

# TURN ON THE LIGHT

Why tackling energy-related challenges in the nexus of water and food in Syria cannot wait

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# DISCLAIMER

1. This paper is based on Oxfam programs data and analysis together with the findings and analysis of a study commissioned by Oxfam in October 2022 and completed in May 2023 exploring the water-energy-food (WEF) nexus in Syria. The paper covers areas where Oxfam operates and can draw evidence from, which are in government-controlled parts of Syria. Oxfam used its best efforts to cross-check the information provided by various sources to inform this paper. Possible data limitations encountered are indicated, when relevant, in the body of the paper. Data was assessed as accurate at the time of writing. As the situation in Syria is very dynamic, and new analyses are published, this information is subject to change.
2. This paper is limited to the situation in government-controlled parts of Syria. However, albeit beyond the scope of this report, the situation about water, energy and food in other areas of the country is equally dire. Hence, a similar analysis for those areas would merit urgent attention. To keep the paper focused and at a reasonable length, whenever it refers to 'Syria', it is intended to mean 'government-controlled areas of Syria'.
3. This paper defines the WEF nexus as the study of the interconnections between water, energy and food "resource sectors, together with the synergies, conflicts and trade-offs that arise from how they are managed".<sup>1</sup> The paper does not aim to conduct a fully-fledged analysis of the WEF nexus, but rather to input to the broader discourse around this approach, and contribute to future thinking with other actors, hopefully by expanding the analysis to other parts of the country.<sup>2</sup>
4. This is a discussion paper written with the sole purpose of improving the humanitarian conditions in Syria. As per Oxfam definition, a discussion paper's purpose is to flesh out key themes, contribute to big questions and debates and engage with core audiences. Presented as work in progress, not as Oxfam policy. As such, it is written to contribute to public debate and to invite feedback on development and humanitarian policy issues. Hence, this document does not reflect Oxfam policy positions. It does intend to inform the discussion about the ineffectiveness of the WEF nexus impacting directly Oxfam humanitarian operations in the strict limit of its mandate as a humanitarian organization. The analysis advanced by this paper does not have the ambition to cover all the factors affecting the WEF nexus in Syria and their possible solutions. For example, albeit beyond the scope of this report, the circumstances in areas of Syria controlled by non-state armed groups are equally dire. Hence, a similar analysis for those areas would merit urgent attention, which could also provide parallel or complementary solutions. Similarly, the analysis of how to strengthen state institutions to counteract the effects of the war economy and corruption would benefit from further attention, by also drawing lessons from existing literature on Syria and other countries in the Middle East.
5. As also indicated by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), Oxfam's research identifies conflict (characterized by widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, explosive ordnance contamination, forced displacement, and massive and systematic violations of international humanitarian and human rights law) and its long-term consequences as key factors underlying the critical state of the WEF nexus.<sup>3</sup> It is grounded on some essential reference that provides a detailed account of grievances and inequalities at the root of the Syrian crisis.<sup>4</sup> However, while the paper explores conflict factors, it is beyond its scope to provide an analysis of the root causes of the conflict.
6. The paper explores some of the effects of legislative frameworks adopted by various states, such as sanctions and Syrian laws, on the WEF nexus. It reports the stipulated objectives of these measures as indicated by the states that adopted them. However, this paper does not aim to revisit the comprehensive range of arguments supporting or challenging the legitimacy and effectiveness of these measures against their stated objectives, as these have been extensively discussed in the existing literature.
7. In order to keep the paper at a reasonable length, it does not provide a full overview of all sanction programmes on Syria implemented by various governments. The paper solely explores regulations within the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) sanctions frameworks that are relevant for the analysis of the WEF nexus. The UN does not currently impose sanctions directly targeting the Syrian government or Syria as a country. However, it has three resolutions

which affect Syria.<sup>5</sup> The analysis aims to provide a general overall framework within which to analyse the interplay between addressing humanitarian needs within the WEF nexus in Syria and these legal frameworks.<sup>6</sup> Other countries have tended to follow these systems for their own autonomous measures.<sup>7</sup> However, the analysis of their sanctions systems is beyond the scope of this paper.

8. This paper uses the terms 'impacts' and 'consequences' of sanctions on the population without further qualification. By doing so, Oxfam does not suggest that states imposing sanctions on Syria intended them to have an impact on the humanitarian situation, nor were these consequences the objective of sanctions.
9. In this paper, sanctions are defined as measures adopted by the United Nations (UN) Security Council, regional inter-governmental organizations such as the EU, and individual states, which aim to influence the behaviour of other states, individuals, or groups without involving the use of armed force. Sanctions aim to bring about changes of policies by imposing various restrictions.<sup>8</sup> To keep this paper focused, 'sanctions' will be used to refer to those measures taken by single states or regional inter-governmental organizations in lieu of unilateral restrictive measures, unilateral coercive measures, unilateral sanctions, or restrictive/autonomous measures when these are applied.
10. This paper adopts the following definition of 'chilling effect': 'When the government passes a law, it often regulates conduct. People and organizations adjust their behaviour to fit the legal rule [...]. But regulations are sometimes unclear, uncertain, or overbroad, which can lead people to refrain from engaging in permissible actions because they are unsure whether they will be legally sanctioned. This phenomenon — a law's effect on activity outside the scope of its intended target — is called the chilling effect.'<sup>9</sup>
11. This paper uses the term 'systemic collapse of the WEF nexus to describe the breakdown of those interlinkages between the water, energy and food sectors that are essential for their functioning and for the provision of basic services.
12. This paper adopts the broader definition of war economy suggested by Carbonnier (2016, p.68), which includes both the generation, mobilization, and allocation of resources to sustain a war effort by parties to the conflict, as well as survival activities undertaken by people seeking to preserve their livelihoods.<sup>10</sup>
13. The exchange rate between Syrian Pounds and US\$ applied in this paper is of 7200 SYP/US\$, which was the one in use at the time data was analysed to produce this paper.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Syrian conflict requires a comprehensive peace solution that is driven and owned by the people of Syria. Tackling the factors that hinder recovery of the energy sector at macro and systemic level will require comprehensive and longer-term dialogue and engagement. However, not all options – especially those related to rehabilitating or maintaining public electricity, water and food facilities and infrastructure – can wait for a political solution to the conflict, as this could bring further escalation of humanitarian needs and displacement. Until that time comes, Syrians should have unimpeded access to basic services. The significant and rapid changes witnessed in a sector as pivotal as energy have reverberated across the water sector and the whole food supply chain, which, despite humanitarian aid, are on the brink of their systemic collapse. This situation is the result of the cumulative effects of a wide range of factors, including conflict, protracted economic crisis, domestic policies and regulations, a war economy, corruption, alongside donor policies and sanctions.

In the areas of Syria where Oxfam works, at the time of writing this report, almost 5.3 million people live with less than two hours of public electricity per day; more than a quarter (27%) are disconnected from the public electricity grid and 10% do not have any alternative electricity source at home. Energy poverty levels, defined as “a situation in which households are unable to access essential energy services and products” reported in recent UN reports are similar to those verified by Oxfam in its data collection. As families become even more vulnerable, the population becomes increasingly dependent on external support. In the areas where Oxfam works, more than 35% of families taking part in this research reported placing additional expectations on the government and on humanitarian organizations to cope with their current living conditions, thus increasing their level of dependency.

Since 2011, water, energy and food have been severely affected as standalone sectors, as well as forming a nexus. The lack of water, energy and food plays a key role in exacerbating the condition of families in Syria today. This is why it is important to understand the interplay between these sectors at household level. Running water schemes without minimum secured levels of electricity is an impossible task. Lack of electricity limits the operability of vital public water systems, which means that families in some areas only receive between 10% and 25% of the amount of water they used to receive before the conflict. Scarcity of diesel renders diesel-powered alternatives for operating those systems mostly non-feasible. Similarly, the energy crisis is one of the main underlying causes responsible for the disruption of the supply chain, as it has an impact on the recovery of the agricultural sector, the increased cost of state-run food facilities and food industries, making it impossible to meet the demand at reasonable prices, hence directly impacting population’s access to affordable food.

This discussion paper offers a contribution, albeit limited, to the broader discourse on the WEF nexus in government-controlled parts of Syria. It looks at what approaches could be used to understand and address the linkages between water, energy and food that could be most beneficial to the people of Syria. It does so through a quantitative and qualitative analysis looking at how the water, energy and food sectors influence each other as a nexus affecting the condition of the population in Syria. It also explores the main causes of the progressive deterioration of those sectors, and the challenges to their sustainable recovery. Finally, it aims to do so by focusing on those aspects that directly impact and limit Oxfam’s work in Syria, particularly when delivering livelihood and WASH interventions. In Oxfam’s experience, delivering principled humanitarian aid in this context continues to require navigating a range of complex dilemmas, particularly when it comes to operational choices on longer-term programming. However, in the short term, addressing the WEF nexus can help in delivering more sustainable and effective interventions at local level.

The primary cause of electricity shortages at household and business levels is the limited capacity of the public infrastructure to *generate* electricity.<sup>11</sup> Oxfam's analysis reveals that in 2022, a significant 70% of the power generation system remained inoperative for electricity production, directly attributable to conflict factors, technical factors and lack of fuel.<sup>12</sup> For example, lack of electricity to run fridges impacts families' ability to safely store and process food. More than 20% of families surveyed reported no longer buying food in bulk due to lack of safe storage options, and hence purchasing goods at a higher price. Similarly, families started to consume food they have bought based on what is going bad first, irrespective of dietary and health considerations. As for water, even when available through the public network or wells, families are unable to pump it into water tanks or house-level water systems due to lack of electricity. Energy poverty has been identified as a significant contributing factor increasing vulnerabilities and protection risks, damaging social cohesion and disproportionately impacting women and gender dynamics. Further examples of impacts on the most vulnerable according to findings around electricity are provided in the paper.

Issues related to energy transmission and distribution, even when not directly impacting electricity shortages at household level, are nonetheless impeding ongoing humanitarian interventions, particularly when it comes to reconnecting vital basic services to electricity at the community level. Based on that, Oxfam's analysis attempted to quantify the main factors contributing to the decline in power generation capacity chronologically, in order to identify its most immediate causes (at the time of writing). In pursuit of this objective, the gathered data was input into a tool that facilitated the construction of a causal chain specifically designed for this study.<sup>13</sup> The main findings were the following. First, some power generation capacity is not available due to distant (int time) causes, linked to events that took place between 2011 and 2017, whose effects persist and have not yet been resolved (mainly conflict and sanctions). Second, some power generation capacity is not available due to more recent events (immediate causes) from the end of 2022.

This paper confirms the findings of earlier research, which sees conflict as the main contributor to the destruction of infrastructure and the uprooting of millions of Syrian people, exacerbated by the impact of sanctions, alongside domestic policies and regulations, which constrain recovery.<sup>14</sup> However, as per the causality study, all play a different role at a different moment in time. For example, sanctions along with export control and domestic regulations, to differing degrees, timing and depending on the specificities of the transactions, significantly hinder service providers (including humanitarian actors). This is particularly true when accessing the international market to source crucial spare parts, fuel, consumables, equipment, and essential technical expertise needed for water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), electricity and food supply services. In specific cases, sanctions also limit the space for capacitating public sector personnel on maintenance and operation of vital WEF nexus systems. At a differing degree (depending on the transactions), domestic regulations and challenges including corruption function as a disincentive for the domestic and international markets to engage with Syria in support of the humanitarian response, further amplifying the major consequences of the 'chilling effect' linked to sanctions (see definition under Disclaimer, item 10).<sup>15</sup> For example, since the onset of the crisis, conflict has reduced (directly or indirectly) the power generation capacity and availability of fuels in government-controlled parts of Syria. However, as the intensity of the conflict reduced in 2018 in some parts of the country, sanctions, alongside domestic regulation and obstacles that hinder fair competition, took a more prominent role in limiting the maintenance and recovery of the electricity sector and the availability of fuels. These factors also limit the advancement of renewable energy options.

A 'one-solution-fits-all' approach would simply not work. Intervening in the water and food sectors requires addressing energy scarcity, which could bring immense relief to millions of people in Syria today. It is almost impossible to address the needs of millions of Syrians for water and food without also addressing the energy crisis. The severity of need also

cannot be addressed effectively and at scale by only delivering localized humanitarian interventions. Understanding the interplay between water, food and energy at household level and avoiding analysing them separately would be the only way to effectively inform any decisions taken to address basic services' access. There is no single standalone solution that can address the energy crisis, and humanitarian organizations cannot come up with solutions on their own.

With this in mind, the paper aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on possible remedies to address the challenges of the WEF nexus in Syria, whereby it could be used to broaden a dialogue that is constructive, multi-layered, and accountable for the views of different stakeholders (humanitarian actors, donors, countries that apply sanctions, the Syrian government, local authorities and independent civil society) in order to expand the spectrum of possible options. In turn, this could help devise more granular solutions that should also factor in the substantial changes in political economy that have occurred in the country. It does so by advancing some initial thinking on three key questions:

1. How can the WEF nexus approach help improve Syrian people's access to food and water?
2. Are there realistic options to help address the energy crisis in the country?
3. How much can dialogue achieve?

In the context of Syria, dialogue is challenging; but the alternative to dialogue is to leave millions of Syrian people deprived of their very basic needs for water, energy and food. Unprecedented humanitarian needs, coupled with the protracted nature of the conflict, has had social and economic consequences in Syria and in the whole region and is one of the elements which prevents finding durable solutions inside Syria and in neighbouring host countries for millions of Syrians that, to date, continue to live in forced displacements.

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# NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See (Simpson and Jewitt, 2019, p.2) Examples from the authors are: water for food and food for water, energy for water and water for energy, and food for energy and energy for food.
- <sup>2</sup> This paper also builds on the work of (Hameed, 2019; Daher et al., 2021; Keulertz and Mohtar, 2022; Lazaro et al., 2022).
- <sup>3</sup> See (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2022a, p. 8).
- <sup>4</sup> For instance, see (Batatu, 1999, 1984, 1981; Chatty, 2018; Gordon, 2022; Musarurwa and Kaye, 2016; Reilly, 2019; Trombetta, 2022, 2013; Vignal, 2021; Daher, 2019; Hallaj, 2021; Mehchy et al., 2022).
- <sup>5</sup> UNSCR 1636 (2005) concerning the 2005 terrorist bombing in Beirut, Lebanon; UNSCR 2199 (2015) which prohibits any trade in antiquities removed from Syria since 15 March 2011; UNSCR 2253 (2015), which imposes sanctions on ISIL/Da'esh and Al-Qaeda, including both ISIL/Da'esh as an organization and individual, named IS members, and prohibits trade and commerce with IS and named members.
- <sup>6</sup> It is beyond the scope of this section to analyse the reasons for the application of different sanctions programs on Syria and the effectiveness they have had thus far against their set objectives. For some reflections on these aspects see, for example, (Giumelli and Ivan, 2013; Seeberg *et al.*, 2015; Morgan, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2020; Oxford Analytica, 2020; Alalwani and Shaar, 2021; Erfan, 2021; Cardwell and Moret, 2022).
- <sup>7</sup> For example, a number of states, such as Norway, Switzerland and the UK, have adopted sanctions similar to those adopted by the EU.
- <sup>8</sup> These include embargoes on the provision of weapons or on equipment that might be used for internal repression; restrictions on the import of other goods; travel bans; and financial sanctions prohibiting making funds or assets available directly or indirectly.
- <sup>9</sup> (Harvard Law Review, 2020, p. 2).
- <sup>10</sup> These include not only coping mechanisms to avoid destitution but also criminal and informal activities and international trade and financial transactions connecting the economy inside the country with the global marketplace.
- <sup>11</sup> This statement is corroborated by the research conducted by other scholars; see, for example, (Butter, 2015; Nasyrov *et al.*, 2018; Hatahet and Shaar, 2021; Seifan and Alhosain, 2021; UN Habitat, 2022).
- <sup>12</sup> Power generation capacity, or installed power generation capacity in this paper, is intended as what is usually referred to as 'nameplate capacity'.
- <sup>13</sup> This approach draws its methodology from the guidance provided by the 2004 OCHA Handbook on Sanctions Assessment.
- <sup>14</sup> See for example (Dahi et al., 2022, p. 10).
- <sup>15</sup> Please see the definition provided in the disclaimer number 10 of this paper.

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