Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion

November 2025

The protracted crisis in Syria had long-lasting effects on the livelihoods of the population, including Syrian refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), who were forced to flee their homes, leaving behind not only their possessions but also their livelihoods.

Following the political transition in December 2024, 1.9 million IDPs returned to their areas of origin, while around 1.2 million Syrian refugees returned from outside Syria until the end of November. However, many continue to face significant challenges in finding means of earning a living.

UNHCR provides livelihood support to the most vulnerable people— with a particular focus on returnees— to increase their self-reliance, reduce their dependency on humanitarian assistance and mitigate the risks of engaging in harmful coping strategies.

14.3 million
people in Syria
in need of livelihoods and early recovery assistance in 2025*

3.2 million
IDPs & Syrian refugees returned to their areas from December 2024 to the end of November

50%
of IDPs in northern Syria find lack of livelihoods the main factor preventing their return to their areas of origin*

Background

Unemployment, job losses, and limited access to essential services continue to pose major obstacles for Syrians in meeting their basic needs. According to the Humanitarian Response Priorities in Syria, 14.3 million people are currently in need of livelihoods and early recovery assistance.

The agricultural sector which represents a key part of the economy in Syria, was heavily affected during the 13 years of crisis, including the destruction of irrigation canals supplying water to tens of thousands of farmers. In addition, Syria has been suffering from drought – caused by insufficient winter rainfall– described by the UN as the worst since 1989 which compounded the problem.

Due to limited livelihoods opportunities in the country, many families are turning to harmful coping strategies—such as borrowing money, selling assets, or engaging in high-risk or degrading work, child labour and early marriage - which undermine long-term resilience and increase exposure to serious protection risks.

According to the Flash Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria, limited access to employment and livelihoods represents the second barriers to return to the country in the next 12 months following the lack of adequate housing.

UNHCR livelihoods assistance

UNHCR is providing support to vulnerable people, particularly returnees to start-up small businesses in urban and rural areas. UNHCR is also restoring basic services and socio-economic infrastructure that are critical to boosting local economic activities in areas experiencing significant returns.

As part of its medium- to long-term strategy, UNHCR leverages its comparative advantages— including long-standing field presence, expertise, data and analysis capabilities, as well as its network of community

* *Humanitarian Response Priorities 2025*
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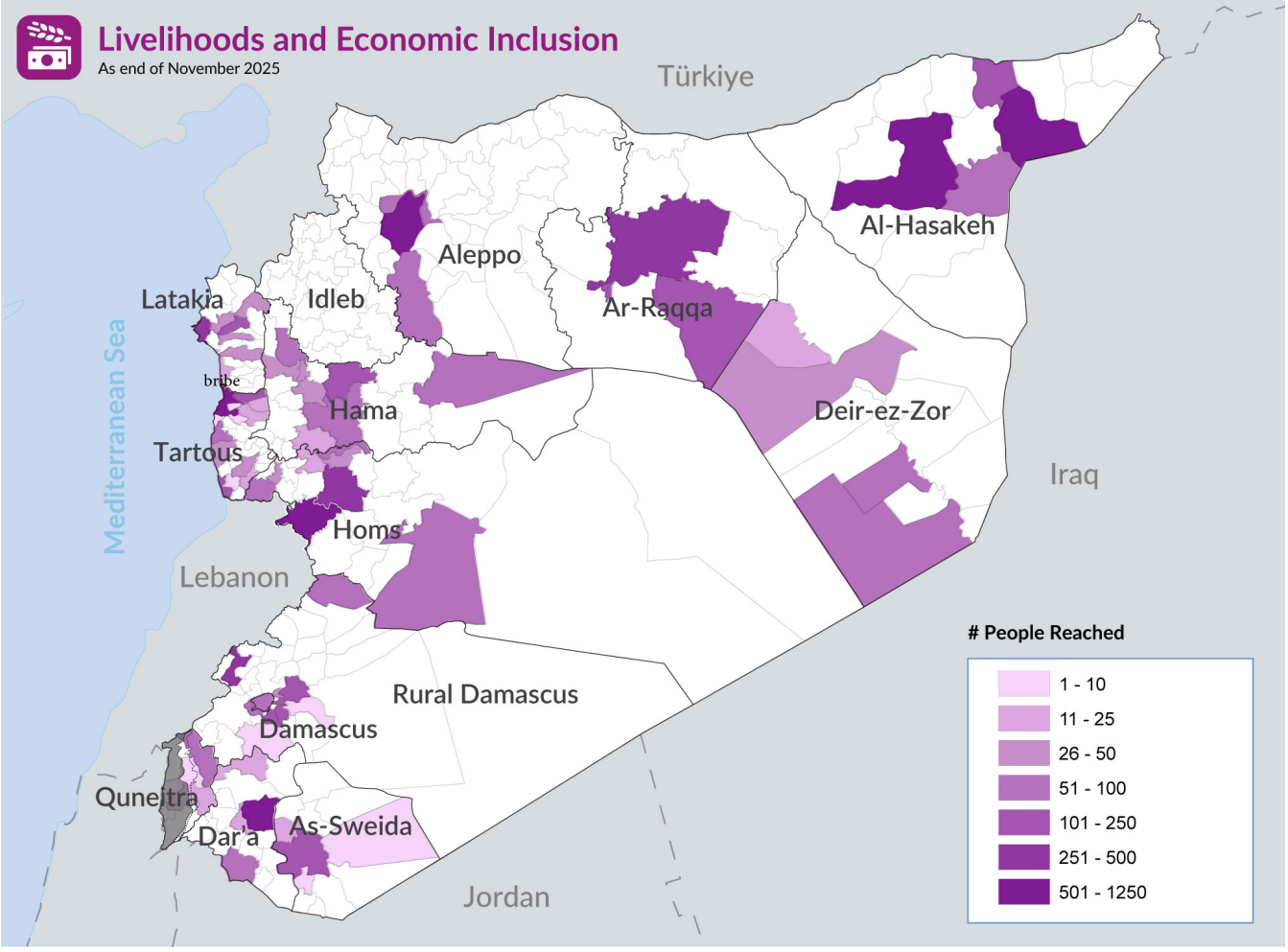
centres - to engage a wide range of actors in these efforts. This includes financial service providers, cooperation with local authorities, UN agencies, development actors, and the private sector with the aim of promoting sustainable responses and advancing protection, resilience, and solutions.



Livelihoods and economic inclusion strategy (2026–2029)

UNHCR Syria's 2026–2029 livelihoods and economic inclusion strategy adopts a catalytic and area-based approach to support sustainable return and reintegration. Shifting from direct service delivery to strategic coordination, the strategy prioritizes scalable innovative initiatives, enhanced engagement with development actors, and gradual shift to longer-term recovery and development-led investments. It focuses on strengthening legal and policy frameworks, expanding access to national, financial services and skills development, as well as rehabilitating key infrastructure in return areas.

UNHCR will utilize community centres to serve as hubs for coordination, job matching, and financial inclusion. This approach aims to empower returnees to achieve self-reliance, participate in local economies, and contribute to peaceful, resilient communities.

Key Objectives of UNHCR's livelihood strategy

1. Enhance institutional capacity and investment in areas experiencing significant returns.
2. Empower returnees and host communities for economic participation.
3. Provide transitional livelihoods support.

Small business start-up projects

UNHCR provides entrepreneurship and business training as well as financial support to vulnerable people mainly returnees to start up or revitalize their small businesses.

Mohammad, a father of seven, works in his car maintenance shop in Douma, Rural Damascus. After years of hardship and displacement, he rebuilt his business through UNHCR's assistance. ©UNHCR/ V.Toumeh

The candidates are identified through the UNHCR-supported community centres, outreach volunteers and protection caseworkers, based on socio-economic factors such as family size, income level, displacement, gender roles, individual skill sets and vulnerability.

Through training, the participants acquire essential business skills such as accounting and customer service, preparing detailed business plans and market studies, as well as assessing technical feasibility and financial viability. Upon the successful completion of the training, the participants become eligible to receive support (cash or in-kind) to implement their business plans and operate their projects.

The small businesses supported by UNHCR span a variety of sectors including, but not limited to, production-related enterprises (e.g. small-scale manufacturing, building and construction), service industry (e.g. shoe repair, auto repairs, computer/mobile maintenance, food catering, tailoring) and retail (e.g. grocery store and clothes shop).

From January to November 2025, 5,986 people participated in entrepreneurship and business training with over 1,500 receiving cash grants to start up or run a small business

Souad clears her debts

After the tragic loss of her husband, Souad was left overwhelmed by debt and struggled to support her family. Determined to change her circumstances, she turned to a local organization and enrolled in an entrepreneurship course facilitated by UNHCR in 2024. With newfound hope, she received a cash grant to start a dairy production business upon successful completion of the course.

Souad sells dairy products in her shop ©UNHCR

Through dedication and hard work, Souad established a shop specialized in producing cheese and milk products, reaching a daily output of 100 kilograms. The business not only provided her with a stable income but also enabled her to repay accumulated debts.

"This newfound stability allowed me to afford essential medical care for my diabetic daughter, support my children's education, and fulfill my daughter's dream of pursuing higher education after finishing school", Souad shared.
Building on her success, Souad secured additional funding from a microfinance institution to expand her business during the profitable sheep milk season—further strengthening her family's resilience and future prospects.

Small-scale repairs of livelihoods-related basic services

UNHCR focuses on facilities and services that generate positive social and economic impacts for returnee communities, including job creation, capacity-building, and enhanced employability—while addressing protection concerns and contributing to the broader economy.

UNHCR and its partners rehabilitate essential livelihood-related infrastructure affected by the conflict, such as vocational training centres/schools, collective agricultural irrigation systems, water canals, and local markets.

Repairing irrigation infrastructure enhances farmers' resilience

Years of conflict and a devastating earthquake left many Syrian farmers without irrigation, threatening their livelihoods and food security. In Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor and Latakia Governorates, thousands of hectares of farmland lay dry, and over 15,000 households struggled to survive. UNHCR and FAO stepped in to rehabilitate irrigation systems, restoring vital water access. Works included installing and testing pumping sets, generators, and transformers, reviving irrigation across over 6,000 hectares of agricultural lands. Civil works reshaped canals and built water basins, ensuring efficient and sustainable water flow. In Latakia, a major hydraulic system was also upgraded, covering 14,400 households and securing summer irrigation. Water users' groups were established to empower farmers in managing and maintaining irrigation systems. These interventions boosted agricultural productivity, enabling displaced families to return to their areas and rebuild their lives.

The irrigation system in Ghanem Ali village (Ar-Raqqa) was rehabilitated as part of a project to restore access to water. The initiative, supported by UNHCR, included repairing a pumping set and improving the main water distribution system, benefiting around 300 households affected by years of damage. ©UNHCR

Impact of UNHCR's livelihood interventions

Last year, UNHCR conducted a post-intervention monitoring of the small business start-up projects, with 384 households interviewed across 123 communities in all 14 governorates. The majority were refugee and IDP returnees, followed by IDPs, host community members, and refugees and asylum-seekers. Around 43% of participants were female and 33% had members with special needs. The monitoring exercise showed that the UNHCR livelihoods interventions positively impacted the household's socio-economic well-being as follows:

Increased households' ability to meet basic needs (food, water, rent, heating etc.) **87%**	Provided households with a regular source of income and helped in covering debt **57%**
Increased households' ability to meet health and medicines needs **48%**	Allowed households to save money that would not have been able to before **41%**
Increased households' ability to meet educational needs of children or relatives (e.g., fees, uniforms, meals, books etc.) **37%**	Improved well-being (e.g. independence, esteem etc.) **33%**
Allowed expansion in projects **27%**	Increased households' ability to repair houses **13%**
Enhanced households' access to resources (e.g. secured access to goods through retail traders) **13%**	Other (i.e. project did not generate income nor reached expected outcome) **2%** (2 households)

Livelihoods and early recovery interventions in 2025

- Four vocational training schools and one public market providing services to over 12,000 individuals will be repaired by UNHCR in Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia Governorates.
- Over 4,000 individuals will receive entrepreneurship/business training across Syrian governorates.
- Over 2,000 households will benefit from small start-up business support in governorates experiencing significant returns.
- Over 1,200 individuals will benefit from access to national/financial services, on-the-job training/apprenticeship schemes, and incentives/wages from infrastructure projects.

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