

Trapped in a downward spiral

The unrelenting toll of Lebanon's crisis on children

December 2023

The persistent and compounding crises in Lebanon are exacting a steadily devastating toll on children nationwide, increasingly stripping them of their education and forcing many into child labour. Desperate parents, grappling with ever-dwindling resources, are forced into a heart-wrenching struggle to keep their families afloat amidst the unrelenting challenges.

The deprivations and uncertainty are leaving children hungry, anxious or depressed. The emotional burden is particularly alarming among children exposed to the recent military escalation on the country's southern borders, and among Palestinian refugees – many of whom have relatives in Gaza.

A UNICEF rapid assessment, conducted in November 2023,¹ reveals further deterioration in almost every aspect of children's lives, as the four-year-long crisis shows no sign of abating.

“This terrible crisis is relentlessly gnawing away at childhood. Its severity is crushing children's dreams, and taking away their learning, their happiness and their future.”

Edouard Beigbeder, UNICEF Representative in Lebanon.



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“My children are living a cruel life... They are living in deprivation and fear, fear more than deprivation...”

Alia, a 42-year-old Lebanese mother of two.

¹ UNICEF Child-focused Rapid Assessment (CFRA) is a telephone survey that is carried out twice a year in Lebanon. The latest was conducted in November 2023 among 2,153 households with at least one child (1,228 Lebanese, 534 Syrian, 391 Palestinian.). The survey produces estimates that are representative of the aforementioned population.

Education: **A stolen future**



26%

of households have children not attending school.

More than a quarter of households (26 per cent) said they had school-aged children not attending school, up from 18 per cent when a similar assessment was conducted in April 2023. Among Syrian refugees, the number of households reporting they had school-aged children not attending school rose to a shocking 52 per cent. The cost of education materials was the most often cited reason for not sending children to school.

Making matters worse, several dozen schools in the southern part of Lebanon have been closed since October due to the intensification of hostilities, affecting more than 6,000 students. In the conflict zones, attendance is minimal at schools that still remain open.² Thousands of children who have been displaced remain out of education.

“School is becoming harder; I cannot buy a jacket for my child in winter. Also, I bought my child a used bag and he told me that his friends have new bags, I told him that’s how much I can afford. What should I say? I am out of words to describe the situation.”

Khaled, a 32-year-old Palestinian father of five.

² Lebanon: Flash Update #3, OCHA, 1 December, 2023

Desperation and sacrifice: **Families on the brink**

84%

of the population purchases essential grocery items on credit or borrows money to purchase food

Lebanese: **72%**

Palestinian: **97%**

Syrian: **89%**

South: **84%**

Nabatieh: **79%**



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“Children are deprived, what can I tell you? Children are not enjoying anything, and all their conversations are negative... Also, children are not having clean water or even proper food. I cannot even warm the house for them during winter. Children do not have a place to play.... Children are not living a normal life.”

Yasmine, a 45-year-old Lebanese mother of one

Skyrocketing prices and widespread poverty are still forcing families to resort to desperate measures just to eat one meal per day and to provide basic shelter. The survey shows that:

- The number of families sending children (under age 18) out to work to supplement the household income, rose to 16 per cent, from 11 per cent in April. Among Syrian refugees, 1 in 3 families said they sent children to work in order to provide resources for the household, with parents reporting that the economic crisis means that frequently the entire family works in order to survive.
- More than 8 in 10 households (84 per cent) had to borrow money or buy on credit to purchase essential grocery items, a 16 percentage point increase over six months.
- Almost a quarter of respondents (24 per cent) said they had to stop their children's education, up from 15 per cent.
- More than 8 in 10 (81 per cent) reduced spending on health treatment, up from 75 per cent.

In southern Lebanon, vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by the hostilities, which led to the internal displacement of almost almost 60,000 people, including 37% of whom are children as of 07 December 2023.³

A major strain on children's mental health



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“The situation of children is not right. The parents are not OK, so their children will not be OK. We try to buy what they want but there is always something missing.”

Salma, 55-year-old Syrian mother of one.

Almost 4 in 10 households (38 per cent) say their children are anxious, and 24 per cent say their children are depressed on a daily basis. The numbers are significantly higher:

- In southern Lebanon: in the South Governorate, 46 per cent of households say their children are anxious and 29 per cent are depressed; in Nabatieh, families reported that 46 per cent of children are anxious while and 33 per cent are feeling depressed.
- Among Palestinian refugee children, almost half of children suffering from anxiety, while 30 per cent feel depressed. Palestinians have suffered generational trauma following recurrent displacement and high levels of violence in Lebanon. Poor living conditions, factional clashes in refugee camps and uncertainty about the future have cumulatively put the mental health of Palestinian children at risk. Added to that, children are severely affected by the constant images and news of violence and bombardment they see every day of the war in Gaza and the West Bank, where many of their loved ones have been displaced, injured or killed.

The survey also shows that 34 per cent of children in Lebanon believe their lives will be worse one year from now, as compared with 27 per cent in April.

What needs to be done

“The daily suffering of children must stop. We must redouble our efforts to make sure every child in Lebanon is in school and learning, is protected from physical and mental harm and has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to society.”

Edouard Beigbeder, UNICEF Representative in Lebanon.

Now, more than ever, it's crucial for the government to take strong action to support, protect, and ensure essential services for all children in Lebanon. The government must show a clear commitment to children's rights. Waiting to invest in children until they're adults risks the future of Lebanon. Delaying support not only denies children a good start but also harms society. Neglecting children today will inevitably manifest in a weakened and struggling Lebanon tomorrow.

- Given the limited fiscal resources, the Government should review and reprioritize budget spending for more efficiency, while ensuring that appropriate resources are allocated and safeguarded towards social sectors.
- Following the successful launch of the scholastic year by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, the Government of Lebanon must prioritize public education with adequate, predictable and multi-year investment. This also requires reforms to achieve cost-efficiency and policies that ensure public funds are transparently and effectively allocated and utilized for the most marginalized children, for teachers and for schools.
- Families need access to social assistance to help them cope with the impact of this destructive crisis. Following the launch of the national disability allowance by the Ministry of Social Affairs, the implementation of the newly approved National Social Protection Strategy offers an opportunity to address key gaps in the system – including the establishment of a National Child Grant.
- Every family should have access to affordable, quality healthcare and nutrition services to survive and reach their full potential. The need to invest in preventive and promotive health and to bring integrated services closer to community is a paramount priority to protect children and families from disease. The implementation of the National Nutrition Strategy launched by the ministry of Public Health requires multiple systems – including health, food, social protection, education, and water and sanitation – to work together and deliver results on child nutrition.
- Lebanon needs an accountable child protection system that would allow all partners to better protect children– in the family, in the community and at school – with integrated child protection prevention and response services. UNICEF calls for the amendment of Law 422, to better protect children in contact and conflict with the law, scale up parenting and psychosocial support programmes, intensify community mobilisation to address harmful social norms and practices, improve the capacity of the social workforce and enhance access to justice.
- Given the dire situation for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Lebanon needs to re-invigorate and implement the 'Lebanese Working Group on Palestinian Refugees Affairs in Labour and Social Security for Palestine Refugees' and the 'Youth Strategy for Palestinian Refugees 2019-2025', as prepared by the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC) to alleviate some of the burdens facing Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.



UNICEF in action

Throughout the crisis, UNICEF has focussed on supporting the most vulnerable children and their families, regardless of nationality. We remain at the forefront of the response to the multiple crises impacting all children in Lebanon and have taken immediate action to support children affected by the intensification of the conflict along the border with Israel.

UNICEF's key achievements in 2023 include the following outcomes:

- Supported more than 1,070 public schools, facilitating the enrollment of over 400,000 children. This assistance involved disbursing funds for teacher salaries, directly supporting school funds, and contributing to parent council funds to cover operational costs.
- In the education sector, UNICEF implemented the Summer Catch-up program in 587 public schools, benefiting over 156,000 children.
- Enrolled 450 children with disabilities in public education and therapy services to enhance their overall well-being.
- Provided cash assistance for education to over 190,000 children (both Lebanese and Syrian refugees) in public schools throughout the year, including children with disabilities.
- Completed the rehabilitation of 26 public schools and solarized 26 other schools in order to reduce operational costs and ensure a continuous supply of clean energy.
- Facilitated improved access to vaccination services, reaching over 600,000 children with routine essential vaccines across the country.
- Solarized 172 primary healthcare centers to reduce costs and ensure uninterrupted essential health services.
- Procured and installed more than 1,000 solar fridges in public health facilities to safely store vaccines.

- Delivered Nutrition and Early Childhood Development services, care practices, and supplies to over 270,000 children and their caregivers.
- Supported the Ministry of Public Health in initiating the Lebanon Integrated Micronutrient and Anthropometry (LIMA) survey.
- Collaborated with the Ministry of Social Affairs, the ILO, the EU, and civil society groups to launch Lebanon's first-ever National Disability Allowance.
- Assisted water establishments across Lebanon with over 706 repairs and maintenance, supplying more than 300 tons of chlorine for water treatment to ensure clean drinking water supply across Lebanon.
- Mobilized over 500,000 people through Qudwa (role model) initiatives, fostering positive behaviors and sustainable social change for children.
- Reached more than 30,000 individuals, including girls, boys, women, and men, with psychosocial support services.
- Trained over 700 child justice-related professionals on child rights in justice proceedings.
- Enhanced the employability of 60,000 young people, empowering them to actively participate in their communities.
- Contributed to solarization, ICT, WASH, and internet connectivity assessments in 158 TVET public schools and 35 TVET private schools, benefiting over 100,000 young people.
- Launched the "Nahnoo Volunteers" platform, engaging over 27,640 individuals and generating close to 11,000 hours of volunteerism, life skills, and youth engagement.
- Partnered with the Ministry of Information and local media to safeguard children and adolescents from media risks and advocate for their rights.

In southern Lebanon, UNICEF's support extends to:

- Pre-positioning emergency healthcare supplies and contributing to the equipment of Primary Health Centres.
- Ensuring the availability of fuel for uninterrupted water supply in the event of power outages.
- Conducting emergency repairs on a damaged water station, restoring access to water for over 6,000 people.
- Distributing essential school supplies, digital learning tools, and offering psychological support to children who have been displaced or whose schools have been closed.
- Facilitating teachers' training initiatives and providing incentives to educators.
- Offering nutrition counselling for caregivers of children under the age of 5 in shelters and host communities.
- Establishing safe spaces within shelters.
- Producing and distributing 1,692 winter kits to date for the displaced population. Additionally, creating youth groups in shelters to empower displaced youth, providing them with a voice and purpose during the crisis.



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