

# Precarious Labour under Lockdown

## Research Summary

### Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on displaced Syrian agricultural workers in the Middle East

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Photo by Development Workshop, February 2020, Adana, Turkey.

Research by:



One Health FIELD Network



DEVELOPMENT  
WORKSHOP

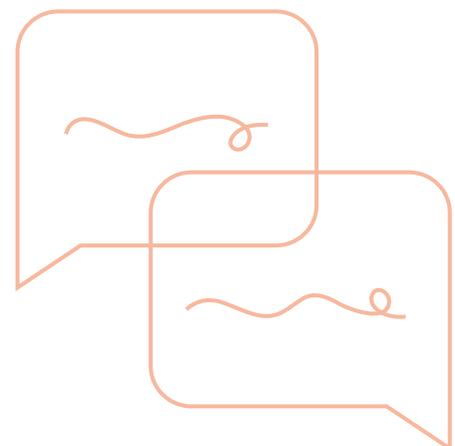
This is a Research Summary of the *Precarious Labour under Lockdown* report, a Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (the Modern Slavery PEC) research project, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. The research team, led by Dr Ann-Christin Zuntz at the University 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 Centre for Development and Peace Studies, and Turkish researchers from the not-for-profit cooperative Development Workshop. You can access the full report on the One Health FIELD Network website at: [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 Modern Slavery PEC. This project was funded through an open call for proposals to examine the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on modern slavery.

## Background

Many Syrians displaced across the Middle East work in the informal economy under precarious conditions, with no financial or social safety net. Across the study countries included in this research, almost 100% of workers had never signed a contract with their intermediary or employer. Previous research suggests that such precarious conditions, particularly for marginalised groups, are linked to increased vulnerability to exploitative practices, sometimes amounting to forced labour.<sup>1</sup> This research 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 sheds light on how the pandemic has exacerbated factors linked to increased risk of vulnerability and has entrenched existing problematic relationships of dependency and exploitative working conditions in the agricultural sector.

The project 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.



1. Development Workshop (2016) *Fertile Lands, Bitter Lives: The Situational Analysis Report on Syrian Seasonal Agricultural Workers in the Adana Plain*. Ankara, Turkey: Development Workshop. Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/59743> (Accessed: 15 May 2020).

## 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 to being exploited. 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 and exploitation, 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% (60/80 of interviewed workers) to lose their jobs temporarily, and 13% (10/80) to be permanently out of work. During the pandemic, 83% (66/80) of Syrian workers found it more difficult to obtain a job in agriculture, compared to previous years, with 94% (75/80) of Syrian workers reporting decreased income and 53% reduced working hours. 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. In response, many Syrian households were forced to employ multiple negative livelihood coping strategies, including cutting costs (81%, 61/75), selling belongings (21%, 16/75), and getting a loan (17%, 13/75). 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 Syrian workers' relationships of dependency with agricultural intermediaries and employers have worsened during the pandemic.**

Syrian workers' relationships with intermediaries are an important factor for shielding them from labour exploitation and ill-health. On the one hand, intermediaries, especially members of workers' own families and communities, can be important allies in guaranteeing fair and timely pay, or reaching a decision to stay home when experiencing symptoms of Covid-19. On the other hand, pandemic-related economic pressures may have entrenched dangerous forms of dependency. Most respondents noted that in cases of conflict at the workplace or unacceptable working conditions, they could not appeal to anyone for support. 34% (27/79) of workers stated that employers or intermediaries could withhold their payments in case of disagreement or poor quality of their work. 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 exploitative working conditions. 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.

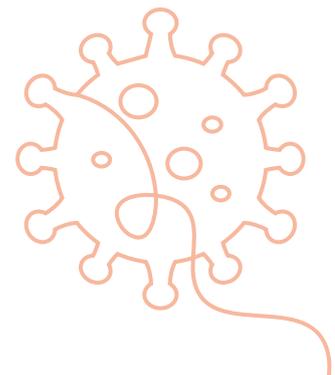
## Displaced Syrians' structural vulnerabilities and working conditions in agriculture are likely to increase their risk of catching Covid-19

Although only one Syrian worker reported that they had personally fallen ill with Covid-19 and only 6% (5/80) of workers knew of cases of coronavirus at their workplaces, 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% (49/80) of workers reported that they did not have space in their home to self-isolate. Syrian workers are also heavily dependent on public transportation to access agricultural work sites. Almost 40% (30/76) of workers reported that intermediaries and employers had not introduced adequate health and safety measures to prevent Covid-19 transmission in the workplace. 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, and not report any illness, due to the need for a continuous income and their inability to afford medical treatment.

## 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.

Although previous studies found much higher rates of child labour among Syrian workers, children worked in agriculture in only 16% (13/80) of households from our research, and this number has not increased during the pandemic. However, the interviews suggest 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 International Labour Organization 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. However, economic losses and greater job insecurity may have increased the pressure on already working women to accept dangerous and non-decent working conditions, as well as exacerbating 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.



# Policy recommendations

## 1. Prioritising refugee and other migrant agricultural workers among vulnerable target groups during emergencies

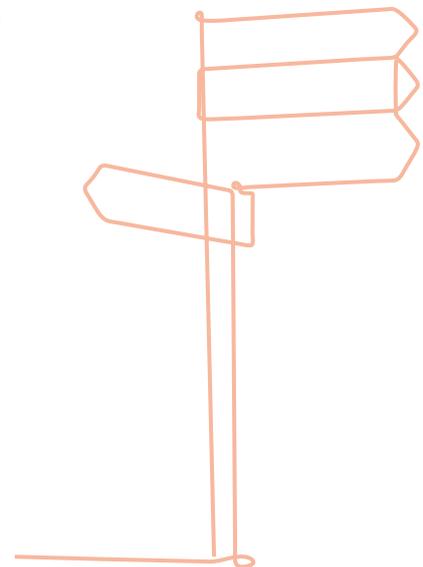
For local and international humanitarian and development actors, and nation-level and local governmental actors

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 marginalised populations, including statutory sick pay, and establish lines of communication that allow them to reach at-risk populations quickly. This will prevent severe exploitation and hardship within these communities, but also help ensure the effectiveness of wider public health measures and protections. It requires comprehensive mapping and situation assessment exercises and building trustful relationships with workers, as well as intermediaries and employers.

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

For 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 in children, are factored into the operational design of emergency interventions.



### 3. 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

For 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;
- formalising 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.



An illustration from a graphic novel published by the project, illustrating life and experiences of Syrian agricultural workers across the Middle East.

Drawing: Sophia Neilson

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