WFP Aid Cuts in Syria

Reactions on Social Media

Social Media Monitoring, September 2023

To support aid operations in Syria, Insecurity Insight is conducting sporadic social media monitoring to understand perceptions and key concerns around the aid response with a view to helping aid agencies to develop communication strategies that take social media views into account.

Summary

This social media monitoring brief presents the findings from a review of approximately 1,000 Facebook comments expressed in online discussions of the World Food Programme (WFP) aid cuts in Syria announced in July 2023. The aim was to identify possible misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation targeting the aid sector and to understand online sentiments that help aid agencies in their programming and security risk management.

Key findings:

- The aid cuts attracted significant attention and numerous reactions on social media, underlining their importance to communities.
- When commenting, social media users highlighted the adverse impact the cuts would entail for themselves, their families and their communities.
- Social media users see the cuts as unjust, with some directing their anger at the organisation itself.
- Users also appear to believe that corruption associated with the distribution of international aid is linked to the aid cuts.

Context

Despite increased food insecurity worldwide in recent years, the WFP globally faces significant decreases in funding for 2023. In Syria, this is expected to translate into a 40% decrease in funding for its programmes in the country, forcing the organisation to take painful and difficult decisions as it seeks to focus its efforts on those most vulnerable to food insecurity as it struggles to maintain the same level of monthly food assistance to an estimated 5.8 million vulnerable people in Syria. As a result, in July 2023 the organisation announced a number of cuts to its food programmes in Syria, which were also communicated to local partners and beneficiaries.

Syria is currently engulfed in a humanitarian crisis caused by a number of factors, including a collapsing economy, characterised by high commodity price inflation, and the February 2023 earthquake. More than 50 percent of Syrians live in extreme poverty, and in 2023 it is estimated that 15.3 million people are estimated to require humanitarian assistance, out of a total population of 22.1 million. This represents a significant increase from 2022, when 14.6 million were estimated to require aid assistance.

Mailing List

Findings

In a clear sign of the importance of what constitutes a critical lifeline to many civilians, **the announcement of WFP aid cuts attracted significant attention and numerous reactions on social media**. Indeed, posts announcing the aid cuts in July 2023 reached tens of thousands of people (see "Methodology" section, below), mostly due to the widespread sharing of such posts and the hundreds of reactions they each received in the form of likes and comments. It is estimated that during the month of July nearly ten thousand social media users interacted with Facebook posts discussing the WFP, most of which dealt with the aid cuts. This attests to the extent to which humanitarian topics are of significant importance to community members who are on social media.

- In reaction to the announced cuts, many social media users **highlighted the impact of the aid cuts** on their and their family's well-being. For example, a male user from Aleppo wrote: *"We have nothing, thank God: no help, no relief, nothing"*. A female user from Damascus commented: *"I swear to God, my situation is very difficult, my financial situation is not possible, and I have a sick daughter, I swear to God who knows my situation"*. Another female said, *"We have children, what will they do ... [?]"*.

- Social media users also appear to view the aid cuts as unjust. A female user wrote in reaction to them, *"unfortunately [there is] no justice at all"*. A male user hailing from Aleppo wrote: *"Allah suffices us, and He is the best disposer of affairs. I swear we are upset, but what can we do [?]"*. It appears that at least some of this anger is directed towards the WFP itself. A female user, supposedly residing in Damascus, commented: *"May God not forgive you as you deprived my children of this benefit"*. A male reacted by saying, *"How nice, they cut [aid for those living in] the most needy area, nice double standards they have"*.

> ***"no one is receiving this aid except for the rich and local council members"***

- Some social media users appeared to believe that the cutting of aid was linked to corruption. A female user wrote, *"no one is receiving this aid except for the rich and local council members"*. Others, possibly civilians who were not aid recipients themselves, argued that the cuts would not have an impact because aid has always been syphoned off to benefit local authorities and be sold by merchants. A male from Idlib commented: *"Praise be to God that they cut it off ..., no one benefitted from it except the local councils and the merchants who now sell it to the people at double its price"*.

  Perceptions that international aid originally meant for vulnerable civilians is instead benefitting actors associated with local authorities are recurrent in Syria. In September 2023, Insecurity Insight reported that local civilians tended to have negative perceptions of international aid, believing that it does not reach their communities due to rampant corruption.

- Women made up 43.5% of social media users sharing their views on aid cuts. This is an unusually high proportion of women taking to social media on an aid or aid-related subject. This is likely to reflect that concerns over food security for their families are particularly widespread among women.

Read Attitudes Towards Border Crossings Openings in Syria

Recommendations for aid agencies

Engage women

- Women are usually strongly engaged around the topic of aid cuts, and good communication should in particular speak to women, female-headed households and access to aid for children.

Understand perceptions

- Be aware that, at least among social media users in northern Syria, there is a strong and deeply held perception that there is widespread corruption related to aid delivery and that this explains why people who most in need do not receive aid.
- Be aware that any reduction in aid allocations for any reason may be interpreted as evidence that corruption and the syphoning off of aid are increasing.

Improve anti-corruption controls

- Consider reviewing and strengthening internal anti-corruption mechanisms to ensure that questionable arrangements and practices do not prevent aid from reaching those for whom it is intended.
- Consider widely communicating your anti-corruption control processes to build trust in these processes.
- Understand the importance of your local staff in building trust in your ethical working practices.

Work with trusted partners

- Identify positively perceived partners and work with them
- Work with local partners beyond implementation.
- The long-term resiliency of humanitarian efforts depends on the further empowerment of Syrian NGOs beyond their role as local implementing partners, to raise their voice in the determination of priorities, needs, and operational requirements of effective programming.

Early recovery and resilience against future shocks

- Consider programming that uses early recovery for resilience building against future shocks, as well as sustainability over time. The goal is to make communities less dependent on aid by ensuring that the benefits of humanitarian relief are not lost or undone.
- Programming that wants to build community resilience requires more than static humanitarian needs assessments and such programmes require a greater importance being place on risk mitigation, crisis preparedness, and context understanding.
- Analysis that supports development of community resilience must consider risks specific to the operational context and has to be based on perceptions and realities among local partners even in complex conflict-affected contexts.

Methodology

Insecurity Insight first collected publicly available social media data in Syria for the period 1-30 July 2023 using key words in Arabic linked or referring to the WFP. Proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool was used to collect the data. In this period, a total of 66 public media and social media posts in Syria included references in Arabic to the "Word Food Programme", with most of these posts attracting reactions in the form of comments, likes and shares. These posts are estimated to have reached tens of thousands of social media users, especially on Facebook (see Figure 1). The high visibility of these posts is mostly due to the wide sharing of social media content related to the WFP aid cuts, especially on 13 July, when a number of pages on Facebook shared an informative leaflet distributed by the WFP.

Figure 1: Number of social media users estimated to have been reached in July by posts mentioning the WFP in Syria

Source: Insecurity Insight

A total of 1,041 Facebook comments on posts mainly referring to the WFP were examined in preparation for this brief, a small sample of which was retained in a database for further analysis. Even though the number of actual posts may not be very high, the comment section especially on Facebook tends to be more dynamic and very rich in terms of opinions and discussion. Moreover, Facebook comments tend to be much more numerous than posts or comments on other prominent social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter). The Facebook comments used as data for this brief were taken from reactions to a number of Facebook posts uploaded in the days immediately following the announcement of WFP aid cuts.

The final sample consists of a total of 62 comments, which were analysed across a number of categories, including: (i) comment date; (ii) commentator's sex; (iii) commentator's location; and (iv) comment theme. Comments were included in the sample if they expressed an opinion in reaction to the announced cuts in aid.

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Unlike in Insecurity Insight's previous Syria-related social media analyses, the sample for the current brief contains a relatively high number of female commentators, who make up 43.5% of the total sample, a significant increase from previous social media monitoring briefs.

The research has a number of limitations. Firstly, it relies on a small sample size, and in view of the unavailability of large-scale data, the available data could not be controlled for location and other categories such as social class or political affiliation. Secondly, only social media data for which users had given their consent for public viewing were included. Therefore, this analysis excludes possibly pertinent data from encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp.

Internet penetration in Syria in 2023 is estimated to include 35.8% of the population. However, accurate data on social media usage is currently not available.

Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: info@insecurityinsight.org

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This document is supported by the H2H Fund which is supported by aid from the UK government; the European Commission through the 'Hunger and Conflict: protecting people in armed conflict and related violence settings from food insecurity, promoting IHL compliance'; and by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed in it do not reflect in any way the position of the H2H Network, the UK government, the European Commision, or U.S. Government who are not responsible for the content expressed in this document.

Insecurity Insight. 2023. Social Media Monitoring, WFP Aid Cuts in Syria: Reactions on Social Media, October 2023. Switzerland: Insecurity Insight. bit.ly/SYRWFPCutsOct2023

Funded by the European Union

H2H Network Humanitarian Action Support

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