A DAILY STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE: SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

Well into the fourth year of the conflict in Syria, it is clear that Syrian refugees in the neighboring countries will not be able to return home in the near future. In Lebanon, where one in four residents is a Syrian refugee, the demands of providing emergency assistance to refugees while trying to support disadvantaged host communities have become especially complex. Lebanon’s government has not been able to come to agreement on approving a range of support projects for both Syrian refugees and disadvantaged Lebanese nationals. And while this political debate goes on, tensions between hosts and guests continue to rise. Having recognized the need to assist both of these vulnerable groups, the Lebanese government, donors, and aid agencies must refine their collaboration in a way that will continue and increase assistance, while making the most strategic use of ever-scarcer funding.

BACKGROUND

Every month thousands of Syrian refugees arrive at Lebanon’s border seeking safety. While the Lebanese government continues to let them in, it is increasingly adamant that it cannot continue to accept refugees without additional assistance from the rest of the world. With more than one million Syrians in the country, the refugees now make up a quarter of the resident population. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), “Lebanon has become the country with the highest per-capita concentration of refugees worldwide, struggling to keep pace with a crisis that shows no signs of slowing.” This situation is made more complex by the fact that an underprivileged Lebanese population of even larger size lives right alongside the Syrians but receives far less assistance.

Lifesaving aid has been the central pillar of the humanitarian response in Lebanon for four years now. Due to ongoing violence in Syria, continuous refugee arrivals in host countries, and difficulty in keeping up with basic needs, emergency assistance like food aid and shelter is still required. But as the Syrian crisis becomes protracted, the focus is naturally turning toward longer-term development assistance. The transition from emergency to development aid cannot simply be based on how much time has passed. Rather, the everyday realities on the ground make it clear that a combined approach is needed because emergency assistance is still vital for so many of the displaced.

As the need for development actors to get more involved in Lebanon becomes evident, the UN, the Lebanese government, and international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should use existing staff resources and in-country expertise to formulate a common set of assessments and strategies for addressing the needs of Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- For 2015, the Lebanese government, the United Nations, and international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should utilize existing staff resources and in-country expertise to formulate a common set of assessments and strategies for addressing the needs of Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities.
- The United Nations Refugee Agency should continue prioritizing support for emergency humanitarian aid, including rental assistance.
- Donors to the aid response in Lebanon should support income-generating programs that increase the self-sufficiency of vulnerable populations in Lebanon.
- Donors who have pledged to contribute to the Regional Response Plan for Syrian refugees should fulfill their commitments before year’s end.
- NGOs working in Lebanon should develop, using existing case studies and available data, a uniform campaign message to educate the public and the international donor community that emergency humanitarian assistance is still required in Lebanon.

In the meantime, donors who have pledged to contribute to the 2014 Regional Response Plan for Syrian refugees should fulfill their commitments before year’s end. For 2015, the Lebanese government, the UN, and international and national NGOs in Lebanon should utilize existing staff resources and in-country expertise to formulate a common set of assessments and strategies for addressing the needs of Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities.

In the past 12 months, multiple plans for humanitarian aid in Lebanon have been presented, but it has been difficult to make them all work in concert. It is clear that bringing all such plans and their related assessment together and creating leadership and accountability mechanisms is an enormous task. However, the current crisis in Lebanon is also enormous, and requires a response on the same scale. Recognizing the existing funding constraints, the planning underway for 2015 must meet the urgent humanitarian needs that continue to exist.

Daryl Grisgraber traveled to Beirut and Mount Lebanon Governorates in August 2014.

government, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and those who depend upon their support are wondering what the aid strategy for Lebanon will look like in 2015. Will emergency assistance continue for Syrian refugees? How will host communities be meaningfully included in joint services? How will the various types of assistance be integrated?

And perhaps most importantly, how will donors and aid agencies continue to fund and structure programs promoting self-sufficiency for the next 5 – 10 years?

In light of how long Syrian refugees’ displacement in Lebanon is likely to be, establishing self-reliance is the most useful application of humanitarian aid and funds. There will be even less humanitarian money available as time wears on and other crises grab the world’s attention, and vulnerable communities in Lebanon will have to meet their own needs as much as possible.

**SOCIAL CHANGES**

Refugees International traveled to Lebanon in August 2014 to find out how urban Syrian refugees in Beirut and Mount Lebanon Governorates are surviving in places where both humanitarian assistance and employment are increasingly hard to find.

Lebanese authorities across the political spectrum are starting to expose a common narrative about the Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This involves ongoing discussion of border restrictions, and more pointed assertion that Syrians living in Lebanon are economic migrants rather than refugees in need of protection.

One such idea is the vetting of arriving Syrians based on their geographic origin. Specifically, people arriving from conflict areas could be admitted as refugees in need of protection, but those coming from more stable regions could be designated as economic migrants instead. Though this proposal has not yet been implemented, it is indicative of ongoing discussions among Lebanese government ministries.

The Lebanese government has repeatedly requested that the world share in the responsibility of protecting the Syrians inside its border. But international financial assistance – whether grants, loans, or bilateral aid – that is channelled through Lebanon’s government has been slow to arrive. In addition, a group of 24 cabinet ministers must channelled through Lebanon’s government has been slow to arrive. In addition, a group of 24 cabinet ministers must be meaningfully included in joint services. How will the various types of assistance be integrated?

In the past year, the World Food Program has had to cut its assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon by 30 percent, compounding the hardships of daily survival. Most Syrians RI spoke to make sacrifices in order to afford food; they don’t pay utility bills, or they send young children to work rather than school. The shortage of donor funds that motivated the UN appeal for Syrian refugees has forced many aid agencies to make hard decisions about reducing programming, and even lifesaving essentials such as food are not immune to cuts.

**A NEW BILL EVERY DAY**

Many Syrians struggle to keep up with the expenses of everyday life. When aid to refugees runs out of money for rent and cease making such a visible contribution to Lebanon’s economic well-being.

Syrians’ access to education is also a challenge. The government of Lebanon has instituted a second shift for the nation’s public schools, which Syrian students can attend. However, the schools cannot physically accommodate all of the children in need. An estimated 70 percent of Syrian children will not be in school in Lebanon during the coming year due to lack of space, unaffordable transportation, and the inability to pay fees.

The UNHCR should therefore continue prioritizing support for emergency services, including rental assistance, as well as proven social cohesion projects. At the same time, NGOs working in Lebanon should develop, using existing case studies and available data, a uniform campaign message to educate the public and the international donor community that emergency humanitarian assistance is still required in Lebanon.
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The Lebanese government has repeatedly requested that the world share in the responsibility of protecting the Syrians inside its border. But international financial assistance – whether grants, loans, or bilateral aid – that is channelled through Lebanon's government has been slow to arrive. In addition, a group of 24 cabinet ministers must unanimously approve the receipt, disbursement, and use of any international funding. This procedural hurdle makes any kind of agreement extremely difficult. As a result, projects that could help address some of the changes driven by the Syrian refugee crisis are not being carried out during this crucial time of social shift.

Though it has proved difficult for the ministries to come to agreement on the specifics of a national strategy, some of the local governments of the municipalities across Lebanon have moved ahead with helping Syrians as an aspect of building their own communities. Social cohesion projects with elements like conflict resolution and community building are improving relations between individuals on a more local scale. Local and international NGOs stressed that their relationships with municipal authorities were an important part of what allowed them to operate in the more volatile areas, and that their intention to bolster Lebanese host communities is an essential basis of their work.

Though not all municipalities are open to efforts such as these, there is nonetheless an agreement from the central government that allows those local authorities willing to take action to do so. This opens an opening for donors and aid agencies to offer programs that will make a tangible difference for vulnerable people on the ground.

In addition, since the events in the border town of Arsal in August 2014, when militants believed to have connections to armed groups in Syria fought with the Lebanese armed forces, there has been heightened suspicion about the Syrians living in Lebanon and whether they compromise Lebanon's security. This summer, Lebanon may well have reached a turning point at which security worries related to Syrians in the country trump humanitarian concerns. When combined with the shortage of humanitarian aid, this puts the future and safety of the refugees on shaky ground.

In general, the Lebanese public is also blaming the Syrians more directly for the country's current woes. Declining wages, rising rents, a difficult labor market, and increased crime are all regularly blamed – rightly or wrongly – on the Syrian refugees. Strain on water resources and the health care system is widely acknowledged. While sympathy for the plight of the refugees is genuine, fear about the impact they are having on the everyday life of the average Lebanese citizen and the country's sectarian composition is growing.

### DAILY LIFE IN LEBANON

Two and a half years after RI first visited Syrian refugees in Lebanon, conditions have barely improved and many refugees still need the most basic daily needs—protection, food, and shelter. Beyond that, healthcare is still difficult to obtain and the challenges of educating Syrian refugee children continue. During interviews and discussions with refugees themselves, RI continually heard of reduced financial support for various programs. Hygiene kits were no longer available, educational programs were being reduced or shut down, cash programming had been reduced, and refugees previously eligible for food aid were receiving nothing.

This lack of resources creates many number of difficult situations, especially with respect to health. Refugees that RI spoke to cited medical problems stemming from a lack of food. Serious health conditions like diabetes and eye surgery are ignored for want of money, and even basic preventive procedures like vaccinations are not always possible for refugees and poor Lebanese alike. Doctors told RI of an increase in communicable diseases as a result of the crowded living conditions. Refugees repeatedly told RI that they have seriously considered going back to Syria just to get healthcare.

Syrian refugees are also burdened by the financial requirements of maintaining a legal presence inside Lebanon. The cost of renewing a residence permit is too high for most, and many refugees simply let their visas expire and then remain. However, this puts them in danger of arrest or deportation for being out of legal status, and it prevents them from moving about the country freely to reunite with family, find livelihood opportunities, or even return to Syria.

In the past year, the World Food Program has had to cut its assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon by 20 percent, compounding the hardships of daily survival. Most Syrians RI spoke to make sacrifices in order to afford food: they don't pay utility bills, or they send young children to work rather than school. The shortage of donor funds mean that the UNHCR appeal for Syrian refugees has forced many aid agencies to make hard decisions about reducing programming, and even lifesaving essentials such as food are not immune to cuts.

Likewise, affordable, adequate shelter for Syrians is lacking. Indeed, one INGO RI spoke to suggested that the threat of eviction is currently Syrians' biggest fear. RI heard numerous stories of multiple families sharing one small living space in order to make ends meet, and of people who had moved several times around Beirut in order to find temporary housing.

There are estimates that rent from Syrians injects about $2 million into the Lebanese economy every month, and many INGOs use this example to build a case that Syrians have been an actual benefit – not a drain – to the Lebanese economy. However, there does not seem to be much consideration of what will happen when the refugees run out of money for rent and cease making such a visible contribution to Lebanon's economic well-being. Syrian's access to education is also a challenge. The government of Lebanon has instituted a second shift for the nation's public schools, which Syrian students can attend. However, the schools cannot physically accommodate all of the children in need. An estimated 70 percent of Syrian children will not be in school in Lebanon during the coming year due to lack of space, unaffordable transportation, and the inability to pay fees.

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### A NEW BILL EVERY DAY

Many Syrians struggle to keep up with the expenses of everyday life. When asked how refugees manage to pay the bills, service providers, NGO workers, and refugees themselves all gave similar answers: they work when and where they can, they sell personal property, they borrow money and go into debt, they beg, they send their children to work, and they hope that aid agencies will provide. On this mission, RI heard many more anecdotes about children working than it had on previous visits to Lebanon.

At a community center on the outskirts of Beirut, Yara, a Syrian refugee who has lived in Lebanon for almost two years with her family of eight, described her situation succinctly: Life is difficult and expensive. There is a new bill every day, and she and her husband constantly fight about which bill to pay this month and how. Like many other Syrians, Yara had taken her teenage daughter out of school in order to work to help support the family. In addition to still not having enough money for daily life, the family was now putting the future of one of its members in jeopardy.

Yara is typical of the refugees RI spoke to at community centers across Beirut and Mount Lebanon Governorates. All expressed worries about paying the rent, finding work, accessing healthcare, and the possibility that humanitarian assistance will be decreased further.

Numerous women RI spoke to at community centers around Beirut said they did not receive any assistance from

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aid agencies, and relied mostly on family members, friends, and neighbors for financial and material support. It was not unusual to hear that a family had pulled children from school so they could help support the family. Indeed, children actually have a reasonable chance at finding work because they can be paid less and tend not to protest about exploitation.

EVERYONE HAS TO MAKE A LIVING

As humanitarian agencies and refugees told RI, the inability to make a living affects not only individual households, but also communities – both Syrian and Lebanese. In regions where both groups live together, underprivileged Lebanese communities are resentful of the aid Syrians receive based on their refugee status. Finding employment in Lebanon was already a challenge before Syrian refugees began arriving. And once there, Syrians are largely confined to manual and unskilled labor like agriculture and construction—jobs that the Lebanese prefer not to do. Those with professional degrees, such as doctors and lawyers, are normally not allowed to practice and so go into the unskilled labor pool as well. As a result, competition for jobs has intensified even as wages become lower. With work so hard to find, many Syrian refugees have had to rely on humanitarian assistance as a crucial part of their strategy for getting by day to day. But funding for such assistance to Syrians lags far behind actual needs, and programs that provided help like food aid, hygiene materials, and educational activities are shrinking.

There is general agreement among service providers in Lebanon that in the long term, Syrians’ standard of living will decrease further if they cannot find ways to cover their living expenses. The Lebanese government has put strict limits on humanitarian organizations’ ability to provide Syrians with assistance finding employment or skills that would lead to better opportunities. This leaves most refugees in the position of having to find positions in a market that is already saturated with unskilled workers, both Syrian and Lebanese. Many Syrians arrived in Lebanon with both education and skills, but the Lebanese government limits their employment prospects through a lengthy work permit application process, among other expensive and often difficult restrictions.

As a result, many international and local groups can only offer life skills training, which tends to focus largely on women. While the need to empower women is accepted and even promoted by donors and aid agencies, its practical effects are changing family and gender dynamics among Syrian refugees. Men who were accustomed to working and providing for a family may now be idle while their wives are actively engaged in learning and empowerment programs, and supporting the family in small but significant ways. This can create discord in the home, or even prevent women from venturing out to get assistance when it is needed. While the need for livelihoods and a sustainable income is uniformly considered important for Syrian refugees and poor Lebanese, there is considerably less consensus about how to create jobs and work that will offer real opportunities for self-sufficiency.

There are some reports that many Syrian families have at least one person working; other reports indicate that this is not the case, even in unskilled positions. The employment situation for Syrians seems to vary from region to region within Lebanon, but there is general agreement that the large numbers of unskilled Syrians available to work are driving down wages and opportunities for poor Lebanese. The numbers in need are bigger than ever and the populations are more vulnerable, but there is less money available for programs that will fill the gap. Therefore, donors to the aid response in Lebanon should support income-generating programs that increase the self-sufficiency of vulnerable populations in Lebanon.

THE FUTURE

A main worry of the Lebanese government is that it simply cannot handle more people in need—refugees or otherwise—and that the stability of the country is at risk. This has created hesitation about supporting the refugees, whose presence is an added responsibility. And while Syrian refugees do want to go home, their vision of how soon this could happen has changed dramatically. Whereas in 2012 they had thought they might be in exile for a few months at most, they are now largely resigned to long-term stays. Future aid to Lebanon must therefore involve development actors and a strategy for bolstering the self-sufficiency of Syrians and the well-being of Lebanese.

The UN’s humanitarian plan for Syrian refugees in the region in 2015 will likely have the largest effects in Lebanon and Jordan, if for no other reason than because the refugee numbers in those countries are so great. The UN, the Lebanese government, and aid agencies must therefore reach a common agreement about how they will work together to tailor assistance to the needs of Lebanese host communities as well as Syrian refugees. Most NGOs that RI spoke to acknowledged that the UN’s coordination activities have improved and become more useful over the past two years. This is a promising development, and a good starting point for further refinement.
In the meantime, donors who have pledged to contribute to the 2014 Regional Response Plan for Syrian refugees should fulfill their commitments before year’s end. For 2015, the Lebanese government, the UN, and international and national NGOs in Lebanon should utilize existing staff resources and in-country expertise to formulate a common set of assessments and strategies for addressing the needs of Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities.

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BACKGROUND

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