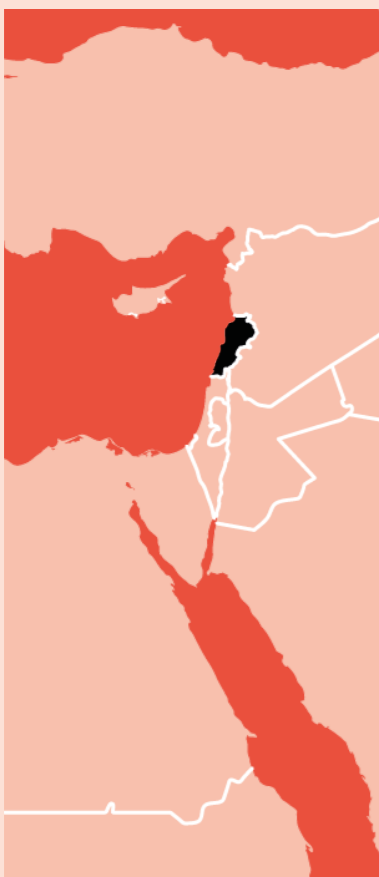# Lebanon: Between stability and stagnation

We speak about refugees every single day. The politicians, the media and, of course, the humanitarian actors ... We have this feeling that they are everywhere, and they are actually. But we barely ever hear their voice.

Humanitarian worker in Lebanon.

The influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon since 2011 has created a massive migration crisis. The country is currently host to the highest percentage of refugees per capita in the world, putting immense pressure on its already fragile infrastructure and basic services. The relationship with Syria has not been easy. The country's historical involvement in Lebanese internal affairs and the civil war between 1975 and 1990 has led to a great deal of resentment in some segments of the population. The links between the Syrian government and Lebanese political actors (notably Hezbollah) and Lebanon's strategic position in a very turbulent region have only increased the complexity of the crisis. The decades-long presence of a large Palestinian refugee population is another source of political and economic instability. Concerned that history does not repeat itself, the Lebanese government has vetoed the establishment of camps for Syrian refugees, and has prevented any assistance or other support that might encourage the refugees to stay.

Lebanon is an unusual humanitarian environment in that physical access to the affected population is relatively easy: the country is very small, with a developed communication infrastructure and relatively few security concerns. It is also a very attractive base for international humanitarian employees; working and living conditions are good, it is comparatively safe, goods and leisure activities are numerous and agency staff can bring their families with them.

From an international to a locally led response

A large number of Lebanese civil society organisations (CSOs) have been involved in basic service provision for years, and have been some of the first actors to respond to the refugee crisis. While initially perceived by international actors as lacking neutrality and impartiality, by 2014, when the international response shifted towards targeting host communities, international NGOs began to regard local CSOs as natural subcontractors, even equal partners. While there is still competition between Lebanese organisations and international NGOs over funds, leadership and visibility, tensions have eased as attention has turned towards how 'aid localisation' will evolve in the coming years. The government has restricted work permits for foreign humanitarian staff, and many Lebanese have taken up these positions. Despite often having no previous humanitarian experience, one UN representative felt that 'the operation has benefited from a very high level of education when it comes to national staff. So, this also has contributed to very high standards in terms of quality'.

The government's position towards Syrian refugees has been ambivalent. On the one hand, it has discouraged them from settling for the long term, while on the other requiring the response to their needs be integrated into national health and education systems. The authorities have also helped in the design of a response that goes beyond a classic humanitarian operation. Only around 20% of Syrian refugees live in informal tent settlements, with the rest spread among host populations in urban and peri-urban areas. The Lebanese situation is therefore a hybrid situation that is to some extent closer to an internal displacement context, despite significant legal constraints on Syrians in terms of residency and work.

Towards a single cash-based response

This very particular environment – a protracted crisis with refugee and host populations in an expensive middle-income country – has encouraged the humanitarian system to innovate and adapt. One of the most significant changes has been the gradual evolution of cash-based assistance towards a single cash system. This began at the end of 2015, when the major cash providers introduced a single e-card incorporating the various forms of cash transfer available (with varying amounts and payment frequencies, unrestricted cash versus cash for food, etc.). In 2017,

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donors decided to guarantee Syrian refugees an unconditional monthly fixed amount of cash assistance for three years. The creation of this single cash system is considered one of the greatest recent humanitarian achievements, not only in Lebanon but also more generally within the humanitarian system as a whole. These changes are based on a longer-term approach and vision for both refugees and host communities, as explained by a donor representative:

We've always said, if we're going to try to reform the cash assistance sector, it can't just be for the next two, three years. It has to be a longer-term goal, with some kind of social safety net system for the most vulnerable.

The invisible wounds of conflict

After seven years, the exceptional situation of refugees has merged with normality. Refugees are scattered among vulnerable host populations with similar needs, adding to the complexity of the response and the risk of tensions between and among communities, for instance around access to healthcare. Some of the most vulnerable appear to be overlooked because they are very isolated, because of their status or because of their specific needs (the elderly, people with disabilities, Palestinian refugees and refugees living in small and isolated informal settlements). As one INGO representative explained:

I have an example of a family who lived in a building in Tripoli, with an elderly person who hadn't gone out since arriving in Lebanon and probably didn't have the [physical] ability [to do so]. It was a building with flights of stairs, probably no facilities in

the bathroom, nothing, and this person had no wheelchair. Those people become a bit transparent, but there are contextual and structural difficulties: locating people, managing to follow [up on] them.

In a country where the wounds of past wars are still healing, refugees from Syria have been welcomed with compassion. Over time, however, the psychological trauma of the war is being forgotten. With their relatives at home still in danger and prospects for the future in ruins, Syrians have to live with the stigma of being refugees and the shame of being dependent on aid. These traumas are rarely spoken about openly, making them difficult to identify and address. Aid interventions need to integrate more localised decision-making with the affected population, particularly with young people, who have been violently propelled into adult life, carrying a heavy load supporting their families but unable to get on with their lives, get married and start a family of their own.

From stability to longer-term development?

Seven years after the Syrian crisis began, and with no resolution in sight, its impact on Lebanon continues to grow. It is very unlikely that every refugee from Syria will be able to return home, at least in the near future. While the aid response has helped to establish a degree of stability in the here and now, the question remains how the transition can be made to longer-term development. If stability is not to become stagnation, future aid programmes will need to adopt a political vision of society, embracing the specific dynamics of this context and aiming for social transformation. Refugees may be at the centre of current debates and of the aid response, but they continue to be excluded from decisions that will have an impact on their lives. They, along with other vulnerable people in Lebanon, will need to be given a voice. • **NAWAL KARROUM, GROUPE URD**

This write-up is based on a case study conducted for the SOHS 2018 by Groupe URD. The full case study can be found at:
sohs.alnap.org

Adam Patterson/DFID