



UNITED NATIONS

الأمم المتحدة
ESCWA

The National Agenda for the Future of Syria (NAFS) Programme
Towards post-conflict Reconciliation and Rebuilding in Syria - *by Syrians, for Syrians*

NAFS Quarterly Newsletter

September 2019



Women and Agriculture in Syria

Page 2-3

Bottom-up Approach to Rehabilitate Rural Agriculture in Syria

Page 4-6

Women and Agriculture in Syria

Syrians have identified issues within the agriculture sector, such as the gender gap, as contributors to the root causes of the Syrian conflict. Agriculture has traditionally been a pillar sector for Syria and it is expected to significantly contribute to household resilience and peacebuilding in post-conflict Syria. In rural areas, women are usually responsible for food security and nutrition within the household, however they do not have the same rights as men. It is important to close the gender gap in the agriculture sector to ensure its important role in Syria in the future.

The Importance of the Syrian Agriculture Sector



Prior¹ to the conflict, there were several trading routes for food supply to, from, and through Syria. Lebanon exported its agriculture and food produce to Syria primarily through its Masnaa crossing. From there, the food produce journeyed on to Jordan through the Nassib crossing on the Syrian–Jordanian border and then to the GCC. Turkey exported its produce through two major routes: the first to Syria through the Bab al-Hawa crossing and then onto Jordan and the GCC. Syria was one of the breadbaskets of the region, exporting cereals, fruits and vegetables to its neighboring countries and the Gulf States². According to the Syrian Arab Republic Situation Report, November 2018, 6.7 million people are food insecure and a further 4.5 million are at risk of food insecurity with the country dependent on grain imported mainly from Russia.

For decades, the systematic mismanagement in the agriculture sector led to the pre-conflict migration and humanitarian crisis, leading to the current Syrian conflict. The agriculture sector was heavily reliant on state support and management³. The government's response to the drought of 2006-2008 included the removal of fuel subsidies to raise funds for farmers to pump water. The cut in fuel subsidies increased the cost of irrigation and transportation of produce for farmers⁴. As a result, many farmers left their farmlands for off-farm incomes or more lucrative industries outside their rural settings, such as construction in neighboring countries, whereas women remained on the farmlands with their children.

The conflict also has had a drastic impact on the agriculture sector in Syria. Despite the damages in the agriculture sector, it has remained a major component of the economy, contributing 26% to the total gross domestic product (GDP) in 2017⁵. Men normally involved in farming activities are injured, detained, killed or forced to join the fight due to the conflict. Moreover, the burning of crops as well as the confiscation and destruction of lands caused many land owners and farmers to flee for safety reasons. Furthermore, the shortages in fertilizers, rising production costs due to damages in the farming equipment, as well as in the water and electricity sectors have worsened the food security situation and left populations unable to produce their food⁶. By 2016, 90 percent of the surveyed households in Syria, spent more than half of their income on food⁷.

The Role of Women in Agriculture in Syria:

In Syria, men were often the bread winners of the household and believed that it is their primary responsibility to provide for their families⁸. However, women constituted half of the farming work force although their control over assets was restricted⁹, and played a key role in household food security and nutrition. Women were perceived as 'helpers' and not farmers, thus their decision-making in the agricultural input has always been limited¹⁰.

After 8 years of conflict, many men have been killed, injured, forced to flee the country or join the fighting, and that consequently decreased the number of working-age men in agriculture. Women increased their participation in the public sphere and became more involved in the labor force and society although women in regions under control of radical religious groups were increasingly marginalized. Thus, the conflict is likely to have increased the feminization of the agricultural labor force¹¹. This feminization trend is generally common during conflicts, in which the role of women is often accelerated as men leave home¹². Women are now breadwinners in one-third of households.

Food security is at the core of peace building and sustainable development thereafter¹⁴. According to Brooks, Jonathan (2016), "Food security and the Sustainable Development Goals", in Patrick Love (ed.), *Debate the Issues: New Approaches to Economic Challenges*, OECD Publishing, Paris, the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include a significant number of interconnected objectives related to agriculture and food. SDG 2 focuses explicitly on food by seeking to "end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture", but multiple other goals relate to challenges in the food system. When implementing rehabilitation programs for agriculture, the role of women needs to be well-acknowledged in policymaking. During the Syrian conflict, some rural areas had around 90 percent of their agriculture workforce as women¹⁵.

Empowering women in agriculture is an important factor in reaching justice, social cohesion and reconciliation since it helps women achieve food security, alleviate poverty, and seek comprehensive and inclusive economic rights. Moreover, Security Council resolutions have highlighted the role of women as key factors in economic recovery and social cohesion¹⁶.

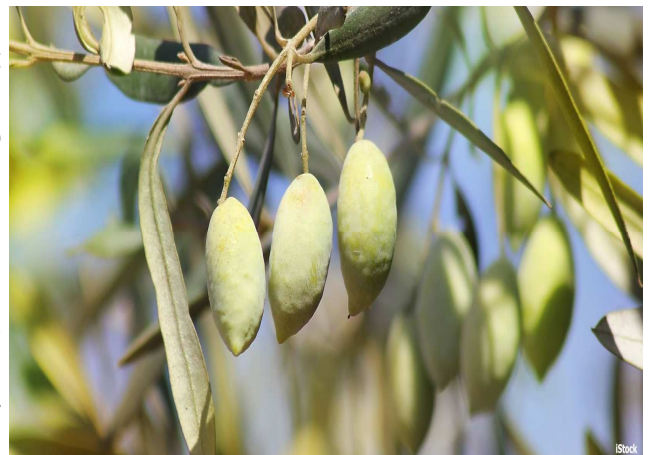
The aim of empowering women is to reduce the negative impact of the conflict and to help the community avoid further poverty, marginalization and reliance on humanitarian aid¹⁷. Giving priority for women as beneficiaries of food aid and social protection can significantly improve household resilience and peacebuilding. Closing the gender gap in agriculture would produce economic and societal gains for the sector and the Syrian economy that would help build peaceful and inclusive societies. Experience and evidence show that women are more likely to spend their incomes on food, healthcare and education. Hence, they are critical for survival during conflict, as well as being the drivers in post-conflict recovery (UN Women, 2012). For that reason, it is important to empower rural women in agriculture, to guarantee their rights to access and use the resources and to participate in managing these resources.

Bottom-up Approach to Rehabilitate Rural Agriculture in Syria

Inequalities and social exclusion are major drivers of conflicts ¹. Prior to the conflict, the Syrian political scene was characterized by poor civic engagement ². The struggle to expand political participation contributed to the outbreak of eight years of armed conflict. During the conflict, Syrians' sense of belonging deteriorated due to the fragmentation of land, displacement, and weakening of the administrative ability of the government. These issues are more prominent in the rural areas where many of the battlefronts have taken place. It is necessary to promote a context-based, bottom-up community engagement to increase the inclusiveness of peace-building efforts and enhance community resilience to prevent conflict relapse. Bearing in mind that rehabilitation of the agriculture sector will be instrumental to facilitate return and socio-economic inclusion, this article examines the significance of a bottom-up approach for community engagement in rural agricultural-based areas.

The Context of Rural Agriculture in Syria

Prior to the conflict, Syria had a centralized government that controlled policies and development plans through a top-down approach. The Syrian governance system made it difficult for citizens to reflect their political opinions to policies and laws. Moreover, the agriculture sector, a pillar of the Syrian economy, was managed with a strong incentive and was impacted by the many policies that were implemented throughout the years by the government. The drought from 2006-2008 which hit hard the agriculture sector, in addition to other important factors caused the rural population, especially those from regions that relied on rainfall, to migrate to urban areas.



Throughout the Syrian conflict, the Syrian government lost its authority over certain territories, and in some parts of Syria, various armed actors shared control areas of the area. This made it difficult for civilians to determine which institutions would address their specific grievances. Moreover, arbitrary detentions and problematic property rights laws, among others, obstructed the restoration of trust in the state. In light of the conflict, many local initiatives emerged, including those that solely upheld the administrative and governing objective in the community ⁵. As their contribution to the society increased, the Syrian civil society is now well placed to become an important actor to reverse the impact of the conflict and build a better future.

Rural areas were disproportionately affected by the conflict. Many of the battle frontlines were located in rural areas and the inhabitants, mainly employed in the agriculture sector, fled for security concerns or were killed, injured, imprisoned or disappeared. Deliberate attacks on farmlands, destruction of agriculture infrastructure, rise in production costs and displacement adversely affected the sector ⁶. Moreover, due to mass displacement from rural to urban areas, certain urban areas are under socio-economic pressure and increased inequality.

Addressing the Root Causes and Reversing the Impact of the Conflict

In a post-conflict state where state institutions might not be capable of providing oversight for the population, local non-state actors may be able to play a role in complementing them. Taking a bottom-up approach is important for the determination of needs and the provision of services, also considering the increased role of the Syrian civil society. The conflict has been costly for Syria, but it is also providing an opportunity to increase community resilience through inclusive local initiatives.

In addition, the agriculture sector is a strategic option to start to effectively restore sustainable peace in Syria. It is a key sector to provide livelihoods for the rural population, ensure food security, and rehabilitate the national economy. The deterioration of the agriculture sector and increased disparities between rural and urban areas were some of the root causes of the conflict. Return to rural areas could be facilitated through effectively rehabilitating the agriculture sector in order to mitigate the socio-economic pressures in urban areas.

Moreover, promoting social cohesion and reconciliation within the local community is paramount considering the scope of damage to the rural areas. For example, locally owned producers' associations with clearly defined structures and individual responsibilities may play a role to mediate contestation over water resources. Often it is not the scarcity of water resources but the way it is mismanaged that creates tension⁷. Similarly, issues surrounding land ownership could be addressed through local initiatives as many of the farmers who abandoned their lands might return after the conflict ends. There are also cases when local farmers claim the unjust confiscation of land by state institutions⁸. In the context of the ailing Syrian judicial system, loss of civil documentation, and HLP issues, locally trusted systems could be an informal mediator when land disputes arise.

Local initiatives may also address issues surrounding displacement, especially considering that access to productive assets and the rehabilitation of agricultural infrastructure are

Points of concern for the returnees⁹. Regarding the strong sense of local identity of the Syrians, restoring the social capital through supporting a bottom-up approach could be itself a factor to facilitate return. The most undesirable scenario is the friction between returnees or IDPs and the local community leading to a relapse of violence.

Kenya's Case of a Bottom-up Approach to Peace-building

Informal initiatives in rural areas are effective partners to promote a bottom-up inclusive approach. In the absence of state authority, local population might form informal structures that would provide solutions to certain issues they face, including access to resources, dispute resolution and sharing of assets. In past case studies, these local initiatives have responded to local needs with a much more conflict sensitive approach than their governments¹⁰. Implementation of projects must not undermine the local efforts to address local needs and issues. Those actors must be included in the programming or policy making to make these processes more inclusive and context-sensitive to that community. Furthermore, international aid agencies may equip them with expertise to enhance the efficacy and equity of their activities.

In 1993, a violent conflict emerged between different clans of Kenyan Somalis in the Wajir district of Kenya and resulted in over 1200 casualties¹¹. The violence was caused by weak state institutions that failed to regulate conflict, limited natural resources due to drought, influx of refugees from Somalia and Ethiopia, and availability of small arms. In 1993, a group of women initiated a movement to achieve peace in the region. This informal initiative for peace consisted of civil society participants and engaged elders from different clans. They succeeded in bringing together the elders to sign a code of conduct and maintain peace in the district. Initially, this was an informal initiative at the local level but eventually it was institutionalized as a peace committee to involve government actors. Other districts duplicated the successful Wajir model. When violence re-erupted in 2007, districts with peace committees reported much less violence.

In rural Syria, state institutions are absent or have weakened, and destruction of infrastructure and remnants of war limit the already scarce agricultural assets. In Wajir, violence erupted in a similar circumstance to this. A lesson learnt from the case of Wajir is that in a situation in which it is difficult for the state to implement peace and justice, the local population may initiate its own movement to mediate conflicts and mitigate tensions with a context-sensitive approach. Informal initiatives could become facilitators of sustainable peace by preventing an escalation of violence at the local level. Moreover, as the local informal initiative was institutionalized in Wajir, there is a possibility of local initiatives being evolved to the political level to benefit the whole Syria.



Bibliography:

Women and Agriculture in Syria:

- ¹ Cooke, K. (2019). Syria's agriculture must be at the centre of any economic revival after war. Middle East Eye. Retrieved. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/syrias-agriculture-must-be-centre-any-economic-revival-after-war>.
- ² United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), "Syrian Arab Republic Situation Report", November 2018
- ³ Basma Alloush, "The importance of the agricultural sector for Syria's stability", Chatham House, Beirut, 11 July 2019. <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/the-importance-of-the-agricultural-sector-for-syrias-stability>
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ Ibid
- ⁶ United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), "Counting the Cost: Agriculture in Syria after six years of crisis", 2017
- ⁷ Ibid
- ⁸ Galiè, A., Jiggins, J., & Struik, P. C. (2013). Women's identity as farmers: A case study from ten households in Syria. *NJAS-Wageningen Journal of Life Sciences*, 64, 25-33.
- ⁹ Middleton, S., Ohman, L., Dorsher, P., Al Kaddour, A., & Folan, A. (may 2018). Resilience through Humanitarian Assistance: Agriculture in the Syrian Conflict. *Global Communities*, 24-24. Retrieved June 27, 2019.
- ¹⁰ Galiè, A., Jiggins, J., & Struik, P. C. (2013). Women's identity as farmers: A case study from ten households in Syria. *NJAS-Wageningen Journal of Life Sciences*, 64, 25-33.
- ¹¹ Galiè, A., Jiggins, J., Struik, P. C., Grando, S., & Ceccarelli, S. (2017). Women's empowerment through seed improvement and seed governance: Evidence from participatory barley breeding in pre-war Syria. *NJAS-Wageningen Journal of Life Sciences*, 81, 1-8.
- ¹² Tieman, R. (2018). What does the rise of female farmers mean for agriculture? *Financial Times*. Retrieved August 6, 2019, from <https://www.ft.com/content/a8dee408-a470-11e8-a1b6-f368d365bf0e>.
- ¹³ Hilton, D. (n.d.). The Shifting Role of Women in Syria's Economy. The Tahir Institute for Middle East Policy. Retrieved June 25, 2019, from <https://timep.org/syrias-women/economy/the-shifting-role-of-women-in-syrias-economy/>.
- ¹⁴ NAFS Phase II Energy sector gap analysis. (2018). United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.
- ¹⁵ Hilton, D. (n.d.). The Shifting Role of Women in Syria's Economy. The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. Retrieved June 25th, 2019, from <https://timep.org/syrias-women/economy/the-shifting-role-of-women-in-syrias-economy/>.
- ¹⁶ "Peace and Food Security: Investing in Resilience to Sustain Rural Livelihoods amid Conflict." Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, March 2016, p. 22., www.fao.org/3/a-i5591e.pdf.

Bottom-up Approach to Rehabilitate Rural Agriculture in Syria

¹ World Bank Group, United Nations. 2018. *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*. pp.109. Retrieved 22 July 2019 from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28337>

² National Agenda for the Future of Syria. 2017. *The Strategic Policy Alternative Framework*. pp.12. Retrieved 22 July 2019 from https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/events/files/spaf_synopsis.pdf

³ Ibid

⁴ Basma Alloush, Chatham House. 2018. *The importance of the agricultural sector for Syria's stability*. Retrieved 22 July 2019 from <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/the-importance-of-the-agricultural-sector-for-syrias-stability>

⁵ *The Strategic Policy Alternative Framework*. pp.20.

⁶ Food and Agriculture Organization, World Food Programme. 2018. *Special Report: FAO/ WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic*. pp.5. Retrieved 22 July 2019 from <http://www.fao.org/3/CA1805EN/ca1805en.pdf>

⁷ World Bank Group, United Nations. 2018. *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*. pp.152. Retrieved 22 July 2019 from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28337>

⁸ The Syria Report. 2019. *Farmers, Powerful Investor Clash Over Land Rights*. Retrieved 22 July 2019 from <https://www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate-construction/farmers-powerful-investor-clash-over-land-rights>

⁹ *Special Report: FAO/ WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic*. pp.43.

¹⁰ International Peace Initiative. 2018. *Local Peacebuilders Share Views on Challenges to Sustaining Peace*. Retrieved 22 July 2019 from <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2018/04/local-peacebuilders-views-challenges-sustaining-peace/>

¹¹ United Nations Development Programme. 2010. *An Architecture for Building Peace at the Local Level: A Comparative Study of Local Peace Committees*. pp.40-42. Retrieved 22 July 2019 from https://www.un.org/en/land-natural-resources-conflict/pdfs/UNDP_Local%20Peace%20Committees_2011.pdf



NAFS Quarterly Newsletter aims to give an insight into the research and initiatives of the National Agenda for the Future of Syria (NAFS) Programme.

Editors: Yarob Badr, Elias Ghadban, Nour Jundi, Mohamad Hassan, Yazan Yatim and Asya El-Meehy.

Cover Photo : Yarob Badr

Design: Ammar Moussa

The publication of this Quarterly was made possible by the contributions of Samer Bolbol for the article "Women and Agriculture in Syria", and Yuki Nakamura for the article "Bottom-up Approach to Rehabilitate Rural Agriculture in Syria" .

The views expressed in this document, which has been reproduced without formal editing, are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of ESCWA.

For more information about NAFS, please visit our website nafsprogramme.info or contact us on escwa-nafs@un.org.