



Responding to the Syrian crisis in Lebanon

Collaboration between aid agencies and local governance structures

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Purpose

This paper is part of a series of research pieces produced under the 'Urban Crises Learning Fund' managed by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). Funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), the Urban Crises Learning Fund aims to build an in-depth understanding of how the humanitarian sector can most effectively operate in urban contexts.

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Lebanon's refugee crisis has highlighted the need for much closer coordination among the various organisations and local authorities involved in the response. This paper analyses existing collaboration mechanisms in relation to the Syrian crisis in Lebanon and provides a series of recommendations, on how national, local and international humanitarian actors can work together more effectively to enhance urban refugee responses in Lebanon and perhaps in other countries. In the context of a protracted urban crisis, this paper argues that humanitarians will only be able to ensure their responses are sustainable and meet needs on the ground if they work closely with local authorities.

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Acronyms

CDR	Council for Development and Reconstruction
DGUP	Directorate General of Urban Planning
GoL	Government of Lebanon
HCUP	Higher Council for Urban Planning
IFI	Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
LCRP	Lebanon Crisis Response Plan
MoSA	Ministry of Social Affairs
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RRP	Regional response plan
RTO	Regional technical office
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UoM	Union of municipalities

Executive summary

This working paper seeks to document and analyse collaboration mechanisms between local authorities and humanitarian actors in addressing the Syrian refugee crisis in urban and peri-urban settings in Lebanon. It outlines existing mechanisms of collaboration, analyses their potential strengths and weaknesses, and derives lessons and recommendations for improving refugee responses in Lebanon, and potentially in other national settings. The report focuses on two case studies: the largely hybrid urban district of Bourj Hammoud, one of the main commercial hubs of Greater Beirut, and the peri-urban coastal region of Sahel El Zahrani, located between Saida and Tyre in South Lebanon.

The response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon, which broke out in 2011, faced many challenges initially; namely the lack of a solid national response strategy and weak local governance capacities, which were needed to respond to a large-scale crisis. International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies took the initial lead in responding to the crisis. Local authorities, who were at the forefront of the response, lacked the adequate capacities to respond and thus were involved in a less organised manner. The humanitarian response suffered overall from weak coordination between international actors, the central government, and (in)formal local authorities, resulting in unequal and scattered aid distribution.

As the crisis prolonged, the government of Lebanon (GoL) became increasingly involved and eventually, in 2015, led the development of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) jointly with UN agencies. Various ministries took a more proactive role in the response, in particular the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), which was designated by the Council of Ministers to take on an official role in the response. At the local level, municipalities and unions of municipalities, despite lacking an official responsibility,

made serious efforts to respond to the refugees due to increasing pressures in their localities and based on moral imperatives. International and UN agencies initially targeted Syrian refugees on the basis of the humanitarian principle of immediate alleviation of suffering following displacement. Local host communities, who were impacted by the crisis due to the increase in the local population and a higher demand on limited basic services, were initially less involved and addressed in the response.

This working paper explores the various formal and informal levels of collaboration, or lack thereof, between international and local organisations, UN agencies and local authorities. In Lebanon, establishing successful coordination mechanisms between national and local authorities and aid agencies is politically and logistically challenging. Due to funding constraints and limited programme timeframes, humanitarian organisations find it difficult to maintain a continuous long-term relationship with local municipalities and unions of municipalities. Moreover, aid agencies often opt to bypass local authorities in project implementation in order to avoid local bureaucracy. Internal politics also create another challenge for coordination with local authorities, as this can interfere with the orientation of aid.

UN agencies and INGOs are now mostly turning short-term relief programmes into longer-term projects for development, and have shown serious efforts to adapt their responses to address local contexts more adequately. However, clearly defining roles among international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and UN agencies and establishing solid coordination mechanisms remains a challenge and is important to enhancing overall public management in urban crisis contexts.

The research concludes that complementing sectoral approaches by adopting area-based approaches to

respond to emergency crises allows humanitarian and development programmes to address the needs of different vulnerable groups, including refugees and local communities, in a more efficient and sustainable manner. This allows the implementation of more inclusive needs-based responses, whilst also preventing unequal aid distribution and the 'compartmentalisation' of society. Moreover, this working paper highlights the weakness in focusing and adapting responses to respond to urban settings which host the majority of refugees. As such, it is important to raise awareness and develop the necessary tools and coordination mechanisms to optimally address refugees in urban contexts, especially with more refugees settling in urban areas worldwide.

Finally, coordination efforts and mutual aid agreements for emergency service provision can provide a solid ground for local actors to know: first, how to turn

international aid into an opportunity rather than financial and political dependency or reason for domestic marginalisation, and, second, to learn the advantages of domestic coordination, internal agreement, and develop the capacities to manage foreign aid. Overall, reinforcing the role of local authorities and actors has proven to be more efficient and manageable in the short-term; however, over time, it also faces political limitations thus challenging the ability to reach a broader consensus on the management of domestic issues. This paper proposes a multi-scalar coordination approach to respond to crises and address diverse social vulnerabilities.

1

Introduction

The Syrian crisis has led to the highest level of refugee population displacement since World War II. By July 2015, the majority of refugees have settled in Turkey (1.8 million), followed by Lebanon (1.2 million), which currently hosts the highest refugee population per capita in the world (one refugee to every four Lebanese), and Jordan (629.128 thousand) (UNHCR, 2015).

The Syrian crisis also caused devastating economic losses to host countries. Lebanon, for example, was estimated to have been affected with 10 billion dollars in economic losses, which lead the government to urge the international community to increase the international aid entering the country (Hassan, 2016).

In the absence of a solid national response strategy to the challenges posed by the influx of refugees and in the context of weak governance and a crumbling system of public service provision in Lebanon, international organisations including United Nations (UN) agencies took the initial lead in responding to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011. This was done in the absence of a national coordination strategy, poor knowledge of current conditions, lack of mechanisms for regulating or coordinating responses, and dire human needs to which they had to respond urgently. The difficulty of coordinating the refugee crisis was further exacerbated by the fact that Lebanon has neither signed the 1951 Refugee Convention nor the 1967 Protocol, forcing United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) operations to go instead through informal agreements. It was also rendered more complicated by the informal nature of refugee settlement in the country, which followed refugees' personal social networks and their ability to fend for themselves outside of nationally organised settlement strategies. As a result, the humanitarian response became ad hoc, resulting in

lower efficiency and an unequal distribution of regional and social aid.

As the Syrian crisis took a protracted form, it began to have implications for Lebanon's demographic, economic, security, and political situation. An increase in vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian populations and higher unemployment rates led to negative economic consequences. The tourism sector was adversely affected due to the rise in security threats related to terrorism and conflicts. The strain on various sectors of the national economy and the pressure on infrastructure and basic services at the national level became challenging, particularly given the political stalemate that had paralysed the country for several years.

In addition, local authorities struggled to deal with the challenges posed by the presence of refugees. Despite poor financial and human resources (Atallah, 2016), tight administrative restrictions, and the pressure exerted by their own voters who viewed the refugee influx as a threat to their livelihoods, many municipalities and unions of municipalities stepped up to the challenge with the meagre resources they had. Their efforts to respond to the crisis can be explained by the sheer physical pressure of the refugees and moral imperatives that were frequently expressed by respondents in many areas of the country, as well as security concerns that caused them to monitor and channel refugee settlements. With uneven levels of capacity, typically connected to size (more than 70 per cent of the 1,000 registered municipalities in Lebanon have fewer than 4,000 residents registered in their area), it is impossible to evaluate the performances of municipalities on equal grounds. However, when looking at their relationship with international organisations, it is clear that these local authorities respond to the refugee crisis in a

more difficult manner, such as when they are ignored or bypassed by the organisations. These may, in some instances, pay them a 'reconnaissance' visit when they first enter their areas, but fail to coordinate with their interventions, even when these interventions fall directly within their jurisdiction.

By 2014, the crisis had clearly taken a protracted form. The Lebanese authorities, international and local aid organisations, as well as UN agencies, began to initiate long-term efforts to shift to more sustainable forms of intervention. This required them to acknowledge the importance of coordination and collaboration given the scale of the crisis and the recognition that none of the actors could act alone – particularly with the dwindling volume of international aid. In 2012, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) was officially designated by the Council of Ministers to be actively involved in the crisis response and Lebanon's Prime Minister established an Inter-Ministerial Committee responsible for managing the refugee response with the Minister of Social affairs as the co-ordinator (UNHCR, 2015). MoSA thus stepped up its role by committing to co-leading sectoral meetings, and strengthening partnerships with international organisations in the response. The government also increased its involvement which, in 2015, led to the creation of the first Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP). Despite such efforts, the adopted mechanisms of coordination and collaboration needed to be revisited, especially because the incentives for aid organisations to collaborate remained contingent on other factors, such as donor agendas. Hence, a number of organisations had developed solid relations with local authorities and considered them their entry points to areas where they operate, while others had 'learned to bypass them'. This is not to say that things worked well in the absence of collaboration, but to recognise that collaboration mechanisms remain weak and that incentives and reassurances will have to be provided if mechanisms are to be set in place in a reliable way.

As such, despite the intervention of MoSA and numerous coordination efforts undertaken since the

1.1 Objectives

The challenges outlined in the opening section of this paper reflect the need to pause and reconsider humanitarian actors' collaboration mechanisms with national and particularly local authorities in Lebanon. This working paper aims to document and analyse collaboration mechanisms between local authorities and humanitarian actors in addressing the Syrian refugee crisis in urban and peri-urban settings in Lebanon. It seeks to outline existing mechanisms of collaboration, to analyse their potential strengths and weaknesses, and to derive lessons and recommendations for improving refugee responses in Lebanon and potentially in other national settings.

1.2 Aid coordination

The importance of improving coordination of the management of international aid in times of crisis has increasingly gained visibility over the past decade amongst donors, aid agencies, and national governments. In fact, there has been a noticeable policy shift in aid effectiveness and coordination, starting with the *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* in 1995 (Bourguignon, 2007). The prime focus of this declaration was to enhance the delivery and management of aid through upgrading mechanisms between official development agencies and partner countries, including aligning donor support to partner countries, harmonising developmental actions, and improving mutual accountability for the more efficient development results.

Following the Paris Declaration, several forums and interventions have taken place that recognise local governments as the main actors in aid coordination and effectiveness. For example, the *Accra Agenda for Action* (AAA, 2008), which is the outcome of the Accra 3rd High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, called for the need to develop capacity building initiatives for local authorities and emphasised the importance of local resources in the provision of technical cooperation.

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