

## The importance of social capital in protracted displacement

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**By understanding the role that social capital plays in the lives of Syrian refugees in Lebanon – how it is created, sustained, converted and what happens when it breaks down – we hope to generate discussion about ways to further tailor assessments, targeting and programming in this and other situations of protracted displacement.**

Through a series of focus group discussions held among refugees across Lebanon and follow-up interviews in selected communities we aimed to capture the state of the four key ‘capitals’ at refugees’ disposal: material, financial, social and human. Although generally these resources were in decline, refugees were in some cases managing to create significant new social capital. That social capital is in many cases their most important asset in protracted displacement.

Social capital refers to those resources that are embedded in social networks. Our research in Lebanon<sup>1</sup> indicates that social capital appears to be the only capital that can be created even in situations of relative vulnerability, and then exchanged for access to livelihoods or used in cost-saving measures or as a form of basic social insurance. Two types of social capital are especially important for these purposes: ‘bonding’ capital, which is created among members of refugee groups, and ‘bridging’ capital, which refers to the connections between individual refugees and outside actors, such as citizens of the host community or aid agencies.

### Convertible capital

Although displacement disturbed both their access to, and the functioning of, their old support systems, many refugees have been able to revive and grow their social networks in Lebanon. Refugees often use their pre-existing social networks to inform their choice of location, choosing to move where they can enjoy social and economic support. The strong ethnic/kinship clusters we encountered during our research reflect this. In Bourj Hammoud in Beirut we came across a tightly knit community of Syrian Kurdish

refugees who had influenced each other’s choice of where in Lebanon to settle. Similarly, the news that a small Sunni community of Hebbariyeh in the predominantly Shi’a-controlled south of Lebanon was highly accepting of conservative Sunnis from Syria has convinced a relatively large number of refugees from the wider Damascus area to settle in this remote part of the country.

Once settled, refugees typically restored contact with relatives – some of whom had also fled to Lebanon – and established new relationships with other refugees, aid actors and members of the Lebanese host community. Beka’a Valley and Akkar in northern Lebanon have exerted a relatively strong pull factor due to pre-existing connections and the availability of cheap housing as well as seasonal or manual employment. Several years into the humanitarian crisis, however, their popularity as destinations began to wane. Nowadays it is through ‘in-group’ social networks – bonding capital – that the refugees we met are able to identify new locations with better employment opportunities and/or lower housing costs and to move within Lebanon.

For Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the restoration of social capital serves several significant functions. First, refugees may create a security net by pooling their resources. Examples of this include the communal cooking and emotional support in times of crisis witnessed in Bourj Hammoud. They may also form relationships with representatives of aid agencies, communicating with them to ensure that emergencies are rapidly reported to the appropriate organisations, as witnessed in Akkar and Beka’a.

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Social capital may also provide opportunities for improving livelihoods. Refugees who have access to information-sharing and mutual assistance networks may increase their chances of being matched with paid work, identify cost-saving opportunities for important goods and services, and attract support from individuals who can exert influence on their behalf. Across all locations, improving livelihoods is perhaps the most important usage of bridging capital and it is a resource that is shared more commonly than one might expect. Refugees with access to Lebanese employers often shared any additional labour opportunities that had arisen with the members of their social networks. Refugees with non-competing skills (for example, in Hebbariyeh, a repairman and an IT specialist) also shared their client base.

Social capital also helps refugees to optimise the use of their limited resources and opportunities. Refugees may be able to considerably reduce rental costs by finding more affordable accommodation through their in-group network, or improve each other's access to livelihoods by looking after each other's children, thus allowing parents to work. Social capital may also strengthen the position of people vulnerable to exploitation, as in-group networks can warn them of exploitative or unreliable employers or landlords. An important tool for maintaining these social networks is the smartphone, and most refugee households we interviewed had at least one. It enabled them to break out of geographical and social isolation and, most importantly, to communicate with potential employers about work opportunities.

Although it is arguably their most convertible capital, refugees' ability to both create and then convert social capital into tangible benefits fluctuated considerably across locations, appearing to be determined by the extent to which refugees had other resources to share or invest into the network. Social networks can sometimes also work in exclusionary way, and benefit people who are socially privileged at the expense of those who are not, diverting

aid and employment opportunities towards a select few. Non-governmental organisation workers frequently pointed out the pernicious role that informal kinship and patronage networks could play in the delivery of aid to refugee communities.

### **Social capital as indicator of refugee well-being**

In places where vulnerability was more pronounced and immediate needs outweighed any considerations of future benefits, social networks appeared to break down completely. As refugees came to regard each other as direct competitors rather than potential supporters, their ability and/or willingness to share information and jointly benefit from opportunities disappeared. We noticed this phenomenon in Beka'a and Hebbariyeh among particularly impoverished refugee households. In all cases the breakdown patterns looked similar – the efforts required to meet essential needs resulted in the gradual decline of social connections and, with it, the disappearance of social security. As one refugee in Beka'a, a place where large numbers of refugees competed for the same low-paid agricultural jobs, explained: "We do not have time to take care of each other ... we do not have even time to talk to each other anymore."

This breakdown of social capital is, we believe, a sign of extreme vulnerability. The loss of this kind of capital severely undermines refugees' capacity to recover from catastrophic events. It can also increase the likelihood of refugees resorting to negative coping mechanisms such as begging, prostitution or returning under unsafe conditions. The degree to which a household is vulnerable is therefore both a symptom and a cause of the breakdown of social capital, and this loss could therefore be considered as an important practical indicator of a household's extreme vulnerability. Based on the evidence available, we believe a socially isolated household would need more urgent and/or specific interventions than would a household that is equally poor but has not lost its social capital. Earlier or more targeted intervention could help bring



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Workers, who are mostly Syrian refugee children and teenagers, work in the vineyards in the Beka'a valley, Lebanon, from 7am until 1pm; many also work a second shift in the afternoon. One 13-year-old girl, the youngest of seven children in her family, said: "I haven't been to school for two months. It is high season for work and I have to work double shifts. We need the money to survive."

affected households back to the point where they would be able to rebuild and maintain both bonding and bridging social capital.

### Including social capital in aid interventions

We have come across sporadic attempts by United Nations (UN) agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to capture and use household social capital in their assessments – looking at indicators such as homogeneity of refugee communities, or density of social networks. But the use of social capital could be much broader, if sufficient efforts were invested in understanding how it works and operationalising it further.

Although including social capital would be out of place in the initial stages of response, we believe it is an important dimension of protracted displacement and may warrant inclusion in assessments, targeting and programming. We believe it would be important for large actors such as UN agencies and WFP to try to design and pilot effective ways of capturing this dimension in the key needs and vulnerability assessments. We would also encourage INGOs to try to capture and include social capital in specific sectoral and project needs assessments, and use those findings to tailor interventions and/or prioritise households with little social capital.

In situations where social capital is almost depleted, we would advise agencies to ensure that assistance is made available until households build up sufficient capacity to resume normal social interactions, and replenish their social capital to the point where it can be converted into sufficient in-group support. We believe it would also be worthwhile to develop and pilot intervention strategies that build on existing in-group social capital in order to ensure the resilience of a wider

social network of refugee households. These strategies could explore interventions such as community-based pooling of funds and community-based savings, loans and micro-credit schemes. At a minimum, the do-no-harm principle should be applied to ensure that interventions that separate closely knit communities or extended families, or separate refugees from their existing bridging contacts, are avoided. Finally, agencies must be helped to understand and quantify social capital so that it can be measured cost-effectively. We hope that our findings resonate with aid agencies' experiences and help make a case for additional research and pilot programming in this area.

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1. The research was conducted in the second half of 2017.