Focus Group Discussions with Affected Communities in Lebanon
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 Lebanon on 5-7 November 2014 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 and hosted by Lebanese NGOs working closely with affected people: the Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training (LOST) in their office in Baalbek and Amel Association at their center in Haret Hreik in Dahieh, Beirut. The groups consisted of youth, women and community leaders from the Syrian, Iraqi and Palestine refugee communities.

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 questionnaire¹ to complement the findings of the discussion. A total of 63 people were consulted and 42 respondents completed the questionnaire, of which 52.5% reported to have received humanitarian assistance in Lebanon. This report represents a summary of both the views expressed during the discussions as well as the survey responses.

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<td>Palestinian and Iraqis - Women</td>
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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 Lebanon:

Protection of Civilians

- Refugees did not feel safe in Lebanon and felt that their own and their families’ safety was at risk due to the lack of social cohesion between the refugee communities and Lebanese society.

- Despite expressing concerns for their safety, no participants shared experiences of seeking protection services in Lebanon.

- There are varied levels of awareness amongst participants about the protection services provided by the UN or international organizations. There was agreement amongst Syrian refugees in particular of the limited power of the UN to enforce protection measures for civilians in the Syrian conflict, especially when government authorities or parties to conflicts are involved.

- With the exception of resettlement services, refugees did not feel encouraged to approach humanitarian organizations for protection assistance or to inquire about protection services when the need arises.

Access to Information on Humanitarian Aid

- Of all the participants, 52.5% stated that they had received humanitarian assistance from aid organizations in Lebanon.

- Participants argued that information about humanitarian organizations in Lebanon was unclear and hard to access for many refugee communities. This applied to most humanitarian organizations, whether they were international or local NGOs or UN organizations. For example, refugees consulted were not aware of the existence of many of the agencies or of their services and locations (except for a few agencies, mostly UNHCR, which refugees were familiar with).

- Members of the Syrian refugee community in particular added that aid distribution criteria were usually not disclosed. As a result, refugees did not know on which basis they received or did not receive aid.

- According to participants, significant corruption and nepotism existed in the distribution of aid. There were accounts of incidents of favoritism within UN agencies for certain “connected” families, especially with regards to resettlement services.

“I believe local leaders and local committees are part of the reason why we don’t receive all humanitarian assistance we’re entitled to”

Palestinian youth, Baalbek
There were also several mentions of diversion of aid within local communities themselves. There were particularly negative experiences with local and religious leaders and local committees, who acted as a liaison between the local community and international aid organizations and UN agencies. These local actors were not seen to distribute the goods received from aid agencies in an equal and transparent manner, raising suspicions that the aid was either sold or diverted from beneficiaries for the consumption of the local leaders and committee members.

Refugees explained how a lack of access to their identification papers or not being able to renew them hampered their registration with UNHCR, residency applications, jobs opportunities and enrollment in schools and universities.

Addressing Vulnerability through Emergency Preparedness, Disaster Risk Reduction and Building Resilience

Refugees stated that they had not received any training or capacity building related to emergency preparedness and were not familiar with any preparedness measures. They therefore believed that they were unaware of how to respond if a crisis occurred or deteriorated.

Survey results confirmed these findings. On average, affected people in Lebanon rated the extent to which they believed aid groups help them, their family and community prepare for future crises to be 1.5 out of 10.

Responding to Protracted Crises

Members of communities who were affected by protracted crises such as Palestine expressed their frustration with attention being mostly paid to more recent crises (i.e. Syria), resulting in significantly larger provision of assistance to members of the latter communities, without finding long-term solutions to the Palestine community’s problems.

Participants argued that aid was usually disbursed in a short-term and short-sighted manner and was usually non-durable (e.g. food and cash allowances), rather than more sustainable types of assistance (e.g. livelihood activities or support in employment to generate sustainable sources of income).

An issue frequently mentioned by refugees in Lebanon was the lack of support from international, national and local humanitarian organizations in providing long-term health assistance. Affected populations were at loss over whom to turn to for regular and emergency healthcare for their families, and how to receive regular assistance for medical cases with chronic and terminal diseases due to the costly nature of healthcare.
Accountability to Affected Communities

- Affected people consulted in Lebanon did not feel that their opinions on humanitarian services were heard. They were not aware of any existing feedback mechanisms in international, national, local organizations or UN agencies to voice people’s opinions and complaints.

- On average, participants rated the extent to which organizations take their opinions into consideration to be 1.73 out of 10. As for the extent to which participants believed that their needs were being met by aid organizations, they gave an average score of 2.5 out of 10. These two ratings are the lowest amongst the surveyed countries (Jordan, Palestine, Egypt and Yemen).

Principles of Humanitarian Action

- There were negative experiences among the refugees consulted with regards to the impartiality of humanitarian aid in both their host states and countries of origin. In Lebanon, some families told that they were denied assistance by some national and local aid organizations on the grounds of religious or political affiliation. Members of the Syrian refugee community highlighted significant challenges they had faced in accessing aid in contested areas in Syria (e.g. Qamishli, Adlib, Aleppo), where warring parties did not allow for impartial distribution of aid for those with different political allegiance or from different religious sects.

Humanitarian Coordination

- Affected people expressed their frustration over the lack of coordination between humanitarian agencies, especially with regards to targeting beneficiaries and aid distribution. This usually resulted in the duplication of aid to certain families who were targeted repeatedly by humanitarian organizations. This raised suspicions amongst participants about the possibility of corruption in humanitarian aid.

- Participants also felt that they had to re-explain their situation and needs to each humanitarian organization they visited due to the lack of established reference mechanisms that could provide an overview of each refugee’s conditions and current needs. This also tends to cause duplication of aid for certain beneficiaries.

Relations with Host Government

- Participants did not feel that they were being supported by the Lebanese government in finding employment, shelter or determining their refugee status. Due to the requirement of official documents for education and employment, which many refugees could not access, many could not enroll their
children in schools or find employment that matched their qualifications.

- Participants also felt that many of their rights were not upheld in their host country. Many believed that the government and media promulgated a negative image of refugee communities to the wider public, which affected social cohesion and put many refugees in fear for their safety and well-being.

- Also, due to the spillover of the Syrian conflict into Lebanese territories, Syrian refugees have become subject to curfews from Lebanese authorities in some municipalities, restricting their freedom of movement.

- Members of the Syrian, Palestine and Iraqi refugee communities stated that they could not officially work and in informal jobs they were paid unfairly in comparison with their Lebanese counterparts.

- These conditions, in addition to restrictions on travel and limited opportunities for resettlement, led many refugees (particularly Syrian refugees) to consider illegal migration by sea despite safety risks. Young people in particular were open to travel by sea to European countries if it meant that there was a chance that their rights and dignity would be preserved.

- Survey results were consistent with these findings. On average, participants in the focus group discussions rated their feeling of being treated with dignity and respect by aid organizations to be 2.04 out of 10.

**Recommendations**

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

**Empowering Affected Populations in Host Countries**

- To maintain and promote human dignity, humanitarian organizations should seek to **empower crisis-affected people to find reliable sources of income and to pursue education at all levels** in Lebanon.

- Syrian refugees expressed a preference to have members of their own communities provide services to them, and called for support in establishing their own temporary schools, opening their own businesses and receiving medical services from fellow Syrians. In light of this, they called on the Lebanese government to facilitate procedures for refugee communities to develop their own initiatives to find suitable employment and education opportunities.

“If you want to protect us from the sea, ensure that our rights are preserved on the ground”

*Syrian youth, Baalbek*
Upholding basic Refugee Rights

- Refugees called for the *upholding of their rights in line with the 1951 Refugee Convention*, including, the right to seek asylum, to move freely, the right to liberty and security, and the right to family life.

- Other rights include the right to education and employment. Most, if not all, of these depend on the refugees’ identification papers and legal documents from their own state, to which many cannot go back to in light of the ongoing conflicts. As such, they called on the Lebanese government to find alternatives for refugees’ legal documents that they cannot renew or access or in their countries of origin.

- There should be *larger quotas in refugee resettlement and greater freedom of movement from one country to another in the MENA region*, so as to promote more equitable burden sharing in the hosting of refugees.

Strengthening Coordination with Host Governments and within the Humanitarian System

- Participants suggested that there be *better coordination between UN agencies and host governments in handling refugee affairs*, and stressed that the UN should be relatively stronger in enforcing and advocating for refugee rights in host States. Also, *governments need to consistently recognize UNHCR identification papers for refugees*.

- Within the humanitarian system itself, different actors should work on strengthening their coordination and information sharing. Some participants suggested activating referral systems between humanitarian organizations.

Using new Means of Communicating with Refugees

- Participants suggested *using different platforms for communicating with refugees* when they first arrive in host countries, so they can have full knowledge of existing humanitarian organizations and services in the country. These can include using host country media to familiarize refugees with the humanitarian system and the kinds of services they can access, or using UNHCR local offices as a point of reference to know about the existing humanitarian services in Lebanon.

- Many participants underlined that aid organizations can be slow and bureaucratic in their response to requests for information. Hence, many proposed the *use of the internet and databases for better communication with refugees*.

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2 The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees provides refugees with a number of rights, including the right to seek asylum, the right to non-refoulement, the right to move freely, right to liberty and security of the person, and the right to family life. Other rights include the right to education, to have access to justice, and the right to employment.
Fostering Innovation in Humanitarian Action

- Participants suggested creating a tool for humanitarian organizations to improve their coordination by availing information on refugees’ backgrounds, needs and received assistance for all agencies to access. Some suggested using electronic cards that include personal information, status of needs and aid received from different organizations. That way, beneficiaries would not feel the need to repeat their accounts to the agencies concerned.

Strengthening Accountability for Affected Populations

- Feedback mechanisms should be provided for affected populations to evaluate the humanitarian goods and services they receive. Affected populations’ feedback should be included in the performance evaluation of humanitarian organizations.

- It is also important that UN and international organizations enforce stronger accountability and transparency measures when dealing with local partners, especially community leaders and local committees.

- Humanitarian organizations should disclose their criteria for distribution of aid to members of affected populations to improve transparency and prevent confusion.

- There should be stronger monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for the distribution and receipt of aid in aid organizations.

Improving Preparedness and Resilience in Conflicts

- Participants showed interest in learning about preparedness measures for conflicts. They recommended incorporating these measures in educational curricula in schools and using state media to spread awareness about emergency preparedness.