Lebanese Economic Association
الجمعية الإقتصادية اللبنانية

المركز السوري
لبحوث
السياسات
Syrian Center For
Policy
Research

Refugees = Partners Media Round Table

اللاجئون شــــركـاء
REFUGEES = PARTNERS
في الإنسانية، في المسؤولية

Bridging the Data Gap between Media & Research:

Challenges and Responses

Beirut, Lebanon, February 2020

Concept Note

Refugees = Partners is holding a round-table discussion on the availability and accessibility of quantitative and qualitative data in regards to the socio-economic indicators of refugees in Lebanon. When it comes to accessing credible and up-to-date evidence-based information concerning the socio-economic impact of the Syrian refugees on the development of local communities, the sparsity and diversity of data sources have become a challenge, both to the media and academic fields.

I.   Background:

After the outbreak of the Syrian conflict and the subsequent influx of Syrian refugees, the overall political and social environment in Lebanon has witnessed a staggering rise in discrimination and hostility towards Syrian refugees, especially in the media. Refugees have been scapegoated in the public discourse and have been blamed for Lebanon's numerous economic, social, security and environmental failures. These trends have been confirmed by several national and regional surveys and opinion polls conducted between 2013-2019, which show that an overwhelming majority of the Lebanese population believe that refugees are a serious economic threat and support stricter regulations against them.[1]

The negative and unbalanced media has served as a quintessential medium to propagate and perpetuate these harmful stereotypes. Media, in the form of local news outlets,

televised news broadcasts and reports, and social media (i.e. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp), has been utilised by local political actors to disseminate unfounded and inaccurate statements that exaggerate the negative social, and economic impact refugees have on the country.

Politicians and public figures have made countless allegations over the last few years that refugees have been draining the Lebanese economy and are hindering economic growth, that they have led the unemployment rate in Lebanon to soar to 46%,[2] and are fiercely competing with the Lebanese labour force. In addition, isolated incidents, such as those in Arasal in 2014,[3] and in Mizyara[4] in 2017, have been used to perpetuate the vilification of Syrians and their portrayal as "security threats."

The process of manufacturing the narrative surrounding refugees in Lebanon has led to two major developments: (1) A xenophobic and racist public discourse that cannot easily be remedied by simple media campaigns and public outrage; (2) Belligerent institutional and socio-economic discrimination such as: restrictions on Syrians obtaining legal residency, stricter border policies, curfews, mass evictions, forced returns, arbitrary arrests, and the implementation of draconian labour policies, all of which further deteriorates the living conditions and security of an already vulnerable displaced population.

While Syrian refugees have adversely affected the Lebanese economy (infrastructure, waste-management, power sector, educational system, primary healthcare, etc.), news outlets and political figures often ignore the sizeable contribution that Syrian refugees make to Lebanon's economy. Since their arrival, Syrian refugees' contributions through rent payments, their labour, their consumption of goods, and the substantial humanitarian aid that Lebanon receives annually have all benefited the economy of Lebanon.

However, the lack of informative, fact-based data on refugees and the impact they have had on the Lebanese economy has facilitated the circulation of populist and xenophobic narratives surrounding refugees.

There is a dire need for access to transparent research and information to counter the polarizing discourse which relies on misleading, selective, and incorrect information. Since the lack of comprehensive surveys and data is a major constraint for journalists, independent media platforms, and activists alike, access to information will significantly benefit these people and platforms that are aiming to oppose the xenophobic and racist rhetoric surrounding both refugees and migrants in Lebanon.

Therefore, there is a dire need to bridge the data gap between media and research.

II.   Round-table Details:

Refugees = Partners is a research-based initiative implemented in coordination with 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 generating evidence-based knowledge and creating a wide-reaching media campaign that highlights the shared humanity between the Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees. This initiative will focus primarily 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 knowledge, expertise, and to take part in the discussions on the role of the media and political discourse in perpetuating misconceptions and social tensions between refugees and host communities. The media roundtable offers an opportunity to engage in substantive discussions on issues of media representations of Syrian refugees and the overall neglect of their socio-economic contributions, and thus, assist in highlighting challenges and responses and furthermore help in formulating tangible recommendations for ethical journalism and reporting guidelines specific to covering the refugees' issues.

III.   Main Themes:

● Create a counter-narrative on rights and protection of Syrian refugees through combined evidence-based information on the socio-economic contribution of Syrian refugees
● Refugees are most often identified by their displacement. The voices of refugees themselves need to be heard in the media to better inform the public debate.
● The negative media portrayals promote the dehumanization and marginalization of immigrants and refugees, which thus ferments support for discriminatory policies and regulations.
● The significance of alternative media outlets in creating a counter-narrative regarding refugees' rights, protection, and socio-economic contributions using up-to-date and evidence-based information.

IV.   Topics / Guiding Questions:

● The role of mainstream media, community leaders and social media in promoting social cohesion and eliminating tensions between host communities and refugees.
● Media narratives and representations of refugees' impacts on the local economy.
● The politics of fear and the rise of anti-refugee sentiments locally and globally - trends and discourses.
● Strategies to approach audiences of various backgrounds to counter the narrative surrounding refugees.
● The benefits of using fact-based research in media.
● The limitations of social media as a medium to disseminate information.
● The validity of building an alternative narrative and other tools required such as lobbying, advocacy and judiciary cause.

V.   Main Objective:

● To promote an inclusive socio-economic environment by creating a counter-narrative regarding rights and protection of the Syrian refugees.

VI.   Format:

Refugees = Partners Media Round Table will be a half-day long event composed of two round table discussions with a maximum of 30 participants, primarily focusing on profiles such as media academics and experts, journalists and media representatives, and with a priority for the members of our advisory committee.

VII.   Expected Outcome:

● A set of recommendations for ethical journalism and reporting guidelines specific to covering the refugee issues.
● An agenda for evidence-based journalism.

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