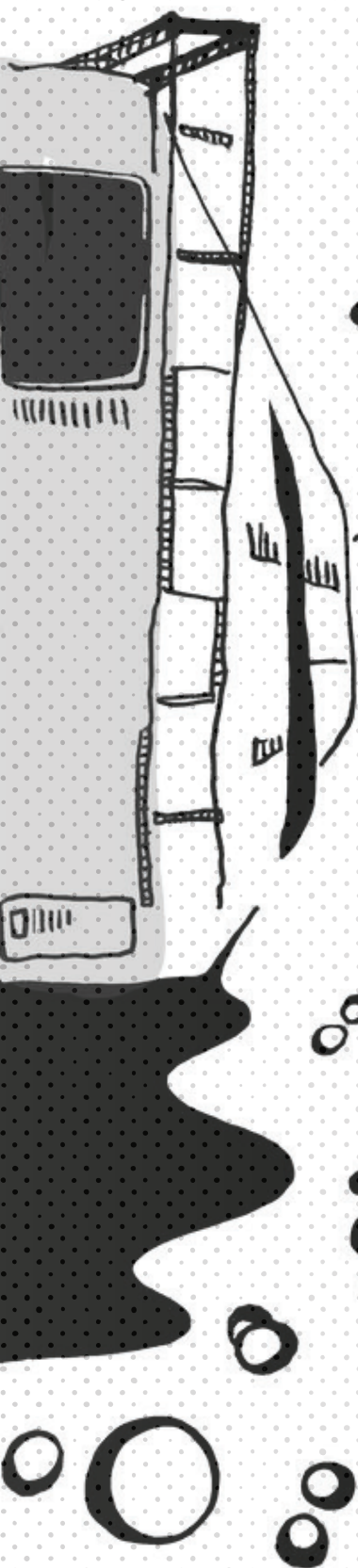


April 2021




# PRECARIOUS LABOUR UNDER LOCKDOWN

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic  
on Displaced Syrian Agricultural  
Workers in the Middle East

SITUATION ANALYSIS REPORT





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### Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Displaced Syrian Agricultural Workers in the Middle East SITUATION ANALYSIS REPORT

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For more information about the Refugee Labour under Lockdown Project, *please visit*  
[www.onehealthfieldnetwork.org/refugee-labour-under-lockdown](http://www.onehealthfieldnetwork.org/refugee-labour-under-lockdown)



The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Modern Slavery PEC.





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The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (the Modern Slavery PEC) was created by the investment of public funding to enhance understanding of modern slavery and transform the effectiveness of law and policies designed to prevent it. With the high quality research it commissions at its heart, the Centre brings together academics, policymakers, businesses, civil society, survivors and the public on a scale not seen before in the UK to collaborate on solving this global challenge. The Centre is a consortium of six academic organisations led by the Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law and is funded by the Art and Humanities Research Council on behalf of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Read more about the Modern Slavery PEC at [www.modernslaverypec.org](http://www.modernslaverypec.org)

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# Acronyms

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COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DGMM	Directorate General of Migration Management of the Turkish Government
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ILO	International Labour Organization
JOD	Jordanian Dinar
LBP	Lebanese Pound
MOI	Ministry of Interior, Jordan
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
SYP	Syrian Pound
TRY	Turkish Lira
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USD	US Dollar
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation





## Executive Summary

## Background

This report is a product of the ***Refugee Labour under Lockdown Project***, a Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre research project, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. The research team, led by Dr Ann-Christin Zuntz at the University of Edinburgh, brings together Edinburgh-based researchers from the One Health FIELD Network, Syrian and Jordanian academics affiliated with the Council for At-Risk Academics and Syrian Academic Expertise-Academic Center for Development and Peace Studies, and Turkish researchers from the not-for-profit cooperative Development Workshop. The report documents how COVID-19 related movement restrictions at regional and local levels, and the economic effects of the pandemic, have changed working conditions for displaced Syrians in agriculture in the Middle East. It draws on remote ethnographic interviews and multimedia ‘*work diaries*’, conducted between November 2020 and February 2021, with 80 Syrian agricultural workers, as well as interviews with 20 agricultural intermediaries and 20 agricultural employers in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and northwest Syria—four countries with huge numbers of displaced Syrians in the agricultural workforce. Each Syrian worker was asked to provide information on all workers in the household, including women and children. With an average family size of 6.1 in this study, we thus collected information about a population of approximately 480 Syrians.

### Interviews

80

agricultural  
workers

20

agricultural  
intermediaries

20

agricultural  
employers

### Research Dates



PRECARIOUS  
LABOUR  
UNDER  
LOCKDOWN





## Key Findings

*For many displaced Syrians in the Middle East, the pandemic has worsened precarious working conditions and tasks in agriculture, making already vulnerable people more vulnerable. Informal work in agriculture remains their only available lifeline, despite the considerable health risks attached to it. The economic pressures of the pandemic, combined with more longstanding structural marginalisation, informal work, ill-health, and lack of education, risk trapping Syrian agricultural workers in an intergenerational cycle of poverty, which will continue beyond the end of the current crisis.*

**Agricultural production continues for displaced Syrians during the pandemic, but workers' livelihoods have become more precarious**

Pandemic-related movement restrictions and disruptions to agricultural supply chains caused 75% of workers to lose their jobs temporarily.



Pandemic-related movement restrictions and disruptions to agricultural supply chains caused 75% of interviewed workers to lose their jobs temporarily, and 13% to be permanently out of work. At the same time, agricultural employers coped with increased production costs through cutting labour-related expenses, further increasing job insecurity for workers in already volatile seasonal labour markets. During the pandemic, 83% of Syrian workers found it more difficult to obtain a job in agriculture, compared to previous years. COVID-19 related economic effects on agriculture also overlap with the sector's seasonal production cycle and intermittent need for mobile workforces; they are reflected in decreased income among 94% of Syrian workers, and reduced working hours per day among 53% of our respondents. Compounded by rampant currency inflation in Lebanon, Syria and, to a lesser degree, Turkey, and increased food prices in the entire region, Syrian workers' purchasing power has declined, and many are now food-insecure. Across study countries, even short-term changes to employment and food prices are particularly damaging to households with little or no financial safety net. In response to decreased income and price hikes in local markets, many Syrian households were forced to employ multiple negative livelihood coping strategies, including cutting costs (81%), selling belongings (21%), and getting a loan (17%). Our data suggest that many displaced Syrians have entered winter 2020/21 with less savings than usual, and thus risk being trapped further in a cycle of debt and precarious labour.

**Displaced Syrians' structural vulnerabilities and working conditions in agriculture increase their risk of catching COVID-19**

Almost 40% of workers said that intermediaries and employers had not introduced adequate health and safety measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission in the workplace.

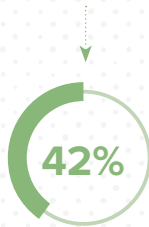


While cases of COVID-19 were rising in each study country in winter 2020/21, only one Syrian worker reported that they had personally fallen ill with COVID-19, and only 6% of workers knew of cases of coronavirus at their workplaces. As many people with SARS-CoV are asymptomatic, it is very likely that the actual number of infected workers in this study was higher. Adherence to proper sanitary measures and physical distancing was almost impossible for the majority of displaced Syrian households: more than half lived in makeshift accommodation, often with shared toilet and bathroom facilities, and 61% of workers reported that they did not have space in their home to self-isolate. Syrian workers also face increased risk of exposure to COVID-19, given their heavy dependence on public transportation to access agricultural work sites: only 50% of workers reported that the maximum number of passengers per vehicle had decreased to allow for social distancing. At agricultural work sites, preventative measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 fall largely on Syrian workers themselves. Almost 40% of workers said that intermediaries and employers had not introduced adequate health and safety measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission in the workplace. Where safety measures had been introduced, social distancing was the most common at 49%, followed by wearing masks at 29%. However, only 31% of respondents shared that they got a new mask every day. Out of 80 workers in our study, only one reported receiving health insurance from his employer, while no workers benefited from paid sick leave. Without such protections, it is likely that Syrian workers could feel obligated to work even if they do become ill, due to the need for a continuous income and their inability to afford medical treatment.

**Displaced Syrian workers' relationships of dependency with agricultural intermediaries and employers have worsened during the pandemic**

Syrian workers' relationships with intermediaries are an important mediating factor for shielding them from, or exposing them to, labour exploitation and ill-health. In our study, 61% Syrians relied on intermediaries to find their most recent job, and 42% of participants reported that they could not find jobs on their own. On the one hand, intermediaries, especially members of workers' own families and communities, can be important allies in guaranteeing fair and timely pay. Closer and more trusting ties with an intermediary can shape Syrian workers' decision to stay home, or keep going to work, when

42% of participants reported that they could not find jobs on their own.



they experience symptoms of COVID-19. On the other hand, pandemic-related economic pressures may have entrenched dangerous forms of dependency. Across study countries, almost 100% of workers have never signed a contract with their intermediary or employer. Most respondents noted that in cases of interpersonal conflict at the workplace or unacceptable working conditions, they could not appeal to anyone for support. 34% of workers stated that employers or intermediaries could withhold their payments in case of disagreement or poor quality of their work. Conversely, 37% of workers in Jordan and 25% of workers in northwest Syria had received an advance payment for their most recent job from their intermediary or employer. There is a considerable risk that during the pandemic, financial dependency on intermediaries and employers may have further entrapped Syrian agricultural workers in a cycle of debt, increasing the pressure on them to accept non-decent working conditions and low wages. For a subset of Syrians who also depend on intermediaries and employers to secure access to housing and basic services, there is an increased risk of homelessness during the pandemic.





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**No clear evidence that Syrian female and child labour in agriculture has increased during the pandemic, but some working women and children have become more vulnerable**

There is a subset of Syrian children that had already been working before the pandemic, but have now further lost access to schooling, and experience what the ILO considers 'worst forms of child labour'. Current disruptions to their education also increase the risk of children dropping out of school more permanently, and that they may become a permanent part of precarious agricultural workforces.

The study did not find proof that the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled more Syrian women to work in agriculture: 47% of Syrian households reported that women had previously been working, a number only marginally higher (48%) during the pandemic. While 83% of workers, and all the 20 employers we interviewed, reported that women's tasks as agricultural workers had remained the same during the pandemic, 51% of workers also pointed out that female workers in agriculture faced specific risks, such as harassment at the workplace and hazardous working conditions. Economic losses and greater job insecurity may have increased the pressure on already working women to accept dangerous and non-decent working conditions. For already working women, and some girls, the pandemic has also exacerbated the 'double burden' of paid labour in agriculture and increased unpaid labour at home. In the future, there is a need to disentangle the effects of the pandemic on girls and boys, and to study more systematically whether the pandemic has particularly affected girls working in agriculture.

Although previous studies found much higher rates of child labour among Syrian workers, under 18-year olds in our research worked in agriculture in only 16% of households, and this number has not increased during the pandemic. While difficulties with measuring child labour might lead to underestimating the actual number of under-18 year olds working, findings from interviews with intermediaries and employers suggest the wide-spread presence of children in agriculture, especially in Lebanon. At the same time, interviews with workers showed that 16% of non-working children of school age in this study were not currently going to school, albeit with great variations across study countries. According to workers, intermediaries, and employers, most working children undertake light tasks in agriculture, but some experience the worst forms of child labour and hazardous work. It seems that there is a subset of Syrian children that had already been working before the pandemic, but have now further lost access to schooling, and experience what the ILO considers 'worst forms of child labour'. Current disruptions to their education also increase the risk of children dropping out of school more permanently, and that they may become a permanent part of precarious agricultural workforces.



## Policy Recommendations

There is an urgent need to include displaced Syrians in broader calls to strengthen global food systems, and create conditions for decent work at the beginning of agricultural production chains. In this report, we formulate policy recommendations specific to the COVID-19 pandemic and other humanitarian emergencies, and which can mitigate the economic impact of crises on Syrian agricultural workers and other vulnerable agricultural workers in the Middle East.

**Prioritising refugee  
(and other migrant)  
agricultural workers  
among vulnerable  
target groups during  
emergencies**



*Local and international humanitarian and development actors, and nation-level and local governmental actors*

In the short-term, policymakers and development agencies should increase social protections for at-risk agricultural workers, including Syrian households, in particular by delivering unconditional cash-based assistance. In preparation for future crises, governments and humanitarian actors should extend social protections to marginalized populations, including statutory sick pay, and establish lines of communication that allow them to reach at-risk populations quickly. This requires comprehensive mapping and situation assessment exercises and building trustful relationships with workers, as well as intermediaries and employers.





Planning and implementing tailored interventions instead of 'one size fits all' approaches



*Local and international humanitarian and development actors, and nation-level and local governmental actors*

Key stakeholders should tailor their interventions to the specific needs of different demographics of agricultural workers during the pandemic. In our study, the following populations turned out to be particularly at risk of labour exploitation and ill-health during the pandemic: seasonal and migratory workers with a high degree of mobility; workers residing temporarily inside agricultural worksites, especially in remote rural areas and in tent settlements; and displaced women and children who were already working in agriculture before the pandemic. Humanitarian actors should develop dedicated protocols and staff training to ensure that the needs of vulnerable people, especially of displaced women and children, are factored into the operational design of emergency interventions.

Developing a systemic approach to addressing pandemic-related pressures on agricultural supply chains in the Middle East, rather than treating refugee labour solely as a humanitarian issue



*Local and international humanitarian and development actors, nation-level and local governmental actors, private sector, unions of agricultural workers and employers, and trade unions*

Governments, humanitarian actors, private sector actors, and worker, employer, and trade unions should work together to 'crisis-proof' entire agricultural production chains and create safe working conditions for all categories of vulnerable agricultural workers. This includes:

- Conducting proactive supply chain mapping and assessment of internal mechanisms;
- Formalizing the role of agricultural intermediaries as a registered profession;
- Creating new interfaces between workers, employers, governments, and humanitarian actors;
- Providing support for agricultural employers in times of crisis; and
- Turning vulnerable and landless workers into agricultural producers.

# 01

## Introduction

- 1.1 The only option for displaced Syrians - Informal work in agriculture during the pandemic
- 1.2 Building on our research in the early days of the pandemic
- 1.3 The backstory of Syrian refugee labour in the Middle East
- 1.4 Rethinking unfree labour
- 1.5 COVID-19 policy responses across the Middle East
- 1.6 Objectives and structure of the report
- 1.7 Methods
- 1.8 Limitations
- 1.9 Participant demographics



## 1.1 The only option for displaced Syrians - Informal work in agriculture during the pandemic

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates a global unemployment rate of 6.5%, with working-hour losses in 2020 four times greater than during the global financial crisis in 2009

The publication of this report in spring 2021 marks two grim milestones: on 15 March 2011, anti-government protests in the streets of Damascus heralded the beginning of the Syrian conflict. Ten years later, 6.6 million Syrians live as refugees, mostly in neighbouring Middle Eastern countries, and another 6.7 million people are internally displaced (UNHCR, 2021). On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic, and its impact on global employment has been staggering: the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates a global unemployment rate of 6.5%, with working-hour losses in 2020 four times greater than during the global financial crisis in 2009 (ILO, 2021). Pandemic-related movement restrictions have hit particularly hard those who have to remain mobile to make a living: this includes seasonal workers in agriculture. While the movements of some privileged groups, including business travellers, have continued relatively unimpeded throughout the pandemic, marginalised people have had to pay the price of self-isolation and quarantine (Benton *et al.*, 2021).

Displaced Syrians in the Middle East have been highlighted as a particularly vulnerable group to the economic effects of the pandemic given their heavy reliance on work in the informal sector. Indeed, numerous humanitarian organisations have documented that many Syrian refugees lost their jobs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Jordan, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey, with devastating impacts on their livelihoods (Danish Refugee Council, 2020; ILO and Fafo, 2020; World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, 2020). However, we should be careful not to treat all Syrian refugees as a homogeneous population; instead, there is a need to better understand how pandemic-related disruptions have affected displaced people in specific locations and economic sectors.

## 1.2 Building on our research in the early days of the pandemic

This report is a product of the ***Refugee Labour under Lockdown Project***, a Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (the Modern Slavery PEC) research project, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which brings together Edinburgh-based, Syrian, and Jordanian researchers from the One Health FIELD Network, with Turkish researchers from the not-for-profit cooperative Development Workshop. The report's goal is to document the impact of the COVID-19

Between April and June 2020, researchers from the One Health FIELD Network found that for Syrian agricultural workers in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan and northwest Syria, the COVID-19 pandemic was not yet a health crisis, but had already caused an economic crisis.

pandemic on displaced Syrians working in agriculture in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and northwest Syria. The extent of COVID-19 related job losses, caused by movement restrictions and public health regulations, is difficult to measure because work in agriculture is mostly informal, and thus does not appear in official employment statistics. In this study, we therefore build on insights from the rapid needs assessments that we conducted during the early months of the pandemic. Between April and June 2020, researchers from the One Health FIELD Network found that for Syrian agricultural workers in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan and northwest Syria, the COVID-19 pandemic was not yet a health crisis, but had already caused an economic crisis.<sup>1</sup> Data from the *From the Field Project* showed that lockdowns had disrupted Syrians' mobility-based livelihood strategies and access to agricultural worksites, while also cutting off access for aid providers. With no financial safety net, Syrian agricultural workers were especially vulnerable to price hikes for food and public transport. As one Syrian refugee poignantly remarked: '*Food is in the markets, but not in Syrians' pockets.*' Moreover, the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 also coincided with the onset of the agricultural season. A study by Development Workshop (2020a), entitled *Hazelnut Won't Remain on the Branch*, demonstrated the pressures on work owners to keep agricultural production going despite widespread movement restrictions. At the same time, Development Workshop (2020c) argued that hypermobile seasonal workers risked becoming a particularly vulnerable group because of their lack of access to basic hygiene and sanitation, as well as crowded living conditions. In the present report, we take further our research from the beginning of the pandemic, exploring more long-term changes to agricultural employment for displaced Syrians.



<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://www.onehealthfieldnetwork.org/from-the-field>

### 1.3 The backstory of Syrian refugee labour in the Middle East

To better understand how Syrian agricultural employment has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have to look at it in the context of more longstanding structural conditions of refugee labour. As Table 1 shows, there is no unified humanitarian response to Syrian displacement in the Middle East. Instead, most Syrians have remained in Middle Eastern host countries that do not give them legal protection as ‘*refugees*’. Across the region, this has led to a proliferation of legal statuses and work permit regulations, often with considerable red tape that makes it difficult for Syrians to formalize their employment (e.g. Lenner and Turner, 2018, on Jordan). What all host countries have in common, though, is that they mostly restrict Syrians to work in low-skilled professions, frequently pushing them to work in the informal economy. Low wages, legal insecurity, and lack of social protections have trapped many Syrian refugees in precarious livelihoods, even after several years in exile (Bellamy *et al.*, 2017). Seasonal employment in agriculture, in particular, keeps Syrian children outside the educational system, perpetuating a cycle of poverty that may last generations (Development Workshop, 2016).

The problem of exploitative refugee labour is often framed as one of insufficient labour market integration in countries with weak economies and ambivalent asylum policies (Betts and Collier, 2017), but this is only half the story. Existing critiques overlook processes of economic globalisation which have compelled agricultural production chains across the Middle East to increasingly depend on cheap, exploitable migrant labour (Gertel and Sippel, 2014). There is now ample evidence that vulnerable Syrian refugees have replaced other highly mobile agricultural workers, for example Egyptian labour migrants in Jordan (Hartnett, 2018; Kattaa, *et al.*, 2018; Tamkeen, 2014) and seasonal migratory workforces in Turkey (Akay Erturk, 2020; Development Workshop, 2016; Pelek, 2018). This ‘*rivalry among the poor*’, as Development Workshop (2016: 8) calls it, is not a side-effect of a largely informal sector, but at the heart of how many agricultural producers operate. Hence, the problem is not Syrian refugees’ economic exclusion, but rather the contentious terms of their inclusion into agricultural labour markets that need seasonal and mobile workforces, and prefer the most vulnerable—and thus cheapest—workers (Kavak, 2016; Phillips, 2013). Instead of understanding refugees as isolated economic actors, we thus focus on their precarious positioning at the beginning of agricultural production chains, and shed light on how pandemic-related economic pressures on agricultural employers have been passed on to Syrian workers.

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	Syrian refugee population	Syrians living outside of official camps	Asylum policy
TURKEY	3.66 million	96%	Syrians in Turkey are under 'temporary protection'. Since Turkey maintains the geographical limitation to the 1951 Geneva Convention, Syrians are not technically considered refugees. In order to receive temporary protection, Syrians must register with the governmental agency in the province (DGMM) they live in, and obtain an identity card.
JORDAN	660,000 <i>(according to UNHCR);</i> 1.3 million <i>(according to the 2015 Jordanian Population and Housing Census)</i>	81%	Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention. Syrian refugees who register with UNHCR are provided with an asylum seeker certificate. The certificate must be renewed annually. Jordanian authorities also require Syrians to register with the Ministry of Interior (Mol) and be issued a biometric residency card (Mol card) to move outside of camps and access public services. Since 2015, Jordan has closed its borders to Syria, prohibiting Syrians from seeking asylum in the country.
LEBANON	1.5 million	100%  <i>The government's 'no camp' policy prevents formal refugee settlements. Syrians therefore live in cities, villages or informal tent settlements.</i>	Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention, but it previously allowed UNHCR to register refugees and issue temporary residence permits. Since 2015, the government has ordered UNHCR to stop registering Syrian refugees and seeking asylum is no longer a valid reason for entering Lebanon. Syrians already in Lebanon must obtain legal residency through sponsorship as an economic migrant or possession of a UNHCR registration certificate.

**Table 1. Syrian refugee population demographics, asylum policies, and access to the labour market in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon** (Jordanian Department of Statistics, 2015; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2016; Turkish Ministry of Labor and Social Security, 2016; ILO, 2018; Janmyr, 2018; Leghtas, 2018; UNHCR, 2018, 2020a, 2020b, n.d. b; Yahya, 2018; Bayram, 2019; European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2019; Yassin and Khodor, 2019; Government of Lebanon and UN, 2020; Osseiran, 2020; Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Interior, Directorate of Migration Management, 2021).

## Right to work requirements

## Restrictions on employment and freedom of movement

Syrian refugees generally need a work permit, which they can apply for 6 months after registering for temporary protection. Syrians under temporary protection working in seasonal agriculture or livestock can be exempt from the work permit requirement but must apply for an exemption. Work permits cost 347 TRY (44 USD).

The Turkish government may impose limitations or quotas on the number of foreigners under temporary protection that may work in livestock and seasonal agriculture and livestock jobs. The government also may limit freedom of movement, requiring those under temporary protection to obtain authorization to travel outside of the province where they are registered.

Syrian refugees need a work permit, which requires them to hold a valid Mol card. Syrian refugees are exempt from work permit fees, but must pay 10 JOD (14 USD) in administrative fees. Work permits for agricultural jobs must be requested through the employer/agricultural cooperative. Work permits for Syrians working in agriculture are flexible and can be transferred between employers.

Foreigners do not have equal access to the Jordanian labour market and most skilled professions are closed to Syrian refugees. Syrian refugees without Mol cards and/or asylum seeker certificates face movement restrictions and may be deported or confined to camps if caught.

Since 2019, the Ministry of Labour has required all foreigners to have work permits, although enforcement mechanisms are not yet fully in place for seasonal workers. Work permits cost 120,000 LBP (80 USD). Syrians must also have sponsorship from a Lebanese employer. Obtaining a work permit grants Syrians legal status as a migrant, thereby precluding them from receiving UNHCR aid.

The government limits Syrian workers to employment in three sectors: construction, agriculture, and environment.



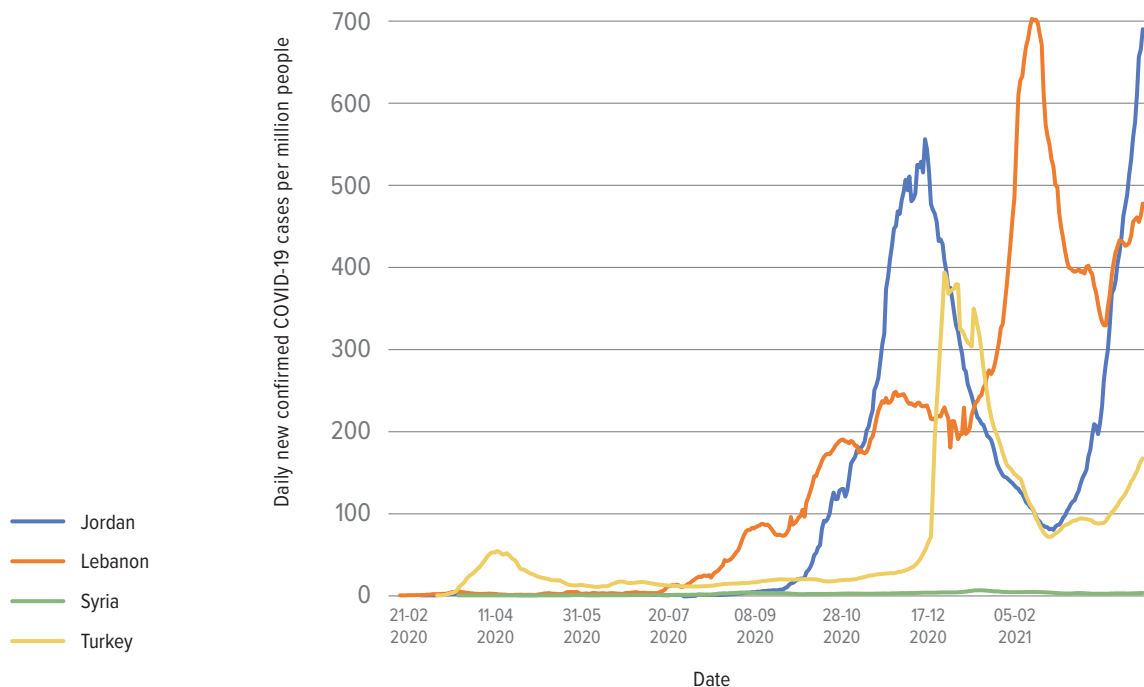
## 1.4 Rethinking unfree labour

In pursuing a systemic approach to the study of Syrian agricultural workers, we aim to develop a more nuanced understanding of how COVID-19 related movement restrictions have affected working conditions and relationships of dependency for displaced Syrians working in agriculture during the pandemic. In recent years, the eradication of forced labour, human trafficking and modern slavery has been high on the agenda of international policymakers, and has also been formalized as one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (target 8.7, cf. UN, n.d.). To be clear, we do not claim that agricultural work for displaced Syrians should be considered '*forced labour*' under the ILO definition, which describes forced labour as '*all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily*' (ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), ILO n.d.). ILO's definition is insufficient in that it emphasizes acts of coercion by individual employers or states, and explicitly excludes more structural forces that may compel a person to accept exploitative work (cf. '*the employer or the State are not accountable for all external constraints or indirect coercion existing in practice: for example, the need to work in order to earn one's living*', ILO, 2002, p. 98). Rather, we follow scholars like Le Baron *et al.* (2018) in adopting a broader understanding of '*unfree labour*' that considers the role of economic necessity, and the lack of other legal employment options, in shaping people's willingness to accept badly paid and hazardous types of work. We ask how greater poverty and job insecurity during the pandemic, together with longstanding structural marginalisation, may have increased the pressure on displaced Syrians to accept exploitative working conditions. Unlike historical forms of forced labour, informal employment in agriculture is often short-term, paid, and accepted by displaced Syrian workers without coercion by employers. But, as Nicola Phillips puts it, '*in contemporary global production, unfreedom is primarily constituted not by coerced entry but by precluded exit*' (2013: 178). Ultimately, in this report, we explore why informal work in agriculture remains many displaced Syrians' only option during the pandemic.



## 1.5 COVID-19 policy responses across the Middle East

The COVID-19 pandemic reached the Middle East at a time when many countries in the region were already grappling with the consequences of protracted conflict, weak or failed political systems, and economic crises. Public health experts and humanitarian organisations were quick to deem displaced Syrian communities particularly vulnerable to a COVID-19 outbreak due to their comparatively limited access to clean water, nutritious food, medical services, and space to practice social distancing (Kassem, 2020; Refugees International, 2020). By mid-March 2020, COVID-19 cases had been confirmed in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Syria (Figure 1), with Turkey seeing one of the fastest growth rates in confirmed cases in the region (Schon, 2020). At the time of this study in winter 2020/21, COVID-19 infection rates had risen dramatically in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, while cases inside Syria appeared to remain low, likely due to limited testing capacity (Figure 1). Indeed, field observations within Syria indicate a far more severe outbreak of COVID-19 than has been officially documented (Turkmani *et al.*, 2020).



**Figure 1. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people by study country between March 1, 2020 and March 15, 2021.** Shown is the rolling seven-day average. Due to limited testing, the number of confirmed cases is lower than the number of actual cases (Data from Dong *et al.*, 2020; JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data, 2021).

All study countries made an initial attempt to curb the spread of the disease through a variety of containment measures, including national and local lockdowns, workplace closures, and restrictions on domestic and international travel, as well as an increase in public health messaging.

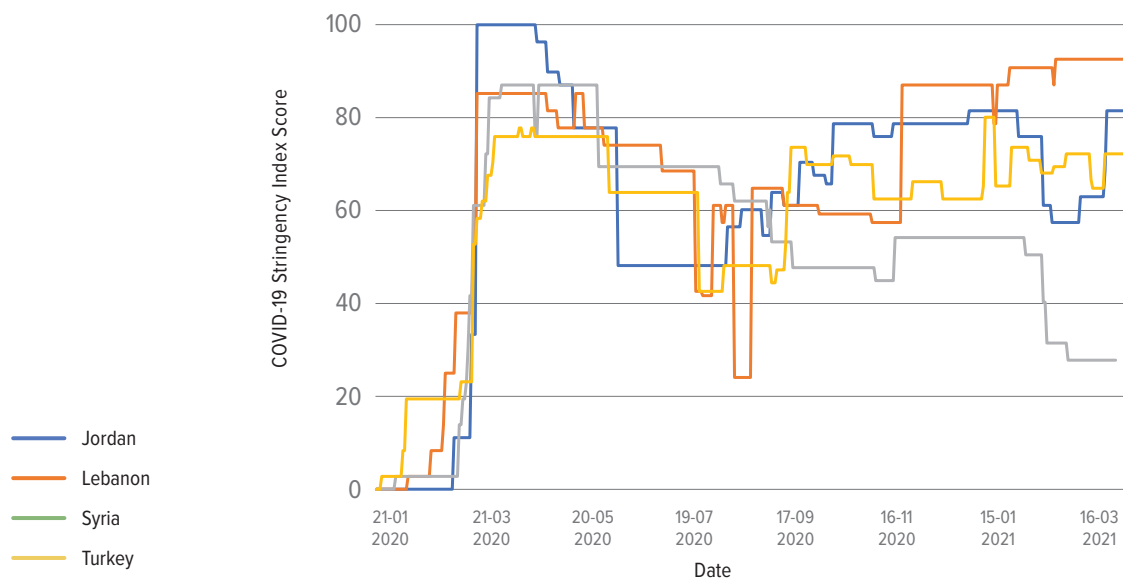
Between the study countries, government capacity to respond to the pandemic has varied. However, as Table 2 illustrates, all study countries made an initial attempt to curb the spread of the disease through a variety of containment measures, including national and local lockdowns, workplace closures, and restrictions on domestic and international travel, as well as an increase in public health messaging. In Jordan, the government launched one of the most aggressive lockdown responses in the world within two weeks of its first confirmed case of COVID-19, declaring a state of emergency, closing schools, shops, and national borders, and declaring a nationwide curfew with punitive enforcement (Hartnett *et al.*, 2020). Turkey and Lebanon also imposed punitive tactics, including stay-at-home orders, but Lebanon's ability to mount an effective response to the pandemic was painfully hampered by the worst financial crisis that the country has seen since its 1975-1990 civil war (Abdo-Katsipis, 2020; Bakir, 2020). In Syria, ongoing conflict has impeded a coordinated nationwide response to the pandemic, resulting in varying regional containment measures imposed by the Syrian government in south/central Syria, by the Syrian Democratic Forces in the northeast, and by various quasi-state actors in the Turkish-held northwest (Marks, 2020). Besides these fragmented regional responses, Syria's ability to contain the COVID-19 pandemic has been limited by severely damaged healthcare infrastructure, restricted access to COVID-19 testing, and a combination of economic sanctions, political impediments, and security concerns which curtail the flow of medical equipment and humanitarian aid into the country (Turkmani *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, COVID-19 response policies in each of the four study countries have oscillated over time, according to fluctuating COVID-19 case rates, as well as changing political will, over the course of the pandemic. Figure 2 illustrates the relative stringency of COVID-19 government response measures across Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Syria during the first year of the pandemic. In general, the countries followed the three phases of COVID-19 response seen worldwide: first, imposing strong restrictions in spring 2020, followed by an easing of restrictions during summer 2020, and then a second wave of renewed restrictions in autumn through winter 2020/21 (Benton *et al.*, 2021).

	Workplace closures	Stay-at-home restrictions	Public transport closures	Restrictions on internal movement	
31 March 2020	Required for some sectors or categories of workers	Required to not leave the house with exceptions for daily exercise, grocery shopping, and 'essential' trips	Recommended closing (or reduced volume)	Restricted movement	Turkey
	Required for all but key workers	Required to not leave the house with exceptions for daily exercise, grocery shopping, and 'essential' trips	Required closing (or prohibited most people from using it)	Restricted movement	Jordan
	Required for all but key workers	Required to not leave the house with exceptions for daily exercise, grocery shopping, and 'essential' trips	Recommended closing (or reduced volume)	Recommended movement restriction	Lebanon
	Required for some sectors or categories of workers	Required to not leave the house with exceptions for daily exercise, grocery shopping, and 'essential' trips	Required closing (or prohibited most people from using it)	Restricted movement	Syria
15 August 2020	Required for some sectors or categories of workers	Required to not leave the house with exceptions for daily exercise, grocery shopping, and 'essential' trips	No measures	No measures	Turkey
	No measures	Recommended	No measures	No measures	Jordan
	No measures	No measures	No measures	No measures	Lebanon
	Required for some sectors or categories of workers	No measures	No measures	Restricted movement	Syria
1 December 2020	Required for some sectors or categories of workers	Recommended	Recommended closing (or reduced volume)	Recommended movement restrictions	Turkey
	Required for some sectors or categories of workers	Required to not leave the house with exceptions for daily exercise, grocery shopping, and 'essential' trips	Recommended closing (or reduced volume)	Restricted movement	Jordan
	Required for some sectors or categories of workers	Required to not leave the house with exceptions for daily exercise, grocery shopping, and 'essential' trips	Required closing (or prohibit most people from using it)	Restricted movement	Lebanon
	Required for some sectors or categories of workers	Recommended	Recommended closing (or reduced volume)	Recommended movement restrictions	Syria

■ Turkey
 ■ Jordan
 ■ Lebanon
 ■ Syria

**Table 2. Key COVID-19 policy response measures by study country during three time points during the pandemic, created with data from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker. This table does not reflect sub-national or regional differences in policies (Data from Hale *et al.*, 2021).**



**Figure 2. COVID-19 Stringency Index scores per study country over time, based on data from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker.** The COVID-19 Stringency Index is a composite measure based on nine government response indicators, such as travel bans and workplace closures, scored on a scale of 0 to 100 (100=strictest). The index shows response levels of the strictest sub-region of a country, in cases where policies vary at the sub-national level. Note: the Index is only a record of the number and degree of a country's policies, and should not be interpreted as a judgement on the effectiveness or appropriateness of a country's COVID-19 response (Data from Hale *et al.*, 2021).

## 1.6 Objectives and structure of the report

This study explores how COVID-19 related movement restrictions at regional and local levels, and the economic effects of the pandemic, have changed working conditions for displaced Syrians in agriculture in the Middle East. Drawing on remote ethnographic interviews and multimedia '*work diaries*' with Syrian agricultural workers, as well as interviews with agricultural intermediaries and employers in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and northwest Syria between November 2020 and February 2021, the study answers the following questions:

- How have COVID-19 related movement restrictions and public health regulations reshaped working conditions and informal recruitment of displaced Syrians working in agriculture?
- How have relationships of dependency between Syrian agricultural workers, agricultural intermediaries, and employers changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How have pandemic-related changes in employment affected displaced Syrians' livelihood strategies? How are Syrian agricultural workers coping with the loss of jobs and greater job insecurity?

- What are the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Syrian women and children working in agriculture? How has women's and children's workload at home and in agricultural worksites changed?
- How can short-term humanitarian and more long-term policy solutions at local, national and international levels mitigate the effects of COVID-19 measures on displaced people's vulnerability to unfree and exploitative labour in agriculture in the Middle East?

This report is organised as follows: the remaining parts of Section 1 introduce the remote ethnographic methods of the study and the collaborative approach to partnerships that underpins this research, and provide information on the sociodemographic profile of the research participants. Section 2 is organised around the four key findings of this study:

- Agricultural production continues for displaced Syrians during the pandemic, but workers' livelihoods have become more precarious;
- Displaced Syrians' structural vulnerabilities and working conditions in agriculture increase their risk of catching COVID-19;
- Displaced Syrian workers' relationships of dependency with agricultural intermediaries and employers have worsened during the pandemic;
- No clear evidence that Syrian female and child labour in agriculture has increased during the pandemic, but some working women and children have become more vulnerable.

Section 3 summarizes the main finding from the *Refugee Labour under Lockdown Project*: for many displaced Syrians in the Middle East, the pandemic has worsened precarious working conditions and tasks in agriculture, making already vulnerable people even more vulnerable. Section 4 presents policy recommendations for governments, NGOs, humanitarian aid providers, and international donors that can factor the rights and needs of refugee and migrant agricultural workers into the COVID-19 emergency response, and ensure decent labour conditions for vulnerable workers at the beginning of agricultural production chains.

## 1.7 Methods

Data for this study was collected as part of the *Refugee Labour under Lockdown Project*, led by Dr Ann-Christin Zuntz at the University of Edinburgh. The study was conducted by members of the One Health FIELD Network, a multidisciplinary team of agricultural and veterinary scientists, social anthropologists, clinical psychologists, and economists based at the University of Edinburgh. Data collection was carried out in close collaboration with Syrian and Jordanian academics affiliated with the Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara), a British non-profit organisation that supports displaced scholars, and Syrian Academic Expertise-Academic Center for Development and Peace Studies (ACDP), a group of independent Syrian academics and experts in agricultural science, food security and sustainable development. Development Workshop, a Turkish not-for-profit cooperative established to support sustainable development in Turkey, contributed their longstanding policy and research expertise with migratory agricultural workers in Turkey.

This study relies on remote semi-structured interviews and ethnography conducted between December 2020 and February 2021. We interviewed heads of 80 Syrian households employed in agricultural production in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and northwestern Syria. Each Syrian interviewee was asked to provide information on all workers in the household, including women and children. With an average family size of 6.1 in this study, we thus collected information about a population of approximately 480 Syrians. The study team also held interviews with 20 agricultural employers and 20 agricultural intermediaries, i.e. labour contractors that facilitate access to employment for many Syrian workers in the Middle East. In addition, we asked Syrian workers to document their working and living conditions during the pandemic through ethnographic '*work diaries*', consisting of photos and videos. Given COVID-19 movement restrictions and some workers' limited literacy in formal Arabic, interviews were conducted verbally in participants' native Arabic dialect, and in Turkish for some intermediaries and employers. All communications took place on WhatsApp, a secure app with end-to-end encryption that is used widely by Syrians throughout the diaspora. Prior to the interviews, all participants received an information sheet, consent form, and an explanatory audio recording in Arabic.

All interview tools, participant information sheets and consent forms are available in English, Arabic, and Turkish on the One Health FIELD Network website:

<https://www.onehealthfieldnetwork.org/refugee-labour-under-lockdown>



The main selection criterion was for participants to have worked in agriculture in the Middle East before and during the COVID-19



pandemic. Arabic-speaking participants were interviewed by a female Syrian academic and a male Jordanian academic, with a Turkish researcher from Development Workshop conducting the interviews with Turkish-speaking agricultural intermediaries and employers in Turkey. Study subjects were recruited through the researchers' professional networks with NGOs in the Middle East, including Development Workshop, the Academic Centre for Development and Peace Studies, Syrian Academic Expertise, Rahma International Society, and the Jordanian Agricultural Engineers Association, as well as through snowball sampling based on recommendations from participants themselves. Recognizing the specific challenges for female agricultural workers, our goal was to include as many female participants as possible. Unfortunately, we were unable to reach an equal gender split: one third of the Syrian workers interviewed for this study are women, although females make up around half of any refugee or internally displaced population (UNHCR, n.d. d). The gender distribution in this study is skewed as we deliberately asked to speak to heads of households, who in a sociocultural context with traditional gender norms are typically considered to be men, even though many Syrian women in this study contribute to the household income. All Syrian workers were paid the equivalent of £10 (13.70 USD) in their local currency for an interview, and an additional £10 for contributing an ethnographic work diary. We chose to compensate agricultural workers for the use of internet data, but also in recognition of their dire economic situation at the time of the study. We paid participants via bank transfer or phone credit.

Research with refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) involves specific ethical challenges, given their exposure to traumatic contextual factors of war, displacement, and poverty (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2007). Displaced Syrians working in agriculture are particularly vulnerable, both as residents in Middle Eastern host countries with limited legal protections for refugees, and as workers in an informal agricultural economy lacking regulation and social protections. Ethics approval for this study was received from the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh. All participants were over the age of 18. Participation was voluntary, and informed verbal consent was obtained due to illiteracy and/or concerns for protecting participants' identities. Participants were given the option to withdraw participation or to decline to answer

particular questions. All data were processed and stored in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) along with the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA), and the University of Edinburgh's data protection guidance and regulations.<sup>2</sup> All names in this report have been changed. Interviews were designed to be sensitive to Syrian cultural norms. The interviewers were either themselves Syrian refugees or familiar with the circumstances of participants, and exercised care and diligence when conducting interviews, refraining from pursuing certain themes if participants expressed distress. All female Syrian participants were interviewed by a female Syrian academic. When necessary, interviewers provided participants with contact details of NGOs that could provide material and/or psychological support in the respondents' places of residence.

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## 1.8 Limitations

This study has some important limitations. Due to COVID-19 related movement restrictions and social distancing rules, both at global and national scales, the researchers in our team were dispersed across different countries, and could only collect data with the help of digital tools, rather than through face-to-face interactions. As a result, this study relies on our participants' self-reported understanding of the effects of the pandemic on their jobs and livelihoods. Due to the small sample size, convenience sampling method, as well as respondents' diverse living and working conditions, our findings are not representative of all Syrian refugees working in agriculture in the Middle East, nor is it possible to statistically compare results between study countries. Furthermore, without baseline data, it is difficult to quantify the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic precarity and exploitative working conditions for this particular demographic. Finally, some of the questions in this study were not answered by all respondents. In very few cases, this was caused by interviewers skipping questions; mostly, it is the result of the skip logic built into our interview tools for workers, intermediaries and employers: some follow-up questions were only posed to respondents to whom they were directly relevant, to keep remote interactions as

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<sup>2</sup> [www.recordsmanagement.ed.ac.uk/InfoStaff/DPstaff/DataProtectionGuidance.htm](http://www.recordsmanagement.ed.ac.uk/InfoStaff/DPstaff/DataProtectionGuidance.htm)

short as possible.<sup>3</sup> Because of the relatively high number of non-responses to some questions, we provide, in brackets for each statistic, the number of respondents who gave this specific answer, and the total number of respondents who answered the question. Please note that the total of respondents in this study is 80 for workers, and 20 for intermediaries and employers, respectively. For example, ‘42% (8/19) of intermediaries confirmed that the actual recruitment process had stayed the same’ means that 19 (out of 20) intermediaries in this study answered this question, and 8 out of these 19 respondents replied that the recruitment process had stayed the same. Notwithstanding these limitations, our findings provide a rich case study of the economic effects of the pandemic on displaced Syrian agricultural workers in the Middle East.

## 1.9 Participant demographics

### Syrian workers

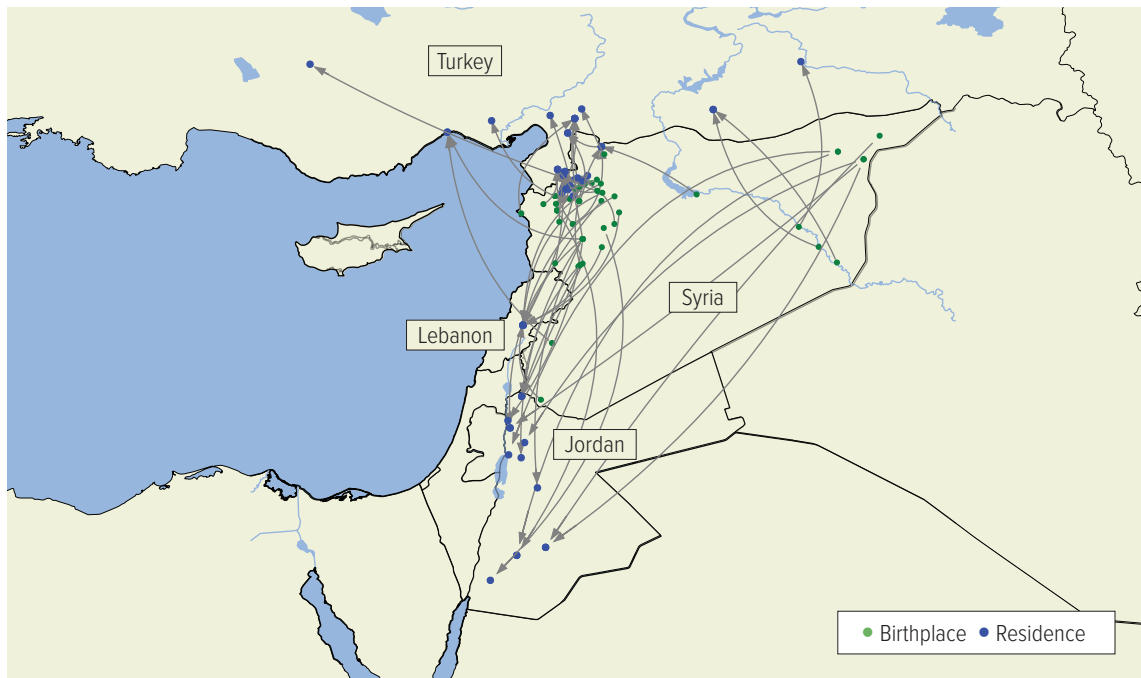
For this study, we interviewed a total of 80 Syrian agricultural workers, with 20 participants in each study country: northwest Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. 65% of our respondents (52/80) were male and 35% (28/80) were female; their age varied from 21 to 57, and most were in their mid-thirties. Back in Syria, 31% (25/80) had completed mandatory primary education (years 1-6), 23% (18/80) had attended lower secondary education (until year 9) and 20% (16/80) had completed higher secondary education (until year 12). Only 10% (8/80) of our respondents held university diplomas. The average household size was 6.1 people, and 93% of households (74/80) had children under 18, with an average of 3.6 children per family.

All of the Syrian workers we interviewed originally came from rural parts of Syria. Map 1 retraces participants’ movements from their birthplaces in Syria to their current sites of refuge within northwestern Syria and neighbouring host countries. Refugees in our study have largely settled close to the Syrian border

<sup>3</sup> For example, only workers who answered affirmatively the question, ‘*Before the pandemic, did members of your household under the age of 18 work in agriculture?*’, were then asked the following three questions: ‘*at which age did under 18-year olds in your household usually start working?*’, ‘*which kind of agricultural activities did under 18-year olds usually engage in?*’, and ‘*how much did under 18-year olds in your household usually earn?*’

in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, reflecting Van Hear's (2014) argument that refugees with few material assets and little social capital may be unable to flee far from their countries of origin. This is likely true for our participants, 63% of whom (49/78) were either small-scale farmers, agricultural day labourers, or in some other capacity involved in agricultural production in Syria before 2011. However, our study also includes a small number of displaced people who until recently mostly worked in other sectors such as hospitality, construction and manufacturing, but lost their jobs at the beginning of the pandemic, and then began working in agriculture full-time.

Outside Syria, workers' legal status and access to humanitarian assistance varied. In Lebanon and Jordan, 100% (40/40) of the Syrian workers we interviewed were registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), compared to only 32% (6/20) in Turkey. This is unsurprising, however, as the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) of the Turkish Government, rather than UNHCR, is responsible for registering individuals under temporary protection in Turkey

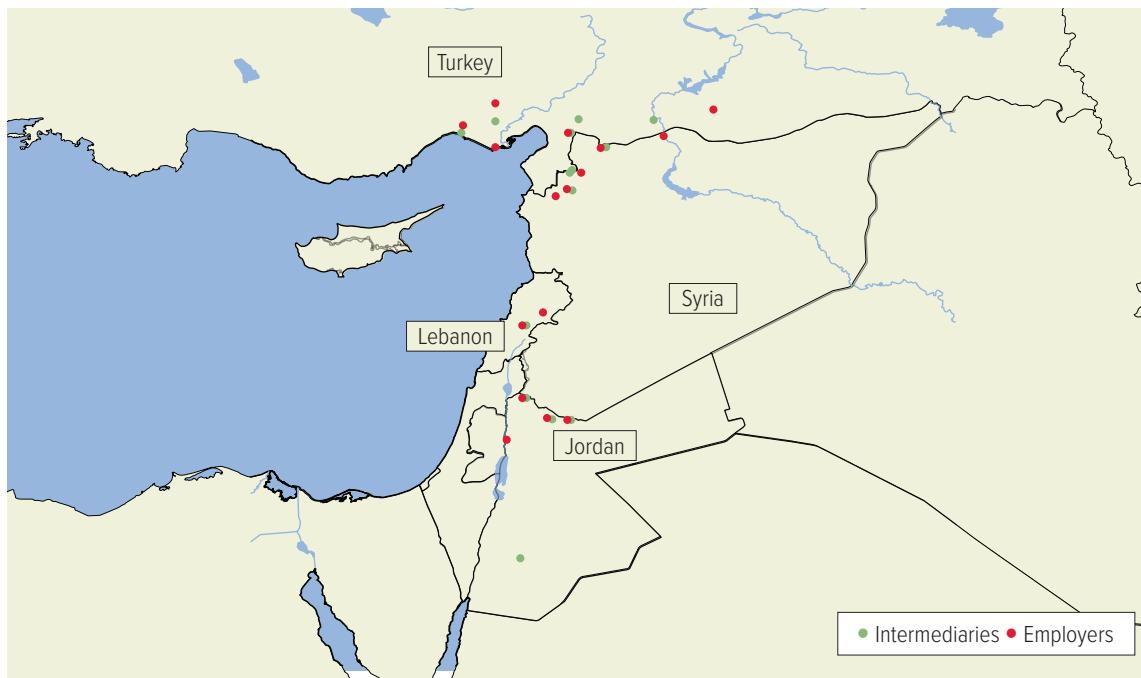


**Map 1.** Syrian workers' displacement trajectories since 2011.

(UNHCR, n.d. c). Similarly, 100% of Syrian respondents in Turkey were registered with the local authorities. Overall, 42% (25/59) of Syrian workers outside of Syria reported having a valid permit to work in agriculture, with 65% (13/20) in Jordan, 50% (10/20) in Lebanon, and 11% (2/19) in Turkey. The diversity of legal situations reflects country-specific refugee-reception systems, and different and complex experiences of lack of documentation. In Turkey, for instance, Syrians under temporary protection are able to apply for an exemption document in order to work in agriculture, which is different from the work permit for waged employment (UNHCR, n.d. a). In Lebanon, work permits for foreigners only became a legal requirement in 2019, and enforcement mechanisms are still not fully in place for seasonal agricultural workers (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2020). In this study, we did not differentiate between different types of work permits that Syrian refugees may be eligible for in the different study countries. Moreover, the relatively high prevalence of work permits reported by respondents should be taken with scrutiny: refugees' access to work permits was not always confirmed by the intermediaries and employers that we talked to, and participants may have feared legal ramifications for admitting to work without a permit. According to the 20 intermediaries we interviewed, 60% of the refugees they employed in Turkey, and 100% of their refugee workers in Lebanon, did not have work permits, whereas all intermediaries in Jordan reported that they only worked with Syrians with official permits. However, according to the World Bank, only one third of Syrian refugees in Jordan hold valid work permits (Ait Ali Slimane *et al.*, 2020). Overall, there seems to be a high level of confusion among Syrian refugees over whether work permits are needed to work in the agricultural sector. Moreover, navigating the legal system around work permits may be more difficult for refugees with little formal education and who are used to working in agriculture informally.

## Agricultural intermediaries and employers

To develop a better understanding of how the pandemic has affected Syrian workers' roles in agricultural supply chains, we also interviewed 5 agricultural intermediaries and 5 agricultural employers in each study country (Map 2). All 20 agricultural intermediaries in this study were male, with an average age of 44 years. In northwest Syria and in Jordan, all intermediaries were Syrians. In the Jordanian case, this reflects the fact that the use of labour contracting seems to be restricted to the Syrian workforce, and was not common before the mass arrival of Syrian refugees since 2011 (Kattaa *et al.*, 2018). In Lebanon and in Turkey, we interviewed 3 Syrian intermediaries and 2 intermediaries with the nationality of the host countries. Out of 15 agricultural intermediaries working in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan, 11 were themselves refugees. With regard to career trajectories, intermediaries broadly fall into two groups: men who took on this profession before the onset of the Syrian conflict, some as early as in the 1990s, and often '*inherited*' it from their fathers; and others who were displaced, and then realized that



**Map 2.** Current locations of agricultural intermediaries and employers interviewed for this study.

there was a professional opportunity for them to bring together refugee workers and employers in host countries. While 8 of the intermediaries had themselves been agricultural workers in the past, 2 had been farm owners, and another 2 had worked as taxi drivers, often across borders, and thus had intimate knowledge of transport routes in the Middle East. At the time of our study, 4 intermediaries were also agricultural workers, and often toiled in the fields alongside the displaced Syrians that they had recruited. Except for two Turkish intermediaries in Turkey who employed both domestic Turkish workers and Syrian refugees, all intermediaries in this study worked exclusively with Syrian workers. In northwest Syria, Syrian intermediaries hired both locals and internally displaced people. In one case inside Syria, an intermediary operated in tandem with his wife, who was responsible for a team of female workers.

For this study, we also interviewed 19 male and 1 female agricultural employers, with five respondents per study country, and an average age of 46.1 years. (The one female employer was Syrian and lived in northwest Syria.) Out of 15 employers operating in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan, 6 were Syrians. While existing literature focuses on Syrian entrepreneurs' contribution to manufacturing, textile and hospitality sectors in neighbouring countries (e.g. Akçal and Görmüş, 2021), our findings suggest that agriculture may also attract investments from the Syrian diaspora, and could be particularly attractive for Syrian businesspeople with limited starting capital, and previous experience in farming. While most employers had a professional background in agriculture, their socioeconomic positions were diverse: 6 out of 20 employers had themselves been agricultural workers in the past, while 5 were former or current land owners, and 4 had originally trained as agricultural engineers or veterinary scientists. The employers we spoke to owned a range of agricultural businesses, including field crops, greenhouses, orchards, plant nurseries, and livestock. The size and profitability of these businesses varied dramatically, ranging from a 150 hectare orchard, livestock, and greenhouse operation in Jordan earning more than 140,000 USD/year, to a one hectare vegetable field in northern Syria that made a marginal income. Only employers in Lebanon relied on a Syrian refugee workforce exclusively—in all other study countries, employers hired displaced Syrians and locals, and in Turkey and Jordan employers also hired domestic migratory workers.

# 02

## Findings and Discussion

### 2.1

Agricultural production continues for displaced Syrians during the pandemic, but workers' livelihoods have become more precarious

### 2.2

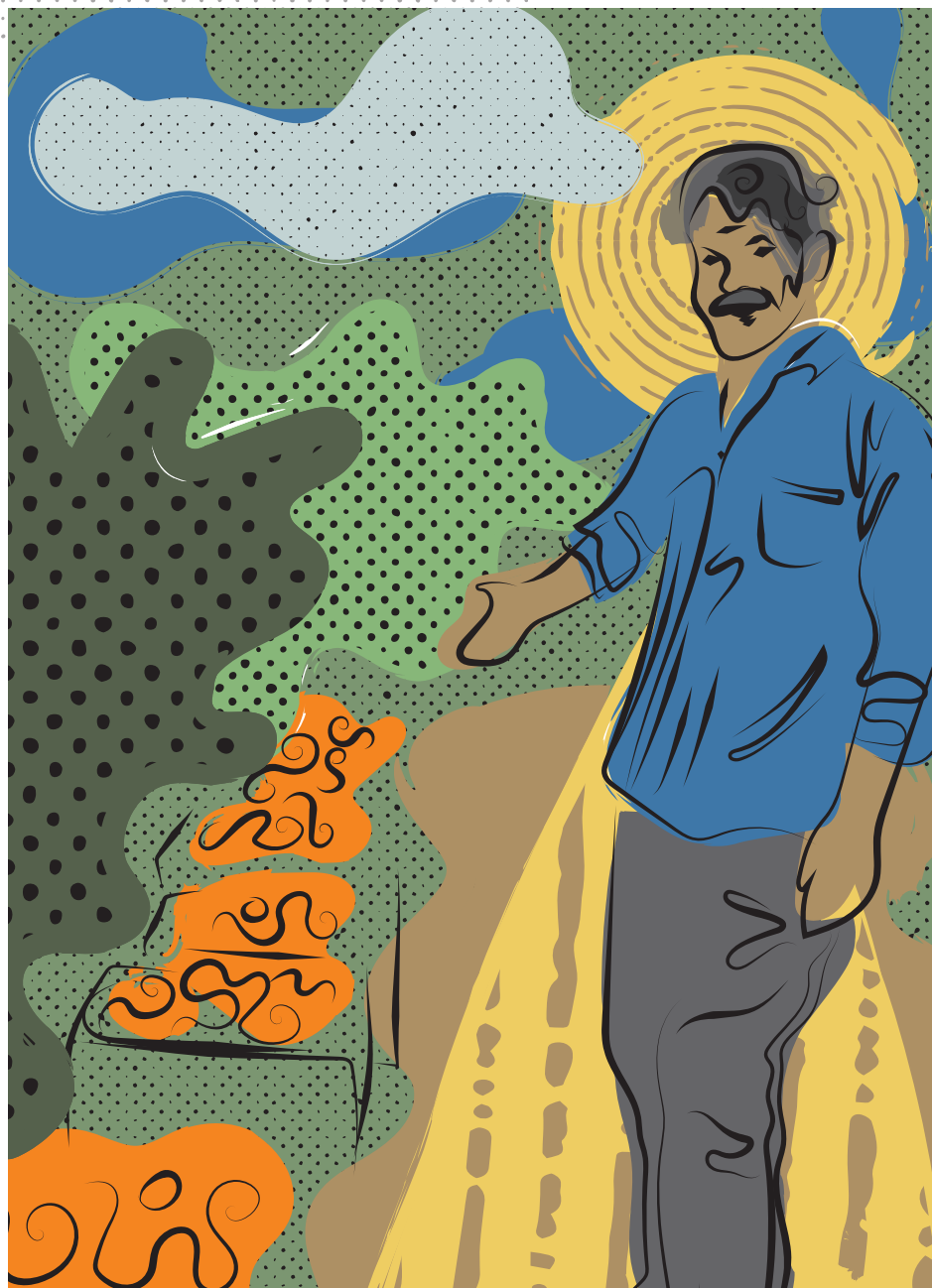
Displaced Syrians' structural vulnerabilities and working conditions in agriculture increase their risk of catching COVID-19

### 2.3

Displaced Syrian workers' relationships of dependency with agricultural intermediaries and employers have worsened during the pandemic

### 2.4

No clear evidence that Syrian female and child labour in agriculture has increased during the pandemic, but some working women and children have become more vulnerable



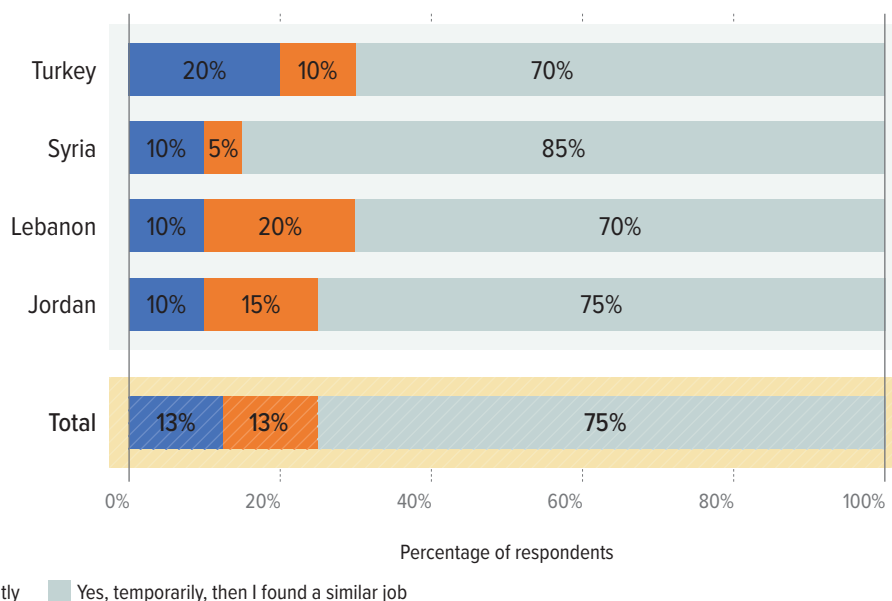


## 2.1 Agricultural production continues for displaced Syrians during the pandemic, but workers' livelihoods have become more precarious

### Movement restrictions and temporary job loss

Our study indicates that many displaced Syrians working in the informal agricultural economy lost their jobs during the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, a moment that coincided with the beginning of the main agricultural season in the Middle East. However, unemployment was only temporary for most Syrian workers: 75% (60/80) of respondents reported losing their jobs to then find another similar job thereafter, but only 13% (10/80) were permanently out of work at the time of this study (Figure 3).

Loss of agricultural employment in the early months of the pandemic was driven by mass lockdowns and movement restrictions in all four study countries, as well as restrictions on the number of passengers on public transportation, which prevented Syrians from going to work in their local areas and making seasonal travel between provinces. In Turkey, for example, vehicles were only allowed to carry half the maximum number of passengers stated in their license. This means that transportation costs doubled or tripled, as agricultural intermediaries had to organise additional buses to transport groups of workers to the fields. By way of illustration, buses now only fit 14-16 passengers,



**Figure 3.** Syrian workers' responses to 'Have you lost your agricultural job because of the pandemic?'; by study country (total n=80; breakdown by country: Jordan=20, Syria=20, Turkey=20, Lebanon=20). Note: Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

when before the pandemic they had transported 20-25 people. During traffic controls, drivers and passengers of overcrowded vehicles incurred high fines (Development Workshop, 2020a). An intermediary in our study reported fines between 1,000 and 3,000 TRY (approx. 89-267 USD) for non-compliance—in other words, between 20 and 60 times the daily wage of an agricultural worker.

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on seasonal mobility in agriculture varied within our study sample. In fact, 23% (18/79) of the Syrian workers we interviewed moved less for work in 2020 compared to 2019, particularly in Jordan, where movement restrictions to contain the pandemic were especially harsh. In a similar vein, all five of the intermediaries we interviewed in Jordan could only work with locally based Syrian workers, whereas intermediaries in other countries were able to travel with their workers within, and sometimes across, regions. For many refugee workers dependent on annual migration between seasonal agricultural work sites, this resulted in decreased income. For example, a 35-year old Syrian man with a family of nine used to move at least four times a year as part of the seasonal agricultural migration circuit in Jordan: in a typical year, they would alternate every 2-3 months between the harvest in Ma'an, Aqaba, and the northern and southern Jordan Valley, and live in informal tent settlements on their employers' land. When we interviewed the father in December 2020, he had been without work for five months due to the COVID-19 lockdown. Without a source of income, he had been forced to take out loans, and his debts had accumulated to 1,095 JOD (1,544 USD). While the majority of our sample (67%, 53/79) reported moving the same number of times during the pandemic as before the pandemic, 10% of Syrian households (8/79) reported relocating more frequently for work during the pandemic, often due to difficulty finding employment. In Zardana, in northwestern Syria, one male participant reported moving his family more than 20 times since the pandemic began. Movement restrictions have since decreased within Syria and neighbouring host countries, with 63% (40/63) of respondents saying that they could move freely in their area as of December 2020-February 2021. Even where movement restrictions remain, most Syrian workers confirmed that they were able to access work sites. Out of 23 respondents who reported ongoing lockdowns and travel bans at the time of the study, 17 could still go to fields and greenhouses.

## Box 1

### Employers' perspective - Coping with pandemic losses through cutting labour costs

One Turkish employer in Turkey summed up his predicament:

**'We couldn't go to the market, we couldn't sell, the product remained on the field. We couldn't find a trader, he didn't come, he didn't buy at the price we asked because he cannot sell at that price. But if we don't get that price, we won't be able to pay workers' wages.'**

Despite the easing of local lockdowns, employers have been forced to decrease the number of their staff in order to cope with pandemic-related disruptions to agricultural businesses. In our study, 35% (7/20) of employers had suffered 'medium losses', and 40% (8/20) complained about 'high losses' during the pandemic. Half of the agricultural employers we interviewed stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had reduced their access to markets for agricultural products. Meanwhile, 25% (5/20) of employers reported that the pandemic had disrupted supply chains for agricultural inputs, and 55% (11/20) noted that inputs like seeds, medication, fuel, fertilizer, and pesticides had become more expensive.

While 40% (8/20) of employers lamented worker shortages, 50% (10/20) also found that labour costs had increased in their area, especially in Syria and Lebanon. In addition, rampant currency inflation in Lebanon, Turkey, and Syria had a negative effect on the profitability of agricultural enterprises—in all three countries, all employers we interviewed reported that exchange rate fluctuations during the pandemic had affected their businesses. As 3 out of 5 employers in Jordan produce for regional markets in the Middle East, they were also more likely to be affected by pandemic-related border closures and disruptions to international supply chains. One Turkish employer in Turkey summed up his predicament: *'We couldn't go to the market, we couldn't sell, the product remained on the field. We couldn't find a trader, he didn't come, he didn't buy at the price we asked because he cannot sell at that price. But if we don't get that price, we won't be able to pay workers' wages.'*

Consequently, 80% of employers (16 out of 20) reported that the pandemic had increased the costs of agricultural production, with 60% of employers (12 out of 20) correspondingly forced to reduce their agricultural production. 6 out of 16 employers whose costs of production had increased coped by reducing the number of workers. A 49-year old Syrian who ran an agricultural business in Qobb Elyas, Lebanon, explained: *'I reduced the surface [of my business] because I was afraid that I might not be able to sell my products, and I switched to wheat because this does not require great numbers of workers [compared to vegetables, which require more manpower].'* 46% (6/13) of employers reduced the number of staff—in other words, workers were made to pay for employers' losses. And this situation is compounded by governments' lack of attention to the agricultural sector during the pandemic: only 2 out of 20 employers in this study had received any form of governmental support over the last year. When asked to prioritize areas of intervention, most asked their governments to regulate prices for agricultural inputs and fuel (which is needed to operate pumps and other machinery), and to reconnect them to international markets.

The economic knock-on effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have hit displaced Syrian agricultural workers hard, making a volatile labour market characterized by seasonal, informal employment even more volatile.

The economic knock-on effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have hit displaced Syrian agricultural workers hard, making a volatile labour market characterized by seasonal, informal employment even more volatile. Although most Syrian workers have since returned to work, finding new work has not been easy and the conditions of their employment are more precarious than ever. While 83% of Syrian workers (66/80) found it *'more difficult'* to obtain a job in agriculture in autumn 2020, compared to before the pandemic, this was not always pandemic-related. On the one hand, employment opportunities have dwindled due to a surplus of labour in some areas, where workers who had lost their jobs in other sectors turned to agriculture, and where some employers had reduced their workforces and scaled down production. Other factors that contributed to greater job insecurity in winter 2020 included workers' difficulties accessing fields and orchards due to local lockdowns, curfews, and restrictions on public transportation, and a fear of getting infected with COVID-19. On the other hand, many of our respondents also attributed their difficulties to the annual downturn of agriculture in winter. While our study does not find that refugees have become a larger share of the agricultural workforce during the pandemic, there is anecdotal evidence that in some cases, Syrian workers have benefited from additional job opportunities, for example when replacing other migrant workers. An employer in Jordan explained that due to border closures, Egyptian labour migrants could not enter the country, so he had to hire more Syrian refugees instead. Hence, we should be careful not to attribute all forms of unemployment to the pandemic alone. Rather, our study highlights that COVID-19 related short- and long-term economic effects on agriculture overlap with the sector's seasonal production cycle and periodic need for huge workforces.

It is crucial to note that pandemic-related movement restrictions and consequent reductions in agricultural production have not uniformly affected the labour supply of Syrian agricultural workers across the Middle East. In areas with huge refugee or IDP populations, such as eastern Lebanon, the pandemic created a surplus of labour, as individuals who lost employment in other sectors flocked to agriculture. In other areas, however, employers faced a shortage of labour, and 55% (11/20) of the intermediaries we interviewed found it *'more difficult'* to recruit workers during the pandemic. From the intermediaries' perspective, changes to worker availability were often location- and time-specific: inside Syria, they struggled to recruit workers who were too afraid to come to work in the early





days of the pandemic. In Lebanon, one intermediary reported that his colleagues were at times ‘*competing*’ over Syrian workers, as some refugees had returned to their home country. These labour shortages were compounded by many workers’ fear to mingle with others at work, especially in the pandemic’s early months. A female employer in Idlib, Syria explained:

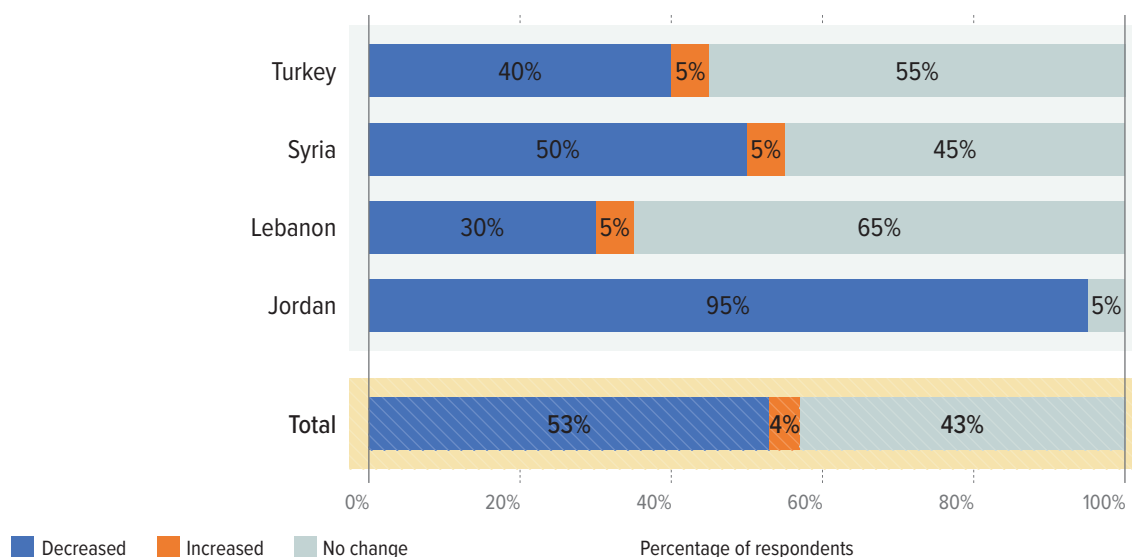
‘At the beginning of the pandemic, we could not find workers because they were afraid, now workers don’t care about the pandemic anymore.’

In Jordan, by contrast, the initial stop to agricultural labour, and far-reaching movement restrictions, meant that some intermediaries were faced with too many workers.

### Decreased income and working hours

The extra volatility in agricultural labour markets is reflected in decreased income among 94% of Syrian workers (75/80), and reduced working hours per day among 53% of our respondents (42/79).

The extra volatility in agricultural labour markets is reflected in decreased income among 94% of Syrian workers (75/80), and reduced working hours per day among 53% of our respondents (42/79). In Jordan, which experienced a set of particularly stringent government lockdown policies, almost 95% of Syrian respondents (18/19) saw their working hours decrease (Figure 4). In Turkey, some of our Syrian respondents lived in official



**Figure 4.** Syrian workers’ responses to ‘How have your working hours changed during the pandemic?’, by study country (total n=79; breakdown by country: Jordan=19, Syria=20, Turkey=20, Lebanon=20).

On average, most Syrian workers in this study perceived that they were working less than full-time hours during the winter months of the pandemic, with highly unpredictable work schedules that made providing for one's family a persistent challenge.



**7 hours a day  
17 days per month**

On average, Syrian workers reported working a median of 7 hours a day (range 2.5 to 12.5 hours per day) and 17 days per month (range 0 to 30 days per month) during the pandemic.

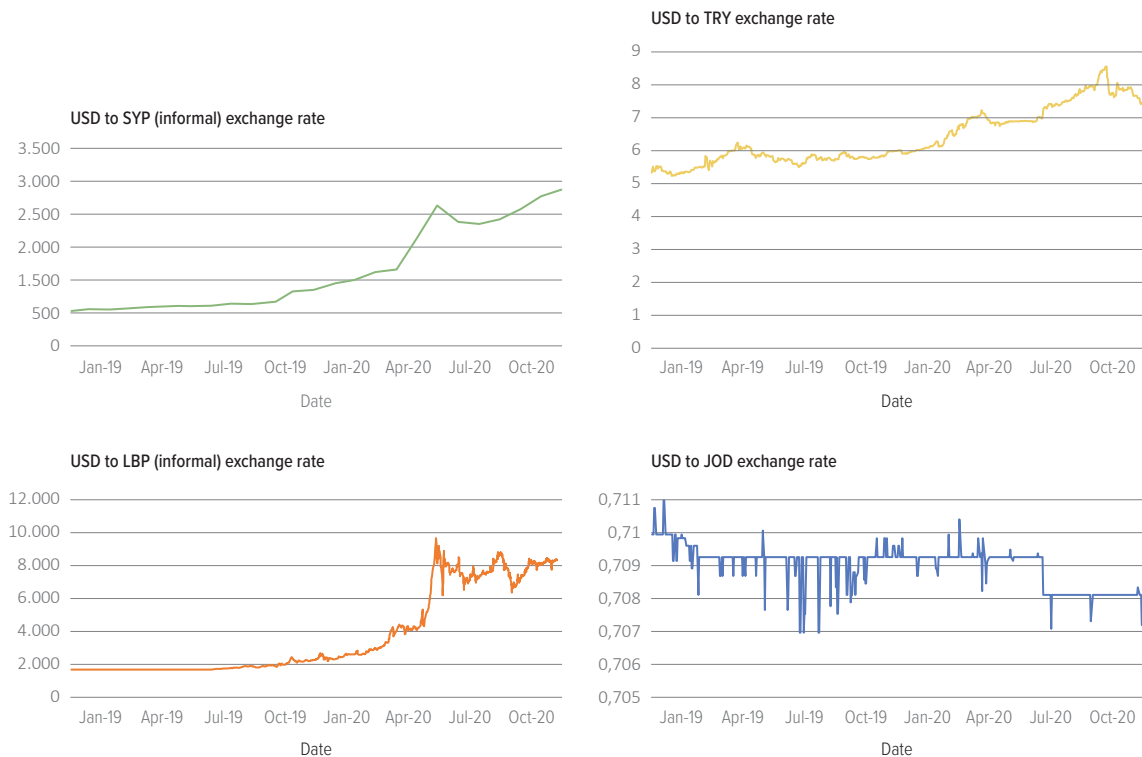
camps and reported special movement restrictions and weekend curfews (as part of nationwide curfews since December 2020), which prevented them from leaving the camps for work (cf. Bahar Özvarış *et al.*, 2020). In other areas, working hours were not reduced, but shifted. In Lebanon, a Lebanese intermediary elaborated that *'on some days we head to work earlier than usual before the curfew goes into effect. We sometimes stop work because of curfew restrictions.'* On average, Syrian workers reported working a median of 7 hours a day (range 2.5 to 12.5 hours per day) and 17 days per month (range 0 to 30 days per month) during the pandemic, but with dramatic variations within the sample. Some respondents only worked 2-3 hours a day during the pandemic, while others worked more than 12 hours a day. Meanwhile, some had not worked a single day in the month prior to this study, while others had worked every day in the past 30 days. Interviews with intermediaries add nuance: while 4 out of 5 intermediaries in Jordan argued that stricter lockdowns and fines on public transport had led to a decrease in working hours, all intermediaries in Lebanon confirmed that work had continued as usual. But on average, most Syrian workers in this study perceived that they were working less than full-time hours during the winter months of the pandemic, with highly unpredictable work schedules that made providing for one's family a persistent challenge.

How workers' daily wages have evolved during the pandemic is difficult to compare across countries, currencies, and types of agricultural activities, but some general trends emerge from interviews with intermediaries. Somewhat counter-intuitively, wages marginally increased in Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey. (In northwest Syria, farmers also switched to paying workers in Turkish Lira instead of Syrian Pound in 2020.) For example, a Lebanese intermediary in Lebanon explained that at the beginning of 2021, wages for female Syrian workers were uniformly raised across the Bekaa Valley, a major area of agricultural production in eastern Lebanon, from 8,000 LBP (5 USD) to 12,000 LBP (8 USD) per day. At first glance, these findings might seem contradictory, as 94% of workers (75/80) reported a dramatic decrease in income. It is important to understand that in this study, we rely on workers' self-reported earnings, and it is possible that many workers' absolute income may not have decreased during the pandemic, beyond the usual fluctuations related to short-term employment in seasonal agriculture.

However, displaced workers' purchasing power has certainly declined during the pandemic, especially in countries subject to dramatic currency inflation like Syria and Lebanon—this may in turn explain why many respondents reported smaller incomes.

## Dwindling safety nets and increased food insecurity

The effect of the pandemic on Syrian agricultural workers' purchasing power is best illustrated by looking at heightened food prices. Reduced income from employment in agriculture has hit displaced Syrian households particularly hard in northwest Syria and Lebanon, where worsening exchange rates have made food and other basic items far more expensive, thereby further diminishing the purchasing power of Syrian households. Figure 5 illustrates changes in currency exchange rates in the four study countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, with particularly high



**Figure 5. Currency exchange rates to the US Dollar in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Turkey between 2019-2020.** Note: the exchange rates shown for Lebanon and Syria are the informal (black market) exchange rates, as the official exchange rates cannot currently be found in local markets. For Jordan and Turkey, the official exchange rates are shown. Data from: [lirate.com](http://lirate.com); [sp-today.com](http://sp-today.com); [ofx.com](http://ofx.com); [investing.com](http://investing.com).

91% (73/80) of Syrian households stated that food prices in their area had increased during the pandemic.



inflation rates for Syria and Lebanon. The Lebanese Pound lost about 80% of its value between October 2019-September 2020, with the price of the basic food basket increasing by almost 189% between October 2019-December 2020 (WFP, 2020a, 2020b). By the end of 2020, an additional 674,000 Lebanese citizens and 577,000 Syrian refugees had fallen below the national poverty line (World Bank Group *et al.*, 2021). Meanwhile in Syria, inflation reached an average of 200% in 2020 compared to 2019.

Across our study countries, 91% (73/80) of Syrian households stated that food prices in their area had increased during the pandemic, with 27% (17/63) also reporting increased costs for public transportation. Even though employers argued that wages had slightly increased in northwest Syria and Lebanon to compensate for the currency inflation, this was not enough to cover rising living expenses. An intermediary in Lebanon clarified:

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‘Before the pandemic, the exchange rate was 1,500 LBP/1 USD, now it’s 8,550 LBP/1 USD. Before, we used to buy a pack of sugar for 18,000 LBP - now it’s 90,000 LBP. At the same time, workers’ wages have decreased. For example, a woman used to earn 5 USD, now it’s 1.5 USD.’

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Another intermediary in the same country gave a similar explanation:

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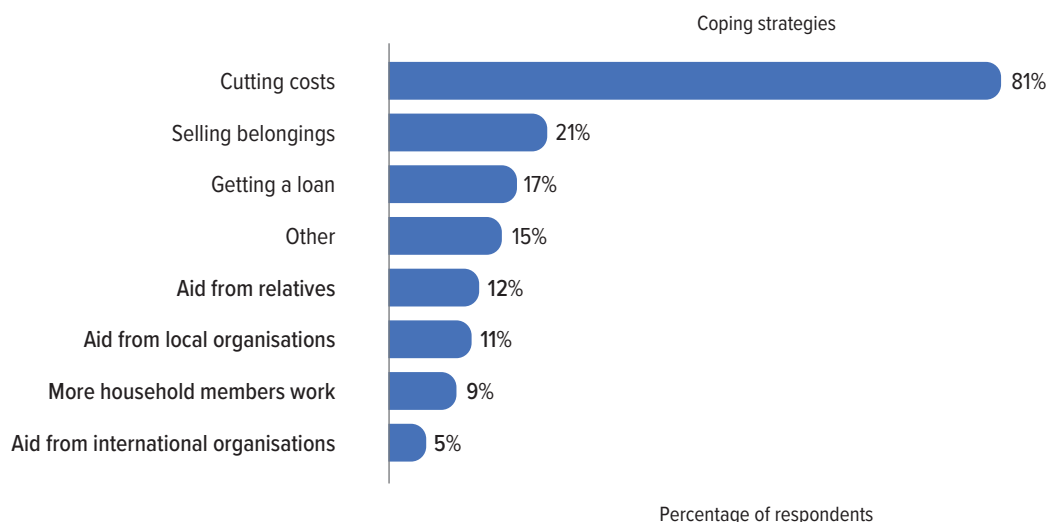
‘Workers used to buy a bag of sugar for 25,000 LBP, now its price is 125,000 LBP, a gallon of oil used to cost 20,000 LBP, now it costs 60,000 LBP. So the prices of food stuff have soared. A bag of bread used to cost 1,500 LBP, today it costs 2,250 LBP. That’s why we raised wages.’

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Across study countries, even short-term changes to employment and food prices are particularly damaging to Syrian refugees with little or no financial safety net.

Across study countries, even short-term changes to employment and food prices are particularly damaging to Syrian refugees with little or no financial safety net. In response to decreased income and price hikes in local markets, many Syrian households were forced to employ multiple negative livelihood coping strategies (Figure 6). Cutting costs was the predominant coping mechanism for 81% (61/75) of households, followed by selling belongings (21%, 16/75), and getting a loan (17%, 13/75). Syrian respondents told us that they were selling belongings such as motorbikes, cars, televisions, refrigerators, washing machines, and even mattresses. A young man living in an informal refugee settlement in Qob Elias, in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, provided a graphic description of his family’s dire situation: ‘TV, washing machine, I am currently selling





**Figure 6.** Syrian workers' responses to 'How have you tried to cope with the loss of income during the pandemic?' (total n=75; breakdown by country: Jordan=19, Syria=18, Turkey=18, Lebanon=20). Note: Participants were able to choose more than one answer to this question, resulting in totals over 100%.

Many displaced Syrians may have entered winter 2020/21 with less savings than usual, and thus risk being trapped further in a cycle of debt and precarious labour.

*our possessions one after the other.* These findings are particularly alarming as agricultural workers usually use the busy agricultural season to make savings for the winter, when it is more difficult to find work. Our data suggest that many displaced Syrians may have entered winter 2020/21 with less savings than usual, and thus risk being trapped further in a cycle of debt and precarious labour. As we explore in 2.3, agricultural intermediaries often play a crucial role in providing loans, and workers' accumulation of debts during the pandemic may further entrap them in financial relationships of dependency with intermediaries. What is more, humanitarian aid was an insufficient safety net for the Syrian refugees in our study. While 33% of respondents (26/80) reported cash support from UNHCR and NGOs as their household's main source of income in addition to work in agriculture, only 11% of respondents (8/75) mentioned aid from local organisations as a key coping strategy during the pandemic: only 1 respondent in Turkey and 1 respondent in Jordan, and 6 people in northwest Syria, shared that they had received humanitarian assistance during the pandemic.

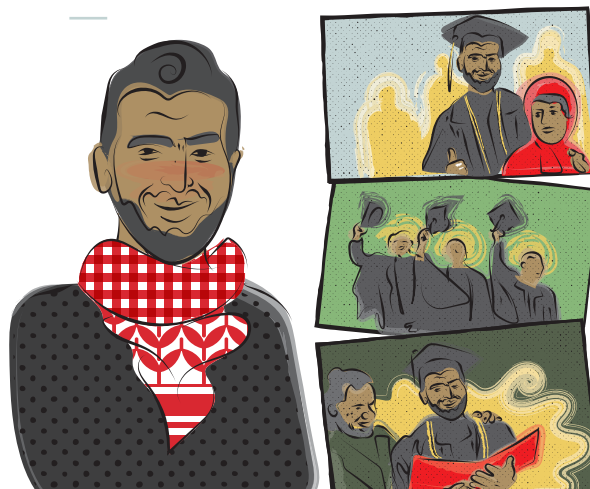
The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) defines food insecurity in terms of four pillars: availability, access, utilization and stability (FAO, 2006). Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has primarily impacted the access dimension of food security by

causing loss of income and purchasing power, particularly among the poor (cf. Bén  , 2020). Although displaced Syrian communities experienced high rates of food insecurity before the pandemic (WFP and REACH, 2015; UNOCHA, 2019; Government of Lebanon and UN, 2020), the Syrian households we spoke to have become even more food insecure, being forced to reduce their food consumption and the quality of their diets. Many reported eating fewer meals per day and reducing portion sizes. Households also started relying on cheaper foods, such as bulgur, lentils, rice and chicken, as compared to fresh vegetables and lamb, and most could only afford tiny quantities of other meat, fruit, and vegetables. The decrease in meat consumption was particularly pronounced, with many respondents reporting that they have not had meat in several months to a year. Furthermore, Syrian workers only very rarely received food from their employers. Only two workers stated that they depended on their employer or intermediary for access to food, and getting paid in a share of the harvest was also rare. It deserves pointing out that, even though many displaced Syrians intermittently work in agriculture, this does not equate easy access to food. Working in food production thus does not shield refugees from going hungry during the pandemic.

## Box 2

Adil's story - 'What can a worker buy with 10 Turkish Lira except for bread?'

Adil and his family fled their home in Zammar, in the countryside south of Aleppo, after his family's house was bombed and his father was killed. At the time, Adil was 25 years old and had just become a lawyer. His family settled in an IDP camp in Kafr Ruhin, in Idlib, northwestern Syria. Adil now works as an agricultural day labourer harvesting olives. During the pandemic, Adil usually works seven hours a day, for which he earns 10 Turkish Lira (1.34 USD). His income has decreased, while food prices have increased; as a result, Adil's family's diet has suffered. The family only has meat once every two weeks, and they no longer can afford fruit. Adil complained to us, 'What can a worker buy with 10 Turkish Lira except for bread?' In addition, Adil has started selling off his family's belongings, including their vehicle.



## 2.2 Displaced Syrians' structural vulnerabilities and working conditions in agriculture increase their risk of catching COVID-19

While cases of COVID-19 were rising in each study country at the time of this research in winter 2020/21, only one respondent reported that they had personally fallen ill with COVID-19, and only 6% (5/80) of respondents knew of cases of coronavirus at their workplaces.

Displaced Syrian communities have been deemed particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to their frequently limited ability to access clean water, nutritious food, and medical services, and a lack of space to practice social distancing (Kassem, 2020; Fouad *et al.*, 2021). Inside Syria, health infrastructure has been decimated by years of conflict, while Syrian refugees in neighbouring host countries frequently face difficulties affording and/or accessing medical services (El Arnaout *et al.*, 2019; Abbara *et al.*, 2020). In Lebanon, for example, the nexus between harsh living and working conditions, and chronic and acute health conditions for agricultural Syrian workers, is well documented (Habib *et al.*, 2016). Syrian refugees and IDPs frequently live in crowded housing (such as refugee camps and informal tented settlements on agricultural land, or one- or two-room apartments) with limited access to clean water and hygiene facilities, making it difficult to follow social distancing measures, prevent disease transmission, and quarantine family members who fall ill (Kassem and Jaafar, 2020).

While cases of COVID-19 were rising in each study country at the time of this research in winter 2020/21, only one respondent reported that they had personally fallen ill with COVID-19, and only 6% (5/80) of respondents knew of cases of coronavirus at their workplaces.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, only 3 out of 20 employers were aware of COVID-19 cases among their workforce. We did not ask workers whether they had actually been tested for COVID-19; we thus rely on their subjective perceptions of illness. As many people with SARS-CoV are asymptomatic, it is very likely that the actual number of infected workers in this study was higher. 12 out of 20 intermediaries also stated that their workers had not undergone a health examination for COVID-19, and 8 out of 17 complained that workers and intermediaries did not have access to tests. But there is also anecdotal evidence of mass testing: as one Syrian intermediary living inside an informal tent settlement in Lebanon told us, the UN tests all camp residents for COVID-19 every forty days. Given our respondents' limited experience with COVID-19, we also do not know how often sick workers are hospitalized. In Turkey, for example, COVID-19 treatment at hospitals is officially free, including for Syrian refugees (WHO, 2020). Therefore, we need to understand better what practical

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<sup>4</sup> In the One Health FIELD Network's initial From the FIELD research in June 2020, there were no reported cases of COVID-19 among our Syrian respondents. COVID-19 case rates may also be significantly higher among displaced Syrian communities due to lack of access to testing. Cf. <https://www.onehealthfieldnetwork.org/from-the-field>

barriers Syrians might face in accessing medical treatment. Despite the small number of confirmed cases, Syrian workers we interviewed expressed deep anxiety about their inability to adequately protect themselves and their families from COVID-19 at work and at home. In this section, we highlight different material and socioeconomic factors of ‘*structural vulnerability*’ (Quesada *et al.*, 2011) that expose Syrian agricultural workers to ill-health during the pandemic. In the figure of the refugee worker, two types of vulnerability overlap. Displaced Syrians in this study are disproportionately at risk of catching COVID-19 because, as refugees and as workers, they make a living in the informal economy and lack corresponding labour protections, and because many dwell in crowded conditions where their access to public healthcare is limited.

### Inability to socially distance at home



While rented houses or flats were the most common type of dwelling for our respondents (44%, 35/80), another 31% lived in informal/temporary tent settlements.

Adherence to proper sanitary measures and physical distancing was almost impossible for the majority of displaced Syrian households in this study, more than half of whom lived in makeshift accommodation, often with shared toilet and bathroom facilities. While rented houses or flats were the most common type of dwelling for our respondents (44%, 35/80), another 31% lived in informal/temporary tent settlements<sup>6</sup>, followed by containers (11%, 9/80), official refugee camps (9%, 7/80), and shared accommodation on agricultural worksites, such as barracks or dorms (5%, 4/80). Households living in rented flats frequently occupied just one or two rooms shared between multiple generations of family members, making it difficult to follow social distancing rules and quarantine individuals who become ill. Correspondingly, 61% (49/80) of participants reported

<sup>6</sup> In the Turkish context, ‘*temporary tent settlements*’ refer to ‘*the place of settlement in destinations of households engaged in seasonal migratory agricultural work where they stay for short or longer periods of time in tents made mostly of canvas, nylon and plastic or prefabricated shelters. These settlements are either compact or dispersed; they may be provided by government agencies in the context of a project or programme or made directly by workers themselves. Their locations may be near irrigation or drainage canals, streams, village pasturelands or roads*’ (cf. Development Workshop, 2020a, p. 11).

In Lebanon, most respondents reported living in ‘official’ refugee camps. However, despite the fact that the UNHCR provides services in many informal tent settlements in Lebanon, Lebanon has an official non-encampment policy for Syrian refugees, and thus does not recognize these settlements as ‘refugee camps.’ Therefore, we have counted respondents who claimed to be living in official refugee camps in Lebanon in the informal/temporary tent settlements category.

### Box 3

#### Ibrahim's story - Living in a tent at an agricultural work site



Ibrahim and his family of six fled to Jordan from rural Hama, Syria in 2012. The family typically moves more than three times per year for work, following Jordan's agricultural seasons. When we spoke to Ibrahim in December 2020, his family was living in Dayr 'Allah, in an informal tented settlement next to the greenhouses where they work. Giving us a video tour on his phone, Ibrahim shows us his family's tent, with herbs growing in containers outside. He tells us that when it rains, the settlement is flooded, and it is difficult to leave the tent. Ibrahim also points out the different water tanks that households use for washing, drinking and cooking: Ibrahim pays 8 JOD (11 USD) for drinking water per week. He then takes us to the toilet that they had constructed themselves, with a separate shower room, made of the same plastic sheeting as the tents, as well as the open fire pit which five households shared to cook and boil water. Living in the tented settlement is difficult. Although Ibrahim and his adult sons can easily walk to work, the family has little privacy, and is struggling to afford all of their expenses. Since education is expensive, Ibrahim has decided to only provide his daughter with an education, while his sons work in agriculture.

that they did not have space in their home to self-isolate if a member of their household showed COVID-19 symptoms. Hypermobility seasonal workers, often living in informal tent settlements, are a particularly vulnerable sub-demographic—their lack of basic hygiene, lack of access to sanitation, healthcare and other public services put them particularly at risk during the pandemic (cf. Development Workshop, 2016).

#### Reliance on public transport puts workers at risk

Syrian agricultural workers also face increased risk of exposure to COVID-19, given their heavy dependence on public transportation to access agricultural work sites: 80% (64/80) of workers in this study relied on transportation to get to work, with 84% (54/64) taking shared transportation services such as buses, minibuses, or transport services arranged by their employers or intermediaries. Moreover, only 50% (27/54) of workers reported that the maximum number of passengers per vehicle had decreased to allow for social distancing. A Syrian intermediary in Lebanon described the changes to public transport: 'A vehicle used to transport more than 30 or 35 workers. Now, the municipality only allows us to transport four or five female workers in one vehicle and they have to be wearing masks and



Only 50% (27/54) of workers reported that the maximum number of passengers per vehicle had decreased to allow for social distancing.

*gloves.*’ However, the same intermediary explained later in the interview that these regulations had been relaxed at the end of 2020. One worker in Adana, Turkey, recounted having to take a shared bus with coworkers who he believed were ill with COVID-19, because the employer had not required the workers to take time off to recover. As one Lebanese intermediary explained, *‘We live and work in an agricultural area. The state does not apply here the rules in place in cities and towns or in public transportation buses.’* In one case, a Lebanese intermediary even consciously contravened existing restrictions on public transport in his area:



‘There’s a shortage in workers and difficulty in recruiting. The municipalities here forbid movement from a location to another. We are banned from bringing workers from [the east Lebanese town of] Baalbeck or other places to Qob Elias. So now if we want to bring a new family [to the informal camp], we smuggle them in or bring them in secretly.’

### Insufficient protections at work



While 97% (70/72) of respondents reported wearing a face mask during transport or at work, 84% (59/70) said that they were responsible for buying the masks themselves.

Many respondents also described that instead of buying face masks, they used head scarves and shawls to protect themselves.

At agricultural work sites, preventative measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 seem to fall largely on Syrian workers themselves. While 97% (70/72) of respondents reported wearing a face mask during transport or at work, 84% (59/70) said that they were responsible for buying the masks themselves. Only 12% (8/70) who used face masks stated that NGOs were purchasing the masks, and 7% (3/70) received masks provided by intermediaries or employers. (Some respondents gave multiple answers to this question because they sometimes receive masks from NGOs, but usually buy them themselves). As one Syrian intermediary in Jordan put it, *‘I bought a mask for myself, but I did not distribute any.’* Syrian workers also had a limited ability to afford to buy new masks regularly: only 31% (21/68) of respondents got a new mask every day. In reality, face mask use may be far more intermittent than reported: our visual ethnographic data from the same workers very frequently show workers not wearing masks. Many respondents also described that instead of buying face masks, they used head scarves and shawls to protect themselves. As one Syrian employer in Turkey described, *‘It is difficult to work with a mask in the field. [Refugees] worked separately. During their breaks, families sat apart, but they arranged it themselves.’* Other employers, like this

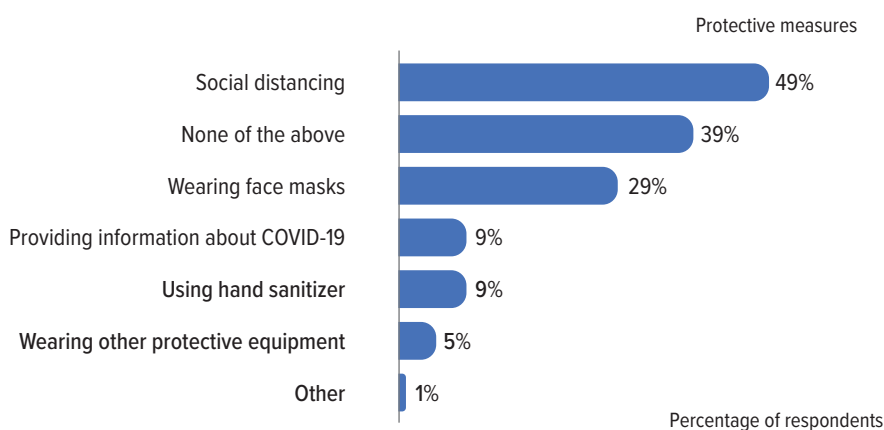


Lebanese businessman, thought that the workplace itself could protect labourers, and that work could continue as usual:

‘Agricultural labour was not delayed [for us]. This is an agricultural area and even before the pandemic, agricultural work required keeping a distance between plants and wearing masks to protect themselves from pesticides, that’s why I think the pandemic didn’t affect us.’

Almost 40% (30/76) of workers said that intermediaries and employers had not introduced adequate health and safety measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission in the workplace.

Furthermore, almost 40% (30/76) of workers said that intermediaries and employers had not introduced adequate health and safety measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission in the workplace (Figure 7). Where safety measures had been introduced, social distancing was the most common at 49% (reported by 37/76 participants), followed by wearing masks at 29% (reported by 22/76 respondents). Workers’ lack of protection was also confirmed by findings from interviews with intermediaries. In our sample, 8 of 20 intermediaries admitted that there were no safety measures at all at the workplace, although this varied across study countries. In Jordan and Turkey, intermediaries reported much stricter regulations, including restrictions on number of passengers on buses and mandatory mask-wearing. The majority of employers in this study (13 of 20) claimed to have imposed mask-wearing and social distancing at the workplace, and 9 of 20 reported that they bore the financial costs for these measures. When we compare these findings with workers’ and intermediaries’ perceptions of insufficient workplace safety during the pandemic, it highlights the need to go beyond employers’ self-reported compliance with public health regulations.

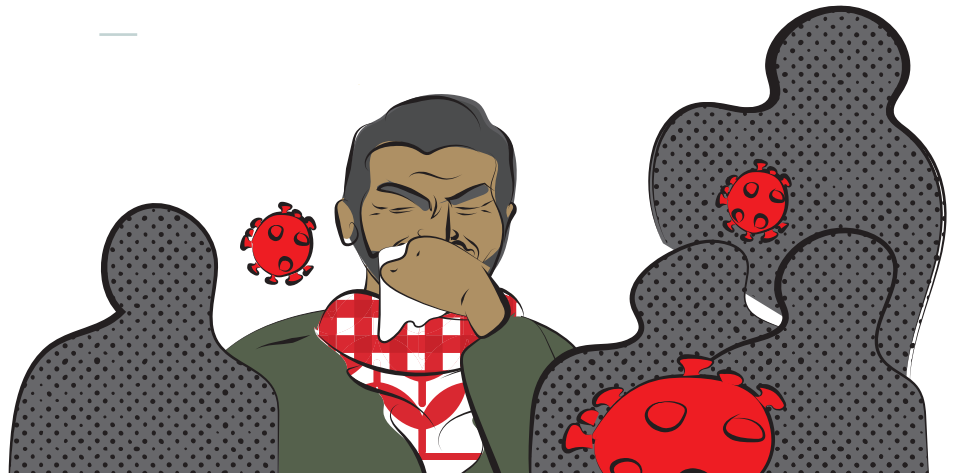


**Figure 7.** Syrian workers’ responses to ‘Has your employer/intermediary introduced any of the following safety measures at your workplace?’ (total n=76; breakdown by country: Jordan=19, Syria=20, Turkey=18, Lebanon=19). Note: Participants were able to choose more than one answer to this question, resulting in totals over 100%.

Out of 80 workers in our study, only one reported receiving health insurance from his employer, while no workers benefited from paid sick leave. Without such protections, it is likely that Syrian workers could feel obligated to work even if they do become ill, due to the need for a continuous income and their inability to afford medical treatment.

In addition to COVID-19 specific safety measures, workers noted that almost no intermediaries or employers provided social protections such as health insurance or paid sick leave that would offer them an economic safety net if they did get sick. Out of 80 workers in our study, only one reported receiving health insurance from his employer, while no workers benefited from paid sick leave. Without such protections, it is likely that Syrian workers could feel obligated to work even if they do become ill, due to the need for a continuous income and their inability to afford medical treatment. Again, it is notable that the employers we interviewed perceived their responsibilities differently. Out of 20 employers, 13 affirmed that they would pay for their workers' treatment out of their own pocket. While most, according to themselves, only offered small amounts, or reimbursed workers' for income lost, one Jordanian employer had ended up spending 2,000 JOD (2,039 USD) to support an employee. Still, 3 other employers stated that they would refer refugee workers for free treatment in hospitals (in Turkey), or to the UN (in Lebanon). Meanwhile, one simply replied: *'[If workers get injured], they just take a rest.'*

According to the workers we interviewed, agricultural employers and intermediaries expressed varying levels of concern about their workers falling ill with COVID-19. In one instance, a male worker in Mersin, Turkey, observed that his employer had strengthened protective health measures after another worker had fallen sick. In another case, a female worker in Hatay province, Turkey, remembered that her boss had asked the workers not to tell anyone that there had been a case of COVID-19 because he did not want the work to stop. Yet another worker explained this more dramatically—recalling that his employer only cared about maintaining agricultural production, not protecting workers, the worker quoted his boss as saying, *'Who dies, dies.'*





## 2.3 Displaced Syrian workers' relationships of dependency with agricultural intermediaries and employers have worsened during the pandemic

Intermediaries' ability to mobilise huge workforces at short notice makes them useful to employers with short-term labour needs.



Syrian agricultural workers' relationships with intermediaries are an important mediating factor for shielding them from, or exposing them to, labour exploitation and ill-health. This makes it vital to understand whether and how these relationships have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. One feature of Syrian labour in agriculture is its informality, the interpersonal nature of work arrangements, and the lack of official complaint mechanisms. Workers' relationships with employers are usually mediated by agricultural intermediaries, a practice well documented for Turkish seasonal migratory workers, and later Syrian refugees, in Turkey (Development Workshop, 2018), Syrian workers in Syria (Abdelali-Martini and Dey de Pryck, 2015), Lebanon (Chalcraft, 2008), and more recently also in Jordan, where Syrian refugees introduced the role of the intermediary after 2011 (Kattaa *et al.*, 2018). Importantly, the role of labour intermediaries, and the details of their relationship with workers, varies across study countries. In our study, agricultural intermediaries provided important services to both parties: 18 out of the 20 intermediaries in this study supplied labour to employers, and distributed wages to the workers. Their other tasks included keeping a record of workers' names and hours, negotiating wages, and driving workers to the fields. In particular, intermediaries' ability to mobilise huge workforces at short notice made them useful to employers with short-term labour needs: 16 out of 20 intermediaries in this study hired entire families, with between 5 and 60 families in their pool of available labour. For example, a Syrian intermediary in northern Syria employed all 76 families living in the IDP camp where he also resided. In Adana province in Turkey, a Turkish intermediary had access to 60 families, i.e. 300 workers. A Lebanese intermediary described the interplay between agricultural producers and workers:

'The boss has nothing to do with workers. He calls me, or in other cases we agree in advance, he tells me that on this day I want 30 female workers, or 30 workers males and females, he says I want 30 workers today. He has nothing to do with their names, phone numbers or identities. [...] I get from the employer 10,000 Lebanese Lira (7 USD) for each worker per day. I give 8,000 LBP to each worker and I am left with 2,000 LBP.'

Across study countries, almost 100% of our respondents had never signed a contract with their intermediary or employer. Most respondents noted that in cases of interpersonal conflict at the workplace or unacceptable working conditions, they

The informal nature of these relationships is further compounded by intermediaries' own legal insecurity, and the absence of sector-wide standards.



could not appeal to anyone for support. As one Syrian woman put it, they '*could only turn to God.*' Employers from Turkey also emphasized that workers could just abandon their job if they did not like the working conditions: '*There is no one who does not like it, if they do not, they go to another province or find another job.*' One employer from Turkey said that refugees '*have to like [the work].*' The informal nature of these relationships is further compounded by intermediaries' own legal insecurity, and the absence of sector-wide standards: in our sample, only 40% of intermediaries in Turkey, and none of the intermediaries in Syria and Jordan, were registered. In the case of Syria and Jordan, interviewees confirmed that their profession did not officially exist. In Lebanon, a country with a long history of agricultural intermediaries dealing with Syrian agricultural workers, all five intermediaries we interviewed had an official license, and four had registered before 2011. In Turkey, an intermediary described the difficulties he faced in his interactions with state authorities, but also employers:

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'It's been 10 years since I registered. I did not renew my registration because ISKUR [Turkish Employment Agency, the institution where intermediaries can register] does not provide any support, and asks for the contracts with workers from registered intermediaries. Employers, on the other hand, do not make contracts [with the workers], are reluctant to do so. Because, in case of employing more than 51 workers, there is the obligation to pay for insurance [social security]. In our work, more than 51 workers are always needed. The employer does not want or cannot cover this [extra] cost.'

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Focusing on the ties between workers and intermediaries is a unique entry point to understanding how particularly vulnerable workers, such as refugees and internally displaced people, become trapped in a chronic cycle of poverty *through* labour. In this section, we begin by describing workers' often intimate ties with intermediaries, and then ask how recruitment processes and financial relationships of dependency have changed during the pandemic.

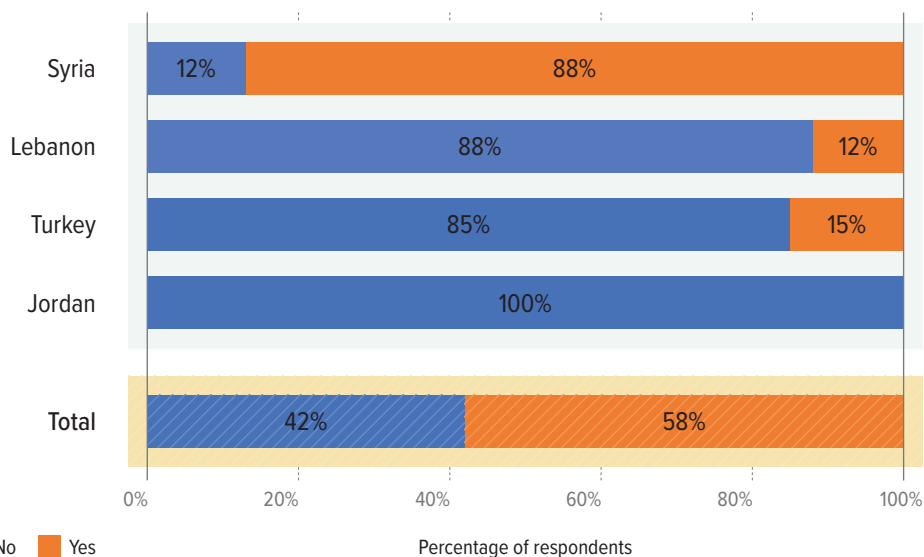
### Intermediaries: Exploiters, allies or both?

Agricultural intermediaries, called *shaweeesh* in Arabic, and *elci* or *dayibas* in Turkish, broker relationships between agricultural workers and employers. In our study, 61% (49/80) Syrians relied on intermediaries to find their most recent job.

Refugees' dependency on intermediaries is higher in Turkey (65%, 13/20), where they could only communicate with employers through Turkish intermediaries, and in Lebanon (85%, 17/20), where workers often lived in informal settlements run by Syrian or Lebanese intermediaries.

42% of participants reported that they could not find jobs on their own.

Refugees' dependency on intermediaries is higher in Turkey (65%, 13/20), where they could only communicate with employers through Turkish intermediaries, and in Lebanon (85%, 17/20), where workers often lived in informal settlements run by Syrian or Lebanese intermediaries. In a similar vein, 65% (13/20) of the employers we interviewed recruited workers through intermediaries. Depending on the agricultural season, the type of work, and the region, most workers alternated between a handful of intermediaries, and these relationships were often long-lasting: 88% (42/48) of respondents working with an intermediary at the time of the study had previously worked with the same person. 42% (28/66) of participants also reported that they could not find jobs on their own (Figure 8). As refugees or internally displaced people, they often lacked contacts and direct lines of communication with local work owners, knowledge of job opportunities and the bargaining power to hold employers accountable to verbal agreements. In northwest Syria, an intermediary explained that *'local families can decide not to use an intermediary because they know each other, but internally displaced people cannot find work without intermediaries.'* Our findings indicate that displaced people who enjoy closer and more trusting relationships with intermediaries might be



**Figure 8.** Syrian workers' responses to *'If there is no agricultural intermediary, can you find agricultural jobs?'*, by study country (total n=66; breakdown by country: Jordan=20, Syria=16, Turkey=13, Lebanon=17). In total, across all study countries, 42% of workers reported being unable to find a job in agriculture without an agricultural intermediary.

less at risk of labour exploitation. In the following sections, we discuss some of the factors that shape relationships between intermediaries and some workers, including kinship ties, shared refugee identity, cohabitation, and language.

Among the Syrian workers who used intermediaries, in 15% (8/53) of cases, agricultural intermediaries were members of their extended families, such as an uncle, cousin, or even spouse or father. Another 45% of workers (24/53) found jobs through working with Syrian intermediaries from their own communities, often a fellow refugee from their areas of origin, and/or a neighbour in their current site of refuge. One male worker reflected upon their shared identity: his intermediary was *'a refugee like us and a friend to all people in the camp.'* Intermediaries themselves spoke affectionately of their workers, and often described their position as respected family elders. One Turkish intermediary working with Syrian refugees in Turkey put it this way: 'We are like family elders. The only person they will call in the middle of the night when they're sick.' 14 of the 20 intermediaries in this study employed Syrian workers who lived in the same area. Another Turkish intermediary emphasised the emotional bond that comes with cohabitation: 'They live next to our tent. We provide whoever needs what. We live side by side, we are neighbors. They got used to it, they do not let me quit. We are family.' At times, individual intermediaries were associated with specific areas, and even specific agricultural activities. A Syrian intermediary in northwest Syria explained:



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'This is traditional labour in our village, there is an intermediary in each family, and he has fixed working months. That's why workers come to the intermediary with whom they would like to work in any given month.'

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In some cases in our study, relationships between workers and intermediaries even predated the Syrian conflict. Inside Syria, an agricultural intermediary had taken his long-standing group of workers with him when he had been internally displaced to the Turkish border. In Lebanon, where hundreds of thousands of Syrian migrants used to work in agriculture, construction, and other low-income sectors before the war, the intermediaries in our study continued to work with the same migrant labourers, who had since returned to the country as *refugees* (cf. Zuntz, Forthc., on a similar case in Jordan).

Only 5 of the Syrian workers in our study worked with intermediaries who were citizens of their host country. In Turkey, where refugees face additional language barriers when communicating with employers, 4 out of the 17 Syrians working with intermediaries dealt with Turkish intermediaries. Anecdotal evidence from our study suggests that workers' relationship with Syrian intermediaries was often better than with their Turkish counterparts. Female Syrian workers in Turkey, for example, reported that Syrian intermediaries were more

#### Box 4

##### The story of a Syrian agricultural intermediary in Lebanon



'[In March 2010,] I had a group of 50 workers, males and females, whom I began to assign tasks. The following year war broke out in my country, so I stayed in Lebanon with the workers I supervise, and I was joined by so many others. I had by that time between 100 and 120 agricultural labourers. Many sought refuge in Lebanon because of the war [in Syria]. [...] When the war broke out, we secured heating for refugees in the camp and managed our affairs. We lived there in summer and winter with the hope that the situation will stabilise in Syria in 2012 and we return home. But as you saw, the war evolved. As a result, the camp still exists until today. I first used to go look for and gather workers, but then when people began to flee Syria seeking refuge, they began to flock to our camp. I myself became a refugee, I could no longer go to Aleppo. As a shaweesh in the camp, I was tasked by the Lebanese authorities with monitoring who enters and leaves the camp and with addressing any dispute. We began to build a tent for every family seeking refuge in our camp and help them with available means. The UN also offered some help and refugees of the camp helped each other. Some would offer money, others a pillow, sheets etc. So we would build a tent for each family and allow them to work with us. We were at first around 22 families, but then we reached around 60 or 62 families. Around five or six families eventually left to Syria and we are left with around 56 families.'

During the pandemic, closer and more trustful ties with an intermediary might shape Syrian workers' their decision to stay home, or keep going to work, when they experience symptoms of COVID-19. Even though some of our other findings show that agricultural intermediaries may take advantage of workers, this suggests that they can also shield them against exploitation at the hands of employers.



likely to ensure they would get paid by employers in times of illness. By contrast, Syrian female workers recruited by Turkish intermediaries complained that they risked losing their pay when they got sick. In Jordan, one Syrian woman fondly recalled that a Syrian intermediary had visited her at home to deliver her wages. During the pandemic, closer and more trustful ties with an intermediary might shape Syrian workers' their decision to stay home, or keep going to work, when they experience symptoms of COVID-19. Even though some of our other findings show that agricultural intermediaries may take advantage of workers, this suggests that they can also shield them against exploitation at the hands of employers.

Many workers in our study preferred finding jobs through intermediaries. According to a male worker in Turkey, *'I can find work through my friends, but it's better to go through a shaweesh because he guarantees my rights.'* The majority of workers (71%, 34/48) described their relationships with intermediaries as *'good,'* 25% (12/48) as *'neutral,'* and only 4% (2/48) as *'tense.'* According to Syrian workers, besides providing employment, agricultural intermediaries helped ensure adequate working conditions, compelled employers to pay workers' wages on time, and passed on workers' complaints. From the perspective of a Syrian intermediary in Lebanon, workers chose to work with him because of the strict hierarchies in the agricultural sector:

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*'I mean if you were a student wanting to join a class at a school, you get in touch with the teacher. [...] A camp [of agricultural workers] is like an institution with a manager and lower rank officials.'*

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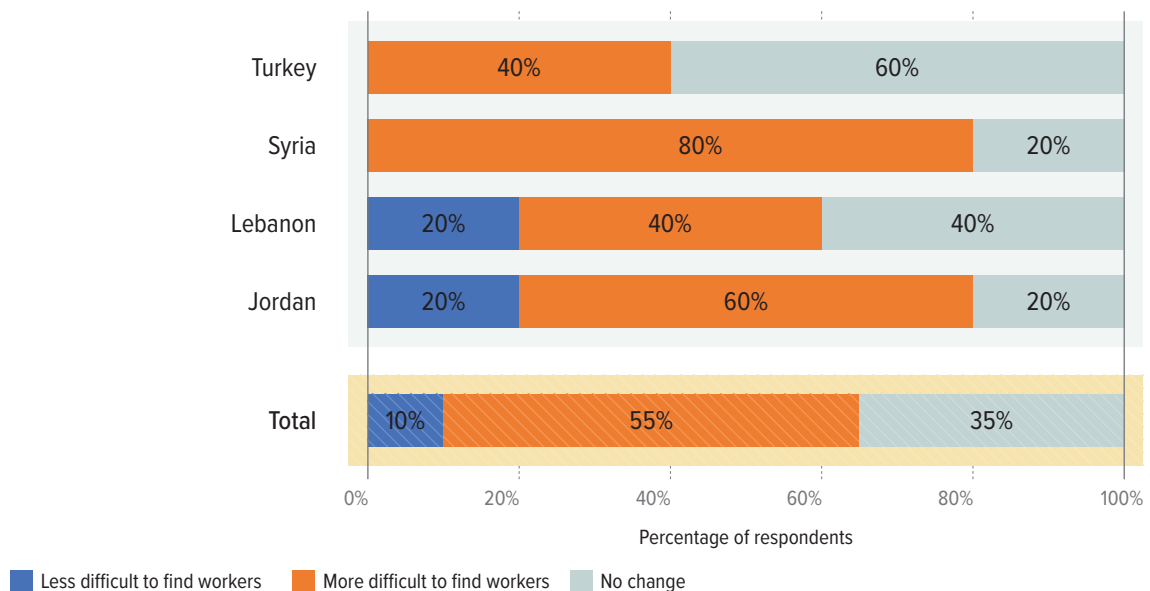
However, a subset of workers confirmed that their relationship with the intermediary was not always positive. While 86% (65/76) of respondents felt well-informed by their intermediary, 7% (5/76) complained that they had received no information on wages, or later discovered that wages were lower than promised, and another 7% (5/76) found that working hours had changed: in most cases, they had to work longer than expected, and in a few occasions, their hours were shortened. Importantly, most Syrian workers in our study did not know how their intermediaries were paid by the employer, or how their commission was calculated.

## Changes and continuities in Syrian workers' relationships with intermediaries during the pandemic

In the following section, we explore pandemic-related changes to the relationship between Syrian workers and intermediaries, and also highlight important continuities. On the one hand, the intermediaries in this study faced greater difficulties in recruiting Syrian workers in 2020. More than half of respondents (55%, 11/20) found it *'more difficult'* to mobilise workers during the pandemic (Figure 9), and 58% (11/19) had to cancel work because of lockdowns and roadblocks, and fines on over-crowded public transport. Hence, 58 % (11/19) of intermediaries argued that the recruitment process had changed during the pandemic. As a Lebanese intermediary explained, the greater volatility of agricultural markets during the pandemic also affected how they communicated with workers:



'The biggest challenge is when we are informed early in the morning that the market is closed at a time when our workers are getting ready to go to work. This forces us to cancel work for the day. In other cases, the merchant asks us to finish packaging the produce in only two hours so that we can make it to the market before it shuts down. These are the challenges I deal with.'



**Figure 9.** Intermediaries' responses to 'Compared to before the pandemic, is it more difficult to find workers?', by study country (total n=20; breakdown by country: Jordan=5, Syria=5, Turkey=5, Lebanon=5).

## Box 5

### How are intermediaries paid?

From interviews with 20 intermediaries in the Middle East, we learned that their payment varies widely across work sites, regions and activities, and their arrangements with employers are usually informal: 92% of employers in our study only had verbal agreements with intermediaries. Broadly speaking, intermediaries either deduct a commission from workers' wages or are paid directly by work owners. Some intermediaries take a percentage of workers' daily wages (e.g. 10% in Turkey), or charge a lump sum for driving the minibus that takes workers to the fields. For example, one intermediary in Turkey receives 100 TRY/day (12 USD) for driving a bus that transports 20-25 workers. Others are paid fixed wages by employers. By way of illustration, one intermediary in Jordan earns 1 JOD/day per worker, i.e. 20 JOD/day (28 USD) for a group of twenty workers that he supervises. Factors that shape intermediaries' income include:

- **Distance and type of agricultural activities:** Intermediaries report a higher commission for organising travel across provinces, and for more highly-skilled work.
- **Number of workers:** An intermediary in Lebanon explains: 'My income depends on the number of workers working with me. For example, if I have 20 workers and each worker works two shifts (morning and afternoon), and I take a commission of 5,000 LBP per worker, that means I will end up with a commission of 100,000LBP/day (66 USD).'
- **Agricultural seasons:** Like workers, intermediaries are affected by seasonal rhythms: at the time of this study in winter 2020/21, 15% of intermediaries were unemployed, and others had seen their income halved. For example, a Syrian intermediary earned 200 JOD (282 USD) at the time of the interview, compared to 400-500 JOD (546-705 USD) before the pandemic. Like for workers, this makes it difficult for intermediaries to estimate their monthly income. A Syrian intermediary in Turkey complained: 'Right now my only income comes from the [Turkish] Red Crescent card [i.e. humanitarian assistance]. One month ago it was 3,000 TRY (366 USD).'
- **Currency fluctuations:** Like Syrian workers, intermediaries are hit by rampant currency inflation, especially inside Syria and in Lebanon. As one intermediary in Syria points out, he used to earn 50 USD before the pandemic, 'but this was more than 150 USD today.'

It is important to understand that not all intermediaries earn significantly more than workers. 77% (14/18) of intermediaries in our study are responsible for arranging transport for workers, and have thus been affected by rising fuel prices during the pandemic and newly introduced fines on overcrowded vehicles, especially in Jordan and Turkey. In some cases,





During the pandemic, intermediaries, many of whom are also Syrian refugees, thus face some of the same challenges as the Syrian workers that they recruit: insecure livelihoods, shaped by seasonal rhythms and currency fluctuations, informality and lack of workers' rights.

intermediaries have paid out of their own pocket to rent a greater number of buses, or to afford bus drivers' higher wages. The same intermediary who earns a commission of 100,000 LBP a day puts his earnings into perspective by factoring in his expenses: 'I don't end up with a good income because I have to pay for my car that I use to transport the workers, for my mobile phone and for my family's living expenses.' While some intermediaries in this study are not better off than workers, others have a considerably higher income. In Jordan, for example, intermediaries' monthly income before the pandemic varied between 200 and 1,500 JOD (282-2,116 USD). In our study, 10% of the intermediaries report receiving the same wages as Syrian workers. Yet, unlike workers, most intermediaries find comfort in the fact that their role is not expendable during the pandemic. One Turkish intermediary emphasizes their bridging function in the agricultural sector: 'We are the ones dealing with workers and aghas [honorific title in Turkish, here means work owner]. [...] But our work continued, thank God. We see it on TV, there are those whose restaurants or workplaces were closed down. We are not like that, we have jobs.' **During the pandemic, intermediaries, many of whom are also Syrian refugees, thus face some of the same challenges as the Syrian workers that they recruit: insecure livelihoods, shaped by seasonal rhythms and currency fluctuations, informality and lack of workers' rights.**

The actual relationship between intermediaries and workers remained the same: 95% (19/20) of intermediaries argued that the nationality of workers and the composition of their workforce had not changed during the pandemic.

On the other hand, the actual relationship between intermediaries and workers remained the same: 95% (19/20) of intermediaries argued that the nationality of workers and the composition of their workforce had not changed during the pandemic. Only in one case in Adana province, a Turkish intermediary reported that: '*There are more Syrians; 90% are Syrians now. 100% in some teams, even the sergeant is Syrian. Turkish workers are reluctant because of the virus and do not want to work sometimes.*' A Syrian intermediary in Jordan summed up that pandemic-related transformations had affected the work on offer, but not his close ties to workers: '*Work has slowed down but nothing changed in terms of workers. We are still here together.*'

Hence, instead of asking how relationships between Syrian workers and intermediaries have changed, we shift the focus to how dangerous forms of dependency have continued, and been entrenched during the pandemic. What binds Syrian workers to intermediaries and employers are not acts of physical coercion or violence. All workers in this study confirmed that employers



Power inequalities between workers, intermediaries, and employers are compounded by complicated financial relationships of dependency, especially through delayed payments and loans, and these have been deepened during the pandemic.

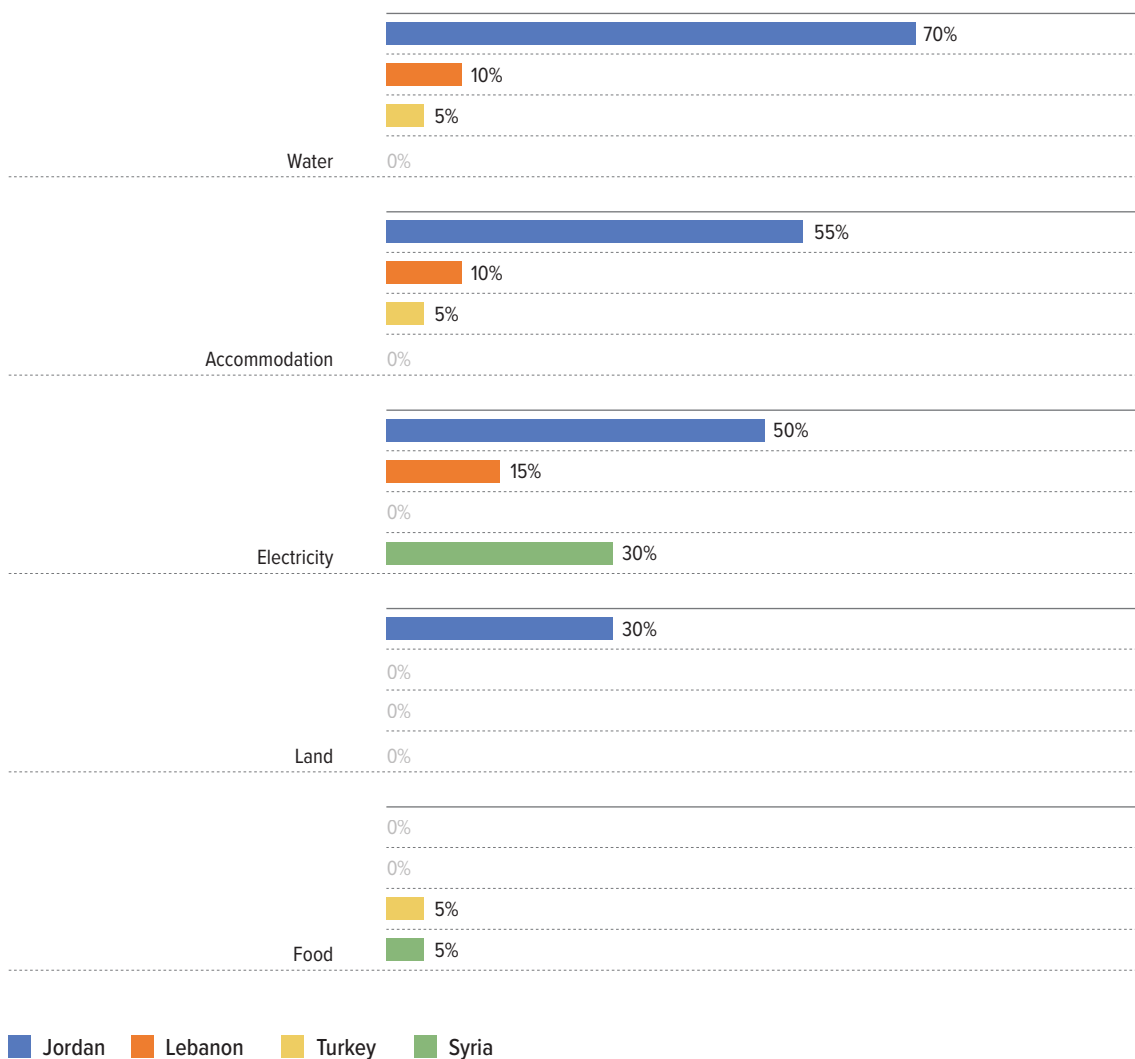
or intermediaries did not confiscate their passports or other identity documents for the duration of their job, and almost all respondents did not face negative consequences if they abandoned their work, beyond the loss of their sole source of income, and in some cases outstanding payments. Except for a handful of cases in Lebanon, including the testimony of a female worker whose tent was burnt down by a spiteful employer, we did not hear about incidents of physical violence. Rather, power inequalities between workers, intermediaries, and employers are compounded by complicated financial relationships of dependency, especially through delayed payments and loans, and these have been deepened during the pandemic.

As discussed more in detail in section 2.1, compared to before March 2020, 25% of workers reported being paid more infrequently, and 22% were paid more irregularly. Greater financial uncertainty during the pandemic may exacerbate the economic losses caused by intermediaries', and sometimes employers', more long standing practice of withholding payments. In our study, 34% (27/79) of workers stated that employers or intermediaries could withhold their payments, with much higher numbers for Syrian refugees in Lebanon (53%, 10/19). Among the 20 employers, only 15% (3/20) said that they could withhold workers' salaries, although the practice seems to be more common in northwest Syria, where 2 out of 5 of employers did the same. Reasons for non-payments included disagreements over the quality of work and working hours, or when employers ran out of money during the pandemic. Besides withholding payment, intermediaries' and employers' established practice of advance payments may further add to economic pressures on Syrian workers during the pandemic. In our sample, 37% (7/19) of workers in Jordan and 25% (5/20) of workers in northwest Syria had received an advance payment for their most recent job from their intermediary or employer, a practice much less common in Turkey (5%, 1/20) and Lebanon (0%). The prevalence of this practice in Jordan was confirmed in interviews with employers: all five employers in Jordan offered an advance payment to their workers. According to employers, the actual amount of the payment varied, from *'two days of wages'* to *'however much they need'* and, in the case of one Jordanian employer, 500 JOD (610 USD), the equivalent of 42 days of work in this specific workplace. Another Jordanian employer usually handed over 1,000 JOD (1,019 USD) to the

There is a considerable risk that during the pandemic, financial dependency on intermediaries and employers may have further entrapped Syrian agricultural workers in a cycle of debt, increasing the pressure on them to accept non-decent working conditions and low wages.

intermediary, who could distribute it as he saw fit. These payments were subsequently deducted from workers' wages. In some cases, employers withheld the first salary, in other cases, loans were subtracted from outstanding payments at the end of the harvesting season. However, some intermediaries stopped handing out advance payments to workers who were established in one location more permanently. A Lebanese intermediary in Qobb Elias, in eastern Lebanon, had provided advance payments to seasonal migratory workers from Syria before 2011, but stopped offering it to Syrian refugees: *'The workers I supervise do not need one. They have been living in the same place for 7 or 8 years. Unless someone wants to buy a car or help his son get married, it's very rare that I give advance payments.'* At times, modes of payment were irregular, and mixed personal consumption and workers' wages. In Lebanon, an intermediary also operated an informal money-lending business: *'On Thursday, there is a market in our area and some workers take a loan from me for shopping. I register the amount in my notebook, and at the end of the year I sit with every worker and we settle their account.'* Similar practices were also reported by intermediaries in Turkey: *'We give out a card [i.e. the equivalent of 1 daily wage] every evening. Sometimes when the worker needs it, payment is made in return for cards.'* The majority (75%, 15/5) of the intermediaries we interviewed offered advance payments to their workers. A subset of Syrian workers, especially in Jordan and inside Syria, may have used these advance payments to pay off existing debts and secure accommodation during the pandemic, if they had to move for their new jobs. There is a considerable risk that during the pandemic, financial dependency on intermediaries and employers may have further entrapped Syrian agricultural workers in a cycle of debt, increasing the pressure on them to accept non-decent working conditions and low wages.

Besides their wages, a subset of Syrian workers also relied on employers and intermediaries for additional services, including accommodation on agricultural work sites (Figure 10). This situation is particularly pronounced in Jordan, where many Syrians in our sample worked and lived on remote farms in the Eastern Desert and in the Jordan Valley, and 55% of workers received housing from their employers. Living on site entailed other dependencies—for example, Syrians in Jordan were also more likely to access water and electricity through their



**Figure 10.** Syrian workers' positively responses to 'Do you rely on the employer or agricultural intermediary for access to accommodation, food, electricity, water or land?'; by study country (total n=78; breakdown by country: Jordan=20, Syria=20, Turkey=19, Lebanon=19). Note: Participants were able to choose more than one answer to this question, resulting in totals over 100% (Non-responses are excluded).



employers or intermediaries. In Lebanon, a Syrian intermediary operated an informal tent settlement for fellow refugees, charging each family an annual rent:

‘Each worker pays 600,000 LBP (398 USD) from their own money [per year]. Every year, I pay [the owner of the land on which the camp exists] the rent fee which is around 48,000,000 LBP (31,841 USD) and, given the harsh conditions, I later gradually collect [the 600,000 LBP] from each worker. I sometimes borrow from my friends or from Lebanese people who help me in paying the land’s rent fee and I later gradually deduct from the wages of the workers to pay back.

During the pandemic, living on site may have shielded agricultural workers from getting infected, especially through the avoidance of close contact on public transport, but it has also increased their risk of homelessness.

The fact that the intermediary himself may incur additional debts in relation to workers’ accommodation further complicates already convoluted financial relationships. During the pandemic, living on site may have shielded agricultural workers from getting infected, especially through the avoidance of close contact on public transport, but it has also increased their risk of homelessness. For example, one intermediary in Lebanon who ran a camp for refugee workers explained that in case of conflict, he could simply expel disobedient workers from the camp. When it comes to understanding how displaced workers’ vulnerabilities have changed during the pandemic, Syrians who rely on intermediaries and employers for payment, accommodation, and basic services deserve special attention.

## 2.4 No clear evidence that Syrian female and child labour in agriculture has increased during the pandemic, but some working women and children have become more vulnerable

Anecdotal evidence from our study suggests that loss of household income during the pandemic might have pushed more women and children to work in agriculture, and this resonates with humanitarian aid providers’ concerns: that pandemic-related losses of household income and lack of access to education may have compelled children to work, and increased women’s double burden of paid and unpaid domestic labour (ILO and UNICEF, 2020, Nisanci *et al.*, 2020; OECD, 2020). However, a look at our data reveals a more complicated picture: in our sample, numbers of women and children working in agriculture, as well as the distribution of labour and women’s and children’s typical tasks, have not changed throughout the first year of the pandemic. While we found no clear evidence that the pandemic had increased the number of Syrian female and child labour in agriculture, economic losses and greater job insecurity may have heightened the pressure on those women and children who were already employed to accept non-decent and hazardous working conditions.

## For working women, more domestic duties have increased the ‘double burden’

In our sample, Syrian women made a considerable economic contribution to displaced households. In roughly one third of surveyed households (25/80), mothers were considered main breadwinners, either on their own or in tandem with their husbands. Before the pandemic, women were working in 47% (35/75) of households, with higher numbers in Jordan (60%, 12/20). Before the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, most women we interviewed had already worked in agriculture, often on their family’s land in Syria. One woman had owned a small shop, others were high school and university students, or housewives. From interviews with workers, we learned about a clear division of labour on fields and in greenhouses, although some women do the same tasks as men. Female workers are usually in charge of harvesting, sorting and packaging vegetables, removing weeds and stringing up plants inside greenhouses, while their male counterparts carry heavy goods and take on more dangerous duties, including climbing trees and spraying pesticides. Besides more physically demanding tasks, more skilled activities are also reserved for men. For example, only men operate heavy machinery such as tractors and ploughs.

From interviews with workers, it is hard to gauge the wage gap between men and women, as payment varies across products, activities, and regions. In the olive harvest, for example, families are usually paid a lump sum per weight, which makes it difficult to disentangle wages for men, women, and children. However, information provided by intermediaries indicates that women in Syria and Lebanon have received lower wages than men, both before and during the pandemic. In addition, working women often have no control over their income: workers reported that in 45% (21/47) of households, wages were paid to husbands or male relatives, rather than to women themselves. In a similar vein, only 3 out of 20 intermediaries we interviewed paid wages to female workers directly. Anecdotally, several respondents described that before the pandemic, women, and sometimes children, had only worked in agriculture on an occasional basis, for example during the autumnal olive harvest in Jordan, and doing home-based work, e.g. removing green stems from dried pepper in Turkey. For some Syrian women, employment in farming before the pandemic may not have been a full-time job, but rather a sporadic source of additional income.



In the Syrian households included in this study, the number of women working in agriculture did not significantly grow during the pandemic: 47% (35/75) of Syrian households reported that women had been working before the pandemic, a number only marginally higher (48%, 36/75) during the pandemic.



In the Syrian households included in this study, the number of women working in agriculture did not significantly grow during the pandemic: 47% (35/75) of Syrian households reported that women had been working before the pandemic, a number only marginally higher (48%, 36/75) during the pandemic. There are several factors that explain why these numbers have stayed the same. To begin with, the majority of Syrians in the Middle East had already been poor before the pandemic, and therefore both men and women had already been working in agriculture. In 2019, more than 83% of Syrians inside Syria lived below the poverty line in 2019, while 64% of refugees residing in host communities in Turkey, 71% in Lebanon, and 80% in Jordan, were considered ‘poor’ (UNICEF, 2019). It is very likely that among our respondents, those household members who could work in agriculture had already been doing before the pandemic. Another possible explanation for the stable figures with regard to women’s employment is that 51% (41/80) of respondents reported increased childcare duties, home-schooling, cleaning, and cooking for women during the pandemic. One Syrian woman in Jordan described the changes in her domestic life:

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‘Before the pandemic, we didn’t clean every day, now we do; we disinfect the doors and we don’t allow the children to play outside.’

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A higher domestic workload may have discouraged some women from seeking employment in agriculture, since they did not have time for any additional paid labour.

However, when we contrast these findings with information from intermediaries and employers, a more complex picture emerges, one that points to the longstanding feminization of agricultural workforces in the Middle East, at least among Syrian refugees in Lebanon and internally displaced people in northwest Syria. Among the 16 intermediaries in our study who employed workers of both sexes, 11 hired more women than men, in some cases three times as many women as men. One Syrian intermediary in Lebanon, who recruited workers from an informal tent settlement, employed 110 women, but only 35 men. In Jordan, a Syrian intermediary, who was a refugee himself, worked with 20 women and only 7-10 men. But some intermediaries shared a different perspective: according to a Turkish intermediary who hired both

Syrian and Turkish workers, *'men are more among Syrians, there are more women among those [seasonal migratory workers] from Şanlıurfa.'* Findings from interviews with employers further confirmed women's presence on fields and in greenhouses. In our small sample, employers in Lebanon, northwest Syria, and Jordan took on more women than men, both before and during the pandemic. For example, a Lebanese employer employed 5 men and a staggering 95 women in his labour pool, both before and in 2020. And only in Lebanon, employers paid women lower wages than men before and during the pandemic. While these data are limited because of the small number of intermediaries and employers that we interviewed in each study country, they do not show that women's share in the refugee workforce in agriculture has increased during the pandemic. But taken together, these findings suggest that Syrian women are already in the majority in many agricultural workplaces, and this confirms trends predating the Syrian conflict in 2011. According to longitudinal FAO data, the share of women in agricultural workforces in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Syria had steadily increased between 1980 and 2010 (cited in Abdelali-Martini and Dey De Pryck, 2015). In 2010, women already made up 52% of the economically active population in agriculture in Turkey, and 62% in Jordan, although women's greater presence in the workplace did not translate into greater control over their income and higher rates of female land ownership, and access to better paid and more highly skilled tasks (Abdelali-Martini and Dey De Pryck, 2015). Our data also indicate that the double burden of paid and increased unpaid labour during the pandemic has hit those women who were already working. As a female worker in Turkey explained, *'My workload has increased because I also work on the field. When I come home, I have to cook and clean, sometimes more than before.'*

Approximately half (51%, 26/51) of respondents pointed out that female workers in agriculture faced specific risks, such as harassment at the workplace and hazardous working conditions, suggesting that Syrian women continue to grapple with more longstanding problems in the agricultural sector.

At the same time, 83% (38/46) of respondents reported that women's tasks as agricultural workers had remained the same during the pandemic, and all the 20 employers we interviewed agreed. However, approximately half (51%, 26/51) of respondents pointed out that female workers in agriculture faced specific risks, such as harassment at the workplace and hazardous working conditions, suggesting that Syrian women continue to grapple with more longstanding problems in the agricultural sector. In our study, only 29% (12/41) of respondents said that women in their households worked in women-only groups, a practice particularly common inside Syria and in Lebanon, where women



are sometimes specifically recruited by female agricultural intermediaries. Work in single-sex groups may allow women to specialise in certain tasks, but in the context of conservative gender norms, it also prevents interactions between man and women. Conversely, many female respondents mentioned that male co-workers and employers made them uncomfortable. As a female Syrian in Lebanon put it, employers compelled women to work at top speed, while also enforcing a feminine attitude of subservience: *'The work owner wants me to keep the pace and keep a smile on my face.'* Casual stories of how harassment can be intertwined with Syrian women's need to work also come up in interviews with employers. An employer in Lebanon recalled the following events: *'A worker fell in love with a female co-worker, and she always complained to me and eventually left work because of this young man, but in the end, they got married and they returned to work together in the fields.'* According to workers, health risks that particularly affect women include snakes and scorpions in orchards, falling from trees, and getting cut by thorns. Pregnant workers were said to be disproportionately at risk, and both male and female workers mentioned the high number of miscarriages in the workplace. In a similar vein, 60% (12/20) of the intermediaries we interviewed counted pregnant women in their workforce, with even higher percentages in Syria and Lebanon. In northwest Syria and Lebanon, all intermediaries we spoke to indicated that female workers kept coming to the fields during pregnancy. As one intermediary in Lebanon explained, pregnant women worked because *'if they don't work, they will go hungry.'* Another intermediary in the same country said:



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*'You know the situation in Lebanon, there's poverty, misery and prices are soaring. So some female workers work during the first two or three months of their pregnancies.'*

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One Syrian intermediary in Turkey even reported that a Syrian worker had given birth during work. Similarly, mothers struggled to get time off work to care for sick children. Women also



seemed to find it even more difficult than men to negotiate their wages with employers, and were often paid late or less than agreed. In northwest Syria, ongoing clashes, bombings, and kidnapping made going to the fields even more dangerous, and according to workers, women were particularly at risk. In sum, the subset of women who have worked before and during the pandemic are particularly vulnerable—while the pandemic may not have increased the numbers of displaced women working in agriculture, economic losses and greater job insecurity may have increased the pressure on those refugee women who were already employed to accept non-decent working conditions.

### Child labour is often invisible, and some Syrian children experience its worst and hazardous forms

Contrary to existing studies that find much higher rates of child labour among Syrian workers, under 18-year olds in our study worked in agriculture in only 16% (13/80) of households, and this number has not increased during the pandemic

At the beginning of the pandemic, humanitarian actors in the Middle East rang the alarm: since 2014, the number of children out of school had remained stable in major refugee-hosting countries like Jordan. Now, there were fears that pandemic-related economic pressures, combined with the shift to distant education, would encourage already working Syrian children to extend their hours, and push previously non-working Syrian children into the informal economy, especially into agriculture, where 42% of Syrian child labourers in Jordan are employed (Tamkeen, 2021). Contrary to existing studies that find much higher rates of child labour among Syrian workers, under 18-year olds in our study worked in agriculture in only 16% (13/80) of households, and this number has not increased during the pandemic (Table 3). As some respondents told us, their children came to work with them because parents needed an additional income, and because schools were closed because of the

			Total	Jordan	Lebanon	Turkey	NW Syria
Before the pandemic	No	✕	83%	95%	70%	70%	90%
	Yes	✓	17%	5%	30%	30%	10%
During the pandemic	No	✕	83%	95%	70%	76%	90%
	Yes	✓	17%	5%	30%	23%	10%

**Table 3.** Syrian workers' responses to 'Did members of your household under the age of 18 work in agriculture before and during the pandemic?', by study country (total n=77; breakdown by country: Jordan=20, Syria=20, Turkey=20, Lebanon=17).

Overall, access to education during the pandemic varied across study countries. On average, interviews with workers showed that 16% of non-working children of school age in this study were not currently going to school, but the situation was much better in Turkey, where non-working children in all surveyed households continued their education, and much worse in Jordan, where 50% of non-working children had disrupted their studies.

pandemic. In Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, almost all in-person education had stopped by late March 2020, as part of the first wave of lockdown restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19 (Abdo-Katsipis, 2020; Bakir, 2020; Hartnett, al-Natour and al-Ajlouni, 2020; WFP, 2020c). However, lack of access to education predates the pandemic in some of the households we interviewed. One male worker shared that he had tried to register his child in a Lebanese school, but the institution had refused, because he was a refugee. Another male worker had not enrolled his daughter in school after the family was internally displaced inside Syria. Overall, access to education during the pandemic varied across study countries. On average, interviews with workers showed that 16% of non-working children of school age in this study were not currently going to school, but the situation was much better in Turkey, where non-working children in all surveyed households continued their education, and much worse in Jordan, where 50% of non-working children had disrupted their studies (Table 4). This resonates with findings of a recent study by UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP, which found that nearly a quarter of Syrian refugees in Jordan lacked internet access, while 46% of Syrian children were unable to access Darsak, the online learning platform provided by the Jordanian government in spring 2020 to support continued learning during school closures (UNHCR *et al.*, 2020).

Against the backdrop of pandemic-related economic losses, we expected to find increased rates of child labour, but for Syrian children, the data tell a more complex story. From the workers' point of view, more than 80% of respondents reported that under-18 year olds in their household had not worked before or during the

		Total	Jordan	Turkey	Lebanon	Syria
No	✕	16%	50%	0%	7%	5%
Yes	✓	45%	25%	58%	36%	60%
N/A (no under 18-year olds in the family, or children are too young to go to school)		38%	25%	42%	57%	35%

**Table 4.** Syrian workers' responses to 'Do non-working under 18-year olds in your household go to school?'; by study country (total n=73; breakdown by country: Jordan=20, Syria=20, Turkey=19, Lebanon=14). Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Difficulties with measuring child labour might lead to underestimating the actual number of under-18 year olds working in agriculture, and some respondents in this study may have been afraid to tell the truth because child labour is illegal in all study countries.

In terms of pandemic-related changes, we see a similar pattern emerge for Syrian women and children: the problem with female and child labour is not that it has increased during the pandemic, but rather that problematic employment patterns continue for a subset of women and children who have been working since before the pandemic.

pandemic. These numbers are surprisingly low, given that child labour in agriculture has been well documented in several countries in the Middle East. In pre-pandemic Jordan, 72% of employers had admitted the presence of children under 15 years of age on their farms (Kattaa, *et al.*, 2018); in Turkey, according to Development Workshop's research conducted in 2018 in Adana province, where the population of seasonal migratory workers is proportionally high, children under the age of 18 had made up one third of agricultural labour (Development Workshop, 2018). Difficulties with measuring child labour might lead to underestimating the actual number of under-18 year olds working in agriculture, and some respondents in this study may have been afraid to tell the truth because child labour is illegal in all study countries. (The minimum age for work varies between 14 in Lebanon, 16 in Jordan, and 18 for seasonal migratory agricultural work in Turkey, cf. UNICEF *et al.*, 2019). Findings from interviews with agricultural intermediaries and employers somewhat contradict Syrian workers' perspective: during the pandemic, 70% of the 20 intermediaries interviewed reported that they were employing children, and in Lebanon, all five interviewees knew about Syrian children in their workforces. In Turkey, one Turkish intermediary counted as many as 30 children amidst his workers; in Lebanon, a Syrian intermediary reported that one third of his group of 150 refugee workers were under the age of 18. In a similar vein, 45% of the 20 employers we interviewed had children work for them during the pandemic. A Jordanian employer explained: *'We don't want to employ children, but we have to take them if they come with their families or group of workers.'* As childcare was not available on fields and in greenhouses, female workers often brought their children along, especially after schools had switched to distant education. In the pictures and videos that Syrian workers shared with us through *'work diaries'*, children were frequently present.

In terms of pandemic-related changes, we see a similar pattern emerge for Syrian women and children: the problem with female and child labour is not that it has increased during the pandemic, but rather that problematic employment patterns continue for a subset of women and children who have been working since before the pandemic. Employers with children in their workforce agreed that children's tasks have not changed because of the pandemic, and 7 out of 9 employers confirmed that the number of children in agriculture had remained stable, compared to pre-pandemic times. Hence, while Syrian child labour is a reality in

Middle Eastern agriculture, this further supports the hypothesis that those destitute households that rely on child labour as a source of income were already sending children to work before the pandemic, and continue to do so now. While official estimates for child labour in the Middle East before and during the pandemic are hard to come by, the phenomenon seemed to be already on the rise in the mid-2010s, both inside and around Syria. In their home country, the destruction of schools and loss of livelihoods have pushed more Syrian children into labour markets. In neighbouring countries, refugee households often depleted their savings in the first years of exile; by 2015, many were more likely to send their children to work. Lack of access to work permits for adults in Jordan and Lebanon, as well as long-standing traditions of child labour in the entire region, have compounded these trends (Terre des Hommes International Federation, 2016). An alternative explanation for the lack of observed increase in child labour in our study is that, despite a loss of household income, some parents were too afraid to send their children to work because of the infection risk. In fact, most respondents reported that they were more worried for their children than themselves. Some workers we interviewed did not even allow their children to leave the house to meet friends.

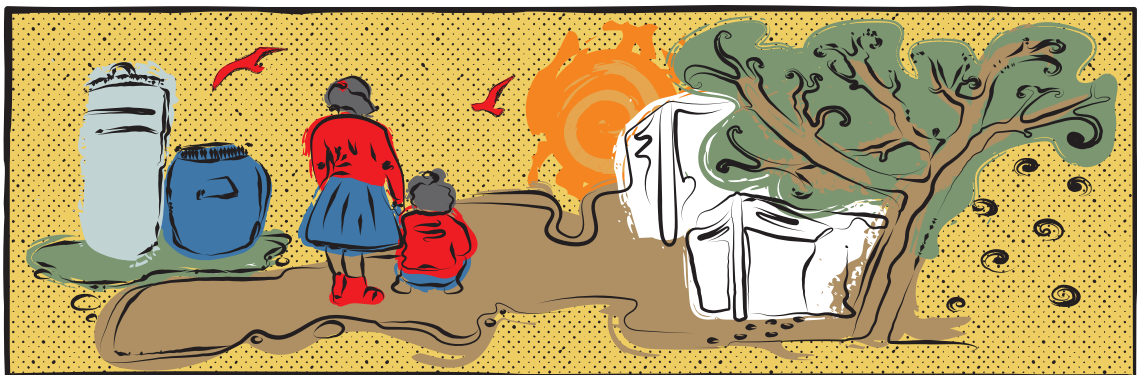
Workers', intermediaries', employers' and humanitarian agencies' different perceptions of who counts as a 'child', and what counts as 'child labour', further complicate an assessment of pandemic-related effects: under-18 year olds, although present on fields and in greenhouses, may not always be counted as '*workers*'; nor are children who only '*help out*' during school vacations in the summer. Conversely, some intermediaries and employers may not consider working teenagers as '*children*'. As one Lebanese intermediary put it, '*they are not really children. [...] They are between 12 and 15 years old.*' Some workers and intermediaries reported that under-18 year olds were paid wages, often lower than what adults received, and a Lebanese intermediary in Lebanon paid children the same wages as female workers. However, children might also be present as unpaid '*helpers*'. For certain types of agricultural activities, e.g. during the olive harvest in Jordan, and during home-based work in Turkey when Syrians remove stems and leaves from dried pepper, families of workers are paid a lump-sum, not by person. This payment mode risks obscuring the economic contribution that children may make. According to 14 intermediaries who answered the question about workers' minimum age, girls

start at an earlier age than boys. According to the intermediaries in our study, girls begin work in agriculture on average at the age of 11, while boys take up employment at the age of 13. But we also heard about cases of Syrian workers in Lebanon, where children of both sexes were as young as eight or nine years. As a Syrian male worker in Turkey put it, his daughter had to start working in agricultural production activities at the age of 10, *'and she doesn't want to work anymore because she feels that she has lost out on her childhood.'* This is particularly concerning because 26% of households also reported that domestic workload had increased for girls, as girls took on more cleaning and other household chores. These findings resonate with pre-pandemic studies documenting longer working hours, harsher working conditions and more domestic duties, as well as a greater risk of school drop-out, for Syrian refugee girls, compared to boys, in Lebanon (Habib *et al.*, 2019). While in many Syrian households, male respondents insisted that male and female family members shared the additional domestic burden, some female workers disagreed. A Syrian woman in Turkey complained: *'Many Arab boys are brought up in a way that they don't have to help out at home at all.'* In the future, there is a need to disentangle the effects of the pandemic on girls and boys, and to study more systematically whether the pandemic has particularly affected girls working in agriculture.

Although workers and intermediaries insisted that activities for children were usually light tasks, there is evidence that some children were involved in what the ILO considers 'hazardous labour', characterised by long working hours, dealing with dangerous substances and machinery, work at dangerous heights, and which exposes children to different forms of abuse.

Going back to the ILO definition of child labour helps us disentangle what forms of labour Syrian children take on during the pandemic. The ILO considers work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and/or mental development and interferes with their schooling, as 'child labour' (cf. Box 6). Only 7 workers in our study provided information about whether working children were also going to school, but in these 7 households, only 3 children attended school regularly, 1 child sometimes went to school, and 3 children did not have time for school or lacked the necessary digital devices. Although workers and intermediaries insisted that activities for children were usually light tasks, there is evidence that some children were involved in what the ILO considers 'hazardous labour', characterised by long working hours, dealing with dangerous substances and machinery, work at dangerous heights, and which exposes children to different forms of abuse. On the lighter side, children assisted their parents during the olive harvest, gathering olives on the ground, and carrying empty crates. A Syrian intermediary in Jordan who took refugee workers to hot

areas in the desert explained: *'The male and female workers pick the tomatoes from the desert and bring them to the road where they are packaged and transported to Amman. They [those under 18] prepare the empty boxes [to be filled with tomatoes].'* In some of the *'work diaries'*, we also see younger boys serving tea and coffee to adult workers. According to their parents, most children toiled for shorter hours than adults, but one third of working children in this study spent ten hours or more each day on the job. One male worker in Turkey reported that his 12-year old sons assisted with spraying hazardous pesticides. Workers in Turkey, Jordan, and Syria described that their children were often exhausted, and complained about considerable health risks for children, including through pesticides, carrying heavy objects and, in a handful of cases, physical violence at the hands of employers. Parents were also afraid that children, like other unskilled workers, might underestimate the risks that come with climbing trees and working next to heavy machinery. In Lebanon, two female workers lamented that their employers were mistreating mothers and their children in the field, and another respondent recalled that parents remained silent in the face of such beatings because they were too afraid that employers would send children home, and thus rob the family of an extra income. Thus, it seems that there is a subset of Syrian children that had already been working before the pandemic, but have now further lost access to schooling and experience what the ILO considers *'worst forms of child labour'*, i.e. work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children. The lack of household devices for online schooling and parents' renewed migrations in search of jobs make it more likely that Syrian children could drop out of schooling more permanently during the pandemic, and join their parents in the fields and greenhouses in the long-term.



## Box 6

### ILO Definition of Child Labour (ILO, n.d., slightly abbreviated)

The term 'child labour' is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that:

- is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or
- interferes with their schooling by: depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.

Whilst child labour takes many different forms, a priority is to eliminate without delay **the worst forms of child labour** as defined by Article 3 of ILO Convention No. 182:

- all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
- the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;
- the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties;





- work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

**Hazardous child labour or hazardous work** is the work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children. Guidance for governments on some hazardous work activities which should be prohibited is given by Article 3 of ILO Recommendation No. 190:

- work which exposes children to physical, psychological or sexual abuse;
- work underground, under water, at dangerous heights or in confined spaces;
- work with dangerous machinery, equipment and tools, or which involves the manual handling or transport of heavy loads;
- work in an unhealthy environment which may, for example, expose children to hazardous substances, agents or processes, or to temperatures, noise levels, or vibrations damaging to their health;
- work under particularly difficult conditions such as work for long hours or during the night or work where the child is unreasonably confined to the premises of the employer.

According to ILO Convention 138, the minimum age for admission to employment shall not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and as per ILO Convention 182, worst forms apply to all children under 18.

# 03

## Conclusions

Disruptions and  
Problematic  
Continuities



Findings from the **Refugee Labour under Lockdown Project** indicate that for many displaced Syrians in the Middle East, the pandemic has worsened pre-existing precarious working conditions and tasks in agriculture, making already vulnerable people more vulnerable.

At the beginning of the pandemic, these longstanding forms of structural marginalisation put Syrian workers in a particularly vulnerable position: when movement restrictions and disruptions to agricultural supply chains caused temporary job losses for Syrian workers, the loss of income quickly eliminated their frail financial safety nets and forced them to accumulate debts, often from agricultural intermediaries.

In this report, we present findings from remote ethnographic research showing that the COVID-19 pandemic has temporarily disrupted employment for Syrian workers in the Middle East and increased job insecurity. Yet, it has also entrenched existing problematic relationships of dependency and exploitative working conditions in the agricultural sector. We tend to think of the COVID-19 pandemic as a set of spectacular disruptions to established modes of working and global economies. However, findings from the *Refugee Labour under Lockdown Project* indicate that for many displaced Syrians in the Middle East, the pandemic has worsened pre-existing precarious working conditions and tasks in agriculture, making already vulnerable people more vulnerable.

Before the pandemic, host countries' ambivalent asylum policies had kept Syrian refugees with low formal education and without financial resources at the margins of formal labour markets, forcing them to make a living through badly paid and informal jobs, such as in seasonal agricultural work. In December 2019, a Syrian refugee working in the citrus harvest in Adana told members of our research team: '*We survive from one day to the next.*' At the beginning of the pandemic, these longstanding forms of structural marginalisation put Syrian workers in a particularly vulnerable position: when movement restrictions and disruptions to agricultural supply chains caused temporary job losses for Syrian workers, the loss of income quickly eliminated their frail financial safety nets and forced them to accumulate debts, often from agricultural intermediaries. At the same time, agricultural employers in our study coped with increased production costs through cutting labour-related expenses, further increasing job insecurity for workers in already volatile seasonal labour markets. At the time of our study, Syrian workers' job opportunities were also limited by the annual downturn of agricultural employment in winter. Hence, COVID-19 related economic effects on agriculture overlap with the sector's seasonal production cycle and intermittent need for mobile workforces. While daily wages stayed the same or only marginally increased in some study countries, living expenses increased and Syrians' actual working hours and thus total income have often decreased. Moreover, compounded by rampant currency inflation in Lebanon and Syria and increased food prices in the entire region, Syrians' purchasing power has declined, and many households in our study are now food-insecure.

The economic effects of the pandemic on Syrian labour and livelihoods have forced workers to continue accepting informal jobs in agriculture, despite the widespread absence of COVID-19 protection measures such as social distancing and wearing masks during public transport and at the workplace.

The economic effects of the pandemic on Syrian labour and livelihoods have forced workers to continue accepting informal jobs in agriculture, despite the widespread absence of COVID-19 protection measures such as social distancing and wearing masks during public transport and at the workplace. Despite few reports of workers personally ill with COVID-19 in our study, lack of access to testing and lack of paid sick leave, let alone sick pay to isolate when close contacts fall ill, make it very likely that Syrian agricultural workers keep going to work even when they are sick, and that the actual prevalence of COVID-19 among this demographic is much higher.

Syrian workers' relationships with agricultural intermediaries, and recruitment processes in the agricultural sector, have not significantly changed during the pandemic. While the majority of Syrian workers in this study rely on intermediaries to find jobs in the informal economy, some of them also directly communicate with employers. Workers depending on intermediaries often struggle to access employment by themselves, and to arrange migratory work in other provinces. Intermediaries, especially members of workers' own families and communities, can be important allies in guaranteeing fair and timely pay. However, there is a considerable risk that COVID-19 related economic pressures on Syrian workers have exacerbated financial relationships of dependency with intermediaries, and sometimes employers, exposing workers to debt bondage and indentured labour. For a subset of Syrians who also depend on intermediaries and employers to secure access to housing and basic services, there is an increased risk of homelessness during the pandemic.



While we did not find that the COVID-19 pandemic itself has compelled more Syrian women and children to work in agriculture, the loss of income and livelihoods may have made it even more difficult for a subset of women and children who were already working before the pandemic to escape non-decent and hazardous working conditions.

Our evidence confirms scholarship that predates the pandemic on more longstanding processes of the feminisation of agricultural workforces in the Middle East, especially in northwest Syria and in Lebanon. While we did not find that the COVID-19 pandemic itself has compelled more Syrian women and children to work in agriculture, the loss of income and livelihoods may have made it even more difficult for a subset of women and children who were already working before the pandemic to escape non-decent and hazardous working conditions. For working women, and some girls, the pandemic has exacerbated the '*double burden*' of paid labour in agriculture and unpaid labour at home: they have to reconcile hard work in agriculture with increased domestic duties, including more frequent cleaning, and supporting children with distant education. According to Syrian workers, intermediaries, and employers, most working children undertake light tasks in agriculture, but some experience the worst forms of child labour and hazardous work. Current disruptions to children's education also increases their risk of dropping out of school more permanently, and that they may become a part of precarious agricultural workforces.



For many Syrian refugees and internally displaced people, but especially for working women and children, informal work in agriculture remains the only available lifeline during the pandemic, despite the considerable health risks attached to it.

In a nutshell, for many Syrian refugees and internally displaced people, but especially for working women and children, informal work in agriculture remains the only available lifeline during the pandemic, despite the considerable health risks attached to it. In the long run, the economic pressures of the pandemic, combined with more longstanding structural marginalisation, informal work, ill-health, and lack of education, risks trapping Syrian agricultural workers in an intergenerational cycle of poverty, which will continue beyond the end of the current pandemic. Syrian agricultural workers' increasing economic precarity during the pandemic also has potential economic reverberations for the larger Syrian diaspora. Through remittance-sending, Syrian refugees already make an important contribution to survival and early recovery in war-torn Syria. Syria is the destination for 90% of Syrians sending remittances internationally (Chehade *et al.*, 2017), and remittances form a vital financial lifeline for many Syrians inside the country, comprising almost 15% of Syria's GDP (Christou, 2020). The World Bank – UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement (2020) has estimated an 8.5% decline in remittances to low- and middle-income countries in the Middle East and North Africa in 2020 due to poor economic growth and unemployment in migrant- and refugee-hosting countries. In 2021, global remittance flows are expected to decline by 14% compared to pre-COVID-19 levels (World Bank, 2020). Hence, the pandemic-related loss of livelihoods does not only affect Syrian refugee workers in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, it also has ripple effects throughout workers' social networks across the region.



There is an urgent need to include displaced Syrians in broader calls to strengthen global food systems, and create conditions for decent work at the beginning of agricultural production chains and for all agricultural workers, refugees, migrants, and locals alike.

On a final note, the socio-legal exclusion and exploitation of Syrian workers are similar to those experienced by mobile agricultural workers around the world during the pandemic, but have not been acknowledged like the struggles of migrant workers in North America and Europe. By way of illustration, meat processing plants and farms in the US quickly became hotspots for COVID-19 transmission in spring 2020, which increased public awareness of the critical role of farmworkers, many of whom are undocumented Mexican migrants (Lancet, 2020). As the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF, 2020) put it, '*we now confront the frailty of a food system which disposes of those who feed us.*' Unlike for undocumented migrants in North America, Syrian refugees' contribution to sustaining agriculture has not yet been recognized. During the pandemic, displaced Syrians, alongside other migrant and seasonal workers, grow the food for their hosts—they might be barely visible, but the product of their hard labour ends up in supermarkets and on people's plates all over the Middle East. There is an urgent need to include displaced Syrians in broader calls to strengthen global food systems, and create conditions for decent work at the beginning of agricultural production chains and for all agricultural workers, refugees, migrants, and locals alike.



# 04

## Policy Recommendations





Even though wage agricultural workers make up a huge proportion of agricultural workforces and the rural poor, their specific needs and rights tend to be absent from international and nation-level efforts at promoting sustainable rural development and food security (Hurst *et al.*, 2007). There is already an extensive corpus of policy recommendations that seek to improve the living and working conditions of seasonal agricultural workers in the Middle East, and eliminate worst forms of child labour and gendered and other forms of discrimination (for an overview, see Development Workshop, 2016; FAO and ILO, 2017; Kattaa *et al.*, 2018; Tamkeen, 2014; Wenger and Abulfotuh, 2019). In this report, we formulate policy recommendations for measures that are specific to the COVID-19 pandemic and other humanitarian emergencies, and can mitigate the economic impact of crises on Syrian agricultural workers, and other vulnerable agricultural workers in the Middle East. This is not a fully comprehensive list of what needs to be done, but a list of key recommendations that we think should be prioritized. Our recommendations are addressed to humanitarian actors, nation-level and local governmental actors, as well as agricultural employers and workers' unions.

Prioritising refugee  
(and other migrant)  
agricultural workers  
among vulnerable  
target groups during  
emergencies



*Local and international humanitarian and development actors, and nation-level and local governmental actors*

Our study shows that in times of emergencies, including disasters, natural hazards, humanitarian crises, and pandemics, agricultural workers in the informal economy, among them refugees and displaced people, are disproportionately at risk of ill-health and losing livelihoods (cf. Development Workshop, 2020b). In the short-term, policymakers and development agencies should increase social protections for at-risk agricultural workers, including Syrian households, in particular by delivering unconditional cash-based assistance. This study has illustrated that in times of crisis, vulnerable agricultural workers risk falling deeper into poverty due to unemployment, underemployment, and a lack of social and economic safety nets that would enable them to weather the economic shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Syrian refugees in Middle Eastern host countries were not among the priority groups for social welfare support during the pandemic, governments, humanitarian organisations, and local NGOs should provide targeted social protections such as unemployment compensation

and cash-based assistance (or in-kind assistance, where cash-based assistance is not feasible due to supply problems in local markets), for the duration of the emergency. Cash-based transfers and vouchers are a proven modality for decreasing poverty and food insecurity particularly in humanitarian and refugee contexts, and can provide vulnerable groups with rapid relief from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. Harvey and Bailey, 2011; Doocy and Tappis, 2016; Golay and Tholstrup, 2020; UNHCR, 2020c). In addition, nutrition, shelter, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), and livelihood support should reach agricultural workers quickly to mitigate factors that put them particularly at risk of ill-health during the pandemic.

In preparation for future crises, governments and humanitarian actors should extend social protections to marginalized populations, including statutory sick pay, and establish lines of communication that allow them to reach at-risk populations quickly. This requires detailed knowledge of workers' living and working locations and movement trajectories during agricultural seasons, which service providers can only acquire through comprehensive mapping and situation assessment exercises and building trustful relationships with workers, as well as intermediaries and employers. Because of their precarious working and living conditions, refugee and migrant agricultural workers are repeatedly exposed to crises. These workers regularly face the complete loss of their livelihoods, not only due to extreme shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic, but also through recurrent floods and other extreme weather events (Development Workshop, 2020b). Hence, governments and humanitarian actors should develop emergency intervention plans so they are ready to provide timely assistance to agricultural workers at the onset of the next crisis.

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**Planning and  
implementing tailored  
interventions instead  
of 'one size fits all'  
approaches**



*Local and international humanitarian and development actors, and nation-level and local governmental actors*

As our study demonstrates, living and working conditions for vulnerable workers differ widely across countries and regions, as well as types of agricultural activities and seasons. Hence, governments and humanitarian actors should tailor their interventions to the specific needs of different demographics of agricultural workers during the pandemic. In our study, the

following populations turned out to be particularly at risk of labour exploitation and ill-health during the pandemic:

- Seasonal and migratory workers with a high degree of mobility;
- Workers residing temporarily inside agricultural worksites, especially in remote rural areas and in tent settlements with insufficient infrastructure for clean water, electricity, sanitation, etc.;
- Displaced women and children who were already working in agriculture before the pandemic.

Humanitarian actors should develop dedicated protocols and guidelines to ensure that the needs of displaced women and in children in particular are factored into the operational design of emergency interventions, and staff should receive training on working with these vulnerable groups, and on how to put these protocols and guidelines into practice. Tailored interventions require valid and sustainable models that fit the specific needs and conditions of different vulnerable groups, and are also appropriate to the characteristics of their host country and region (e.g. habitat, institutional capacities, type of agricultural production). For example, instead of including children of Syrian seasonal agricultural workers into the formal education system, humanitarian and governmental actors may consider alternative educational models such as mobile schools or teachers, school adoption training, and vocational education.

Developing a systemic approach to addressing pandemic-related pressures on agricultural supply chains in the Middle East, rather than treating refugee labour solely as a humanitarian issue



*Local and international humanitarian and development actors, nation-level and local governmental actors, private sector, unions of agricultural workers and employers, trade unions*

As our study shows, pandemic-related pressures on different elements of supply chains are passed down to the most vulnerable actors within the agricultural production chain: refugee and migrant workers. Hence, exploitative Syrian labour in times of crisis is not an isolated humanitarian issue that can be solved with more financial support targeted at displaced people alone. Instead, governments, humanitarian actors, private sector actors, and worker, employer, and trade unions should work together to ‘*crisis-proof*’ entire agricultural production chains and create safe working conditions for all categories of vulnerable workers. This includes:

- **Conducting proactive supply chain mapping and assessment of internal mechanisms:** Agricultural businesses, especially those exporting products and raw materials regionally and transnationally, should establish internal supply chain tracing systems. This should include their suppliers and subcontractors at different tiers. Full compliance with the UN Guiding Principles would require undocumented migrant work to be fully absent from subcontractors' supply chains (UN Human Rights Council, 2011). Agricultural businesses should assess their internal mechanisms, protocols, and workflows, and take necessary actions to meet requirements as well as enhance working conditions to achieve decent work standards. This will allow them to take a proactive stance on mitigating human rights violation risks, and will equip them to uphold decent work standards in times of crisis. Meanwhile, central or local level government agencies, unions, INGOs, and NGOs may closely monitor, ask for accountability, and support companies with collaborative projects.
- **Formalizing the role of agricultural intermediaries as a registered profession:** As our study shows, agricultural intermediaries have valuable knowledge about workers' whereabouts and needs during the pandemic, which should make them a prime source of information for governments and humanitarian actors. Nation-level governments should make the role of agricultural intermediaries a licensed profession, and intermediaries should be represented in unions for agricultural workers.
- **Creating new interfaces:** We propose the creation of an electronic platform for Syrian agricultural work opportunities under the supervision of government agencies and international organizations, or trade union organizations, to enhance opportunities for monitoring, documenting contracts, and improving working conditions for displaced Syrians across the Middle East. First, if policy actors invest in creating new interfaces that bring together workers and employers directly, it can improve their communication lines with workers in times of emergency. Second, this platform will create a database for Syrian agricultural workers seeking work, and it will facilitate connections between workers and employers looking for specific skill sets. Third, this type of database could help NGOs identify participants for cash-for-work or cash

assistance programmes as support for workers who lost their work due to COVID-19.

- **Support for agricultural employers in times of crisis:** As our study shows, employers cope with pandemic-related losses through cutting labour costs. In response to pandemic-related economic pressure, the employers we interviewed did not lower wages for individual workers, but they reduced the overall number of employees. Emergency support with labour costs targeted at employers will directly benefit agricultural workers by reducing the surplus of available labourers, and also keep struggling agricultural businesses afloat. Support for employers should be coupled with more monitoring of public health regulations and workplace standards, e.g. through frequent monitoring and workplace inspections, and imposing better record-keeping on workers. In addition, if key stakeholders support employers with agricultural inputs and fuel during the pandemic, this may also indirectly benefit workers.
- **Turning vulnerable and landless workers into agricultural producers:** Most migratory workers do not have access to land to cultivate their own vegetables or crops; in the case of Syrian and other refugees, lack of citizenship in host countries may prevent them from property ownership. Therefore, NGOs should design humanitarian projects that can create job opportunities, e.g. through establishing and supporting worker cooperative associations, renting land for displaced farmers, and empowering individual refugee farmers to rent land themselves for cultivation or livestock production. Some local NGOs in northwest Syria already successfully assist internally displaced people with renting land for personal consumption or for establishing community gardens (e.g. Syrian Academic Expertise and Malteser International). Humanitarian and governmental actors in all study countries should explore opportunities for facilitating access to land and providing vulnerable workers with agricultural inputs and machinery, as well as start-up loans.

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