

The 1st Conference of Refugees = Partners



Economic Inclusion to Mitigate The Refugee Crisis

Beirut, Lebanon

2 August 2019

CONCEPT NOTE

Refugees = Partners is holding its first conference on the 2nd of August 2019, on the subject of “Economic Inclusion to Mitigate the Refugee Crisis.” The conference aims to address the repercussions of the refugee crisis on Lebanon by acknowledging the structural dysfunctions of the Lebanese economic system and the challenges faced in dealing with the refugee crisis, and highlighting the economic contributions of Syrian refugees as well as potential options for building an inclusive socio-economic environment.

I. Background

After more than eight years of ongoing conflict in Syria, the MENA region and Lebanon in particular have faced significant and existential challenges that various actors must address. The Syrian conflict has been considered one of the most catastrophic conflicts since WWII in terms of the direct involvement of global, regional and local actors; intensity of armed battles; vast economic and human losses; gross human rights violations; aggravation of oppression, resurgence of identity politics and conflict economy while forcing millions to be IDPs and refugees. There seems to be no end to the conflict in sight and the likelihood of reaching a political solution has diminished, especially with the deterrence of the Geneva peace process and the constant diversion in the positions of the conflict’s key actors.

The outbreak of the Syrian conflict has adversely affected Lebanon in a multiplicity of ways. The closure of trade routes between Syria and Lebanon, regional destabilization, and deterioration in security and stability has led to a sizeable downturn in the Lebanese economy that has intensified the political polarization and gridlock. The conflict also initiated the plight of refugees such that Syrian refugees accounted for approximately 25 percent of the Lebanese population as of 2014. The steady influx of Syrian refugees has reportedly put a strain on an already frail infrastructure, added more pressure on public services, and exacerbated the labor market in the low-skilled informal labor sector, aggravating social tensions with local host communities.

This has contributed to the emergence of a hostile narrative towards Syrian refugees, with refugees increasingly used as scapegoats in both public and local discourse for the economic, social, security and environmental failures in the country.

Additionally, in the absence of a comprehensive policy on Syrian refugee presence in Lebanon, the legal status of refugees has become “precarious.” The lack of policy framework to govern relations with Syrian refugees has led to increasing insecurity which has consequently reduced the likelihood of Syrian refugees’ active participation in the development of the Lebanese economy.

To mitigate the impact of the crisis and the influx of refugees, substantial support from donors and humanitarian organizations has been allocated to support the state, refugees and local host communities. However, there is a need to implement programs that move away from cash assistance into sustaining activities such as employment or livelihoods programs.

II. Conference details

Refugees = Partners project is a research-based initiative implemented in coordination between the Lebanese Economic Associations (LEA) and the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) to promote an inclusive socio-economic environment by creating a counter-narrative on rights and protection of the Syrian refugees through advocacy, social activism and calls for policy change. The project intends to accomplish this through evidence-based knowledge and a wide-reaching media campaign that highlights the shared humanity between the Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees, with a focus on the socio-economic impacts and contributions of Syrian refugees to the development of local communities.

The initiative, which is a joint effort by Lebanese and Syrian civil society organizations, intends to create a platform for constructive dialogue, identify challenges, opportunities, and share responsibilities, counter the polarized and hostile narratives against refugees and enhance the emergence of inclusive policies that benefit both the Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees.

Refugees = Partners invites you to share your research paper, present its main findings, and take effective part in the discussions on the current conditions and challenges faced by refugees, and to suggest practical and sustainable alternatives. The conference offers an opportunity to engage in substantive discussions on serious issues facing Syrian refugees, thus, assist in guiding tangible recommendations and a more effective collaboration and partnership among existing initiatives.

III. Conference Main Themes

- *Situation Ante*: Structural challenges facing the Lebanese economy prior the Syrian conflict
- The refugee crisis as an opportunity to transform and reform
- Refugees as an opportunity for the prosperity of the Lebanese economy
- Building a future: Refugees and host communities as partners after return

IV. Conference Topics

- Current status of refugees: Legal, socio-economic and humanitarian response
- Discriminatory laws and regulations: The legal framework governing institutional relations with refugees
- Macro-economic performance: Growth, demand, and humanitarian support economies
- Labor market and local economic dynamics
- Public services and refugees

V. Conference Main Objective

- The development of a nonpartisan discourse to work for an inclusive public good.

VI. Conference Assumptions

- The conflict in Syria is beyond the Lebanese and Syrians' ability to resolve
- The impact of the refugee crisis could be mitigated through alternative policies or more efficient institutions
- Evidence-based knowledge and research can support more efficient policies

VII. Conference format

Refugees = Partners first conference will be a one-day event divided between two panel sessions and four parallel working groups' sessions highlighted in the comprehensive tentative agenda that follows:

Keynote Speech - Dr. Tarek Mitri | The Issam Fares Institute on Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (IFI – AUB)

Panel I: Current Status of Refugees: Legal, Socio-economic and Humanitarian Response

Moderator

Sobhiya Najjar | Journalist and Social Activist

Speakers

Dr. Jad Chaaban | The American University of Beirut (AUB)

Rabie Nasser | Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR)

Rapporteur

Alissar Kaghadou | Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR)

Mariam Farah | Refugees = Partners Project

Guiding Questions:

- How are policy decisions regarding the refugee's crisis made?

- What are the mechanisms that were used in the decision-making process regarding refugees over the past few years?
- What are the disadvantages of the strategy that was used to cope with the refugee crisis, and what are its advantages?
- How can the development of policy-making mechanisms in Lebanon ensure the alleviation of burdens and create economic opportunities for Lebanese and Syrians in a way that will not undermine economic development, and thus, increase the margin of the labor force participation?
- How could the implementation of alternative policies ensure prosperity for everyone and simultaneously protect their rights?

Parallel Session 1: Working Groups 1A - 1B

WG 1A: Discriminatory Laws and Regulations: The Legal Framework Governing Institutional Relations with Refugees

Moderator

Fadel Fakhri | The Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH)

Speakers

Máiréad Collins | Christian Aid

Léa Yammine | Lebanon Support

Elham Barjas | Refugees=Partners Project

Rapporteur

Marwan El Tibij | Refugees= Partners Project

Rabe Banna | Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR)

Guiding Questions:

- To what extent have regulations towards refugees in Lebanon been discriminatory and exclusionary?
- Have the de facto informal institutions and policies aggravated or alleviated the marginalization and alienation of both Lebanese and refugee communities?
- How can the guarantee of basic human rights, such as the, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, right to work, decent living conditions, and social protection, enhance the economic performance?
- Who benefits and loses from these discriminatory laws and regulations?
- In what ways can participatory and inclusive institutions improve the social relations including trust, cooperation, and volunteerism between the Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees?
- What are the options to transform de jure and de facto institutions towards more human protection and social justice?

WG 1B: Macro-economic Performance: Growth, Demand, and Humanitarian Support Economies

Moderator

Dr. Ghassan Dibeh | The Lebanese American University (LAU)

Speakers

Dr. Mounir Rached | The Lebanese Economic Associations (LEA)

Dr. Kamal Hamdan | Consultation and Research Institute (CRI)

Wafsa Najdi | Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI – AUB)

Rapporteur

Maya Gavin | Refugees=Partners Project

Aline Mansour | Refugees=Partners Project

Guiding Questions:

- What is the economic impact of refugees' crisis and how does it differ from the overall impact of the conflict in Syria on Lebanon?
- What are the structural challenges of the Lebanese economy and how does the refugee crisis aggravate or reduce the deficiencies of the Lebanese economy?
- What are the gaps in terms of the data and indicators on the Lebanese economy? Do we have well-established evidence on the performance of the economy? (i.e., growth, employment, consumption, and investment)
- What is the political economy of the refugee crisis? Who has designed the policies and what is the role of the international community? Who has benefited and/or has been adversely affected by the economic policies? Do refugees have an impact on the economic policies and interventions?
- What are the strategies and policies that could expand economic opportunities to benefit both Lebanese and refugees?

Parallel Session 2: Working Groups 2A - 2B

WG 2A: Labor Market and Local Economic Dynamics

Moderator

Dr. Kanj Hamade | The Lebanese University

Speakers

Dr. Rima Habib | The American University of Beirut (AUB)

Cynthia Saghir | Refugees=Partners Project

Jessy Nassar | King's College London

Rapporteur

Elham Barjas | Refugees= Partners Project

Mariam Farah | Refugees= Partners Project

Guiding Questions:

- Is there a general consensus on the unemployment rates and the labor force participation rate in Lebanon in the aftermath of the Syrian conflict? What is the labor force participation rate?
- To what extent has the refugee's influx affected and changed the structure of the labor market in Lebanon? What are the sectors that have absorbed most refugees?
- Is the Lebanese labor force competing with the refugee labor force over employment opportunities, or did the labor supply shock of Syrians have a complementary effect?
- To what extent has the informal economy absorbed the Syrian refugees' labor supply and how decent is it?
- Who has benefited from the entry of refugees into the labor markets?
- What are the viable strategies and policies that can help expand job opportunities for all and improve work conditions, including fair wages and social protection?
- How can the economic relations between Syrians and Lebanese improve the social capital between the two communities? And how can these relations assist in building an effective cooperation during reconstruction phase in the future?

WG 2B: Public Services and Refugees

Moderator

Dr. Mohammed Alhammedi | Durable Solutions - Jordan

Speakers

Dr. Maha Shuayb | Centre for Lebanese Studies

Ms. Maha Al Ayyoubi | Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)

Rapporteur

Alissar Kaghadou | Syrian Center for Policy Research

Marwan El Tibi | Refugees= Partners Project

Guiding Questions:

- How have health and educational policies responded to the sizeable refugee influx?
- What types of pressure has the crisis created for the infrastructure, human capital, and institutions?
- The crisis has substantially increased the demand for more utilities, energy, housing, security, administration, and transportation. How can we evaluate the performance of the response from different actors: the government, civil society and local communities, the UN, and refugees?
- How can the expansion of the Lebanese economy and the encouragement to invest in infrastructure trigger economic growth and ease the spillovers into other sectors?
- What are the sustainable solutions to managing the sizeable increase of the population and demand on services? What is the potential role of municipalities?

Panel II: Debriefing and Final Remarks: Future Scenarios for Potential Socio-economic Inclusion of Syrian Refugees

Moderator

Fatima Ibrahim | Refugees= Partners Project

Speakers

Ziad Abdel Samad | The Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND)

Frances Guy | UNDP

Dr. Jad Chaaban | The American University of Beirut (AUB)

Rapporteur

Rabe Banna | Syrian Center for Policy Research

Elham Barjas | Refugees= Partners Project

Guiding outline:

- Summary of discussion and main outcomes
- Future Scenarios for Potential Socio-economic Inclusion of Syrian Refugees
- Next steps

VIII. Expected Outcomes

- The dissemination of the main research findings produced by different institutions to make scholarly content as usable and widely-accessible as possible. The researcher's contributions in their field of knowledge can foster a systematic improvement of further research, which essentially could be useful for instrumental developments in policy and decision-making.
- A comprehensive statement that presents an overview of the estimated socio-economic burdens and benefits, as well as the potential socio-economic opportunities, that can guide in monitoring and evaluating policy influence and help engage in policy dialogue that can potentially lead to policy change.
- Explore opportunities to expand partnerships with a wide range of actors, exchange resources, advocacy efforts and access to data and information.

IX. Next Steps

- Research questions or initiatives: Coordination across research communities on the refugees' dialogue with different stakeholders.
- Organize and form a committee to develop an integrated policy that both examines the positive and negative impacts and contributions of Syrian refugees on the Lebanese economy, and develops a clear plan to deal with refugees.