

CBI and Emergency Food Assistance ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY IN TRINIDAD & TOBAGO



Main issues related to food security

- Loss of livelihoods
- Limited self-reliance
- Limited access to employment
- Irregularity
- Abuse and exploitation

Background

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 triggered prolonged loss of livelihoods among displaced people as well as a significant increase in the demand for food support. With social assistance initiatives implemented by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago covering only citizens and permanent residents, non-nationals in irregular situations – including the majority of displaced people – remained excluded and with heightened risk of destitution and critical food insecurity.

Thus, UNHCR supports a food assistance programme developed by partner Living Water Community (LWC) in collaboration with private sector fintech service provider WiPay to provide QR code-generated digital identifiers to displaced people who meet socioeconomic and protection criteria. A national network of supermarkets was established to allow displaced people to redeem QR codes and purchase food items directly at stores. This procedure reduced interpersonal contact, was protection-sensitive, corresponded in quantity to emergency assistance provided by the Government to locals, and provided support for meeting basic food needs.

Overview of the programme

In 2020, UNHCR supported 2,491 households through this programme, totalling 9,892 individuals, of which 88% were Venezuelans. Households led by women represented 63% of beneficiaries, while men-led households represented 36%. Modifications were made for the 2021 food assistance programme, which resumed from March 2021, based on feedback and lessons learnt in 2020. Persons now apply through a dedicated WhatsApp phone number or email address. A Food Team member makes contact via a phone interview to determine vulnerability criteria. Cross-checks are done with internal databases to reduce duplication, and if eligible, a QR code, supermarket information, and a feedback survey are sent to their email. The transfer values are as follows:

Household size | Transfer values (USD)



Challenges

For the third time, Trinidad and Tobago is undergoing a nationwide lockdown, with measures gradually implemented as early as 14 April. A State of Emergency was declared on 15 May and approved until August 2021. Currently, the country is experiencing its worst COVID-19 caseload and death rate since the onset, and displaced peoples' livelihoods and food security have been severely impacted.

Since the start of 2021, UNHCR has prioritized cash-based interventions (CBI) to support vulnerable refugee households and individuals, being the largest assistance activity implemented by UNHCR and partners. Under the response for the Venezuela Situation, UNHCR has allocated USD 100,000 for emergency food assistance. The initial target for the year was set at providing 1,200 households with emergency food assistance. Feedback from partner LWC indicated that this target will be met and possibly surpassed by the end of June, based on current demand and capacity.

Moreover, as early as 5 May, LWC's Food Assistance Team has been facing a considerable backlog with food applications due to limited processing capacity. In response, UNHCR has approved reallocation of existing budgetary resources to increase the capacity of the Food Assistance Team. LWC has implemented a pre-screening tool that assists in identifying urgent cases and are exploring technological solutions that may facilitate more rapid screenings. However, capacity limitations still prove to be a constraint as the number of applications continues to increase daily, with the expectation that many families who have already received support will require assistance again, as the pandemic lingers. Complaints have been received from displaced people with pending applications due to longer wait times as some urgent needs are not being met quickly enough.

APPLICATIONS

The following table presents a monthly breakdown of total number of assistance applications, as well as total number of households and individuals approved with UNHCR's support:

MONTH	# OF APPLICATIONS	# HOUSEHOLDS APPROVED	# INDIVIDUALS APPROVED	HOUSEHOLD APPROVAL RATE	% INCREASE OF HOUSEHOLD APPLICATIONS	% INCREASE OF HOUSEHOLD APPROVALS
March	305	117	435	38%	-	-
April	560	204	759	36%	84%	74%
May	4,190	355	1,220	8.5%	648%	74%
TOTAL	5,055	676	2,414	-	-	-

In May, applications increased by 648%, coinciding with the declaration of the new lockdown measures; the approval rate of 8.5% represents the backlog of application processing. The pre-screening tool used by LWC to identify the most critical cases for emergency food assistance prioritized 400 cases in May, thereby bringing the approval rate based on applications processed up to 89%. Due to limited capacity, there remains a large percentage of cases awaiting processing, while the extremely vulnerable cases are being prioritized.

According to assessments, most applicants currently have no source of income, with no household member employed even intermittently. Additionally, approximately 30% of households have young children between the ages of 0 and 2. As a coping mechanism, skipping meals is practised by almost everyone, with eating twice a day becoming the norm due to limited resources. Moreover, reports of GBV and other forms of violence are increasing which further contribute to

food insecurity, as the capacity and productivity of survivors is severely compromised because of illness, injury, stigma and discrimination. Persisting economic shutdowns are likely to increase the risk of food insecurity among refugees and asylum-seekers, possibly prompting dangerous attempts to return to adverse conditions in country of origin. On the other hand, Precarious shelter situations and the rise in food insecurity have also led to an increase in exploitation of families who are unable to pay rent, while import constraints, delays in customs clearance and rising food prices have led to a decrease in the purchasing power of persons at supermarkets.

Most communications to UNHCR hotlines have been consistently related to cash-based interventions since the implementation of national lockdown measures. Food assistance has experienced a 78% increase in queries, based on May hotlines data.

PRIORITIZATION

If the initial year-end target of 1,200 assisted households is met by mid-year, there is a risk that there may not be sufficient food assistance for displaced people available for the following six (6) months. Aware that the situation has drastically worsened and given the

gap in financial assistance and human resource capacity, UNHCR is urgently amending its Agreement with LWC to provide an additional USD 115,000 under specific COVID-19 funding to cover the shortfall. The total emergency food assistance allocation will now be USD 215,000.

Based on an assessment of current resources (including support from other donors), the increasing number of daily applications, the number of applicants on the waitlist and the expectation of already approved beneficiaries requiring further assistance this year, UNHCR requires an additional **USD 375,000** to provide *direct assistance to the most vulnerable cases awaiting assistance; boost the human resource capacity to receive, process and verify applications; strengthen innovative technological solutions to improve overall efficiency and responsiveness; and undertake extensive monitoring to obtain feedback and inform programmatic adaptations.*