



Briefing on COVID-19 and Lebanon

April 21, 2020

The Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) Coalition – an initiative between Basmeh and Zeitoneh, AIEF Act for Human Rights, PAX, 11.11.11. and Upinion – was formed in 2019. The coalition undertakes research and advocacy on protection issues facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return inside Syria. This briefing outlines some research findings, and key protection and rights concerns that the RPW coalition has so far noted with regard to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in Lebanon, and contains a number of recommendations for Lebanese and international policymakers, donors and NGOs. It uses information observed and gathered by coalition members through their work in Lebanon, as well as through a digital survey¹ conducted by the coalition between 30 March and 15 April 2020. As well as applying to Syrian refugees, much of the research below also covers concerns faced by Palestinian refugees, host communities, and others.

1. Humanitarian impact of COVID-19

Income and Livelihoods

Syrian refugees and other vulnerable communities in Lebanon have seen their livelihoods disappearing due to the social distancing measures and the closure of non-essential services and shops. At the same time, prices of basic food and hygiene products have surged due to the financial crisis that Lebanon was already facing before COVID-19.²

80% of all respondents to the survey (348 out of 429 respondents) and 85 % of Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian respondents (200 out of 234 respondents) answered that they had lost their main source of income, due to the lockdown measures making it impossible to work: their income has been severely reduced or disappeared. All areas of Lebanon seemed to be equally affected by job / income loss.

It is therefore important that all stakeholders thoroughly explore and advocate for ways in which income-generating activities can continue, while taking the necessary precautions. In addition, stakeholders should rapidly develop and implement direct income support for all vulnerable communities in the form of expanded cash assistance. Prolonged loss of livelihoods will do irreversible harm to already vulnerable communities that are not covered by any social protection policies; moreover, in the absence of immediate emergency cash assistance, these communities will have no choice but to continue income-generating activities which place them at risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19.

Social Distancing

Lack of awareness of social distancing measures by refugees and vulnerable communities have been reported in some areas, as well as, crucially, the lack of the ability to comply with social distancing measures when living in overcrowded conditions and informal settlements, and when experiencing an urgent lack of income and the need to secure basic necessities.

Access to Health Services, Hygiene Services and Aid

85% of respondents (305 out of 360 individuals) reported that they do not have access to or the possibility to buy sufficient sterilization and hygiene materials. Amongst Syrian respondents this figure was 89% (169 out of 190 individuals). This aligns with a survey by the Lebanon Protection Consortium (LPC), conducted between 17-20 March 2020 in informal tented settlements, in which 87% of respondents highlighted hygiene items (detergents and bleach) as their priority to respond to Covid-19 and 69% highlighted the need for protective equipment (gloves and masks).³

When respondents were asked if they had received any help in the form of food rations, sterilization and cleaning materials, only 4.5% responded saying that they had received some aid, and out of 198 Syrians and Syrian-Palestinians who participated in this section of the survey only 1 reported having received some aid.

Lack of information

38% of respondents said they would like to receive more information on COVID-19 in the coming weeks, which they can then further spread to their communities. 42% of respondents are not aware which COVID-19 hotline they can contact if they suspect having contracted the virus.

2. Discriminatory measures against Syrian refugees

There are significant concerns and fears about how COVID-19-related discrimination could negatively impact refugees in Lebanon through unequal access to aid, discriminatory implementation of movement restrictions, and stigmatization in case of outbreaks among the Syrian community.

Non-Discrimination in Access to Aid and Services

It is essential that health and hygiene assistance, as well as other aid, is available without discriminating between refugees, other migrants, and Lebanese citizens. This includes access to testing and treatment for COVID-19, as well as – in the future – access to a vaccine.

Lockdown and Curfews

Across Lebanon there are restrictions on movement and curfews due to COVID-19. These are implemented dif-

ferently across the country, and in some areas – such as the Bekaa – stricter curfews apply to refugees, including preventing them from leaving informal settlements except for tight timeslots.⁴ In some cases, Syrians are threatened with the confiscation of their identity documentation in case they breach the rules, leading to increased vulnerability. Any restrictions on freedom of movement or curfews should be applied in a non-discriminatory manner and there should not be specific restrictions for refugees.

Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity about the lockdown policies – which leads to increased fears amongst refugees about whether specific, stricter policies apply to them. It is essential that lockdown policies are clearly communicated.

Undocumented Syrians

Syrians have reported fears of stigmatization and discrimination when accessing health services, in spite of the Government of Lebanon stating that all Syrians will be treated if they contract COVID-19. There are also fears that in the case of infection they may be forcibly returned to Syria or arrested.

It is of utmost importance to spread awareness among Syrians in Lebanon that infection does not equal deportation or arrest for undocumented Syrians, and that lack of reporting puts both the infected individual and other people at increased risk. Simultaneously, it is important to strictly monitor that this period of crisis, or the period succeeding it, does indeed not provide a license for Lebanese authorities to deport Syrians.

Stigmatisation

There are significant concerns that should a significant number of Syrians in Lebanon contract COVID-19, that this could add to the stigmatization of Syrian refugees and fuel discrimination and hate speech. These narratives should be countered publicly by Lebanese authorities.

Covid-19 survey

80% answered that they had lost their main source of income

87% highlighted hygiene items as their priority to respond to Covid-19

85% do not have access to or the possibility to buy sufficient sterilization and hygiene materials.

38% would like to receive more information on COVID-19

3. Human rights, civic space and role of civil society

NGOs and Civil Society

Local NGOs and civil society – across humanitarian, human rights and peacebuilding sectors – are a crucial part of an effective response to COVID-19 in Lebanon, especially when INGOs and expat staff may leave to be with their families at home. Local NGOs and civil society's work is essential for reaching communities with effective humanitarian programming and community engagement. Local humanitarian actors benefit from being constantly on the ground, being directly in contact with the affected population and having established reliable networks especially in fragile areas where confidence in national and/or international authorities is low. Furthermore, holding human rights and peacebuilding concerns central in the response will ensure stronger trust and community buy-in, as well as allowing for proper scrutiny, evaluation and improvement of the response.

Additionally, some donors are redirecting their funding to focus on their COVID-19 response. These funds, whether concerning the sterilization of prison facilities, the distribution of hygiene equipment or material, awareness-raising regarding social-distancing measures, access to information or proper hygiene habits to vulnerable populations are indeed needed. But funding and advocacy should remain in place to address the root causes of human rights abuses and inequality, in addition to the COVID-19 emergency response. It is essential to ensure that funding for longer-term human rights, civil society, development and peacebuilding activities is maintained, to help ensure that the positive impacts this work has had are preserved over the longer term, and to help protect against backsliding on these issues during the COVID-19 emergency.

Human Rights and Civic Space

Measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, while critical and necessary in these circumstances, may lead to serious long-term backsliding on human rights standards. Lebanon risks seeing its civic space shrink and might witness an increase in human rights abuses, as restrictive emergency measures are undertaken to protect public health.

The country has witnessed a decrease in terms of freedom of speech over the past few years with more and more individuals being summoned by the authorities following critical statements or publications. Emergency measures may be interpreted to further empower authorities to restrict free speech under the guise of preserving public order. In addition, limitations on freedom of movement and assembly due to social-distancing measures may further limit

humanitarian efforts to effectively advocate for the promotion of human rights.

The emergency public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic is essential but this response can and must support—rather than undermine—long-term efforts to advance human rights. The emergency response must proceed in parallel to continued planning, programming and evaluation of protection concerns and human rights guarantees for the most vulnerable members of society. This will require the continuous and robust participation of civil society in decision processes.

Some municipalities and authorities have already adopted restrictions with regard to the work of NGOs which, although they are described as efforts to combat the virus, represent a backsliding on human rights without advancing public health. For example, some municipalities have implemented requirements that NGO assistance must target more Lebanese than Syrian individuals in each response, rather than basing assistance targeting on vulnerability and need. Municipality officers have demanded to be present during distribution rounds, and that distributions take place in the NGOs' centres and not in the informal settlements themselves; neither of these requirements are justified by public health and may discourage or limit access to assistance for the most vulnerable. It is important that all operations are fully needs-based and that it is monitored that priority is not given to specific nationalities, sects or religions.

Aid Localization

The current crisis is the ultimate moment to put risk-sharing and aid localization commitments into practice, and to leverage the contribution of local actors to national health capacity strengthening and service provision.

Local NGOs should benefit from longer-term and flexible funding, including adequate support for overhead costs to cover safety, health insurance, severance pay and other risk management priorities. Transparent conversations need to be held between donors, UN agencies, INGOs and local partners about how to effectively mitigate risks in the COVID-19 response and how duty of care to frontline respondents can be ensured. Donors need to showcase extreme flexibility in funding and in terms of reallocation of existing budgets, allowing local NGO staff to adapt to the current circumstances, adjust programming and acquire new skills where necessary.

New funds for the COVID-19 response should be made available, however not at the expense of existing programs addressing on-going humanitarian or development needs. Local NGOs and civil society need to take part in country-level fora and dialogues concerning planning, preparedness, and evaluation of the response.⁵

Recommendations

All Actors

- Should ensure that health and hygiene assistance, as well as other aid and support in response to the COVID-19 crisis, is available without discrimination between refugees, other migrants, and Lebanese citizens. This includes access to testing and treatment for COVID-19, as well as – in the future – access to a vaccine.
- Should ensure that the emergency response to COVID-19 proceeds in parallel to continued planning, programming and evaluation of protection concerns and human rights guarantees for the most vulnerable members of society.
- Should ensure the continuous and robust participation of civil society in decision making processes, including both ongoing protection and human rights programming, as well as in all phases (planning, implementation and evaluation) of the COVID-19 response.
- Should ensure that all operations in response to COVID-19 are fully needs-based, and that it is monitored that priority is not given to specific nationalities, sects or religions.
- Should communicate clearly that there are no immigration consequences for testing or being diagnosed with COVID-19, and that rumours of deportation are false.
- Should monitor the protection and rights issues facing displaced Syrians and vulnerable host communities (not necessarily specifically related to COVID-19).
- Should rapidly develop and implement direct income support for all vulnerable communities in the form of expanded cash assistance.
- Should held transparent conversations between donors, UN agencies, INGOs and local partners about how to effectively mitigate risks in the COVID-19 response and how duty of care to frontline respondents can be ensured.

Lebanese Government and Authorities

- Should ensure that all restrictions implemented in response to COVID-19 apply equally to Lebanese citizens, refugees, and other migrants, and that these policies are clearly communicated.
- Should make clear to Syrians in Lebanon that diagnosis with COVID-19 does not trigger deportation or arrest for undocumented Syrians, and that testing and treatment are not contingent upon legal residency status.
- Should counter any narratives which use COVID-19 to stigmatize and discriminate against refugees.
- Should ensure a safe space for NGOs, journalists to access information, engage in dialogue and to express dissent and disagreement.
- Should not take advantage of movement limitations to suppress dissent, and refrain from summoning or arresting human rights defenders denouncing or condemning duty bearers and civil representatives actions.

Donors

- Should ensure sufficient funding in response to COVID-19 and urgently commit resources to support emergency response plans for COVID-19 testing and treatment, food assistance, hygiene promotion, healthcare, rent support and emergency cash and/or in-kind assistance, as well as awareness-raising activities. This can be done, in part, through a contribution to the UN's COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan. In the GHRP, UN agencies and donors should also increase the availability of unearmarked funds for NGOs.
- Should ensure that any funding to COVID-19 response plans is additional to already existing humanitarian and development projects, and does not come at the expense of existing funding.
- Should ensure flexible funding for local NGOs, in terms of reallocation of existing budgets, allowing staff to adjust to the current circumstances, adapt programming, acquire new skills, invest in tools and procedures for safety and risk management.
- Should accelerate and concretize aid localization efforts and commitments, by providing longer-term and flexible funding that includes adequate support for overhead costs to cover safety, health insurance, severance pay and other risk management priorities.
- Should maintain support to human rights activities, local civil society, and peacebuilding activities: Donors should ensure that any diversion of human rights and peacebuilding funding is only short-term and temporary, and that funding for these activities is maintained or increased given their important role in the response, as well as to protect against backsliding on important issues during the COVID-19 emergency.



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Endnotes

- 1 The coalition uses online large-scale surveys to assess the protection space for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Between 30 March and 15 April 2020, the coalition conducted a survey to assess how the COVID-19 measures taken by the Government of Lebanon regarding COVID-19 have affected the lives of refugees and other vulnerable communities. In total, 429 Syrian, Syrian-Palestinian, Lebanese and Palestinian-Lebanese respondents based in locations across Lebanon have participated, and more respondents are expected.
- 2 See <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-lebanon-shortages-rising-food-prices-economic-crisis>.
- 3 <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/covid-19-concerns-and-needs-of-syrian-refugees-in-informal-tented-settlements-in-lebanon/>.
- 4 Human Rights Watch has, for example, documented that since the outbreak of COVID-19 at least 21 municipalities have introduced discriminatory restrictions on Syrian refugees that do not apply to Lebanese <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/02/lebanon-refugees-risk-covid-19-response>.
- 5 For more reflections on the important role of local civil society in the response, see this blog written by CAFOD and Basmeh and Zeitooneh <https://charter4change.org/2020/04/03/covid-19-four-entry-points-to-localise-the-response/>