



Helpdesk Research Report

Responding to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon: lessons learned

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Question

What lessons should donors consider when responding to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon? Include relevant lessons from international responses as well as Lebanon's own experience. Reference the role of international actors; capacity of government authorities; political implications; and the role of non-governmental organisations (the private sector and civil society).

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1. Overview

Lebanon has more refugees, as a percentage of the population, than any other country.¹ And this trend is increasing. Following the 2011 Syrian crisis, also Lebanon hosts more Syrian refugees than any other country. In addition, it has a substantial Palestinian refugee community, and a relatively small Iraqi refugee population.

Lebanon has experienced many waves of refugees throughout recent history, as have many other areas in the region – Syria, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan and Iraq. Therefore, the **evidence base for this subject is large** – with extensive academic, practitioner and policy literature. The literature is

¹ See <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/%C2%A350m-uk-support-lebanon-refugee-numbers-soar>

particularly extensive in regards to the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and the 2006 Iraqi refugee crisis. In terms of focus, a large amount of research looks at refugee camps, and the health and education sectors. The Syrian refugee crisis, starting in 2011, is relatively well documented in practitioner and policy literature – especially in the last year, reflecting the gravity of the situation. A UNHCR weekly update is published on ReliefWeb summarising the United Nations’ and other actors’ responses to Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey.²

Due to the substantial literature base, this report focuses on lesson learned relating to Lebanon. The Iraqi refugee crisis of the 2000s is also explored as a second key case study. Where relevant, the different roles and capacities of international actors, government authorities, non-governmental organisations and the private sector are detailed. This report examines refugees and does not examine internally displaced people.

As the literature base is large and the subject is broad, the issues listed in this report are not conclusive, but indicative of the most prominent themes identified during the three-day research period. Three groups of lessons emerged from the literature:

- **Political lessons** learned include: understanding Lebanon’s historic refugee experience; understanding how sectarian divisions affect policy and decision-making; the limitations of excluding key stakeholders; and understanding historic relations between refugees and host communities.
- **Strategic lessons** learned include: learning from the UNHCR evaluation of its response to the Syrian refugee crisis; developing a medium-term refugee strategy for Lebanon; and ensuring donors meet funding pledges.
- **Practical lessons** learned from development interventions include: understanding the complexity and controversy of refugee camps; using service delivery to provide services and ease tensions; partnering with local organisations; providing shelter and infrastructure; targeting urban refugees; understanding the varying impacts of refugees on different host communities; and using targeted development assistance.

2. Political lessons learned

There are a variety of overlapping approaches that can be taken to manage refugee flows, the most commonly discussed in the literature include: human rights-based approaches, refugee camp-based approaches,³ urban refugee approaches,⁴ supporting local communities,⁵ and targeted development assistance.⁶ The objectives of each approach differ according to the local context, and can include objectives of repatriation, resettlement, or local integration (Betts, 2009). There are growing calls to integrate conflict prevention approaches in activities in Lebanon, as the strains on Lebanon’s host communities increase and the incidences and risk of violence increases (UNHCR, 2013a).

² Latest example here: UNHCR (2013) *Inter-Agency Regional Response for Syrian refugees - Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey 25 July - 7 August 2013* <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/inter-agency-regional-response-syrian-refugees-egypt-iraq-jordan-lebanon-turkey-25-0>

³ Focusing on the creation of official refugee camps, with services provided within the camps for the refugees.

⁴ Focusing on integrating refugees and in supporting host communities in urban areas.

⁵ Focusing on supporting host community to absorb (and possibly integrate) refugees into local communities.

⁶ Focusing on providing services for both refugees and host communities.

2.1 Understanding Lebanon's historic refugee experience

Lebanon's refugee population has been established over time by various groups. Each group has been treated differently by the Lebanese authorities, and these experiences offer distinct lessons. The main groups include: Palestinian refugees – arriving around 1948, 1967 and throughout the 1990s; Iraqi refugees – arriving in the 1980s, and 2000s; and the Syrian refugees arriving from 2011 onwards.

The current influx of Syrian refugees

Lebanon hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees than any other country – with the UNHCR estimating 575,000 refugees in June 2013 (approx. 14% of Lebanon's population) (Crisp, et al., 2013).⁷ The figures are estimates – the Lebanese government alternatively estimates the number of refugees to already be higher than one million (Crisp, et al., 2013). The number of refugees is expected to carry on increasing, in line with continued conflict in Syria. In response, the UN launched a new interagency Syria Regional Response Plan in January.⁸

The majority of Syrian refugees live in locations across Lebanon in rented accommodation or unofficial tented settlements. The issue of whether refugee camps should be established is controversial, and is explored further below.

The long-term Palestinian refugees

Palestinian refugees make up an estimated 10% of Lebanon's population, with half of these living in Lebanon's 12 official refugee camps, and the other half living in 27 unofficial 'gatherings' within local communities (UNRWA, 2010).

The Lebanese government's management of Palestinian refugees has exacerbated the marginalisation of this group from the rest of the population. Suleiman (2006, p.3) describes the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as 'perhaps the most unfortunate and destitute grouping of Palestinian refugees in any Arab host country'. It is a protracted refugee situation.⁹

The government's policy of 'containment' has meant that Palestinian refugees have limited social and civil rights, no access to public social services, very limited access to public health or educational facilities and no rights to work (Danish Refugee Council, 2009). Meanwhile, it has allowed the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to take responsibility for providing 12 refugee camps and parallel services for the refugees.

Iraqi refugees

An estimated 7,700 Iraqi refugees reside in Lebanon in 2013 – less than 2% of the population. Most live around Beirut in unofficial situations.¹⁰ Although less restrictive than the policy towards the Palestinians, the majority of **Iraqi** refugees similarly are not legally allowed to stay in Lebanon and so live informally with little access to services or legal employment.

⁷ See - <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> and <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/makeshift-settlements-lebanon-unicf-delivers-essential-supplies-syrian-refugee>

⁸ See - <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/syria-regional-refugee-response-update-lebanon-jordan-turkey-iraq-and-egypt-17>

⁹ See definition here - <http://www.unhcr.org/40ed5b384.html>

¹⁰ See - <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486676>

Vulnerable groups

Children make up more than half of the refugee population – making provision of education an important issue.¹¹ A DFID press release reports that 10% of the female refugees have experienced violence.¹² Holt (2013, p.326) identifies that ‘harsh living conditions in the [Palestinian refugee] camps and the high rate of unemployment among men have led to an apparent increase in domestic violence’. However, Holt (2013, p.327) also notes that the refugee situation has produced conditions of empowerment for female Palestinians, who played a crucial role as part of the resistance movement in Lebanon in the 1970s.

2.2 Understanding sectarian divisions affect policy and decision-making

The situation between Lebanon’s fragile political and sectarian balance is under increased pressure from the Syrian conflict, and the influx of refugees (Crisp, et al., 2013; ICG, 2013). Hinds (2013) notes that ‘the pro and anti-Assad movements in Syria mirror the sectarian divide in Lebanon’, as Lebanon is currently divided into two broad groups:¹³

- **The 8 March Alliance** – a coalition of pro-Syria (pro-Assad) parties which includes Hezbollah, the Shia Amal movement and some Christian, Druze and Sunni groups.
- **The 14 March Alliance** – a coalition of anti-Syrian parties made up of Sunni, Christian and Druze parties.

The majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are Sunnis (who back the uprising in Syria), therefore the influx of this group is polarising for the 8 March Alliance parties (ICG, 2013). At present, the government is often **unable to reach consensus on refugee issues** due to sectarian divisions in government (Crisp, et al., 2013; ICG, 2013). This has led to problems – for example, the government stopped monitoring refugee arrivals at one stage leading to inaccurate data sets (Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2013; ICG, 2013).

This issue has also been problematic in the treatment of the Palestinian refugees who are predominately Sunnis. One key reason why **naturalisation of Palestinian refugees is difficult** to pursue is that it would upset Lebanon’s delicate sectarian balance (Crisp, et al., 2013, p.12; Hanafi, 2012, p. 67 in Hinds, 2013).

2.3 Limitations of excluding key stakeholders

In a briefing paper for the US Institute of Peace, Harris (2009, p.2) argues that in Lebanon, international donors’ decision to ban working with Hezbollah has ‘reduced the effectiveness of reconstruction efforts’.

2.4 Understanding historic relations between refugees and host communities

Syria and Lebanon have historically had quite open and porous borders with each other – many Syrians have experience working in Lebanon, intermarriage is common and there are significant social, economic and political links between the countries (ICG, 2013). It can therefore be expected that levels of understanding between the refugees and host communities are relatively high, and that Syrians are able to blend in with local communities (Chatelard, 2011b).

¹¹ See <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/funding-gap-threatens-refugee-response-lebanon>

¹² See <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/%C2%A350m-uk-support-lebanon-refugee-numbers-soar>

3. Strategic lessons learned

3.1 UNHCR evaluation of its response to the Syrian refugee crisis

A self-evaluation of the UN-led interagency refugee mission in the region, carried out by UNHRC (Crisp, et. al. 2013, p.1-2), with NGOs ICVA and InterAction, found that by substantially scaling up its intervention, UNHCR has 'helped to avert the [Syrian] refugee crisis from spiralling out of control'. The report lists its significant achievements as keeping most borders open; preserving protection space 'to a considerable extent'; maintaining positive and constructive relationships with the government; leading and coordinating the emergency operation; enabling refugees to benefit from access to basic public services (while malnutrition and mortality rates have remained relatively low); and expanding UNHCR's registration and coordination capacity (Crisp, et. al., 2013, p.1-2).

The report recognises five areas that now need more work (Crisp, et. al., 2013, p.1-2):

- 'More extensive and effective **outreach** to out-of-camp refugees.
- Improving standards and **security** for refugees living in camps.
- Reinforcing UNHCR's **presence** and capacity **at the point of delivery**.
- Ensuring the **immediate involvement of development actors** so as to mitigate the impact of the refugee influx on host states and communities.
- **Clarifying and strengthening UNHCR's approach** to coordinating the international response to the Syrian refugee emergency.'

3.2 Developing a medium-term refugee strategy

The increasing number of Syrian refugees is widely recognised throughout the literature as having the potential to destabilise and polarise Lebanon, as have past refugee influxes in Lebanon (Crisp, et al., 2013; International Crisis Group (ICG), 2013; Hinds, 2013).¹⁴ Increasingly, the literature calls for Lebanon to develop a comprehensive, forward-looking and medium-term refugee strategy (Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2013; ICG, 2013). The government has been criticised for its slow response to the current crisis - it wasn't until December 2012 that the government adopted a plan to manage the refugee flows (ICG, 2013).

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees. However, as host country, the Lebanese government is responsible for protecting refugees in its territory. A variety of bilateral, multilateral and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) finance, implement and support government activities to target refugees in Lebanon.¹⁵

3.3 Donors' funding promises

The literature widely criticises donors for not complying with aid pledges (ICG, 2013; Betts, 2009). This has meant that the Lebanese government does not have sufficient financial support, general

¹⁴ See <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/un-refugee-chief-urges-support-lebanon-risk-grows-syria-conflict-could-cross-borders>

¹⁵ For detailed analysis of international aid to Lebanon see: Combaz, E. (2013). *International aid to Lebanon* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 979). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham. <http://gsdrc.org/docs/open/HDQ979.pdf>

humanitarian and development activities are underfunded, and UNHCR and UNWRA's activities are underfunded.

4. Practical lessons learned from development interventions

4.1 Refugee camps

The literature base examining refugee camps in Lebanon, and other countries, is vast and presents many different perspectives, illustrating the controversial nature of this issue (ICG, 2013; Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2013).¹⁶ Some of the key issues include:

Refugee camps have been **overemphasised** in the humanitarian community. During an interview ODI's Simone Haysom noted that the humanitarian community has focused too much on researching camps, to the detriment of developing and financing other approaches to refugee crises. Crisp, et al. (2013) recognise that camps in Jordan and Northern Iraq have received the majority of international attention and resources, despite the estimation that more than 60% of Syrian refugees live outside camps (Crisp, et al., 2013). In recognition of this, the UNHCR (Crisp, et. al., 2013, p.1-2) evaluation report notes that UNHCR will carry out more extensive and effective **outreach to out-of-camp refugees**. But it also plans to improve standards and **security** for refugees living in camps (Crisp, et. al., 2013, p.1-2).

Camps have **separated Palestinians from Lebanese**. During an interview, Professor Dawn Chatty affirmed her 'strong position' against setting up camps in Lebanon, noting that many Syrian people do not want camps as they can separate and marginalise the refugees from the host community. Also, Syrian refugees are aware of some of the problems emanating from the already existing camps in Lebanon and Jordan – where there were reports of restrictions on people leaving. Chatty instead argues for a community supporting approach.

Camps can provide spaces for **radicalisation and militarisation**. In Lebanon, on one hand, there has been strong resistance to establishing official refugee camps from Hezbollah – among other reasons, Hezbollah fear the camps could militarise opposition. This concern is echoed in the literature, Barnes-Dacey (2012) warns of the 'dangers of autonomously run refugee centres', highlighting the emergence of Fatah-al-Islam the radical Sunni Islamic group that formed in 2006 in a Palestinian refugee camp, and by recent violence between state security and two camps in 2012 June (Hinds, 2013).

Meanwhile, on the other hand, during political discussions some Sunni and Islamic leaders have supported setting up camps. In light of the controversy surrounding camps, UNHCR has proposed the establishment of smaller 'transit sites' (Crisp, et al., 2013), while in its latest report, ICG (2013) has also called for a contingency plan to prepare plans for small refugee camps, should the numbers of refugees increase.

4.2 Service delivery

Education for children

Allaf (2011) notes that providing education in crisis situations is gaining increasing recognition as an important issue, and raises three important lessons. First, providing education can 're-establish normalcy'

¹⁶ See also - <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/07/08-syria-humanitarian-crisis>

for children (Allaf, 2011). Second, Allaf (2011) underlines that efforts must be made to ensure that support to refugees does not 'breed resentment and violence', but instead promotes tolerance and diminishes tensions between refugees and the host communities. This emerged as a pertinent lesson in the case of Iraqi refugees in Jordan – where many of the Jordanian host communities lived in similar or worse economic situations than the relatively wealthier Iraqi refugees (Allaf, 2011).

UNRWA Lebanon is currently focusing on ensuring education provision through various channels, including school parliaments and community workshops. Another issue UNRWA is working on is examining with authorities how to ensure that qualifications are recognised in both countries, which is important to ensure that students do not return to dangerous areas in Syria just to take exams. Refugee efforts currently underway in Lebanon face challenges of how to transition students from the Syrian to the Lebanese education system, and ensuring different languages are catered for.

Strengthening communities to host refugees

Various reports argue that integrating refugee services into existing structures and opening these also to host communities are important ways to promote inclusive attitudes to refugees, and to reduce tensions (Chatelard, 2011b, p.4; ICG, 2013). This is especially relevant when host communities face similar socio-economic challenges to the refugees – such as Iraqi refugees in Jordan. Chatelard (2011b) notes that budget and donor flexibility allowed the International Medical Corps to modify its health programme in Jordan to include non-insured Jordanians, in addition to Iraqi refugees.

Providing parallel services

In a synthesis report based on seven case studies, Haysom (2013, p.23) notes that some of the lessons from successful service provision to refugees are 'uncomfortable' as UNRWA's successes have been achieved via establishing parallel services 'a modality criticised for failing to develop state institutions, diminishing state responsibility and eroding sovereignty'. Harris (2009, p.2) also highlights the risks of providing parallel services noting that due to sectarian divides and fears over corruption, key regional donors (Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE) rebuilt infrastructure directly, 'undermining government credibility, stability, reconciliation and the reconstruction process as a whole' in Lebanon.

Roles of international actors

Multilateral bodies play a central role in service provision for refugees. Most Palestinian refugees depend on the specially mandated United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (**UNRWA**)¹⁷ for services, a limited amount of UNRWA services are available to other groups (Danish Refugee Council, 2009). **UNHCR** provides support mainly to refugees coming from Iraq and now Syria – and plays an important role registering refugees, providing services, household support, legal assistance and resettlement (Danish Refugee Council, 2009). Both UNRWA and UNHCR are under-resourced (Danish Refugee Council, 2009; ICG, 2013).

Roles of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector

Meanwhile, NGOs and the private sector are important actors in service provision for Lebanese citizens. The role of NGOs has been particularly accentuated by the low levels of government capacity. For example, 65% of people in Lebanon do not receive systemic health care coverage through state bodies but instead through NGOs and non-systemic government grants (which can be difficult to access) (Chatty,

¹⁷ See - <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=65>

Mansour and Yassin, 2013). Access to these limited government services and grants is often determined by sectarian membership and political clientelism (Chatty, et al., 2013).

The private sector has also played an important role, alongside other development actors, in assisting refugees – for example, in helping UNICEF to deliver shoes, winter clothes, blankets and fuel.¹⁸

4.3 Partnering with local organisations

INGO CARE ran a programme targeting Iraqi refugees in Jordan from 2007 onwards, through partnerships with 14 local Jordanian partners (Washington, 2011). The programme faced various challenges including: an initial lack of outreach to Iraqis; linguistic and cultural misunderstandings over the terms of the program; the patriarchal/paternalistic role of some of the local partner organisations in their local communities; and the perception that refugees were favoured over host communities with similarly low levels of access to resources (Washington, 2011).

To address these challenges, the CARE programme: assigned staff members to work on coordination and understanding between CARE and local partner staff; provided institutional capacity-building and mentoring to the partner organisations; and designed flexible funding agreements to improve the perceptions of equity (Washington, 2011).

Washington (2011) identifies **key lessons** to be considered before partnering with local organisations:

- Establish clear and mutually agreed definitions and expectations and ensure flexibility in funding agreements
- Understand the partner organisation's motivation, goals, capacities and extent of community outreach
- Use partners to identify, develop and plan projects
- Maintain regular, open dialogue, outside of formal monitoring processes
- Base programmes on pre-established and long-term on-going relationships with local partners.

4.4 Shelter and infrastructure

Crisp, et al. (2013) report that the greatest concern with the current wave of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is shelter – as the majority of Syrians are living in tents on private land or rented properties in locations across the country. Levels of security, rental costs, and service provision vary significantly.

In an interview, Dawn Chatty noted that at a recent conference about the crisis, participants had suggested that international actors could fund, coordinate and assist refugees to rent land and properties to ensure that better prices and facilities are available. Meanwhile, Crisp, et al. (2013) note that some Syrian refugees have already moved from initial locations due to 'different livelihood opportunities, rental charges and insecurity, including targeted attacks on refugees'.

4.5 Targeting urban refugees

Washington (2011) of CARE Jordan explains the distinct features of working with urban refugees, as opposed to camp based refugees. Washington (2011) notes that different targeting strategies are required, with: a stronger focus on **information campaigns** and **outreach work**; service provision in

¹⁸ See <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/makeshift-settlements-lebanon-unicef-delivers-essential-supplies-syrian-refugee>

multiple locations; **service provision** to host and refugee populations; and the development of **partnerships** with local organisations.

While there have been many waves of refugees leaving Iraq, the Iraq refugee crisis of 2006-7 is often cited in the literature as an important example to understand the challenges and lessons learned of refugee flows in an urban context (Chatelard, 2011b).

4.6 Varying impacts of refugees on different host communities

Disaggregation of the impacts of different refugee groups on different host communities is important to understand how some groups benefit from refugees in their country or area, while others may lose out. According to these variable impacts, relationships between certain host community groups and refugees can be positive or negative.

Chatelard (2011a, p.10) identifies studies providing ‘compelling evidence’ that the socio-economic **impact of Iraqi refugees in the region has been positive** – largely due to many of the refugees arriving with substantial financial resources, and subsequent trade and investment from the refugees. Meanwhile, Betts (2009, p.8) explains that when Angolan refugees were repatriated from Zambia, agricultural productivity in the region declined and ‘local people regretted the departure of Angolan refugees’.

Chatelard (2011a, p.9) warns host government and humanitarian organisations **not to exaggerate the number and poverty of Iraqi refugees** in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt as while this ‘might be effective in mobilising donor support’ it can have ‘negative implications for the refugees themselves, who are unjustly portrayed as a burden on host states and communities’.

4.7 Targeted development assistance (TDA)

In a policy briefing based on a mix of case examples, Betts (2009) argues for a TDA approach to manage refugees. A TDA approach integrates the needs of both refugees and host communities, with the objective of improving refugees’ access to rights, self-sufficiency, and, where possible, local integration (Betts, 2009, p.1).

Betts (2009, p.2, 17-19) proposes the following for making TDA a ‘win-win’ approach for donors and host countries:

- Political needs:
 - Donors should commit: significant additional funding, and an integrated approach targeting refugees and citizens
 - Host states should offer: self-sufficiency and possibly local integration¹⁹ of the refugees; and protection (including a neutral arbiter and a credible negotiation process).
- Practical needs:
 - Institutional collaboration between UNHCR and other development actors
 - Joined-up government and new budget lines
 - Interventions based on an integrated approach (e.g. with focus on creating sustainable livelihoods for refugees, using pre-existing community structures and relationships between host communities and refugees, using evaluations to monitor and follow-up on project implementations).

¹⁹ It is important to note that Lebanon, Syria and Jordan’s current approach to refugees does not include local integration.

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Key websites

- UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response
<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>
- UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response: Lebanon
<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>
- UNRWA Lebanon
<http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=65>
- International Crisis Group: Lebanon
<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/lebanon.aspx>

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