

The World Food Programme's Contribution to Addressing the Food Crisis in Syria 2021-2023

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Abstract

Syria experienced a severe food crisis during 2021-2023 driven by to multiple overlapping crises; prolonged armed conflict since 2011, economic collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the devastating February 2023 earthquake. This study analyzes the contribution of the World Food Programme (WFP) in addressing Syria's food crisis during this period. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach with document analysis techniques and a Neoliberal Institutionalism theoretical framework, this research examines WFP's programmes, operational strategies, and concrete contributions. Findings reveal that WFP reached 5.5 million people in 2023 through emergency food distribution (averaging 1,700 kcal/day), cash-based transfers for 1.5 million beneficiaries and nutrition programmes for 400,000 children and pregnant or lactating women. Despite a 37% funding gap, humanitarian access restrictions, and persistent security threats, WFP demonstrated adaptive capacity in responding to the crisis. This study contributes to understanding the role of international organizations in managing complex food crises in conflict-affected contexts, while also highlighting the structural limitations of donor-dependent assistance systems.

Keywords: *Syria, World Food Programme, Food Crisis, Humanitarian Assistance, Food Security*

Abstrak

Syria mengalami krisis pangan parah periode 2021-2023 akibat *multiple crises* yang mencakup konflik berkepanjangan sejak 2011, krisis ekonomi, dampak pandemi COVID-19, dan gempa bumi Februari 2023. Penelitian ini menganalisis kontribusi World Food Programme (WFP) dalam menangani krisis pangan di Syria pada periode tersebut. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan teknik analisis dokumen dan kerangka teori Neoliberal Institusionalisme, penelitian ini mengkaji program-program WFP, strategi operasional, dan kontribusi konkret yang dicapai. Temuan menunjukkan WFP menjangkau 5,5 juta orang pada 2023 melalui distribusi pangan darurat rata-rata 1.700 kkal/hari, bantuan

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tunai untuk 1,5 juta orang, dan program nutrisi untuk 400.000 anak serta ibu hamil atau menyusui. Meskipun menghadapi gap pendanaan 37%, hambatan akses kemanusiaan, dan ancaman keamanan, WFP menunjukkan kapasitas adaptif dalam merespons krisis. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman peran organisasi internasional dalam menangani krisis pangan kompleks di zona konflik, sekaligus mengidentifikasi keterbatasan struktural sistem bantuan berbasis donor.

Kata kunci: Suriah, World Food Programme, Krisis Pangan, Bantuan Kemanusiaan, Ketahanan Pangan.

Introduction

The food crisis is one of the greatest humanitarian challenges of the 21st century, threatening the survival of millions of people. Between 2021 and 2023, global acute food insecurity increased significantly, from 193 million in 53 countries in 2021 to 258 million in 58 countries in 2022.¹ Armed conflict is a major driver, with around 70% of the 319 million people facing acute hunger living in fragile or conflict-affected states.²

Syria represents the most complex food crisis. The food security situation has worsened due to a combination of four mutually reinforcing factors. First, the prolonged conflict since 2011 has devastated the national food system, with wheat production plummeting to a 50-year low, reaching just 1.05 million tonnes in 2021, a quarter of the pre-conflict average of 4.1 million tonnes (2002-2011).³ Meanwhile, by the end of 2022, 6.5 million Syrians had fled abroad and another 6.8 million were internally displaced.⁴ Second, the economic crisis caused the currency to depreciate by almost 90% in three years, with the informal exchange rate reaching SYP 6,307/USD in December 2022. The price of a food basket in December 2022 reached SYP 425,585 (equivalent to USD 141 at the official exchange rate), while the minimum wage in Syria is only SYP 92,970, which only covers one-fifth of the needs of the food basket.⁵ Third, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated an already fragile food situation, in one year, an additional 4.5 million Syrians fell into food insecurity, bringing the total to a record 12.4 million people, or nearly 60% of the population, by early 2021.⁶ Fourth, the February 2023 earthquake in northwestern Syria increased infrastructure damage and increased the need for emergency assistance.⁷ As a result of the accumulation of these four crises, by 2023, as many as 12.4 million people, or nearly 60% of Syria's population, will face acute food insecurity.⁸

The World Food Programme (WFP), as the UN's largest food aid agency, is a leading humanitarian organization fighting global hunger.⁹ In response to multiple crises in Syria, WFP reached 7.1 million people in 2023 through various interventions, including emergency food assistance to 6.8 million people, school meals for 856,300 children, and nutrition programs for 341,500 pregnant/lactating women and children to prevent acute malnutrition. However, these contributions face significant challenges, due to a funding crisis, WFP was forced to cut its General

Food Assistance program by 40% starting in July 2023, before ending it completely by the end of the year.¹⁰

Several previous studies have examined the WFP's role in Syria, but each has its own limitations. Milandry (2021) examined the period 2018-2020¹¹, Mutiara (2024) covers 2021-2022 but does not include the impact of the February 2023 earthquake¹², Pratama et al. (2025) used a humanitarian-development-peace nexus perspective, but the analysis of measurable contributions for the 2021-2023 period still needs to be explored further¹³, Alsina and Eldridge (2025) examined the effectiveness of cash transfers in various countries but analysis of implementation in Syria is still limited¹⁴, and Ullah et al. (2025) Focus on Sudan rather than Syria, and emphasize systemic challenges rather than specific programs, but this article provides a strong theoretical framework on the role of international organizations in conflict zones that can be applied in the context of WFP in Syria.¹⁵

This study presents three novelties. First, it covers the full period of 2021-2023, including the impact of the February 2023 earthquake, which has not been examined in previous studies, including Milandry (2021) and Mutiara (2024). Second, it provides a detailed quantitative analysis of three WFP programmes: GFA, CBT, and Nutrition, with measurable outcome data compared across each year of the 2021-2023 period, going beyond the descriptive approach employed by Pratama et al. (2025). Third, this study does not merely describe how WFP operates, but also critically examines its structural limitations, including why donor fatigue and funding gaps cannot be resolved through institutional efficiency alone, an aspect largely absent from existing literature on WFP's role in Syria.

Unlike previous studies that either focus on limited time periods, lack post-earthquake analysis, or confine themselves to descriptive accounts of WFP's programs, this article makes a distinct contribution by integrating critical institutional analysis with empirical program data across the full 2021–2023 crisis period. This positions the study as a more comprehensive and analytically rigorous examination of WFP's role in Syria's complex humanitarian context.

This study raises the research question: *"How has the World Food Programme (WFP) contributed to addressing the food crisis in Syria during 2021–2023?"* This question is significant as it enhances our understanding of how international organisations such as WFP operate amid multiple simultaneous crises, as well as the adaptive strategies they employ to sustain the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

This research uses the Neoliberal Institutionalism perspective from Keohane and Nye (2012),¹⁶ equipped with the concept of international organizations from Archer (2015),¹⁷ and the concept of food security from FAO¹⁸. The selection of this framework is based on the characteristics of the problem involving complex multilateral coordination in humanitarian crisis conditions.

Neoliberal institutionalism argues that international institutions play a crucial role in facilitating cooperation even in an anarchic international system. Institutions can reduce uncertainty, lower transaction costs, provide information, and increase transparency, thus facilitating mutually beneficial cooperation.¹⁹ The concept of complex interdependence²⁰ is the foundation of this analysis, reflected in the Syrian population's dependence on external food aid.

Archer's (2015) concept of international organizations categorizes the role of organizations into three: as an instrument of member states, as a forum for interaction and consensus building, and as an independent actor that has the autonomy to act independently.²¹ Like the WFP, which has its own programs and operational strategies, this concept helps analyze how the WFP performs a dual function in addressing the food crisis in Syria.

The FAO concept of food security encompasses four dimensions: availability, access, utilization, and stability, and uses the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) as the standard for classifying food insecurity.²² These three components of the analytical framework are integrated to comprehensively analyze WFP's contribution, allowing for an in-depth analysis of WFP's operational mechanisms, functions and impacts in the context of complex food crises in conflict zones.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive-analytical methods to examine the World Food Programme's (WFP) contribution to addressing the food crisis in Syria from 2021 to 2023. This approach was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of WFP's operational mechanisms, adaptation strategies, and multidimensional contributions within the context of a complex humanitarian crisis.

Primary data comes from official WFP documents including the monthly Syria Country Brief for the 2021-2023 period, the Syria Annual Country Report for 2022-2023, Situation Reports, and publications on program strategies and funding reports. Secondary data was obtained from publications by credible international organizations such as UN OCHA (Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023), the Food Security Information Network (FSIN), the Global Network Against Food Crises (GNAFC), and FAO, as well as indexed academic journals. Document selection criteria included publication period 2021-2023, source credibility from UN organizations or peer-reviewed journals, substantive relevance to WFP programs and the Syrian food crisis, and availability of full digital access. Data collection used document review through the official portals of WFP, FAO, UN OCHA, ReliefWeb, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate.

Data analysis used a qualitative content analysis method with a deductive-inductive approach through five stages: data codification based on the dimensions

of food security and types of WFP programs, categorization of findings according to the Neoliberal Institutionalism framework, triangulation of sources for data validation, interpretation of data in the context of theory, and drawing conclusions.²³

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation by comparing WFP publications with independent reports from OCHA, FAO, and FSIN, the use of verified official documents and peer-reviewed publications, and systematic documentation of the analysis process. Validity was ensured through triangulation to avoid organizational bias, while reliability was maintained through consistency of data selection criteria, a systematic analysis framework, and documentation of research procedures that allow for replication.²⁴

Results and Discussion

Food Crisis in Syria 2021-2023

The period 2021-2023 marked a critical phase in the Syrian humanitarian crisis, with multiple crises accumulating and reinforcing each other. The conflict since 2011 continues to destroy agricultural infrastructure and food systems. In 2022, 41% of general hospitals and 43% of primary health care facilities were either partially functional or not functioning at all.²⁵ Wheat production in 2021 reached only 1.05 million tonnes, down from 2.8 million tonnes in 2020 and only a quarter of the pre-conflict average of 4.1 million tonnes (2002-2011), transforming Syria from a net wheat exporter to a country heavily dependent on imports.²⁶

The economic crisis has exacerbated the situation with drastic currency depreciation. Consumer price inflation in Syria reached 289% in 2022 compared to 2020 and 729% compared to 2019, reflecting unprecedented hyperinflation.²⁷ The WFP reference food basket price in December 2022 reached SYP 425,585 (equivalent to USD 141), while the minimum wage of SYP 92,970 only covers one-fifth of this need.²⁸ This condition results in more than 90% of the Syrian population living below the poverty line,²⁹ Meanwhile, between 2019-2021, basic food prices soared by up to 800%.³⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive disruption through the disruption of supply chains, the loss of livelihoods for informal workers, and the disruption of humanitarian aid programs. Its impact has pushed the number of people experiencing acute food insecurity to 12 million, or 55% of Syria's population, by 2022, a 51% increase compared to pre-COVID-19 levels in 2019.³¹

The 7.7-magnitude earthquake on February 6, 2023, in northwest Syria further complicated the crisis. Prior to the earthquake, northwest Syria was already experiencing its highest humanitarian emergency since the conflict began, with 4.1 million people fully dependent on humanitarian assistance. The earthquake resulted

in more than 4,400 deaths and 8,100 injuries in northwest Syria as of February 15, 2023, and damaged more than 9,000 buildings in the region.³²

The combination of these four crisis factors creates a situation of multiple crises that mutually reinforce and exacerbate the impact on food security. By 2023, 12.1 million people, or more than 50% of Syria's population, will face food insecurity, while another 2.9 million will be at risk of falling into famine without adequate humanitarian intervention.³³

Figure 1. Development of Food Insecurity in Syria 2020-2023



Visualization of Data Processed by the Author. **Source:** WFP & FAO (2022), OCHA (2022), FSIN & GNAFC (2023).

WFP Food Assistance Programme in Syria

1. General Food Assistance

General Food Assistance (GFA) is the emergency food distribution program that forms the backbone of WFP's operations in Syria, providing monthly food packages to the most vulnerable populations. The program is designed to meet minimum daily calorie requirements, including carbohydrates, protein, fat, vitamins, and essential minerals, taking into account local preferences for the type and quantity of commodities. In 2023, the food ration varies by region. In government-controlled areas, WFP provides up to 1,000 kcal/person/day until September 2023, then reduces to 700 kcal/person/day in the last quarter of 2023. In northwest Syria, the ration reaches 1,300 kcal/person/day throughout the year. GFA reaches the most conflict-affected areas in all 14 Syrian governorates, including Aleppo, Idlib, Deir-ez-Zor, Raqqa, and Homs.³⁴

Distribution is carried out through direct distribution, partnerships with local organizations, and electronic vouchers in areas with well-functioning markets. In 2023, before the program was discontinued, the GFA reached 5.5 million people. However, funding shortages forced WFP to gradually reduce recipients before finally terminating the program completely in December 2023.³⁵

2. Cash-Based Transfers (CBT)

CBT provides cash assistance that allows recipients to purchase food according to their preferences in local markets. This program not only meets food needs but also supports the local economy by increasing purchasing power and creating demand for local traders. In 2023, CBT, through electronic vouchers, reached 525,600 people in areas with well-functioning markets. The amount of assistance is determined based on market prices to meet minimum food needs and is distributed through mobile money, prepaid debit cards, and electronic vouchers.³⁶

Implementing CBT requires prerequisites: functioning markets with adequate commodity availability, safe and accessible areas, financial infrastructure, and willing traders. The program can only be implemented in large cities and stable areas, while areas of active conflict still rely on in-kind distribution.³⁷

3. Nutrition Programs

WFP's Nutrition Programs focus on the most vulnerable groups, namely children under five, pregnant women, and breastfeeding mothers, to prevent and address acute malnutrition. The program focuses on protecting the first 1,000 days of life, from pregnancy to two years of age, as a critical period during which malnutrition can cause irreversible damage to brain development and physical growth, affecting learning capacity, economic productivity, and lifelong health.³⁸ In 2023, WFP's nutrition program reached 341,500 pregnant/lactating women and children for the prevention of moderate acute malnutrition (MAM), and 129,600 people for the treatment of MAM across Syria, providing specialized nutritional foods, vitamin and mineral supplementation, and nutrition education.³⁹

The program includes a Supplementary Feeding Program for malnutrition prevention with Super Cereal Plus, nutritious biscuits, and fortified oil. For moderate acute malnutrition, WFP provides Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF) and micronutrient supplements, while cases of severe acute malnutrition are referred to UNICEF for further management.⁴⁰

In addition to the distribution of nutritious food, the program also includes nutrition education on exclusive breastfeeding, complementary feeding, and hygiene practices, as well as routine growth monitoring for early detection of malnutrition.⁴¹

Table 1. WFP Programs and Achievements in Syria 2021-2023

Program	Target Recipient	Modality	Key Achievements	Geographic Coverage
General Food	The most vulnerable	Direct distribution, local organization	5.5 million people before being discontinued in	14 governorates: Aleppo, Idlib, Deir-ez-Zor,

Assistance (GFA)	populations in conflict areas	partnerships, electronic vouchers	December 2023; ration 700-1,000 kcal/day (government area) and 1,300 kcal/day (northwest)	Raqqa, Homs, etc.
Cash-based Transfers (CBT)	Population in areas with well-functioning markets	Mobile money, prepaid debit cards, electronic vouchers	525,600 people; the aid value is adjusted to market prices for minimum food needs	Large cities and stable areas
Nutrition Programs	Children <5 years, pregnant & breastfeeding mothers	Supplementary Feeding, RUTF, Super Cereal Plus, nutritious biscuits, enriched oil, nutrition education	341,500 (MAM prevention) + 129,600 (MAM treatment).	All of Syria

Visualization of Data Processed by the Author. Source: WFP. (2024). Syrian Arab Republic Annual Country Report 2023.

Operational Strategy in Various Crisis Conditions

WFP faces highly complex operational challenges in the 2021-2023 period. Obstacles to humanitarian access are a major obstacle; as of May 2022, only four cross-line convoys had reached northwest Syria, far below actual needs. Cross-line convoys require complex negotiations and the agreement of all parties to the conflict, and cannot replace the scale of ongoing cross-border operations through a single border crossing. On the funding side, pledges for 2022 cover less than half of the \$10.5 billion requirement, the largest ever for the Syrian crisis, forcing WFP to gradually reduce food distribution across Syria.⁴²

In response to these challenges, WFP developed four adaptive strategies. First, diversifying aid modalities by combining in-kind food distribution and cash-based transfers (a hybrid modality) according to market conditions and regional accessibility. Second, strengthening coordination with a network of local and international cooperating partners. Third, updating the beneficiary database through the Vulnerability Needs Review (VNR) to ensure targeted assistance.

Fourth, a region-based approach that prioritizes populations with the most severe levels of food insecurity.⁴³

WFP's Contribution to Food Security

WFP's contribution can be analyzed through four dimensions of food security. From the availability dimension, WFP reached 5.5 million people in 2023 through the Global Food Security Facility (GFA) before the program was discontinued due to a funding crisis, with food ratios varying between 700 and 1,300 kcal/person/day depending on the region, amid wheat production reaching only a quarter of pre-conflict levels.⁴⁴

From the access dimension, the CBT program through electronic vouchers reached 525,600 people in areas with well-functioning markets, providing recipients with flexibility to purchase food needs according to local preferences while supporting the local trader economy.⁴⁵

From the utilization dimension, the nutrition program reached 341,500 pregnant/breastfeeding mothers and children for MAM prevention and 129,600 people for MAM treatment, accompanied by nutrition education on exclusive breastfeeding, complementary foods, and hygiene practices.⁴⁶

From the stability dimension, the unprecedented funding crisis forced WFP to cut aid to 2.5 million of its 5.5 million beneficiaries in June 2023, after previously reducing food ratios to half their original size for two consecutive years, before finally stopping the GFA completely in December 2023.⁴⁷

Analysis in the Perspective of Neoliberal Institutionalism

Using the Neoliberal Institutionalism framework of Keohane and Nye (1977), WFP's contribution can be understood as a manifestation of the role of international institutions in facilitating cooperation and reducing uncertainty in a complex international system. WFP, as an international institution, creates a framework of rules, norms, and procedures that reduce transaction costs in the distribution of humanitarian aid, enabling multilateral coordination between dozens of donor countries, humanitarian organizations, and millions of beneficiaries that would not be possible without the presence of credible intermediary institutions.

The complex interdependence of Syria is reflected in two dimensions. The sensitivity of interdependence is evident in how changes in donor policies directly impact WFP's ability to deliver aid. When a funding crisis hit in 2023, the WFP was forced to cut aid to 2.5 million of its 5.5 million recipients within a matter of months.⁴⁸ Vulnerability interdependence is reflected in Syria's inability to address food insecurity without external assistance, with more than 12.1 million people, or 50% of the population, remaining dependent on food aid in 2023.⁴⁹

However, reflectively, the Neoliberal Institutionalism framework has significant limitations in explaining the reality of the Syrian crisis. First, this theory

assumes rational actors motivated by shared interests, but the phenomenon of donor fatigue and the ever-widening funding gap actually shows that donor geopolitical interests often trump the logic of institutional efficiency. Second, Neoliberal Institutionalism tends to ignore the asymmetric dimension of power: the WFP relies entirely on voluntary donor contributions, so the institution's capacity to function optimally is subject to the changing political priorities of donor countries. Third, this theory cannot explain why even institutions that have proven efficient and transparent continue to experience chronic underfunding, because the root of the problem is not institutional efficiency but rather geopolitical dynamics and unequal burden-sharing among donor countries.

Thus, while the WFP has demonstrated its capacity as an efficient coordinating institution, a sustainable solution to the Syrian food crisis cannot be achieved solely through strengthening institutional capacity. A political resolution of the conflict and the restoration of domestic food production capacity are fundamental prerequisites, something that lies beyond the scope of WFP's mandate and capacity as a humanitarian institution.

Conclusion

This study analyzes WFP's contribution to addressing the food crisis in Syria during 2021-2023 through three main programs: General Food Assistance reaching 5.5 million people before termination in December 2023, Cash-Based Transfers reaching 525,600 people, and Nutrition Programs serving 341,500 for MAM prevention and 129,600 for MAM treatment. WFP contributed to all four dimensions of food security: availability, access, utilization, and stability, despite chronic underfunding that forced a 40% reduction in food rations before GFA's complete suspension.

The Neoliberal Institutionalism perspective effectively explains WFP's function in reducing transaction costs and enhancing multilateral coordination transparency. However, it has significant limitations in explaining the persistence of funding gaps, donor fatigue, and geopolitical influences beyond institutional efficiency logic. The structural instability of a donor-dependent system is reflected in the forced suspension of GFA, the largest emergency food program in Syria's humanitarian response.

These findings indicate that while humanitarian assistance is vital for short-term survival, sustainable solutions require political resolution of the conflict and restoration of Syria's domestic food production capacity. Future research is recommended to conduct comparative studies with other conflict-affected countries and undertake longitudinal analyses of humanitarian assistance's long-term impact on community resilience.

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