The role of municipalities in ensuring stability

Josep Zapater

Responses to crises in Lebanon's Beka'a region in 2017 show that refugee-hosting municipalities can be a pillar of peaceful coexistence and must be supported.

The eastern Lebanese region of Beka'a, which shares a long border with Syria, hosts around 360,000 registered Syrian refugees. This is both the highest absolute number among regions in Lebanon and also the highest proportion of refugees to local population. In 2017 the region experienced a series of upheavals which posed significant challenges to peaceful coexistence between host communities and refugees.

Crises in the Beka'a region

In February and March 2017, thousands of Syrian refugees were evicted from the municipality of Zahle and around the strategic Riyak airbase. While security concerns were cited, authorities did not establish contingency plans for alternative settlements. In April, Lebanese host communities demonstrated in several municipalities demanding the closure of shops held by Syrian refugees. In June, fires destroyed two refugee settlements in the Central Beka'a municipalities of Bar Elias and Qab Elias, killing two refugee girls. And in July and August military operations by Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) effectively cleared the outskirts of Arsal (which hosted around 11,000 Syrian civilians) of militant presence, ending a three-year stalemate. These events have left the refugee community exhausted, more in debt, more vulnerable and filled with uncertainty and fear that these successive crises have been staged to force them to return to Syria. They have also contributed to raising tensions between refugees and host communities.

UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) and its partners have made significant efforts in response to these crises. After hostilities ended in Arsal, the municipality, together with humanitarian and development partners, developed an Arsal Action Plan which for the first time includes integrated humanitarian

and development planning and participation of Syrian refugees in planning. Mediation and advocacy have also been extensively used during the Riyak and Zahle eviction crises.

Municipalities: key players in peaceful coexistence

Against this difficult background, local authorities have generally played a positive stabilising role in the Beka'a region, which is not always sufficiently recognised and understood. This was made apparent by the diverging reactions in Beirut and locally to the fires that destroyed two refugee settlements. Fires in refugee settlements are a recurrent problem, with casualties and deaths (in particular of children) not uncommon. For years, UNHCR and humanitarian partners have been working both on fire mitigation, including the placing of fire extinguishers in virtually all settlements and training in their use, and on contingency response. The municipalities of Bar Elias and Qab Elias responded quickly to the fires, with firefighters and Lebanese Red Cross personnel putting themselves at risk to limit casualties. Local civil society and humanitarian workers gave emergency assistance to Syrian victims and rebuilt the sites in a matter of days. The perception among the donor and diplomatic community in Beirut, however, was initially very different; the rumour that arson had been committed by disgruntled Lebanese host communities reached Beirut much more quickly than did news of the overwhelming solidarity with Syrians that local municipalities and Lebanese civil society actors showed.

In Arsal, humanitarians and development actors and the municipality have built very positive working relationships. A dedicated monthly coordination mechanism has been established. Perhaps more importantly, UNHCR and other humanitarian actors have fulfilled commitments to respond to the needs of poor Lebanese as well. The municipality has consistently played a moderating role between Syrian and Lebanese communities, taking into account how initial solidarity in 2013 and 2014 has given way to weariness, complaints over

economic competition and fears of collusion between Syrian refugees and armed actors.

In Zahle, UNHCR and the municipality have started a dialogue in which the difficulties of hosting a large refugee population have been expressed. This includes a feeling of abandonment by Beirut elites, who are unable or unwilling (due, in part, to political sensitivities) to reach agreements on concrete policy guidelines on hosting refugees at the local level. Economic considerations also play a role. The agriculture and food industries in the Beka'a region could not survive without Syrian refugees. At the same time, agricultural and urban landlords refuse to pay municipal tax on the rent paid by refugees. Thus, those who gain the most from the Syrian refugees' presence are not assisting municipalities with the substantial extra costs incurred as a result of their presence, such as those associated with water and solid waste management.

Increasing support to municipalities

In Lebanon, as in many other countries, municipalities are the administrative body most directly affected by the presence of refugees. They also have a responsibility and an interest in keeping the peace in their territory – often resisting direct pressure from a part of their Lebanese constituency who may be advocating for tougher measures against refugees. It is questionable, however, whether the humanitarian and development community has done enough to help them in this effort.

Some valuable efforts are in place and the repeated crises in 2017 have actively been used to increase support to municipalities. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNHCR co-chair a social stability working group which analyses tensions in the Beka'a region. The Ministry of Social Affairs and UNDP produce maps of risks and resources, designed to channel donor resources to needs identified at municipal level. UNHCR maintains diplomatic ties with mayors, governors and the LAF to keep tensions manageable and to transparently communicate that return is the only sustainable solution for Syrian refugees,

UNHCR/David Azia

An informal settlement hosting 120 families near Barelias, Beka'a Valley, Lebanon.

once conditions allow it – thereby assuaging widespread fears that the international community is aiming for local integration. An increasing percentage of UNHCR's meagre resources goes to assisting vulnerable Lebanese, either through small community projects such as provision of refuse trucks and solid waste management plants, or through delivery of household assistance to poor Lebanese families including fuel cards and rehabilitation of housing. Municipal coordination bodies are in place in three key municipalities (Arsal, al Qaa and Zahle).

All these efforts are, however, partial and relatively fragmented and there is a danger that, without a more structured approach to supporting municipalities, their role in securing peaceful coexistence will be progressively weakened and crises will become less manageable.

The importance of area-based coordination and planning

In order to support peaceful coexistence, the international community must take bold steps to consider the municipality as a natural unit for planning and coordination, transitioning from a traditional sector-based humanitarian coordination structure.

In particular, this needs to take into account key aspects such as assistance to vulnerable Lebanese households, management of informal settlements, dialogue with refugee communities, water and sanitation provision, improvements to local infrastructure and enhancing access to livelihoods. For this to happen several important steps need to be taken.

The Government of Lebanon and the United Nations' Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017-2020[1] is, overall, well-prepared and evidence-based. At the same time, its capacity to address local needs and channel resources to municipalities needs to be reinforced, and there is a need to recognise that after seven years local authorities do not need to be endlessly consulted – they need to be supported.

Similarly, while current discussions around the coordination model in Lebanon have introduced some elements of area-based coordination, overall they remain focused on sector and agency responsibilities. What is needed is a clear commitment from the international community, including from donors, to prioritise municipalities on the basis of jointly identified, evidence-based need.

The local plans that have been developed through the Mapping of Risks and Resources framework, led by the Ministry of Social Affairs Lebanon and UNDP, represent a valid model. Their capacity to channel donor funding into local development, and their synergies with humanitarian planning, need to be reinforced. As a pilot initiative, UNDP and UNHCR are endeavouring to integrate development and humanitarian planning in the Arsal Action Plan. These efforts will need to be properly evaluated, corrected and scaled up.

Technical staff of humanitarian and development agencies involved in coordination, planning and information management remains overwhelmingly concentrated in the capital. Recognition of the importance of area-based, localised coordination and planning will need to be accompanied by a decentralisation of resources.

Direct assistance by humanitarian agencies to poor Lebanese households remains insufficient and fragmented, reinforcing a sense of injustice among host communities. Agencies need to undertake more integrated planning and to take into greater account the role of local communities, including mayors and civil society, in identifying persons in need.

In the eighth year of the Syrian conflict and with increased pressure on Syrian refugees to return to an unstable and dangerous situation, the international community needs to provide bolder, more purposeful support to Lebanese authorities. In a difficult environment in 2017 in the sensitive Beka'a region, municipal authorities have demonstrated they have more than earned the right to be a key recipient of and partner in this support.

Josep Zapater *zapater@unhcr.org*
Head of Sub-Office Zahle, UNHCR *www.unhcr.org*

This article was written in a personal capacity.

1. UNHCR's Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan in Response to the Syria Crisis http://bit.ly/UNHCR-3RP-2017-2018