

Agricultural Voices Syria: Promoting sustainable agriculture in conflict zones

SUSSEX SUSTAINABILITY RESEARCH PROGRAMME | MARCH 2023



Picture 1: Fires during harvesting in the Idlib Governorate, Northwest Syria.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief was released after a series of devastating earthquakes in Southeast Turkey and Northwest Syria in February 2023 which has exposed once again the enormous difficulties created when natural disasters occur in a country already weakened by a protracted crisis and long-term conflict. After 12 years of war, all sectors of the Syrian economy have been heavily impacted and the path to long-lasting economic recovery remains somewhat distant. In particular, the agricultural sector has suffered major infrastructure damage, alongside disruptions to crop production, livestock, agricultural assets, supply chains, and the loss of agricultural expertise due to internal displacement and outmigration. While institutional structures have remained in place in government-controlled areas, in opposition areas the loss of government has also meant the loss of agricultural extension services.

In 2021, members of the non-governmental organisation [Syrian Academic Expertise](#) (SAE) – Syrian agricultural experts living in Northwest Syria or in exile in Turkey – in collaboration with the University of Sussex and the [Council for At-Risk Academics](#) (Cara) launched “Agricultural Voices Syria” (AVS) with funding from the [Sussex Sustainability Research Programme](#) (SSRP). Thousands of people have benefitted from this innovative knowledge exchange project which focuses on supporting Northwest Syrian farmers with knowledge and expertise of sustainable agricultural practices and techniques. Building on the success of a podcast series released in May 2021 (phase one), the production and dissemination of short videos was launched in April 2022 (phase two).

The AVS podcast and video series was produced in Arabic by experts from SAE who received training and support from University of Sussex media experts. Key to the distribution of these audio-visual outputs was establishing networks and partnerships in Northwest Syria, and the promotion via social media. The aim of regular user surveys was to gain feedback and evaluate uptake and

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impact. Additionally, they helped to collect unique data on the use of podcasts and videos to promote sustainable agriculture, and ameliorate the loss of government agricultural extension services in the conflict-affected Northwest of Syria.

Key Recommendations

The following recommendations draw on information collected in focus groups and workshops with local authorities, donors and agricultural experts in Northwest Syria. These actions target governments, institutions and donors that provide funding to Northwest Syria and those NGOs and organisations that implement projects aimed at post-conflict reconstruction.

1. Develop local skills and capacities to achieve self-sufficiency in food production, dedicating more resources to Syrian NGOs involved in the long-term reconstruction of the agricultural sector.
2. Integrate farmers' voices and local knowledge in the interventions of donors, NGOs and local authorities through social media platforms such as AVS.
3. Instigate programmes and projects that focus on improving small- and mid-scale sustainable farming.
4. Promote education in agriculture and open schools and training facilities.
5. Promote capacity building in agricultural extension systems and open field stations.
6. Promote and support the marketing of agricultural products.
7. Promote and support the role of women in farming and food processing.
8. Collect evidence-based data to inform programming and connections between climate change and food insecurity in conflict zones.
9. Restore infrastructure and agricultural assets in peace zones and promote actions focused on the production of strategic crops, livestock breeding, and food processing.
10. Accelerate diplomatic efforts to address the absence of a central authority in Northwest Syria which has a major impact on the lack of agricultural planning and natural resource management.



Picture 2: Syrian agricultural expert providing guidance to a farmer during a field visit in Azaz, Northwest Syria.

OVERVIEW

Syria has the largest displaced population in the world. Over half of its 21 million pre-crisis population have fled into exile or have been internally displaced. Of these 13 million, nearly three million are now living in Northwest Syria where armed conflict, airstrikes and shelling persist. Macro-economic conditions are worsening, as evidenced by the sharp devaluation of the Syrian pound, rising living costs, increased domestic debt and widespread loss in income and opportunities for development ([Refugees International, 2022](#)).

Around 3.3 million Syrians are food insecure across Syria ([OCHA, 2022](#)), with broad humanitarian need in the non-government-controlled Northwest of Syria exacerbated by a cholera outbreak in September 2022 and by the most recent earthquakes in February 2023. Humanitarian aid continues to play an important role in tackling these urgent needs but at the expense of early recovery assistance, which only makes up 10% of the Humanitarian Response Plan ([Reliefweb, 2021](#)). Achieving food security for local and displaced populations in the Northwest remains a critical priority only achievable through the introduction of targeted agricultural supply chain interventions which must be sustainable and scalable.

The transition from the pre-2011 state-run subsidised system to today's market economy (at the time of writing) has required farmers and local institutions to understand market dynamics, actors and key drivers, as well as the processes involved in agri-food systems. This knowledge gap has to be addressed to enable the implementation of a transition strategy based on competitiveness and longer term reconstruction.

Research has shown that in countries struck by protracted crises and war, local peace processes do take place in certain zones despite conflicts around them (Allouche and Jackson, 2019; Allouche and Zadi Zadi, 2013). Concentrating actions for supporting agriculture in these so-called 'zones of peace' is an important step in achieving food security in conflict zones.

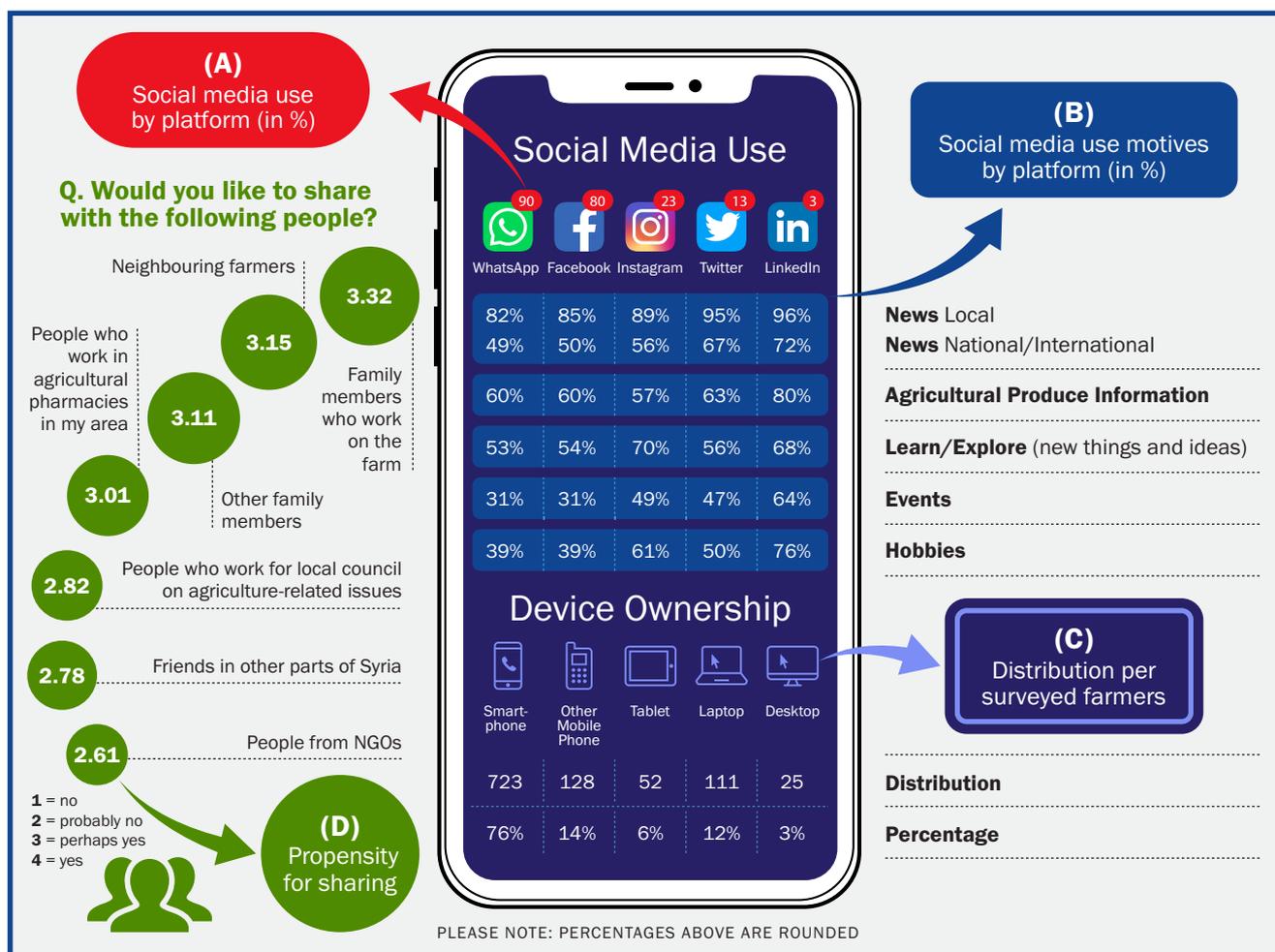


Figure 1: Overview of social media usage, device ownership as well as motivation and propensity for sharing the Agricultural Voices Syria podcast among surveyed farmers.

KEY FINDINGS

Integrated social media for development

Over the past five years smartphone ownership and access to internet and social media via these devices have increased dramatically in countries with emerging and developing economies.

According to Pew Research Center’s study on emerging and developing economies (Pew, 2018), 53% of surveyed adults had access to smartphones, with the pace of smartphone uptake increasing rapidly in previously low-use economies such as Jordan, Lebanon and the Philippines. Broadly speaking, gender and age have a relatively low impact on smartphone use, while income and education levels are much more influential (Pew, 2018).

Research carried out over the past two years as part of AVS has contributed to documenting the particular value of social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook for building networks, sharing knowledge and facilitating the discovery of podcast agriculture extension services. Unlike older media forms, podcasts are a key way of

disseminating information via social media, making access increasingly easier.

Developing countries with similar profiles to Syria, particularly in the Middle East, showed social media use was actually higher compared to other global regions. Across five Middle Eastern and North African countries, a median of 68% used social media, as compared to only 55% in the advanced European economies (Pew, 2018). In 2021 AVS surveyed over 1,000 Syrian farmers which demonstrated a significant level of smartphone ownership and use (76%), and a higher than anticipated use of social media. Of these, WhatsApp and Facebook dominated at 90% and 80% respectively, primarily used to check the news, or search for agriculture-related information on products and cultivation methods (figure 1A/B/C).

Research carried out by Qalati et al. (2021) on small-to-medium-sized enterprises in developing economies, also found that social media is a highly effective and efficient means for reaching intended stakeholders, with the greatest impact on performance and productivity compared to all other technological and organisational variables.

Integrated social media for delivering agricultural extension services

An initial social media outreach campaign was used to help raise awareness of AVS and to develop a network of users. While podcast episodes were distributed via Spotify, CastBox and Anchor, a downloadable smartphone app was developed to make access even easier. Podcast episodes covered a wide range of agricultural areas and methods, from the correct use of fertilisers, grafting, and the conservation of produce to the cultivation of strategic crops, beekeeping, hydroponics and permaculture. Topics were selected by SAE agricultural experts who were in touch with farmers over a sustained period of time and, on many occasions, were asked to provide advice on specific problems farmers encountered. Since the launch of the AVS podcast series in May 2021, a relatively high number of users has been recorded in a short period of time with over 12,000 downloads registered on all platforms.

The phase one survey also captured farmers' positive feedback and revealed a significant interest in developing visual materials to support the podcast. The [AVS video series](#) introduced in 2022 was distributed through a free YouTube channel and garnered considerable interest as demonstrated in the number of views across a range of topics: safflower cultivation (13,000 views), alfalfa cultivation (9,600 views), wheat cultivation (1,500

views), conservation agriculture (1,400 views), palm tree seedlings (1,300 views) and grape farming (1,000 views).

Since the end of the initial series, the knowledge exchange network of AVS users has continued to snowball via social media as awareness of AVS and its relevance to local needs has spread. The 2021 phase one survey also revealed that farmers in the targeted area were sharing podcast content with other local farmers as well as with family members working in agriculture (figure 1D). The 2022 phase two survey of farmers included a question on how food scarcity in Northwest Syria might be addressed, to which 47.9% pointed to the need for increased agricultural training, with 47.2% suggesting that internally displaced farmers be offered land to allow them to resume their professions where they find themselves in Northwest Syria.

Of the 1,097 farmers who responded to the phase two survey, 98% saw social media as an important conduit for agriculture-related knowledge, compensating for the loss of government agricultural extension services in the region. Farmers expressed high preference for distribution on all platforms, suggesting that Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Spotify, Castbox and Anchor should be integrated to deliver overall support (figure 2). The involvement of Syrian human capital in the delivery of these services is also important. AVS outputs have been valued for being produced and hosted by Syrian experts (figure 3).

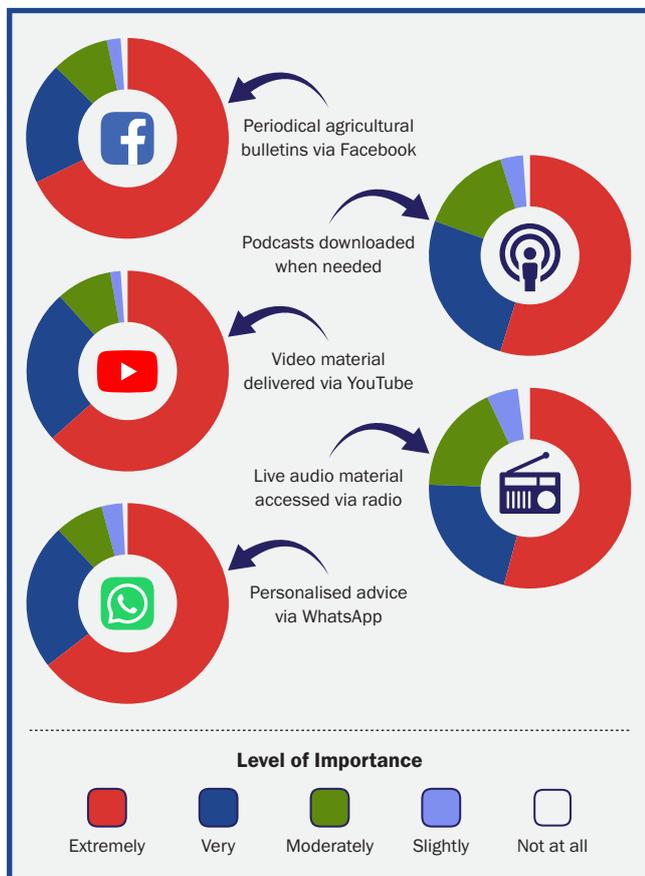


Figure 2: Importance of social media platforms for the delivery of agricultural extension services in Northwest Syria.

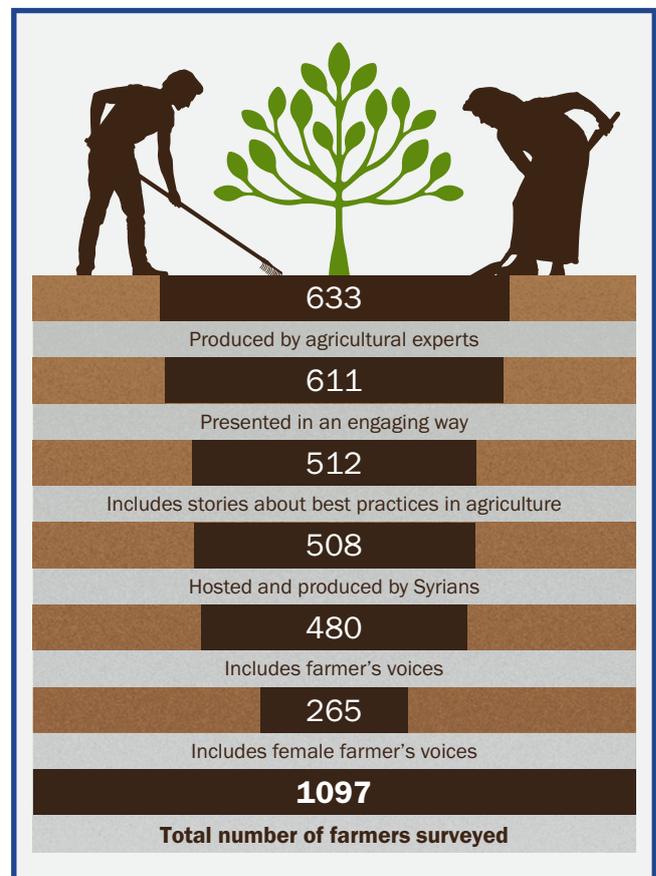


Figure 3: Features of Agricultural Voices Syria podcasts and videos ranked by importance among surveyed farmers.

Integrated social media for empowering communities and supporting knowledge exchange

The podcast episodes were easy to produce in situ with limited resources and also easy to consume while being vital in connecting disparate communities. The emergent communication technology of podcasting, native to and integrated into social media, exists without the corporate and government scrutiny, regulation and control of traditional broadcasting. Throughout its relatively short history, podcasting has been used in many diverse ways, including giving a voice to those silenced and marginalised by official, authorised and licensed media channels (Spinelli and Dann, 2019).

CITATION

Barbu, M. et al. (2023) 'Agricultural Voices Syria. Promoting sustainable agriculture in conflict zones', *SSRP Policy Brief 10*, Sussex Sustainability Research Programme (SSRP), University of Sussex and Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton, UK.

In addition to providing podcast and video content to farmers in Northwest Syria, the AVS project proved a fulcrum for larger and transferable positive social impacts. These include:

- building a platform for communities ravaged by war to voice concerns and needs;
- offering local councils and expat agricultural experts an opportunity to occupy highly visible spaces in an emergent media landscape while establishing the terms of debates in conversations around conflict, food security and sustainability;
- expanding and empowering emergent media networks for broader participation in a public sphere in a region where conventional broadcasters have been destroyed or diminished;
- supporting vital knowledge exchange between agricultural experts in exile and farmers on the ground.

Policy Implications

- AVS is not just a tool, but a model to support knowledge exchange, connect agricultural experts with farmers and local institutions, and create local networks in conflict zones. Podcasts, videos, agricultural bulletins and field visits create a viable agricultural extension system, but one that requires support, continuity and flexibility.
- Social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and YouTube are useful tools to support farmers in a conflict zone but cannot substitute infrastructure and agricultural assets. Meteorological stations, extension fields, laboratories for studying plants and veterinary diseases, schools and training facilities are necessary for the development of a competitive agriculture system in Northwest Syria. A broad estimation of labs and extension field costs is presented in figure 4.
- Likewise, support in the marketing of agricultural products is key in this stage as well as the promotion of females in the workforce in different stages of agricultural production processes.
- The Syrian human capital in exile plays an important role in the country's early recovery. Despite a relatively modest budget, AVS has achieved measurable and impressive results due to the sustained efforts of Syrian agricultural experts in Northwest Syria and in exile who are keen to be involved in the reconstruction of their country. In the difficult aftermath of the earthquake in South Turkey and Northwest Syria it has become critical to maintain food production and support all actors who can address dire food shortages.
- AVS and its future iterations can become a communication platform of integrated social media to promote best practices, link humanitarian organisations, NGOs and institutional actors working towards achieving common goals in Northwest Syria. In order to create a much-needed multiplier effect in a territory devastated by a long-lasting conflict and a recent natural disaster, AVS can be scaled-up to reach more farmers and strengthen their voice.

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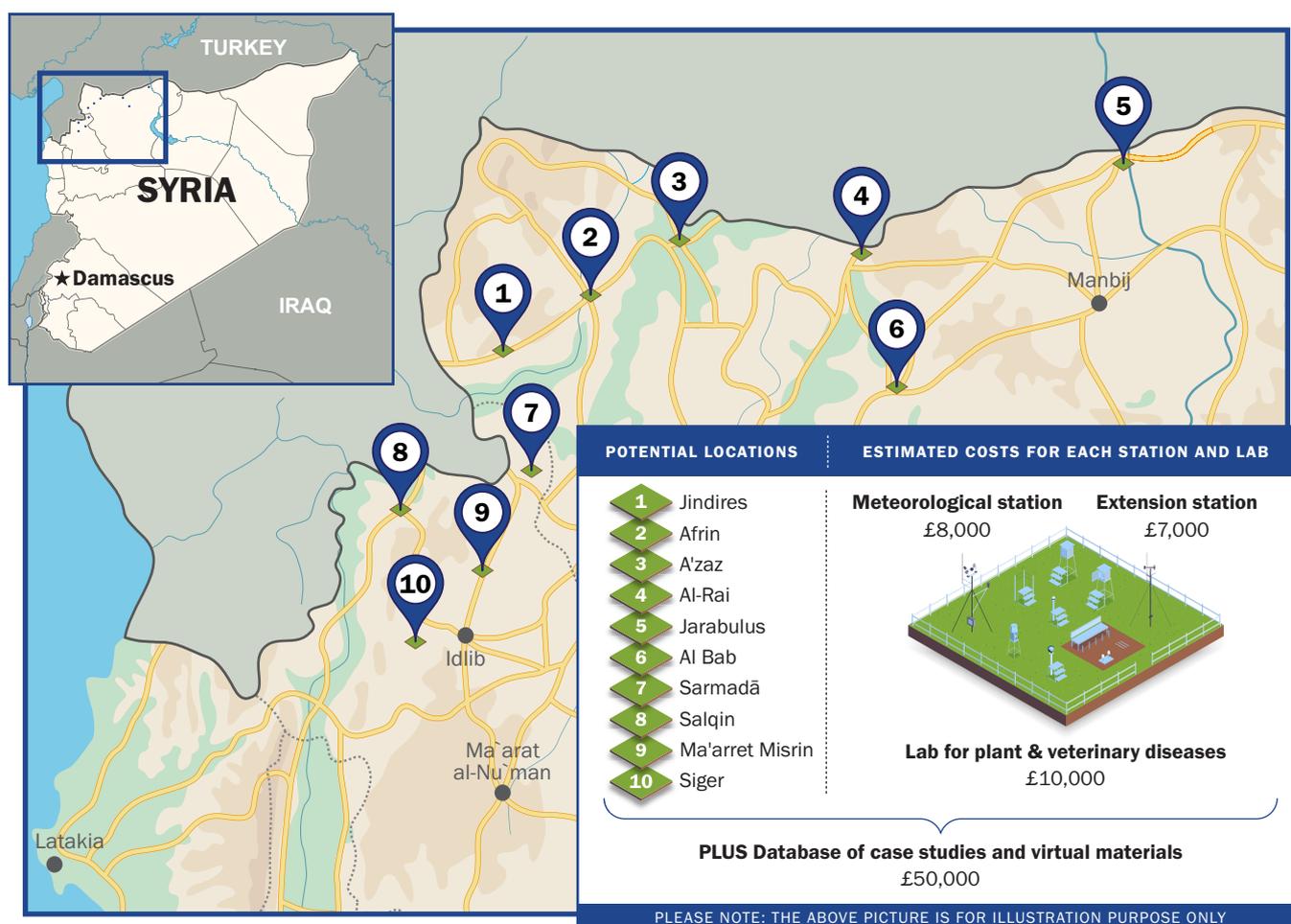


Figure 4: Map of potential locations of meteorological stations, field extension stations and labs, and overview of costs.

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