

Leveraging agricultural revitalisation for peace: Post-conflict recovery, agri-food systems, and food security in Syria

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Refugee tents for IDPs, spread out in an olive grove in Atmeh, Syria.
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MAIN MESSAGES

- **Agricultural recovery is central to Syria's broader stabilisation**, with the sector being uniquely well-positioned to generate rapid peace dividends through food security, employment, and economic revitalisation.
- **Conflict, displacement, and climate change have severely degraded Syria's agri-food system**, creating intertwined risks - ranging from resource scarcity to land disputes - that can fuel renewed instability if not addressed.
- **Conflict-sensitive, climate-resilient approaches are essential for rebuilding the sector**, including infrastructural rehabilitation, inclusive natural resource governance, and the restoration of agricultural extension services.
- **Harnessing diaspora capital and private sector engagement can accelerate recovery**, but requires the development of enabling policies, risk-sharing mechanisms, and coherent governance reforms.
- **Recovery efforts must balance urgent production needs with long-term sustainability**, ensuring that land, water, and ecosystem rehabilitation are approached through equitable, gender-transformative, and nature-positive solutions.

INTRODUCTION

Syria's embattled new government faces a catalogue of competing short-, medium-, and long-term recovery priorities. Facing a still unstable security environment and with total physical reconstruction costs estimated at \$216 billion (World Bank, 2025), Syria's immediate stabilization is contingent upon several urgent needs, including security sector reform, the reconstitution of public service administration and delivery, the promotion of fiscal and broader economic recovery, and the sustaining of constitutional reform and transitional justice processes. Amidst these myriad challenges, a revitalized Syrian agricultural sector is capable of emerging as a cornerstone of recovery and sustainable development.

Agriculture remains, despite extensive damage to agricultural lands and irrigation infrastructure, the backbone of Syria's rural economy. Its critical pre-war contribution to domestic food security, employment, and Syria's export economy means a reconstituted agricultural sector has the potential to become an important engine for broader post-conflict recovery, particularly as access to affordable food remains one of the highest priorities amongst communities in need (REACH, 2025).

Agricultural reconstruction and recovery strategies must, however, encompass more than just the reconstruction of physical infrastructure, increasing productivity, or the generation of employment opportunities. Critical and likely more thornier issues such as land tenure, returnee (re)integration, equitable natural resource access and management, and the effective dissemination of climate-smart and resilient technologies for adaptation are equally essential undertakings if the sector's recovery is to be sustainable in the long-term.



Credit: Salah Darwish/Unsplash

SYRIA'S AGRICULTURAL SECTOR: THEN AND NOW

Syria's arable and forest areas cover around 6.5 million hectares, representing 35% of the country's total landmass. Pre-war data captures how the majority of cultivation centres around a variety of staple and cash crops such as cereals, cotton, legumes, almonds, vegetables, fruits, and olives, whilst animal agriculture accounted for approximately 34% of the sector's overall value (Almohamed and Sheikh, 2021).

The sector has, moreover, formed a historically critical pillar of Syria's broader economy. Prior to the civil war, 42.6% of Syrians resided in rural areas and just short of 20% of its labour force was engaged in primary, secondary, or tertiary agri-food production or processing activities. Agricultural value chains were as such an important source of either direct or indirect income for just under half of Syria's pre-war population, and the sector was responsible for around a third of Syria's export economy (Mohammed et al., 2020). Historically, agricultural products rank second in terms of export revenue value, after oil (Almohamed and Sheikh, 2021).

Even prior to the eruption of political instability and conflict, however, the sector faced several substantial challenges and vulnerabilities. From the 1980s onwards, Syria's Ministry of Agriculture prioritized an agricultural modernization program focused primarily on increasing yields in pursuit of domestic food self-sufficiency and the centralization of critical extension services, such as seed distribution. In practice, this entailed the rapid adoption of subsidized modern seed varieties designed to succeed in 'improved' conditions – such as in irrigated or more fertile areas in Syria, and on fertilized and chemically treated lands – and a diminished availability of traditional landraces capable of surviving in more arid, marginalized agricultural areas (Mauvais and Amin, 2022).

The effects of this short-termism were palpable: a heavy reliance on a centralized supply system for agricultural inputs, the gradual loss of local crop varieties suitable for farming in arid areas and which form a crucial barrier against desertification, and a cumulative increase in vulnerability to external shocks or instability.

This high-level prioritization of irrigation-driven agricultural production caused the sector to eventually become responsible for more than 88% of Syria's annual freshwater consumption (Almohamed and Sheikh, 2021). These trends contributed to the substantial overexploitation and over abstraction of groundwater resources, underpinned by the expansion of agricultural land, the availability of heavily subsidized fuel for pumping, as well as overly pluralistic governance structures with competing mandates and poor coordination mechanisms around water allocation and usage (Aw-Hassan et al., 2014; Almohamed and Sheikh, 2021).

Particularly the removal of fuel subsidies following the 2006-2010 drought – occurring amidst a broader set of reforms aimed at promoting the privatization and liberalization of Syria’s economy – significantly undermined the viability of many agricultural efforts due to rising input and transportation costs, in turn triggering substantial socio-economic dislocation and rural-urban migration (Daher, 2018; Hussona, 2020).

Conflict impacts on Syria’s agri-food sector

These pre-existing sectoral vulnerabilities were rapidly exposed and have since been further exacerbated by the various impacts of more than a decade of conflict. The collapse of centrally planned agricultural systems and markets quickly revealed the effects of entrenched farmer dependencies, which immediately undermined access to critical agricultural inputs (Mauvais and Amin, 2022). The subsequent implications of the conflict itself for the sector are, moreover, widespread. As of 2017, estimated sectoral reconstruction and recovery costs are \$16 billion – in which the destruction of agricultural infrastructure accounts for \$3.2 billion, crop production losses amount to \$6.3 billion, and animal agriculture losses total around \$5.5 billion – with Al-Hassakeh, Ar-Raqqqa, Rural Damascus, Deir-ez-Zor, Dara’a, and Idlib governorates amongst the most affected (FAO, 2017). The conflict has also resulted in a notable loss of human capital in the agricultural sector, with the country’s rural population having shrunk by 50% between 2011 and 2016 (Al-Attar, 2024).

The ecological impacts of the conflict are moreover extensive, partially as a consequence of agricultural land forming an explicit target of military activity (Linke and Ruether, 2021). More than 85% of agricultural land in Syria is exposed to soil erosion, accelerated by alarming vegetation changes driven in part by population movements and urban sprawl, the effects of military armaments, and a growing presence of invasive species such as Giant reed (Gaafar, 2021; Action Against Hunger, 2025). Between 2012 and 2019, Syria moreover lost over 20% of its total tree cover area, linked to frequent forest fires, illegal logging, charcoal production, and agricultural expansion (Gafaar, 2021).

Climate change impacts on Syria’s agri-food sector

Lastly, threats facing Syrian agriculture have been further compounded by the evolving impacts of anthropogenic climate change. Syria has since the early 2000s been experiencing variations in climatic patterns – notably, temperature increases and precipitation variability – that have significantly affected agricultural output and diminished green cover by reducing water availability (de Châtel, 2019; Karnieli et al., 2019). Since 2020, moreover, Syria has been reeling from one of its worst droughts in nearly 40 years, with evolving drought patterns in the Fertile Crescent around the Euphrates and Tigris rivers causing large parts of Syria to be subjected to extreme and exceptional agricultural drought (Otto et al., 2023).

As of 2025, substantial deviations in vegetation coverage and health have for example been observed in areas such as Al-Hassakeh, Ar-Raqqa, and Deir-ez-Zor, revealing widespread (wheat) crop failures due to irregular and insufficient precipitation (NES NGO Forum, 2025).

Future projections, moreover, suggest that in large part due to climate change, yields of rainfed crops in Syria are likely to decline by between 29% and 57% from 2010 to 2050 whilst irrigated crop yield is expected to decline by between 0.9% and 40%, depending on the crop type (Breisinger et al., 2013). In part due to its structural dependency on well-irrigated and fertile cultivation areas, the sector is therefore particularly vulnerable to the combined effects of rising temperatures, decreased rainfall, and water scarcity.



Credit: Charles Roffey/Flickr

CONTEMPORARY FOOD (IN)SECURITY TRENDS AND CHALLENGES


The major disruptions faced by Syria's agricultural sector have undoubtedly contributed to a what remains a dire humanitarian situation across the country. More than half of Syria's population – around 12.9 million people – are food insecure, 3.1 million of which are severely food insecure (WFP, 2024). At the same time, 7.2 million people remain internally displaced, a trend further compounded by two new waves of displacement in 2024 originating from Lebanon.

The availability of foodstuffs within Syria forms a key supply-side obstacle towards promoting food security within the country. Most recently, the 2025 cereal harvest (concluded in July) is estimated to have produced more than 60% below the annual average largely due to severe drought conditions and the impact of insecurity in the context of the fall of the Assad regime in November and December 2024. As a consequence, wheat import requirements for the 2025-2026 marketing year are forecasted at 3 million tons – about 70% above the 5-year average – a notable increase amidst continued fiscal instability and a lack of foreign exchange reserves (FAO, 2025).

Additional production-related challenges moreover include persistently high agricultural input costs, which have increased by an estimated 60% since 2020 (including a 300% increase in 2024 alone compared to 2023), as well as widespread mine contamination, particularly in agricultural areas and access roads (WFP, 2024; SFM, 2025; Food Security Cluster, 2025). Food processing facilities such as mills, silos, and bakeries – whilst in most cases operational – require access to stable input supply chains and urgent technical support for repairs if they are to scale production and meet demand (REACH, 2024).

Securing access to sufficient food similarly remains a key challenge experienced by many Syrian households. Persistently low household incomes amidst broader economic turmoil mean that a substantial portion of household income is still required to meet nutritional needs, despite recent efforts by the Syrian Transition Government to increase the national minimum wage. Purchasing power is additionally undermined by currency devaluations since 2023 and a continued exposure to sometimes volatile international food imports (FAO, 2025; Food Security Cluster, 2025).

Especially in the context of such periodic food price spikes, as well as a recent subsidy reduction for bread – which has driven up bread prices more than tenfold – the hardship faced by vulnerable population groups has therefore rapidly increased (Humanitarian Action, 2025). Female-headed households, which account for almost one third of Syrian households, are particularly likely to struggle to meet nutritional requirements in the context of additional income generation or unpaid care responsibilities (CARE, 2021).



Partially because of broader food security-related challenges, utilization of available and accessible food is often limited. Production challenges, volatile food pricing regimes, and continued insecurity, are forcing dietary shifts to cheaper but less nutritious alternatives, particularly affecting the health and wellbeing of already vulnerable groups.

Nearly 80% of children in Syria, for instance – an estimated 500,000 children – aged 6 to 23 months live in food poverty, consuming fewer than the recommended 5 out of 8 food groups daily (UNICEF, 2024). This lack of dietary diversity is increasing exposure to broader health risks. Anaemia levels for children and adolescents remaining elevated at 25% (increasing to up to 50% of adolescent girls) (WHO, 2025). Diarrheal episodes amongst children increased towards the end of 2024 – associated with 50% of undernourishment cases – whilst 1 in 10 women are wasted, contributing to increased risks during pregnancy (Nutrition Cluster, 2024).

The stability of consistently available and reliably accessible food supplies remains, moreover, under threat. Despite a change in the dynamics of the conflict following the toppling of the Assad regime in late 2024, bouts of inter-communal conflict and violent retribution continue to engender instability and displacement, threatening food production capacities and supply chains. In March 2025, for example, an eruption of violence in the coastal governorate of Latikia resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths, whilst violence against primarily Druze civilians in As-Sweida governorate escalated following a dispute between local factions and Bedouin tribes (WHO, 2025).

A tellingly sharp deterioration in food security was detected in As-Sweida following this surge of violence, with inadequate food consumption rates more than doubling from 28% in June to 60% in August amidst a 40% increase in the cost of living over the same period, demonstrating the close relationship between insecurity and food supply challenges (WFP, 2025).

CONFLICT RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH A DYSFUNCTIONAL AGRI-FOOD SECTOR

Aside from the direct nutritional consequences of Syria's damaged agricultural sector, there are various mechanisms through which the sector's recovery – or continued dysfunction – are interwoven with a number of structural and proximate drivers of conflict that may pose a risk to broader post-conflict recovery efforts. The presence of these conflict risk pathways in relation to agricultural recovery in Syria highlights the need to explicitly account for the perhaps more contentious social and political dimensions of sectoral revitalization. A failure to do so, conversely, risks exposing potential recovery gains and peace dividends to renewed insecurity.


Natural resource scarcity

Amongst the most immediate conflict risks associated with agri-food system functionality pertains to natural resource scarcity, both as a consequence of anthropogenic climate change and resource mismanagement. Whilst the exact degree to which indirect climate impacts played a role in Syria's initial descent into civil war remains a contested debate (Kelley et al., 2015), the continued risks posed by ecological fragility to post-conflict recovery and stabilization efforts are self-evident. Particularly in the context of Syria's fragmented socio-cultural and religious topography and the collapse of a centralized security apparatus, the need to secure ecological resources vital to the survival of rural communities dependent on agri-food system livelihoods forms an important currency in identitarian group mobilization processes (Shahi and Vachkova, 2018).

There is therefore a distinct risk of natural resource scarcity facilitating the emergence of both old and new dividing lines at more local levels – where intra-village social cohesion is being undermined by indebtedness, demographic changes, and the deterioration of psycho-social wellbeing – as well as at a larger scale, such as between sedentary farmers and pastoralist communities (Schwartztein and Zwijnenburg, 2022). In this context, access to productive resources such as pasture, fertile land, and shrinking water resources may form triggers for localized disputes and conflicts. Escalations into inter-communal forms of violence are, moreover, made increasingly likely given the erosion of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and the proliferation of small arms throughout the country, resulting in a lowered opportunity cost to engage in violence.

Displacement and returnee dynamics

Closely related to the equitable distribution and management of natural resources – particularly land – are the consequences of displacement and returnee dynamics. As the prospects of rebuilding the shattered nation improve, just over 1.2 million Syrian individuals have returned from other countries – mainly Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan – and 1.9 million IDPs returned to their areas of origin since December 2024 (UNHCR, 2025). Whilst the majority of people are returning to major urban centres such as Damascus and Aleppo, an estimated 480,000 are returning to predominantly rural areas hard hit by climatic variability (UNHCR, 2025).



Syria's land tenure system has historically consisted of a combination of formal, informal, and customary arrangements that combine private and state ownership, Islamic waqf (religious endowments), and communal land use (SLDP, 2020).

Under the Assad regime, this tenure landscape was transformed into an instrument of dispossession that systematically favoured state-affiliated elites whilst marginalizing vulnerable groups, dynamics which have largely ceased after the regime's collapse. Whilst the new 2025 Constitutional Declaration preserves the principle of private property, no clear mechanisms have as of yet been created for restitution of housing, land, and property (HLP) claims by displaced persons, a situation made evermore challenging due to the destruction or absence of key ownership documentation (SLDP, 2025).

In rural areas, communal and collective land arrangements such as agricultural cooperatives, tribal grazing territories, and waqf play a critical role in structuring agri-food livelihoods. These tenure arrangements have historically been poorly protected under Syrian law, however, and during the conflict many cooperative lands were reallocated or left fallow, with members lacking legal recourse to defend their usage rights. Similarly, customary communal grazing lands in Syria's Badia region are formally state-owned, but access by pastoralist communities has long been governed by customary norms. The absence of formal legal access right recognition has resulted in such lands being expropriated for industrial, military, or resettlement purposes, further marginalizing pastoralist livelihoods and undermining customary resource sharing arrangements (SLDP, 2025).

As populations begin to return to rural areas of origin and rebuild their lives and livelihoods, the risk of property and access-related disputes is likely to increase, particularly under broader conditions of resource scarcity. The inability to re-secure access to and ownership of previously cultivated lands may, moreover, act as a disincentive for small-holder farmers or collectives to invest in inputs and capital necessary to reinitiate agricultural production at scale, hampering broader food security efforts.

Erosion of state legitimacy

Lastly, agri-food-related conflict risks may increase as a consequence of the erosion of already fragile state legitimacy should Syria's new government prove unable to deliver sectoral peace dividends and respond to climate stressors in a sufficiently timely manner. Thus far, the new Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-dominated government has demonstrated a mixed track record in its transition to formal power. Authorities have avoided the kind of widespread institutional collapse that accompanied regime change in Iraq and Libya, but have also demonstrated only limited successes in key arenas such as transitional justice, security sector reform, public and civil society engagement, and judicial and constitutional reform (ETANA, 2025).

Irrespective of whether thus far limited moves towards democratization and inclusivity are genuine or performative, it is likely that – at least in the short- to medium-term – the new Syrian authorities are unlikely to derive a great degree of bottom-up input legitimacy from meaningful citizen participation (ETANA, 2025). Instead, the effectiveness and permissibility of the government is likely to disproportionately rely on its capacity to restore essential services, promote stability, and initiate socio-economic recovery processes.

In rural settings, this translates into addressing urgent short-term sustainable development priorities – such as the restoration and reconstruction of critical production and processing infrastructure, improving access to critical agricultural inputs, protecting individual and collective HLP rights – but also longer-term investments into the dissemination of climate-resilient technologies and practices, infrastructure for human capacity development, and the reconstitution of natural resource user associations. A failure to deliver on short-term needs and medium- to long-term investments may increase the risk of increasing political disillusionment, and crucially provide opportunities for non-state armed groups – perhaps most notably Islamic State (IS) – to exploit localized grievances (Schwartztein and Zwijnenburg, 2022).



Credit: Joel Carillet/Getty Images

CONFLICT-SENSITIVE AND PEACE-RESPONSIVE AGRICULTURAL RECOVERY INITIATIVES

Despite the presence of multiple potential threats to social cohesion and stability associated with agri-food system dysfunctionality, sectoral recovery priorities also offer critical entry points for the shaping of interventions that can simultaneously mitigate the risk of new tensions or insecurity. Failing to capitalize on such options would represent a missed opportunity for the sector's reconstruction to contribute to broader social recovery and peacebuilding efforts.

Agricultural infrastructure rehabilitation

Firstly, given the urgent need to rehabilitate extensive damage to agricultural infrastructure – including irrigation systems and pumping stations, storage and processing facilities, as well as rural transport networks – **labour-intensive infrastructure rehabilitation programs** provide both immediate employment and income generation opportunities whilst also initiating longer-term recovery trajectories. The arguably most widely deployed instrument for such purposes are Cash for Work (CfW) program modalities, previously successfully deployed for the purposes of agricultural rehabilitation settings such as Afghanistan and Iraq (ICRC, 2025; FAO, 2018).

CfW programs – whilst not without their constraints, notably in their limited longer-term sustainability – can produce a number of immediate stabilization benefits acting as a foundation for subsequent recovery activities. These include reducing incentives to engage in negative coping strategies in the face of hardship, the rehabilitation of (community) assets that can underpin subsequent recovery efforts, and local market stimulation by reintroducing income flows and supporting local businesses (Food Security Cluster, 2019).

To maximize the potential of CfW programs to contribute to reduced insecurity and minimize the risk of 'doing harm', care must be taken in their design and implementation. Needs and feasibility assessments should inform target geographies and the design of work schemes to ensure the program is capable of addressing humanitarian needs and assisting vulnerable groups, a reliable and safe payment mechanism can be established, interference with primary community livelihood strategies is minimized (and that program efforts serve to support the revitalization of these strategies), and that the program is politically accepted within and between communities (Food Security Cluster, 2019). Beneficiary targeting criteria should moreover account both for clear inclusion and exclusion criteria – with additional support required for those ineligible or unable to participate – as well as efforts at fostering inter-group contact and collaboration, such as between villages or across social groups.


In Syria in particular, particular attention needs to be given to areas at risk of labour market saturation due to high numbers of returnees, how infrastructure revitalization efforts may impact local socio-economic disparities in the context of potentially disputed individual and communal tenure systems, and how reconstruction can occur on the basis of improved resilience to future climatic and ecological shocks.

Secondly, in the context of natural resource scarcity and the erosion of both formal and customary resource sharing arrangements, the **reconstitution of inclusive and decentralized natural resource governance structures** forms an essential activity to both improve the management and distribution of resources and the restoration of social capital within and between communities. The militarization of water management throughout Syria's civil war – with control over such resources becoming an important strategic consideration for multiple factions – has left Syria's water management institutions fragmented and pluralistic. Strengthening coherent standards for water usage and distribution, enforcing prohibitions on illegal well drilling, and cleaning up polluted water resources therefore form urgent recovery priorities (PAX and STJ, 2025).

However, opportunities also exist to strengthen water co-governance mechanisms between different groups and factions to bolster peacebuilding efforts, forming an appropriate starting point given that most water infrastructure networks traverse multiple jurisdictions and communities (Benzoni, 2025). Although some decentralized water management structures – such as Water Basin Management Committees – in theory existed in Syria prior to the conflict, such structures in practice often remain inactive.

Reactivating and strengthening such existing institutional structures at provincial or basin levels could form an important avenue of cross-regional and inter-group cooperation – particularly as policy trade-offs between domestic food security and the maintenance of Syria's scarce water resources become more apparent and decisions around water allocation become potentially more contentious (Benzoni, 2025).

A similar need exists with regards to the management and restoration of Syria's rangelands – particularly in the Badia region – which covers 55% of the country's territory and is inhabited and utilized by Syria's already oft marginalized pastoralists. Detritus of war, as well as in some cases remnants of non-state armed group formations, have all served to limit the access of pastoralists to pasturelands, whilst limited and erratic vegetation growth combined with reduced agricultural outputs means that nomadic communities are also faced with a scarcity of livestock fodder (Schwartztein and Zwijnenburg, 2022). There is thus an urgent need to develop rangeland restoration, protection, and conservation interventions to support the revitalization of livestock activities, with community-based rangeland management approaches offering a potentially important modality for doing so (Coppock et al., 2022).



The development of shared rangeland management plans containing agreed upon goals, actions, and roles – defined by both pastoralist and sedentary agriculturalist communities – as well as the establishment of community institutions to manage implementation and resolve conflicts are likely to form important approaches to addressing ecological degradation whilst simultaneously reducing the risk of scarcity-induced disputes.

Thirdly, Syria's increasingly challenging climatic and ecological landscape requires equipping those active within the agri-food sector with the capacities to adapt to climate change. **CSA input packages** are therefore essential undertakings for the promotion of climate-resilient production. The conflict has severely impacted the coverage and efficacy of Syrian agricultural extension services, resulting in the loss of over 50% of qualified technical staff and leaving only about 10% of extension units operational (FAO, 2024).

Restoring these services should focus both on the provision of conventional materials and inputs, such as drought-resistant seeds and fertilizer, but also entail the creation of critical extension services such as climate forecasting and early warning systems and capacity transfers around sustainable crop, soil, and water management techniques. Doing so will likely require significant investments in the restitution of monitoring capacities, information management and transmission, and the creation of technical educational facilities such as Farmer Field Schools (FFS) or Farmer Business Schools (FBS).

The dissemination of CSA input packages and restoration of climate-sensitive extension services are critical to addressing both immediate needs for the resumption of agricultural activity at scale, as well as building longer-term resilience to continued climatic oscillations such as precipitation and temperature variability. Moreover, by investing in such capacities now, the new Syrian authorities are likely to help generate tangible peace dividends for rural communities, thereby disincentivizing the deployment of negative or conflictive coping strategies as material conditions improve.

Lastly, reviving the private sector's capacity to invest in small and medium agri-business enterprises will prove critical to initiate sectoral recovery at scale, and **diaspora-backed financing instruments** offer important opportunities to do so. Globally, diaspora send home an estimated \$450 billion in remittances every year. Despite only 5% of this amount being used for agricultural purposes in rural areas, this amount still represents 4 times the global annual official development assistance (ODA) for the agricultural sector (IFAD, N.D.).

In the context of Syria in particular, there are myriad examples of Syrian diaspora investments in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan, often consisting of firms initially based in Syria that have since the outbreak of conflict successfully relocated to pre-existing markets with capital they have been able to preserve through monetary or physical means. In Turkey, for example, it is estimated that there are upwards of 10,000 formal and informal firms run by Syrians, 76% of which plan on keeping their businesses in Turkey but also expand into Syria, should the investment climate improve (Speakman et al., 2018).

In practice, the private investment climate within Syria – including within the agri-food sector – remains challenging, yet is slowly improving. Despite continued fiscal instability and irregular service delivery, the gradual removal of bilateral sanction measures for individuals and trade restrictions on various goods and services is slowly enabling a greater volume of private sector involvement in Syria’s agricultural recovery. Creating a permanent, government-backed investment instrument for leveraging diaspora investment, however, is likely to further accelerate the ability of the sector to attract capital, and lessons may crucially be drawn here from previous undertakings in this space. In Somalia, for example, a joint IFAD-US State Department Diaspora Investment in Agriculture (DIA) initiative led to the creation of the Somali Agrifood Fund, a matching seed capital fund that supports investment projects ranging from \$20,000 to \$250,000 through a 40% contribution. The remaining 60% are financed by the business owner through cash or in-kind contributions, as well as by external capital provided by diaspora members (IFAD, N.D.). Such investment vehicles can form a blueprint for similar efforts to unlock capital for agricultural investment and recovery in Syria.



Credit: Salah Darwish/Unsplash

RISKS AND TRADE-OFFS FOR AGRICULTURAL RECOVERY

The previous sections have illustrated how Investments in Syria's agricultural recovery, whilst exhibiting great potential for broader stabilization efforts, are also confronted with a complex risk landscape and may – if not informed by careful conflict sensitive planning requirements – serve to inadvertently undermine peacebuilding outcomes. Some of the most critical potential trade-offs involved in resource allocation and strategic objective setting are outlined below.

- **Securing staple crops versus diversification:** investments in reviving and scaling staple crop production, notably wheat, are likely to enable the stabilization of bread prices and promote domestic food security. However, prioritizing investments in staple primary production capacities, market re-linking, and value chain development also risks crowding out higher-value crops that may boost household income and the sector's export potential, potentially locking recovery into a low-diversification path.
- **Dissemination of CSA technologies and capacities versus unequal access:** disseminating CSA input packages to smallholder farmers remains a crucial undertaking to promote long-term resilience to droughts, heatwaves, and water scarcity and ensure acceptable productivity rates under future climate scenarios. However, wealthier farmers are likely to have a first-mover advantage in this space, securing their incomes whilst poorer smallholders are left behind. This may also contribute to the eventual concentration of land ownership and reduced social legitimacy of recovery programs, if perceived as biased or ineffective.
- **Subsidization of key inputs and products versus longer-term fiscal stability:** in post-conflict Syria, subsidies for key agricultural inputs as well as basic food items form politically attractive short-term tools to stabilize production and consumer access. However, implementing such tools also comes with the risk of structural fiscal deficits at a time where the value of Syrian currency is already weak. Subsidization may also engender market distortions by providing perverse incentives for producers, and discourage private sector investment due to price distortion and reliance on potentially fluctuating state procurement.
- **Reintegration of returning rural populations versus tenure stability:** the reintegration of returning refugees and IDPs into rural settings is likely to provide opportunities for economic revitalization and broader reconstruction. However, amidst an unstable land tenure and resource governance landscape, rapid reintegration also risks tensions emerging over access to productive assets and resources. Enabling returnee movements and reintegration processes in a peace-positive manner will therefore have to be accompanied by investments in equitable and responsive governance structures

- **Upscaling agricultural production capacity versus water resource management and environmental sustainability priorities:** reviving domestic agricultural production capacities will not only provide an engine for income generation and broader economic recovery, but is also expected to reduce the burden on public finances by diminishing reliance on foreign food imports. However, as Syria continues to grapple with water scarcity, environmental degradation, and energy insecurity, expanding agricultural production will have to be balanced and made coherent with potentially competing water management, ecosystem rehabilitation, and energy conservation demands.
- **Prioritizing rapid rebuilding of infrastructure versus peace-responsive and forward-looking approaches:** There are monetary and human costs of fast but conflict-blind rehabilitation efforts that insufficiently consider the conflict potential of infrastructure investments. War-affected countries may have a 40% risk of falling back into conflict when recovery efforts are insufficiently focused on peace (Goenaga, 2017), while large infrastructure investments may themselves be at risk of destruction or project failure due to renewed tensions and conflicts (Mashatt et al., 2008). Conflict-sensitive investment frameworks that consider socio-cultural contexts and conflict potential can help to avoid such negative impacts and costs.




Credit: Salah Ahmed Akacha/Pexels

RECOMMENDATIONS

This brief has, firstly, sought to contextualize the role and importance of Syria's agri-food sector both prior and subsequent to the country's devastating conflict, and secondly, identified several risks, opportunities, and trade-offs Syria's new authorities are likely to be confronted with when promoting sectoral investments in the short- to medium-term.

The sector holds significant potential to contribute to broader socio-economic development and to produce immediate peace dividends as well as long-term stability and food security. However, it may also inadvertently become 'locked into' unsustainable fiscal, ecological, and socio-political recovery trajectories, threatening its sustainability, efficiency, and resilience. It is therefore imperative that strategic prioritization and resource allocation are informed by conflict sensitive and risk-informed decision-making frameworks. To this end, this brief concludes with the following recommendations for sustainable and peace responsive agricultural recovery in Syria:

- **Ensure that climatic data and projections are built into agricultural rehabilitation strategies to ensure long-term sustainability and resilience through compound risk analysis and the creation of (almost) real-time decision support platforms:** given the Syrian agri-food sector's already notable vulnerability to climatic deviations and natural resource scarcity, integrating near real-time climate monitoring and projections into critical decision-making processes – such as those pertaining to cropping patterns, sectoral and spatial water allocation, or subsidization policies – is essential to prepare the sector for future climate change trends. However, given the potential social risks associated with contested natural resource access (particularly land and water), it is similarly imperative to construct a comprehensive picture of compounding risk that involves climatic, ecological, economic, and social dimensions. Developing tailored GIS-informed decision-support dashboards for national actors, underpinned by compound risk metrics and analyses that chart the interaction of these various layers of risk, will as such prove essential for climate resilient and conflict sensitive agri-food system investments. The current situation in Syria suggests that such efforts should start with the establishment of reliable baselines that can inform future planning approaches as well as monitoring and evaluation processes.
- **Promote smallholder resilience and sustainability under projected climate scenarios through the provision of on-farm CSA technologies and practices:** aside from ensuring that higher-level decision-making and resource allocation is informed by up-to-date biophysical and climatic data, it is imperative that those directly active within the agri-food sector are equipped with appropriate climate resilient technologies and practices. This will in turn require the design and provision of tailored CSA input packages consisting of technological innovations, core material inputs, and capacity and knowledge development components, as well as the restoration of core agricultural extension service capacities.



Investments will likely also be required in the creation of an appropriate enabling environment to allow for human capital development and scale uptake of sustainable technologies and practices, including in educational infrastructure such as Farmer Field Schools (FFS) or Farmer Business Schools (FBS).

- **Ensure that infrastructure and ecosystem rehabilitation are informed by conflict sensitive nature-based solutions (NbS) and sustainable land management (SLM) approaches:** helping avoid Syria's agri-food sector becoming locked into unsustainable recovery trajectories will similarly require the bottom-up introduction of nature-positive solutions and approaches to ecosystem and landscape management. These should be carefully designed and their implementation determined by comprehensive ecosystem assessments that map ecosystem services and functionality, as well as socio-ecological dynamics and their relation to potential conflict risks. Such assessments can form the foundation for the development of nature-positive and peace responsive resource management interventions that can address both environmental challenges as well as conflict prevention and peacebuilding outcomes, thereby leveraging the potential of climate action to contribute to sustaining peace and promote recovery.
- **Build an enabling environment for private investments in food system rehabilitation, resilience, and growth:** leveraging private capital for agri-food sector investments, particularly that of Syria's diaspora in both neighbouring countries and further afield, will prove critical in effectively scaling broader sectoral recovery. This is particularly relevant in the context of investments in climate resilient agriculture and mitigation and adaptation measures to ensure the sustainability of Syria's food system in the face of climate change. Unlocking these sources of capital will require the development of policy frameworks, financing instruments, and investment vehicles that help de-risking such investments through, for instance, fund matching arrangements. The development and implementation of such instruments will, moreover, require enhanced collaboration and coherence across various sectors and actors, including fiscal, development, humanitarian, and donor entities. Similar opportunities exist in relation to the creation of tailored credit facilities and climate-sensitive financing products made accessible to small-holder farmers within Syria itself.
- **Facilitate returnee reintegration into, agri-food systems:** the war in Syria has left swaths of agricultural land uncultivated, contaminated, and unsafe to farm. Efforts to promote the recultivation of agricultural land with staple crops to promote food security is further hindered by unclear land ownership, the destruction of agricultural infrastructure and assets, and a lack of access to agricultural resources, primarily water. The recovery of agricultural production systems and smooth reintegration of returnees into these systems needs to be supported by clear governance frameworks and guidelines, the rehabilitation of ecosystems and landscapes, as well as by farmer support systems.

- **Gender transformative recovery efforts:** The rebuilding of Syria's agri-food sector represents an opportunity to address structural inequalities that have excluded women from land ownership, investment in climate resilient agriculture, leadership on agricultural innovation, and decision-making for agri-food system policy development and implementation. Research on gender transformative approaches to food system recovery and rehabilitation can drive win-win approaches to the design of sectoral development, finance, social protection, and capacity sharing policies and programs that can boost both sector growth and women's empowerment.



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