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Categorising Syrians in Lebanon as ‘vulnerable’

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Vulnerability assessments are used by humanitarian actors to identify those at greater risk of harm but their use in the response to displaced Syrians in Lebanon is problematic.

M, a Syrian man in his mid-30s, living with two children, his wife and his mother, had not received food aid in over a year. He wondered what it was that made his family ineligible for assistance when neighbours had told him that if there was only one provider for five dependents then you were eligible. “I just don’t understand why I was cut off [from assistance]”, he said. “You’re supposed to be a family of five, and we are five. And there’s no one else to provide for the family. My neighbours, they are still [receiving assistance], and they have two males who can work.” Meanwhile, M’s brother, who had two children and a wife, continued to receive aid. Was it because his brother’s wife was sick? Or was it that his own household had three adults? M did not know what made him and his family ineligible for food aid and, in many ways, such lack of clarity is intentional.

Access to food aid for Syrian refugees in Lebanon is, like many other humanitarian assistance programmes, determined by an assessment of a family’s or individual’s ‘vulnerability’. Driven in large part by a scarcity of resources, this practice is inspired by the notion of ‘triage’ as used in emergency medicine to classify individuals based on priorities.¹ While it has become widely used by humanitarian actors, the exact criteria used to determine eligibility is kept obscure intentionally, in part to prevent people making false claims based on the criteria and in part because these criteria, or ‘cut-offs’, change with each new round of donor and budgetary assessments.

UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) and other humanitarian actors employ vulnerability assessments as a means of screening to reduce the number of people eligible for protection and/or resettlement. The effect of these categorisations, however, goes well beyond determining access to humanitarian programmes and services. Our

research with Syrian refugees in Lebanon, conducted over 24 months between 2013 and 2017, suggests that differentiating individuals based on these criteria has consequences well beyond questions of humanitarian access, even affecting how Syrian refugees perceive themselves.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon are generally in a deeply precarious social and legal situation. Lebanon has long refused to ratify the key refugee protection instruments, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. It also lacks any meaningful legislation on asylum issues. While UNHCR has been able to operate in the country since 1963, in 2015 the Lebanese government suspended all UNHCR registration processes for Syrian refugees. UNHCR still considers most Syrians in Lebanon as refugees but has in practice come to differentiate between registered, unregistered and what it terms ‘recorded’ refugees, i.e. those who have approached UNHCR after the government’s ban on new registrations. This means that of the approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees, only roughly two thirds are actually registered with UNHCR. Importantly, these three groups have varying access to protection and assistance.

Only registered refugees receive a UNHCR registration certificate. Following the introduction of Lebanon’s new residency policy for Syrian nationals in 2015, possession of this documentation became one of two means for Syrians to renew their residency in Lebanon, the other being to secure a sponsor under the *kefala* system as an economic migrant. This 2015 policy made the renewal or regularisation of stay so onerous and expensive a process that a considerable number of Syrians are unable to renew their permits and are consequently forced to reside irregularly in the country

– that is, without legal permission or documentation. The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017-2020 estimates that 60% of those over the age of 15 lack legal residency, an increase from 47% in January 2016.

Constructing vulnerability

The categorisation of certain individuals as ‘vulnerable’ has been critical to the broader humanitarian governance of Syrians in Lebanon, where targeted assistance was put in place as early as 2013. The primary manifestation of this logic has been the annual Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR) survey. This survey provides the basis of targeted humanitarian assistance, allowing the Syrian population to be segmented by levels of vulnerability, and the basis of the review determining the new cut-off for humanitarian assistance. Crucially, the sample is drawn from the population of registered refugees, which structurally excludes a significant (although undetermined) segment of the broader Syrian refugee population.

The 2017 VASyR² does not define vulnerability but rather identifies its components, such as shelter conditions, poverty levels, food (in)security, household demographics, and coping strategies. Overwhelmingly, its findings demonstrate that the vast majority of registered Syrian refugees are significantly vulnerable. For example, in 2017, 76% of refugee households – a 5% increase on the previous year – were living below the poverty line. However, the exact criteria used to determine eligibility for assistance remain opaque and what defines the ‘most vulnerable’ is a source of great contention among Syrians.

Vulnerability and gender

A set of gendered assumptions appears to underlie a humanitarian understanding of vulnerability. For instance, one of the key recommendations of the 2017 VASyR is that “[w]omen in general, and female-headed households in particular, require additional support.” This appears to be driven by two findings: that working refugee women have lower incomes than their male counterparts

despite working almost the same number of hours, and that female-headed households have a lower income than male-headed households. However, the survey also finds that young women are significantly more likely than young men to be enrolled in secondary school. This points to the neglect of important vulnerabilities particular to men that remain under-emphasised in the survey’s recommendations. A 2016 assessment by the International Rescue Committee found that the humanitarian system does not prioritise supporting Syrian men in Lebanon, who are often unable to access the support they need, and who feel, moreover, that they are excluded from it. Their involvement in informal work makes them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, for which there are no effective or consistent responses. Perhaps more alarmingly, the report finds that the factors that create vulnerability among single and employed men are often either not captured in traditional assessments or are interpreted as actually diminishing their vulnerability.³ Gendered notions of vulnerability appear to predominate, in which certain demographic groups, such as women and children, are prioritised while others – young and/or single men – are ignored or excluded. For example, being employed is generally seen as reducing one’s vulnerability; however, one in five men surveyed by the International Rescue Committee claimed to have experienced exploitation and abuse at work.

Vulnerability and resettlement

How vulnerable an individual is considered to be also determines their access to resettlement. Within the assessment procedure for resettlement, vulnerability is again the key determinant. As one senior UNHCR staff member explained: “Firstly we [UNHCR] do a selection where we pick out those who are most vulnerable. And then we look closer and closer: are you really vulnerable? Yes, but really, really vulnerable? And that’s how the pool all the time decreases.”

Certain categories are perceived to be vulnerable by definition. According

to UNHCR, those automatically assessed as vulnerable and to be considered for resettlement from Lebanon are “survivors of violence/torture, women and girls at risk, [and those with] medical needs or disabilities”.⁴ This approach is compounded by some resettlement schemes, such as the UK’s programme for Syrian refugees, which officially prioritises “the elderly, the disabled and victims of sexual violence and torture”.⁵ Many resettlement programmes for Syrian refugees appear to restrict access to resettlement for single Syrian men, despite the vulnerability they experience.⁶

Vulnerability and (in)visibility

Notions of vulnerability reinforce perceptions of what a ‘real’ refugee looks like, perceptions that are active among both Syrians themselves, and many local authorities. There is a real risk that labels accentuate the contradictions they seek to reduce. One clear example is how humanitarian agencies in Lebanon have validated the distinction between ‘registered’ and ‘unregistered’ refugees by using only the registered population in the vulnerability assessment.

The 2016 VASyR survey stated uncritically that the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon had stabilised, without reference to the government’s 2015 residency policy that has restricted the number of Syrians. The 2017 survey now acknowledges explicitly the implementation of a restrictive border policy and a freeze on registration by the Lebanese government. Nonetheless, the survey continues to rely on a sample of registered households. While this is acknowledged in the opening pages, the distinction is blurred within the text where the sample is taken to be representative of all “Syrian refugees”. The result is that the needs and potentially particular vulnerabilities of unregistered refugees – whether recorded or not – are rendered invisible within one of the most significant policy planning and assessment documents of the crisis response.

A similar obscuring operates at a local level, where shelter conditions – one of the components of the vulnerability assessment – become proxies for not only one’s level

of need but even whether or not one is considered a refugee by local authorities. In a meeting with a district official in the north of Lebanon, one of the authors was advised to visit municipalities along the coast because there – unlike in towns more inland – refugees could be found. It became clear that this local official, like others we encountered, understood those living in informal settlements or shelters to be refugees, in contrast to those who had rented accommodation within villages and towns. Local officials also drew a similar distinction between Syrians who have no prior ties to the community and rely on assistance, and those who used to work (or continue to work) in the locality. Neither those who live in rented homes nor those with access to work are the ‘exemplary victims’ that local authorities have in mind.

In an era of increasingly targeted funding, the development of a set of criteria to determine access to services may be inevitable. However, it is critical that, in creating and using these categories, humanitarian actors are aware of how they may reinforce perceptions of refugees’ vulnerability that are not necessarily helpful.

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