Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion

September 2026

Syria is currently experiencing one of the largest return movements globally, with more than 1.8 million refugees and over 2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) having returned, while millions more indicate they would consider returning if conditions improve.

Returnees in Syria face major barriers to livelihoods due to limited jobs, weak markets, and socio-economic challenges. As a result, many struggle to meet basic needs, making livelihoods support essential for sustainable reintegration.

UNHCR livelihoods and economic inclusion support is designed to contribute directly to UNHCR Syria's overall strategy and overarching vision of enabling the safe, dignified, and voluntary return and reintegration of forcibly displaced persons by 2029.

13.3 million
people in Syria in need of livelihoods and early recovery assistance in 2026*

3.8 million
IDPs & Syrian refugees returned to their areas from December 2024 to September 2026

58%
in MSNA* cited livelihoods as a key priority reflecting a growing preference for recovery and self-reliance

Background

Unemployment, job losses, and limited access to essential services continue to pose major obstacles for Syrians in meeting their basic needs. According to the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan in Syria, 13.3 million people are currently in need of livelihoods and early recovery assistance.

The agricultural sector, which represents a key part of the economy in Syria, was heavily affected during the 13 years of crisis, including the destruction of irrigation canals supplying water to tens of thousands of farmers. In addition, Syria has been suffering from drought – caused by insufficient winter rainfall– described by the UN as the worst since 1989 which compounded the problem.

Due to limited livelihoods opportunities in the country, many families are turning to harmful coping strategies—such as borrowing money, selling assets, or engaging in high-risk or degrading work, child labour and early marriage - which undermine long-term resilience and increase exposure to serious protection risks.

According to the Enhanced Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria, limited access to employment and livelihoods represents some of the key barriers to return to the country in the next 12 months following the lack of adequate housing.

UNHCR livelihoods assistance

UNHCR is providing support to vulnerable people, particularly returnees to start up small businesses in urban and rural areas. UNHCR is also restoring basic services and socio-economic infrastructure that are critical to boosting local economic activities in areas experiencing significant returns.

As part of its medium- to long-term strategy, UNHCR leverages its comparative advantages— including long-standing field presence, expertise, data and analysis capabilities, as well as its network of community centres - to engage a wide range of actors in these efforts.

* *Humanitarian Needs and Response Priorities 2026*
* *Muti-Sector Needs Assessment - Syria*

This includes financial service providers, cooperation with local authorities, UN agencies, development actors, and the private sector with the aim of promoting sustainable responses and advancing protection, resilience, and solutions.

UNHCR Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion Strategy (2026–2029)

UNHCR Syria's 2026–2029 livelihoods and economic inclusion strategy adopts a catalytic and area-based approach to supporting sustainable return and reintegration. Shifting from direct service delivery to strategic coordination, the strategy prioritizes scalable innovative initiatives, enhanced engagement with development actors and the private sector, and a gradual shift to longer-term recovery and development-led investments. It focuses on strengthening legal and policy frameworks, expanding access to national financial services and skills development, as well as rehabilitating key socioeconomic infrastructure in return areas.

Key objectives of the strategy

1. Enhance institutional capacity and investment in areas experiencing significant returns.
2. Empower returnees and host communities for economic participation.
3. Provide transitional livelihoods support as an entry point to longer term economic inclusion.

Small business start-up projects

UNHCR provides entrepreneurship training as well as financial support to vulnerable people, mainly returnees, to start up or revitalize their small businesses.



Mohammad, a father of seven, works in his car maintenance shop in Douma, Rural Damascus. After years of hardship and displacement, he rebuilt his business through UNHCR's assistance. ©UNHCR/ V.Toumeh

The candidates are identified through the UNHCR-supported community centres and UNHCR data platforms, based on socio-economic factors such as family size, income level, displacement, gender roles, individual skill sets and vulnerability.

Through training, the participants acquire essential business skills such as accounting and customer service, preparing detailed business plans and market studies, as well as assessing technical feasibility and financial viability. Upon the successful completion of the training, the participants become eligible to receive support (cash or in-kind) to implement their business plans and operate their projects.

The small businesses supported by UNHCR span a variety of sectors including, but not limited to, production-related enterprises (e.g. small-scale manufacturing, building and construction), service industry (e.g. shoe repair, auto repairs, computer/mobile maintenance, food catering, tailoring) and retail (e.g. grocery store and clothes shop).

In 2026, UNHCR will support 2,000 households through material and cash grants to start up or run a small business

Success story: Souad clears her debts

After the tragic loss of her husband, Souad was left overwhelmed by debt and struggled to support her family. Determined to change her circumstances, she turned to a local organization and enrolled in an entrepreneurship course facilitated by UNHCR in 2024. With newfound hope, she received a cash grant to start a dairy production business upon successful completion of the course.

Through dedication and hard work, Souad established a shop specialized in producing cheese and milk products, reaching a daily output of 100 kilograms. The business not only provided her with a stable income but also enabled her to repay accumulated debts.



Souad sells dairy products in her shop ©UNHCR

"This newfound stability allowed me to afford essential medical care for my diabetic daughter, support my children's education, and fulfill my daughter's dream of pursuing higher education,", Souad shared.
Building on her success, Souad secured additional funding from a microfinance institution to expand her business during the profitable sheep milk season—further strengthening her family's resilience and future prospects.

Small-scale repairs of livelihoods-related basic services

UNHCR focuses on facilities and services that generate positive social and economic impacts for returnee communities, including job creation, capacity-building, and enhanced employability—while addressing protection concerns and contributing to the broader economy.

UNHCR and its partners rehabilitate essential livelihood-related infrastructure affected by the conflict, such as vocational training centres/schools, collective agricultural irrigation systems, water canals, and local markets.

Repairing irrigation infrastructure enhances farmers' resilience

Years of conflict and a devastating earthquake left many Syrian farmers without irrigation, threatening their livelihoods and food security.

In Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor and Latakia Governorates, thousands of hectares of farmland lay dry, and over 15,000 households struggled to survive. UNHCR and FAO stepped in to rehabilitate irrigation systems, restoring vital water access. Works included installing and testing pumping sets, generators, and transformers, reviving irrigation across over 6,000 hectares of agricultural lands. Civil works reshaped canals and built water basins, ensuring efficient and sustainable water flow. In Latakia, a major hydraulic system was also upgraded, covering 14,400 households and securing summer irrigation. Water users' groups were established to empower farmers in managing and maintaining irrigation systems.

These interventions boosted agricultural productivity, enabling displaced families to return to their areas and rebuild their lives.


The irrigation system in Ghanem Ali village (Ar-Raqqa) was rehabilitated as part of a project to restore access to water. The initiative, supported by UNHCR, included repairing a pumping set and improving the main water distribution system, benefiting around 300 households affected by years of damage. ©UNHCR

Impact of UNHCR's livelihood interventions

The Small Start-up Business Projects 2025 monitoring, covering 1,000 beneficiaries, shows strong early livelihood outcomes, particularly among returnees who represent over 86% of the participants. The programme—implemented mainly through cash grants complemented by entrepreneurship training—has supported small, service- and retail-based businesses across multiple governorates. Beneficiaries demonstrate high levels of vulnerability, with large household sizes and significant prevalence of disability and chronic illness, yet outcomes are largely positive: most beneficiaries report stable income, improved ability to meet basic needs, and business continuity or expansion. Training was widely attended and highly valued, especially in financial management and business skills, contributing to improved performance and decision-making. While market access is generally not a major constraint, sustainability challenges persist, including limited capital for growth, seasonal income, and gaps in financial management. Overall, the programme is effective in promoting early recovery and self-reliance, but continued support such as follow-up coaching, access to finance, and market linkages is needed to strengthen the long-term resilience and scalability of supported businesses.

Livelihoods and early recovery interventions in 2026

- Six vocational training schools and one irrigation network providing services to over 12,000 individuals will be repaired by UNHCR in Aleppo, Homs, Ar-Raqqa and Idlib Governorates.
- 2,000 households will benefit from small start-up business support in governorates experiencing significant returns.
- Over 1,000 individuals will benefit from access to national/financial services, on-the-job training/apprenticeship schemes, and incentives/wages from infrastructure projects.

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