

CVA CASE STUDY



UNFPA Cash Assistance to Support Individual Protection Needs: Northwest Syria

SUMMARY OF LEARNING

As part of humanitarian programming in northwest Syria, through cross-border operations managed from Turkey, UNFPA provided one-off, unconditional, Individual Protection Assistance (IPA) in the form of cash disbursements to 10,074 vulnerable Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to cover the costs of their most urgent and vital needs.

Overall, **the IPA project was considered relevant and effective** as transactional costs were minimal and the women and men who received the assistance were given full agency to determine what their immediate needs were.

Cash vouchers, which were immediately converted to cash, were distributed via local implementing partners (IPs). Recipients of cash assistance were identified by IPs, at times in coordination with local councils,¹ according to **specific vulnerability criteria** adapted by UNFPA and IPs in line with the Protection Cluster's IPA guidelines for northwest Syria. In some cases, eligibility was cross-checked via door-to-door visits to avoid fraud. **Post-distribution monitoring results confirmed that funds were mostly used by recipients for health, shelter, food and legal services.**

The **one-off cash assistance also served as an effective entry point** to provide recipients with relevant **information on available services in the respective areas, including protection and GBV specialized services.** Female staff and protection staff were integrated into distribution teams, which served, by design, to also offer recipients psychological first aid and referrals. Given the broad protection objective of the intervention, including but not limited to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) prevention, specific indicators will be explored to measure the various protection outcomes of ongoing cash interventions of this nature.

Given the persistent dire humanitarian needs in northwest Syria, UNFPA and its IPs agreed to implement a second round of cash assistance in 2021. The second cash project is anchored in lessons learned and best practices, such as including vulnerable members of the host populations as recipients in an effort to contribute to social cohesion.

¹ The geographical area in northwest Syria where UNFPA Turkey Cross-Border implements its projects is not under the control of the Government of Syria. As such, 'local councils' are currently the de facto governance structures on the ground.

HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT

Syria's crisis, now in its tenth year, has displaced more than half of the country's pre-war population. In 2019, the conflict triggered an additional 1.8 million new displacements.² Northwest Syria has hosted the majority of these displaced persons, with 2.7 million out of the 4.1 million people currently residing in this region estimated to be internally displaced.³ After nearly a decade of conflict marked by violence, military operations, multiple displacements and economic shocks, a staggering 2.8 million people in northwest Syria rely on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs.

The first quarter of 2020 saw the humanitarian situation in northwest Syria exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19 preventative measures and the rapid devaluation of the Syrian Pound. Overall, more than 1.4 million IDPs live in precarious conditions in camps and settlements, and 80 percent of these individuals are women and children, who remain among the most vulnerable populations. 81% of assessed IDPs have reported facing problems in obtaining humanitarian assistance, with 91% stating that "not enough" assistance was available for all in need.⁴ Instability has continued to characterize the situation on the ground given the dire humanitarian situation and lack of cohesive local governance and security structures. In that regard, incidents between non-state armed groups and between armed groups and civilians have increasingly been reported in the northern Aleppo and Idlib governorates. At times, these have escalated into armed clashes, which have endangered civilians and impeded humanitarian work.

In 10 years the crisis displaced



MORE THAN HALF OF THE COUNTRY'S PRE-WAR POPULATION

2.8 million people



RELY ON HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

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² IDMC: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/syria>

³ Ibid

⁴ REACH – Press release Feb 2020 and needs assessment – April 2020



Young girl © UNFPA_Syria

SYNOPSIS OF UNFPA CASH ASSISTANCE

In early 2020, UNFPA decided to scale up its assistance to provide programming for the most vulnerable with the aim to reduce overall protection risks. A one-off, unconditional IPA intervention in the form of CVA assistance was designed, targeting individuals with exacerbated vulnerabilities. The assistance was delivered through four of UNFPA's IPs between April and September 2020.

\$100-120 USD each was distributed to 10,074 persons

CVA was assessed to be the most effective means of supporting individuals eligible for IPA. \$100-120 USD each was distributed to 10,074 persons identified for the CVA project.⁵ The amount was determined based on the rolling Cash Working Group's calculation of what is needed by an individual to cover the cost of the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket. Post-CVA distribution, UNFPA and its IPs had encountered at times difficulties to follow up on individual CVA recipients on the ground due to continuous movement of these IDPs. Post-Distribution Monitoring reports found that recipients used the assistance, inter alia, for shelter, medicine, transport to health care, food and education.

The project design also provided for an effective entry point to provide key information to newly displaced persons on available services, including GBV services. Overall, the project was considered relevant and effective, and IPs emphasized the need for such assistance to continue in the near future given the prevailing and persisting protection needs on the ground.

⁵ 51% female and 49% male. The IPA was distributed in the following locations: Afrin, Al Bab, Ariha, A'zaz, Harim, Idlib, Jarablus, Jebel Saman, and Jisr-Ash-Shugur.

PROGRAM DESIGN



Assessments

The UN has no staff on the ground in northwest Syria given the political and security situation in the respective geographical area. It therefore works through local IPs and relies, inter alia, on their assessments. Since there is no formal functioning national banking system in northwest Syria, the informal money transfer system hawala was proposed for use in the CVA project. This came with the challenge of identifying sufficient female hawala agents as it is not culturally appropriate, in many circumstances, for men to hand over money directly to women in the area of project implementation.



Eligibility Criteria and Targeting

The main criteria for CVA eligibility was persons displaced after 2019 in addition to one or more of the following vulnerability criteria: woman-headed households; elderly-headed households; households with persons with disabilities; newly arrived displaced persons without shelter; high-risk pregnant or lactating women without family support; severe medical conditions; extreme poverty; and, GBV survivors and women and girls at risk.

While several IPs used the local councils (de facto authorities) to identify and/or verify recipients, relying on recipient lists compiled by local councils based on IP-provided vulnerability criteria, one IP in Idleb did not use local councils in order to maintain recipient confidentiality of those receiving GBV prevention or response services. However, as the CVA project was not only linked to GBV outcomes, the IPs in general managed to avoid any potential identification and stigmatization of survivors and/or women at risk.⁶ It is important to note as well that there was no active identification of GBV survivors during the CVA initiative.

IPs also verified the recipient lists identified by local councils, where possible, through door-to-door visits as well as cross-checking and finalising the lists through designated committees composed of the IP's protection staff. Thus the final recipient selection was done without the involvement of the local councils.



Risk Analysis

Northwest Syria is controlled by various de facto authorities, one of which is designated by the UN as a terrorist organization. There is no formal national banking system, only hawala companies. Due to the high risk of theft, robbery, or looting associated with the delivery modality of direct cash under such circumstances, which could put both recipient and IP staff at potential risk of harm, IPs generally agreed that the voucher modality was the safest. Having been in the money transfer business in the region for many years, hawala companies have the know-how and experience to administer cash. However, direct cash was still considered as a delivery option by the IP in some specific cases, generally in situations

⁶ To note: the word and even concept of GBV is not used with the de facto authorities in northwest Syria.

when the hawala agents did not have direct access to the recipient, when a specific need was identified, or in order to protect the confidentiality of a GBV survivor. If direct cash was used by an IP, they would ensure that only small amounts were carried around and distributed in order to avoid any potential security situation.

All IPs underlined the importance of identifying a quiet and secure location for distribution to avoid chaos among a population in need. IPs' security and safety teams contributed to the assessment of secure locations and accompanied protection teams to distribution sites. Depending on the location, cash and/or vouchers was identified as the best modality.



Modality and Delivery Mechanisms

UNFPA's IPs have existing contracts with hawala companies, which enabled a swift organization of money transfers. IPs transferred money from their bank accounts in Turkey to hawala agents in northwest Syria. Additionally, IPs designed a cash voucher that could not be replicated and where personal data was encrypted and passed on to the IP's finance office subsequently encoded.

In some cases, direct cash was preferred over a cash voucher, for example for smaller amounts of money to be delivered at a smaller location. However, the vast majority of assistance was delivered through cash vouchers. The whole process was fast and smooth: the recipient would receive the voucher from the IP, and once received, the cash voucher was exchanged for cash by the recipient from a hawala agent.

While some IPs opted for hawala agents to join protection teams during the distribution, some opted for recipients to collect the cash at the hawala office using an issued cash voucher. One IP identified several female hawala agents to accompany the protection teams when distributing cash directly to women, while others provided transport for women to collect the cash at the hawala company. Only female staff directly handed cash or cash vouchers to female recipients.

All IPs had complaint mechanisms in place for the CVA assistance. The complaint mechanisms included: complaint boxes; WhatsApp numbers; hotlines; direct complaints verbally communicated to the IP. Several IPs included information on these complaint mechanisms on the cash voucher in addition to verbally informing the recipient in cases of illiteracy or visual impairments. All distributing teams, which all integrated female staff, were trained on the prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation including on referral pathways to protection and GBV services.



Use of the vouchers

Post-distribution monitoring reports showed that both women and men chose to spend their cash on shelter, medicine, transport to health care, food and education. Given the high humanitarian needs in the region, feedback from those receiving cash or cash vouchers understandably pointed to the need for more assistance in the form of cash or cash vouchers.

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LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

The cash for individual protection needs in northwest Syria brought many lessons learned and identified key best practices, both context-specific and those that could be useful for other cash and voucher assistance in other countries:

- Ensure that established and conducive working relations are in place with local councils (local authorities) in order to mitigate potential interference.⁷
- Align the amount of cash provided to the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket as calculated by the Cash Working Group.
- Allow flexibility for different modalities such as direct cash or cash vouchers according to different risks and preferences of individual recipients, where possible.
- Whenever possible, cash assistance should be delivered to the person deemed eligible for the IPA rather than the head of household. This should be done in order to ensure that the recipient has maximum influence over how the cash is spent. The eligible person should also be consulted on their preference in terms of direct recipient, in line with global CVA and GBV guidance.
- Ensure that implementing teams have enough protection and/or female staff to accompany each distribution in order to safely access women, and provide information on GBV services, as needed.
- Verify the lists of recipients and ensure confidentiality. Adequate safety measures during distribution and robust data protection systems must be in place.
- IPs should conduct a vulnerability/risk analysis to ensure that IPA is given to those in most needs, e.g. two persons with disabilities may not have the same level of vulnerabilities. Data protection shall be applied to the creation and any subsequent storage of such analysis.
- If possible, include host communities in addition to IDPs on the recipient list to foster social cohesion.
- Use cash and voucher assistance as an entry point to provide other key protection services such as GBV and sexual and reproductive health referrals.
- Develop indicators to measure achievement in terms of protection outcomes related to cash and voucher assistance. Indicators should be adapted to a context where the population is on the move, and should be drafted and agreed upon by all relevant partners where the population keeps on moving, and should be drafted and agreed upon by all involved partners.

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⁷ It is worth mentioning that 100% of UNFPA partners in Syria are national organizations, while within the GBV Sub-Cluster 87% are national organizations. Those organisations are constantly concerned about being exposed to risks such as potential aid diversion by designated terrorist groups, which would put their own existence at risk.

Way forward

The CVA project was part of the humanitarian approach of UNFPA in northwest Syria aimed at immediate relief for extremely vulnerable individuals. UNFPA and its IPs are now working with Johns Hopkins University to demonstrate how this assistance could reduce protection risks and contribute to improved access of services for women in northwest Syria. Looking towards resilience and early recovery, if larger sums would be considered, a clear framework should be developed in coordination with the Cash Working Group and early recovery cluster to assess how this contributes to achieving such objectives.





*Delivering a world where every
pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is
safe and every young person's potential
is fulfilled*

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