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Lebanon: **Children's future on the line**

The devastating, compounding impacts of economic depression, COVID-19, the Beirut Port explosions and political instability



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Hadi¹, a 15-year-old Lebanese child, spends five hours a day picking fruit in Ismaeie, southern Lebanon. The backbreaking work enables him to supplement his family's meagre income, but it comes at the expense of his schooling.

Mousa², a Syrian refugee who is also 15, cleans windshields at a busy intersection in the city of Saida. His father is too sick to work, and his mother has passed away. **“Now, I bring home the only money to buy food and pay rent,”** says Mousa, who makes the equivalent of about \$3 a day.

These days, the two face increasing competition from other children as more and more families struggle to cope with falling incomes and sky-rocketing prices amid Lebanon's economic collapse – which is likely to rank among the worst financial crises the world has seen since the mid-19th century³.

The prolonged economic depression is just one of the mutually reinforcing crises in Lebanon, which is reeling from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the massive August 2020 Beirut Port explosions, as well as persistent political instability. In addition, Lebanon has the highest proportion of refugees per capita in the world, hosting 1.5 million Syrians and over 200,000 Palestinian refugees.

Faced with major inflation and rising unemployment, people are finding it increasingly difficult to access basic services – as their quality continues to rapidly decline. Poverty among the Lebanese almost doubled to 55 per cent in 2020, from 28 percent in 2018, while extreme poverty tripled from 8 percent⁴.

Children across Lebanon are the worst hit. With no end in sight to the devastating crisis, their health and safety are at risk and their very future is at stake.

A growing number of parents are finding it impossible to provide for their children. Having exhausted all other options, many are taking desperate measures to support their families, including sending their children to work, marrying off their young girls, skipping meals and incurring debt they can't afford. Children, some as young as 6, work in the streets, in agricultural fields and garages or on construction sites, where they are exposed to risks of exploitation, violence and abuse.

¹ [Read Hadi's story](#)

² [Read Mousa's story](#)

³ [World Bank, Lebanon Economic Monitor, Spring 2021](#)

⁴ [ESCWA policy brief 15 \(2020\)](#)



“Life has never been as hard as it is today,” says Fadia, a mother of two, pointing out that even during the (1975-1989) Lebanese war, no child ever had to leave school and go to work. Now, rather than studying, Fadia’s sons, aged 15 and 17, spend five hours a day picking oranges. Even with their support, there isn’t always enough money to put food on the table. **“When we have money, we buy what we need. If we don’t have money, we don’t eat,”** says Fadia.

Jobs are increasingly hard to come by, particularly for youth, who, even before the crisis, were already more likely than others to be unemployed – 34 per cent of the young people are unemployed.

The dire economic situation, combined with pandemic-related lockdowns, has often caused tensions and anxiety within households, resulting in increased risks of violence, with women and girls in a particularly vulnerable situation.

Across Lebanon’s population, every group is affected, Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians.

The compounding crises affect just about every aspect of children’s lives, including education, nutrition and mental health. **Eighty per cent of children in Lebanon are worse off than they were at the beginning of 2020,** according to the Child-Focused Rapid Assessment (CFRA)⁵ conducted by UNICEF in April 2021.



“Food prices are so high now that I can’t keep us adequately fed every day,” says Syrian refugee Rehaf (23), a mother of three. She says her family survives on bread and zaatar. **“My children eat first, and if there’s anything left, I’ll eat that.”**

⁵ Conducted by telephone among 1,244 households

CHILDREN ARE GOING HUNGRY



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OVER 30%

of families had at least one child who skipped a meal

77%

of households said they did not have enough food

The rapid assessment revealed that over 30 per cent of families had at least one child who skipped a meal or went to bed hungry in March 2021, and 77 per cent of households said they did not have enough food or enough money to buy food. For Syrian households, the figure was a staggering 99 per cent. In addition, one in five households did not have enough drinking water.



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CHILDREN AT RISK AS FAMILIES STRUGGLE TO COPE

Because they do not have enough money for food, medicine or other essentials, and in the absence of a coherent and comprehensive social protection system, many households resort to negative coping mechanisms that often place children at risk. Nine per cent of families sent their child to work, 15 per cent stopped their children's education and 60 per cent had to buy food on credit or borrow money. The situation is even worse for Syrian households, at 22 per cent, 35 per cent and 100 per cent respectively. There is also evidence that more families are marrying off their young daughters to reduce their economic burden.

15%

of families stopped their children's education

60%

had to buy food on credit or borrow money

Tahane, 12 years old

She has to study online due to covid restrictions.

Children and youth are being impacted differently by school closures, depending on the community they belong to. While Lebanese learners had the option to follow an online curriculum, all those surveyed reported difficulties studying online. Syrians and Palestinians meanwhile reported that there was no provision for online learning through their schools.

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CHILDREN'S HEALTH IN PERIL



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76%

of households said they were affected by increases in medication prices

The economic crisis, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut Port explosions, further devastated the health system, which was already in crisis, with severe repercussions on access to health services. The survey shows that 30 per cent of children were not receiving the primary health care they needed, while 76 per cent of households said they were affected by the massive increase in medication prices. Despite the huge challenges, primary health care consultations – including paediatric and reproductive health consultations – are still being provided, though they dropped 15 per cent in 2020, compared to

30%

of children were not receiving the primary health care they needed

2019. Immunizations were also affected, falling by 20 per cent in the same period.

Among vulnerable families, children's health also had been severely affected by a lack of adequate nutrition, as well as the near collapse of water and wastewater services. In addition, an estimated 600,000 children live in the area affected by the massive explosions on 4 August 2020 in the Port of Beirut that killed more than 200 people, injured over 6,500, psychologically affected many residents and caused widespread damage.

CHILDREN'S FUTURE AT STAKE



With food prices soaring by 400 per cent in December 2020, and annual inflation hitting a record high of almost 85 per cent, an increasing number of households are sinking into poverty and vulnerability. The April 2021 assessment indicated that 40 per cent of children are from families where no one has work, and 77 per cent of children are from families that do not receive any social assistance. As the crisis shows no signs of easing, this is particularly worrying for the future of the 2.1 million children living in Lebanon, 64 per cent of whom need support⁶. The CFRA showed that 80 per cent of parents or other primary caregivers had concerns for their children given the current situation, with many worried about the children's future, education, safety and health.



40%

of children are from families where no one has work

77%

are from families that do not receive any social assistance

⁶ [Lebanon Crisis Response Plan population planning figures 2021](#)

EDUCATION IN CRISIS



over **400,000**
children out of school

25%
of families could not afford the
tools needed for online learning

The COVID-19 pandemic, political and social instability, the August explosions and the economic crisis have combined to deal major blows to education in Lebanon. School closures affected over 1.2 million school-age children in 2020, while poverty and other factors kept over 400,000 children out of school. Making matters worse, the explosions damaged 183 educational facilities, affecting over 77,000 students. Schools implemented distance learning, but the April assessment showed that 25 per cent of families could not afford the tools needed for online learning, such as computers and access to the internet. Those who can access remote

learning have to contend with a highly erratic power supply. Seventy-five per cent of children aged 6-14 had difficulty concentrating or were unable to concentrate on their studies at home, which is possibly indicative of hunger and mental distress.

Schools first shut down during a wave of protests in October 2019. While some students were able to return to class in the first two months of 2020, schools closed again after COVID-19 hit. With insufficient access to distance learning tools, students have been out of meaningful learning for almost two academic years.

THE NEED FOR URGENT ACTION

The outlook for the future is grim. The World Bank⁷ says the economy looks likely to contract by a further 9.5 per cent in 2021 and has warned that there is “no clear turning point in the horizon.” As the country teeters on the brink of economic collapse, a persisting political stalemate means addressing the root causes of the crisis is certain to prove extremely challenging. But there are immediate measures that can and must be taken.

“We urge the Lebanese authorities to take every step possible to protect all children in Lebanon. Their health, safety and future are at ever greater risk as the crisis keeps getting worse. Determined, concerted action is critical to mitigate the suffering, particularly among the most vulnerable, who are trapped in a spiral of poverty.” Yukie Mokuo, UNICEF Representative in Lebanon.

UNICEF reinforces its call on the national authorities to urgently:

- **Implement a major expansion of social assistance,** including providing cash assistance to the most vulnerable groups, such as households with children and people with disabilities. This can help establish conditions for a quicker, people-centred recovery and preserve Lebanon's most precious asset: its human and social capital. It also reduces the risk of families resorting to child labour and other negative coping practices. The building blocks are already in place including a sector plan and newly designed programmes to provide social grants.
- **Ensure financial access to quality education for all children.** This entails developing an inclusive education policy and funding mechanisms, and a national plan for every child to have proper access to e-learning platforms.
- **Ensure financial access to strengthened primary health-care services.** There is growing evidence that investments in primary health care (PHC) have a wide-ranging impact, particularly in times of crisis. PHC is critical to give newborn children a healthy start in life and prevent the spread of diseases. Access to routine immunization is one area that needs to be strengthened in Lebanon, by reinforcing policy related to free vaccination at PHC level and finding fiscal space to finance vaccine procurement.

⁷ [World Bank, Lebanon Economic Monitor, Spring 2021](#)

UNICEF'S RESPONSE

UNICEF provides life-saving support to children, protects their rights and helps them achieve their potential. Despite the challenges, UNICEF continues to play a major role in the response to the economic crisis in Lebanon, the impact of COVID-19 and the Beirut explosions.



Response to the economic crisis

UNICEF is providing critical support to children and their families, most notably in WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene), education and child protection. An Integrated Child Grant, known as Haddi, will support 70,000 Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian children. UNICEF has also scaled up efforts to address malnutrition and provide mental health support to vulnerable children, particularly those engaged in child labour – who often have no access to education – and to children who experienced or are at risk of violence. UNICEF supports efforts to prevent the collapse of water services and spent \$6.9 million in repairs and maintenance of water systems in the first quarter of 2021 to secure services for up to 4 million people. Fuel shortages have severely affected the operation of pumping stations and power plants and have prevented farmers from irrigating their fields.

The Beirut explosions response

UNICEF is supporting the rehabilitation of the Karantina hospital's children and maternity wards and schools damaged by the explosions. It also brought a chlorination system back into service, repaired a reservoir serving 10,000 people and reconnected buildings to the public water system. An Emergency Cash Transfer programme reached 80,000 vulnerable individuals living in explosions-affected areas. UNICEF provides psychosocial first aid to children and caretakers affected by the explosions, distributed critical humanitarian supplies, saved vaccines from damaged warehouses and engaged youth in a community-based response that involved cash-for-work.

The COVID-19 response

UNICEF is playing a critical role in the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine, mobilizing Lebanon's communities to promote vaccine awareness and boost registration. Since the start of the pandemic, UNICEF has supported isolation centres, provided personal protective equipment (PPE) and infection prevention and control (IPC) kits, and conducted large-scale awareness-raising campaigns. It also provided COVID-19 prevention measures to public schools, to ensure a safe environment for children. Encouraging families to send their children back to school has been a major priority.

[Learn more: UNICEF in action](#)



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