



Basic Assistance Working Group Meeting: March 2021- Minutes of Meeting			
Date	23/4/2021	Time	10:00am
Facilitators	Ruba Cheaib	Duration	2 hours
Minutes Prepared by	Ruba Cheaib		
Agenda	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sector Updates: <i>Assistance- March 2020 + Winter 2020/2021</i> <i>Coverage of MPCA and transfer value</i> <i>Economic indicators</i> <i>SMEB online Dashboard</i> 2. WFP RAM Situational Analysis 3. LOUISE Operational Updates 4. Update on Dollarization Discussions 5. BA Protection Risk Analysis Review 6. Referral Analysis Q3-4 2020 		
Agencies represented	<p>Action Against Hunger (ACF); Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED); Arcenciel; Basmeh & Zeitooneh; Cash Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning Organizational Network (CAMEALEON); Care International in Lebanon; Caritas Austria; Caritas Lebanon; Caritas Switzerland; CCP Japan; DanChurchAid(DCA); ECHO; EU; Embrace Lebanon; Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO); German Embassy; HelpAge International; Hilfswerk International (HWI); Humanitarian Corridor - Fédération de l'Entraide Protestante; Inter-Agency-UNHCR; International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); International Rescue Committee (IRC); International Organization for Migration (IOM); Intersos; Islamic Relief Worldwide- Lebanon; La Chaîne de l'espoir; Lebanese Red Cross (LRC); Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS); The Lebanon Protection Consortium (LPC); Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA); Nusaned; OCHA; Oxfam GB; Relief International (RI); Save the Children (SCI); Secours Islamique France (SIF); SPHERE Building Tomorrow; Trócaire; UNDP; UNHCR Lebanon; UNHCR MENA; UNFPA; UNICEF; UN Women; WFP; World Bank</p>		

Update on Basic Assistance (BA) Working Group (BAWG) meeting: Starting May 2021, the BAWG will be held on the fourth Thursday of each month at 10am.

1. Sector Updates (presented by Ruba Cheaib)

a. Assistance- March 2020 + Winter 2020/2021

- In March 2020, 118,800 households received multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA). In addition, to that, around 5,200 households received cash grants through UNICEF Integrated Child Wellbeing Program.
- There has been an increase, specifically among refugees, in coverage since last month. This is due to UNHCR and WFP caseload expansions. A smaller scale increase is noted among Lebanese with assistance to Palestinians from Syria (PRS) remaining stable.
- The total amount of USD value disbursed in March for MPCA is US\$8,200,000. This USD value is calculated using respective partner exchange rates as assistance is disbursed in LBP.
- For Winter assistance, from November 2020 through March 2021, **214,623** households received seasonal cash assistance. The largest disbursement of seasonal cash assistance was disbursed in November. The USD value of seasonal cash assistance disbursed was US\$65,000,000. For in-kind assistance throughout the winter season, 160,000 blankets, 15,000 mattresses, 8,500 heaters, 25,000 clothing kits and 44,000 other non-food item kits, across the population groups.
- In March, coverage for Syrian MPCA reached 44%. An increase in coverage is expecting in April, reaching around 50%, with some expansions taking place.
- Transfer value for MPCA remains at 400,000 LBP. The gap, looking at the non-food Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB), the transfer value for MPCA and accounting for income stands at 290,000LBP.

b. Socio-Economic Indicators

- *Exchange rate*: Following the spike in mid-March where the exchange rate reached around 14,000-15,000 LBP to the USD, the rate has since leveled off, hovering at around 12,000LBP/USD throughout April. Other rates remain unchanged. **Reminder to partners to report exchange rates with financial service partners on the dedicated Activity Info Database.** For the most part, most partners are still operating with a 3,900LBP/USD rate, with some others (namely LOUISE agencies) have secured a higher rate at 6,240LBP/USD.
- *Consumer Price Index (CPI)*: CPI for January and February 2021 have been released by the Central Administration of Statistics (CAS). A continued upward trajectory is still noted in the annual change of the CPI over time. Looking at February 2021, compared to February 2020, the annual increase stands at 155% with a monthly change of +5% compared to January 2021. The monthly change from December 2020 to January 2021 was recorded at +3%.
- *SMEB monitoring*: Most data coming in to monitor SMEB comes from WFP price monitoring while others are adjusted using the CPI. The value of the SMEB basket in March 2021 stood at around 1,800,000LBP. March figures are calculated keeping components of the SMEB that rely on CPI data constant from

February to March. The increases in the SMEB value are largely driven by the increase in food and non-food (mainly hygiene) items.

c. SMEB Online Dashboard

- This online power BI dashboard is intended to make price data and trends of the SMEB, easily accessible to all partners and interested parties. The dashboard includes figures presenting monthly trends of the SMEB (revised SMEB of August 2020). The figure will be updated on a monthly basis as new data become available. The value of the SMEB basket in March 2021 stood at around 1,800,000LBP (23% increase compared to June 2020, and 6% increase compared to February 2021). The data is separated for food (per person and per household) and the non-food basket (items and services). A checkbox is available to view price trend of individual items.
- The non-food basket is separated in to two part as the data sources differ. Non-food items such as hygiene item prices come from WFP retail price monitoring while the service components (health, education, rent, etc.) are taken from the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR) and adjusted using the CPI.
- At the bottom of the dashboard, two graphs show the food and non-food basket per month, in relation to the transfer values for food assistance and MPCA. While data is primarily presented in LBP (as data is gathered in LBP), the dashboard allows the viewer to view this amount in USD, using the average unofficial exchange rate of the respective month.

2. WFP RAM Situational Analysis (Presented by Abdallah Souhani, WFP)

- *Supply:* Data from the Port of Beirut Good Movement shows a decreased trend in the weight of unloaded food. A small increase is noted in the last month. A decrease of 20% is noted following the port blast. Between January and March 2021 an 18% decrease is noted compared to the same period last year. The weight of unloaded goods decreased by 5% compared March 2020 to March 2020. Data from the Lebanese Customs website (comparing imports from January to November 2020 to the same period in 2019) show a small increase (3%) in cereal imports, namely due to wheat subsidization. Total food imports, excluding cereals, decreased by 14% while total food imports, including cereals decreased by 7%. Total value of all imports decreases by roughly 34%. Wheat imports, according the Lebanese Customs data, increased by 20%. Based on WFP shipment data (port of Beirut and port of Tripoli), a 50% decrease is noted when comparing January to March 2021 to 2020. Comparing March 2021 to March 2020, a 35% decrease in wheat imports in noted. Stock coverage evaluation, taken from data from WFP contracted shops shows a nearly stable coverage over the past few months. However, there were large scale market disruptions in March 2021 following the rapid depreciation of the LBP to the USD. These disruptions caused a decrease in stock coverage across shops. A gradual improvement is noted in more recent weeks. By April 9th, 72% of shops had more than 2 weeks of stock coverage. The head of the syndicate of food suppliers mentioned, on April 12th, that current stocks would cover market needs for 2 to 2.5 months. Data from WFP contracted shops (week of April 9th)

on the availability of subsidized products shows that at the beginning of March 68% of shops reported scarcity of products, which improved to 60% in the week of April 9th. However, there was drop in expectation to receive new orders. Only 42% were able to place new order for subsidized goods and 1% reported receiving the full order in the week of April 9th.

- The new Exchange Platform rolled out by the central bank, was unveiled earlier this month. However, it was not indicated when the platform would be operational and what rate would be raised. Reports show that the platform will be available for certain categories of people, not to the general public.
- The food SMEB reached 176,000 LBP in March 2021, a 194% annual increase and a 13% monthly increase. The trend of the basket followed trends on exchange rate development. Preliminary data from April shows that the basket has reached 220,000LBP. The non-food basket reached 278,000LBP in March 2021, a 221% since October 2019 and a 15% monthly increase. Preliminary data from April shows that basket has reached 325,000LBP.
- Updates on Subsidies, bread and fuel: No official decision taken on subsidies. The finance minister has indicated that the reserve allocated to subsidies would continue to the end of May, at the current rate. The Ministry of Economy and trade as released an updated list of subsidized commodities, including industrial and agricultural materials. The ministry has issued a revised price of bread which depends on the area of selling (bakeries versus retails shops). Gasoline prices have increased by 58%, diesel by 60% and cooking gas by 34%.
- Food Security implications: As inflation and unemployment rates continue to rise, poverty is rising which is leading to a further deterioration in the food security status of persons in the country. Debt is continuing to increase with the main reason being to borrow money to buy food and food expenditure share has been increasing for all residents in Lebanon. It is expected that extreme poverty will continue to increase in Lebanon by end of 2021. The modification or removal of subsidies will likely have an impact on inflation trends, potentially leading to social tensions and civil unrest.

3. LOUISE Operational Updates (Presented by Milos Terzan, UNHCR)

- Preferential rate remains at 6,240LBP/USD, negotiations for higher rates continue.
- As a normal practice to reduce loads at ATM, cards are uploading over several days. For some areas, the staggering of loadings is smaller while others in longer, depending on availability and distribution of ATMs and caseloads.
- A set of SOPs for ATM monitoring as been developed to make sure that the objective and activities of this exercise are clearly recorded. LRC (WFP partner) in the north has contracted a security company in the North for ATM monitoring and crowd control and should be operational as of April 2021.
- Two new ATMs have been installed in underserved areas in Zehrieh, Tripoli by Banque Libano-Française (BLF) while installment of new ATMs in North, North Bekaa and South and being discussed.

- Redemption rates remain high (97%) in April. Number of banks that allow use of cards outside their network have decreased, leaving only 4 banks that are accessible with the LOUISE card.
- Programmatic updates: WFP has expanded the number of households covered by MPCA from 48,000 to 63,000. The inclusion of new families to MPCA and/or food assistance, impacting 12,000 households, through the Grievance Redress Mechanism is expected to be rolled out in May.
- UNICEF’s Integrated Child Wellbeing Program should reach 8,500 children in April (7,500 in March). UNICEF is also looking to monetize WASH services in Aarsal. UNICEF is also designing a social assistance program to all nationalities, reaching 50,000 individuals, to be rolled out in June. This program is linked to UNICEF services provided by partners. Data will be gathered from other services being provided and linked with the social assistance component for an integrated approach (i.e. existing services will serve as the entry point for identification of vulnerable children).
- SHEILD, who have joined LOUISE months back, and are implementing a cash for work program has reach a total of 133 workers and is ending in May this year.
- A number of Partners have approached to join LOUISE, pending Governing Body approval.
- No changes when it comes to transfer values. Food assistance remains at 100,000LBP/month/person and MPCA 400,000LBP/month/family. UNHCR and WFP continue to advocate with the MoSA on increasing the transfer values to cover needs.

4. Update of Dollarization Discussions

- Following donors’ request to assess whether a shift to dollarization of humanitarian aid would provide greater value for money to beneficiaries and the wider humanitarian system, a process has been led by the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Lebanon (HC/RC) to develop an economic and risk analysis related to the currency of disbursement.
- A risk and mitigation measure analysis has been drafted focusing on programmatic operational and protection risks of possible dollarization of aid. Preliminary discussions were held on the topic of transfer values and – if requested - how to go about conducting community consultations. The risk and mitigation measure analysis was shared with the HCT in an ad-hoc meeting in early April. The HCT then requested operational actors to identify a set of programmes that could not be dollarized for specific operational reasons.
- For the BA sector, and in consultation with key partners, no intervention under the Sector was flagged as “not possible” to dollarize for specific operational reasons, however the sector reiterated the concern around a non-harmonized approach to dollarization across nationality groups, given the delays in scaling up assistance to Lebanese beneficiaries.
- Participants in the sector working group flagged the recent development of a letter from BDL to the RC/HC and World Bank offering an exchange rate at the ‘market rate’ for humanitarian aid (continued disbursements in LBP).

5. BA Protection Risk Analysis (PRA)

- The PRA was initiated in 2019 as part of the Inter-sector priority to mainstream protection across the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan. The PRA tool was piloted through the BA and Health Sectors in 2019 and since then, it is being rolled out across other sectors. The PRA is based on four principles of protection mainstreaming which include the identification of protection risks that may be caused by intervention under the sector and the designing and implementation of plans to address those risks. It is recommended that the PRA is updated on at least an annual basis and thus was reviewed in 2021.
- The 2021 review began with three field level sessions across regions throughout March to review previously identified risks and mitigation measures and identify any new risks and a preliminary discussion was held within the BA core group. The next step, after providing partners with time to review the matrix, will be to prioritize risks and develop a response and monitoring plan and monitoring plans.
- The identified risks are categorized into broad groups: complaints and feedback, referrals, access to assistance, tensions and monitoring and evaluation.
- *Complaints and Feedback:* Risks identified relate to the delays in receiving of assistance due to long resolution times of card and pin issues stemming from incorrect classification of issues and without the presence of substitutionary support. Risks related to sexual exploitation and abuse were identified, namely in the event of an absence of needed mechanisms for reporting. A couple of risks were identified that relate to lack of common messaging around specific protection risks such as risk of self-harm and intention to return.
- *Referrals and GRM:* Risk related to GRM was in relation to lost opportunities if gathered data is not honed. Risks related to referrals included the risk of not having adequate referrals at distribution sites. Risks were also identified in relation to inefficient referrals which would lead to lack of service delivery.
- *Monitoring and Evaluation:* risks identified included risk of missing the needs of specific groups (persons with disabilities, gender, elderly) if data is not adequately disaggregated and risk of not capturing risk of exploitation if tools are not designed appropriately.
- *Tensions:* Risks in relation to tensions at ATMs were noted, with some mitigation measures (ATM monitoring and staggered loadings) already in place. Other risks included tensions as a consequence of perception aid bias, lack of information on targeting, and currency of disbursement.
- *Access to assistance:* Several risks were identified that relate to safe access to assistance for persons with specific needs at distribution sites and ATMs, the lack of which may lead to risk of exploitation. A new risk identified was increased risk of COVID transmission due to shared transportation to ATM and sites. Impact of shortage of fuel may also put access to ATM at risk. A recurring risk identified was with regards to beneficiaries not being able to meet their

needs in the event that the assistance does not keep up with market prices and currency value.

- *Next steps:* Risk matrix will be shared with partners for feedback following which, risks will be prioritized with support from the protection sector and from that a monitoring and action plan will be developed.

6. Referrals Analysis

- A large increase in the total number of referrals to the BA sector is noted in Q4 as compared to Q3 with around 10,400 referrals made to BA in Q4, compared to around 2,000 in Q3. 66% of referrals were accepted in Q4, which is an improvement compared to Q3 where that figure was 41%. 'Referral accepted' does not mean that a service was provided, but that the receiving agency committed to providing a service.
- The majority of referrals were for Syrian refugees across all governorates with the highest number of referrals made for vulnerable Lebanese in Beirut. Over half or more of referrals, across governorates, at the individual level, were for females.
- *Next Steps:* In coordination with the food security sector and DRC, a message was sent to rims partners to explain and clarify what services are available through BA and the food security sector and distinguishing different interventions. The message also explained why there is a low uptake of referrals to the BA sector linked to the targeting mechanism used by UNHCR and WFP.
- A sector specific referral training will be held for BA in May.

7. AOB

- A survey link will be shared with BA partners to gather data on plans and funding for 2021 as well as plans and for any assessments and monitoring activities.