



## Refugees = Partners First Workshop

# “The Impact of Restricted Legal Status on Syrian Refugees Access to Livelihood in Lebanon”

Beirut, Lebanon  
July 30, 2021

## Final Statement

Refugees = Partners (R=P) launched a series of three workshops titled “Towards A New Policy to Promote Syrian Refugees’ Access to Legal Status in Lebanon” on 29 June, 2021.

These workshops aim at addressing the legal and structural challenges that prevent refugees from obtaining legal status in Lebanon, by assessing the impact of recent development on vulnerable communities, particularly the Syrian refugee community, and to study the innovative approaches to help establish a comprehensive socio-economic framework.

During the first workshop on “The Impact of Restricted Legal Status on Syrian Refugees Access to Livelihood in Lebanon,” the participants interventions dealt with work, health, education, livelihood, and other subjects, in addition to the impact of the absence of legal papers and valid residencies on the refugees’ access to these services and its impact on their lives. The participants also discussed the impact of the current economic crisis in Lebanon on the livelihood of vulnerable communities, including those of Lebanese, immigrants, refugees and foreign workers. Moreover, they discussed the beneficiaries and victims of the existence of discriminatory and exclusionary policies targeting refugees, and how these measures have exacerbated the marginalization of Lebanese society in general. Finally, the discussion dealt with the way in which the refugee crisis has been invested in guiding public policies in Lebanon, and what the expected role of the international community in helping to solve these crises.

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## **Refugees Access to Health**

The participants discussed how the refugee crisis was simply another reflection of the failure of the state, and its representatives in the legislative, executive and judicial institutions, to perform its role towards the citizen and the resident, this role represented by planning and taking informed decisions (based on knowledge) to manage interests and guarantee rights for a decent life (for all the people it governs).

Refugees today live in a miserable legal, economic, and social situation due to the difficulty of obtaining valid legal residency. Figures indicate that only 20% of Syrian refugees have legal residency in Lebanon, according to the VASyR 2020 report, in addition to the absence of any clear and obligatory context for birth records and personal status of Syrians in Lebanon to reduce their lack of identification documents. These legal challenges had significant repercussions on their ability to access work (only 0.5% of refugees have a work permit), as well as their access to education, health, and other services.

Regarding the health issue, Dr. Fouad Fouad, a Physician and Professor of Public Health at the Faculty of Health Sciences at the American University of Beirut (AUB), and Director of the Refugee Health Program at the Institute of Global Health at the same university, pointed to the great disparity in the number of people receiving the vaccine against the Corona virus, as well as in the number of those registered on the vaccination platform, where the proportion of vaccinated Syrians does not exceed 1.3% compared to 93% of the Lebanese. He wondered about the reasons behind the failure to integrate refugees into a very important health issue such as fighting a global pandemic, and how the absence of legal papers, and to a lesser extent, the lack of necessary awareness, may have a severe impact on public health of the general population.

Dr. Fouad also explained how the composition of the health system in Lebanon and the administrative duplication between a prevailing government system and a humanitarian relief system run by international institutions, led to the absence of an effective strategy for managing this technical sector, which, as well, led to the ineffectiveness of providing health services that were supposed to be available to everyone in parallel, and this is the case when it comes to the issue of providing vaccines and the vaccination campaigns.

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## **Education and Legal Documents**

Dr. Maha Shuayb, Director of the Center for Lebanese Studies and the Supervisor of several research studies concerning the access to and the quality of education, talked about how educational administrations restrict the right to education only to Lebanese citizens, and therefore, restricts foreigners' access to educational services, which permits some politicians to brag about allowing refugees into schools rather than considering access to education a legitimate right for all residents.

Dr. Shuayb added that having the international organizations deal with the issue of refugees and ignore the issue of their legal status in parallel with the provision of educational services has led

to a major gap in the course of the educational process and the presence of many obstacles that prevented many students from completing their basic education.

The Lebanese state's insistence that the refugee education must be confined to the government sector without eliminating the legal obstacles related to providing legal papers that allow students to register for official certificate exams, turned education into a case of extortion for students as well as for international organizations that fund refugee education, and this weakened the position of those organizations that accepted to respond and provide relief services without considering eliminating the legal restrictions.

Moreover, Dr. Shuayb indicated to the harsh economic conditions as well as the legal obstacles that led to the dropout of many young refugees into the labor market, after realizing that the higher their educational rank is, the fewer their chances of getting a good job would be. Therefore, if the person is a refugee, investing in education in Lebanon is not a good deal, despite the fact that the conditions of the informal work are not any better in terms of low wages and the absence of guaranteed rights.

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### **The Fragile Economic Conditions**

This subject was raised by Mr. Adib Nehmeh, an Expert and Consultant in Development, Social Policies and the Fight against Poverty, and currently a Consultant to the Arab Non-Governmental Organizations Network for Development (ANND), when he spoke about the convergence of the living situation of refugees today with the living standards of the poor and above-poor Lebanese classes, due to the deteriorating financial collapse and the economic situation. This change in the class and social composition to which the Lebanese middle classes were exposed, contributed to the increase of the vulnerability of the living situation of all residents in the country, albeit to varying degrees.

Nehmeh also explained how the current crisis has narrowed the gap between the respective situations of refugees and Lebanese citizens, especially after both workforces lost 90% of the value of their income. At the same time, their insurance and social security have lost their effectiveness and feasibility as a result of high prices and inflation. Nehmeh considered that the changes in the social structure would have a greater impact on the Lebanese in comparison to refugees, immigrants and foreign workers, who are not experiencing a significant qualitative change in their situation but will surely deteriorate.

In addition, Nehmeh stressed on the need to carry out statistical research based on evidence-based knowledge and numbers rather than speculation and analysis, as the number of refugees is decreasing and not increasing, as well as the population growth in general. Thus, the purpose of exaggerating the number of residents in Lebanon and keeping these data confined to specific parties is to create more confusion and misperception, which also can be utilized for political agendas.

Finally, Mr. Nehmeh talked about the future and the need to overcome the current crisis through moving from a rentier economy to a productive one and strengthening the industrial and trade

sectors. This transformation would require an organic and continuous integration of the Palestinian and Syrian workforce into the Lebanese workforce within legislated conditions because it is not possible to move from the current economy to a productive economy without benefiting from the maximum of the human resources found in Lebanon, especially the highly productive foreign workforce.

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## **Lessons Learned**

Mr. Jihad Nammour, Lecturer at the Institute of Political Science at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, and Academic Coordinator of the Arab Master's Program in Democracy and Human Rights, also spoke about the "no policy" policy adopted by the Lebanese government when dealing with the refugee issues, and how these policies benefit from the "organized chaos" to keep the refugee situation in such a fragile and uncertain state, making them more vulnerable and easily exploited.

He added that the sectors in which Syrians worked in Lebanon had largely collapsed, such as the construction sector and to a lesser extent the agricultural sector, which created a kind of competition with the Lebanese workforce, in an attempt to highlight their weakness and vulnerability in front of any party that provides aid or subsidies.

In an intervention by Mr. Ziad Abdel Samad, Executive Director of the Arab Non-Governmental Organizations Network for Development (ANND), he indicated that Lebanon's "disassociation policy" could have been a positive policy if Lebanon had avoided engaging in other's conflicts, but it cannot be a feasible and effective policy on the issue of refugees residing on its territory.

The session ended with the intervention of Dr. Sami Khiyami, an Independent Researcher and Consultant, and the Former Syrian Ambassador to Britain, where he pointed out that it would be sufficient for the Lebanese government to use its constantly improving relations with the Syrian government to persuade it to accept birth registration and civil facts for Syrian citizens in Lebanon, through a central system that was designed long ago in the Civil Affairs Directorate and which can be used anywhere in the world.

Dr. Khiyami suggested benefiting from the international aid to establish a prefabricated clinic or hospital that can be displaced at any time, to accommodate the Syrian doctors and surgeons in Lebanon, thus relieving pressure from the Lebanese health system and making use of the existing competencies.

Concerning his opinion on the repercussions of the financial crisis on the current situation, Dr. Khiyami said that this will lead to more cooperation and coordination between Syrian professionals and the Lebanese who have recently moved to the production market after the deterioration of the services market, which will open the door to a positive participation process for both parties. The Syrian who has a profession and finds it difficult to open up to foreign countries because of language and other barriers, will find what he/she misses in the Lebanese, who is more exposed to languages and can exchange opinions with foreign countries, and thus the participatory process becomes achieved.

In conclusion, the attendees of the first workshop stressed that the legal status is a very important issue when it comes to any future integration, with the necessity to seek the assistance of international organizations to push on the Lebanese government to facilitate the issuance of refugee residencies, and to associate the international aid to achieve their legal status, so that the humanitarian response will be effective and therefore, Lebanon won't lose the opportunity to benefit from the foreign workforce to stimulate some of its productive economy, and to benefit from the Syrian-Lebanese relations in improving the social capital and building effective cooperation during the reconstruction phase in the future.