliers out of business by substantially reducing market prices (Idris 2016). In Pakistan, markets were overwhelmed by the provision of in-kind aid, with large traders being the only stakeholders to benefit from the situation (Idris 2016).

Similar concerns are also being raised in the northern Syria context: 55.7 per cent of in-kind aid, including food kits, ready-to-eat food rations and bread flour is sourced from outside Syria (FSC 2017). This means that local producers are being undercut, despite their capacity to provide many products locally. One Syrian aid practitioner noted recent problems with a programme being implemented in Idleb, because food kits containing lentils had driven lentil prices too low, undercutting local lentil farmers.<sup>123</sup> It was simply too difficult for local farmers to compete against lentils that were provided for free in the food kits. Similarly, Syrian

aid practitioners participating in the workshop generally agreed that much of the aid that they have witnessed has distorted local economies, undercutting local attempts to survive in the crisis.<sup>124</sup>

Connected to issues of market distortion, many respondents – Syrian aid practitioners, local leaders, and beneficiaries themselves – expressed deep concern that current approaches to aid delivery is resulting in economic dependency for communities in northern Syria. Similar comments were made by a local council member in Darkoush who, when noting the suspension of aid delivery by an INGO in their area, explained that while people were suffering, it was not all negative: ‘The pressures may urge people to rely on themselves more and minimise reliance on external and free assistance.’<sup>125</sup> As he went on to explain, the suspension had effectively paralysed the local markets – indicating the level of dependency that local markets now have on the aid being provided. Even some aid beneficiaries noted the problems of dependency, with one stating outright: ‘Food kits are causing dependency, they make people lazy. We need to focus on crafts and livelihoods, because if we lose these we will go backwards.’<sup>126</sup>

While words such as ‘laziness’ are sometimes used to describe the phenomenon of dependency, it is clear that in the majority of circumstances people’s desire to work has not been diminished. Research results clearly show that when people lost their previous source of income, they

123. Researcher, Darkoush and Salquin, 30 November 2016.

124. Workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

125. Interview with manager of the service office at the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

126. FGD with men, Darkoush, 30 November 2016.

did everything in their power to make ends meet, turning to alternative and sometimes quite difficult employment such as day labouring or various forms of menial self-employment. Of the 204 respondents who participated in the survey in Darkoush and Salquin, only 8 (4 per cent) listed aid as their primary source of household income. Similar results were also found by a LNGO that undertook a survey of local employment in different communities in Idleb governorate in 2015, showing 3 per cent of community members to be dependent on aid at that time.<sup>127</sup>

Rather, observations of dependency in this context points to the increasing dependency of the local economy on external sources of aid, with local markets being distorted and local producers undermined. This local economic dependency makes it increasingly difficult for community members to find employment, undermining their capacity to earn a salary independently of aid, and potentially also undermining prospects for economic recovery when the conflict is ended. While survey results clearly indicated that there has been a massive growth in small and microbusinesses, as community members have adjusted to the wartime economy, it is noteworthy that there are very few programmes designed to support this sector.

What can be done to support this important, clear and existing strength in communities? And is the current focus on food baskets causing market distortion and dependency of local economies? These are important questions for the international humanitarian response in northern Syria.

## 5.2 Supporting local economies

Humanitarian work is, of course, different to development work. While humanitarian work focuses on alleviating suffering and saving lives in an emergency context (whether natural, or due to organised violence), development is generally associated with improving the normal state of affairs (Calhoun 2008; Fearon 2008). This difference between the two is typically interpreted with humanitarian work focussing on short-term solutions to an immediate crisis, and development work focussing on medium- to longer-term solutions to underlying drivers of vulnerability.

As discussed previously, response planning in the northern Syria context has emphasised the provision of immediate household assistance, mainly in the form of food baskets, and to a much lesser extent in the form of vouchers or cash transfers. While there is evidence to support the positive impact of more flexible forms of assistance such as cash

transfers in stimulating local economies, impacts are nonetheless still short-term. For example, an assessment of a cash transfer programme in Jordan showed the impact of cash assistance to be short lived, with beneficiaries failing to save or invest this money for future income-generating activity. Understandably given their hand-to-mouth existence, beneficiaries spent between 80 per cent and 90 per cent of the cash they received on rent, with most of the remaining amount spent on food (IRC 2016). Similar experiences were also noted in a cross-country study of cash interventions across different countries in Africa and Asia, where beneficiaries spent most of the cash on basic food and non-food items, with no real investment in livelihood assets (Mohiddin *et al.* 2007).

Short-term measures such as these have their place, particularly if they are sufficiently flexible, allowing beneficiaries to use the support to meet their particular priorities and needs. But in a prolonged war such as the war in Syria, these measures do not displace the need for more holistic and durable solutions that take into account the negative externalities of aid provision such as market distortion and local economic dependency. For these reasons, market-support interventions have been receiving increasing attention in other parts of the world as a way to enhance existing market systems, support market resilience and community self-resilience, and enhance prospects for economic recovery (Juillard *et al.* 2016; IRC 2016).

Many research respondents emphasised the need to make better use of existing local resources – including human resources – rather than relying on external sources of support. Local council members in both Darkoush and Salquin strongly advocated improving INGO engagement with community members in order to better use local resources – valuing existing human capital, building community members' capacity and trusting them.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, Syrian aid practitioners participating in the workshop argued that the current approach to providing aid needs to change because of the problems it causes in local economies, and because of missed opportunities to leverage local resources and strengths. There was considerable frustration expressed during this discussion, as Syrian aid workers reflected on their incapacity to change current approaches, being bound by donor preferences. As one workshop participant argued, reflecting on past experience of aid provision in Iraq and Afghanistan:

*Why haven't aid agencies learnt? [...] I think the problem is politics – that donors have different timing and [political] agendas to those of us on the ground [...] they will always reject what communities ask for, because they will say it's not the right time for them.*<sup>129</sup>

127. Interview with community worker, Gaziantep, 23 February 2017.

128. Interview with manager of the service office at the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016; interview with the head of the local council, Darkoush, 26 November 2016.

129. Workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

A key challenge that was identified in the aid practitioner workshop was the need for INGOs to coordinate effectively with local leaders and local initiatives. One Syrian community worker explained that he had seen many missed opportunities and wasted resources because INGOs did not engage properly with communities – giving the example of a hospital that was built by an INGO less than 3km from another hospital that the local council was already attempting to restore.<sup>130</sup> Communities and community members are not merely passive recipients of aid: they can and do work using their own initiative, making the best use they can of the resources that they have available to improve the lives of themselves and others in the community. Without external support, such local initiatives have often been small: for example, community members organising themselves to provide assistance to IDPs and financially disadvantaged families, giving small cash grants, clothes and tents that they crowdsourced from other community members.<sup>131</sup> But some have been larger and more organised, focused on mobilising community members to support women's empowerment activities or other such initiatives.<sup>132</sup> Large or small, such local initiatives are extremely important as they build a sense of self-sufficiency and trust between different sectors of the community, strengthening the sometimes very difficult relationship between IDPs and host communities.<sup>133</sup>

INGOs need to engage properly with community members. Respect and support for local efforts is critical to build community trust in INGOs, which is currently extremely low. As a community worker explained, 'Community members hear about how much money is spent in their area, but they are not seeing the results on the ground'.<sup>134</sup> Many research respondents, including community members themselves, confirmed this impression of diminished trust in INGO work.

There were many alternatives that were offered to redress the current imbalanced focus on food baskets. One Syrian aid practitioner participating in the workshop suggested a more nuanced, contextualised use of cash-for-work programmes, as the NGO she worked for had had some success with a pilot education programme in which community members had been paid to support the re-opening of a local school. Another participant suggested finding a way to facilitate registration and export clearance

for goods produced in non-government controlled areas, thereby expanding the market for local Syrian producers to sell in neighbouring Turkey.<sup>135</sup> Yet another suggested more small grants programming to support the many small and microbusinesses that have emerged, although it was also acknowledged that this option was risky, with a recently trialled small grants programme being forced to shut down when it was found that beneficiaries were selling the machinery they received.<sup>136</sup>

While alternative programming options may vary, a key point that was repeated many times is that response planning needs to be properly contextualised to fit existing market conditions in the Syrian context – which is not currently being done. As workshop participants pointed out, the relatively small number of livelihood programmes that do exist tend to take a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach, with projects implemented across different contexts regardless of the specific needs and market conditions of each area. For example, one participant noted a hairdresser training programme that was offered to women in IDP camps, resulting in many qualified female hairdressers with no customer base, asking: 'Who said that hairdressing should be only a woman's job anyway?'<sup>137</sup> Another workshop participant spoke of livestock projects being implemented in areas where there were no veterinarians, resulting in significant losses for farmers when disease broke out.<sup>138</sup> Because of such programming failures, he argued, 'We need livelihood support, but not the mainstream [...] We need to break the mainstream by supporting livelihoods across the entire value chain'.<sup>139</sup>

Similar points have been made in other research studies around the world, as research teams have recommended a more integrated, crosscutting approach that supports existing market actors, service providers and infrastructure (Juillard *et al.* 2016; IRC 2016). Common across all of these studies and research recommendations is the importance of context: the need to place communities, and how they use and access markets, at the centre of analysis. For example, a livelihood assessment conducted in late 2015 in southern Syria, where there has also been considerable agricultural and business shrinkage similar to that experienced in Darkoush and Salquin, recommended more support for existing local initiatives and capacities to enhance communities' resilience and potential recovery

130. Interview with community worker, Gaziantep, 23 February 2017.

131. Interview with food distribution team member, Darkoush and Salquin, 29 November 2016.

132. Interview with community worker, Gaziantep, 23 February 2017.

133. Interview with food distribution team member, Darkoush and Salquin, 29 November 2016.

134. Interview with community worker, Gaziantep, 23 February 2017.

135. Workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

136. *Ibid.*

137. *Ibid.*

138. *Ibid.*

139. *Ibid.*

when the conflict is over (CARE 2015). Similar to recommendations from participants in the aid practitioner workshop, the research team specifically recommended developing small businesses along existing value chains, so as to support processing, marketing and demand through relevant cash-based programming (CARE 2015).

In the Syrian context, where so many elements are subject to change, there is little capacity for implementing long-term strategic measures to slowly build up a larger economy. However, particularly in larger urban hubs where there is sufficient population to support private enterprise, there are opportunities to be found at the local level, taking a mixed, strategic approach that covers immediate needs while also supporting (rather than undermining) existing local strengths and capacities. Among other possibilities, appropriate responses might include the development and support of cooperatives, focused skills development and training to plug identified gaps, facilitating quality control and export clearance for Syrian goods into neighbouring countries to expand potential markets, and/or approaches that support the integration and growth of more localised economies. It is likely that different approaches would be required for rural and urban settings, reflecting the different demand base, and principles of Do No Harm would need to be considered to ensure such initiatives do not contribute to the conflict.

However, while there was general agreement amongst workshop participants that a more integrated holistic

approach is needed, it is not clear if INGOs would be best placed to lead this work. A major issue in working across value chains, and looking for potential to cooperate in order to increase economies of scale (even if at a small level) is that it requires that most valuable commodity: trust. There needs to be trust between community members who are looking to cooperate with each other, and there needs to be trust in the person or people who are helping them to do so. And, as discussed previously, community trust in INGOs in northern Syria is extremely low.

There is, however, space for INGOs to support such activities – for example, supporting the research that would assist people in identifying the different elements of a single value chain in order to identify breakdowns, bottlenecks and programming opportunities going forward. Working across value chains in the current context where businesses are small, scattered and localised will be no easy task, as value chains are rarely (if ever) limited to a single community. Such work would require good market analysis, to assist people in identifying appropriate responses tailored to the specific needs, opportunities and priorities of different communities in northern Syria. Notably also, such an approach would require improved data coordination and overall response strategy, as efforts to put in place more strategic approaches are currently undermined by lack of integrated data and general low levels of coordination – at both community and programming levels.

# 6

## Conclusion

One of the difficulties with humanitarian aid work is that while there are many lessons of what not to do, it is difficult to find clear answers going forward. By its very nature, humanitarian aid delivery is complex. And particularly in a conflict zone, the stakes of getting it wrong are high.

Nonetheless, it seems clear that the current imbalanced emphasis on in-kind food aid is causing real problems in the cities of Darkoush and Salquin, and more generally in opposition-controlled northern Syria, failing to meet beneficiaries' real needs, causing market distortion, and creating dependent local economies. While there are, of course, situations in which food kits are the most appropriate modality of aid provision, these tend to be short-term crises where food is simply not available in the local markets (Levine *et al.* 2004). As discussed previously, this is not the case in Darkoush and Salquin, with research results clearly demonstrating that local markets have continued to function throughout the crisis. Rather, it appears that the preference for in-kind assistance is driven by donor programming preferences, with many Syrian aid practitioners noting their feelings of helplessness at the impact of food baskets in creating distorted and dependent local economies.<sup>140</sup>

As long as programming puts all decision-making in the hands of the donors, without allowing beneficiaries to decide how to spend the aid they receive based on their own needs, it is inevitable that cases of misdirected aid provision will continue to recur – leading to other problems in the community. The inescapable reality is that it is impossible to get programme decision-making right all of the time, particularly in a conflict zone. By keeping aid modalities inflexible, donors run the risk that their aid money will be wasted: if needs assessments are not well conducted, if poor programming decisions are made due to remote management or other issues, if aid such as seeds for farming is delivered too late for the planting season

because of transport delays, then donor decisions will fail to hit the mark. By allowing beneficiaries to make their own decisions based on what aid will be of most use to them, these programming risks can be mitigated.

Because of this, there are strong arguments to be made in favour of more flexible forms of aid provision. This might be through use of cash transfers, unconditional vouchers, improved approaches to voucher programming that would allow an increased and/or rotating number of contracted stores including smaller businesses, local sourcing of all in-kind products, and many other programming possibilities besides.

However, research results clearly indicate that this is not the only issue. Beyond issues of flexibility, it is also clear that current approaches that focus only on addressing the gap between household expenditure and income are failing to engage with key changes and challenges that have emerged in local economies in northern Syria – namely, the switch in focus from large private enterprise to small and microbusinesses, and the increasing localisation of economic activity. Programmes that seek to support local economic activity need to take a deeper, more contextualised approach that plugs into and supports existing value chains.

Community members are not merely passive recipients of aid; they are actors in their own right, and if engaged with they can add significant value to projects that are implemented in their community. By failing to leverage community capacities, NGOs are ignoring a vital resource that would assist with their programming. However, it is unclear if this should be the role of INGOs currently delivering aid in Syrian communities. As various respondents pointed out, there are many actors operating in this space, including local councils, LINGOs and Syrian community members themselves that may be better placed to lead such work. Nonetheless, INGOs can and should

140. Workshop with Syrian aid practitioners, Gaziantep, 28 February 2017.

provide support through improved data integration, supporting focused market analyses of existing value chains to identify future programming options.

Where does this leave INGOs? It appears there is a choice to be made. They may choose to limit themselves to providing aid as flexibly as possible. Or, if they have an interest in providing livelihood support, they should ensure that such programmes are adequately contextualised to local realities – properly engaging

with communities, leveraging existing local strengths and resources, and investing in undertaking proper market analysis to strategically support existing value chains. In either case, it is important that INGOs are open and accountable in the programming choices that they make, and sufficiently humble in recognising that communities survive and source resilience because of their own strengths, which can be supported – or not – by external actors.



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# Appendix 1.

## Household survey

**Introduction and research background:** Good morning/afternoon. We are from Trust Consultancy & Development (an independent research company) conducting research about local households (LHH) in Darkoush/Salquin to see the extent to which humanitarian aid, namely voucher programmes, affects LHH activities and markets in the region. The interview will take about 30 minutes and you have the choice to participate or not. If you do not wish to proceed at any point, you have the right to leave or refrain from answering any questions. Participation in this interview is not linked to your inclusion in any current or future projects. Everything you say during the interview will be treated with confidentiality and respect, and your identity will remain anonymous. Do you have any questions?

Date of interview

Location

- Salquin
- Darkoush

Interviewer's name

Interviewer's gender

- Male
- Female

### General/demographic information

1. Respondent's gender

- Male
- Female

2. Are you the head of the household?

- Yes
- No

3. How old are you?

4. What is your marital status?

- Single
- Married
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Abandoned/separated

5. What is the highest level of education you have attained?

- Cannot read or write
- Can read and write
- Primary
- Preparatory
- Secondary
- Institute or technical degree
- University or higher

6. What is your occupation?

- Student
- Housewife
- Unemployed
- Employed (please specify)

7. How many members does your household consist of?

8. How many children (below 15) are in your household?

9. Do you have a disability?

- Yes
- No

10. How does the household describe itself in terms of status?

- Host community
- IDP
- Returnee
- Household level

11. Pre-2011, how many members of the household were contributing to household income?

(Please add information for all members, including gender, age and monthly income in Syrian pounds)

12. In the past six months, how many members have contributed to household income?

(Please add information for all members, including gender, age and monthly income in Syrian pounds)

### Household income sources, pre-2011 and in the last 6 months

Questions 13, 14 and 15. What were the three main sources of income for your household pre-2011?

Type of income	13. First main source	14. Second main source	15. Third main source
Public sector employee			
Private sector employee			
Self-employed			
Employer			
Remittances			
Humanitarian aid			
Government assistance			
Retirement income			
Investment income (eg from property rent, bank interest)			
None			
Other (please specify)			

Questions 16, 17 and 18. What were the three main sources of income for your household in the last 6 months?

Type of income	16. First main source	17. Second main source	18. Third main source
Public sector employee			
Private sector employee			
Self-employed			
Employer			
Remittances			
Humanitarian aid			
Government assistance			
Retirement income			
Investment income (eg from property rent, bank interest)			
None			
Other (please specify)			

Questions 19 and 20. Did you receive your income in US\$ or Syrian pounds, pre-2011 and in the last 6 months?

Type of income	19. Pre-2011	20. Last 6 months
US\$		
SYP		
Both US\$ and SYP		
Other (please specify)		

**Community income sources, pre-2011 and in the last 6 months**

Questions 21, 22 and 23. What were the three main sources of income for your community pre-2011?

Type of income	21. First main source	22. Second main source	23. Third main source
Public sector employee			
Private sector employee			
Self-employed			
Employer			
Remittances			
Humanitarian aid			
Government assistance			
Retirement income			
Investment income (eg from property rent, bank interest)			
None			
Other (please specify)			

Questions 24, 25 and 26. What were the three main sources of income for your community in the last 6 months?

Type of income	16. First main source	17. Second main source	18. Third main source
Public sector employee			
Private sector employee			
Self-employed			
Employer			
Remittances			
Humanitarian aid			
Government assistance			
Retirement income			
Investment income (eg from property rent, bank interest)			
None			
Other (please specify)			

Questions 27 and 28. Which two main sectors were the most important sources of income for the community, pre-2011 and in the last 6 months?

Main sector of income	27. Pre-2011	28. Last 6 months
Agriculture		
Industry		
Building and construction		
Trade, hotels and restaurants		
Transport, storage and communication		
Finance, insurance and real estate		
Services		
Other (please specify)		

29. During the period 2011 to the present, has your household sold any assets to meet household needs?

- Yes
- No

Questions 30 and 31. How do you describe the ability of the market to meet your basic needs pre-2011 and in the last 6 months?

	30. Pre-2011	31. Last 6 months
Sufficient		
Insufficient		
More than enough		

Questions 32 and 33. Could your household meet its basic needs, pre-2011 and in the last 6 months?

	32. Pre-2011	33. Last 6 months
Yes		
No		

Questions 34 and 35. Where did you purchase basic goods for your household, pre-2011 and in the last 6 months?

	34. Pre-2011	35. Last 6 months
Retailers		
Directly from producers		
Local markets		
Public distribution system/government shops		
Black market		
Other (please specify)		

Questions 36 and 37. On average, how much did your household spend on basic goods/services per month pre-2011 and in the last 6 months? (in Syrian pounds)

	Household spending per month (SYP)
36. Pre-2011	
37. Last 6 months	

38. What currency is used to purchase goods in the market now?

- US\$
- Syrian pounds
- Both
- Other (please specify)

39. How has the US\$ affected the prices in the local market?

- I do not know
- Prices have increased
- Prices have decreased
- No change

40. Do you have any further comments?

41. Enumerator's comments

# Appendix 2. Focus group discussions with voucher beneficiaries

**Introduction:** Good morning. My name is [name] from Trust Consultancy & Development. We are currently doing research on the impact of humanitarian aid on livelihoods and markets in [area]. Your name will not be documented and the information you provide will be used for research purposes only and will not be shared with anyone. Your participation does not affect your inclusion in any current or future humanitarian assistance projects. Participation is voluntary and you

have the right to withdraw at any time if you do not wish to proceed or to refrain from answering any questions. There is no financial compensation for participating in this survey, but your participation is important for us to design projects that are suitable and relevant to the needs of this community. The interview will take about 30 minutes and everything you say will be treated with strict confidentiality and respect. Do you have any questions? Do you wish to participate?

Interviewer name:	Interviewer gender: Male      Female	Interview date:
Location:    Darkoush/Salquin	Neighbourhood:	Address:

Serial No.	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Status	Occupation	Educational Level
1	M   F		S   M   D   W   A	H   IDP   R		0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8
2	M   F		S   M   D   W   A	H   IDP   R		0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8
3	M   F		S   M   D   W   A	H   IDP   R		0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8
4	M   F		S   M   D   W   A	H   IDP   R		0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8
5	M   F		S   M   D   W   A	H   IDP   R		0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8
6	M   F		S   M   D   W   A	H   IDP   R		0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8
7	M   F		S   M   D   W   A	H   IDP   R		0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8
8	M   F		S   M   D   W   A	H   IDP   R		0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8
9	M   F		S   M   D   W   A	H   IDP   R		0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8
10	M   F		S   M   D   W   A	H   IDP   R		0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8

**Marital status:** Single (S), married (M), divorced (D), widowed (W), abandoned (A)  
**Status:** Host (H), internally displaced person (IDP), returnee (R)  
**Educational level:** Illiterate (0), can read and write (1), primary (2), preparatory (3), secondary (4), intermediate institute (5), university (6), master's degree (7), PhD (8)

**Thinking about your household...**

- What are the key economic challenges/difficulties your household faces?
- What coping strategies do you use to deal with these economic challenges in your household? Please give examples.
- Has the US\$ had any impact on your ability to meet household needs? Please give examples.
- What has the impact been on the community?

**Thinking about your community...**

- What have been the major economic changes in your community since the conflict began in 2011? (This could be an economic change that had an impact on living standards, salaries, food prices, smuggling etc)
- When did that happen?
- What have been your positive experiences of money traders in your community? How would you describe them?
- What have been your negative experiences of money traders in your community? How would you describe them?

**Thinking about the different ways that people are trying to help...**

- Do you prefer using vouchers or receiving direct aid like food baskets? Why?
- What do you feel are the positive aspects of using vouchers?
- What do you feel are the negative aspects of using vouchers?
- Here, we have many people trying to help by doing different things. Thinking about these, what do you think was most successful from your own perspective? How did it improve people's lives? What were the important factors that made it successful?
- Imagine the war ended tomorrow. What would be most important to focus on in order to begin rebuilding your community and local economy? How would you do that?

# Appendix 3. Key informant interviews with contracted businesses

**Introduction:** Good morning. My name is [name] from Trust Consultancy & Development. We are currently doing research on the impact of humanitarian aid on livelihoods and markets in [area]. Your name will not be documented and the information you provide will be used for research purposes only and will not be shared with anyone. Your participation does not affect your inclusion in any current or future humanitarian assistance projects. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time

if you do not wish to proceed or to refrain from answering any questions. There is no financial compensation for participating in this survey, but your participation is important for us to design projects that are suitable and relevant to the needs of this community. The interview will take about 30 minutes and everything you say will be treated with strict confidentiality and respect. Do you have any questions? Do you wish to participate?

Interviewer name:	Interviewer gender: Male    Female	Interview date:
Location: Darkoush/Salquin	Neighbourhood:	Address:
Interviewee gender: Male    Female	Interviewee age:	Interviewee occupation:

## Thinking about your business...

- When did you start your business?
- What are the key economic challenges for your business? How have these changed, comparing now to before 2011?
  - Supply of goods/basic materials to produce goods
  - Supply of qualified labour
  - Capacity to sell goods
  - Pricing of goods
- What strategies do you use to deal with these challenges in your business? Please give examples.
- Do you think it is easy for people to do business now?
  - If yes, please give specific examples of what people can do
  - If no, what are the specific factors that are stopping people from doing business?
- What impact do you feel the exchange rate has had? Please give examples.
  - On your business? (please give specific examples)
  - On the local economy more broadly? (please give specific examples)
- What have been your positive and negative experiences of money traders in your community?
- Compared to before the conflict when banks were operating, what do you feel are the negative and positive impacts of money traders on the local economy?
- Do you like the voucher system? Why/why not?
- What do you feel are the positive aspects of using vouchers?
- What do you feel are the negative aspects of using vouchers?



11. How would you improve the system of providing vouchers?

12. Do you feel that the process for contracting businesses for using vouchers is fair? Why/why not?

**Thinking about your community...**

13. What are the major sources of income in the community?

14. Comparing now to before 2011, what have been the major changes?

- Informal work?
- Impact of black market?

15. Comparing now to before 2011, what have been the major changes to who in a household is earning money?

- Impact on men?
- Impact on women?
- Impact on children?

16. What are the negative impacts of these changes?

17. Are there any positive impacts? (if yes, please give specific examples)

18. What have been the major economic changes in your community since the conflict began?

19. In your opinion, what are the key economic challenges that are faced now in your community?

20. What are the main coping strategies that community members use, in order to manage these challenges?

21. What do you think the long-term impact of these coping strategies might be?

**Thinking about the different ways that people are trying to help...**

22. Here, we have many people/entities trying to help by doing different things. Thinking about these, what do you think was most successful from your own perspective? How did it improve people's lives? What were the important factors that made it successful?

23. Imagine the war ended tomorrow. What would be most important to focus on in order to begin rebuilding your community? How would you do that?

# Appendix 4. Key informant interviews with non-contracted businesses

**Introduction:** Good morning. My name is [name] from Trust Consultancy & Development. We are currently doing research on the impact of humanitarian aid on livelihoods and markets in [area]. Your name will not be documented and the information you provide will be used for research purposes only and will not be shared with anyone. Your participation does not affect your inclusion in any current or future humanitarian assistance projects. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time

if you do not wish to proceed or to refrain from answering any questions. There is no financial compensation for participating in this survey, but your participation is important for us to design projects that are suitable and relevant to the needs of this community. The interview will take about 30 minutes and everything you say will be treated with strict confidentiality and respect. Do you have any questions? Do you wish to participate?

Interviewer name:	Interviewer gender: Male      Female	Interview date:
Location: Darkoush/Salquin	Neighbourhood:	Address:
Interviewee gender: Male      Female	Interviewee age:	Interviewee occupation:

## Thinking about your business...

1. When did you start your business?
2. What are the key economic challenges for your business?
3. How have these changed, comparing now to before 2011?
  - Supply of goods/basic materials to produce goods
  - Supply of qualified labour
  - Capacity to sell goods
  - Pricing of goods
4. What strategies do you use to deal with these challenges in your business? (please give specific examples)
5. Do you think it is easy for people to do business now?
  - If yes, please give specific examples of what people can do
  - If no, what are the specific factors that are stopping people from doing business?

6. What impact do you feel the exchange rate has had? (please give specific examples)
  - On your business?
  - On the local economy, more broadly?
7. What have been your positive and negative experiences of money traders in your community? (ie compared to before the conflict when banks were operating, what do you feel are the negative and positive impacts of money traders on the local economy?)
8. Do you like the voucher system? Why/why not?
9. What do you feel are the positive aspects of using vouchers?
10. What do you feel are the negative aspects of using vouchers?
11. How would you improve the system of providing vouchers?

12. Do you feel that the process for contracting businesses for using vouchers is fair? Why/why not?

**Thinking about your community...**

13. What are the major sources of income in the community?

14. Comparing now to before 2011, what have been the major changes?

- Informal work?
- Impact of black market?

15. Comparing now to before 2011, what have been the major changes to who in a household is earning money?

- Impact on men?
- Impact on women?
- Impact on children?

16. What are the negative impacts of these changes?

17. Are there any positive impacts? (if yes, please give specific examples)

18. What have been the major economic changes in your community since the conflict began?

19. In your opinion, what are the key economic challenges that need to be faced now in your community?

20. What are the main coping strategies that community members use, in order to manage these challenges?

21. What do you think the long-term impact of these coping strategies might be?

**Thinking about the different ways that people are trying to help...**

22. Here, we have many people trying to help by doing different things. Thinking about these, what do you think was most successful from your own perspective? How did it improve people's lives? What were the important factors that made it successful?

23. Imagine the war ended tomorrow. What would be most important to focus on in order to begin rebuilding your community? What would it take to do that?

# Appendix 5. Key informant interviews with money traders

**Introduction:** Good morning. My name is [name] from Trust Consultancy & Development. We are currently doing research on the impact of humanitarian aid on livelihoods and markets in [area]. Your name will not be documented and the information you provide will be used for research purposes only and will not be shared with anyone. Your participation does not affect your inclusion in any current or future humanitarian assistance projects. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time

if you do not wish to proceed or to refrain from answering any questions. There is no financial compensation for participating in this survey, but your participation is important for us to design projects that are suitable and relevant to the needs of this community. The interview will take about 30 minutes and everything you say will be treated with strict confidentiality and respect. Do you have any questions? Do you wish to participate?

Interviewer name:	Interviewer gender: Male      Female	Interview date:
Location: Darkoush/Salquin	Neighbourhood:	Address:
Interviewee gender: Male      Female	Interviewee age:	Interviewee occupation:

## Thinking about your business...

1. When did you start your business?
2. Please describe the most common types of transactions, their frequency and average size?
  - Remittances
  - Salaries
  - Level of risk
  - Difficulty in managing
3. What are the key challenges for you in doing money trading?
4. What strategies do you use to manage these challenges? Please give examples.
5. Are these challenges the same or different to the types of challenges that banks managed before the conflict? Please explain, giving examples.
6. Do you sometimes have problems or conflict with people in doing this work? Can you give examples? How do you manage these conflicts?

7. Do you think it is easy for people to do business now?
  - If yes, please give specific examples of what people can do
  - If no, what are the specific factors that are stopping people from doing business?
8. What impact do you feel the exchange rate has had? Please give specific examples.
  - On your business?
  - On other service or product-based businesses?
  - On the local economy, more broadly?

## Thinking about your community...

9. What are the major sources of income in the community?
10. Comparing now to before 2011, what have been the major changes?
  - Informal work?
  - Impact of black market?
11. What have been the major economic changes in your community since the conflict began?

12. In your opinion, what are the key economic challenges that need to be faced now in the community?

13. What are the main coping strategies that community members use, in order to manage these challenges?

14. What do you think the long-term impact of these coping strategies might be?

**Thinking about the different ways that people are trying to help...**

15. Here, we have many people trying to help by doing different things. Thinking about these, what do you think was most successful from your own perspective? How did it improve people's lives? What were the important factors that made it successful?

16. Imagine the war ended tomorrow. What would be most important to focus on in order to begin rebuilding your community? How would you do that?

# Appendix 6. Key informant interviews with local council members

**Introduction:** Good morning. My name is [name] from Trust Consultancy & Development. We are currently doing research on the impact of humanitarian aid on livelihoods and markets in [area]. Your name will not be documented and the information you provide will be used for research purposes only and will not be shared with anyone. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time if you do not wish to proceed or to

refrain from answering any questions. There is no financial compensation for participating in this survey, but your participation is important for us to design projects that are suitable and relevant to the needs of this community. The interview will take about 30 minutes and everything you say will be treated with strict confidentiality and respect. Do you have any questions? Do you wish to participate?

Interviewer name:	Interviewer gender: Male    Female	Interview date:
Location: Darkoush/Salquin	Neighbourhood:	Address:
Interviewee gender: Male    Female	Interviewee age:	Interviewee occupation:

## Thinking about your community...

1. What are the major sources of income in the community?
2. Comparing now to before 2011, what have been the major changes?
  - Informal work?
  - Impact of black market?
3. Comparing now to before 2011, what have been the major changes to who is earning money in the community?
  - Impact on men?
  - Impact on women?
  - Impact on children?
4. What are the negative impacts of these changes?
5. Are there any positive impacts? (if yes, please give specific examples)
6. Do you think it's easy for people to do business now?
  - If yes, please give specific examples of what people can do
  - If no, what are the specific factors that are stopping people from doing business?
7. What have been the major economic changes in your community since the conflict began?
8. In your opinion, what are the key economic challenges that are faced now in your community?
9. What are the main coping strategies that community members use, in order to manage these challenges?
10. What do you think the long-term impact of these coping strategies might be?
11. What have been your positive and negative experiences of money traders in your community?
12. Compared to before the conflict when banks were operating, what do you feel are the negative and positive impacts of money traders on the local economy?
13. What impact do you feel the exchange rate has had on the local economy?

14. Are you aware of any local initiatives/groups that have helped the economy? Please explain.

**Thinking about the different ways that people are trying to help...**

15. Which is better: using vouchers, or receiving direct aid like food baskets? Why?

16. What do you feel are the positive aspects of using vouchers?

17. What do you feel are the negative aspects of using vouchers?

18. How would you improve the system of providing aid?

19. Here, we have many people trying to help by doing different things. Thinking about these, what do you think was most successful from your own perspective? How did it improve people's lives? What were the important factors that made it successful?

20. Do you feel that different programmes/projects trying to help are coordinating well together? Why/why not? Please give specific examples.

21. If not, what practical recommendations would you make for improvement?

22. Imagine the war ended tomorrow. What would be most important to focus on in order to begin rebuilding your community? How would you do that?

# Appendix 7. Key informant interviews with NGO staff

**Introduction:** Good morning. My name is [name] from Trust Consultancy & Development. We are currently doing research on the impact of humanitarian aid on livelihoods and markets in [area] and would like to chat with you about the economy and [organisation's] voucher programmes. The information you provide will be used for research purposes only and will not be shared with

anyone. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time if you do not wish to proceed or to refrain from answering any questions. The interview will take about 30 minutes and everything you say will be treated with strict confidentiality and respect. Do you have any questions? Do you wish to participate?

Interviewer name:	Interviewer gender: Male      Female	Interview date:
Location: Darkoush/Salquin	Neighbourhood:	Address:
Interviewee gender: Male      Female	Interviewee age:	Interviewee occupation:

## Thinking about households...

1. What are the key economic challenges for households in this community?
2. What coping strategies do you see people using to deal with these challenges in their household? Please give examples.
3. What are the short- and medium-term implications of these strategies?
4. What are the long-term implications of these strategies?
5. What are the major sources of income for households?
6. Comparing now to before 2011, what have been the major changes?
  - Formal work?
  - Informal work?
  - Impact of black market?
7. Comparing now to before 2011, what have been the major changes to who in a household is earning money?
  - Impact on men?
  - Impact on women?
  - Impact on children?

8. What are the negative impacts of these changes?

9. Are there any positive impacts? (if yes, please give specific examples)

10. Can you think of any local initiatives/groups that have helped the economy? Please explain.

## Thinking about the local economy...

11. What have been the major economic changes in the community since the conflict began?

12. What are the main challenges?

13. What are the key economic challenges for local business?

14. How have these changed, comparing now to before 2011?

- Supply of goods/basic materials to produce goods
- Supply of qualified labour
- Capacity to sell goods
- Pricing of goods

15. What strategies do businesses use to deal with these challenges? Please give examples.

16. What are the short- and medium-term implications of these strategies?



17. What are the long-term implications of these strategies?

18. Do you think it is easy for people to do business now?

- If yes, please give specific examples of what people can do
- If no, what are the specific factors that are stopping people from doing business?

19. What impact do you feel the exchange rate has had? Please give specific examples.

- On local households?
- On local businesses?
- On the local economy, more broadly?

20. What have been your positive and negative experiences of money traders in the community?

21. Compared to before the conflict when banks were operating, what do you feel are the negative and positive impacts of money traders on the local economy?

22. Comparing vouchers to other types of aid, what are the advantages and disadvantages of this system? What are the advantages and disadvantages for beneficiaries?

23. Do you feel that the process for contracting businesses for vouchers is fair? Is it easily managed? Why/why not? How could it be improved?

### Thinking about the different types of aid provision...

24. What is the most successful aid initiative you have observed? This might be your programme, or other programmes you have observed.

25. How did it improve people's lives?

26. What were the important factors that made it successful?

27. Do you feel that different aid agencies are coordinating well together at the local level?

28. If not, what are the specific factors stopping good coordination at the local level? (please give specific examples)

29. Are you aware of any good examples of coordination at the local level? (please give specific examples)

30. What missed opportunities do you see for NGO coordination at the local level? What does that mean for the quality of aid provision? (please give specific examples)

31. What practical recommendations would you make for improvement?

32. Imagine the war ended tomorrow. What would be most important to focus on in order to begin rebuilding the community? How would you do that?

# Appendix 8.

## Key informant interviews with other stakeholders (researchers etc)

**Introduction:** Good morning. My name is [name] from Trust Consultancy & Development. We are currently doing research on the impact of humanitarian aid on livelihoods and markets in [area]. Your name will not be documented and the information you provide will be used for research purposes only and will not be shared with anyone. Your participation does not affect your inclusion in any current or future humanitarian assistance projects. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time

if you do not wish to proceed or to refrain from answering any questions. There is no financial compensation for participating in this survey, but your participation is important for us to design projects that are suitable and relevant to the needs of this community. The interview will take about 30 minutes and everything you say will be treated with strict confidentiality and respect. Do you have any questions? Do you wish to participate?

Interviewer name:	Interviewer gender: Male      Female	Interview date:
Location: Darkoush/Salquin	Neighbourhood:	Address:
Interviewee gender: Male      Female	Interviewee age:	Interviewee occupation:

### Thinking about local businesses...

1. What are the key economic challenges for local businesses?
  - Supply of goods/basic materials to produce goods
  - Supply of qualified labour
  - Capacity to sell goods
  - Pricing of goods
2. How have these changed, comparing now to before 2011?
  - On your business?
  - On the local economy, more broadly
3. Do you think it is easy for people to do business now?
  - If yes, please give specific examples of what people can do
  - If no, what are the specific factors that are stopping people from doing business?
4. What impact do you feel the exchange rate has had? (please give specific examples)
  - On your business?
  - On the local economy, more broadly
5. What have been your positive and negative experiences of money traders in the community?
6. Compared to before the conflict when banks were operating, what do you feel are the negative and positive impacts of money traders on the local economy?
7. Are you aware of any local initiatives/groups that have helped the economy? (please give specific examples)
8. Comparing vouchers to other types of aid, what are the advantages and disadvantages of this system? What are the advantages and disadvantages for beneficiaries?

9. Do you feel that the process for contracting businesses for using vouchers is fair? Why/why not?

**Thinking about your community...**

10. What are the major sources of income in the community?

11. Comparing now to before 2011, what have been the major changes?

- Informal work?
- Impact of black market?

12. Comparing now to before 2011, what have been the major changes to who in a household is earning money?

- Impact on men?
- Impact on women?
- Impact on children?

13. What are the negative impacts of these changes?

14. Are there any positive impacts? (If yes, please give specific examples)

15. What have been the major economic changes in the community since the conflict began?

16. What are the key economic challenges?

17. What are the main coping strategies that community members use, in order to manage these challenges?

18. What do you think the long-term impact of these coping strategies might be?

**Thinking about the different ways that people are trying to help...**

19. What is the most successful aid initiative you have observed?

20. How did it improve people's lives?

21. What were the important factors that made it successful?

22. Do you feel that different people trying to help are coordinating well together? Why/why not? (please give specific examples)

23. If not, what practical recommendations would you make for improvement?

24. Imagine the war ended tomorrow. What would be most important to focus on in order to begin rebuilding your community? How would you do that?

The ongoing conflict in Syria has left 13.5 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance. Several local and international organisations provide aid to northern Syria, but their chosen modalities fail to effectively meet community members' needs. While aiming to respond to immediate short-term needs, this research demonstrates that these modalities also tend to distort markets and undermine local urban economies. Current approaches to aid provision are yet to reflect economic adaptation in Syrian cities, failing to support and build on existing local resources, capacities and strengths. A shift from mainstream programming to include more contextualised market-based approaches is vital to fill this gap in aid provision.

IIED is a policy and action research organisation. We promote sustainable development to improve livelihoods and protect the environments on which these livelihoods are built. We specialise in linking local priorities to global challenges. IIED is based in London and works in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and the Pacific, with some of the world's most vulnerable people. We work with them to strengthen their voice in the decision-making arenas that affect them — from village councils to international conventions.



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