

Planning details for the establishment of three social markets (SOMAs) in Syria

Planning status as per mid-May 2025

1. Underlying considerations:

As the construction of the “Bakery of Grace” – the first major reconstruction project of *Korbgemeinschaft* – has been successful despite many doubts and numerous obstacles and setbacks (embargo, pandemic, energy shortages, inflation and many other difficulties), our trust is deeper than ever that the grace of the Lord has not forgotten the fate of the people in Syria, even in times of greatest need or perhaps even because of these dire needs. The Bakery was completed and put into operation right at that peak of the pandemic and has since served as a reliable source of good-quality daily bread. It is a firm anchor for the supply of ever more needy families due to ever new economic setbacks affecting most severely the sick, elderly, invalids, widows and orphans, including among them domestically displaced persons.

After numerous delays and hurdles, the social market (SOMA) planned above the bakery was built in a downsized version and has now finally been completed in its entire original size. Luckily, even its smaller version has provided valuable services for sorting and temporarily storing the humanitarian goods that *Korbgemeinschaft* regularly is shipping to Syria in large containers.

In the near future, the large SOMA will also be used to receive and store bulk purchases of goods of daily need. There, the goods will be repackaged into smaller household quantities and will then be transported to the three smaller SOMAs that are planned to be opened soon.

The underlying idea is similar to the one guiding the Bakery of Grace: The range of basic food and hygiene products is intended to be available to everyone. Those who have an income and can afford to buy the products will be charged reasonable, fair prices. In view of the social-Christian orientation of the SOMAs, there is no intention, however, to generate a commercial profit. Instead of this, any margin will be used to provide poor families and other destitute people with essential goods free of charge.

2. Key points of the plan:

Operation of three SOMAs, with the necessary premises already available, in the form of church property, on a rent-free basis. The project accommodators are the dioceses concerned.

- Safita
- Mashta Al-Helou in the Valley of Christians
- Latakia

Envisaged product range:

Initially, there will be a basic stock of roughly 30 products (basic food items and hygiene articles). Goods of good quality will be purchased in bulk quantities at wholesale prices from reliable partners. Retail quantities will be sold at a fair price, slightly below the usual level, so that as many consumers as possible, including people in lower income ranges, can become paying customers.

Logistical handling:

The SOMAs will be equipped with an electronic sales system that allows goods to be purchased and paid for by the use of chip cards. Each customer will have a chip card with an individual customer number. *Korbgemeinschaft* will credit a certain amount of money onto the chip cards of the poorest community members. These amounts will be determined according to the degree of social need and the living conditions (family size, illnesses, income situation, etc.). This assessment will be carried out on the basis of a point system by the members of the local *Korbgemeinschaft* teams.

The paying customers will also have their individual chip cards, but they will have to finance the credit amounts themselves. The charging and recharging can be done online from home or in the SOMAs. Each SOMA will have a separate management office for such transactions.

This chip card-based payment system will also be useful for keeping track of incoming and outgoing goods at all times and will thus support the timely replenishment of stocks of individual sales items.

Foreseeable job creation:

The large storage in Maarouneh with an area of 800 m² will require one qualified person responsible for warehouse management (stock control, etc.) and several warehouse workers and helpers for handling the large product packages. Refilling, weighing, repacking, wrapping, vacuuming and labeling to obtain retail package sizes will offer additional employment for several people, including women.

For the ongoing operation of the small SOMAs, at least four employees will be required (for management, the cash desk, warehouse tasks and all-round help). The plan here is to work with the members of the local *Korbgemeinschaft* teams. With the exception of the management, regular rotations among the team members can be arranged so that each team member has the opportunity to earn some income, while at the same time leaving enough time for studies, further training, family commitments and other social tasks.

Required infrastructure:

As mentioned above, the premises are already available on a rent-free basis. However, there are still some necessary room adaptations to be done, e.g. partitions for the office of the manager. Ongoing electricity and operating costs must of course be included in the operating expenses, as well as the salaries.

In addition, various types of equipment will be required for the small SOMAs: Computer for the cash desk based on chip cards, conveyor belt in the checkout area, various racks, transport trolleys, lifting devices, refrigerators for dairy products, office equipment (printer, PC, office desk and chair, folders, paper, toner, etc.).

The main storage will require massive lifting equipment, hydraulic transport trolleys, several mobile ramps, office equipment with computers for the precise recording of incoming and outgoing goods, racks, various containers (bags, boxes, bottles), vacuum packaging machines, film and foil sealing devices, labels, measuring cups, scales, etc.

A robust, all-wheel drive delivery van is already available, but is currently still waiting to be transported to Syria. A second small truck may be added later, once the SOMAs have started running successfully.

What the SOMAs are intended to achieve:

- The supply of poor people with low income or none at all with basic products of daily need on a sustainable, pro-active basis, as a form of income-generating help towards self-help. The focus lies on Christian parishes, but shopping in the SOMAs will be possible for everyone and people of other denominations who are in great need will not be excluded from the receipt of “social chip card credits”.
- The creation of meaningful, sustainable jobs for Christian-minded, socially committed, predominantly young people, especially women.
- Based on the chip card credit, each family can decide for itself which ones of the products offered at the SOMA are needed most. Each family also has to handle its own credit balance with care, as it will not be refilled on a random basis, but according to strict social criteria. In any case, the product choice will be more individualized and the *Korbgemeinschaft* team will no longer have to repeatedly package and distribute uniform aid packages.
- Creation of additional opportunities for regional products: The approx. 30 basic sales items are intended to be gradually supplemented by local, partly seasonal specialties, from the production of family businesses and income-generating projects. These will include eggs, dairy specialties from sheep and goat farming, vegetables, herbs, etc. In the Valley of Christians (Safita) there are many olive trees and fruit trees, especially apple trees. Depending on the season, these products can be sold in the SOMAs fresh or dried, processed into jam or jelly, etc. This will open up easily accessible local sales opportunities for other small businesses. It will guarantee the freshness of the regional specialty products, which is beneficial to the health of the consumers. In addition, this strategy fulfills the ecological principle of favoring the shortest possible transport routes of consumer products.
- Running several small SOMAs also offers the advantage that they will be within walking or cycling distance for most families.
- For us at *Korbgemeinschaft*, the gradual easing of embargo restrictions has the advantage that wholesale purchases can now also be paid for outside Syria, even in EUR.

- Planned, gradual steps towards sustainability and self-financing of the SOMAs: During the foundation and set-up phase, it will be necessary for the goods to be ordered and paid for by *Korbgemeinschaft*. It is essential that the basic equipment and the entire initial stocking of goods will be provided as start-up assistance. The members of local *Korbgemeinschaft* teams have expressed their willingness to volunteer some of their time during the start-up phase. As soon as there are sales proceeds (after deduction of ongoing operating costs), subsequent product purchases should be covered or at least supported by the sales proceeds. This should allow to provide the poorest people with free products in the form of free reloading of chip card credits.

Underlying principle of “non-profit” orientation:

Any operating profit is to be used for Christian-social purposes in the form of support for the poorest. The rules for emerging jobs and employments are still being worked out under the country's new administration and are still largely unregulated. However, in view of the rampant poverty, we cannot simply wait and see. We will adapt to relevant regulations step by step, as they emerge.

For the development of these Christian-social SOMAs, we are hoping for support towards the start-up costs from aid organizations. We are looking for trustful co-financing from our faithful friends and sponsors.

We trust that this project, too, will rest in the Lord's protective hands.