



## Refugees = Partners Second Workshop

### **“Challenges and Opportunities: Syrian Refugees'**

### **Access to the Labor Market”**

Beirut, Lebanon  
Sep 21, 2021

#### **Final Statement**

Refugees = Partners (R=P) launched its second workshop in a series of workshops titled "Towards a New Policy to Promote Syrian Refugees' Access to a Legal Status in Lebanon" on Tuesday, September 21, 2021.

These workshops aimed 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 innovative approaches that help establish a comprehensive socio-economic framework.

During this workshop, the attendees' interventions mainly revolved around the effects of not differentiating between the concepts of the refugee, immigrant, and displaced person, how this lack of distinction is reflected in the Lebanese government's treatment of Syrians as "displaced"—with the aim of abandoning its responsibilities towards them, and finally how international organizations relegate their policy to the respective host governments.

The impact the current economic crisis in Lebanon has had on the livelihoods of vulnerable communities, including Lebanese, immigrants, refugees, and foreign worker communities, was also discussed. The main focus was oriented towards the need for the host community to participate with the refugee communities in building the economy, and on ways that would enable refugees to access the labor market. The discussion highlighted the importance of framing the presence of refugees as an "investment in human capital", and to explore the reasons that enable them to be active and productive in the economy.

The discussion was wrapped up with a few notes on the need for Syrian refugees to engage in digital work, the indicators that allow or impede access to such work, and the role international

organizations and humanitarian interventions can have in using international aid as a tool of pressure to influence public policies.

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### **Absence of Legislation in the Field of Refugee Affairs**

The attendees discussed the legal ambiguity in the Lebanese government's dealing with the Syrians residing in Lebanon through their varying designations as displaced persons or refugees. This practice is designed in order for the government to evade its responsibilities, knowing that they, as the government, bear several responsibilities towards the displaced. What further complicates the problem is the increase in refugee cases—tens of millions of people during the last decade due to humanitarian and climate crises. This has made it difficult for the international community to commit to sustainable solutions. Instead, the response of the international community has focused mostly on humanitarian aid.

According to statistics, the global population of displaced persons and refugees has reached 82 million people, 67% of whom migrated from only five countries, and with the largest proportion coming from Syria. Although Turkey hosts about four million refugees, Lebanon still received the largest number of refugees in relation to its area and population.

The Lebanese government's policy has adopted two principles in dealing with refugees: the first is that they do not obtain legal residency and identification papers, and the second is that they are deprived of education and work, and that they are kept under the patronage of the sponsorship system.

In this context, Dr. Karim Al-Mufti, a professor of international relations and law and a researcher specializing in human rights, pointed out that the Lebanese government closes the labor market to Syrians, and enacts discriminatory measures, such as curfews, against them. It also transforms the sponsorship system into a system of embezzlement after it added displaced persons and refugees to the sponsorship policy despite human rights activists' opposition.

Al-Mufti talked about the phenomenon of "climate refugees", a new challenge due to the changing weather conditions and global warming, which has become a threat to humanity as a whole. According to projections, the number of displaced persons in 2050 could reach 1.5 billion people.

On the other hand, Al-Mufti focused on the "New York Declaration" of 2016, which stipulated the combination of refugees and immigrants as one group protected by law, urged the signatory states to declare more self-reliance in securing livelihoods to open labor markets to refugees and immigrants away from just humanitarian aid, and finally to ensure the refugee children's access to education.

As for the distinction between an immigrant and a refugee, the reasons and ways refugees arrive to a new country differ from those of an immigrant, as the immigrant continues to enjoy their

nationality and their various rights. However, a refugee needs the protection of the state they arrive in, as they are usually fleeing the scourge of war or political persecution. Refugees are also under the protection of international treaties such as the 1951 Geneva Convention.

Al-Mufti indicated that Lebanon is one of the countries that signed the "New York Declaration" but deals with the presence of Syrian refugees completely contrary to what the declaration recommends, as it closes the labor markets to refugees and migrants and takes discriminatory measures against them. These practices are not included in the category of sustainable solutions and strategic goals of the United Nations.

Toward the end of his intervention, Al-Mufti called for the need to separate the concept of the displaced, the refugee, and the immigrant, and to establish a special system that secures the right of each to work, education, and to explore various life affairs. He also urged for a reconsideration of the Lebanese labor law so as to develop economic plans that correspond to the current situation of the country, abolish the sponsorship system, and to start a real partnership with all the nationalities present in Lebanon to reach the sustainable growth of the country.

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### **Difficult economic situation of refugees**

Regarding the economic situation of refugees, the data provided by Camilla Gilbert, UNHCR Interagency Coordinator, under the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR) published by UNHCR, indicates that the economic crisis and the circumstances of the spread of COVID-19 have pushed most refugees below the minimum expenditure basket, meaning that their expenditures have become minimal and can barely meet their basic needs.

She noted that the main source of income for refugees depends on cash assistance from humanitarian organizations, followed by debt, and lastly work. Although 66% of the Syrian families interviewed have one employed member, compared to 52% last year, family income has not increased as a result of the additional members' work.

Despite the indications that unemployment is low among the Syrian refugees, the logical explanation for this is that they are forced to accept low wages in informal work, given the deteriorating situation in the country.

According to Gilbert, the humanitarian response to refugees in Lebanon is shared between the Lebanese government and the international community, which funds and supports the implementation of the response. Yet, the deteriorating condition in Lebanon prevents the optimal implementation of the humanitarian response. The solutions and aspirations undertaken by the response plan have shifted from long-term to short-term direct solutions, and the orientation has turned toward supporting the local economy and cash-for-work activities, rather than expanding the economy and promoting sustainable development.

It should be noted that most Syrians work in agriculture, construction, and cleaning, where they are allowed by law to work, alongside a large percentage of Syrians who work in the informal sector. In 2019, the Ministry of Labor took action against illegal foreign labor, forcing Syrians working in Lebanon to obtain work permits for jobs in their approved sectors. However, the resignation of the government prevented these policies from being implemented. On the other hand, the international organizations continued supporting the small and medium enterprises and building sustainable sources for income.

Moving to 2020, after the agreement between the ILO and other partners from the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Labor, work has been done to develop appropriate policies and conditions for refugees in Lebanon to obtain decent work—which would include women’s access to the labor market as well—and to focus on the sectors of infrastructure, environmental services, and economic development.

Gilbert concluded her speech by emphasizing the persistence of challenges in the labor market and the need for Syrian refugees’ participation. Those concerned with livelihoods continue their efforts to inject the necessary resources to ensure the existence of sustainable sources of income for the refugees and vulnerable Lebanese. Finally, there is a need to cooperate with the government to achieve a balance between wages and the fluctuating exchange rate.

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### **The Collapse of the Lebanese Economy and Addressing the Issue of Asylum**

Rabie Nasser, an economic researcher and co-founder of the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), spoke about the policies pursued by the Lebanese government, which is heavily reliant on loans and individual savings, the looting of Lebanese public money, and spending financed by private banks in exchange for high interest. All these policies constitute a major cause of the economic collapse, which are separate from the Syrian crisis and the effects of the refugee crisis. Nasser also pointed to the close link between solving the refugee crisis and the economic conditions in Lebanon, where it is not possible to talk about a solution to the deterioration of the refugee situation without talking about solutions to the Lebanese economy.

Nasser pointed out that there are not enough statistics that can be referenced to study the situation of the refugees. According to the latest census of the labor force survey, it appeared that there are 4.8 million residents in Lebanon, including 974,000 Syrians, Palestinians, and other nationalities. If we include the number of people residing in the camps, the total number does not exceed 5.1 million, Nasser claimed, while the international organizations exaggerate the number of refugees and estimate the number of residents in Lebanon at 6.8 million people.

As for the method of addressing the issue of the refugees, Nasser spoke of the possibility of treating them as a burden on the economy, or the possibility of benefiting from them to constitute a real wealth and an essential part of the national economy. However, the strategy followed by the Lebanese government is based on dealing with the refugees as a “security

threat". Therefore, there is a direct and explicit interference of security forces into their lives. On the other hand, the Lebanese government has obligated international organizations and civil society to intervene in the humanitarian situation and provide aid.

In addition, the Lebanese government is stifling Syrians and preventing them from participating in various activities. This is a paradox that became clear through statistics conducted by the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), which showed that the main source of income for Syrian refugees is work and not aid, as Camilla Gilbert indicated, while the main income of 24% of Lebanese families is, in the first place, borrowing, with remittances in the second place.

This security restriction reduced the possibility for Syrians to contribute to the Lebanese economy, whether they were investors, workers, experts, or technicians, which has led to the migration of a large number of existing competencies that could have supported the Lebanese market. These Lebanese labor market could have benefited greatly from these competencies for several reasons. The first reason is demographic, the sectors that the Syrians work in are in need of a young workforce, and the Lebanese demography has turned into a non-young society, due to a rise in emigration. The second reason is that Syrians work in sectors such as agriculture, industry, retail trade, and personal services, and Lebanon today desperately needs these sectors in light of the deterioration of the tourism and banking sector.

In addition, the work Syrians performed during previous periods of migration was not a point of conflict between the people of the two countries, therefore there is a great potential for cooperation between the two communities.

Nasser warned of the existence of a large gap in the relationship between the refugee community and the civil society organizations, as most organizations and United Nations agencies work in an elitist manner to distribute aid, without real participation of refugees in the decision-making process, or active transformation of their aid into development projects. He pointed out that the international organizations are generally subject to the policies of the countries of asylum, explaining that these organizations avoid any conflict with those governments.

He also considered that the Lebanese economy has become competitive with respect to neighboring countries after the significant drop in prices, but that there is also a need for the policies that support the productive sectors. Lebanon could also benefit from the experience of neighboring countries such as Jordan and Turkey, which invested the Syrian human capital to improve their economic situation.

Nasser concluded his intervention by talking about the future of the Lebanese economy and the importance of investing in Syrian human capital as a fundamental solution. He stated that this would result in the establishment of natural social relationships and development priorities that would benefit from the current deterioration to rebuild a healthy relationship between the refugee and host communities. It would also improve the working conditions of the Lebanese and Syrian workforce.

## **The Refugees' Need and Ability to Participate in the Digital Economy**

Watfa Najdi, Program and Policy Coordinator at the Issam Fares Institute for International Affairs at The American University of Beirut (IFI-AUB), pointed out in her intervention that the successive economic crises in Lebanon have made people turn towards a set of new responses. Foremost of these is the digital economy which, in her opinion, can provide the unemployed skilled youth with new possibilities. These possibilities could attract foreign investments, increase economic inclusion, and contribute to income generation amid the collapse of the local currency.

It is well known that the digital economy can be a tool for promoting economic growth in developing countries and a fast path for refugees and marginalized populations to access the labor market and achieve self-reliance. However, it is important to understand its respective challenges and limitations that can limit its feasibility.

For example, according to Najdi, it is estimated that 80% to 90% of the population in Lebanon has access to the Internet, but this access varies between the rural and urban areas and the refugee camps where the infrastructure is inadequate, and the Internet coverage is poor. Frequent power cuts also pose additional challenges for young people trying to access digital job opportunities, noting that it is still unclear whether Syrian refugees are allowed to work as legal independents in Lebanon, even though their work with an employer outside Lebanon means they are not direct competitors for the Lebanese workforce.

Regarding the risks that Syrian refugees are exposed to in digital work, Najdi stated that the refugees in Lebanon are excluded from the banking system, and therefore their independent online work may take place informally, which increases the potential risks related to working conditions due to banking restrictions on the foreign currency withdrawals.

Najdi pointed out an important issue: the decline in knowledge and education of a large proportion of refugees, which gives them little chances of accessing jobs that require proficiency in foreign languages and technological knowledge. Current projections for the coming years indicate a decrease in the school enrollment rate of refugee children as a result of the depreciation of the Lebanese currency and the reduced ability of families to invest in education.

Najdi concluded her intervention by emphasizing that all these disparities have severe impacts on the potential the digital economy has in becoming a source of humanitarian relief and economic development, despite the fact that the successive crises in Lebanon created the need for the digital economy and the need to invest in it, especially for vulnerable groups in society.

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## **Lessons Learned**

Dr. Fouad Fouad wondered in his intervention about the possibility of having representation for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Rabie Nasser responded that there could be no representation in light of the Syrians' fear, and their exposure to the continuous security repression in the countries of asylum. Open space is the basic condition for participation and expression. As for the Syrian case, it cannot be said that the current organizations represent the priorities of the refugee communities or that they are actually integrated within them in order to form a supportive political or union representation.

Nasser indicated that the confinement of social relations in light of crises turns them into traditional ones. Syrian society has begun to depend on family and regional relations, and the same applies to Lebanese society in light of the current crisis, unlike what it was in the past.

In conclusion, the attendees stressed that legal status is a vitally important precursor to any future integration. They all agreed that there is a need to seek international assistance to pressure the Lebanese government to facilitate the issuance of refugee residencies. They called for a strategic vision that encourages more involvement of refugees in the economic process, especially in the digital economy, which will enable Lebanon to emerge from its economic crisis, a necessary outcome for all.