

Failure to adapt: aid in Jordan and Lebanon

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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.



Syrian refugees queue for relief items at Za'atari camp, Jordan.

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If the shop too often contravenes the rules, it is penalised or dropped from what shopkeepers acknowledge as a quite lucrative scheme.

Inevitably, the paper voucher has attracted its own micro-economy. The arithmetic is simple. The voucher is sold by the recipient for \$20 to the middle men (usually immediately outside the gate of the distribution site) who then sell it to the shopkeeper for \$23, who then redeems it for its face value of \$27. This is big business, representing about \$20 million dollars per month changing hands. In an effort to curtail nefarious transactions of this kind, the voucher will soon be replaced by an electronic e-card that will include a proportional contribution for non-food items. It is not yet known how the middle men will capitalise on this aid credit card but they will.

Meanwhile, the UN is preparing for a shift from general to targeted distribution in which they identify the 'most vulnerable' families. This is a shifting target, changing almost

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.

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