



ASSESSING THE ROLE OF AGRICULTURE IN SYRIAN TERRITORIES



a context analysis in the Districts of Afrin, Atarib and Idleb

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Assessing the Role of Agriculture in Syrian territories

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INTRODUCTION

the conflict context

Syrian people, since 2012, are suffering of the upset of the civil war. The conflict is heavily affecting agriculture (FAO and WFP 2016)¹, and the activities of thousands of farms, traditionally an important source of food and economic support at the local and national level.

Nonetheless, there are indicators showing that agriculture still represents a key sector providing jobs, income and food (RFSAN 2016)² to Syrian people. Recently it is reported that there is a slightly increasing of the productivity for the main staple crops and that the improved security conditions are somehow offering “new livelihood opportunities”³.

the CIHEAM Bari program

CIHEAM Bari, since June 2015, is implementing the multi-donor programme “Agricultural and Livestock support for Syrian People” in the districts of Idleb, Atarib and Afrin, in North-West of Syria. The program aims to increase the resilience of the Rural Communities and is supporting the stabilisation process in the involved areas through technical assistance, delivery of inputs and services in revolving fund. The specific objective of the program is: “Rural Communities livelihoods are supported through increased and diversified agricultural and Livestock production, improved access to services/inputs and functioning value chains.

agriculture in the program areas

Available data (Wattenbach, 2006)⁴ indicate that, in the program territories, agriculture has always been the main activity of rural communities. The territories are mainly mountainous and hilly, becoming flatter in eastern direction. Rainfall vary from more than 600 mm to less than 300 mm, moving from mountains to plains. Traditionally farming systems are based on rain-fed wheat and permanent crops (mainly olive trees) cultivation. However there are plains where farmers, before the conflict, had access to water through farms wells and public networks, and were intensively cultivating wheat, horticultural crops and olive trees too.

Livestock were part of farmers' assets too with sheep being the most relevant animal for farmers. The reduced availability of grazing areas, made this sector less important compared to livestock breeding in other Syrian territories.

¹ FAO/WFP (2016), Special report, FAO/WFP crop and food security assessment mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, 2016

² RFSAN (2016), Food Security and Livelihood Assessment – Syria, An assessment, FAO, IMMAP and the Food Security Cluster (South Turkey), October 2016

³ FAO/WFP (2017), Special Report, FAO/WFP crop and food security assessment mission to the Syrian Arab Republic, ARAB REPUBLIC

⁴ Wattenbach H. (2006), Technical Report, Farming Systems of the Arabic Syrian Republic, FAO-Cooperazione Italiana- Ministry of Agrarian Reforms.

THE SURVEY



assessing the scope of agriculture in the program areas

After 2 years of activities, the program organized a territorial survey to have a good understanding of the nowadays scope of agriculture and an updated pictures of the farmers conditions.

Specifically the survey aimed at assessing:

- farmers' engagement and dependence from agriculture
- the status of their productive assets and of agricultural activities
- farmers' access to agricultural inputs and services
- the existing product markets
- farmers' main challenges and plans
- women's roles and relations

methods and tools

The assessment was implemented between December 2016 and March 2017. Primarily it consisted of a structured interview to farmers, head of their households.

Specifically, the questionnaires were administered to 489 farmers in the three districts and from six villages (Table 1 and Figure 1). These were selected by local councils and authorities collaborating to the program, to include in the survey the different farming systems relevant to the farmers.

The findings of the farmers' questionnaire are presented in Section 1.

TABLE 1 - DISTRICTS AND VILLAGES COVERED BY THE SURVEY

District/Village name		
Afrin	Atarib	Idleb
Frerya	Atarib	Kaferyahmol
Simalka	Kafarnoran	Ramhamdan
Turnde	Aljeena	Zardana
Kimar	Kammari	Alsanama
Haj Khalil		
Hajilar		
Qere gol		
Qastal keshek		

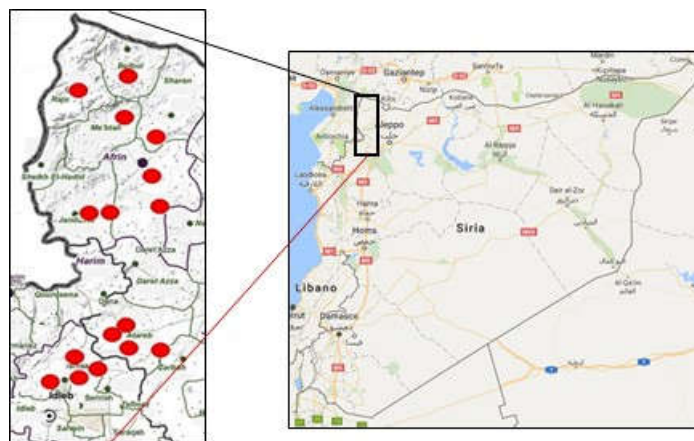


FIGURE 1 - LOCATION OF THE DISTRICTS AND VILLAGES COVERED BY THE SURVEY

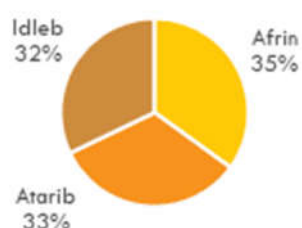


FIGURE 2 - BREAKDOWN OF FARMERS (MALE & FEMALE) RESPONDENTS BY DISTRICT (%)

Parallel to the farmers' questionnaire, a complementary survey, targeting women living and working in the study areas, was carried out with the aim to explore rural women's main activities, challenges and attitudes in present conflict times. Overall, 342 questionnaires were compiled covering all targeted districts and villages. The findings of women's survey are presented in Section 2.

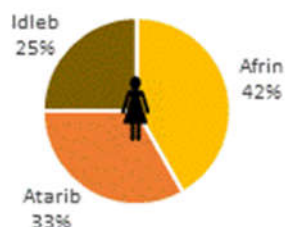


FIGURE 3 - BREAKDOWN OF WOMEN RESPONDENTS BY DISTRICT (%)

Focus groups discussion and semi-structured interviews to selected informants were also carried out, prior and after the questionnaires administration; they allowed gathering qualitative information, which were used to cross-checking and interpretation of questionnaire data.

SECTION 1

FINDINGS OF THE FARMERS' SURVEY

Farmers' characteristics and importance of agriculture



an important human capital is involved in farming

The 489 interviewed farmers were also main farmer and the breadwinner of their households. Out of this, 61 were women⁵ who, for reasons due to the conflict, replaced their men, in a temporary or permanent way, as main farmer of their family.

Farmers' average age is 42 years for men and 36 for women, showing that the majority of farms are led by fully active adults. More than 80% of them are between 26 and 59 years old. Only 15% exceed 60 years and very few are the farmers younger than 25 years (Table 2)

Only one fourth of male farmers is illiterate, this percentage increases to over 50% for women farmers. The majority got primary and preparatory/secondary school degrees, with 8% who got university degree too (30 men and 3 women).

Almost all farmers are married and with families. The family composition reveals the existence of an important human and social capital in the rural areas. In prevalence, families have between 4-9 members and significant is the presence of families with more than 9 members (67), out of these 6 led by a woman.

The analysis of the age categories within families confirms the important features of the farmers' families. Active adults, between 26 and 59 years, are the most present one, followed by the youngest generation, boys and girls between 0 and 14 years, by youths between 15 and 25 years. Elders, generally, are few in numbers.

⁵ This number does not represent the average presence of women head of farm. The survey has particularly look for female head of farm in the surveyed villages.

TABLE 2 - SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWED FARMERS

	M		F		Total	
	n.	%	n.	%	n.	%
Age						
0-14	-	-	-	-	-	-
15-25	12	3%	1	2%	13	3%
26-59	356	83%	49	80%	405	83%
≥ 60	60	14%	11	18%	71	15%
Total	428	100%	61	100%	489	100%
Education						
illiterate/read&write	101	24%	33	54%	134	27%
primary	125	29%	10	16%	135	28%
preparatory & secondary	164	38%	15	25%	179	37%
university	38	9%	3	5%	41	8%
Total	428	100%	61	100%	489	100%
Marital status						
married	424	99%	57	93%	481	98%
not married	4	1%	4	7%	8	2%
Total	428	100%	61	100%	489	100%
Household size						
1-3 members	35	8%	7	11%	42	9%
4-6 members	166	39%	29	48%	195	40%
7-9 members	166	39%	19	31%	185	38%
≥ 10 members	61	14%	6	10%	67	14%
Total	428	100%	61	100%	489	100%

Some families are unfortunately experiencing members' flows for reasons related to the conflict. Around 25% of the HHs is hosting children and youths that come from other families and districts. Similarly, families experienced human loss, mainly regarding youth and adults who left or died (Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.).

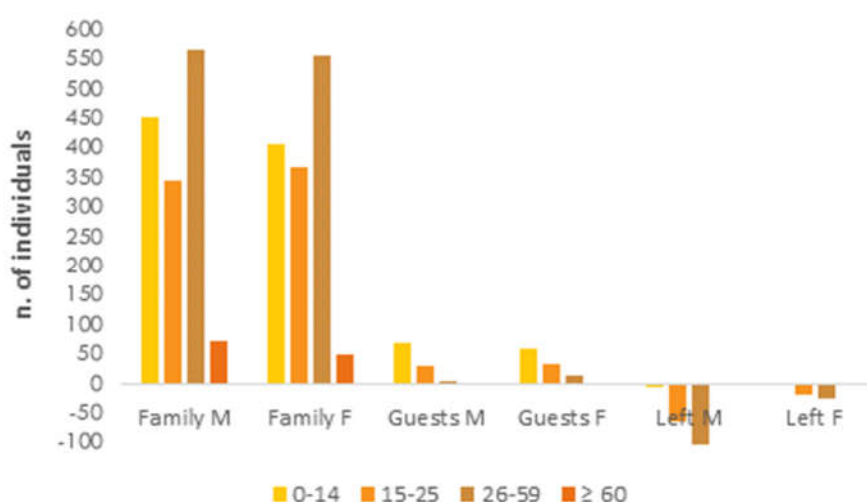


FIGURE 4 - HH COMPOSITION (N. INDIVIDUALS) PER SEX AND AGE CATEGORY, THE HEAD AND TYPE (FAMILY MEMBERS, TEMPORARY GUESTS AND INDIVIDUALS LEFT), 2016

Focus groups with farmers revealed that there are large numbers of displaced people, hosted in camps or dispersed in the areas, in search of means of subsistence. Sometimes farmers host entire

migrant families and it is common that their families lost important male members, in particular the ‘father who died in the conflict or has been detained, disabled, injured, or has emigrated’.

Regarding sex distribution, in general there is a quite balanced presence of males and females, within young and adult categories. An exception is represented by women-led families where adult and elder women prevail on men (Figure 5).

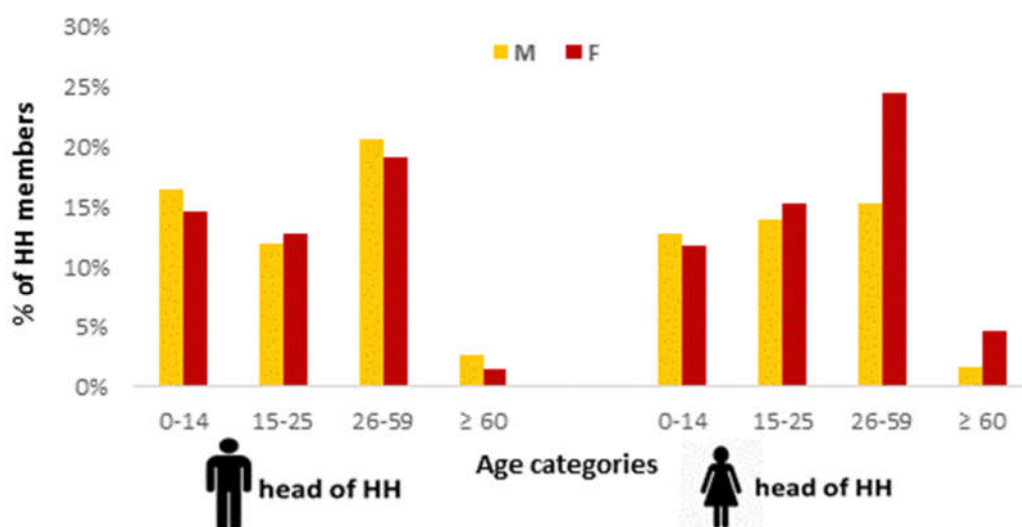


FIGURE 5 - HH MEMBERS (%) PER SEX AND AGE CATEGORY IN MALE- AND FEMALE- HEADED HHS

agriculture is the main source of livelihoods for farmers' families

Around 80% of the respondents say that in the last 3 years farming has been the main source of incomes for their families (**Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.**).

The relevance of the data is remarked by the fact that around 50% of farmers say that families do not have other significant sources of income outside their farms (**Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.**). In addition, the majority of farmers with off-farm incomes (25% of the total sample) say that these incomes come from family members working for other farmers and farms, which further shows the importance of agriculture for rural families.

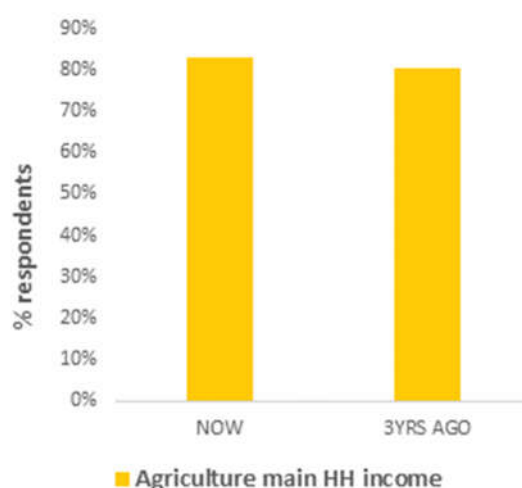


FIGURE 6 - AGRICULTURE AS MAIN HH INCOME SOURCE: PRESENT VS 3YRS AGO COMPARISON (% RESPONDENTS)

It is also worth to mention that, among other off-farm income generating activities, waged manual labour in other sectors results quite important too, while less relevant seem other sources, such as small business activities, clerical work, remittances and pensions.

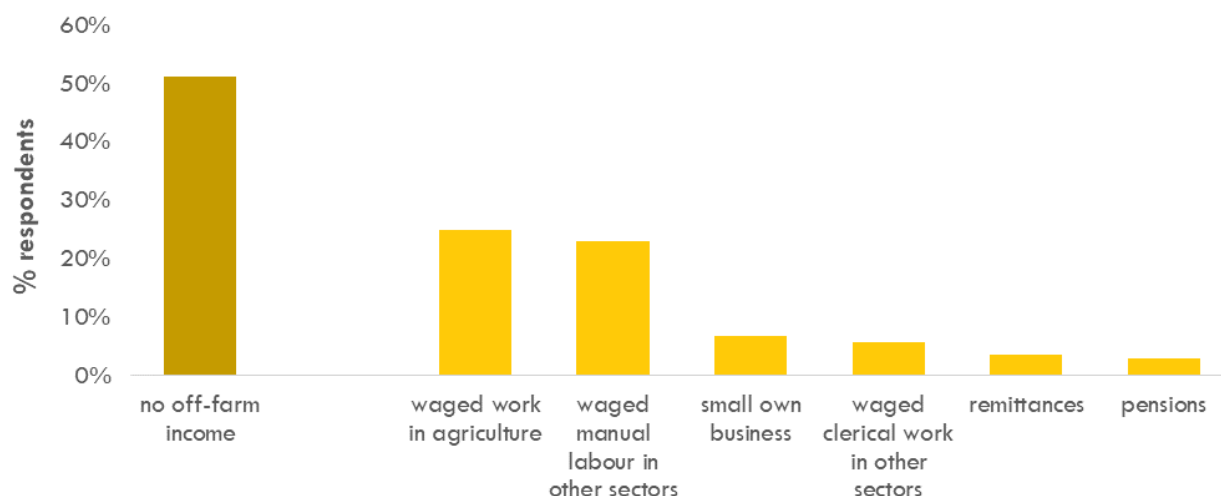


FIGURE 7 - HH OFF-FARM INCOME SOURCES (% RESPONDENTS)

Although a detailed farming analysis is dedicated in the following paragraph to *Farms, Crops and Livestock*, **Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.** anticipates the importance for the families of different farm activities.

In particular it shows the strong engagement in farming of all the family members. Data do not reveal responsibilities and time spent on the different activities, but indicate that men and women are highly involved in all the activities, certainly with complementary roles. Boys and girls (up to 15 years old) are also consistently involved in farming, with a smooth prevalence of boys.

There is a low share of families who makes also some on-farm processing of agricultural products in which the role of women and girls is predominant over the men and boys' one.

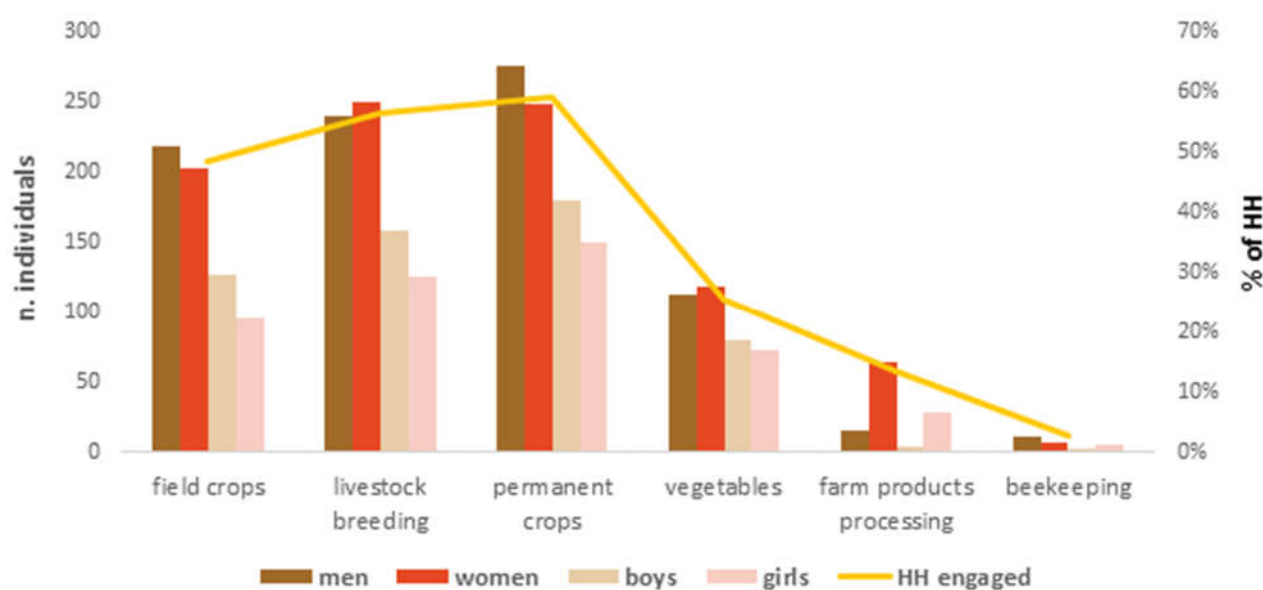


FIGURE 8 - ENGAGEMENT IN AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES OF HH (%) AND HH MEMBERS (N.) PER SEX AND AGE CATEGORY

Farms, crops and livestock



prevalence of small farms with poor assets

The portfolio of agricultural activities highlights that almost two-thirds of farms have mixed activities, keeping both crops and animals, one-third only crops, very few only livestock (**Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.**). These figures suggest that cropping is the most relevant activity for farmers, confirmed by the fact that almost all the farmers said they are cultivating the totality of their farmland and that animal, as described below, are few in numbers.

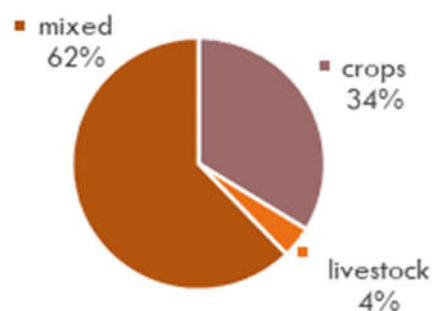


FIGURE 9 - FARM TYPES (%)

Farmlands are generally very small. More than 70% of the interviewed farmers own no more than 4ha of land, with a predominance of smallholders with up to 1ha. The remaining part has land between 4 and 10ha size. There is also a minority of farmers owning more than 10 ha, whose holdings, alone, represent 27% of the total cultivated area in the sample (**Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.**).

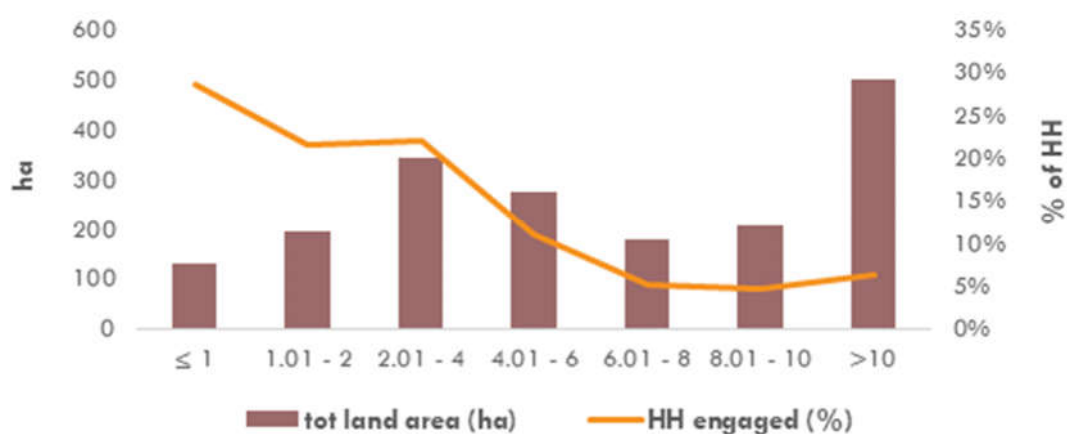


FIGURE 10 - LAND AREA (HA) AND HH (%) DISTRIBUTION PER FARM SIZE CATEGORY

Around 62% of farmers report that their farm endowments are very poor and limited to small scale equipment for farming. However, 25% of farmers own tractors, used in the last 3 years; this may indicate they can access spare parts and machinery maintenance services.

It is worth to highlight that a consistent part of farmers (around 50%) say that they have irrigated land. 66 of them have wells that worked in the last 3 years and probably other farmers are sourcing water from irrigation schemes that were not identified by the survey.

Discussion with key informants reported that nowadays there is a significant lack of agricultural machineries, especially tractors, cultivators, seed drills and harvesting machineries. There is a lack of spare parts and most of the machineries need maintenance. In addition, the majority of wells in the area stopped working mainly due to the high operating costs, in particular the cost of fuel.

Regarding livestock endowments, these appear very poor too and mostly represented by structures for animal recovery, simple fenced areas or covered structures.

*basic crops are wheat and olive trees...
vegetables add, where water is available*

Looking at crops, wheat and olive trees confirm to be, markedly, the most cultivated and preferred by farmers in the surveyed areas, both in terms of invested area and HHs engagement. Significant is also the share of farmers whose choices fall on barley and black cumin. Less diffused is the cultivation of pulses (lentil and chickpeas). A share of farms, certainly the one having access to irrigation water, is investing on horticultural crops that include potato and a range of vegetables (Figure 11).

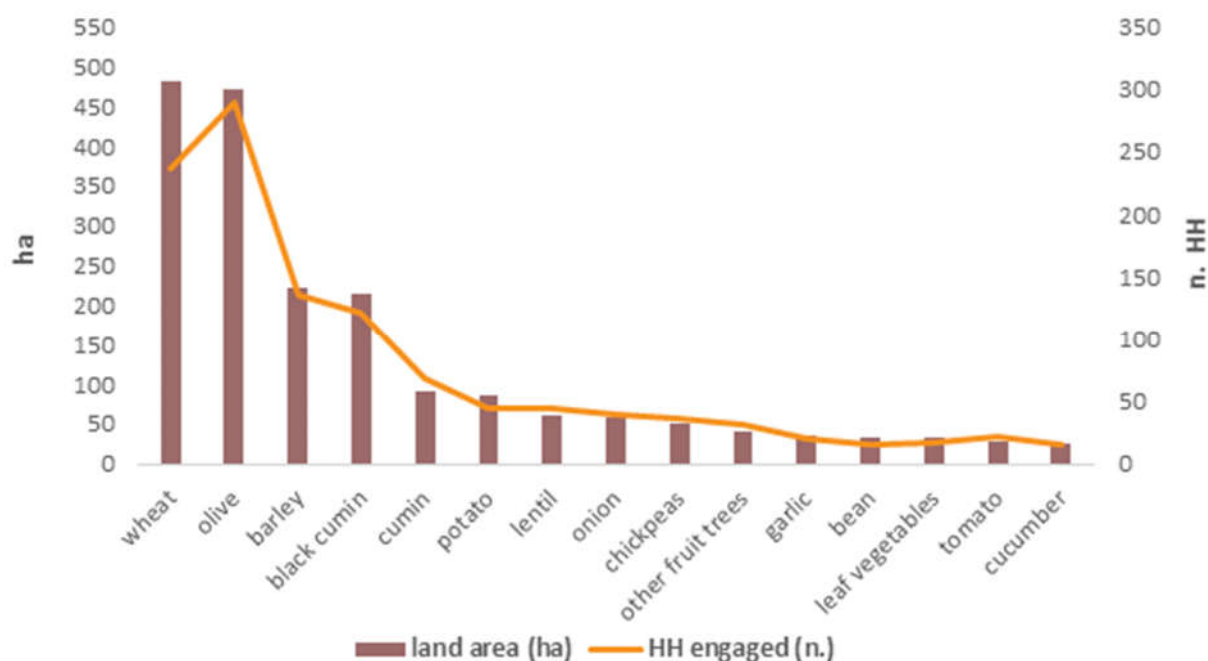


FIGURE 11 - LAND USE (HA) AND HH ENGAGEMENT (n.) PER CROP

The analysis of changes in cultivation patterns (12 months for crops, 36 months for trees) (Figure 12) shows how, for the most important crops (wheat and olive trees), HHs engagement and invested surfaces remain mostly unchanged (a small reduction for wheat land area), thus keeping their relevance in the farms activities.

In focus groups, some farmers and key informants report that wheat cultivation has declined due to high production costs, shortage of seeds, lack of markets, in particular in Afrin for the siege of the areas. For olive trees too they report some problems mostly related to cutting of trees for heating purposes and damages caused by airstrikes.

Farmers are also showing an increased interest in barley and pulses, probably because these crops are more resistant to the recurrent droughts that in recent times have heavily penalized rainfed cultivations. A certain part of farmers has also significantly engaged in horticultural crops, in particular in different kinds of vegetables, as a consequence of the availability of water for irrigation, the existence of local demand, the need or opportunity for farmers to generate fast incomes.

Opposite is the trend for black cumin where data record a reduction in particular in terms of surfaces (minus 25%), condition that may be linked to the lack of favourable markets and/or the need of farmers to orient their attention on crops more important for the family's immediate needs.

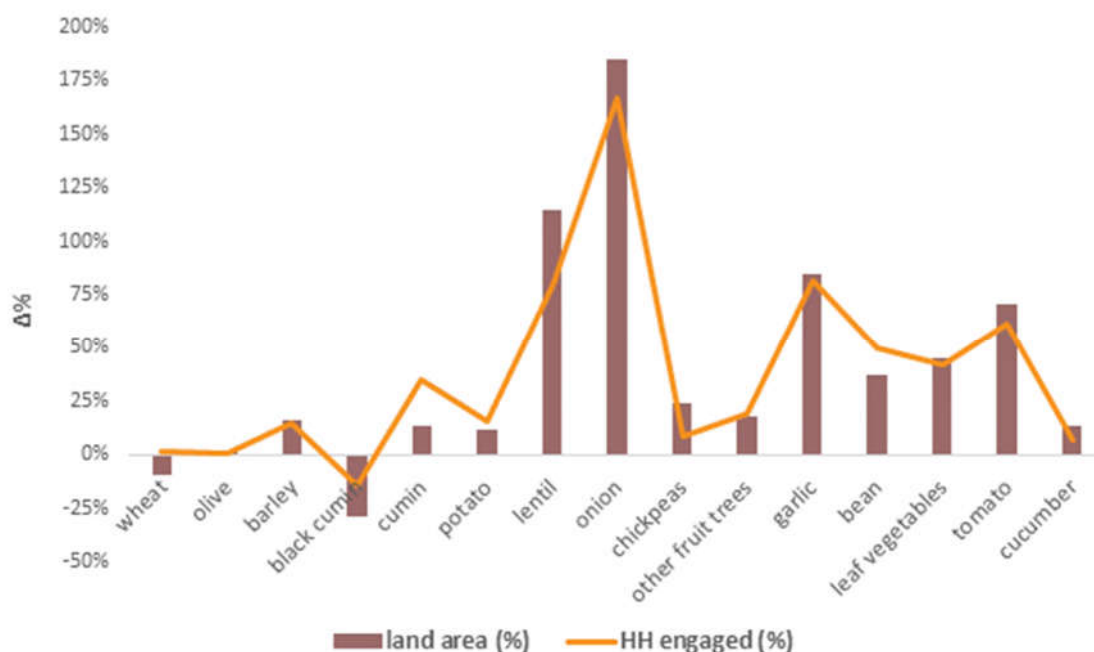


FIGURE 12 - LAST YEAR (2016) CHANGES (%) IN LAND USE AND HH ENGAGEMENT PER CROP

sheep breeding, the most diffused and the most affected

Regarding livestock, numbers confirm that farmers keep few animals, sufficient to provide basic foodstuff (dairy products, and eggs) and exchangeable assets in case of need.

Sheep is the most important livestock species held by almost 50% of interviewed farmers (Figure 13) (almost the totality of farmers who keep animals), with flocks varying from 10 to 30 heads. Poultry follow with around 25% of respondents saying that they keep from 10 to 25 chickens. Goats are less common in the analysed sample, and held by around 10% of the farmers (6-10 heads flocks), while very few farmers keep cows, 1 or 2 heads in numbers. At the time of the survey beekeeping resulted as an activity not common among farmers.

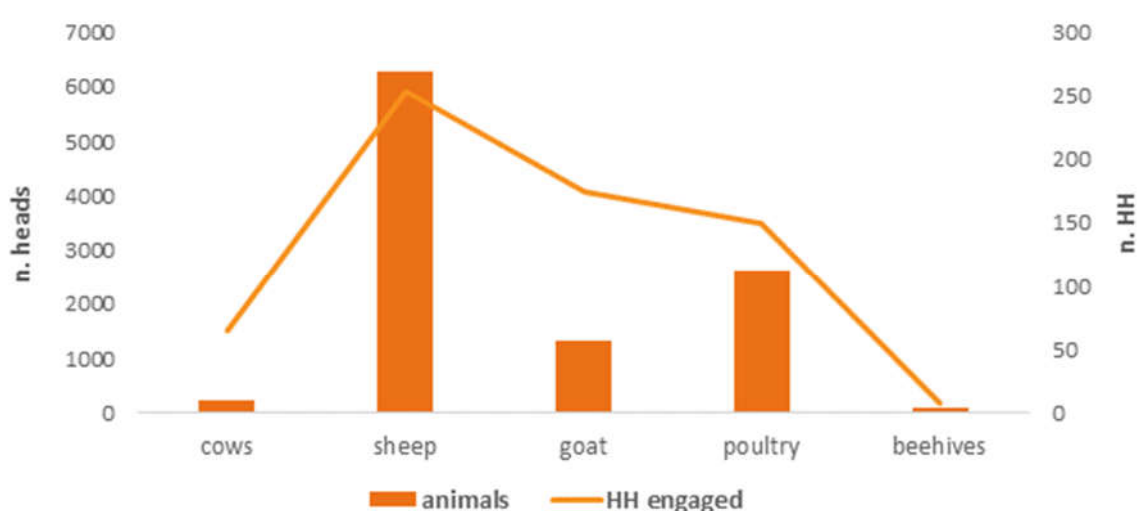


FIGURE 13 - LIVESTOCK NUMBERS (N.) AND HH ENGAGEMENT PER SPECIES

Analysing changes in the last 36 months (Figure 14), it comes out that farmers have significantly reduced the numbers of sheep per farms (minus 25%), but they did not disengage from the activity. The same happened for goats, even if reductions in numbers are much lower. Farmers' disengagement is more evident in the case of cows and beehives. For poultry, on the contrary, to a small increase of farmers' engagement correspond a marked fall of chickens. This data may be conditioned by the fact that the interview included farmers who had commercial poultry farms and that dismantled or downsized the activity).

For livestock too focus groups confirm the declining in animal numbers, highlighting important losses for cattle. Farmers sold animals due to difficulties in getting access to fodder and other food staff, and for the need to get money for meeting urgent family needs.

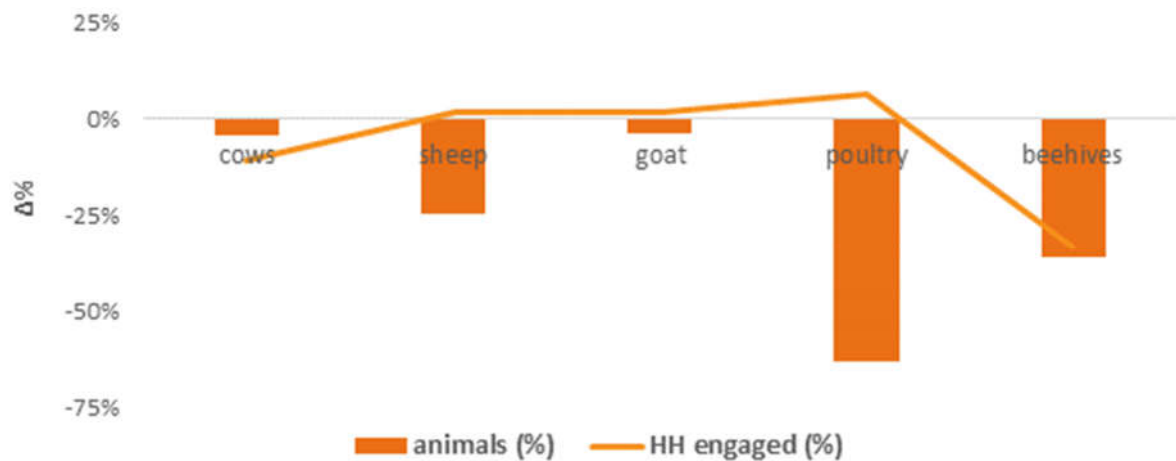


FIGURE 14 - LAST YEAR (2016) CHANGES (%) IN LIVESTOCK NUMBERS PER SPECIES

Agriculture inputs and services



lack of inputs or lack of money?

Regarding inputs for crops, chemicals are the most required one, together with fertilizers, indicated as the main needed input by around 90% of the respondents. The need for seeds is expressed by around 50% of farmers, and a similar share indicates the need of fuel, for the agricultural machineries functioning.

In focus groups farmers identify also the difficulties they face in particular for accessing services for land preparation and harvest mechanization and say that '*minimal service is done for crops, ploughing one instead of three, sowing and harvesting manually for the lack of machineries*'.

For livestock, most breeders blame the problems in the access to foodstuff and to medicines and veterinarian services, aside the difficulties to access and find grazing areas. Focus groups with farmers have confirmed these needs and highlighted some differences. For instance, in Atarib they say that veterinarian services are available but are not easily affordable, while in the other districts there is a substantial lack. On the contrary, all express the need of specific services, such as the artificial inseminations for cows.

Only 10% say that the lack of the required input in the market is their main problem for inputs access. On the contrary, most of them say that the main problem is the availability of financial resources, in particular the lack of cash to buy inputs, the high inputs prices, to a less extend the lack of credit.

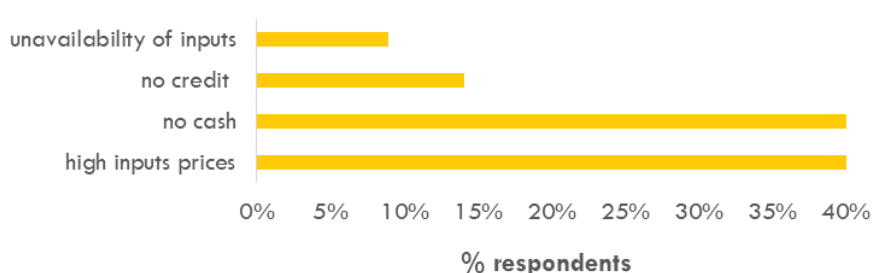


FIGURE 15 - PROBLEMS IN ACCESS TO AGRICULTURAL INPUTS (% RESPONDENTS)

local market actors are the main channels for inputs access

Small middlemen, local shops, local traders are identified by farmers as key market actors facilitating access to agricultural inputs (Figure 16). One fourth of respondents acknowledge an

important role played by NGOs and humanitarian programs. Other actors, that include local councils, farmers organizations, processors and traders, are perceived as less relevant.

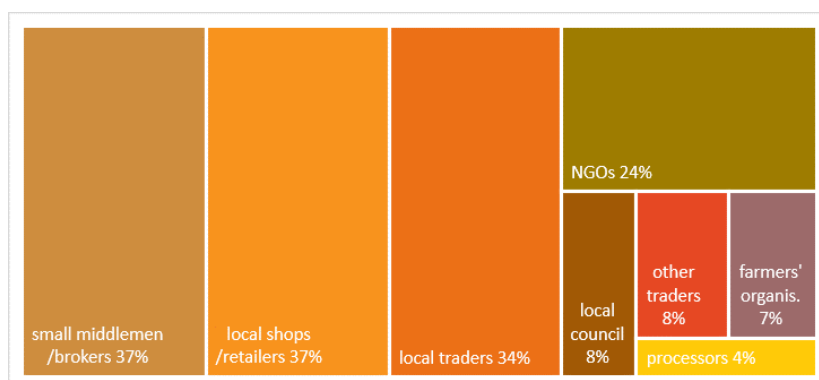


FIGURE 16 - ACTORS FACILITATING ACCESS TO AGRICULTURAL INPUTS (% RESPONDENTS)

Figure 17 gives details about the main input providers in relation to input types. Local market actors confirm their importance in supplying the majority of inputs (chemicals, seeds/seedlings, fodders and animal treatments and fuel). NGOs are relevant in providing seeds, fertilizers, fodders and veterinarian services. Farmers themselves play an important role in supplying seeds/seedlings, which indicate farmers play a non-secondary role in seeds multiplication and nursery activities, and in granting access to water, presumably provided by farmers who hold wells for irrigation.



FIGURE 17 - OUTLETS FOR AGRICULTURAL INPUTS (% RESPONDENTS)

The analysis of the farmer-to-farmer relationships, although revealing that the majority of farmers is not giving or receiving any support from other farmers, inform that a minor but significant share of farmers engage with other farmers, in particular for help in farming operations, access to inputs and credit.

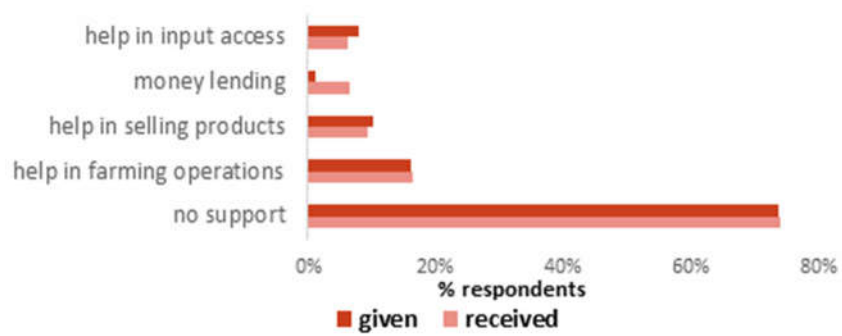


FIGURE 18 - TYPES OF GIVEN & RECEIVED SUPPORT BETWEEN FARMERS (% RESPONDENTS)

Agricultural products markets



products do have markets

As seen in the previous paragraph (*Agriculture inputs and services*), agriculture is the major source of incomes for farmers' families, and all farmers say they sell their crops and animal products in the local markets.

Their main challenges are not the absence of buyers, neither have they identified insecurity and poor road conditions as main limiting factors. The main problems are the high costs for products transport and the low selling prices (Figure 19).

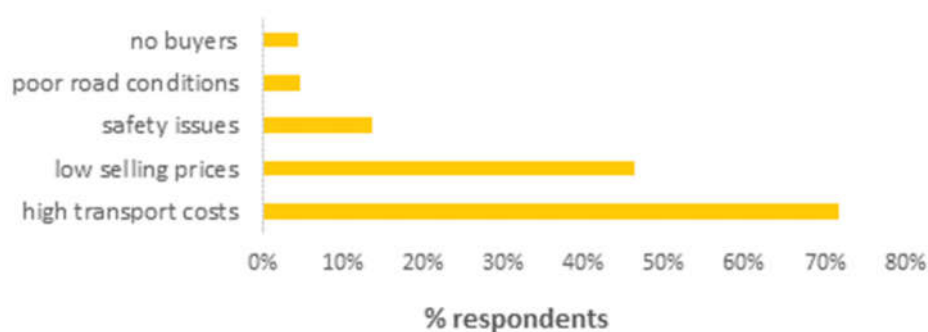


FIGURE 19 - PROBLEMS IN ACCESS TO MARKET FOR AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS (% RESPONDENTS)

middlemen are the key products traders

As for inputs, for farm products too, farmers perceive local small traders as key facilitators to market access, in particular the middlemen, followed by local traders and shops/retailers. Other actors that include other traders, NGOs, local councils and processors are less relevant.



FIGURE 20 - ACTORS FACILITATING ACCESS TO MARKET FOR AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS (% RESPONDENTS)

Looking at the main agricultural products' categories, middlemen/brokers are confirmed as a very important channel for marketing grains (cereals and pulses), fruits (olives) and animal products. Local shops and retailers are important actors in the selling of vegetables, fruits, and animal products. The direct selling to consumers is also common, in particular for animal products and vegetables. Direct selling of farmers to processors is almost absent. This does not imply the absence of processors, that may get products from different suppliers, for instance through middlemen and local traders.

The majority of products' transactions are at the field level, where traders go to control and buy products. Some farmers report that they usually bulk their products together with other farmers and share costs to bring these to market places.

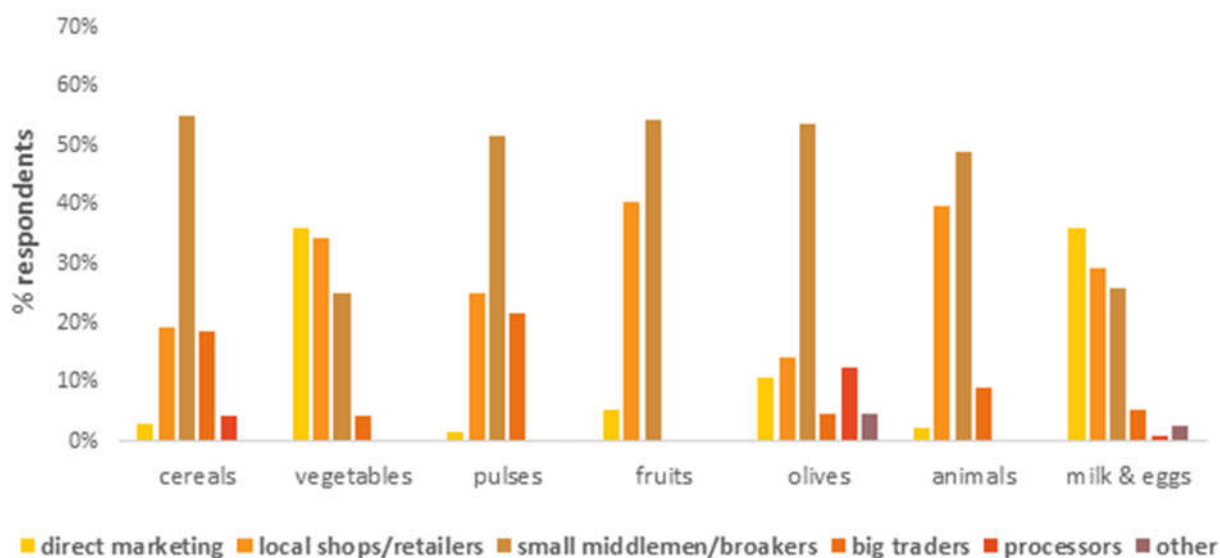


FIGURE 21 - OUTLETS FOR AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS (% RESPONDENTS)

Challenges and strategies



a stressing and unstable context

In general terms, the conflict is determining several stresses on farmers and on their families and data were collected that represent this situation. For instance, 85% of respondent farmers said that they are facing severe declines of incomes since the outset of the conflict, and, as seen in section 1.1, they frequently lose important family members or are hosting refugees. Shortage of specific food items, in particular of meat, is also very common, and 33% of families have experienced significant problems in access to food and even hungry periods.

Furthermore, focus groups inform that at the household level, families are suffering for the absence of drinking water that need to be purchased and transported with tanks, and for the lack of electricity, unless they do have the capacity to get and keep working generators. Conditions are very harsh and many families left. Other families decided to stay because 'they do not want to leave or do not have another place where to go or do not have money for facing displacement'. Some families come back also 'because they cannot stay as migrants'.

Certainly, farming remains a challenging activity and farmers say definitely that, in the last 12 months, the main constraint in crop cultivation was the lack of rain, followed by the lack of irrigation water. Positive is the fact that a significant part (almost 35%) says not to have been affected by any negative event, and that less than 10% report that their farm activity was conditioned by the unfavourable socio-economic context created by the conflict (unavailability of inputs, risks for land management, unable to prepare land or harvest crops). This maybe an indication that the conflict context, nowadays, is not a factor discouraging farmers' activities.

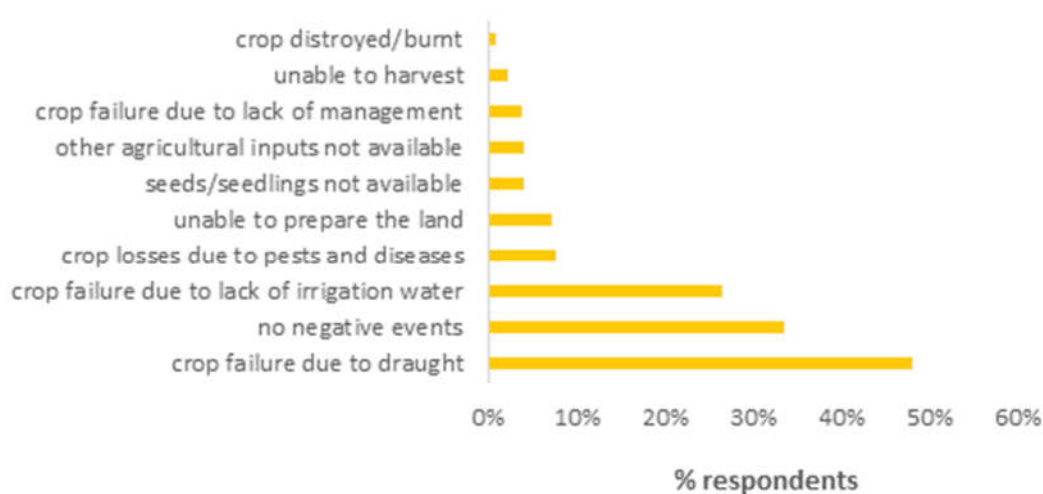


FIGURE 22 - LAST YEAR (2016) NEGATIVE EVENTS EXPERIENCED ON CROPS (% RESPONDENTS)

For livestock too is positive that 30% of respondents say that there were no significant negative events affecting livestock rearing, even if, about 60% is suffering for the lack of foodstuff and for the difficulties to access grazing areas, and around 25% experienced animal diseases outbreaks. Fortunately, only a small share lost animals due to killing or thefts.

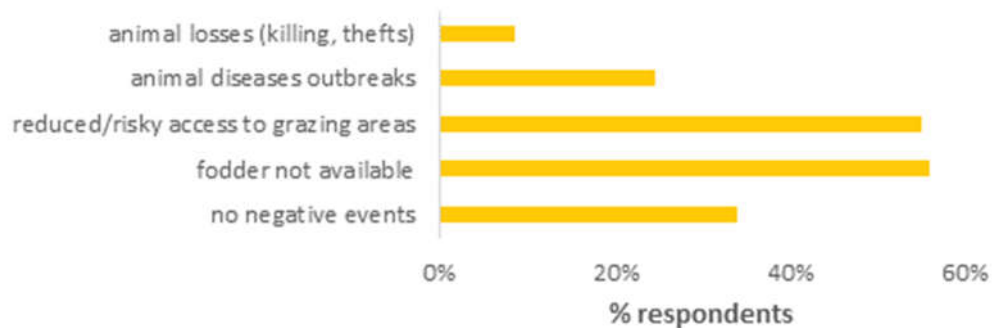


FIGURE 23 - LAST YEAR (2016) NEGATIVE EVENTS EXPERIENCED ON LIVESTOCK (% RESPONDENTS)

farming adapted, not abandoned

Reassuring is the fact that in the last 12 months there is not a significant downsizing of the agricultural activities. The great majority of farmers reveal they did not change their agricultural portfolio and their practices, and very few are the farmers who decided to exit from agriculture.

Limited is also the number of farmers who, with the aim of reducing costs and risks, are changing agricultural practices. There is also a small number of farmers shifting their interest towards more secure/profitable agricultural activities.

It is important to highlight that, in the last year, more than 10% of respondent breeders increased their number of animals.

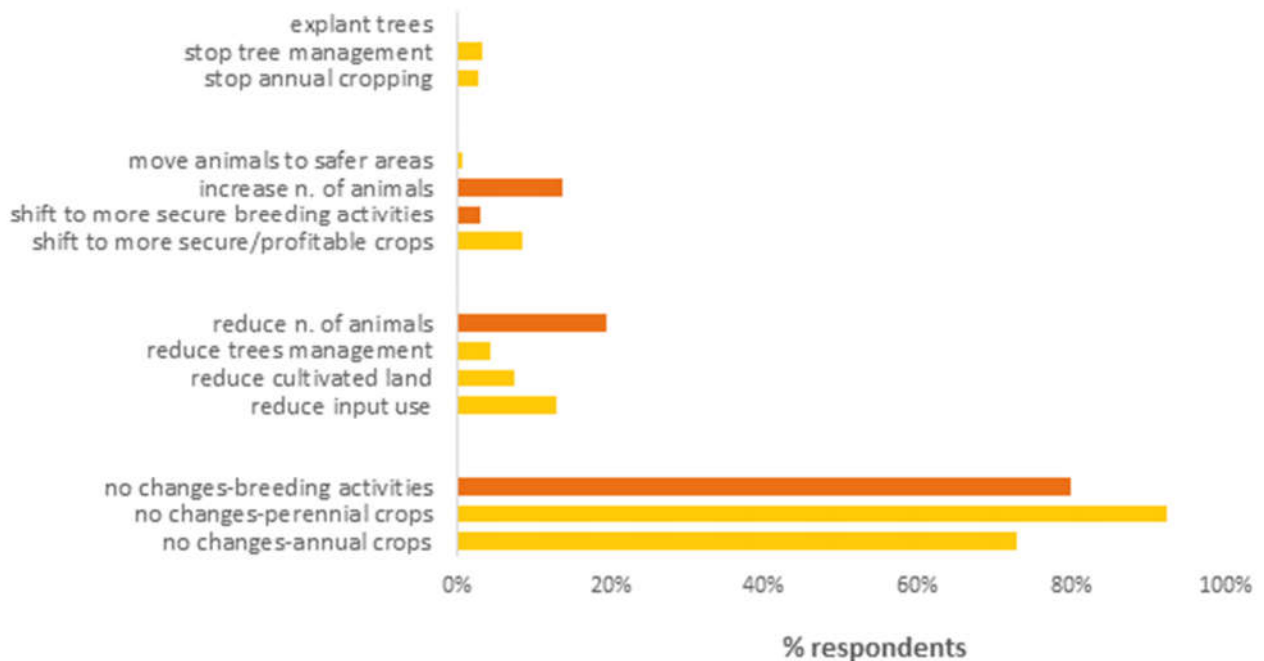


FIGURE 24 - LAST YEAR (2016) CHANGES MADE ON CROP AND LIVESTOCK MANAGEMENT (% RESPONDENTS)

The above considerations are somehow confirmed by the plans of farmers for the next future. The great majority is not planning variations and very few are thinking to abandon agriculture or want to decrease the cultivated area or the number of animals.

The interest on agriculture is also confirmed by a 10% of the respondents who are thinking to diversify their activities in favour of more secure/profitable crops, and by more than 25% of breeders who are planning to increase the number of animals.

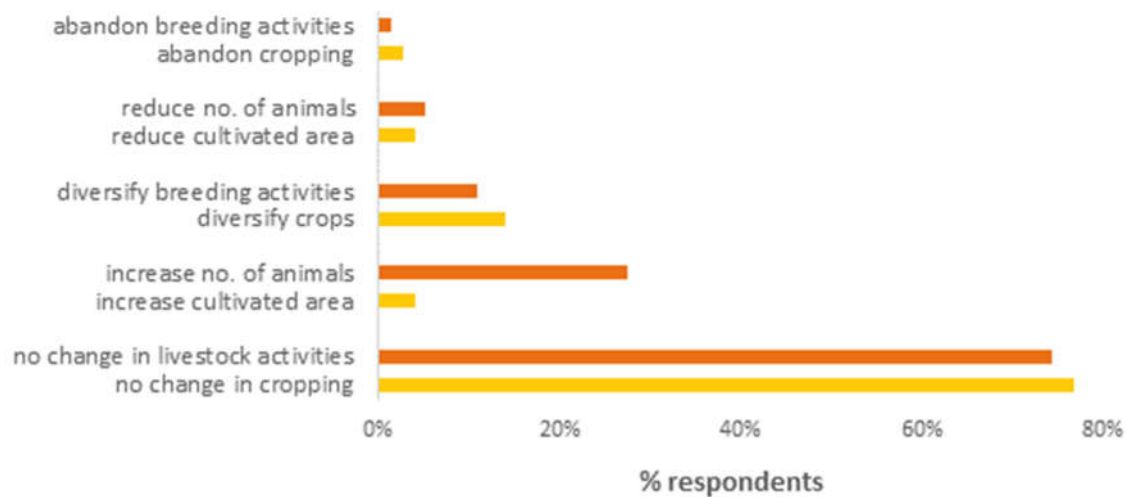


FIGURE 25 - FUTURE PLANS ON CROPS AND LIVESTOCK MANAGEMENT (% RESPONDENTS)

SECTION 2

FINDINGS OF WOMEN'S SURVEY

Rural women's individual survey: respondents' characteristics



Most respondents, in all districts, fall in the age group (26-59). Illiteracy is quite widespread, clearly more in the old generation than in the younger one. At the same time, an important share of respondents achieved at least the primary level of education, much fewer respondents reported to have a secondary school or university degree (Figure 26).

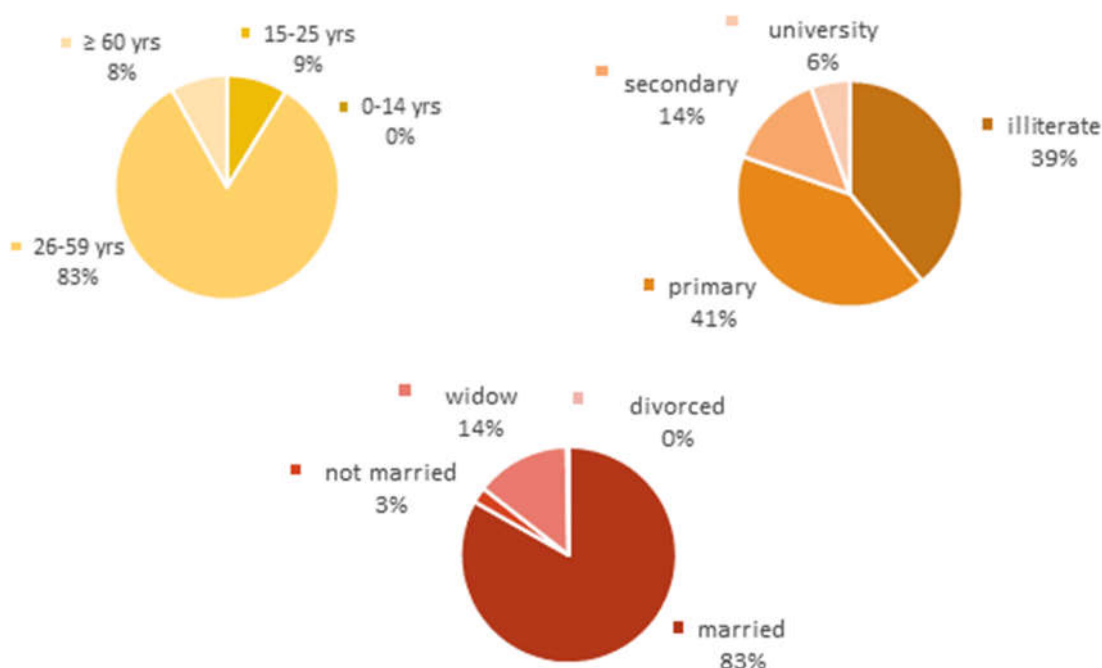


FIGURE 26 - SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN RESPONDENTS: AGE, EDUCATION, MARITAL STATUS (%)

As for marital status, most respondents are married. Widows represent the second most important category; unmarried or divorced women are very few in the respondents' group (Figure 26).

Early marriage does not appear to be a largely widespread practice in the surveyed group, yet, 16% of respondents reported it for their own household and some local informants expressed concern for an observed increase of cases due to the worsening of households' economic situation.

Given the ongoing conflict, women denounced the worsening of infrastructure and service conditions in all surveyed areas with substantial differences between districts.

According to local informants, water scarcity and power cuts, in particular, have significantly *'increased the physical burden of domestic activities that women have to carry out manually like heating water to shower or wash, washing clothes and dishes by hand, or using a charcoal iron'* (local informants in Atarib).

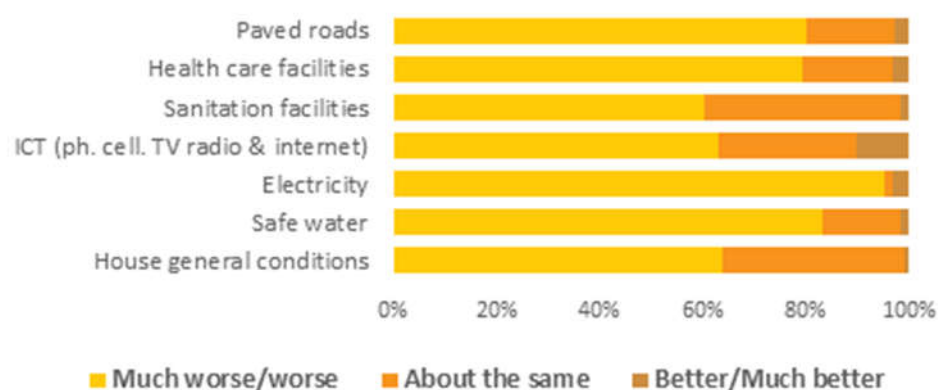


FIGURE 27 - LAST YEAR (2016) CHANGES IN INFRASTRUCTURE & SERVICE (% RESPONDENTS)

Women play a crucial role in survival of agriculture and rural families



Due to the difficult economic situation resulting from the conflict, women significantly ‘share the economic burden of the family’ (local informant in Atarib) and have crucially increased their involvement in economic activities. They have increased their contribution as household breadwinners ‘since everything is expensive and if she doesn’t help with income life becomes even more difficult’ (local informant in Afrin). Some women, more than 30% of respondents, also declared to have sold their gold and precious belongings in recent times to be able to meet family’s needs.

Bringing money to fulfil family needs is now a priority, for many husbands too, especially in contexts where conflict has drastically reduced men’s mobility. To what extent such a contingent priority is making women’s multiple contributions more visible and breaking the stereotypical division between men as breadwinners and women as family caretakers remains to be further investigated.

In surveyed areas women appear to be deeply involved in agricultural family businesses.

Olives and vegetables are the most mentioned crops (Figure 28). ‘Women prefer to grow vegetables instead of field crops because vegetables give continuous income for daily expenses and daily family needs, though it is tied to availability and access to water and the cost of fuel. Vegetables are easily marketed among neighbours or in the village markets’ (local informant in Atarib).

Sheep and goats, followed by poultry, are the most diffused animal rearing activities managed by women.

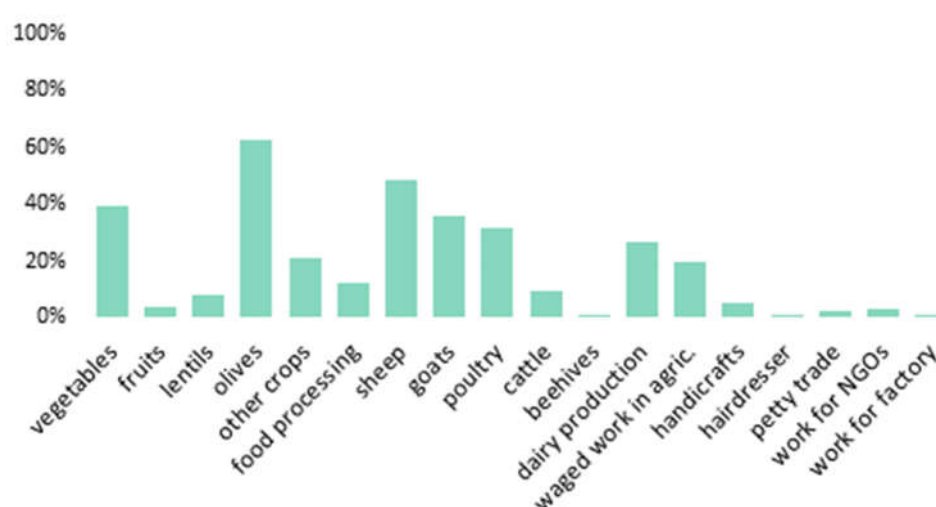


FIGURE 28 - CROP FARMING, LIVESTOCK BREEDING & OTHER ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT BY WOMEN (% RESPONDENTS)

While crop farming and animal rearing are carried out by men and women together, food processing is essentially a 'woman's job'. At the same time, not so many women, overall, reported to be involved in food processing activities. The preparation of seasonal home-made preserves (molasses, jams, etc.) - the 'mouneh' - can be challenging for various reasons: high price of raw materials, especially sugar, power cuts and high price of fuel used for cooking. Moreover, before the conflict many women used to buy such preserves from the shop and not all of them learnt from their mothers how to make them (local informant in Afrin). Food processing also includes dairy activities (yoghurt, cheese) carried out individually, at home where animals are reared, or as a group business too.

Not only do women help their husbands on family land, they also often work as waged seasonal labourers in others' agricultural land, often big farms, relying on transport arrangement to and from the fields. 'Male doesn't work on others' land' (local informant in Atarib). For rural women, in some contexts more than for men, waged work in agriculture represents another possible source of income.

A few women appear to be involved in non-farm activities. It is another way to contribute to the household income. Some women run small or micro individual businesses like handicraft activities (wool production, weaving, sewing), petty trade or hairdressing. Literate women may get the chance to work for international donors, local NGOs and women's associations or privately provide educational or healthcare services.

Anyway, women carry out their activities mostly on family land, at home or in a place nearby. The number of women engaged in work outside home still remains quite limited. Agricultural work carried out by women is essentially seasonal while their engagement in animal rearing is reportedly more regular and continuous. Dairy activities and food processing are mostly a daily occupation due to the need of processing fresh milk and to the variety of fruits and vegetables preserves that can be made all through the year.

Even though a significant amount of work carried out by women remains unpaid family work, various respondents also reported being paid for (or earning money from) their work carried out in the agricultural family business. Waged work in agriculture is clearly paid work when carried out 'outside home' on other farmers' agricultural fields. In some cases women also help close neighbours with their agricultural works getting food in exchange or help, in their turn, when needed (Figure 29).

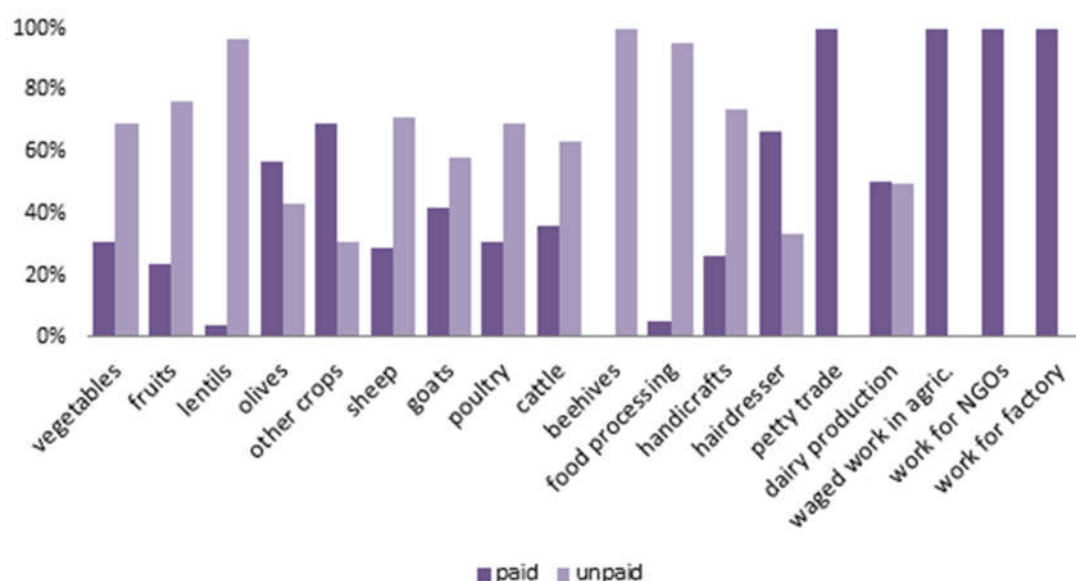


FIGURE 29 - WOMEN'S PAID AND UNPAID WORK IN CROP FARMING, LIVESTOCK BREEDING & OTHER ACTIVITIES (% RESPONDENTS)

Products and services generated through women's non-farm businesses and their waged work also normally bring money for the family, with the exception of home-made food preserves and pickles produced for self-consumption (representing a significant share) and sewing work performed for family members. Unsurprisingly, agricultural produce and livestock are both sold and self-consumed. Many respondents reported to be engaged in market relations from home or at the local market (Figure 30). At the same time, dealing with traders and customers is not a regular practice for women in the surveyed areas, where women do not generally interact with non-related men (Galilè et al. 2013)⁶. *'Male family members or close neighbours normally go to the souk to sell products'* (local informant in Idleb).

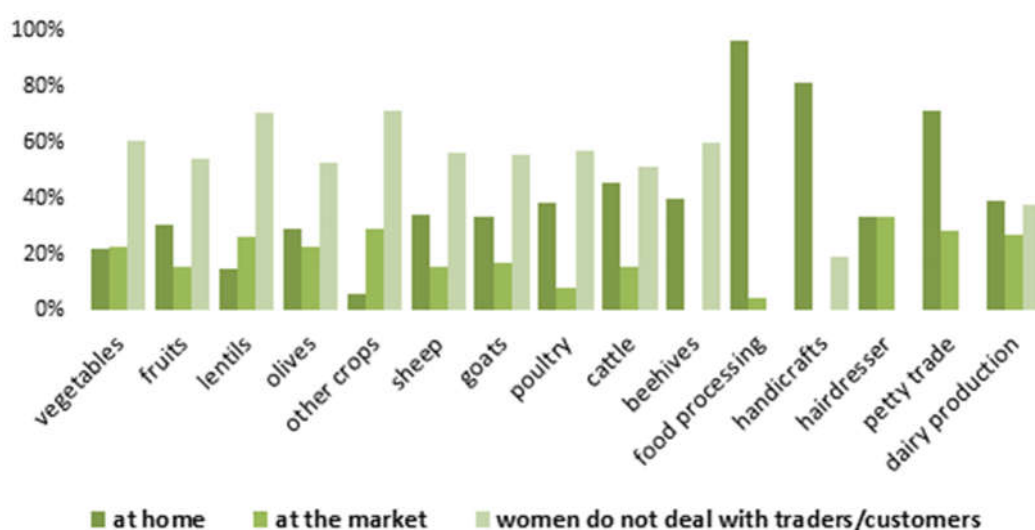


FIGURE 30 - WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN AND LOCATION FOR MARKETING OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS (% RESPONDENTS)

Agricultural and livestock enterprises were essentially part of rural women's life even before the conflict. Agricultural and livestock activities on family land are safe - critically important in present conflict times - and leave them time for their household duties, less in the case of animal breeding which is considered more time-consuming. At the same time, the intense work required in agriculture on family's and others' fields as well as in animal husbandry is physically exhausting for women that, instead, do not complain about access to inputs or lack of technical knowledge, both clearly available (or perceived as available by women) within and through the family. In the case of waged work in agriculture and non-farm activities, women seem to value also other aspects, besides it being a source of continuous income and safety, like the opportunity to develop new relations, learn new things and independent decision-making about the use of money derived from such activities.

Despite the challenging living conditions, the fatigue of the agricultural work, their household chores and the diffused feelings of insecurity and instability due to the conflict, a number of women, about 20% of the sample, expressed the desire to plan for a better future.

⁶ Galilè, A., Jiggins, J. and Struik, P.C. (2013), women's identity as farmers: a case study from ten households in Syria. *NJAS-Wageningen Journal of Life Sciences*, (64-65), 25-33.

Plans to expand and improve family agriculture and livestock enterprises co-exist with women's employment and self-employment plans in different sectors, ranging from the opening of a clothes shop, a beauty salon or a language centre, to the creation of a handicraft workshop, teaching to children in kindergartens or offering (and training to provide) nursing services. Some women also mentioned the interest in contributing to women's association projects. Overall, women expressed the need either to strengthen their existing skills or to widen their abilities, all quite pragmatic and reality grounded desires. Some shared simple personal dreams, like completing their own education, having children or children's marriage, build own house ...

Rural women, urgent needs and useful connections



To meet daily life challenges in the surveyed areas women receive support from local and international actors operating.

For basic needs, like food and cash, family ties remain almost exclusively the most important supportive relations (Figure 31). Close neighbours may quite be important too in case of need, also for help in agricultural works. As local informants interviewed in preliminary discussions reported, women usually ‘rely on female neighbours that get, in exchange, a daily share of vegetables or dairy products or, a share of the harvested products in case of wheat or lentils’ (local informant in Atarib). This is not surprising as exchange of work between neighbours represents a common practice in many Syrian rural areas (Galilè et al. 2013)⁶.

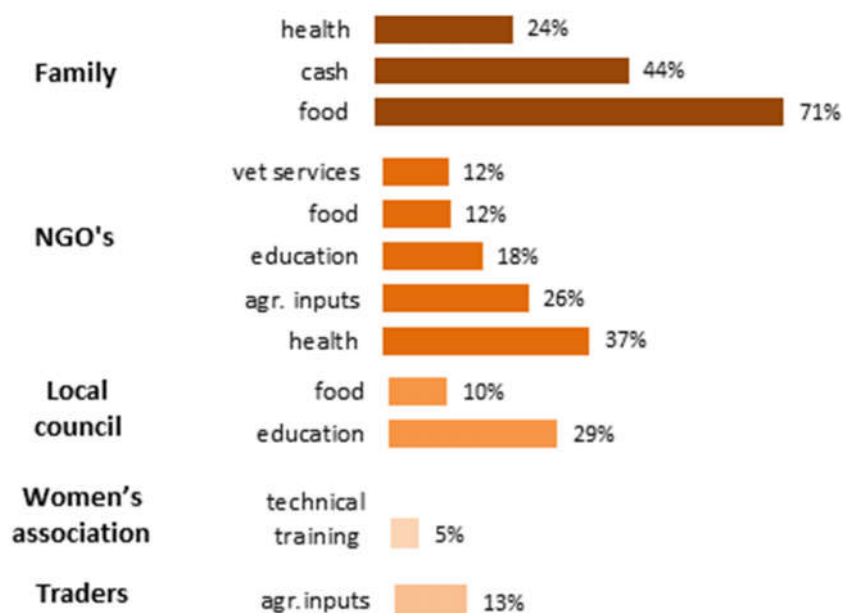


FIGURE 31 – ACTORS PROVIDING SUPPORT TO WOMEN IN MEETING BASIC AND AGRICULTURAL NEEDS (% RESPONDENTS)

NGOs are important providers of healthcare services together with healthcare units. Local Councils and NGOs play an important role in meeting food needs.

Concerning needs in agriculture and animal husbandry activity, NGOs and traders represent the most mentioned actors supporting women in access to farming inputs. ‘Local Council essentially operate as functional and institutional links between women beneficiaries and support programs. When women cannot go to Local Councils, NGOs visit them at home. Disadvantaged women (widows, women with disabled children get special support’ (local informant in Idleb). NGOs are also central for veterinary services.

Local Councils are important actors in providing education services together with NGOs, donors and some associations. Some NGOs operate through Local Councils, other work directly on the field.

It is worth noticing that support for technical training remains, instead, very scarce and it is mainly provided by women's associations and cooperatives. This confirms recent literature findings about women's limited access to formal sources of information, knowledge and experience, an unfortunate circumstance which, combined with women's confinement to domestic settings and geographical isolation of rural communities, prevents women's exposure to learning and skill development, reinforcing inequality and exclusion, despite the significant contribution that women provide in agriculture (Galiè 2013; Abdelali-Martini 2011).

Only 13% of respondents (n. 45) declared to be members of a women's association (Table 3)

TABLE 3 - WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS IN SURVEYED AREAS: LOCATION AND MEMBERSHIP

Women's association	District	n. respondents
Free woman association	Afrin	8
Sara	Afrin	4
Women's training and awareness association	Afrin	1
Staying alive	Atarib	20
Struggle of a woman	Atarib	2
Rural Women association in Kaferyahmol	Idlib	8
Other	-	2
Total	-	45

Besides the provision of technical training, women's association also appear to provide support for non-farm job opportunities for local women and group business ventures. Concerning the latter, though, according to local informants in the surveyed areas, 'collaboration' does not appear to be a regular practice beyond relations with family or close, trustworthy neighbours.

Work in women's associations may be important for rural women also in relational terms. The increased burden of household chores and their direct involvement in breadwinner activities leave no time for social life which is now limited to a few contacts and exchanges with family members and close neighbours, given also the high risk and cost of transport.

Work in (or for) a women's association may represent an opportunity out of geographical and social isolation; associations may offer spaces where women can start thinking of alternative paths of life, learn new skills, dialogue and, possibly, get progressively ready to negotiate new identities.

Attitudes towards women's new roles and responsibilities in conflict times



Women clearly play an important role in the household economy not only with their personal engagement in economic activities and their hard work but also through their influential participation to household decision-making. For many issues concerning household and children management, most women declared to take decisions, at least, on equal terms with husbands or, in his absence, with other male members of the family, *'if they help economically'* (local informant in Idleb). Cases of exclusive or very strong influence were also reported for certain issues. 'Crop and livestock management' & 'marketing' and 'purchase of durable goods' remain, instead, the areas where women reported to have less influence in decision-making. Common perception of women being less knowledgeable and experienced in agricultural matters contributes to explain such circumstances (Figure 32).

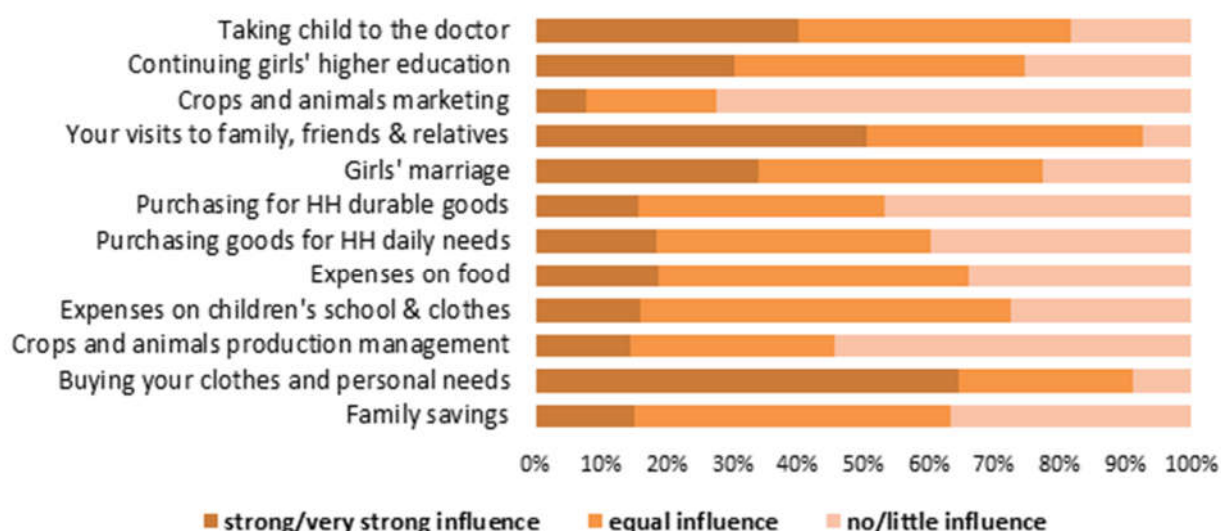


FIGURE 32 - WOMEN'S INFLUENCE ON DECISION-MAKING (% RESPONDENTS)

Only a few respondents stated that they have little or no influence at all in decisions about the use of the money derived from agricultural activities in which they are directly engaged. In most cases, instead, women take decisions alone or jointly with family men about how to use the money derived from household agricultural and livestock enterprises. They also declared to be able to decide about money coming from their waged work or non-farm activities.

As reported in other recent surveys conducted in Syrian conflict zones, women appear to be taking on new roles and responsibilities in everyday life, often even doing men's jobs. *'Her role has become as the man's one'*, confirmed local informants in the surveyed areas too. *'She is now responsible for many things, as for taking children to school or relatives' places or to the hospital'* (local informant in Idleb). In safer times, children could move alone and men's presence in daily routine was normal.

When explicitly asked their opinion about the truthfulness of such observed changes, a significant share of respondents (61%) agreed and expressed, to a certain extent, positive attitudes (Figure 33).

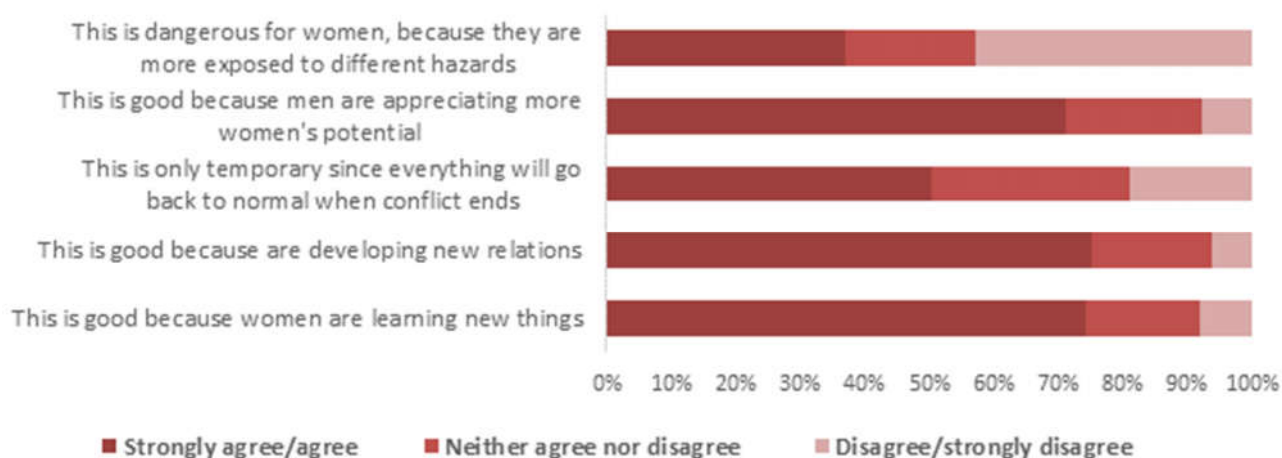


FIGURE 33 - WOMEN'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS NEW ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES (% RESPONDENTS)

More than 70% of the respondents who stated that women are indeed taking on new roles and responsibilities, also agreed on considering this a good chance to learn new things. An equal share of respondents agreed on seeing such changes also as an opportunity for women to develop new relations. Such an outward looking thinking seems to co-exist in the group with inward-looking considerations about the higher appreciation women are experiencing within family due to their new roles and responsibilities and their precious contribution: more than 70% of respondents expressed this opinion. At the same time, more than one third of respondents (37%) clearly also acknowledged the risks inevitably connected to women's exposure. Interestingly, 50% of the group tends to consider such changes only a temporary situation rather than part of a broader structural change in women's role. The overall situation appears to be perceived as very fluid and women's empowerment advances, if any, as rather contingent.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

interpreting the generated knowledge

- The survey, naturally, tells of farmers who still live and work in the program areas. It does not tell about all the farmers and families that, for reasons due to the conflict, have abandoned agriculture or even left their territories.
- The interviewed farmers are from villages that are part of much wider territories. This means that it would be risky to generalize the findings, extending their validity to the entire districts but, certainly, these are useful to compare with other available information, coming from other territories and sources.

supporting agriculture

- The analysis definitely shows that agriculture is still an important sector in the program territories. These are still lived by many farmers, with their families composed of numerous young and active members. They constitute an important human and social capital deeply involved in agriculture. Farming is their main source of food and income, and the activity to which all family members contribute. Despite the several challenges and stresses created by the conflict situation, but also by the recurrent droughts, they are not downsizing or abandoning farming.
- Agriculture scope, however, is not limited to farmers' livelihoods. The study highlighted how farmers regularly interact and make transactions with a range of local actors for selling their farm products or purchasing agricultural inputs and services, clearly expressing the existence of local food systems and supply chains, relevant in terms of the food security and resilience of the surrounding communities to the conflict situation.

identifying key actors to target

- Among farmers, smallholders are the majority and the most vulnerable. Many of them own only very small farmland, few animals, and, aside family labour, not many other assets. Nonetheless, they work not only for their families, but produce also for the surrounding communities. Efforts should aim at avoiding that insecurity, stresses and shocks, would further undermine their activities, determining their exit from agriculture.
- Women-led farms and families, whose men left for reasons related to the conflict, should be also a specific target of support actions. Also, inclusive and gender sensitive interventions should address the technical needs and skill development potential of the many rural women who live and work in men-led farms and families, and who critically contribute to the household income, with exhausting paid and unpaid work.
- Visible, though still contingent and temporary, changes in gender relations have been reported in the program areas by women who are taking on new roles and responsibilities in everyday life; they consider this circumstance a good chance to learn new things or develop new relations as well as an opportunity to get higher appreciation from husbands and other family members. The risks inevitably connected to this exposure are also acknowledged and should be carefully considered in support interventions too.
- The presence of a number of private actors, represented by middlemen, shops and retailers, market places, etc., to whom farmers attribute key roles for their agricultural

activities, highlighted the need that interventions do not replace or weaken these actors. On the contrary it also suggested to start to think about specific interventions supporting the agribusiness sector, as a mean to facilitate farmers activities and trigger local development processes.

orienting support towards specific sectors

- Among crops, wheat and olive trees are definitely the most important for farmers, on which immediate interventions are needed to support and relaunch such supply chains.
- Attention should be placed also on pulses and barley crops, very important for local food security, towards which farmers' interest recently increased, probably to better face the recurrent droughts or market problems for other crops.
- The opportunity to support horticultural crops cultivation, important to trigger fast socio-economic development processes at local level, should be also considered in areas where there is access to water. The willingness of farmers to invest in these cultivations clearly emerged in some program territories.
- Regarding livestock, sheep are the most important to farmers and also the most hit in the recent years. However, also other livestock species, in particular goats, poultry and lastly cows, contribute to family food security, providing key foodstuff or exchangeable assets in times of need.
- Interventions planning to facilitate farmers' access to agricultural inputs and services should continue since they match the major needs of farmers: the need for fertilizers and pesticides for crops; the need of foodstuff and veterinarian services for livestock. Interventions should be planned in a way to reach the most vulnerable categories, which frequently are not able to pay at market prices, for lack of money or for other expenditures priorities.

investigating further

- The study results also showed the need of further investigation in the program areas. For instance, values chains analysis is needed in all the mentioned agricultural sectors that would catch the main sector challenges and opportunities, for farmers and other key actors.
- Equally, agro-business sector analysis, at village and urban centre level, would provide indications on the existing strategic agro-business actors in need of support, and the potential support mechanisms.