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The role of host communities in north Lebanon

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Research conducted in Akkar, north Lebanon, suggests that the role played by the host community demonstrates good local capacity which should be built on to encourage further civic engagement and empowerment.

Two problems have beset the response to the situation of Lebanese host communities with regard to the Syrian refugee presence. The first is the tension over short-term versus long-term strategies towards the displacement, with the former being emergency responses largely excluding the host community and the latter being 'developmental' approaches which include them as 'vulnerable' populations. The second is differences in perception and approach between actors, particularly governmental and non-governmental actors, as to whether host community actors should be taken seriously as an empowered channel of assistance or should be viewed as vulnerable.

Host communities play a significant role in assisting Syrian refugees as a result of the decision of the Lebanese government not to set up camps. This assistance takes many different forms. For example, Lebanese individuals host people directly in their homes (either family members, prior acquaintances or complete strangers); individuals lend an empty 'home' or outbuilding to be used by a refugee family without charging rent; landlords reduce the rent payment or accept long delays in rent payment; individuals lend small amounts of money to refugees for everyday expenses; and individuals give furniture, clothes, labour and larger amounts of money to Syrian refugee strangers.

The spontaneous assistance provided by host communities, which in many respects replicates that of the Albanian host community during the much shorter Kosovo refugee crisis in 1999, should be incorporated into longer-term development strategies; the host communities should be seen not only as a vulnerable population in need of assistance but also, more usefully,

as empowered actors with the potential to generate cohesive community initiatives. This would also require the perspective of the host community to shift towards a more nuanced view of their own potential capacity, alongside their vulnerability.

How are host communities operating?

The majority of assistance being afforded to Syrian refugees by the Lebanese host community has come about through personal exchanges and one-to-one interactions. With many individuals offering shelter to complete strangers, out of humanitarian sympathy, it is not necessarily the case that Lebanese individuals are only helping Syrian family members or prior acquaintances – but these closer affiliations naturally tend to make up a slightly larger proportion of support. It is not possible to identify any broad trends in who is providing support; Lebanese individuals, men and women, well-off or living just within their means, those with large families or living alone, are all contributing to giving assistance. Of course, it should be noted that there are also individuals who are taking advantage of the situation by exploiting the vulnerability of refugees, through charging high rents or paying low wages.

Alongside this there is a micro-economy forming on highly localised scales, as refugees sell food coupons or medical aid for rent money or cash for other payments. A collection of young mothers living in tents on some land outside Halba town described how they sell the diapers they receive as aid from UNHCR to pay rent for the land. Another woman described how she 'repays' the assistance of neighbours, who helped her build a bathroom and assisted with small amounts of money, by giving excess food she receives from the UNHCR food

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Syrian women cook together in a mosque converted to accommodate refugees in Arsal, northern Lebanon. 2012.

vouchers. People also run up small amounts of credit with local shopkeepers on a weekly basis. A system of job swapping is also evident amongst skilled manual workers and teachers. These small-scale bargains between refugees and their hosts are useful for both populations to get by and highlight both the importance of dignified 'autonomous' trade for the refugee, and the significance of the role of the host community in providing assistance by accepting the refugees into the informal economic life of the community.

Secondly, Lebanese individuals who are hosting Syrian families do not necessarily expect anything in return for the support they are giving; indeed, many would see this as an affront to their personal humanitarian efforts. However, there is a form of gift economy occurring, with many Lebanese individuals who offer assistance expecting to be repaid by the Syrians at some point in the future – and there is a mutual understanding that this will occur. For many Syrian refugees it is a necessary source of pride that they repay whatever assistance they are receiving. In effect, Syrian individuals are involuntarily creating a burden of debt or obligation which will take many years to repay.

Thirdly, a large number of networks of assistance are being formed between women. Many refugee families have no men present; often the Syrian men who are present are disabled and unable to work and Lebanese women often provide them with assistance.

Although women rarely hold positions of governmental authority within the municipality in north Lebanon, women are often landladies and matriarchs within their household, or are widows or have husbands working abroad in the Gulf; these women are more likely to rent out an outbuilding or basement of their home where they can.

The host community support within Akkar reflects a community with a great deal of humanitarian spirit and moral sensibility for the welfare of refugees, shows the proactive attitude of the Lebanese, and indicates bonds of trust between members of the two national communities (although, it should be noted, not necessarily between different religious communities).

Help to host communities

These Lebanese hosts who open up their homes to refugees are essentially operating outside of much of the assistance being given to refugees by NGOs. From the outset the 'host' Lebanese community has been viewed as a vulnerable group but excluded from the largely emergency-oriented planning meant for refugees. Currently they are seen as vulnerable but an integral part of the longer-term 'development' approach which is viewed as the best way of dealing with the protracted Syrian refugee crisis. Within the 2014 Regional Response Plan 6, local communities and authorities are intended to be supported with activities in areas such as water and sanitation, social cohesion, health and employment, to be delivered by humanitarian and development actors.¹ These intended initiatives demonstrate an awareness of the importance of local actors as social agents in supporting the refugee population, alongside the necessity to refrain from excluding them.

Some schemes, such as the flagship joint UN-Lebanese government Lebanese Host Communities Support Program, continue to frame host communities as 'vulnerable' rather than 'empowered'. Nevertheless, there are examples of schemes which are moving towards sustainable and embedded support for host communities. One Polish NGO

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assisted in the renovation of an outbuilding within a Lebanese host home, to make it liveable for a refugee family, by fitting a bathroom, kitchen, chimney, windows and doors. Significantly, this NGO dealt with the landlady of the building, rather than with the refugees. And local NGOs (such as Akkar Network for Development) are carrying out projects with the municipality and women's empowerment projects, which aim to build on the capacity of the community.

A precedent?

The 1999 Kosovo refugee crisis, which saw nearly half a million Kosovar refugees cross into Albania, helped to transform civil society in Albania and foster longer-term links between the Albanians and Kosovars. It was the actions of the Albanian population towards the refugees in offering housing, food, education and counselling services to 70% of them which generated a level of trust between the two populations and, crucially, civil society and local governments. This gave Albanians a sense of empowerment that continued afterwards.

In the case of the Kosovar refugees, Albanian NGOs played a critical role in identifying host

families and helping link them to UNHCR programmes, and collective shelters were set up by local authorities. These collaborations fostered trust and communication among different segments of society and directly increased social cohesion and local capacity.

The key question to emerge from the role of host communities in Lebanon, then, is whether the current combination of the local, national and international responses to the crisis will inspire long-term capacity building at the local level. While building on the assistance offered by the host community may be problematic owing to its ad hoc nature, the potential it has for future community cohesion and civic engagement could now be further strengthened. The perspective of the host community itself should shift towards a more nuanced view of their potential capacity, alongside their vulnerability, in order to achieve this.

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1. 2014 Syria Regional Response Plan: Strategic Overview
<http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Syria-rrp6-full-report.pdf>