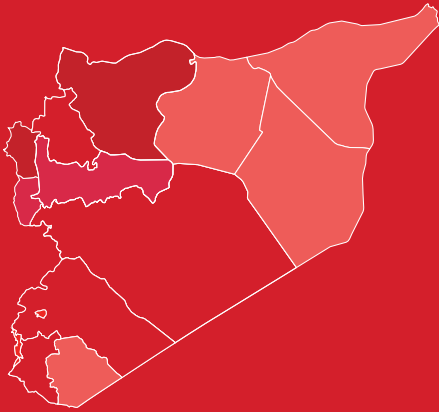


# Transforming lives: the impact cash assistance on people's wellbeing

A case study from Syria



## Introduction: responding to a crisis

On 6 February 2023, a series of devastating earthquakes struck the border region between southern Turkey and northern Syria. This disaster inflicted severe damage across the Governorates of Aleppo, Hama, Idlib, Homs and Latakia, resulting in significant loss of life, injury and displacement. The destruction of homes, schools and health facilities left communities in dire need of assistance.

In response, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, supported by various humanitarian partners, implemented a multipurpose cash assistance programme to provide relief to affected families. Between May 2023 and June 2024, over 49,000 households, consisting of around 204,635 individuals, received a one-off payment of 3,105,000 Syrian pounds, to enable them to meet their basic needs for three months.

This case study examines the impact of this assistance on recipients' wellbeing.

## What is wellbeing?

Wellbeing encompasses various dimensions, including material conditions, mental and emotional health, and social relationships. While the meaning of wellbeing changes from one person or one culture to another, there is a growing consensus that it has three universal dimensions: objective wellbeing, subjective wellbeing, relational wellbeing.

These dimensions can be further broken down into broad categories or domains.



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Wellbeing Domains	 1. Material conditions	 2. Health	 3. Safety & Security	 4. Social relations	 5. Freedom of choice and action
Details (non-exhaustive)	The material conditions of a person, ability to meet basic needs, having enough food, assets, work, housing, shelter.	Physical health, mental health, access to health services	Personal safety, safe access to resources, protection from or in times of disasters, safety of housing/ shelter, safety at the workplace/ job, environmental hazard.	Social cohesion, mutual respect, ability to provide/ receive help, involvement in the community	Opportunities to achieve what a person values doing and being, equal rights for women and girls, equal access to education, ability to choose occupation or lifestyle, recreational time & space

Source: BRC & ICRC wellbeing guidance

The British Red Cross and the International Committee of the Red Cross have developed guidelines to assess the impact of cash assistance on all the dimensions of wellbeing.

## Why measure wellbeing?

Wellbeing promotes a people-centred approach and evaluates whether cash assistance enhances lives beyond simply enabling people to meet their basic needs. It looks not just in economic terms but aims to understand people's needs and priorities, and how best to meet these in a holistic manner. Demonstrating improvements in wellbeing can redefine success, emphasizing what people find important rather than a top-down focus on basic needs. Since perceptions of wellbeing are linked with social and cultural norms, preferences and mindsets, the approach can contribute to defining more localised responses and monitoring of cash assistance in the future.



### 1. Material conditions: meeting essential needs

The cash assistance provided by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent significantly improved recipients' ability to meet their basic needs for food, shelter and economic stability.

- **Food security:** The assistance enabled families to meet their basic food needs for an estimated two to three months, depending on household size and priorities. Having enough food is vital for nutrition and health. But the impact goes beyond physical needs, being able to buy food also contributed to dignity, as people could choose what to buy and eat and were able to access culturally important products like meat, vegetables and olive oil, which they had not had access to for a long time. Being able to buy coffee and tea provided a sense of normality and enabled families to enjoy spending time together and having guests.



The assistance helped us access better quality food, including vegetables and meat.



After being in a community shelter, I was happy to be home and eat traditional food.

- **Housing:** All earthquake-affected families prioritised using the assistance for housing-related expenses, to repair their homes or rent a new place when evacuated. Being able to secure a safe space to live in was critical to people's priorities. A home is not only a physical space, but the house provides a sense of belonging, security, and a place for families to come together. The assistance increased recipients' sense of stability as they were able to buy items perceived as durable (such as a carpet, a door, or lighting).



Before we had nothing except food.

I used the money to pay six months' rent. Now I feel good and with peace of mind.

We could sit together, share drinks, and talk as a family about how we will use the money.



- **Economic stability:** The assistance reduced for a period of time economic stress and reliance on damaging coping strategies such as accruing debt, using unhealthy fuel sources and taking children out of school to work or beg. The protracted crisis in Syria has severely undermined people's economic security and caregivers' abilities to provide nurturing care, and the cash contributed to parents' pride in their role as caregivers as they were able to give their children their favourite food and treats and buy special food for babies.



The cash assistance gave us the motivation to look forward and reduced our stress.

This Ramadan was like kissing God. I felt the richest person in the world because I could take care of my children.





## 2. Health: physical and mental wellbeing

The cash assistance provided crucial support in enabling recipients to look after their physical and mental health and access health services.

– **Access to healthcare:** The funds enabled access to specialized health services, treatments, surgeries and essential medications. This was particularly important for families with members who had disabilities or chronic illnesses. Medicines represent a significant financial burden for families and are often a reason why people get in debt.

“ The most important thing for me is that I was able to put my child with special educational needs in a specialised school. ”

– **Mental health:** The assistance was perceived as a significant stress reliever. It reduced the pressure of providing for basic needs and allowed families to focus on their overall wellbeing. Recipients shared many examples of the assistance contributing to all household members subjective wellbeing.

- Increased happiness and feeling good.
- Cash assistance gave them motivation to look forward.
- Cash assistance reduced pressure to provide for the family.
- Feeling more relaxed and positive about life.
- Feeling relieved that at least for some time they would have food.
- Feeling dignified and respected after paying debts.
- Less stress and pressure because they could afford surgery and health care.
- Parents shared children’s happiness when they could buy them new clothes and shoes.
- School items (notebooks, pens, school bags, etc.) motivated children to attend school.
- Parents felt satisfied with themselves when they could keep children in school.



## 3. Safety and security: ensuring personal and environmental safety

The cash assistance enabled recipients access to resources and a safer environment that increased their ability to relax, connect with others, and perform daily tasks effectively.

– **Housing safety:** By enabling families to repair damaged homes or pay rent, the assistance helped ensure they had safer living conditions.

– **Accessing assistance:** There were no significant security issues related to accessing the cash assistance. Beneficiaries felt safe making the journey to the distribution point, during the distribution, and when spending the money. Assistance gave them a choice of marketplaces where to purchase what they need.

“ Repairing the house was important for safety, especially for women. The cash assistance helped with that. ”





#### 4. Social relations: strengthening family and community bonds

The cash assistance fostered stronger social relations and community cohesion.

- **Family dynamics:** The assistance improved household dynamics, reducing stress and enabling families to spend quality time together. Families reported feeling closer and more united. Being able to afford gifts for loved ones was highlighted as having a positive impact on self-esteem and family relationships.
- **Community support:** The programme fostered a sense of solidarity within communities. Miscommunication on programme objective and timing of assistance distribution generated some tensions but the overall message shared was about feelings of solidarity and recipients claiming organisations to support those not assisted. On occasions, beneficiaries were able to support one another and participate in community activities, enhancing social cohesion.
- **Positive image and traders' confidence:** an important impact for beneficiaries was that assistance helped them gain the trust of vendors who they rely on to purchase goods on credit. Paying their debts reinforced their image as trustworthy people, ensuring they would be able to access credit in the future.

“ We were a family again. I could buy some sweets for my children and a gift for my wife, and we felt special. ”



#### 5. Freedom of choice and action: empowering decisions

The cash assistance enabled individuals to invest in what they value, including education, their occupation, and recreational time. It gave them greater autonomy and the ability to make meaningful decisions, reinforcing their dignity and feelings of ownership of their future.

- **Education:** The assistance allowed parents to keep their children in school and even enabled some to return to education. This was an important achievement for many families as education is a major priority and taking children out of school is one of their last resort coping strategies.
- **Economic activities:** Some beneficiaries used the funds to start or support income-generating activities, aiming to become independent of humanitarian assistance in the future.

“ I convinced my son to continue studying because the assistance provided enough money to cover basic needs for some time. ”



We need employment opportunities; we want to live with dignity and not looking for assistance.

We have lost hope and then cash assistance came and restored our hope. There is something good in life again.



- **Social celebrations:** The assistance allowed families to participate in important social celebrations, such as Ramadan and Eid, which were sources of happiness and community cohesion.



Before the assistance, I thought I would spend all Ramadan crying. Then assistance came, and we could afford food and drinks to celebrate.

I did not receive anyone at home for long time because I was ashamed that I couldn't offer tea to anyone. Now I can receive guests, I can invite them to drink.



# Conclusion

## Continuing the journey towards wellbeing

The humanitarian cash assistance provided by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent has had a transformative impact on the lives of Syrian families affected by the earthquakes. Beyond meeting immediate needs, the programme has significantly enhanced beneficiaries' overall wellbeing, alleviating stress, improving mental health and fostering stronger family and community relationships. The success of this programme highlights the effectiveness of cash in humanitarian responses and underscores the importance of continuing to provide such support in future crises. Recovery programmes should build on this success, integrating cash assistance with complementary support to address the multifaceted needs of affected populations.



Cash assistance came like a drop of water in the mouth of a thirsty person.



### General recommendations for programming

Often the positive impact of cash assistance beyond just meeting basic economic needs it is not captured as considered secondary impact. Yet the evaluation results and the feedback shared by the recipients, demonstrate these are equally important.

- **Holistic approaches for needs assessment, analysis and programme design:** Build programmes based on a holistic understanding of people's needs and priorities, focusing on how people want to live, what their aspirations are and how humanitarian assistance can contribute to that.
- **Wellbeing targets and indicators:** include wellbeing target and indicators and collect data through baselines and end line and regular monitoring information to understand impact.

