Focus Group Discussions with Affected Communities in Jordan

Main Findings

Background and Methodology

In preparation for the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) regional consultation for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), focus group discussions (FDGs) were held in Amman and Jerash on 4-6 February 2015 with people affected by humanitarian crises. The discussions were co-facilitated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Regional Office for MENA (OCHA ROMENA) and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies’ (ICVA) MENA hub. Care International Jordan office hosted the discussions in their office in Amman, while the Center for Community Development in Jerash Camp hosted the discussion with Palestine refugees. The groups consisted of youth, women, men and community leaders from the African, Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi refugee communities in Jordan. It is worth noting that Iraqi refugees included those who were affected by the 2003 war and those displaced from Iraq since 2013/2014.

The sessions were structured in three parts: first, the WHS global and regional process was introduced; second, participants discussed their experiences and views of humanitarian action, guided by a ‘listening questionnaire’ developed with the support of a WHS advisory group on Communicating with Communities; and third, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire\(^1\) to complement the findings of the discussion. A total of 92 people were consulted and 85 respondents completed the questionnaire, of which 80% reported to have received humanitarian assistance. This report represents a summary of both the views expressed during the discussions as well as the survey responses.

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<th>Target group</th>
<th>Age</th>
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\(^1\) On a 10-point scale where 10=high and 1=low, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire that included questions on access to humanitarian services, priority needs and evaluation of performance of humanitarian actors.
Main Findings

The following issues were identified as the most pressing priorities by the people consulted in Jordan:

Protection of Civilians

- The enormous influx of Syrian refugees into Jordan led to concerted efforts to legalize their status in the country. In addition to their UNHCR cards, refugees received personal identification cards from the Jordanian Ministry of Interior. The same applies for Iraqi refugees who came to Jordan after the war in 2003.

- Notwithstanding measures to legalize their status, Syrian refugees in particular reported that they are vulnerable to harassment from host communities. This often happens in schools and in streets.

- Politics also plays a key role in the degree of protection Syrian refugees enjoy. Respondents from the Syrian refugee community stated that deportation of Syrian refugees from Jordan back to Syria had become common.

- Protection remains the biggest concern for Somali and Eritrean refugees in Jordan. They feel their safety is jeopardized in host states generally, and many of them are not recognized as refugees in Jordan. This is due to the fact that a lot of them reported that they were smuggled into Jordan illegally.

- Despite variations in protection, survey results show that refugees in Jordan record the highest feeling of safety and protection when compared to their counterparts in Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen and Syria. On a 10 point scale, refugees rated their feeling of safety and protection to be on average 6 out of 10.

- When asked about protection of civilians during conflict, Syrian refugees stated that they didn’t believe that sufficient measures were taken by the international community and by humanitarian organizations in relation to the conflict in Syria. One participant from the Syrian refugee community stated that the UN agencies evacuated their offices when the conflict erupted.

- For Iraqi refugees who were uprooted in 2013/14, protection of civilians is a key concern. Many respondents have left the country due to persecution. Although they feel that their situation is far better in host states, some stated that they still need protection assistance. What exacerbates the situation, according to the refugees, is the length of the status determination process for incoming Iraqis, which can last anywhere from one to five years.

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“We, as Somalis, don’t have a government, hence we have neither official documents nor identification. As a result, we are not recognized as refugees because we have fake Yemeni passports”

Somali refugee, Amman

“We need better protection measures. We are afraid”

Female Syrian refugee, Amman
Many of the refugees also stressed the importance of giving specific attention to protecting women and children affected by conflict, particularly women from the Syrian and Iraqi communities.

**Humanitarian Access**

- Iraqi refugees affected by the recent crisis reported that many Iraqis fled the country once the incursions of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) occurred, and did not witness any aid being distributed. Some of the participants told accounts of their displacement to Erbil, where they received shelter assistance. Overall, however, finding housing for internally-displaced Iraqis was reported to have taken months.

- Syrian refugees explained that during conflict, aid distribution was partial. Different parties to conflict, who had control over different territories, distributed aid only to their supporters. (e.g. areas under rebel control, like Homs, did not receive aid from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent).

- They believe that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and local committees were the ones responding most to their needs during conflict. However, due to the lack of monitoring, diversion of aid was very likely, especially by those assigned to distribute the aid, since there are no accountability mechanisms.

- On the topic of cross border aid delivery, some Syrian youths suggested the involvement of young Syrians in these operations, as they know the cities and are aware of how to reach people in conflict areas.

- Many refugees mentioned the issue of proximity (or lack thereof) of humanitarian organizations to affected communities. Affected communities complain that humanitarian organizations operate in places that are not close to where they live, which makes them incur extra costs to go collect aid.

- Somali refugees also reported difficulty in gaining access to humanitarian organizations during conflict. They underlined that it is possible for local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Somalia to reach affected people, but not for international organizations.

- Many refugees believed that favoritism was a common practice in humanitarian organizations in Jordan, especially with local NGOs. They believed that certain individuals within their communities had managed to acquire special access to humanitarian goods and services that they were not equally entitled to, mentioning examples of preference in treatment given to some members of their communities in accessing food assistance, financial aid and refugee resettlement services.
Addressing Vulnerability through Emergency Preparedness, Disaster Risk Reduction and Building Resilience

- Refugees reported the lack of capacity building for affected communities for disaster preparedness and resilience. This is explained by the fact that humanitarian organizations are almost always too focused on response and meeting urgent humanitarian needs.

- They also believed that humanitarians not doing enough to create livelihood opportunities to improve resilience.

- On this issue, Somali refugees were critical of both humanitarian actors and government actors, as there was no previous preparedness capacity building for Somali refugees in the past, despite recurring crises.

Responding to Protracted Crises

- For Iraqi, Palestinian, and African refugees affected by long-term protracted crises, there is a lack of sustainable of humanitarian aid. Many of the respondents highlighted the fact that donors and humanitarian actors are too focused on new refugee communities affected by recent crises to allocate funds or initiate projects related to their needs. For example, Iraqi refugees who came to Jordan after the 2003 war complained that health assistance in Jordan is now far less than before the Syrian crisis.

- Members of the Iraqi refugee community also reported that since the “first Iraqi crisis”, the Jordanian government has not allowed them to work, as Jordanian laws prohibit the employment of refugees for fear of their exploitation. This, while protecting refugees from possible harm, also limits their chance of becoming self-sustaining and independent members of society. This leaves Syrian refugees with no choice but to start working illegally in Jordan, where they are often underpaid, overworked and subjected to poor working conditions.

- For Palestine refugees, the context is different. The protracted nature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the regional political factors led to a national encampment policy in Jordan. Palestinians live in two main camps: Baqaa and Jerash. Jerash camp is mostly inhabited by Palestinian refugees from Gaza and Baqaa Camp is mostly composed of Palestinians from the West Bank. Camps have grown to be self-sustaining communities, with limited support from UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for the Palestine Refugees in the Near East) in Jerash camp as reported by respondents. In this context, humanitarian assistance has focused more and more on development and building resilience than about responding to crises. Thus, Palestine refugees voiced their concerns about the lack of funding and long-term projects that address their needs in a sustainable way.

*Some humanitarian organizations tell us “You’re Iraqi. We don’t have aid for you”*  
Iraqi refugee, Amman
• Members of the Palestinian, Syrian and Iraqi communities, particularly women, stressed the importance of psycho-social support for communities affected by conflict and violence, specifically those that have endured a protracted crisis. Syrian and Iraqi communities emphasized on psychological support in order to heal the wounds of war.

• A repeated concern across different communities was the lack of financial support and interest from humanitarian organizations and donors to support emergency and long-term regular healthcare for refugees affected by protracted crises.

Relations with Host State

• As noted above, Jordanian laws prohibit refugees from working to protect them from exploitation. This was reported by all refugees affected by long-term crises as a serious problem, given the implications for securing a steady income. Some, like Syrian refugees, depend solely on monthly allowances received from international organizations like CARE.

• In spite of these concerns, refugees believed that Jordan still managed to create some innovative solutions to address the refugee influxes into its territory. For Syrian refugees, the Ministry of Interior created special identification cards that guarantee their protection and respect before the law. Additionally, a “refugee sponsorship” program has begun for Jordanian nationals to sponsor Syrian refugees from the Zaatari Camp and provide them with financial help, in an effort to help refugees better integrate in society.

• Although some refugees, particularly Syrians, feel that they are protected by the state authorities, they report that they do not feel as safe when dealing with host communities, who sometimes become hostile or even violent against them.

Principles of Humanitarian Action

• Syrian refugees reported a lack of impartiality in aid provision back in Syria. They noted that aid was only distributed to supporters of armed groups within their territories. Eritrean, Sudanese and Somali refugees believe humanitarian aid is also distributed in a partial manner, and according to them, humanitarian organizations discriminate in the distribution of aid based on the “nationality” of the refugee, not on need alone.

• Surveyed refugees across different communities rated the extent to which humanitarian organizations are neutral and impartial in Jordan to be 5 out of 10, the highest average in all surveyed countries.

• On humanity, Iraqi refugees report that dealing with humanitarian organizations, and having to wait for a significant length of time to determine their status in Jordan, has put them under immense psychological pressure due to the “inhumane” treatment they believe they are subjected to. When asked about this
principle, Somali refugees believed that, despite seeking asylum several times and in different countries, their treatment by humanitarians is still negative “wherever they go”.

- On average, refugees in Jordan rated the extent to which they feel humanitarians treat them in a way that preserves their dignity and respect to be 4.3 out of 10.

**Relationship between International Humanitarian Actors and Regional and Domestic Institutions**

- There is a perceived lack of accountability to local partners, resulting in local humanitarian organizations being accused of aid diversion and impartiality in aid distribution.

**Engagement with Affected Communities**

- Additionally, Refugees do not believe they have a say in the type of assistance they received. Survey results show refugees in Jordan rated the extent to which humanitarian organizations respond to their needs to be 2.8 out of 10.

- Some refugees, especially Iraqi refugees, reported that monitoring and evaluation and grievance mechanisms in humanitarian organizations are not “credible”, and will depend on those who are operating the organization. Some refugees felt they were exploited, even pressured to “pay a fee” to some aid workers so they can process their legal papers or have them chosen for a resettlement interview.

- There are concerns that humanitarian organizations focus more on promoting their work in front of donors than actually serving affected communities.

- Affected communities should be included as volunteers in the process, not just as beneficiaries. Volunteer networks from affected communities should be encouraged by humanitarians.

- There are no known and clear mechanisms to include the views of affected communities in the type of aid they receive. Additionally, affected communities do not feel that their voices are included or taken into account in the humanitarian process. As such, many do not take the time to write complaints or evaluate the assistance they receive.

- A common complaint by refugees in Jordan is that humanitarian aid is very slow, especially when it comes to UN organizations. Some Syrian refugees even believed that the UN is “part of the problem, not the solution”.

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“We live in a protracted crisis. We sought refuge more than four times, but the ill treatment did not change”.

Somali refugee, Amman
Humanitarian Financing

- Refugees affected by protracted crises complained that they do not receive sufficient attention from donors and humanitarian actors.

- Iraqi refugees affected by the recent events in their home country criticized donors for directing their funds towards the Syrian crisis, seeing that it is the subject of substantial media attention. These concerns were echoed by African refugees, who felt that they were “forgotten” amidst all the other crises happening in the region.

Migration

- Refugees from all consulted communities stated that they wish to migrate to escape the poor living conditions in host states, but are often constrained by their own national governments due to lack of official papers, travel restrictions, etc. They try to use resettlement services through UNHCR but are often unsuccessful.

- Illegal migration, often by sea, is common for Sudanese, Eritrean and Somali refugees, who may not carry any legal documents. Many of the consulted refugees reported being uprooted several times. Many have come to Jordan from Yemen.

Humanitarian Coordination

- There were numerous complaints from refugees about the lack of coordination between humanitarians, which leads to repetition and duplication of aid, as well short-sighted needs assessments.

Enhancing the Role of Media, Youth and Academia

- Youth need to be encouraged to become more involved in humanitarian organizations to serve their communities as they have more stake in the issue and know local needs best.

Recommendations

The below are the recommendations put forth by members of affected communities in Jordan to improve the humanitarian system:

Protection of Civilians

- Ensure sufficient protection for affected people, specifically vulnerable refugees, who are subject to persecution.
Protracted Crises

- For refugee communities affected by protracted crises, health assistance or even health insurance, should not be discontinued. In addition, psychosocial support should be sustained for those traumatized by conflict, specifically children and women.

- Resettlement services, refugee registration and overall humanitarian aid should be based on fair and clear criteria, mainly on a needs basis, without partiality or preference to any group.

- The burden of hosting refugees should be shared amongst all neighboring countries, so there is no pressure on one or two countries in the region.

Engagement with Affected Communities

- Iraqi refugees suggested that neutral committees could be formed to assess the conditions of refugees. This would then feed into the work of humanitarian organizations.

- International pressure should be exerted on the national government during a crisis to respond to the needs of its people.

- Determination of clear criteria for aid provision and for services (e.g. resettlement) should be well communicated and clarified between humanitarian organizations and refugees.

Migration

- Refugees across all of the consulted communities called for better access to legal channels of migration and for more opportunities, since the lack of burden sharing across many countries meant that there is increased pressure not only on host states, but on the humanitarian goods and services available for different refugee groups in the same country.

Humanitarian Financing

- Humanitarian finance and funds should not be directed to refugees according to their nationality, as many refugees believe this is discriminatory.

- International donors should create special funding for protracted crises.