

Helpdesk Research Report

Perceptions of different modalities of social assistance in the Levant

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Question

What evidence is there on local actors' relative perceptions of different social assistance modalities (cash transfers, food vouchers and food distribution), especially on transitions away from food distribution? What differences are observed between social groups? Where possible, focus on the occupied Palestinian territory, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

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1. Overview

Major international aid actors worldwide have been moving away from in-kind food aid and turning towards food vouchers and cash transfers. International agencies working in the Levant – i.e. the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria – have tried to reconcile this general shift with the historical, political and social specificities of social assistance in the Levant. In this context, what are the relative perceptions of local actors in the Levant about different social assistance modalities related to food?

Some findings are relevant to all modalities of assistance. In particular, Palestinian refugees perceive the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) as deeply connected to their status as refugees. Many have therefore been **attached to in-kind aid from UNRWA as a tangible manifestation of their identity**, and have opposed a shift towards vouchers or cash. At the same time, studies on Gaza suggest that recipients have **no permanent preference**. Rather, they favour the modality that they are familiar with and that they consider to be most appropriate.

Beyond this case, a number of studies on all four focus countries find that recipients have a preference for one or two modalities over others. While no single modality emerges as a clear preference, the general balance seems to **favour primarily vouchers, and then cash**. Recipients also have preferences about how assistance is implemented. For example, many express satisfaction with the shift towards using mobile phones or electronic cards.

A number of **cross-cutting factors shape local actors' perceptions**, a point made in most references. One factor is the wider political, economic and social conditions (such as Israeli occupation). Another is dissatisfaction about aid quality, quantity and type, especially the fact that aid does not meet basic needs and does not address unemployment. In addition, gender inequalities matter as they subordinate women and girls in both public and private arenas (e.g. in the cases of female widows, and of women with disabilities). A final factor is the perceptions of the food available through in-kind aid or vouchers: its quantity, quality and diversity, but also the collective and individual perspectives on desirable food.

Perceptions of food vouchers are mixed.

- In many projects, recipients are **very satisfied** with vouchers. A major reason is the dignity achieved through the choice, discretion, and privacy afforded by vouchers, as well as through shopkeepers' respectful behaviour. Recipients also liked that vouchers created flexibility and ease in timing, procedures, and access to nearby shops. They also appreciated the availability of good-quality, diverse food. Successful mechanisms for grievances, and the resolution of problems raised, also seem associated with beneficiaries' satisfaction.
- Conversely, recipients expressed a number of **negative views** about some voucher programmes. Perceived problems included: a lack of diversity of accessible food items, and unsatisfactory types of food; problematic budget and pricing of vouchers; the burdens in time, distance and money entailed by involvement in some programmes; and practical failures in implementation, communication, organisation, and technology (e.g. voucher e-cards failing to work).
- The effects of the perceptions of vouchers on **gender** are mixed and contradictory. Some beneficiaries found that vouchers had had a positive impact on gender relations within households, giving greater decision-making power to women, protecting men's sense of dignity, reducing domestic tensions, and increasing women's mobility outside the home. However, others pointed that vouchers, implemented in gendered ways, may not empower women.

Perceptions of cash transfers are mixed as well, though largely favourable. In several programmes, beneficiaries had a positive view. They experienced cash transfers as being convenient, as upholding their dignity and freedom of choice, and as increasing their social capital. They also reported that transfers reduced tensions within families and in the wider community, including between local residents and refugees. Negative views of some programmes included cases where: cash transfers had created conflicts for the refugee recipients, both with host communities and among refugees; women, including widows, could not access cash assistance due to socio-economic restrictions and burdens; and men often refused to ask for social assistance for fear of public shame.

Perceptions of in-kind food aid are mixed as well. The positive perceptions by Palestinians served by UNRWA or WFP (especially in Gaza) stand out as a special case. Otherwise, this rapid review mostly found expressions of concerns and negative views, from recipients and from excluded host communities. For example, recipients complained about long, humiliating queuing, and difficulties to store food.

Available knowledge, and knowledge gaps

This rapid review of the literature found a limited knowledge base on the report question. There is a dearth of academic references published in the past ten years on the specific report topic. Grey literature from the past five years offers a fairly small but rigorous knowledge base. A notable strength of this evidence is that it was generated through a variety of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. The overall knowledge base also offers disaggregated findings that distinguish by different groups in relation to aid (beneficiaries, shopkeepers etc.), as well as by socio-economic class, gender, nationality, refugee or migration status, and to a lesser extent by age and disability. Nonetheless, individual references lack systematic disaggregation and discussion of structures of inequality (e.g. perceptions of poor refugee women vs. better-off resident men). The knowledge base covers all four countries of focus, though with a slant towards urban areas. Findings establish a number of causalities, and are generally conclusive.

The knowledge base also has weaknesses. A handful of sources – notably the World Food Programme (WFP), UNRWA and Oxfam – have commissioned, written, or published most of the relevant studies. In addition, only a few studies compare the relative perceptions of different aid modalities: most discuss modalities in isolation. Vouchers are by far the more researched modality, whereas there is limited research on cash transfers, and fairly little on in-kind food aid (which probably reflects the current state of aid modalities). Further, many of the indicators and data are about outputs rather than outcomes, even in impact studies (LaGuardia et al. 2015: 65). Most references are also snapshots of perceptions at one time, with little research on changes over time. A significant number of the projects reviewed are pilots or small-scale, and it is unclear how applicable their findings would be to larger programmes and to scaling-up. Lastly, some findings are based on a single reference, or are mixed or contradictory.

2. Perceptions relevant to all assistance modalities

Preferences among different modalities

Historical significance of modalities for Palestinian refugees

Food aid in UNRWA programmes has an entrenched presence. This is because Palestinian refugees often see food assistance as a physical manifestation that the **provision of services by UNRWA manifests their status as refugees**. This is visible in a 2012 opinion poll of Palestinian refugees living in refugee camps in the oPt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. About 45 per cent of respondents considered UNRWA to be intrinsic to Palestinian refugees' identity and fundamental rights. A total of 88 per cent saw UNRWA as important in sustaining the cause of Palestinian refugees, and felt that stopping UNRWA services would harm their condition (al-Azza n.d.: 71).

Consequently, in Gaza, UNRWA has made an exception to its global preference for cash transfers, and still operates food assistance. In this context, there remains a lack of consensus about the best modality for reducing food insecurity. For instance, non-refugees in Gaza who are deeply poor and lack food security are eligible to vouchers, cash, or in-kind food aid (ICAI 2013: 19-20; Waterfield & Cherrier 2015: 65).

In practice, Palestinian refugees and unions, as well as the governments hosting UNRWA operations, have strenuously **opposed attempts to shift social support from a mix of cash and food to cash-only assistance**. They have resisted such a change unless they were backed by guaranteed funding in line with international best practice (ICAI 2013: 4). In addition, refugees have also protested cuts to the cash component of aid, including where such cuts were due to budget shortfalls (*idem*: 19-20).

Recipients' inconsistent preference for a modality

Studies about beneficiaries' preference in Gaza yield “**oddly inconsistent**” findings on their favourite **modality** (Mountfield 2012: 14). Some of this results from study biases (*ibidem*).

Another reason is that beneficiaries may **most value the modality through which they are receiving assistance**. This was a finding both in an external mid-term review of a WFP-Oxfam pilot project with food vouchers in urban areas in Gaza between 2009 and 2011 (Creti 2011), and in an external evaluation of the follow-up WFP cash voucher programme in Gaza (Mountfield 2012: 14-15). This is partly because recipients were influenced by the implementing organisations, and partly because they were “afraid to suggest changes that could affect their benefits” (Creti 2011: 24).

- **Voucher users almost unanimously preferred vouchers** (Creti 2011: 24):
 - They preferred vouchers over in-kind food aid. They could manage to get wheat flour from relatives and other families, for example as gifts, and could afford to buy it. On the other hand, they could not get the items on the voucher in these ways.
 - They preferred vouchers over cash. One reason is that beneficiaries knew they would try to save the cash money and would turn to lesser quality foods, which would create stress for them. Groups of women also explained that cash would get spent on other things at the expense of food. They were not confident they would directly control the money to buy a weekly supply of fresh food, when men might take it to buy dry food in bulk.
- Conversely, **beneficiaries of in-kind food distribution almost unanimously preferred in-kind assistance** over vouchers and cash transfers (*ibidem*).

Gazans' seemingly inconsistent preferences may also **reflect where beneficiaries are in the journey from in-kind aid to vouchers to cash**, and that beneficiaries are happy with the general direction of the assistance they receive, Mountfield argues (2012: 15). Gazans have mostly had experience with in-kind food aid, and are gradually becoming familiar with vouchers and, to a lesser extent, cash. Mountfield obtained very consistent views from men and women beneficiaries, by asking them *when* they deemed each modality to be appropriate rather than *which* modality they preferred. Beneficiaries then consistently said that (*idem*: 14):

- **In-kind food aid** was seen as appropriate when movement is not possible, such as in times of war, as well as for families with no children and for extended families. Beneficiaries noted that getting food aid entailed heavy costs of transportation.
- **E-vouchers** were deemed applicable at all times, for all, and useful for all meals. Beneficiaries added that e-vouchers were particularly good for divorced women and widows, and for families with children where vouchers rectify nutritional deficits. Beneficiaries noted that e-vouchers spare families a lot of embarrassment, and restore the image of fathers as providers.
- **Unconditional cash** was seen as meant for non-food items, such as medication, school needs, credit for mobile phones, and cigarettes, as well as for other commodities from shops. Unconditional cash was deemed good in combination with other aid.

Recipients' preference for one modality

Other studies find that recipients do state clear preferences. In the UNHCR response to Syrian refugees in Lebanon, refugees have **approved of the shift from in-kind assistance to cash assistance** through

e-vouchers and ATM cards. That transition has been aided by Syrian refugees' capacity to navigate different markets, and by their fair financial literacy (LaGuardia et al. 2015: 127).

In several programmes, recipients expressed a **preference for vouchers over food distribution**. This is the case in Gaza with the WFP cash vouchers for food: recipients found these vouchers to be a significant improvement (Mountfield 2012: 2). One reason they named for this was respect for their dignity and self-esteem, and the lack of social stigma – shopping like everyone else, instead of queuing with men at points of food distribution. Another was freedom in deciding when to acquire the food, and some choice in selecting food items. Practical reasons included the shorter times spent on getting food, and the ease of carrying smaller amounts of food back to their home (Waterfield & Cherrier 2015: 52, 66).

In WFP programmes for Syrian refugees in Jordan, similar preferences by the refugees led WFP to shift from cooked hot meals to dry food rations, then to paper vouchers, and currently to e-vouchers. Beneficiaries have highly praised the change from paper vouchers to e-cards. E-vouchers have reduced their waiting times and burden of transportation, and have allowed them to go to shops regularly for smaller amounts, which are better suited to their limited storage (LaGuardia et al. 2015: 63).

In a WFP pilot using food vouchers for Iraqi refugees in Damascus in 2009-2010, nearly all surveyed households preferred the vouchers. Only 13 per cent would rather have received money (Elguindi 2010: 70).

In a sample survey of Syrian refugees in Lebanon – some who had received cash assistance for winter, and some who hadn't – about 80 per cent of respondents expressed a **preference for cash-only assistance**. Slightly over 15 per cent preferred both cash and food e-vouchers. Fewer than 5 per cent preferred only e-vouchers. The minority of households that preferred some or all of their assistance in-kind (through e-vouchers) may live in places far from shops to purchase food or from ATMs. The costs of travel, in both money and time, are likely explanations for some of these households' preference (Lehmann & Masterson 2014: 29-30).

In the WFP voucher project in the oPt, some beneficiaries in the West Bank mentioned that they would have **preferred traditional food aid, or cash, over vouchers**, if the list of approved commodities could not be extended to include additional basic items (Galluzzi & Natsheh 2010: 43).

Recipients' preferences about implementation of assistance

In WFP's voucher programme in Gaza, all recipients interviewed for an independent evaluation preferred the **e-voucher** system to vouchers in the form of coupons (Waterfield & Cherrier 2015: 34).

In a recent pilot with Syrian refugees in Lebanon, WFP has used an electronic system of delivery for aid and vouchers. This system, called OneCard, is a **single electronic card for food vouchers and cash transfers**: it allows beneficiaries to receive food assistance using point-of-sale terminals at selected retailers, as well as receiving cash assistance through ATM cards.¹ A September 2015 evaluation found that beneficiaries' **priority was timely and problem-free access** to their entitlements, while any preference for one or two cards was secondary (Creti 2015: 21). Regarding these technical preferences, the findings were as follows (*idem*: 20-21):

- **47 per cent preferred OneCard.** These respondents found OneCard more user-friendly, i.e. less confusing to access both entitlements with one card. Many also found it easier to use, to carry,

¹ In this project, cash transfers are related to UNHCR whereas food vouchers are related to WFP. For this reason, the project is discussed under "vouchers" in the other sections of this report.

and to avoid losing. To a lesser extent, they appreciated its efficiency. Beneficiaries with financial literacy could use the OneCard by themselves and tended to prefer it to the two-card system.

- **37 per cent had no preference between having one single card or two.** They said that the number of cards didn't matter, with some commenting that both cards work in a similar way. A few people added that the most important to them was receiving the entitlement.
- **16 per cent preferred two separated cards.** Their main reason was the risks created if the single card got lost or blocked in an ATM: they feared the loss of access to both benefits, especially food. They liked still having one card if they lost the other. Besides, a few respondents found it confusing to use one card for both entitlements. Beneficiaries who had experienced problems using the ATM function tended to prefer two cards, and were extremely concerned with the risk of losing the food benefits. This “group, although limited in number, was very assertive and transmitted their fears to others” (*idem*: 21).

In a programme of unconditional cash transfer in Akkar, Lebanon, over 90 per cent of beneficiaries **preferred ATM cards** to other modalities, such as cash in an envelope or in-kind distribution (Campbell 2014: 10).

At a more general level, Syrian refugees in Jordan largely recognised that **registering with UNHCR** had benefits, including receiving cash for food (LaGuardia et al. 2015: 80). However, in Lebanon, a number of refugees are not registered with UNHCR. Their reasons include: fear that registration might associate them with particular factions; distrust of the purpose or benefits of registration; and not needing protection or assistance, or using different channels for these (*idem*: 145).

Some Syrian refugees in Lebanon warned that they were subjected to **over-assessment**, and that these exercises had led to limited or no assistance for them (*idem*: 147).

Cross-cutting findings

Most references used in this report identify the following factors as widespread among recipients of all modalities of aid in all four countries of focus. First, **wider political, economic and social conditions** are ubiquitous in local actors' perceptions and play a determining role. These are viewed not just as hampering the workings of aid, but also in constraining the local economy, society and politics and in creating situations where aid is needed in the first place. These conditions include the Israeli occupation, the Israeli-Egyptian blockade of Gaza, and the violent conflicts in Syria.

Second, there is significant **dissatisfaction about aid quality, quantity and type** - especially the fact that aid does not meet basic needs and does not address unemployment. This has ramifications for access to food, and beyond. For example, a 2012 opinion poll of Palestinian refugees living in refugee camps found that Palestinian refugees in the oPt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria felt that UNRWA services needed to improve in quality and quantity – over 75 per cent thought so about food aid, and over 77 per cent about cash assistance (al-Azza n.d.: xix). Syrian refugees in Lebanon saw their views as not being incorporated into the latest UN plans about the aid response, despite community participation (LaGuardia et al. 2015: 142).

Third, many local actors note that **gender inequalities** shape how populations receive and use aid, how they perceive it, and who gets included and excluded, within and between households. The subordination of women and girls to men and boys, in both public and private, leads to a gendered division of labour (paid and unpaid), of space, and of time (e.g. UN Women & OCHA 2015). For example, in the oPt:

- **Female widows** are subject to close scrutiny and social restrictions, especially young widows. Widowed women’s access to assistance is typically mediated informally by male kin and in-laws. There is no guarantee that widows could directly access nor individually control any benefits or entitlements (*idem*: 3-4).
- **Women with disabilities** are also subjected to structural constraints that affect their access to aid. Homes and public infrastructure are largely inaccessible, which starkly restricts the mobility of persons with a physical disability. Single women with a disability “are more likely to face discrimination and marginalisation” (*idem*: 5). Married women with disabilities have reported continuing to be responsible for household chores and care, with little help from their husbands. They indicated reverting to female family members to assist them with this (*ibidem*).

Fourth, **perceptions of the food available through in-kind aid or vouchers** matter. They are related not only to tangible characteristics of the food quantity, quality and diversity, but also to collective and individual perspectives on desirable food. For example, Syrian refugees in an Oxfam cash programme in Jordan preferred the food in Syria. They described it as “fresher, cheaper, more abundant and generally of higher quality” than in Jordan (Sloane 2014: 22). Receiving cash that enabled them to buy food similar to Syrian products had psychological benefits (*ibidem*).

Nature and political economy of relevant stakeholders

The literature identifies a range of stakeholders whose perceptions of different modalities matter, because they shape aid practices or policies, or the larger political, economic, and social conditions of aid:

- **Aid recipients.** They are the core focus of this report and are discussed in all references.
- **Persons who could qualify for aid but are excluded from it** because they do not meet the criteria, or because sufficient aid cannot be provided. Most references discuss them.
- Local actors involved as **producers** (e.g. farmers), **manufacturers** (e.g. owners of food factories), **intermediaries** (e.g. traders, banks), **sellers** (e.g. shopkeepers), or **monitors** (e.g. civil servants).²
- Other **individuals and groups in domestic society who may be hostile** to aid recipients, such as better-off socio-economic groups or socially conservative groups. On these actors’ perceptions, see for example: LaGuardia et al. (2015); UN Women & OCHA (2015).
- Local, national and international **actors involved in running or implementing** international or local aid (e.g. municipalities, relief or charity associations, NGOs etc.). The perceptions of NGOs are discussed in nearly all references used, with other kinds of actors much less discussed.
- **International and domestic elites**, including policy makers in the domestic state, businesses, and well-resourced aid actors. On these actors’ perceptions of different modalities, see for example: Drummond et al. (2015); LaGuardia et al. (2015); Waterfield & Cherrier (2015).

² On these actors’ perceptions, see for example: Campbell (2014); Creti (2011); Creti (2015); Galluzzi & Natsheh (2010); LaGuardia et al. (2015); Waterfield & Cherrier (2015); Zurayk et al. (2012).

3. Perceptions of food vouchers

Positive views

Recipients' views

Recipients were found to be highly satisfied with paper or electronic vouchers in a number of projects. Examples of those include: WFP programmes for Syrian refugees in Jordan (LaGuardia, D., et al. 2015: 63); a four-month pilot with Iraqi refugees in Damascus (Elguindi 2010: 70); a project led by WFP in the West Bank and Gaza (Galluzzi & Natsheh 2010: 43); a WFP-Oxfam pilot in Gaza (Creti 2011: 23-24), followed by a WFP programme implemented with Oxfam and Ma'an (Mountfield 2012: 2, 9); and a WFP programme for non-refugee families in Gaza (Waterfield & Cherrier 2015: 4, 34).³

One major reason for recipients' satisfaction was **dignity**. In addition to dignity achieved through choice (discussed later), recipients also mentioned that vouchers preserved their dignity:

- **Through discretion and privacy.** In the WFP cash voucher programme in Gaza, beneficiaries consistently reported appreciating the normality and dignity of going discreetly to a local shop instead of queuing for a handout (Mountfield 2012: 9). In the WFP-Oxfam pilot, beneficiaries noted that they liked that their names were not exposed in public lists, but nearly fully anonymised. They considered the SMS system that informed them of when to collect vouchers to be very discreet (Creti 2011: 23-24).
- **Through shopkeepers' respectful behaviour.** In the WFP-Oxfam project, shopkeepers treated voucher users as any other customer. Recipients felt this protected their discretion and privacy, and thus their sense of dignity. This also let them bring their children into the shops without seeming to be begging (Creti 2011: 23-24). In the WFP voucher programme in Gaza, shopkeepers treated beneficiaries well or preferentially, with no stigma attached to the collection of vouchers (Waterfield & Cherrier 2015: 52). In the WFP pilot in Damascus, almost all interviewees were happy with their treatment at the participating shops (Elguindi 2010: 71).

Choice was another major reason for satisfaction. Recipients liked being able to choose what they needed and wanted (quantity and type of food), when they wanted, as evidenced by studies of the WFP's voucher programme in Gaza, the WFP-Oxfam pilot and programme in Gaza, and the WFP pilots in Damascus.⁴ For example, in the WFP-Oxfam pilot in the oPt, users preferred to redeem their vouchers more for dairy products and eggs, because users viewed these foods as having a high nutritional value (i.e. prioritising sources of animal protein) and as being difficult to access from other sources (Creti 2011: 37). In the WFP project in the oPt, recipients especially liked the greater choice of quantities that could be redeemed, and the inclusion of perishable items such as dairy (Galluzzi & Natsheh 2010: 43). In addition, choice led to less spoilage, as beneficiaries could exchange their vouchers at any time rather than receive a two-month ration at once (Elguindi 2010: 73).

³ Annex nine in this report summarises the positive and negative perceptions expressed during focus group discussions that were held for the evaluation. It offers a wealth of detailed insights from beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries, and shopkeepers. See: Waterfield & Cherrier (2015), pp. 23-32 in annexes (p. 110 sq in PDF). This evaluation also looked into an UNRWA cash-for-work programme, but the direct connection to food and food aid was less direct and clear, so this was not incorporated into this report.

⁴ Creti (2011: 23-24); Elguindi (2010: 72); Mountfield (2012: 2, 9); Waterfield & Cherrier (2015: 52).

Flexibility and ease in redeeming vouchers was another ground for recipients' satisfaction:

- **Flexibility and ease in timing.** Recipients in the oPt liked being able to decide when to go shopping, which gave them a sense of respect, as document about the WFP voucher programme, the WFP-Oxfam project, and the WFP project (Creti 2011: 23-24; Galluzzi & Natsheh 2010: 43; Waterfield & Cherrier 2015: 52).
- **Limited burden on time.** In the WFP pilot in Damascus, the voucher programme dramatically reduced queuing time: whereas recipients had queued for 3 to 5 hours to receive in-kind rations, they spent 30 to 45 minutes in the participating shops (Elguindi 2010: 71). In the WFP project in the oPt, 99 per cent of the beneficiaries rated the waiting time at the shop as good, 1 per cent as fair, with no dissatisfaction expressed (Galluzzi & Natsheh 2010: 43).
- **Flexibility and ease in procedures.** In the WFP project in the oPt, 99 per cent of the beneficiaries rated the verification of vouchers at the shop as good, 1 per cent as fair, with no dissatisfaction expressed (Galluzzi & Natsheh 2010: 43).
- **Proximity of participating shops.** In the WFP pilot in Damascus, beneficiaries valued being able to redeem their vouchers in a nearby shop, rather than travelling long distances for a two-month in-kind food ration (Elguindi 2010: 72).

Quality, variety and availability of food were cited as reasons for satisfaction. In the WFP cash voucher programme in Gaza, beneficiaries consistently reported appreciating the quality of the produce available through the voucher (Mountfield 2012: 9). In a WFP project in the oPt, 93 per cent of beneficiaries rated the quality of the food obtained with vouchers as good, 6 per cent as fair, and 1 per cent as unsatisfactory. A total of 98 per cent of beneficiaries rated food availability as good, 1.4 per cent as fair, and 0.2 per cent as unsatisfactory (Galluzzi & Natsheh 2010: 43). In the WFP pilot in Damascus, the foods sold in participating shops met local preferences better than the in-kind basket. Beneficiaries chose products according to their needs, which led to fewer re-sales of commodities. It also facilitated recipients' diversification of food (Elguindi 2010: 73).

Successful **mechanisms for grievance, and resolution of problems raised**, also seemed associated with satisfaction. In the WFP-Oxfam project, beneficiaries could leave complaints, requests (e.g. requesting to be assigned to a closer shop), or suggestions, in a box in each shop. Beneficiaries made use of this, and the implementing partners addressed the feedback. This was done case-by-case, through workshops with participants where issues were discussed and solved, and through modifications to the project (Creti 2011: 23-24; Macauslan 2012: iv). In the WFP programme for non-refugees in Gaza, recipients could effectively express complaints and request to modify the list of approved food products. To respond, WFP and its implementing partners harnessed the efficiency of the e-voucher platform (Waterfield & Cherrier 2015: 33). In the WFP pilot in Damascus, WFP staff devoted time and effort to solving problems with the PIN number of SIM cards provided by WFP. As a result, complaints about this did not significantly appear during the second cycle of the project (Elguindi 2010: 72).

Positive impact on children was mentioned in the WFP cash voucher programme in Gaza: female beneficiaries highlighted various positive effects for children, including making visits to supermarkets a happy occasion for children (Mountfield 2012: 9).

Views of persons excluded from the aid

In the WFP programme in Gaza, an external evaluation found **no evidence that the targeting had led to widespread conflict** by households excluded from the programme. It also found no evidence that the programme either created or mitigated conflict (Waterfield & Cherrier 2015: 53).

Concerns and negative views

In several projects, recipients were critical of the **diversity and types of food accessible** through vouchers. In the WFP project in the oPt, some beneficiaries in the West Bank found the number of approved commodities too small (Galluzzi & Natsheh 2010: 43). In the WFP pilot in Damascus, a third of recipients surveyed wanted a larger selection of food items. Recipients would also have preferred different types of lentils, chickpeas and rice, which is one reason they hardly purchased the ones available through the project (Elguindi 2010: 69-70).

Recipients also had issues with the **budget and pricing** used in several projects. In the WFP project in the oPt, some beneficiaries in the West Bank complained that the value of the voucher was limited (Galluzzi & Natsheh 2010: 43). In the WFP-Oxfam project in Gaza, users redeemed their vouchers the least for wheat flour, as it was too expensive compared to market prices while being accessible from other sources (Creti 2011: 37).

Voucher users also pointed to **burdens of time, distance and money** entailed in participating in some projects. In the WFP OneCard pilot in Lebanon, beneficiaries noted the burden of time and money involved in just attending events for awareness-raising or communication on an aid modality, or attending a distribution of aid (Creti 2015: 20). In the WFP pilot in Damascus, only 60 per cent of interviewees were happy with the distance to the nearest shop, because one of the three shops selected had to stop exchanging vouchers due to problems with its Internet connection (Elguindi 2010: 71).

A number of projects posed problems to recipients due to practical **failures in implementation, communication, organisation, and technology**.

- Recipients noted that the WFP-Oxfam project in Gaza **could have created more opportunities for men and women to develop skills and to go out of the house**, especially for young married women who face strong restrictions imposed by husbands (Creti 2011: 24).
- In WFP's voucher programme in Gaza, beneficiaries identified several problems with implementation. Most recipients interviewed for an external evaluation indicated **not knowing how long they would receive the vouchers**, despite communication about this by implementing actors (Waterfield & Cherrier 2015: 34). The complexity of criteria used for targeting also meant that inclusion and exclusion were not entirely transparent to beneficiaries (*idem*: 53).
- In the WFP pilot in Damascus, recipients mostly reported to the helpdesk **problems with phone technology**: SIM cards not working (21 per cent); recipients not receiving text messages (20 per cent); and PIN numbers not working or not received (13 per cent) (Elguindi 2010: 71). Problems with text messages continued during the second cycle of the pilot, proving that the imposition of specific SIM cards was impractical (*idem*: 73).
- In the WFP OneCard pilot in Lebanon, beneficiaries **did not make use of the single call centre** set up for the project. Instead, they still communicated problems to different implementing partners, to the platform manager, or to UNHCR. This was probably due to a lack of harmonisation on part of project implementers, according to the evaluator (Creti 2015: 6-11).

Gendered dimensions brought out in perceptions

Perceptions of positive impact on gender relations within households

Beneficiaries perceived the WFP-Oxfam pilot, the WFP cash voucher programme, and the overall WFP programme in Gaza, as making a **positive impact on gender dynamics within households**:⁵

- Vouchers gave **more decision-making power to women**, who participated in choosing which items to buy. Often, both men and women went together to the shops, and in many cases the wife listed, and decided on, food items for purchase ((a) and (b) in footnote 5).
- Participants in the WFP programme approved of **providing the voucher (or in-kind assistance) to men**. This was not only because dominant Palestinian norms define men as heads of households, but also because this allocation protected the dignity of men. The occupation and blockade had extremely disempowered men, rendering them unable to provide for their families or to find work. Providing the vouchers to men therefore reduced tensions within households that might have arisen if women had been the designated recipients, and protected women from tensions or risks of domestic violence ((c) in footnote 5; Mountfield 2012: 9).
- Vouchers **reduced tension and increased harmony within households** ((a), (b), (c) in footnote 5; Mountfield 2012: 9). This was thanks to the guaranteed source of food ((c) in footnote 5).
- In turn, lesser tensions within households led to lesser restrictions on **women's mobility**. Women used the visit to a shop to redeem a voucher, with their husbands or alone, as “an opportunity to go out and meet people” ((a) in footnote 5; also see Mountfield 2012: 9).

Perceptions of limited positive impact on gender relations within households

On the other hand, an independent evaluation found that WFP's voucher programme for non-refugees in Gaza **may not have any specific or direct impact on women's empowerment**. Participants explained that dominant social norms limited the scope of women's decision-making and ability to go out, due to household chores and childcare. Women often did make the decisions about food consumption in the home, and typically prepared the list of items to purchase, in some cases together with men. However, they did not necessarily leave the home to shop themselves, and were less likely than men to purchase items (Waterfield & Cherrier 2015: 60). This was a point echoed by the recipients of vouchers in the WFP-Oxfam project in Gaza. They regretted that the project provided too few opportunities for beneficiaries to meet and network, which would create valuable social dynamics (Creti 2011: 24).

Rather than the voucher programme alone, recipients identified an **associated training on nutrition for women beneficiaries** as an important tool towards women's empowerment (Waterfield & Cherrier 2015: 52). Since 2011, WFP has coupled its voucher programme for non-refugees in Gaza with a growing pilot project on nutrition awareness for women recipients, who are often confined to the domestic sphere. Participants reported gaining significant new opportunities to interact with the community beyond their immediate family, and developing informal networks of support. In turn, this increased these women's social engagement and their influence at household level, with greater discussion within couples on food purchases (*idem*: 50-52).

More broadly, a number of the **aid practices perceived to have a positive impact are flagged as structurally detrimental to women and girls**, and to gender equality, by UN Women and OCHA (2015).

⁵ Sources: (a) Creti 2011: 23; (b) 2010 gender review of Oxfam programme in Gaza, cited in Creti 2011: 23; (c) Waterfield & Cherrier 2015: 54.

4. Perceptions of cash transfers

Positive views⁶

An external evaluation of the UNHCR response to Syrian refugees in Jordan found that Syrian refugees had a positive view of direct cash assistance. This is because cash upheld their **dignity and freedom of choice**, was more **convenient**, empowered them to buy a variety of food items and to adapt to their evolving needs (LaGuardia et al. 2015: 68). In addition, participants in an Oxfam programme of cash for work in Gaza reported **greater self-esteem and having met new people** through the programme (Macauslan 2012: iii).⁷

In a study about the impact of cash assistance for Syrian households in host communities and informal settlements in Jordan, beneficiaries reported that cash assistance had improved their social networks and broader social cohesion. This was because the cash income had allowed them to pay back loans in their social circles, thus **reducing tensions within families and in the community** (Sloane 2014: 20). Similarly, another impact evaluation suggested that cash assistance had improved relationships within the households of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. There were fewer disputes between adults in the household reported by beneficiaries than by refugees in the control group (Lehmann & Masterson 2014: 26).

Further, this cash assistance improved relationships between beneficiaries and members of the host community. Beneficiaries were more likely to report receiving help from Lebanese (31 per cent, compared to 26 per cent in the control group). Conversely, beneficiaries were more likely to provide help to Lebanese. Beneficiaries also reported no significant change in their relationships with other Syrians, suggesting that the cash programme had not led to increased jealousy or to crime such as theft (*idem*: 33-34).

An evaluation of winter cash assistance for Syrian refugees in Lebanon found **no elite capture**: no households reported that a local interest group asked them for money (*idem*: 28).

Neutral views

Winter cash assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon between November 2013 and April 2014 was **not a pull factor** for nonbeneficiary refugees to settle into areas with cash transfers, even for relatives of cash recipients (*idem*: 35).

Concerns and negative views

A 2013 independent assessment of aid provided by UNRWA indicated that beneficiaries found the **cash assistance to be so small that it had no impact**. In practice, refugees could no longer rely on UNRWA for effective social protection. Poor families had to rely on support from sources such as charities, informal work, or extended families. In addition, beneficiaries noted that these cash transfers lasted them for two to three weeks only, instead of a month in the past, because of rising costs (ICAI 2013: 19).

⁶ Other major references on perceptions of cash transfers in the oPt are: Abu Hamad & Pavanello (2012a & 2012b); and Jones & Shaheen (2012a & 2012b). However, they are not centred on food-related issues. Instead, they cover the entire Palestinian public cash transfer programme. They are simply mentioned in the reference list.

⁷ This programme was part of a larger one for food security and livelihoods, called GFSL, which also included a voucher programme, and support to income generation.

Cash transfers by Oxfam to Syrian refugees residing in impoverished communities in Jordan was reported to have created some **tensions and resentment with Jordanian host communities and, in a few cases, among Syrian refugees** (Sloane 2014: 20).

Gendered dimensions brought out in perceptions

Five of six families in the Oxfam programme of cash transfer to Syrian refugee households in Jordan reported that the cash had **reduced household tensions**, because it had eased stress about money and helped address some pressing needs (*ibidem*).

On the other hand, evidence from Gaza points to some **negative perceptions**. A recent gender alert by UN women and OCHA reported that, in many instances, emergency cash assistance for **widows** had not reached them after the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza. Often, widows could not access this aid due to gendered social restrictions on women, transportation costs they could not afford, and due to a lack of information about such aid. Widows who sought to receive cash assistance would send a male relative to receive it on their behalf (UN Women & OCHA 2015: 3-4).

In the Oxfam FSL programme in Gaza, women reported that their **husbands often refused to ask for help** for fear of losing their dignity, because some lists of aid recipients are publicised on the streets in Gaza. Husbands often refused to work with local employers too, due to humiliation and exploitation by these employers (Macauslan 2012: 56). Women also let Oxfam know that the **timing** of its cash-for-work activities conflicted with women's household activities. Oxfam changed the timing in response (*idem*: 71).

5. Perceptions of food distribution

Except in the **case of Palestinians supported by UNRWA or WFP**, especially in Gaza, this rapid review found mostly evidence about concerns and negative views regarding food distribution, from recipients and from members of host communities excluded from the aid (see previous sections on the Palestinian case; and section 2 for comparative perceptions that discuss food aid).

There was discontent among recipients with the **lack of variety of the food items** in the baskets that WFP had provided to nearly 125,000 Iraqi refugees in Syria since 2007. This was one reason for WFP's later experimentation with food vouchers (Elguindi 2010: 65). Similarly, after the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza, displaced persons in several communities reported that the content of emergency food packages was inadequate. They pointed particularly to the shortages of milk for children, and micronutrients for pregnant and lactating women (UN Women & OCHA 2015: 7).

After the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza, Gazans also noted **favouritism based on clan or political affiliation** in the distribution of emergency food aid (UN Women & OCHA 2015: 7). Emergency food assistance was also **mostly distributed to men**, without a proper organisation of lines for distribution. This left women and the elderly to fight for their shares (*ibidem*).⁸ More generally, the emergency response failed to take into account the vulnerabilities related to age, gender and disability (*ibid.*).

In Jordan, food distribution to Syrian refugees has emerged as an **inequity between refugees and host communities** (LaGuardia et al. 2015: 79).

⁸ UNRWA has now enabled certain categories of women to apply for, and receive, food assistance independently, in their own name (UN Women & OCHA 2015: 8-9).

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Key websites

- Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights: www.badil.org
- Cash Learning Partnership – Resources & Tools – Middle East publications in English: http://www.cashlearning.org/resources/library?keywords=®ion=middle_east&country=all&year=all&organisation=all§or=all&modality=all&language=english&payment_method=all&document_type=all&searched=1&pSection=resources&pTitle=library
- ODI - Transforming cash transfers: beneficiary and community perspectives on social protection programming: <http://www.odi.org/projects/transforming-cash-transfers-beneficiary-and-community-perspectives-social-protection>
- Oxfam - Policy & Research: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research>
- Reliefweb – Updates: <http://reliefweb.int/updates>
- WFP – Publications: <http://www.wfp.org/publications/list>

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