Failure to adapt: aid in Jordan and Lebanon

Jon Bennett

Many aid agencies in Lebanon and Jordan find themselves stuck in a wholly inappropriate paradigm of assistance from which they cannot extricate themselves.

As the whole edifice of aid machinery descended on the world’s latest emergency, it soon became apparent that it was ill-equipped to adequately address the needs of a displaced population from a middle-income country.

Although a majority of the refugees are either hosted or in rented accommodation, Za’atari camp in Jordan (now the world’s largest refugee camp) stands out as the most visibly ‘managed’ Syrian population. It encompasses everything that is wrong about camps. The Jordanian government confines the population, taking possession of their identity papers, and disallowing free movement to other parts of the country. The aid agencies collude by containing the crisis through provision of aid. Both parties are bewildered when stones are thrown at them by frustrated camp residents. This is a predominantly educated population with resources and a history of regional migration and ties across the Middle East. They are finding it difficult to be ‘grateful’ for having to queue for a loaf of bread and a food parcel while trapped in a dusty field on the Jordan/Syria border.

There are some stark examples of organisations with solutions looking for problems. In Lebanon the population’s biggest burden is spiralling rents, made worse by reducing work opportunities. They are not generally food insecure, yet they receive cash vouchers ($27 a month) from the World Food Programme (WFP) which cover only a part of the actual food consumption of people who are used to spending far more per month on essentials. Far from being a life-saving intervention, the voucher is just one of several ‘coping strategies’ – resources they can draw on – and it is hardly surprising that up to 40% of these vouchers are sold rather than redeemed. The depletion of household resources is, at this stage in the crisis, a financial, not nutritional or food-related, crisis. To say that the $27 per month voucher offsets other costs is a truism that does not justify such a costly venture, the administration of which drains both financial and human resources.

At least twice a month people queue up for their vouchers at warehouses or football stadiums in urban centres where a combination of ‘non-food items’ (from UNHCR), food vouchers (from WFP) and ad hoc gifts from Gulf states and philanthropic individuals are distributed. The registration process is meticulously designed to avoid fraud at an enormous cost of time and expense. The recipient then takes the voucher to a designated shop where agency staff ‘monitor’ the counter to ensure that the voucher is spent only on nutritious food items – no toothpaste, shampoo or chocolate.
Dimensions of gender-based violence against Syrian refugees in Lebanon

Ghida Anani

Assessments of the impact of the Syrian crisis indicate high levels of sexual and gender-based violence, with rape, assault, intimate partner violence and survival sex appearing increasingly common. Humanitarian agencies urgently need to work together to address this trend.

In times of conflict everyone is affected by violence; however, women and girls in particular are more at risk of facing different forms of violence including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) due to the lack of social protection and lack of safe access to services. There is wide recognition of sexual violence as a weapon of war but other forms of violence against women during conflict also exist, including domestic violence, sexual exploitation and early marriage.

In early September 2013 UNHCR estimated the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon at 720,003 and the number of the displaced is still rising. Several local and international organisations have conducted rapid assessments to better understand the magnitude and impact of the crisis on displaced Syrians in Lebanon. Some of the main issues identified by these assessments include overcrowding, inadequate access to basic services, rising rent and food prices, and competition for the limited work opportunities. The assessments also helped to identify women and children as among the most vulnerable groups, solely by virtue of belonging to a particular gender, a certain age group or social status. This in turn shed light on the increase in SGBV among the daily as more people are evicted from rented accommodation that they did not anticipate staying in for more than a couple of months before returning home. Middle-class families who arrived in comfortable cars find that their savings are rapidly depleting, hence the seeming paradox of a family arriving for a food box or voucher in a Mercedes.

It is surely not necessary to go through the rigmarole and huge expense of itemised vouchers, food and non-food parcels, and distribution logistics in a country where supplies are plentiful. There seems to be as wilful blindness on the part of donors and aid agencies caught in a repetitive stereotype of refugee assistance. Without the redundant modalities of the aid ‘industry’ on the ground, Syrian refugees could probably have received at least twice as much money in a simple cash hand-out.